



Association of  
Independent  
Museums

# AIM Bulletin

August 2025

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# Welcome to AIM Bulletin!

www.aim-museums.co.uk

## Reflections on resilience

I am writing this update shortly after AIM National Conference 2025, which this year took place in Portsmouth. It was a fantastic event with an excellent balance of talks, workshops, and masterclasses. Once again, the conference was sold out, with 300 delegates attending from all types of museums across the UK – and beyond!

What struck me most was the resilience of our sector. These are not easy times. We face uncertainty on multiple fronts – from funding pressures and fluctuating visitor numbers to changes in local government structures which, even for us independents, will bring new challenges and shifts.

We've seen a real terms cut in DCMS funding. While the injection of support for the MEND programme and civic museums is extremely welcome, these are stopgap measures. What we really need is fresh thinking – and perhaps even radical change – to ensure the long-term prosperity of the sector.

As custodians of our history, museums must be prepared to ask difficult questions and challenge accepted narratives, including our own. I have heard some wistful reflections on the so-called “good old days,” when government funding was more generous and curatorial skills were perceived to be more deeply valued. But I would argue that golden age never truly existed. Yes, there were moments – like Renaissance in the Regions – when funding flowed, but even then, resources were unevenly distributed, benefiting only a small portion of the sector.

Museums have always faced challenges. What makes us remarkable is our refusal to give up or shy away from the big questions. Today, that means confronting traditional narratives, researching histories that have long been

overlooked, and seeking innovative, sustainable ways to fund the core work of our sector – caring for objects, archives, and heritage, and displaying them well and working with our audiences.

It also means speaking with one coherent voice about our value: to the UK economy, to social cohesion, to the creative industries. It means tackling the climate emergency and improving the wellbeing of our communities. The conference highlighted many inspiring examples of how museums are already doing this work – and doing it brilliantly – often through strong partnerships that amplify their impact.

I urge you to make use of the AIM Economic Toolkit to demonstrate your museum's contribution to national prosperity, and take a look at the work on the place of museums in the Creative Industries (see page 6). Keep an eye out, too, for upcoming research on business models and the use of open spaces. If we all start using the same language and metrics and speak to our local funders and decision-makers with one clear voice, we will strengthen our collective impact. By doing this, to paraphrase *Jerry Maguire*, you help us to help you.

I'm already looking forward to next year's AIM National Conference, which will be held at Ushaw House, Chapels and Gardens and recent winner of Art Fund's Museum of the Year, Beamish. The focus will be on what makes an excellent business model. So, if you have a novel or sustainable model, or lessons learned you would like to share, answer the call for proposals on page 4 – we would love to hear from you!

**Rhiannon Goddard**  
AIM Chair



### Front cover

Bugles have been used on the battlefield to relay important messages to soldiers. Today, this Gurkha bugler is announcing a critical message to all – The Gurkha Museum Trust is undergoing a critical transformation known by its Nepali name Project Kaida. Visit The Gurkha Museum this August to discover more about the Gurkhas' heritage and culture, their contributions in ending the Second World War as part of the nation's VJ80 commemorations, and the future of Gurkha heritage under Project Kaida. [Credit: Corporal Raju Tamang Royal Gurkha Rifles].



# What a scorcher! AIM Conference 2025

**Delegates from across the UK convened in Portsmouth for two sun-baked, inspirational days celebrating independent museums.**

Portsmouth Historic Dockyard, the Mary Rose Trust and the National Museum of the Royal Navy provided wonderful locations for sessions, social events, a range of behind-the-scenes tours, boat trips and even pop-up choirs!

The event, which had sold-out for the second consecutive year, 'met or exceeded' expectations for 90% of delegates. according to the post-conference survey, with 83% seeing the event as 'excellent or good value for money'. Among many familiar faces, almost a third of delegates were attending an AIM Conference for the first time, testament to the growing popularity of the event. The chance to network and the inspiration provided by breakouts and keynotes were particularly valued by survey respondents. For the third consecutive year, AIM members responded to the open session callout with a fantastic range of sessions covering a broad range of topics from organisational transformation and recovery to community collaboration and engagement, preserving endangered crafts, managing risk and much more besides.

Themes emerged around how best to adapt to the ever-changing economic context, nurture the passion and energy of all our communities; value wellbeing as fundamental to good business; and the powerful role creativity can have in articulating the urgency of sustainability.

Delegates commented on the great venues and location, which took full advantage of the breadth of the Historic Dockyard, the friendly feel of conference and the ability to network with and learn from others, with the combination of all these different elements combining to deliver a wonderful experience. Social events aboard HMS Warrior and the fascinating Mary Rose Museum, complete with a



community choir and 'candle-lit' quartet drew gasps of delight and provided a wonderful and apt setting as the sun went down.

As ever, the survey provided a good range of creative and constructive feedback for the team to consider for next year's event and attendees took to LinkedIn to share their thoughts after the event.

*Left inspired and re-energised from hearing about the innovative work happening across the sector and catching up with colleagues old and new. The generosity at these events is second to none.*

*My first AIM conference is done! . . . a brilliant experience, and I'm coming back full of ideas!*

*As an emerging curatorial professional, it was an absolute delight to be part of such a significant gathering – full of insightful sessions, inspiring conversations, and valuable opportunities to learn*

*You know you've been to a fantastic AIM Conference when you come home buzzing with ideas, confidence and just general loveliness about working in and for the museum sector.*

Have you got something great to shout about? We are looking for proposals for breakout sessions for next year's AIM National conference at Ushaw Historic House and Gardens, and Beamish in County Durham on 10th-11th June.

### AIM Conference 2026 Speaker Callout

Always a popular part of our conference schedule, breakout sessions run for 40 minutes and focus on pragmatic advice and ideas from people who have 'been through it'.

