

Philpot Museum Display Panel – Glass Gallery



Display Panel in Glass Gallery, August 2016
(Photo by team member Mike Applegate)



Museum's Glass Gallery, November 2005



Museum Extension, June 2018

Glass Gallery demolished in 2017
to make way for new extension.

The Museum underwent a complete restoration of the building with installation of new displays between 1994 and 1998. This included a Glass Gallery extension on the seaward side of the building. It was fully re-opened in 1999 by David Attenborough and won the Gulbenkian prize for museums later that year. The Research Team transcribed the text from the Introductory display panel in the Glass Gallery.

Glass Gallery Introductory Display Panel (Text only)

Before the Museum

The museum stands just above the old seawall, now protected by the defence works completed in 1995. It was built in 1900-1 by Thomas E D Philpot, a former mayor of the town, specifically as a museum. This is unusual: although the great provincial cities built civil museums throughout the Victorian era, few towns the size of Lyme- its population just over 2,000 in 1901 and some 3,500 today- can take pride in their own purpose-built museum.

Guncliff and Cockmoil Square

The museum's corner is one of the older parts of town, and was formerly crowded with houses like those which can still be glimpsed up alleyways in Bridge Street and Combe Street. Clearance in this part began in the 1880s, first for the rebuilding of the Town Hall(in which Philpot was also closely involved) and then for the museum.

Even after the museum was built, several houses remained on the site. The area, now known generally as Gun Cliff, then included Cockmoil Square, shown in the plan of 1827, which marks the old Guild Hall and prison (as well as Bennett's land between the museum site and the sea)

Gun Cliff proper is clearly shown on the 1856 elevation to have been raised considerably higher than it is now, to allow clearance for the guns. Demarcation of the original Gun Cliff site can be seen today in the levels of ground behind the town hall: the curling steps originally led to the gun platform.

The museum houses fronted on to Cockmoil Square. One of them was the house where Mary Anning was born and where she (and her parents before her) sold fossils before she moved to Broad Street in 1826. The Annings must have been neighbours of the Bennetts and indeed for a while, their tenants.

In spite of its narrow and crowded streets, the Bridge street- Cockmoil Square area housed a surprising number of thriving businesses early in the 19th-century. there were several boot and shoe makers, including John Bennett, the Anning's furniture making and curiosities (until 1826), a confectioner, a milliner, and dress-maker, straw hat maker, hairdresser, grocer, baker, and butcher. The number fell during the second half of the century, sometimes because the owners had graduated to better premises in Broad Street. But the more basic trades remained, and even in the 1890s, between the rebuilding of the Guild Hall and clearance for the museum, the butcher's shop still stood on the corner of the square and Bridge Street.

Philpot and his architect

Thomas E D Philpot (1859-1918) was great-nephew of the misses Philpot who fossilized with Mary Anning. A bachelor, he lived in Lyme, his declared profession "landowner and JP" and was active in town affairs, becoming mayor in 1890 and 1891. He owned extensive property in Lyme itself, including the old post office in Broad Street, the drill hall, now the marine theatre, and Guildhall cottages, now the tourist information centre. He also contributed to many schemes of building and improving public buildings in the town, including the National School in Church street, the parish itself and the town hall; and in 1889 he bought three properties in Cockmoil Square for the purpose of building a museum and art gallery.

Philpot's chosen architect was George Vials (1843-1912). Vials trained with an eminent architect in his native Northampton, and in about 1870 moved to London to join the practice of Sir. Matthew Myatt, which specialised in designs and restorations in various period styles. The bulk of Vials career was devoted to church building and restoration but he was also a capable painter and exhibited several times at the Royal Academy.

Viall's first acquaintance with Lyme came in 1884, when the Rev Edward Peek commissioned him to turn the stables in Poulet House (now the Alexandria Hotel) into a chapel. Through Peek, Vials met Philpot, and during the next two decades, working for either or both of them, he was not involved with the design or improvement of most of Lyme's public buildings as well as private houses. He took many photographs of his work in the town, preserved in albums kept by his family.

Diaries kept by Vials from 1878-1900 (only 1880 missing) are still in the possession of his family. They are a record of his business affairs only, but show how often and widely he travelled to commissions in different parts of the country. They also show the very wide range of details he dealt with in both his public and private buildings. In Lyme his concerns included soil and plants for Holme Cleeve, hemispherical bells for the Peek Chapel, chandeliers, dining-room dado, doors, stoves, water filters, drainage and plumbing ("men's WC etc); and on 4 April 1887 he noted: "to Harvey Nichols and Co to choose chancel carpet for LR Parish Church (Philpot's gift)"

Vials pre-eminence among architects working in Lyme was established by his commission to rebuild the Town Hall in 1887-88. The original 17th-century building has been falling badly into disrepair, and when plans for celebrating Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 were being

discussed Edward Peek offered to restore the interior fittings at his own expense if the Corporation would undertake the restoration of the exterior.

