

CHASE

FEATURE

WHY on earth should museums tell visitors what their culture is?

No, honestly. Museums are begging to be social hubs. They could be a beating heart for communities to engage with and contribute to.

National museums do this by announcing exhibitions that tell visitors what is important. But local galleries have a greater privilege — they can ask what is important. And that is what's happening at Clifton Park Museum, in a project that has let Rotherham's own disrupt what a museum can be.

"I often work with communities," said lead collaborator and artist Pippa Hale. "And they often participate by being in it or making some of it. But it's always about delivering my idea."

"Culture isn't something done to people, they are the culture. So — how do we make something together?"

As a contemporary artist, Pippa's work has focused on the social history and geography of where she works, and in her own words says she seeks to "close the gap" between past and present.

Pippa was commissioned by Rotherham's Heritage Services to reinterpret Clifton Park's existing collection. With support from Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) and funding by Arts Council England, she was tasked with finding new ways to connect it to Rotherham's people.

Her solution was not to tell Rotherham what its history was, but to ask Rotherham itself.

She didn't have to walk far to ask either — the subjects she chose were three of Clifton Park's own front-of-house staff.

The people she entrusted the project's vision to were in plain sight; Angie and Zahid from visitor experience, and Dean from the kitchen. These would be the brains behind what would be called the Revealed Roots and Concealed Connections exhibition.

"They were all a little bit terrified," said Pippa. "I think they thought I would have them painting."

"But we started with a tour around the collection, and Dean shared how even though he worked there he hadn't been around the museum since he was a child. And here Angie and Zahid gave him the full visitor experience."

"The Clifton Park collection is really evocative of local galleries — in that it's a mad mix of paintings, sculptures, journals, toys... How on earth do you make that relevant to Rotherham people today?"

The challenge was to ask Angie, Dean and Zahid to look at the collection with fresh eyes and use its pieces to explore Rotherham through their own experiences. To focus her three Rotherham subjects, she asked them what meant the most to them.

The answers were fresh, striking and very, very Rotherham.

Dog-lover Angie struck upon a life-size painting of Yorkshire's famed Joshua Walker, with the house that would be Clifton Park Museum off in the distance. And he was posing with his hunting spaniel.

So Pippa and Angie tracked down the spot Mr Walker stood in — and invited Rotherham's dog walking community to get involved. Now, dozens of portraits have been snapped of the community in the same spot to stand alongside the historic painting. And because dogs aren't allowed inside Clifton Park, a dozen of the pictures



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are outside in the courtyard instead so walkers can enjoy them too.

Zahid's passion for Rotherham United was paired with a wealth of photos of the workforce from the town's historic Guest and Chrimes. A video of the men leaving the factory at closing time in 1901 is paired with the United team leaving the tunnel at match time in 2019. The team photo of the present day squad is mirrored in a striking photo of the factory's workers.

And Dean brought in his most prized possession — a ship in a bottle from his nan. He delved and found dozens of journals and stories of seafaring voyages taken by Rotherham's people, like one woman's expedition to New Zealand in the 19th century. These have been brought to life in new readings by the Clifton Park's staff, making an audio exhibition paired with the collection's many paintings of ships.

"It's the beginning of a journey for the museum," said Pippa. "Asking communities what they would like to see and what stories are they telling. And what stories they aren't telling as well. Last year, Black Lives Matter made us question whose stories aren't we telling as much as those we are."

"There is a definite shift happening. Engagement needs to be at the core of what museums do, right at the outset."

"Rotherham Heritage Services has been really brave — inviting people to come in and disrupt everything, to ask why things are done that way, to really challenge everything."

"Would you get that in a big London-based museum? Regional museums perhaps have that freedom and a responsibility to serve local people."

The exhibitions by Angie, Zahid and Dean will be at Clifton Park until February 6, 2022, but it

will evolve in that time. They want to grow the exhibition further. One plan is to find living former workers of Guest and Chrimes and hear their stories.

Another is to record people's modern-day ship voyages to add to Dean's exhibit.

By blending in more and more of Rotherham's stories, Clifton Park's new exhibit can really be one where its community decided what was important — and maybe all regional museums should take that same step.

CONTACT:

Email: pippa@pippahale.com

Website: pippahale.com

Instagram: [@pippahale](https://www.instagram.com/pippahale)

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQmFrUwh9UU>

Facebook: [cliftonparkmuseum](https://www.facebook.com/cliftonparkmuseum)

'Culture isn't something done to people, they are the culture'

ALISTAIR ULKE talks to artist Pippa Hale about the Revealed Roots and Concealed Connections exhibition at Clifton Park Museum

