



Museums Worcestershire Annual Review 2020-2021



*Museums Worcestershire is a partnership between
Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County Council.*

“This year was difficult for everyone, with so many people coping with loss, illness, isolation and financial hardship. I’m proud of the Museums Worcestershire team who rapidly found new ways of working to stay connected with our communities, supporting those who needed us most.”

Philippa Tinsley, Museums Manager

In 2020-21, Museums Worcestershire was:

- **Relevant**, an agile and flexible response to the pandemic kept us connected to families and those alone at home with online and outreach resources, exhibitions and events
- **Ambitious**, to support all our communities we successfully bid for more than £240,000 of external funding
- **Dedicated**, we found new ways to partner with our volunteers, our councils, Worcestershire’s heritage community and our local artists

“It’s such a desperately difficult time for many youngsters and every little gesture of kindness makes the world of difference.”

*Ruth Allsopp, Operations Coordinator for Worcester Foodbank who distributed
Museums Worcestershire’s family activity packs*

“We have felt enormously supported by all your input and wise advice.”

*Faith Ranger, Malvern Museum, who received consultancy support as part of the
No One Left Behind project*



Our Museums

“What a year, a year unlike any other, full of huge challenges, but alongside this came fresh opportunities for working in new ways”
Stuart Webb, Operations Manager, The Commandery

During lockdown, critical security, environmental, and building checks had to continue, all carried out in a Covid-secure way. To open, our museums were made safe and welcoming, with one-way routes, sanitising stations and limited visitor numbers.

“Your toilets are so clean. The National Trust could learn a thing or two from you!”
Visitor to Hartlebury Castle

125 days museums were open in 2020-21

48% average visitors when open compared to previous years

Our Museums: The Commandery

Improving the visitor experience:

- New interpretation and displays add in more fascinating stories of The Commandery's history
- Creation of a nature play area for younger visitors
- A garden fitness trail for local locked-down families

New ways of working:

- Talks in the gardens about museum objects
- Cross-site working saw the Hartlebury workshop creating interactives for The Commandery

When we were able to open to the public:

- August Bank Holiday was fully booked for a nine-hole mini golf course
- Families had fun with a Halloween *Ghoulish Ghost Trail* and Christmas *elfies* in the Elves' workshop
- Fully booked and socially-distanced ghost tours

"Very enjoyable and very safe"

"Really lovely to be out in the fresh air – the fitness fun was great for our 3-year-old"

"What a garden, such a calm atmosphere... great for all ages, I would love to just come over here and read a book."

Commandery visitors





Our Museums: Worcester Art Gallery & Museum

Improving the visitor experience:

- *A Welcome View* exhibition designed to reassure, welcome visitors back and reconnect with art after the first lockdown
- *The Printed Line* exhibition opened in September 2020 bringing great art from national collections to our doorstep in Worcester

New ways of working:

- Online exhibitions during lockdown supported visitors to experience the positive benefits of experiencing creative work
- Development of digital Covid-safe *Museums After Hours* events, supporting local performers and business
- Maintained Covid-secure access to the main City Offices in the museum building throughout lockdowns to support the City Council in their transition for office-based staff to work from home

When we were able to open to the public:

- More than 1800 visitors visited in October half-term, many to enjoy the socially-distanced *Where's Wally* event with their families

“We are so very lucky in Worcester, to have a venue of such character and quality, with its team of imaginative and creative staff who organise the wonderful exhibitions there in. The standard of planning and forethought is of an increasingly high standard with each subsequent show. Keep safe, we all depend on you!”

Art Gallery & Museum visitor

Our Museums: Worcestershire County Museum at Hartlebury Castle

Site run in partnership with Hartlebury Castle Preservation Trust

Improving the visitor experience:

- A new 1950s display *Lavish Living* installed
- Improvements to the outdoor offer with new outdoor interactive activities, an all-weather gazebo and an upgrade of the orchard picnic area

New ways of working:

- Online booking system ensured a safe number of visitors on site and for events
- Children's craft activity bags were made for families to purchase in the shop to make at home

When we were able to open to the public:

- Socially-distanced *Swashbuckling Fun* activities on August Bank Holiday
- 600 visiting the Castle during Heritage Open weekend
- Visitors returned to enjoy carefully-planned Covid-safe event periods with family, with 500 enjoying October half term and 300 enjoying Christmas festivities

"It was a nice surprise to find a gem like this on my doorstep. We ended up spending 4 hours wandering around the gardens, house and having something to eat in the cafe. The gypsy wagons are incredible too! The staff were incredibly friendly and helpful. Keep up the good work."

Hartlebury Castle visitor





Our Museums: Capital Investment

Worcester City and Worcestershire County Councils have continued to invest in the museums, taking advantage of lockdown to carry out repairs that improve the environmental, historical and commercial sustainability of all the museums' important listed buildings.