For the 2026 event, we will be exploring effective organisational business models – what works, what flourishing museums have in common, and how to generate income and control costs to manage effectively as an independent museum. Breakouts will reflect on the following broad themes:

- Relevance for resilience – developing a fundable offer e.g. through modernising interpretation and display, capital transformation, community outreach, telling new stories to new audiences, exploiting data and insight, building your digital offer
- Building the brand – turning your organisational ancestry and legacy assets (collections and buildings) and your stories into a unique, place-making, visitor offer
- Entrepreneurialism – running effective (charitable) businesses, developing a commercial mindset, taking risks, strategy and vision, futureproofing and risk management

Submit your proposal at [aim-museums.co.uk/news/aim-conference-2026-speaker-call-out](https://aim-museums.co.uk/news/aim-conference-2026-speaker-call-out)

Deadline Wednesday 24th September.



Another round of the popular leadership programme announced for Autumn 2025.



# Find your Spark!

Strengthen your professional and personal resilience with this programme of support and development for independent museum leaders. Share your challenges and opportunities with a small peer group of museum directors and senior leaders. Reignite your creativity, re-energize your teams and face the future for your organisation with confidence.

Spark! is for those leading the overall team in their museum. We particularly welcome people with a significant leadership role including

individual museum directors and other senior leaders.

## Benefits

Guided by experienced consultants, this targeted programme of support and professional development is designed to enable you to pause, reflect and plan. Participants are expected to continue reflecting on their practice between sessions.

It is also designed to be a safe space to raise difficult issues and gain ongoing support from a network of peers – which will be part of the legacy of participating.

## Delivery

Running Oct-Jan (see [www](http://www.aim-museums.co.uk) for details) the programme is delivered online to a cohort of 12 participants and includes Action Learning Sets, workshops to cover topics selected by you, and two individual, hour-long coaching sessions. Topics have included restructuring and managing organisational culture; recasting roles for volunteers; supporting good governance; developing your team(s)

[More information and application process: aim-museums.co.uk/spark](http://www.aim-museums.co.uk/spark)

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## Pilgrim Trust extends AIM partnership with a £292,600 award

**AIM's long-standing partnership with the Pilgrim Trust is to be extended for an additional two years with a further funding boost of £292,600.**

In partnership with AIM, Pilgrim Trust has helped small museums to care for and conserve their collections for many years, support which has proven to be popular and invaluable to AIM members.

Last year, with additional support from the Julia Rausing Trust, Pilgrim Trust funding enabled AIM to launch a brand-new grant programme – Museum Fundamentals – providing support, advice, and funding to help with core museum activities, including caring for collections.

The first round of Museum Fundamental grants was announced recently with Expressions of Interest for the second round open until August 8th.

Pilgrim Trust Director, Sue Bowers said:

“We are delighted to be renewing our strategic partnership with AIM and to partner with the Julia Rausing Trust so that Museum Fundamentals can now be extended for a further two years.”

AIM Director, Lisa Ollerhead:

“I am delighted that our important partnership with Pilgrim Trust continues. Their ongoing support strengthens and broadens what AIM can offer museums, in direct response to member needs. It helps the many small and medium-sized cultural organisations that are a mainstay of the UK's heritage sector, and whose hard work keeps collections cared for and accessible to all.”



Aberdeen Archives, Gallery and Museums

# Museum Futures programme launched

**Markus Offer, Museum Futures Programme Manager, Museums Galleries Scotland, introduces the Museum Futures programme.**

Museum Futures is a partnership programme developed by the Scottish Government, Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS), and The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). Backed

by £4 million of Scottish Government funding, it aims to support the sector to adapt to meet current and future challenges, and plan for long term sustainability.

In 2024, MGS and DC Research conducted a survey of the Scottish museum sector. 11% of survey respondents indicated that their organisation could be at risk of closure within the next year. Museum Futures has been developed in response, its aim is to create new pathways to support the innovation needed for the sector to transition to a more sustainable way of working.

Museum Futures offers two main funding channels – an open fund to build leadership capacity and enable strategic change at an organisational level; and a strategic, targeted fund to enable change at a sector-wide level by piloting initiatives that explore new ways of working through collaborative and place-based approaches.

Alongside funding, Museum Futures offers a menu of wraparound organisational support, including skills development, expert advice, and peer to peer learning. This includes a new Organisational Health Checker

## Museums: The creative industries' untapped resource

**Museums should be recognised as collaborators in innovation, skills development, and industrial strategy, says new research.**

The Government made economic growth a central focus of the Spending Review and Industrial Strategy, identifying the creative industries as one of eight critical sectors for driving progress.

However, whilst undeniably important to the creative industries, inspiring and enabling groundbreaking work in film, TV, design, and beyond, museums and galleries continue to be absent from creative industry strategies.

developed by MGS to help organisations make informed decisions regarding immediate and long-term priorities.

Markus Offer, Museum Futures Programme Manager at Museums Galleries Scotland explains more.

### Why this specific programme and why now?

We listened to sector feedback about needing increased capacity to thrive and progress, this programme is here to meet those needs. It is essential that we support the sector effectively and work with them to deliver a tailored approach to maximise the impact of the programme. The funding from the Scottish Government will enable us to do this. We know independent museums have been under enormous pressure to deliver all the great work they do for their communities and need financial support to continue to deliver for years to come. Without this funding, we are at risk of losing key services in Scotland. We need to think creatively and be innovative in our approach to spending this money. It is essential that museums tell us what they need to not just survive, but to thrive. This programme gives us the opportunity to pilot new ways of working and to take risks to see what approaches work best.

### How important has partnership working been to get this programme out there?

Essential – the partnership between MGS, the Scottish Government, and NLHF will pool understanding and knowledge of the sector and

demonstrate the effectiveness of different types of support from the programme through action learning. This collaborative approach will help improve funding models and ensure better value for public investment in the future. The partnership will also highlight the benefits of working across agencies for both immediate and long-term impact.

