Features

Museums Change Lives Awards winners



Analysis

Building on the UK's industrial heritage



Reviews Ely Museum

Ely Museum, Cambridgeshire

Stuart Orme applauds a seamless mix of old and new at this revamped museum that charts the rich history of the area

Fensforthe memories



There's a sense of anticipation | removed from the older part, when you visit a museum that's just been refurbished, particularly one that you know quite well. What's new and what has been retained? Will it have a freshness, yet maintain the elements that make the museum unique? Visiting the newly revamped Ely Museum on a sunny Sunday afternoon, I'm delighted to say that the team who have worked on this particular project have done a superb job.

The venue closed in September 2019 for a £2.2m overhaul that was intended to take just a year. Delays caused by the pandemic meant the museum didn't reopen until May 2021, but it's been very much worth the wait.

The historic building that houses the museum has had several alterations and an extension added, and it is to the credit of the architects that it's not immediately apparent from the exterior that these have taken place, so seamlessly are they blended into the building. The extension has allowed for the back-office facilities to be

with the addition of a lift allowing full accessibility to the building, improved toilet facilities and a new multipurpose learning and community space to be created. As soon as you arrive it feels fresh and welcoming, with a far more attractive entrance and reception area.

The extension has created extra display space, allowing much more of the historic building to be seen. The oldest parts date back to at least 1417 and housed the town's gaol from about 1679 to 1836.

The refurbishment has been carried out sensitively, retaining one of the prison cells as an evocative space featuring stories of some of those who had been incarcerated there. Wooden panels explaining many of the building features are dotted around the museum, but the key one that describes the overall development and history of the building is tucked away in a corner of the museum shop. I felt this might be better located near the start of the tour to give more context at the outset.

animated films that bring myths and the Fens to life

Above left: Ely Museum with its new extension





The main narrative thread of the exhibition is the story of display serves the Fens and this marshland's relationship with the people who have lived there. The ground floor covers the period from prehistory to the beginning of modern Fen drainage in the 1600s, with the upper floor picking up the more modern story. The flooring on the entry to the ground floor gallery subtly evokes this sense of time and place, along with appropriate sounds and interpretation by the window highlighting local fauna and flora that has been planted in raised beds outside.

Keeping it local

Objects are well displayed in high-quality cases with clear interpretation. Throughout the museum, small subsidiary panels link stories back to local archaeologists and farmers, giving a nice sense of the stories being rooted very much in the local community.

I liked the use of tactile objects set into niches at the bases of cases. These are low enough for small children, but high enough that they are still accessible for adults (even

a sturdy six-plus-footer like A market stall me) to reach. There are some up fun facts lovely items to see. For me, the with replicas of highlight was the astonishing local produce that visitors piece of large cirular bronze age metalwork called the East Cambridgeshire Gold Torc, a real "wow factor" artefact that one can only speculate as to who owned it and what they used it for.

can weigh

One of the nicest features on the ground floor is an area evoking a Fenland house,

which has an audiovisual display that allows visitors to landscape was created and select short animated films that bring three Fen myths and legends to life. Many museums brush over folk tales, which are an important part of our cultural heritage, and it was lovely to see how Ely Museum has embraced this particularly rich part of Fenland storytelling.

However, I did wonder whether the museum might

have missed an opportunity to include a film on Hereward the Wake, who was allegedly an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who fought in resistance to the Norman Conquest and straddles the boundary between history and myth. He is famously associated with Ely, but features only in a limited way in the museum's main displays.

Tiger kings

Another excellent audiovisual display is about the Fen Tigers, a resistance group that opposed the drainage of the Fens in the 17th century. Located in a stairwell, this display also explains the complex process of the area's drainage in the 1600s. It does this in a clear way using line-drawn animations, but with the opportunity to pause or carry on the story to cope with different interest levels and alleviate a potential bottleneck in a space that might otherwise restrict visitor flow.

The upstairs displays initially focus on the use of the Fens today, with a clear explanation of how this is maintained.

There's a lovely market stall set-up that uses fun facts and replicas of local produce that I can imagine is very popular with families visiting the museum. I suspect there is also the opportunity going forward to build on this interpretation, particularly given the likely impact of climate change and rising

Focus on Pandemic adaptations

Closing the museum for refurbishment was always going to be a huge change for our small team to adapt to, but we certainly weren't expecting to also be plunged into a

pandemic within six months. Thanks to our fantastically dedicated staff and project team, the work barely stopped. The builders were back on site, with a reduced workforce and new procedures, within four weeks. Our architects did their site visits out of hours to minimise contact. The designers sent us samples by post and, once it was allowed,

staff met up in car parks to look at colours and materials in a socially distanced way. Our Activity Plan was

reimagined: our learning and community engagement staff pulled out all the stops, and within the first week of lockdown had "Museum from Home" activities for homeschooling online. These consisted of activities, factsheets and video clips of crafts all on a weekly theme. They produced these every week for 24 weeks from March until the schools returned. Working with the local food

bank, staff also distributed free craft packs to families who might not otherwise have been able to participate.

Once schools reopened, we stretched our technological skills and began Virtual Visits volunteers and staff beamed live into classrooms with images and video clips.

We were delighted to complete the works only five months later than planned, and to welcome visitors into the new museum once restrictions allowed in May 2021. Sara Adderson is an assistant curator at Ely Museum



Project data

Cost £2.58m Main funders National Lottery Heritage Fund; East Cambridgeshire District Council through the Community Infrastructure Levy; Thomas Parsons Charity; Amey Community Foundation; Garfield Weston Foundation; The Foyle Foundation Architect HAT Projects Main contractor RG Carter Project management Focus Consultants **Exhibition design** Simon Leach Design 'Graphic design David Sudlow Designers Lighting design DHA Designs **Exhibition build** Workhaus Display cases Glasshaus Cost management Gleeds Admission

MA members free



interactives are an important part of the

Left: the downstairs gallery covers the area's medieval history

sea levels on this fragile environment. Other displays take in the

infamous 1816 Littleport Riots, which were the result of high unemployment and rising grain costs. The modern history of the town and local wartime stories are also covered. These included some really nice use of evacuee tags to tell the stories of children who were evacuated to Ely and the surrounding area during the second world war.

The galleries conclude with a small temporary exhibition space (currently with a display about the refurbishment) and a research area in which you can search through the collections' database and view many films from the East Anglian Film Archive that relate to the region.

On leaving, I felt a warm glow of having had an enjoyable visit to a lovely museum, and real admiration for the team at Ely that they have managed to accomplish so much in a limited space under such unusual and difficult circumstances.



Stuart Orme is the curator at the Cromwell Museum in Huntingdon,