

Museum reviews

Messing about on the river

River and Rowing Museum, Mill Meadows, Henley on Thames, Berkshire RG9 1BF. Phone + 44 (0) 1491 415 600, fax + 44 (0) 1491 415 601. E-mail: museum@rrm.co.uk, Web site: www.rrm.co.uk

The best way to approach the museum is to walk along the river bank from the centre of Henley itself. On the day I visited there was much evidence of recent flooding, reinforcing the close and perhaps perilous relationship between the museum and the river itself. The striking design of the museum gradually reveals itself from the trees and one is immediately aware of a building both stunningly modern and yet reminiscent of an upturned boat hull. Set on stilts above the water meadow, the museum, designed by David Chipperfield, combines the use of concrete, glass and lead with an oak cladding which seems to succeed in appearing modern and rustic at the same time. Many museums make much of their location and the fact that their buildings put their collections into context, but I have seldom been to one which felt so much at ease with its subject matter.

As well as a modern reception area, the ground floor of the museum contains two smaller exhibition galleries used for temporary exhibitions, administration, meeting and conference rooms and a café. On the day I visited, one of the ground-floor galleries contained the boat used by the victorious British team at the Sydney Olympics.

The main galleries of the museum are situated on the first floor, fully accessible by lift and stairs. Reaching the top of the stairs, the orientation did not really make it clear which of the two galleries one should visit first, and I probably started in the wrong place, although the stories told in the galleries are discrete. One would assume, however, that the visitor should start in the Thames gallery, which a graphic panel tells us is 'Liquid History'.

In the course of the displays the visitor is taken on a journey from the source of 'Old Father Thames', down its 354 km course to the sea, describing the ecology, natural and human history of the river.

In many museums and galleries, curators and designers conspire to start with some kind of loud and memorable audio-visual experience – starting with a big metaphorical 'bang'. At Henley quite the opposite happens, and the visitor entering the gallery is soothed by an introductory section, which includes a stunning panoramic view over the water meadows skirting the Thames outside. The lighting is subtle, and dreamy 'New Age' music tinkles in the background. The reader should not assume from this description that I lapsed into a relaxed stupor at this point, but the low-key introduction may not be to everyone's taste, and one wonders if primary school children would feel the same closeness with nature that older visitors might. Nevertheless, graphic panels illustrating the huge variety of wildlife outside the museum do make you feel that you are looking out of a giant birdwatching hide.

The theme of relaxation is continued with a number of booths in which visitors can sit and listen to recordings of music and verse inspired by the Thames. Extracts from music as diverse as Handel's *Water Music* of 1717 and the Kinks' 1967 'Waterloo Sunset', plus a selection of poetry and prose from Dickens, Eliot, Kipling and Betjeman, are available for the visitor to listen to whilst looking across the watery landscape. The displays then unfold, telling the story of the people who lived and still live on the banks of the Thames. The sacred significance of the river is not ignored – literally thousands of swords and other finds have been dredged from the Thames, and some stunning finds are displayed here. Moving from the Palaeolithic to the present, exhibits and archaeological finds bring the story of the varied inhabitants

to life. One such amazing exhibit was a Saxon log boat dating from AD 405–530, hewn from a single oak tree.

The most visible evidence of human influence on the river was its regulation. As early as 1620 locks were installed to improve passage along the river for barges. In 1856 the Thames Conservancy was created, and, until the Environment Agency took over control of the river quite recently, it was this body which maintained locks and weirs, and regulated fishing and other activity. The museum displays mirror the various sections of the river, from source to sea, and well designed cases and graphics tell the story of this history and the wildlife and nature which are associated with it.

The museum does not shy away from addressing contemporary issues, particularly environmental ones. I was impressed with a very well thought out interactive exhibit dealing with water consumption in the Thames valley. Even more impressive was the museum's decision to give space to a video made by the Water Aid charity which showed just how difficult life is for people in Africa without clean drinking water. The interactive contrasted how the average person in the Thames valley uses 150 l of water each day, whilst in the Third World the figure is only 10 l. Food for thought indeed.