The County Museum

- Significant roof repairs have preserved the fabric of the Hartlebury Castle buildings.
- Installation of a new fire alarm system to protect the nation's best collection of Gypsy Vardos.

Art Gallery & Museum

- Storage area light fittings replaced and fitted with automatic timers to reduce the building's carbon footprint.
- New shop fittings sympathetic to the architecture updated the retail area in the foyer.

The Commandery

- Derby Road gates giving pedestrian access through to the canal and café completely rebuilt.
- For the first time since open log fires blazed, heating was introduced to the civil war rooms making them more comfortable for visitors.
- Drainage and asbestos surveys undertaken to enable future improvements to the site.

Income Generation

Cultural Recovery Funding enabled us to trial ways of improving income generation and find new ways to deliver activities. The learning will take us forward to meet the future challenges of Covid-recovery.

- The Commandery and Art Gallery & Museum shops worked with a retail consultant to improve the offer ready for reopening.
- Equipment purchased enabled talks to be filmed for delivery online and then to deliver talks safely outside.
- Audience research will capture the changing needs of visitors after the pandemic.
- A new Commandery guidebook will provide a new source of retail income.

Museum staff responded swiftly to the changing needs brought about by the pandemic:

“Our wedding got postponed twice this year due to lockdown. We're so grateful to everyone who helped us bring it forward, with less than 24hrs notice! Especially The Commandery, our beautiful venue where we were finally able to say our vows.

“Highly recommend The Commandery as a venue, it's beautiful and the staff are so friendly and attentive, it really felt like they were as emotionally invested as we were.”

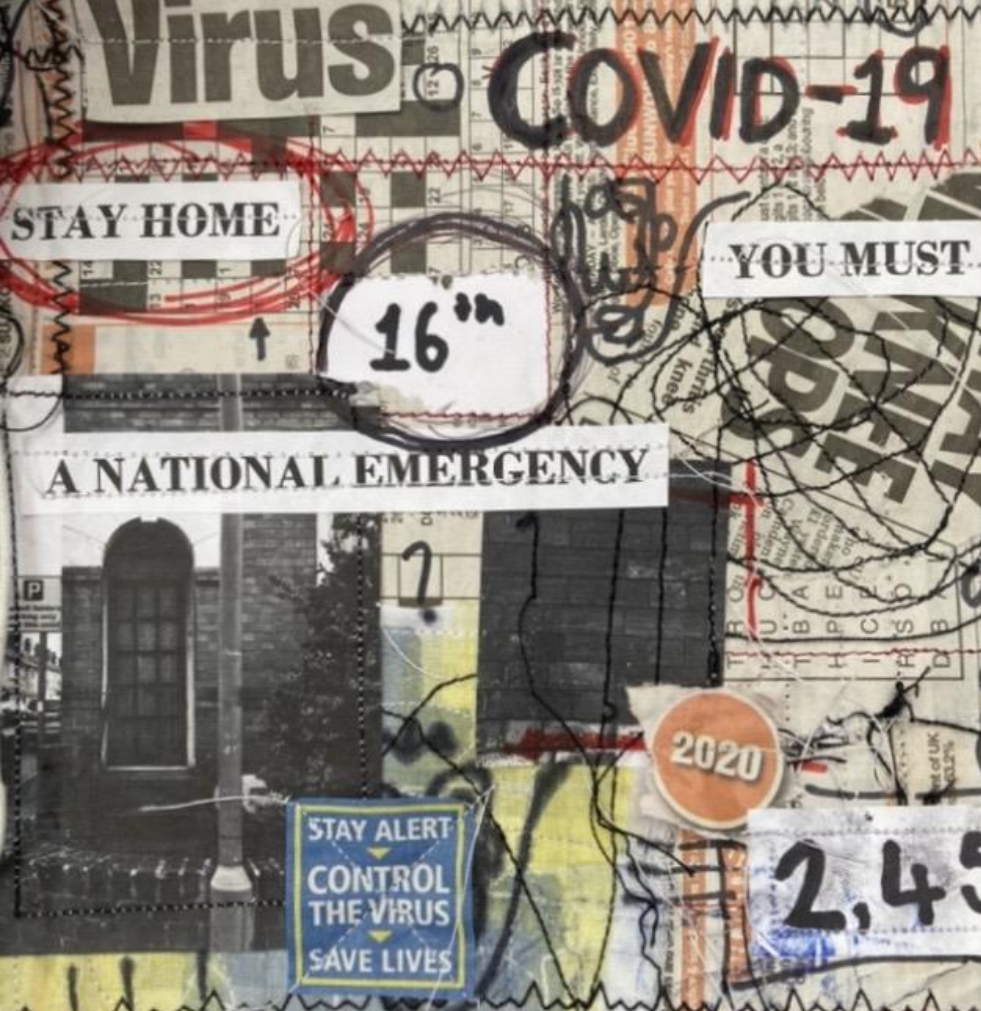
Wedding party, The Commandery

Our partners also responded swiftly to the changing situation:

“Amazing cookies & coffee in a lovely setting next to the canal. Good takeaway service whilst not able to sit in during Covid.”