The Corporation did not allow the opportunity to pass and Vialls was asked to produce a report and designs. The Corporation had hope to get away with repairs but a much more radical job was necessary: in the end part of the building was pulled down to widen the street, and a new (the present) entrance was built at the west end.

Vialls re-installed the 17th and 18th-century fittings in the new interior and added a heating system of which the flue accounts for the second pinnacle on the building, removed at sometime early in this century. (A very full account of the re-opening and its "Enthusiastic Proceedings" is given in the *Bridport News*, 25 January 1889)

Philpot commissioned Vialls to design the museum he planned for the site of the three properties he had bought in Cockmoil Square in 1889. The building began in 1900 and was completed in 1901, and gives the impression that Vialls enjoyed designing it. The style is exuberant and charming mixture of 17th century Dutch with touches of Jacobean and a dash of Charles Rennie Mackintosh on the seaward side.

The builders were Caddy and Sons of Lyme.

The Museum's History

From its completion in 1901, the museum stood empty and unused for nearly 20 years. *The Bridport News* of 12 June 1912 reported that the Mayor proposed to Lyme's Borough Council "a scheme for the opening of the Philpot museum and free lending library"; one councillor observed that "he did not think that they would average two people a day who would visit the museum during the 9 months of the year", and the scheme was rejected. During the First World War, the building served as a Red Cross depot, but relapsed into disuse.

In 1920, T E D Philpot's niece, Caroline, gave the museum to the Borough of Lyme, and in march 1921, two rooms were opened thanks to the efforts of Dr Wyatt Wingrave, formally confirmed in 1927 as the museum's first honorary curator. Wyatt Wingrave added local objects to his own collections and virtually created the museum single handed.

The *museum guide and report* issued by Wyatt Wingrave in 1923 listed the objects displayed in the two rooms, devoted to geology and archaeology. Several of the exhibits are familiar to visitors today; notably the town fire engine, the wooden tracery from Buddle Bridge, the cannon balls from the Siege of Lyme and the nucleus of the fossil collection. "So far it is a nucleus", Wyatt Wingrave wrote of the displays, "but it is hoped that in time, with the help of loans and gifts, it will become worthy of Lyme's great reputation and of the building itself."

The museum also benefited enormously from the work of Cyril Wanklyn (1864-1943), historian of Lyme. Forced to retire from his city career but an illness which left him stone deaf, Wanklyn came to live in Lyme and interested himself in the mass of neglected documents in the Borough's monument room. He spent most of the last twenty years of his life sifting and classifying the town's records, stretching from the 13th century until after the 1832 reform act. One of his most notable discoveries was the first extinct manuscript of Henry Fielding, written and posted up in Lyme in 1725; its discovery was reported in *The Times* of 4 December 1944, and the document is displayed in the Writers' gallery.

Wanklyn published many articles about Lyme's history, and in 1922 his *Lyme Regis A retrospect*. In 1938 he was made a freeman of the Borough.

A further crucial contribution to the Museum's development was made by Dr W D Lang, FRS keeper of Geology at the British Museum (Natural History), and trustee of this Museum from 1937-1948, who greatly enhanced and classified the collection of fossils. A fuller account of his work is given in the Geology Gallery.

The Museum Since the War

There was apparently no curator from 1945 to the early 1960s. For a time the museum was opened daily in the morning from someone in the Town Hall and locked again when it got dark: several townspeople today recall the pleasure they had as youngsters, wandering at will in the Museum, but losses were severe. In the 1960s, a group of people, Laurence Whistler pre-eminent among them, took a new interest in the museum, which gradually revived. Several curators were succeeded by John Fowles whose careful work brought the museum back to its original path of sound scholarship.

The building was also deteriorating badly. Signs of this were most obvious in the exposed east wing, which finally reached such a state of dilapidation that the Borough council had to demolish it on grounds of safety. its utilitarian replacement was completed in 1969.