**“ It is essential that museums tell us what they need to not just survive, but to thrive. ”**

### What are your hopes for the programme?

That it gives the sector more capacity to try new approaches in order to become more sustainable. Museums will be making transformational decisions based on improved understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities through the Organisational Health Checker. The museums and galleries sector will be better connected and mutually supportive, demonstrating collaborative and innovative leadership and business practices. Fewer museums will be in crisis mode with available capacity and support aiding the move towards new organisational models and the skills needed to develop their sustainability. Together we can build a stronger future for the sector, and MGS will be working to support this journey and advocate effectively for these organisations.

### How does this programme differ from other MGS support?

This programme is completely different to anything we have done before. There will be a key focus on innovation, partnership working, collaborative working, and entrepreneurial pilots. With the amazing creativity that the sector has, we hope that this will increase sustainability and help to drive more income to continue to do the great work that museums do. We will be offering a variety of training and development opportunities as well as tailored Continued Professional Development (CPD) for upskilling museum staff in the most needed areas. Some of these opportunities will be planned from feedback museums have already given us, but most of the training will be informed by what museums feel they really need after completing the Organisational Health Checker. We have been working hard to broker new relationships with external organisations that can provide support and open new ways of thinking. There will also be the opportunity to work with consultants that can help with specific needs. This programme is about lasting legacy and building a more sustainable future. For maximum impact we need museum organisations to complete the Organisational Health Checker and think big about what will make them more resilient for the years ahead.

[www.museumsgalleryscotland.org.uk/museum-futures/](http://www.museumsgalleryscotland.org.uk/museum-futures/)

In response, AIM, The National Museum Directors' Council (NMDC) and Art Fund commissioned a report by City Global Futures on the role of museums in the creative industries.

The research highlights five cross-cutting themes illustrating museums' contributions:

- Innovation, R&D, and Digital Production
- Skills and Talent Development
- Placemaking and Reimagining
- Creative and Regenerative Ecosystems
- Tourism and Soft Power

And outlines three key advocacy messages:

1. Museums play a major role in the creative industries

through innovation, skills, placemaking, creative ecosystems, and global pull, with clear contributions and impact. Quantifying the related economic impact of museums across the Creative Industries remains an opportunity.

2. Museums should be represented and included in national economic and creative policy discussions and form part of long-term national and local partnerships around the creative industries.
3. Museums have significant potential in the innovation economy but require investment in digital infrastructure and capacity.

Contact Lucy Bird, Art Fund's Policy and Research Lead if you would like to be sent the full report or discuss the findings and future phases of work. [lbird@artfund.org](mailto:lbird@artfund.org)

# News in brief

## Black Country Living Museum Wins Top UK Tourism Award

Black Country Living Museum has been awarded Gold for Large Visitor Attraction of the Year at the 2025 VisitEngland Awards for Excellence. The awards drew over 1,800 entries from across the country, with just 52 national finalists selected following rigorous judging by tourism industry experts.

In a highly competitive category, it prevailed over two outstanding national finalists— Liverpool Football Club Tours and Experiences and the National Space Centre—to claim the top spot.

Director and CEO Andrew Lovett OBE said: “To take home the Gold is a proud moment for us all—and a well-earned recognition of the passion and dedication of our staff and volunteers. I’m thrilled we can now celebrate this with our visitors, who are such a vital part of our story.”



Black Country Living Museum.

## Beamish wins Art Fund Museum of the Year 2025.

Comedian and award judge Phil Wang presented AIM member, Beamish, The Living Museum of the North East, with the £120,000 Museum of the Year prize at a ceremony in June covered live on the BBC.

Finalists each receive £15,000 and included: Chapter, Cardiff; Compton Verney, Warwickshire; Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast; and Perth Museum, Perth.

The 2025 edition of the prize, which regularly includes AIM members among the shortlist and winners, recognises ‘impactful projects that spotlight the people who bring museums to life, in addition to looking at overall achievements of the organisation’.

[www.artfund.org/museum-of-the-year](http://www.artfund.org/museum-of-the-year)

## Win for Stourbridge Glass Museum at M+H Awards 2025

AIM member Stourbridge Glass Museum was named Joint Winner of the Sustainable Project of the Year at the Museums + Heritage Awards 2025 in May. The museum’s Greener Glass initiative, an eco-friendly, upcycled glass exhibition housed within a purpose-built environmentally sustainable museum, was made possible with funding from AIM.

The museum highlights a world-first achievement: a renewable all-electric hot glass studio run by Allister Malcolm Glass Ltd, pioneering a new benchmark in traditional high-energy crafts. The project demonstrates how deeply sustainable technologies can be embedded into capital projects to reshape the future of heritage practices.

Stourbridge Glass Museum shares the accolade with Railworld Wildlife Haven, both recognised for their innovative and impactful approaches to sustainability.

## Manchester Museum named European Museum of the Year 2025

Manchester Museum has been recognised as one of Europe’s leading museums after winning the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) 2025.

Judges praised how Manchester Museum has ‘reimagined its mission, acknowledging and addressing its complex history by redefining the role of its collections and public programmes.’ Its approach to co-curation was cited as part of this, working with local and diasporic communities to bring new perspectives to collections and challenge traditional narratives. The South Asia Gallery, a British Museum partnership, is a key element of this,



Stourbridge Glass Museum at M+H Awards.

co-curated with 30 inspiring community members from across the South Asian diaspora, who were able to tell their own stories in their own words and on their own terms.

Manchester Museum was also praised for ‘thoughtful, informed, and impactful community engagement, creating a truly inclusive space where all individuals, regardless of identity or background, can see themselves reflected and represented.’ The Manchester Museum Celebrates programme of events, created in collaboration with charities, faith organisations and community activists, aims to build understanding between cultures, bringing people together to celebrate culturally significant events such as Lunar New Year, Vaisakhi, Africa Day, and Iftar.

Meanwhile, the Museum’s Top Floor has been transformed into a social and environmental justice hub, creating a space for collaboration with charities and non-profit organisations helping Greater Manchester’s communities act on the issues they care about. It acts as the headquarters for Pinc College, a specialist creative education college for neurodivergent young people, aged 16 to 24.

