

Antony Lee - The Collection – bringing history back to Lincolnshire

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Background

The Collection: Art and Archaeology in Lincolnshire opened its doors to the public on 1st October 2005, the end result of over ten years of campaigning and over £12 million worth of fundraising. The Collection is an amalgamation of Lincoln's two oldest cultural institutions – the City and County Museum and the Usher Art Gallery (whose neo-classical form sits next to the new museum building). The old City and County Museum was housed, since its inception in 1906, in Lincoln's Greyfriars – a beautiful thirteenth-century Franciscan Friary church. Unfortunately, however splendid the medieval architecture of that building may be, such historic buildings have rarely been the comfortable bedfellow of the conservation and visitor needs of a modern museum.

Design and Build

A new home for the sizeable collections (mainly archaeological, but including the usual assemblages of natural history, geology, militaria and ethnography) was found on the site of a multi-storey car park near the city centre, and a two and a half year scheme of archaeological intervention and building work began. While waiting for our new home to emerge, phoenix-like, from behind its hoarding, work began in earnest on the design and content of the archaeological gallery. The exhibition designers commissioned for the project were Event Communications.

The decision was taken at an early stage that the layout should contain a strong sense of archaeological chronology, but that this should not be the only way visitors should be able to explore the collections. One theme that took early prominence was to have a 'river of time', inexorably snaking its way through the gallery, but with the public able to leave the main flow at various points to investigate particular themes, archaeological techniques or key objects in more detail. The architecture of the building proved a barrier to this idea, however, with the rectangular gallery space potentially leading to a confusing and convoluted path through the collections. The design finally agreed upon has a chronological timeline running around the outside edge of the space, and a series of thematic displays and the major interactive elements in the centre (Fig 1). The gallery can be entered through one of three doors, each allowing the displays to be explored in a different way.

Chronology and Themes

The choice of themes for the thematic cases (food production, trade, material use, games and leisure, messages from the past and a dressing up area with associated displays representing the possessions of historical characters), was influenced by the content of the museum's educational programme. It was important that the thematic cases were not secondary in quality to the chronological story and the destination of certain key objects was occasionally a source of conflict, thankfully resolved with the loss of very few curators. The central space of the museum is dominated by a satellite photograph of Lincolnshire – a feature that has become a firm favourite with visitors, and which has now been crawled over (quite literally) by numerous generations of Lincolnshire residents. Aside from being an interesting floor filler, the image serves to remind our visitors that although based in Lincoln, the museum is about the whole of Lincolnshire.

One problem that requires solving was how to bring the chronological story to a satisfactory conclusion. The strengths of the collection lie in the 'core' periods – prehistory, Roman, Saxon, Viking and Medieval, but there was a strong desire to end the chronological timeline on a positive note in artefactual terms and not just end the museum abruptly at the rather arbitrary date of 'c.1750' when our archaeological collections end. An early response to this was to create a 'time hall', where a series of large-scale graphics would represent major events in history, bringing the visitor back to the present day. The idea was truncated due to space limitations (and the desire to dedicate space to the core collections), but the basic premise remains, with a large graphic showing key advances in science and technology and providing the names and dates of key people from the county. Another important element of

this section of the gallery was to encourage visitors to go beyond the walls of the gallery and investigate other local museums and heritage sites.

The floor of the museum is suspended, allowing objects to be placed beneath the floor, under glass. Early concept sketches showed large quantities of material displayed in this manner, but difficulties in interpretation, access and conservation make the sketches attractive but unworkable. One object that has been placed under the feet of visitors is the Roman tessellated pavement discovered on the museum site during the archaeological works. This was removed to the Lincolnshire Heritage Service Conservation Laboratories and underwent consolidation and restoration for the two years of the museum's construction, and had itself spawned a large project involving many staff, volunteers and students.

A success of the gallery, and certainly one commented on by many visitors, has been the balance between the displays and interactive, both high and low tech in nature. Visitors can make their own mosaics and stained glass windows, see themselves with woad face paint, sort archaeological materials, look at environmental samples, play historical games, listen to different languages that have been spoken in Lincolnshire and analyse human skeletons (from replicas of course!). On touch-screens, people can play a wide variety of games relating to food production, shopping and bartering, material use and medieval creatures in the Luttrell Psalter.