Commandery Coffee customer





Supporting Our Communities

Worcestershire's Creative Community

From the Art Gallery with Love, funded with £20,689 from the Arts Council England Emergency Response Fund, supported the local cultural sector by commissioning 12 artists for a digital exhibition programme. The artworks are displayed in a new online gallery.

Left: Me, Myself & Skype, 2020 by Elsa Fox and Mia Townsend

One of the artists, Susan Birth, worked with Headway Worcestershire (a local charity supporting people affected by brain injury) to create the online work *Echoes of Ancient Art*.

"Really enjoyed doing it as I've never done anything like that before."
Clare - Headway participant

Worcestershire's Heritage Community

No One Left Behind, through £32,410 of Historic England Covid-19 Emergency Response Funding, enabled Museums Worcestershire and Worcestershire Archives & Archaeology to work together to support the sustainability of Worcestershire's heritage sector during the pandemic. We shared expertise through training, toolkits, consultancy and mentoring in business planning, marketing, volunteering and fundraising.

"Being able to talk through ideas with someone who has the knowledge, expertise and a network of colleagues to call on has been invaluable"

Ashleigh Jayes, Almonry Museum and Tourist Information Centre

Supporting Our Communities: Volunteers

Volunteers at Home is a revolutionary scheme funded through a Museums Association/Esmée Fairbairn Foundation Sustaining Engagement with Collections grant in which volunteers took museum artefacts into their own homes to continue their archiving and conservation work.

Lockdown meant volunteers were suddenly prevented from undertaking their usual projects onsite. The team were determined to find an innovative way to involve and include their volunteers, many of whom were socially isolated.

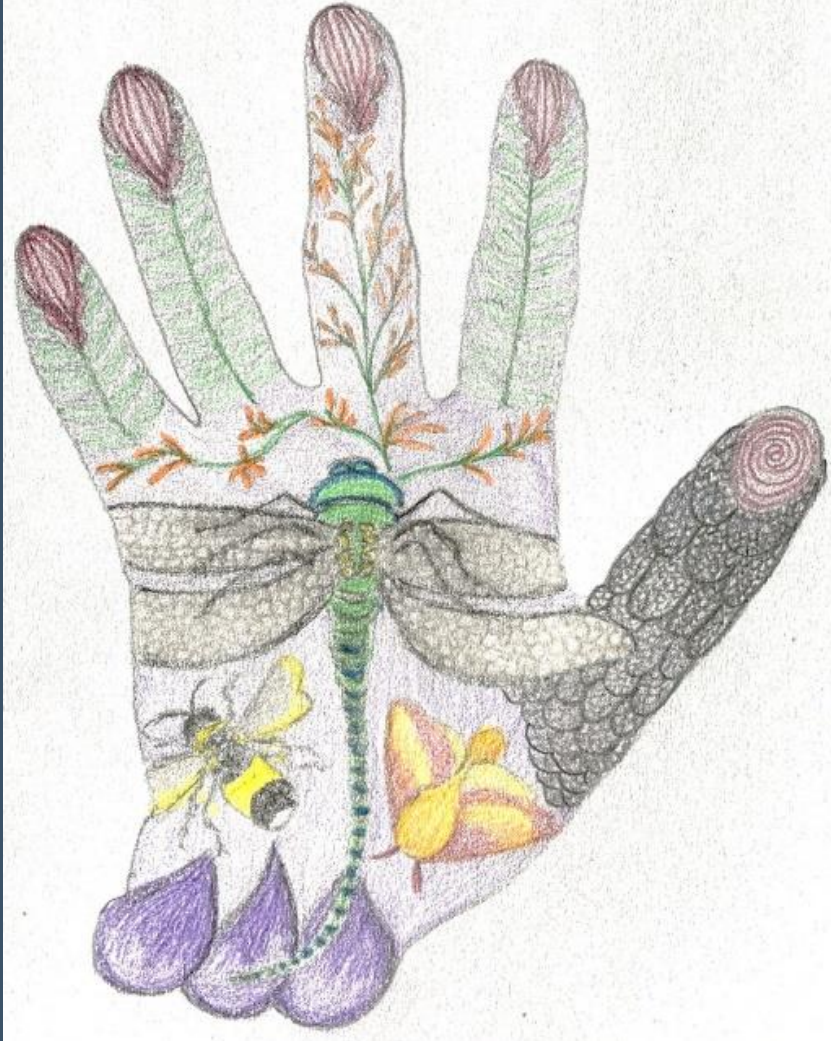
“A lot of our volunteers live at home on their own and they were really missing being at the museum and the sense of purpose it gave them. We wanted them to feel they were still part of the organisation.”