These initiatives are part of a wider, values-led transformation, underpinned by a £15 million redevelopment, which was completed in February 2023.



Manchester Museum.

## Tickets Now Available for Heritage Volunteering’25

Tickets for the heritage sector’s flagship volunteering conference, sponsored by Investing in Volunteers, Heritage Volunteering’25, are now on sale. Taking place via Zoom on 25 November and 26 November the conference will explore the role that volunteering can play in transforming lives and communities.

This year’s Keynote Speaker is Lisa Ollerhead, AIM Director who will explore the impact of AIM’s Connected Communities project. Professor Martin Webber and Dr. Beth Casey, from the University of York, will discuss their research and the practical tools they have developed to help organisations build more inclusive volunteering programmes. Attendees will also have the chance to pick from 12 workshops ranging from creating communities of volunteering to creating a sense of belonging.

[www.heritagevolunteeringgroup.org.uk](http://www.heritagevolunteeringgroup.org.uk)

# Meet the Safe Access Peer Cohort

## Jenna Marrion, freelance Project Manager, on the development of Safe Access.

Last year we were thrilled to hear our grant application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund's Heritage Innovation Fund was successful, enabling us to further develop the Safe Access Project. The third, 'Grow,' phase is a two-year £250k programme that will focus on embedding wellbeing and a Trauma Informed Approach within heritage settings, so that people from marginalised backgrounds can engage safely with sensitive collections and stories.

A fundamental element of this phase is a Peer Cohort Learning and Support Programme bringing 14 diverse heritage organisations together for a series of needs-led developmental activities designed to foster collaborative culture change. After many months in the making, we are delighted to introduce our Safe Access Peer Cohort:

- Boston Manor House
- Coffin Works (Birmingham Conservation Trust)
- Hampshire Cultural Trust
- Lakeland Arts
- Peterborough Sculpture Collection/Nene Park Trust
- Poole Museum
- Queer Britain Museum
- Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
- Stockroom
- The Green Howards Museum
- The Mosaic Rooms
- Pankhurst Centre
- Warrington Museum & Art Gallery
- Yorkshire Sculpture Park

We are also excited to share that the Safe Access Peer Cohort Learning and Support Programme will be co-facilitated by Antonia Canal and Hamza Rana. Their combined passion and experience as anti-racist heritage consultants, community facilitators, and cultural project leaders provide the ideal skillset, understanding and vision to design and deliver this transformative, relational, and action-driven programme.

### Refinement of the Wellbeing Framework

During the 'Test,' phase of Safe Access, AIM's project partners at Queer Kernow produced a draft Wellbeing Framework. The Cohort will be trialling the recommendations provided in that draft Framework throughout the lifecycle of the 'Grow' Phase so that we can refine and develop it with robust testing at its core. By the end of the project we will have a sector ready toolkit to support and enable heritage organisations in centring wellbeing, understanding, and compassion for lived experiences in their everyday working practices; with the main aim of improving how freelancers, staff, visitors and volunteers from marginalised communities experience museums and heritage, particularly sensitive collections and histories.

### The Structure of the Peer Cohort Learning and Support Programme

With the aim of addressing the unique challenges faced by museums and heritage sites in creating safe, inclusive, and accessible environments for all, Antonia and Hamza will be bringing the Cohort together for monthly online sessions, providing a comprehensive learning experience through a variety of formats:

- **Workshops** – action-focused workshops covering a range of topics relevant to creating safe and

inclusive heritage spaces. By taking an iterative approach to the programme, the needs and understanding of the Cohort will inform the workshops content.

- **Action Learning Sets (ALS)** – offering a collaborative space for Project Leads to explore and tackle challenges collectively. The ALS methodology encourages group problem-solving and reflective practice, fostering a supportive learning environment.
- **Sharing sessions** – providing a platform for Project Leads to share their experiences, insights, and key learnings from their activities and developments. This peer-to-peer sharing is crucial for building a community of practice and disseminating best practices across the Cohort.
- **Specialist talks and best practice sharing** – ad hoc specialist talks and best practice sharing opportunities will be scheduled to provide additional learning opportunities and will be tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the Cohort.

### Stay in touch!

Additional ways to engage with the programme as we progress over the next year will include a resource bank and open events. You can follow us on LinkedIn

[www.linkedin.com/company/safe-access-project](https://www.linkedin.com/company/safe-access-project)



The Safe Access cohort meeting at the recent AIM Conference.



**AIM's annual survey, which ran in Spring, provides an ongoing dataset on evolving member needs, alongside a sense of the wider health of the sector.**

#### What most matters to members

The top three rated AIM services has remained consistent with previous years

- Grant giving programmes
- Advocacy and representation to policy makers and funders
- Being part of a like-minded community.

#### Governance focus

This year, we asked several questions specifically about governance and, in particular, key governance challenges. This highlighted trustee recruitment as overwhelmingly the most common issue – particularly for small museums. Other areas of focus include balancing a strategic vs operational approach, Board capacity, and issues with local councils

Top areas of Governance support members wanted include:

1. Guidance on new legislation, policies, Charity Commission updates etc
2. Guidance for new Trustees
3. Focused online learning and training sessions
4. Written resources
5. Help recruiting new trustees and volunteers

#### Drivers for membership

As with previous years, the overwhelming reasons for members joining AIM are for support, expert advice, and the latest relevant information for running a successful heritage organisation, especially support for small

organisations. Other significant membership drivers are to be part of a community of likeminded museums and for access to grants. Members also like to know AIM is there to help, when and if they need support.

#### State of the sector

The responses to our state of the sector questions suggest a more positive position than in the last couple of years, although it is likely that museums are setting more realistic expectations in line with the challenging environment:

- Overall organisation performance over the last 12 months met expectations for 53% of respondents.
- 52% of respondents report that visitor numbers over the last 12 months have recovered to pre-pandemic levels, or higher.
- When asked how optimistic respondents are feeling for the next 12 months, in terms of organisational performance, the average score is 70/100, +5 points on last year.