The final section of the gallery deals with the lower reaches of the river as it passes through London, including a reconstruction of the Thames Flood Barrier. I felt that, good though this section was, it could have made more of the hustle and bustle of the Thames in London during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the huge amount of trade up and down the river and the large area covered by docks in the London area are surely worthy of interpretation. Given the overall feel of the gallery as a whole, it is probable that the design team did not wish to compromise the tranquil feel created in the rest of the displays.

Crossing to the other side of the building, the visitor is presented with an altogether different story, that of rowing itself. The introductory area highlights the historical development of the rowing boat, beginning with the use of this

means of transport in the riverside communities described in the Thames gallery. Such communities depended on the use of boats to allow them to hunt, trade and wage war, but, in time, rowing also developed into an art and a sport, with the pursuit of speed as its goal. There would, given the nature of the collections, be a great temptation to concentrate on the more modern development of rowing technology, but the curatorial team have ensured that the context from which modern rowing has grown is fully explored. Successive displays chronicle the Greek trireme, perhaps the ultimate statement of rowing power, the Venetian gondola, the Thames wherry, wooden-hulled lifeboats and arctic whaleboats.

It is in this part of the museum that the design of the building, so striking on the outside, also becomes apparent inside. The light and airy gallery, shaped like so many of the sleek rowing boats in the collection, has many examples of boats suspended from the roof itself, almost sculptural in form. The use of wood within the displays also helps to bind interpretation and building closer still. As the displays unfold, telling the story of the development of modern rowing, use is made of interactives to help illustrate some of the processes involved – the visitor can handle examples of hulls, oars and outriggers, as well as sit in rowing machines. The final section of the gallery is a rowing 'Hall of Fame' and here displays and videos describe the growth of rowing as a sport, with mentions of the most famous examples of racing – the University Boat Race, the Henley Regatta and finally the Olympics. Not surprisingly, much space is devoted to the exploits of British rowers, particularly the great Olympian, Sir Steve Redgrave.

The choice of Henley as the location of a rowing museum was perfect, as the town has been the home of the famous regatta for over 150 years. More information on this annual sporting event is found in the final gallery on the first floor of the museum, which concentrates on the social history of Henley on Thames itself. This gallery is reached by walking across a glass-sided bridge with views of the river again prominent – on the floor

below, the museum has an education centre for schools and groups. The displays are of the sort often seen in many local and social history museums, describing life in the town through the ages, with sections on industry, housing, trade, law and order, transport and the like, but they are well designed and displayed. The gallery is dominated by a beautifully preserved steam launch, *Eva*, although for this reviewer the sight of the large railway station 'running in' board from Henley on Thames was of great interest.

Walking back along the river bank towards the town, I was struck that this museum has been able to strike an important balance with its visitors. By their nature most transport museums can appeal only to a particular segment of the population, and in the case of rowing it might be argued that this particular mode is one which appeals only to a small minority of sports fans, arguably an affluent minority. However, by broadening the approach of the museum, and incorporating the story of the Thames and Henley itself, the museum has more than succeeded in putting the story of rowing into context, and in the process has created a museum that appeals to an audience over and above those interested in the sport.

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Mexican cars: memories, not history

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This is a small, specialised Mexican museum, known only to a few people and visited by even fewer. It is located in one of the world's biggest cities, well provided with every sort of museum and cultural activity; this fact needs to be taken into consideration when accounting for the museum's lack of popularity. During the twelve years of its existence the Museo del Automóvil has aimed to

offer 'a new way of appreciating antique automobiles'. It has been the temporary home of some of the most prestigious cars, such as Rolls Royce, Mercedes Benz, Packard, Pierce Arrow, Porsche, Alfa Romeo and Bugatti. Changes are made to the museum's permanent exhibition every three months in order to provide variety to the displays.