From 1939 the museum suffered a severe decline. The Borough took over the building during the Second World War, storing the collections upstairs, using the ground floor as an ARP report post and the cellar as an air raid shelter. In a letter to her mother in 1948, Muriel Arber noted: *"the museum is a very saddening sight, all going damp and mouldy, and many of the exhibits just jumbled in their cases or the cases empty"*

The Museum Today

John Fowles regime as Hon Curator left the museum in fine spiritual fettle. He set up and generously funded a body of Friends of the Museum who provided the volunteers to man the desk and welcome visitors. The museum is indeed proud of its long tradition of voluntary service, still continuing today.

But times were changing. The long and searching process of registration with the Museums and galleries Commission lay ahead. Competition with other "attractions" was becoming acute as tourism emerged as a major national industry and visitors were looking for more diversions on their holidays. Above all, dilapidation of the Museum's structure had gone so far as to make it very nearly unsafe.

The trustees decided to divide the scheme into two parts. Phase 1 would be the reconstruction of the building, including the trustees' own proposed improvements and extension, and phase 2 would be the internal refurbishment, with provision of new displays and storage space etc.

The Regeneration Scheme

Discussions between the new hon. curator (Liz-Anne Bawden from 1998) and the museum council for the south west during the process of registration led to the trustees' commissioning in 1990-91, a report from Robin Wade and Pat Read design partnership which recommended a thorough-going refurbishment and extension of the museum.

Patrons of the Museum

John Fowles and Sir David Wilson, then Director of the British Museum, kindly agreed to become patrons of the museum. (They are seen photographed in the stairwell at the time of the launch of the appeal in November 1991.) They were soon joined as Patrons by Sir Crispin Tickell, then Warden of Green College, Oxford; formerly British Permanent representative at the United Nations and President of the Royal Geographical Society; an eminent spokesman on the environment, and a great-great-great nephew of Mary Anning.

The Rebuilding Work

The entire collections were packed up and put into store and the museum cleared for work to start in November 1993. the interior was stripped out , including the floors, the main staircase and the central landing, both of which had been broken were replaced. All the roofs were replaced and the cupola re-leaded; new oak were laid throughout with under floor central heating for the better conservation of the collection. The loggia was glassed in to form a new entrance and shop, and a new gallery built on the seaward side. Floors were levelled throughout at ground level to allow access for the disabled

The design team for the rebuilding work was; architects, J Stark of Dorchester, (Anthony Jaggard designed the elegant extension of the new seaward gallery proposed by Robin Wade); structural engineers, Brody Forbes of West Bay; and quantity surveyors Peter Gunning Associates of Bath and Dorchester. The builders were M F Lake of Charmouth (now of Lyme)

The Museum's status

During the negotiations leading to the rebuilding work, West Dorset District Council generously gave the museum to the Trustees. The museum became fully independent as a private limited company of charitable status (although still associated with and supported by WDDC). Provisional Registration with the Museums and Galleries Commission was granted in 1992, and full registration achieved on completion of the rebuilding work, in November 1994.

The Internal Work

While funds were being raised and plans prepares for the internal refurbishment, the Museum resumed as far as possible its normal life. temporary displays were arranged and talks and temporary exhibitions given in the Museum's splendid empty shell (the walls were left unplastered for 3 years to allow the salt to leach out and the bricks to dry)research and preparation of the new displays and the accompanying texts and labelling, radically and systematically rearranged throughout the museum, was undertaken by Jo Draper from 1996. building and construction work began in earnest in 1997 and the first completed gallery, the writers' gallery, was officially opened by John Fowles on 12 December.

The walls were replastered and decorated during the winter and spring of 1998 and work continued on the displays until their completion by the end of the year. The museum's loyal volunteers have pursued their work cheerfully throughout both phases of the work, welcoming visitors and explaining the disruptions as well as providing the services of giving talks, walks and temporary exhibitions, cataloguing etc. Visitors too, have been very good-humoured, following the peripatetic displays with appreciation as galleries were temporarily closed and re-opened, and continuing to contribute generously to the appeal fund.

The team responsible for the internal work was: builders: M F Lake of Charmouth (now of Lyme); design: Robin Wade; graphics design: Jackie Baines of Robin Wade & partners; Quantity surveyor: Geoffrey Tulloch, design construction, case woodworking of Lyme. The Museum's accountants: Thomas Westcott and Gillard of Axminster, administered the monies throughout both parts of the work. Jo Drapers did the research and wrote the texts and labels for the displays; other contributors were Liz-Anne Bawden, Bryan Meloy and Edwina Wheeler. Ken Gollop, John Fowles and Muriel Arber gave advice. Liz-Anne Bawden and Edwina Wheeler dressed the displays.