#### Priorities for advocacy

The following three responses had over 40% share of all responses:

1. To make funding more readily available to cover core costs
2. To increase funding available for general maintenance
3. To make it easier to access funding for back of house projects including collections care and management.

These priorities are similar regardless of the size of museum responding. And when it comes to museums' own fundraising priorities, one-off projects, capital projects and core costs are top of the list.

#### Freelancers and suppliers

A separate survey was run for members in the individuals and Associate Supplier categories. Here, 87% rate their membership as excellent or good value for money and membership drivers are mostly to access practical and pragmatic advice, to stay up to date and to connect with potential clients.

You don't have to wait for the annual membership survey to provide feedback or share your thoughts, we always welcome member input. Contact us on [aimadmin@aim-museums.co.uk](mailto:aimadmin@aim-museums.co.uk)

AIM administers grants including Collection Care Audits funded by the Pilgrim Trust and Museum Fundamentals funded by the Pilgrim Trust and The Julia Rausing Trust.

# AIM grants case studies

## AIM Pilgrim Trust Conservation

### Stromness Museum

£1,765

Stromness Museum has received two grants from AIM to work with the conservator Hana Bristow to rehouse and preserve their seaweed collection, part of which is now on display.

Stromness Museum holds a collection of 400 specimens of pressed seaweed collected between 1839 and 1962 by several key Orcadian naturalists. These specimens are a vital source of information for science and are an important historical record and archive as they are used by researchers to help understand the effects of climate change.

Thanks to an AIM Pilgrim Trust Remedial Conservation Grant, the museum was able to see through to completion the conservation and remounting of the final group of seaweed specimens requiring conservation, which were collected in 1929-30 by the Orcadian naturalist George Ellison. We are delighted that this work now ensures the longevity of the collection and improves future access for researchers, outreach activities, exhibitions, and digitisation work.

It was valuable to work with the same conservator, Hana Bristow, who has previously worked on other seaweed specimens as part of the first AIM grant. Due to the established working relationship, less time was spent on liaising back and forth and this made the process quicker and smoother. At the time of the project, Hana was on the pathway to becoming ICON accredited. This grant normally only funds accredited conservators to undertake remedial work unless there are exceptional circumstances. This was one of those cases, as Hana had the relevant experience and was specialising in natural history; she had also recently relocated to Orkney.



Seaweed on display at Stromness Museum following the conservation work. Inset: Conservator Hana Bristow remounting a seaweed specimen.

Specimens now have new acid-free handling mounts with clear labelling, protected inside polypropylene herbarium sleeves. Twelve specimens required some form of interventive treatment to stabilise their condition, which often included re-adhering lifting parts, unfurling crumpled areas to regain their original form via humidification, or creating fragment packets to safely store detached parts of specimens.

I now feel an immense sense of pride when I look at the seaweeds, rather than overwhelming despair!

**Janette Park**  
Honorary Curator

## AIM Training Grant

### Army Flying Museum £350

The AIM Training Grant was crucial for me to take part on the National Army Museum's Regimental Museum Curators' Course, in London, as it provided me with the funding required to travel into London and stay in accommodation for the week.

The course provided me with essential curatorial skills and taught me a huge amount about what is needed to successfully work in a Regimental Museum. During the week I learnt about object handling and conservation, the handling of radioactive materials in collections, education in museums, the planning process for displaying an exhibition and its execution, marketing, and collections management among other topics.

All the knowledge I have gained during the course will help me in my work at the Army Flying Museum, especially in implementing our forward plan comprising of temporary exhibitions, public programming, collections documentation, and preventative conservation. Having no prior formal qualifications in this field I am now in the best position to contribute to the delivery of this forward plan, whilst being a part of the Army Flying Museum's small curatorial team.

**Andy Bryant, Collections Documentation Officer**



Activity at National Regimental Museum Curators' Course.

# Kimyo

**A new platform takes a novel approach to looking at your collections, as Fiona Bethel, Educational Outreach and Engagement Director of Kimyo explains.**

Have you ever thought about the way that your collection is presented to a younger audience, and how it is perceived from a child's perspective? Would you like support in encouraging younger children to visit your museum? Kimyo can help – it's a new platform that provides museums with an alternative way of presenting their collection, from a child's-eye view.

Kimyo's approach focuses upon child-centred communication, it helps you to think about your collection in a way that encourages repeat visits from younger visitors. Thinking about how items are presented, and incentivising the 'collection' of items, we provide a platform to both promote your location and collection and provide relevant and timely information that encourages questions and inquisitive minds.

Being mindful of time or personnel

constraints, and to help you further to think about your younger audiences, Kimyo has several time-saving tools that can be used to promote items in your collection, such as:

- AI tools to support the writing of descriptions to make them accessible for a targeted younger audience.
- Automatically generated Collector Sheets that visitors can print at home and bring with them to enhance their experience.
- A quick and easy interface for updating your listed items.

We have already been working with AIM members such as the Oxford Bus Museum, who say "The Kimyo website is easy to use and the support at Kimyo is excellent. I have no experience in writing for seven-year-olds or knowing what will attract them, so Kimyo's

offer to review my wording and adapt it for young people was a bonus."

Another user says "Kimyo has helped us to look at our historic building from a child's-eye view and to think about which objects and features will appeal to younger visitors. This has gone on to prove useful in other education projects outside of Kimyo. As a small attraction with a limited marketing budget, Kimyo is a terrific opportunity to bring in new visitors from the local area and beyond. Focusing on individual objects is a clever approach which allows us to highlight some of our more hidden features and attract those who had not heard of us or would not otherwise have thought to visit us."

Get in touch to find out more, free subscriptions available for low revenue AIM members

<https://kimyo.co.uk>



# Major Joan Crooke's Mess Dress and Purse at Soldiers of Shropshire Museum

In November 2024, Soldiers of Shropshire Museum was excited to welcome a landmark accession in the form of a 1962 Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) officers' mess dress and purse, which belonged to Shropshire servicewoman Major Joan Crooke (1920–1995).