One of the museum's main problems is lack of space. The 4,500 m² can accommodate about 100 vehicles, but the conditions are not ideal. With the exception of the entrance hall, which contains no more than ten items, most of the automobiles are crowded together in rows, with the result that visitors have to content themselves with limited views, chiefly of the vehicles' fronts. It is impossible to appreciate the flanks, except partially and from far off, while the rears are hidden by each other or by the building's walls. Allowing adequate room for every vehicle in this collection to be examined closely seems out of the question, as it would entail at the very least a doubling of the space. Only then could visitors walk around each car to view each side and, perhaps, gain a glance at the interior of the automobiles, an important aspect that is almost impossible at present.

The Museo del Automóvil is, however, a venture that deserves praise. It combines the efforts of private Mexican collectors who provide their vehicles on loan so that they are accessible to the general public. Indeed, the museum is unique in Mexico. The collectors aim 'to show the developments of the automotive industry by means of individual units', allowing visitors to physically appreciate changes in wheels, tyres, lights, bodies, accessories. Another goal of the museum is, naturally, to 'keep and maintain antique automobiles'.

Owing to the size of the Museo del Automóvil, it is possible to see all the exhibits in some twenty minutes, although a detailed inspection of the best-located pieces would take much longer. Unfortunately there is little encouragement to do so. The layout of the museum encourages people to walk around two paths in the main hall, then return to the entrance hall and look



The display in the main hall of the Museo del Automóvil

about for a while longer. Having done so, the visit finishes at the admission desk, where someone will offer to answer questions; normally only one person is on duty at a time, as a result of the small number of visitors. There are no leaflets, and no other sources of information available to the public. A tendency to favour spectacular and rare pieces is evident, and the museum's scheme of classification and display is of the sort that appeals largely to collectors and enthusiasts; it does not offer much in the line of education or material for academic study. The majority of the vehicles are labelled with essential details – model, brand and year – and in some cases special features are also mentioned. The occasional missing placards are not a major problem for most visitors, as only hard-core fans of antique automobiles care to learn about these details. The main reason for people to visit is to be impressed by the dazzling show of luxurious or rare vehicles. Indeed, this is what the museum expects, and it is to visitors' advantage to be 'good observers', as there is no interpretation that might trigger a learning experience. The exception is the entrance hall, which provides two massive graphic displays showing the development through the decades of car bodies and other technical features.

The museum's visitor services are very limited: a display cabinet with some items for sale, and wheelchairs for disabled access. There are discounts for teachers, students and senior citizens, although this is not advertised at the entrance and the person in charge requests the full admission price unless asked directly about reductions. These are certainly welcome, as the charge of 25 Mexican pesos is high and represents almost 2 per cent of the monthly minimum wage. Museums are generally expensive in Mexico, and most Mexicans who visit them are required to do so as part of school activities. Many visitors are merely seeking a moment's relaxation, and only a small number have a genuine desire to learn something about their past or culture.

Visitors to the Museo del Automóvil come from different backgrounds and ages, from small children to the elderly, from students to housewives, workers and the occasional tourist. The staff recall stories of older visitors reduced to tears at the sight of cars from their past; on the other hand the young are astonished and amused at the means of transport used in olden days: there is plenty of scope for the 'My grandfather used to have one of these' type of reminiscence. This must make the sponsors

happy, since their chief aim is to offer a place where people can 'spend a pleasant time admiring beautiful automobiles'. With few hints about the historical contexts in which the cars were produced or used it is difficult to get involved beyond a personal liking or dislike for the colours, shapes and sizes of the artefacts themselves, let alone learn and explore topics such as the meaning of automo-

biles in modern Western culture, or the future of the car industry. In this respect the Museo del Automóvil has little to contribute to transport history and a change in its very traditional approach does not seem likely in the future.

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