Success

At the time of writing, the museum has been open for around 18 months and it is still pleasing to see new visitors gleefully discovering both the architecture of the building and the collections for the first time. The highlight so far has undoubtedly been the museum's short listing for the Gulbenkian Prize, but we are determined not to rest on our laurels, and our temporary exhibition programme, involving some excellent touring exhibitions from the British Museum should ensure that we can keep attracting new audiences for many years to come.

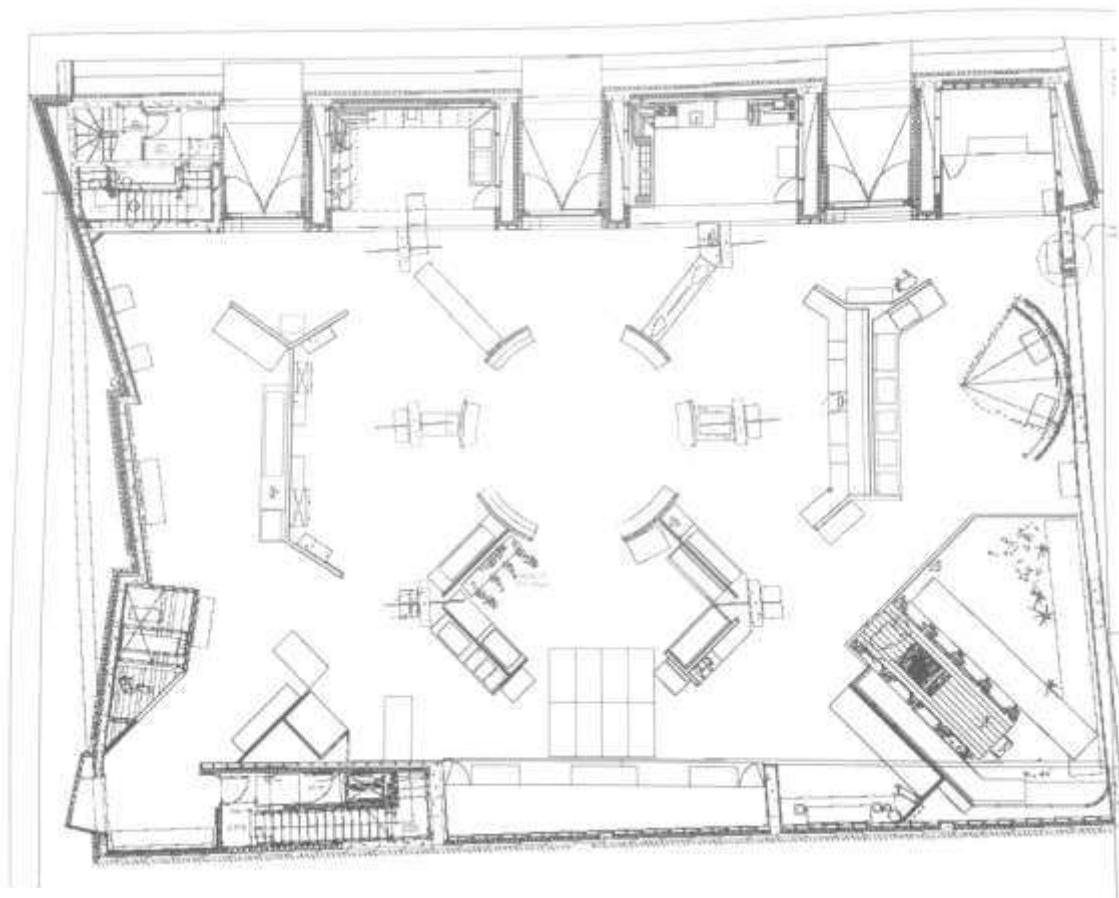


Fig 1. Floor plan of the archaeology gallery