A bundle of archive material relating to Joan was discovered in an auction lot which was donated to Soldiers of Shropshire Museum by one of its Facebook followers; this material prompted a social media appeal that ultimately brought the dress and purse to the museum – from the attic of one of Major Crooke's extended family!

In the museum's development towards greater inclusivity and a more representative collection, the dress is the first substantial item of women's military uniform in the collection.

The dress reflects an ideal of femininity that Army authorities expected WRAC officers to embody at military social events. Wonderfully, the purse contains a comb, mirror and a small plastic black cat for luck (see above image), personal items linked to the social events at which Joan wore the rayon dress, designed by Owen Hyde Clark of the House of Worth.

From the moment the dress and purse were acquired, the team were eager to place them on display. Firstly, as a compelling focal point for encountering Joan's personal story, supported by archival material previously donated. Secondly, as a flagship marker of curatorial change that is establishing women's stories more visibly within the museum's physical space, and which in turn is enabling more untold experiences and perspectives – discovered through volunteer research projects – to reach prominent public display.

The museum team are very grateful to receive a Museum Fundamentals project grant, as unfortunately both the dress and purse require conservation treatment before being showcased. The fabric of the dress is marked by several orange stains – anecdotally tomato soup! While these stains form part of the dress's object biography, they detract from its intended visual impact.

Fabric at the sides is sharply creased, giving a flattened rather than rounded shape. The fabric at the back appears pleated, but

this effect, like the side creasing, developed due to long-term storage conditions. The purse has loose lining, beads and thread.

Michelle Harper, an accredited conservator with the Institute of Conservation who specialises in textiles, will shortly be undertaking cleaning work on the dress and purse; Creasing will be reduced by humidification treatment.

Richard Gough, the museum's Director, prioritised the conservation work to these significant collection items and has allocated a prime spot for their display.

"Having this stunning dress on display is clearly an important step for the museum, but I wanted to go further by showing how far we've come in talking about women in and around the Army – so a conspicuous display case in prime view has been earmarked for the new display."

He continues: "We're all used to seeing scarlet tunics and male soldiers' smart dress in our displays, but to have such a markedly feminine item is phenomenally important. I believe the only other example in a museum collection is in the National Army Museum and belonged to Princess Mary."

*Soldiers of Shropshire Museum plans to have the Mess Dress on display in its Shrewsbury Castle home from Autumn 2025.*



**Grace Scott, Engagement Officer, Portsmouth Museums**  
on the value of stopping, studying, and drawing.

# Finding peace and mindfulness

Last summer, my colleague and I loaded our backpacks with pencils and postcards (and reward stickers – enjoyed by both adults and children alike!) and ventured to eight different parks and green spaces around Portsmouth. Our mission was simple . . . ask people to draw a tree!

This was part of the museum engagement programme for a new exhibition *The Quietness of Feeling*, a display of works by Benjamin Haughton – a Victorian artist whose fascination with trees is captured in his extensive works. We sought to provide everyone with the same experience Haughton had, of finding peace and mindfulness in the act of stopping, studying, and drawing a tree.

On various days, we either parked up the library’s electric tuktuk at a site, or approached on foot with colourful backpacks, setting up displays of previous drawings on park benches to encourage people to see what we were up to.

What we discovered was that approaching people with a postcard and pencil raises questions, but following a quick explanation, it is liberating. The number of adults who relished the opportunity to draw or doodle while outside was huge. Parents thinking we were only asking children to participate were surprised but delighted to have been invited to

partake in drawing too. Soon we had people sat cross legged on the ground in front of us or at the foot of different trees in the area, sketching, shading, in deep thought or chatting. Children asked questions about how trees look different, the impact of changing seasons, and stories they wanted to create about their favourite tree in the park (many fairies apparently reside in Portsmouth trees!).

It is my belief that simple materials such as cheap pencils and postcards can take away the intimidation from creating art on more pricey materials like sketch books and canvasses. People felt able to fill a small space with a quick sketch and to make mistakes or start again.

We gave participants the option to take home their creations or display them alongside our growing collection which would later be scanned and displayed on a screen outside the exhibition.

Overwhelmingly they chose the latter and soon we had over 600 tree drawings to scan, and many more still in the works thanks to the appointment of an Arts Engagement Officer following a successful Arts Council bid. We have now embarked on a new tree drawing activity – “Ceme-trees”, sketching some of the hundreds of varied species of trees in our local cemeteries, and hopefully unlocking a new type of green space



for people to visit while challenging the idea that cemeteries only have one purpose.

The result of these Art in the Park outings is that we were able to break down the physical, mental, and financial barriers to engagement by meeting people in a comfortable and familiar environment with a simple request to draw a tree. The organic conversations that arose from it meant we could discuss the exhibition, the museum, art, and natural history – all on their terms. Collections engagement can take many forms, but we have found that sometimes the simplest of activities can generate the most meaningful interactions.

[portsmouthmuseum.co.uk](http://portsmouthmuseum.co.uk)

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# Enhancing your E-Commerce Offering – practical steps when undertaking an online shop refresh

**Do you want to improve your eCommerce offering but don't know where to start? Elizabeth Pardoe, Solutions Consultant from Rod Barlow Consultancy, offers some helpful tips for navigating an online shop refresh.**

## Outline the areas for improvement

Refreshing your eCommerce setup is exciting, but before diving in, it is important to understand why your current site is not meeting your needs. Breaking it down into four key areas can help:

- **User experience and site design**
- **Customer conversion and retention**
- **Site maintenance** – how easily you can manage your site without needing a developer.
- **Customer engagement** – newsletters, promotions, email marketing etc.

Perhaps your online shop is difficult for visitors to navigate or is not optimised for mobile. To pinpoint these challenges, try seeing your site through the eyes of your customers. Walk through the entire journey – from searching products to checkout – and get feedback from your team, wider organisation, and even friends or family. Honest insights can highlight key areas for improvement, helping you build a platform that truly works for your customers.