David Nash, Curator of Social History

Volunteers at Home is the first project of its kind in the UK and its evaluation and toolkits are now being shared across the country: this could result in a national shift in the way museums interact with their volunteers.



**A huge thank you to all our volunteers for their magnificent contribution to our museums.
We appreciate your enthusiasm, knowledge and commitment even more during this challenging year.**



Supporting Our Communities: Learning

Informal Learning

- The informal learning programme was quickly adapted to meet the changing needs of lockdown. Weekly family *Makeathons* were shared on social media, encouraging creative learning at home and a way for people to connect with each other. The programme ran for 12 weeks until our museums reopened and continued to be available for those still isolating.
- Once our sites reopened, Covid-secure family trails and take-away activities were introduced at all venues, providing new ways of sharing information. Summer creative workshops were adjusted to enable some to take place socially distanced and outdoors.
- Working with the Youth Voice team at Worcestershire Children First, we shared highlights from the collection with a programme of online creative workshops for looked-after children and their foster families.

Formal Learning

- Digital loans boxes meant schools could receive one of our physical resource boxes supported by a follow-up online session with the learning team.
- *Make a Mini Museum* activity was shared with all Worcestershire schools when students could no longer be in the classroom.

Work Experience

- The pandemic made normal work experience opportunities unfeasible. In order to support young people to gain skills towards careers in heritage we delivered a work experience programme via web modules, with a certificate available for those who complete it.
- Student and volunteer Amelia Ross was awarded a Museum Work Experience Grant by The Costume Society, to inventory, photograph and research parts of the Worcester City costume collection in a Covid-secure way during lockdown.



The Museums Worcestershire Team

“We invested heavily in staff development and wellbeing within the emergency-funded projects. One of the biggest outcomes of the pandemic was teams coming together. We were all isolated from each other physically but these projects were a way for those staff to work together. There was a sense of purpose and fulfilment at being able to continue to deliver services to our communities.”

Deborah Fox, Senior Curator

As a local authority service, staff were not furloughed and so the team rapidly took on new work tasks using a mix of IT equipment from home, often team-members' own.

We supported the City and County Councils' emergency response, with museum staff working on the distribution of business and social isolation grant administration as well as supporting colleagues in communications, emergency planning and the bereavement team.

Frontline staff, who would normally be welcoming visitors, in early lockdown joined a temporary Digital Magic Team to enable museums to have a greater online presence and stay connected with our audiences. Culture Recovery Funding later enabled the team to prepare resources that could be enjoyed onsite as museums reopened.



Collections

The service's **Pandemic Collecting** project, in partnership with Worcestershire Archives, focused on ensuring that this traumatic and transformational period will be remembered for future generations.

New research into the origins of the collection has resulted in previously unknown stories shared through talks, articles and displays about the Egyptian collection, objects in the World Cultures collection acquired during the voyage of HMS Rattlesnake and Worcestershire's links to the transatlantic slave trade hidden in the coins and medals collection.

Conservation work to a portrait thought to be of Mary Queen of Scots was undertaken following funding from the Leche Trust revealing original detail and clues about the sitter's identity. Funding from West Midlands Museum Development has enabled further research ahead of its display in 2022.

The delayed **Vardo Project**, funded by the John Ellerman Foundation, began with the appointment of the service's first Vardo Curatorial Officer who will work with our Gypsy, Romani and Traveller communities to forge new relationships and develop a better understanding of the County's nationally-significant collection.

"I did enjoy the (bite size) talk and it did help me to feel connected to what was going on in the Museum and Art Gallery"

"You've done a great job in offering different access to the museums service over the last 12 months... I appreciate the efforts that have gone into adapting the service during the pandemic."

Regular Art Gallery & Museum visitors





Looking Ahead

- All three museums reopen to the public on the week commencing 17th May, with new exhibitions, new content and new ways of working.
- The Volunteers at Home project is paving the way nationally for how museums engage with their volunteers.
- The Art Gallery & Museum has secured £23,000 from the Art Fund's Weston Loan Programme to stage a major exhibition in 2022 exploring the City's Japanese collection.

*Front cover image: Mosaic Modern Worcestershire,
2020 by Sarah Leavesley
From the Art Gallery with Love project*

“Worcestershire has shown its resilience this year, helping out our neighbours and keeping our loved ones safe.

Museums Worcestershire has put its communities at the heart of everything it has achieved, and amongst this year’s extraordinary circumstances has galvanised to make sure no-one has been left behind.”

*Councillor Lucy Hodgson
Chairman, Joint Museums Committee 2020-21*