

Reviews



St Albans Museum and Gallery, Hertfordshire

Danny Birchall, Issue 118/10, p52-53, 01.10.2018

An emphasis on changing exhibitions and local partnerships makes this museum a breath of fresh air, says Danny Birchall

St Albans Town Hall, built in 1830, was once a site of power and privilege – behind its giant portico it housed a courtroom on the ground floor, where the guilty were condemned, and assembly rooms on the upper floor, where wealthy people danced the night away. Now, after a £7.75m restoration and reopening as St Albans Museum and Gallery, it is a site of a different kind: of art, memory and community.

The museum's pavement cafe, wedged into a triangle between two busy shopping streets, bustled with older residents and young parents on a Tuesday morning in June, shortly after its opening.

Inside the building, the cafe and gift shop lead to the extension of public seating in the refurbished courtroom. You can enjoy a latte where the trial was held in St Albans' 1851 election-rigging scandal, when it emerged that most of the votes in a byelection had been bought, though you will struggle to charge your phone or find a wifi signal.

Outside the courtroom, a large display with inset object cases tells the story of the city. This archetypal home counties town was once a Roman city (burned down by the British warrior queen Boudicca), the site of an important battle during the Wars of the Roses and host to a monastery that was dissolved by Henry VIII. It also developed the local industry of hosiery. The late 19th-century introduction of rail travel brought St Albans into London's orbit and its house prices are those of a satellite city.

Eclectic collection

In the newly dug basement, a climate-controlled gallery housed the inaugural exhibition *First Impressions* (now over), which celebrated the role of printing in both local and national history. St Albans was where many of the London Underground's most famous advertising posters were inked, and the displays celebrated the local printworks.

Alongside examples of early printing – St Albans had presses even before Cambridge – there was a high-tech 3D printer on show, donated by a local firm. An animated and engaged gallery guide showed visitors how to clean and set the machine, printing a green replica of New York's Empire State Building.

A tour of the complex of tiny cells that once held prisoners waiting for trial brings you back through the dock and into the cafe-courtroom again.

On the first floor, there is the strange and eclectic mix of objects that you would expect in a local museum: half a taxidermy lion named Arthur, a corporation plate, a gold disc by the rock band the Kinks. But this is where the display begins and ends: *St Albans on Demand* is a rotating display of old favourites and unexpected discoveries from the permanent collection. Some, like the lion, are remembered for being on display at the museum's old site on Hatfield Road as much as for their relevance to local history.

Wandering from here into the assembly rooms you were suddenly immersed in the artist Susie MacMurray's lush, moving installation *Masquerade* (now deinstalled), which paid tribute to the privilege and repression of the Georgian and Victorian women who once danced in this site, represented by dramatic contrasts of form and material.

A golden medusa-tailed and tentacled mannequin was constructed from delicate handmade chain mail. What at first looked like poppies tumbling out of a fireplace on closer inspection resembled red velvet shoulder puffs packed with rough steel wire.

Energising a difficult area with contemporary art has become a popular strategy for museums, but this still felt like a bold response to the space, propelling visitors into reflection on the meaning of what happened there, rather than fixing a historical interpretation.

Local partnerships

Beyond this, glassed-in walkways have extended the building on the first floor, where the Keepers' Galleries hosted a collection of works and displays by the artists Lyndall Phelps, Abi Spendlove and Katy Gillam-Hull (the exhibition *Accumulate* finished in July).

The artists worked with the permanent collections since the closure of the Hatfield Road site, as well as with members of the local community, to study, reinterpret and uncover stories about the museum's objects. Although the show was less assured and dramatic than the other displays, it nevertheless demonstrated the value of work done with the community during the three years that the museum was closed, imaginatively transforming old collections for the new space.

The traffic outside notwithstanding, St Albans Museum and Gallery feels like a breath of fresh air in many ways. Its lack of reliance on permanent collections and an emphasis on changing exhibitions and displays, with the kind of high-quality facilities for national touring exhibitions, suggests a commitment to the type of programme that will attract regular return visits by local audiences.

It is also a demonstration of the value of local partnerships. Ongoing art installations and displays in the museum are being curated in collaboration with the University of Hertfordshire's arts and cultural programme, UH Arts.

It is more than refreshing to see a local authority invest in heritage, arts and culture in a period of savage financial cuts, when many councils are putting their museums first in the queue for the chopping block.

The redevelopment relied on a substantial Heritage Lottery Fund grant, but St Albans City and District Council put up nearly half the project cost. Such generosity could be down to relative local prosperity; the council might also have St Albans' status as a London satellite on its mind. A forward-looking museum and gallery could do much to enhance the town's sense of being a place in its own right.

The test of the museum's success can only be the sustainability of a provocative artistic programme, access to national exhibitions and local community partnerships. If St Albans Museum and Art Gallery can keep these alive, it will be an example to celebrate and follow.

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Project data

- **Cost** £7.75m
- **Main funders** St Albans City and District Council; Heritage Lottery Fund; Arts Council England; St Albans Museums and Galleries Trust
- **Architect** John McAslan + Partners
- **Construction** Willmot Dixon Construction
- **Exhibition design** Mowat & Company
- **Graphic design** Studio Sutherland
- **Brand** Jane Wentworth Associates
- **Interpretation** St Albans Museum and Gallery
- **Arts programme** St Albans Museum and Gallery in partnership with University of Hertfordshire
- **Audiovisual** Wide Sky Design; St Albans Museum and Gallery
- **Lighting** REL
- **Display cases** Meyvaert; Qwerk; MER Services
- **Shop design and products** St Albans Museum and Gallery in partnership with the British Museum
- **Admission** Free

Comments