The National Trust for Scotland (NTFS) wanted more control over their online shop, particularly the freedom to refresh its look and content without relying on a costly developer for every minor change. The high operational costs and lack of flexibility left the team feeling stuck. On top of that, the site's navigation was clunky, and the checkout process was frustrating, hurting user experience and limiting sales. Rubber Cheese's 2023 Annual Visitor Attraction Website Survey Report revealed that unnecessary checkout steps costs organisations up to £225,000 per year in lost sales – a staggering amount.

The answer? A more standardised platform that the team could update and manage themselves. Shopify is a software-as-a-service solution, paid through subscription, which was the perfect fit for NTFS's needs, offering the flexibility and ease of use they were looking for.

## Define your ambitions and expectations

The next step is to clearly define what you want to achieve with your new site. This will likely include these key areas:

- **Higher conversion rates** – Driven by a robust, efficient checkout process.
- **Future-proofing** – A site you can easily maintain and update yourself.

- **Enhancing user experience and design** – A platform that is intuitive, visually appealing, and easy to navigate.
- **Strengthening customer engagement and retention** – through targeted marketing and personalised interactions.

By setting clear goals, you will create a site that is aligned with your long-term vision. We worked with NTFS to create more contemporary, image-led site pages, which were easily customisable in-house. They wanted a clean mobile view, so we ensured that the design scaled to smaller screens.

Demonstrating the effects of their online shop refresh, particularly building a robust checkout process, NTFS have seen their conversion rate rise from 4.27% in December 2023 to 8.68% in December 2024. Furthermore, from September to December 2024, NTFS saw a 59% increase in their online transactions and a 55% increase in revenue from online sales; that there was no marketing surrounding this launch, yet NTFS saw a notable spike in online sales demonstrates the benefit of the new system.

## Find inspiration and create your “online shop wishlist”

Now it is time for the fun part—building your wishlist! For inspiration, explore other online shops in the sector – what features and functionality stand out to you?

- **Integration with the main site** – Is branding and design consistent between the main website and the online shop?
- **Page layouts** – How do the homepage, collections pages, and product pages look and flow?
- **Search functionality** – Are search recommendations and filtering options helping customers find what they need?

## Explore solutions and partners

Now you can confidently search for potential software solutions or partnerships to help make your requirements a reality.

At Rod Barlow Consultancy we work with organisations of varying sizes to improve their eCommerce offering. We offer a range of services including technology strategy and selection, Shopify new site builds, migrations, and refreshes as well as ad-hoc Shopify technical and UI/UX projects and support packages.

[www.rodbarlow.com](http://www.rodbarlow.com)



NTFS Online Shop.

# AYO GORKHALI!

## Here comes The Gurkha Museum

For more than 210 years, the Gurkhas have earned global respect for their courage, loyalty, and unwavering honour. Their battlefield cry, “*Ayo Gorkhali!*” (“The Gurkhas are upon you!”) still sends shivers down spines of foes. It is a powerful declaration of the Gurkhas’ presence and indomitable fighting spirit, a phrase that has echoed through battles and is deeply ingrained in Gurkha military tradition. Recruited from Nepal, Gurkha soldiers have served the British Crown since 1815 and received twenty-six Victoria Crosses, Britain’s highest award for gallantry. Currently, over 4,500 Gurkha soldiers are integrated into the British Army. The Gurkhas continue to be essential contributors to UK defence, revered at home and abroad for their remarkable record of service and sacrifice. Today, the Gurkhas’ heritage, culture, and traditions are preserved, protected, and promoted by The Gurkha Museum Trust, which now embarks on its most courageous initiative yet: *Project Kaida*.

### The world’s Gurkha museum

The Gurkha Museum narrates an extraordinary tale between two nations, distant in geography and culture, that have united to make an exceptional contribution to Britain and global security – a story that commenced in 1814 and endures to this day. Across two floors of public galleries, visitors uncover what sets Gurkha soldiers apart – their Nepali culture (*kaida*), their homeland and rigorous recruitment process, their unique uniforms, their weaponry (including the khukuri), and their battle honours.

The Gurkha Museum Trust is dedicated to ensuring that the stories and values of the Gurkhas are never forgotten and remain relevant. Three decades since its last significant renovation, this task is becoming increasingly challenging. The Gurkha Museum urgently requires refurbishment to modernise the Gurkha narrative, enhance accessibility, elevate the visitor experience, and attract a broader audience. It is time for the Museum to evolve.

### Introducing *Project Kaida*

*Kaida* is a Nepali word referring to ‘the Gurkha way’ – what Gurkhas do and how they do it. *Kaida* is the glue that binds together the Brigade of Gurkhas and links the serving soldier to his veteran predecessors. *Project Kaida* is a once-in-a-generation redevelopment designed to transform The Gurkha Museum from a modest military museum into a world-class heritage destination and global reference centre for Gurkha history and culture. *Project Kaida* will:

1. **Deliver a new research and education centre** – We hold over 3,500 books related to Gurkha heritage and Nepali culture, along with copies of regimental journals and personal records. The remodelled library now has dedicated spaces for discovery and learning, it includes:
  - a. A research room for those wishing to undertake academic research or family queries.
  - b. An archive room housing official records, diaries, photographs, and personal stories.
  - c. A flexible lecture and education space used for talks, unit visits, and children’s workshops.
2. **Bring the Gurkhas’ history online** – We will be cataloguing and preserving over 30,000 unique documents and photographs, making them accessible globally through the digitalisation programme.
3. **Inspire current and future generations** – Our three-year funded new education and outreach programme will bring Gurkha history and culture to life through engaging exhibitions and events at the Museum, travelling exhibitions and workshops to schools and communities, and online resources for all ages.
4. **A new museum experience** – We will renovate both the ground floor and first floor public galleries to ensure the



Left: New library at The Gurkha Museum. As well as research, this space is used for lectures, meetings, and children’s workshops. Middle: The National Lottery funded Digitisation Officer in one of the archive rooms at The Gurkha Museum. Right: The National Lottery funded Outreach and Community Officer at a recent family workshop exploring the Gurkhas’ contribution to the Burma Campaign in 1945.



Left: The design concept of the ground floor of the redeveloped public galleries (RIBA Stage 3). The new open plan design will support enthusiasts, intergenerational families, military units, and schools' visits. The image shows a stylised Chautari to provide visitors with an opportunity to sit down, rest and absorb the displays. The ground floor will also feature a 'messing' installation with interactive screens for guests to sit around and listen to inspiring Gurkha stories. Right: Fundraisers Riflemen Bikash Limbu and Rohit Gurung handing a cheque to the Director, Dr Daren Bowyer. Riflemen Bikash and Rohit raised £1,074 for The Gurkha Museum Trust's redevelopment by completing a sponsored Welsh Three Peak Challenge.

Brigade of Gurkhas' artefacts are accessible to all future visitors. This will involve stripping-out, redesigning and refitting the Museum's public galleries to represent the authentic Nepali and Gurkha story through a new dynamic and intuitive layout. (The full plans are available on The Gurkha Museum Trust's website ([www.TheGurkhaMuseum.co.uk/Future](http://www.TheGurkhaMuseum.co.uk/Future)).

#### Cost of securing the Gurkhas' story

The total project cost of £5.2 million covers the transformation of the library into a research and education centre; digitalisation of the archives; an inspiring outreach and educational programme; and the stripping out and refitting the public galleries. The National Lottery Heritage Fund has awarded The Gurkha Museum Trust two grants totalling £2.9m. To receive the full National Lottery Heritage Fund grants The Gurkha Museum must fund-match. The Museum's fundraising efforts are being led by the serving and retired members of the Brigade of Gurkhas.

*"I am proud to serve in the Brigade of Gurkhas, with over two centuries of history. As part of my commitment to honouring our heritage, I fundraised for The Gurkha Museum Trust, an institution that preserves the incredible legacy of the Gurkhas and supports vital initiatives like Project Kaida."* (Rifleman Bikash Limbu – fundraiser)

#### Countdown to change

The Gurkha Museum's ground and first floor galleries will be available for viewing until 8 September 2025, when renovations of the public galleries will begin. Throughout *Project Kaida*, The Gurkha Museum will remain open and operational, dedicated to preserving, protecting, and promoting Gurkha heritage. Even during the necessary renovations of the public galleries, the medal room, library, research area, and office on the second floor will remain accessible – we will continue offering engaging exhibitions, events, and lectures onsite, offsite, and online.

#### 2025 Summer Exhibition: Victory in 1945

Throughout August the Gurkha Museum Trust, during their annual summer exhibition, will honour the contributions of Gurkha units and individual soldiers in 1945, celebrating their roles in bringing about the end of the Second World War.

The exhibition will showcase an intriguing array of original documents, unique artefacts, inspiring narratives, and interactive activities suitable for all ages, along with expert insights.

#### Follow the progress of *Project Kaida*

From schoolchildren to scholars, veterans to visitors, The Gurkha Museum is a place for all of us. It is the sole museum responsible for the Brigade of Gurkhas' records, collections, and artefacts. The museum holds and narrates the stories of steadfast service and sacrifice – a legacy that must never be forgotten and continues to this day. By visiting The Gurkha Museum and supporting *Project Kaida*, you help ensure that "Ayo Gorkhali!" continues to echo through future generations.

[www.TheGurkhaMuseum.co.uk](http://www.TheGurkhaMuseum.co.uk)



# Whisper

## Simon Harrison of Associate Supplier Whisper outlines how technology can offer an enriched and informative experience for your visitors.

Museums and heritage sites often struggle with balancing the need to provide meaningful and contextual information to visitors whilst minimising the visual impact of signage and information boards.

The Whisper Service solves this problem by presenting each section of your visitor guide automatically on the visitor's mobile phone, as they move around your museum.

### Technology simplified

Whisper is a high-tech solution requiring a low-tech setup. With minimal set up, you can easily manage your own visitor guide, branding, and location triggers within the Whisper web portal.

### What will visitors see?

Visitor information is usually presented using a simple web-type layout, formatted specifically for mobile phone screens. You don't need any special web skills to create this; Whisper seamlessly combines your text and images to create

great-looking information screens ready for your visitors.

It can also present audio and video content and supports multiple languages.

### Right page, right time

Whisper uses a combination of GPS and Bluetooth locator beacons to identify exactly where a visitor is, and then automatically offer the corresponding information via their phone screen.

Visitors can go back and look at the guide sections for the places they've already been through, and you can also choose to make elements of your guide always available, for example, site maps, parking information, toilets, and facilities.

### No network needed

Poor mobile phone signal or availability of WiFi isn't a problem with Whisper. Whisper can automatically preload information to phones as the visitor nears the museum or site, meaning that is available even if the visitor's phone has no data connection. The user does not need to do anything to achieve this, it just works.

### Easy to access

To engage with this offering, visitors should be encouraged to install the Whisper Service on their phone from the Apple Play Store or the Google AppStore. This could be done via your website or as visitors arrive at the welcome desk. However you choose to

tell visitors about the app, the download is made easy by providing a QR code to scan with their camera, which automatically installs the service and even uses your own branding whilst going through the process.

And importantly, visitors can be assured that Whisper is completely anonymous. No information about the user is captured – there is no user login or account requirement, so visitors can enjoy the enhanced experiences without reservation.

### Down the track

We're working on a few new and exciting things over the forthcoming months, including

Heat maps: You'll be able to see where people linger, and for how long, as they move around your location. Being completely anonymous, this data can be captured without concerns over privacy and tracking. Whisper knows there is a phone there, but nothing about who it belongs to.

Martyn's Law: As well as providing general security awareness information to visitors as they arrive, Whisper can be used to quickly pass emergency messages to everyone who is on site, again even when there is no data network available.

Currently, Whisper is free to try – visit [www.justwhisper.com/nfpo](http://www.justwhisper.com/nfpo)



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