



Association of
Independent
Museums

AIM Bulletin

February 2026

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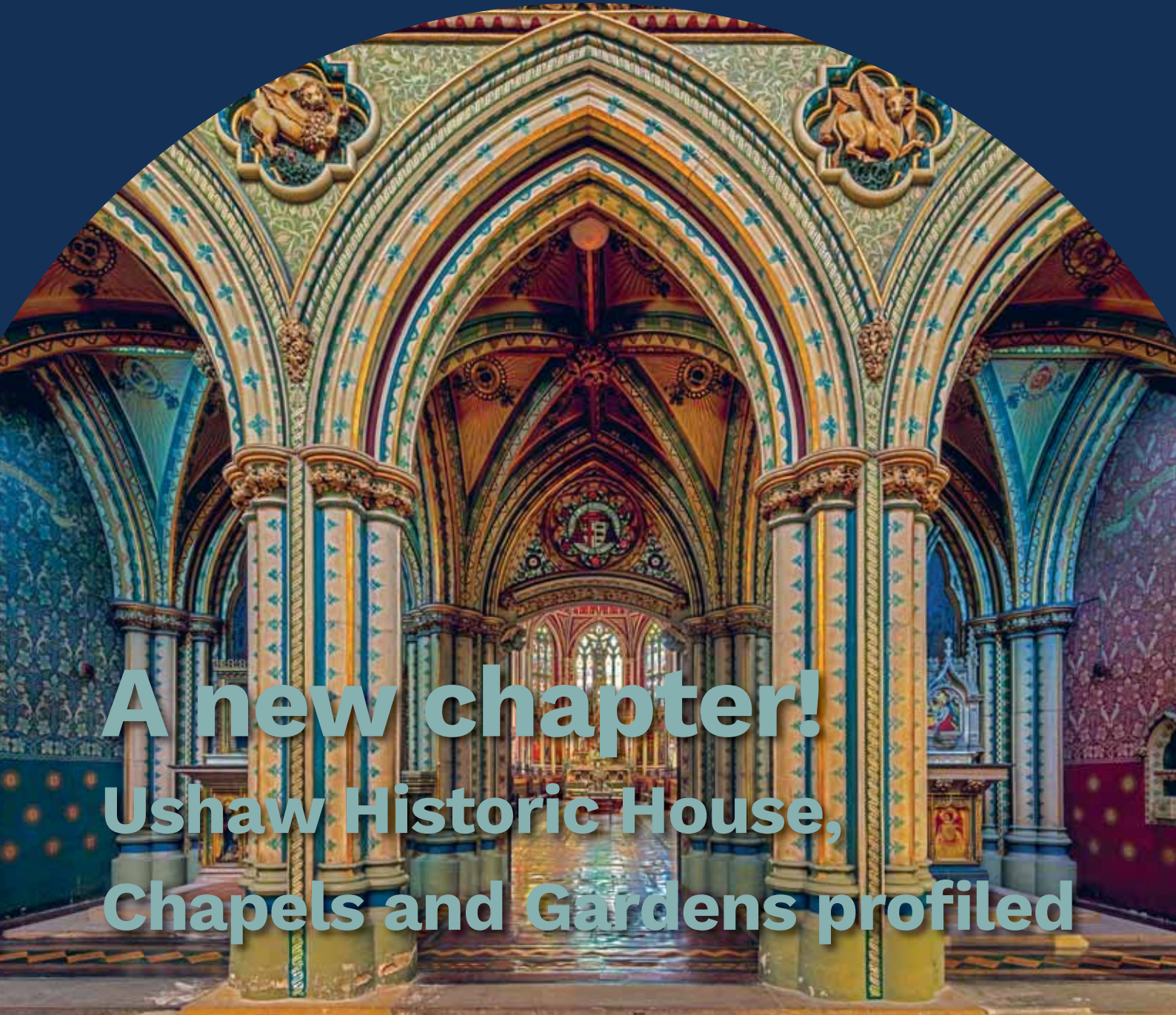
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Welcome to AIM Bulletin!

www.aim-museums.co.uk

Letter from the Editor

If there's one thing most of us can agree on, it's that running a museum right now isn't straightforward. The past few years have tested organisations of every size, prompting tough questions about finances, purpose and sustainability. But as we highlight in this edition, independents remain full of energy, ideas and a real willingness to adapt.

This issue introduces *Fragile to Flourishing* AIM's new research on museum operating models. Published earlier this month, the research takes a clear-eyed look at the pressures museums face – from rising costs to shifting visitor expectations – while also exploring how some organisations are finding new ways forward. As ever there are no simple or easy answers, and certainly no singular solution. However, the research provides a practical framework that helps museums reflect on where they are now, think about possible futures and make more confident, informed choices about what to protect, what to change and what to let go.

Those conversations will continue at this year's AIM Conference, *Independent Advantage – Rethinking your museum operating model* brings us to the North East this June, with Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens hosting conference sessions and Beamish providing the setting for social events and the pre-conference study day. The programme is packed with practical sessions, inspiring case

studies and plenty of space to connect with peers. If previous years are anything to go by, tickets won't hang around for long – so it's well worth booking early.

We're also taking a look beyond the UK in this edition. Our interview with Nora Venezky, President of the Small Museum Association in the U.S highlights just how many challenges – and opportunities – are shared by small and independent museums on both sides of the Atlantic. From limited budgets to wearing multiple hats, the parallels are striking, and the conversation is a timely reminder of the power of peer support, practical skills-sharing and collective optimism.

Finally, our cover story shines a spotlight on Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens. Once facing an uncertain future, Ushaw has reimaged itself as a thriving, mixed-economy organisation, balancing heritage conservation with enterprise, creativity and community engagement. Its story is both distinctive and deeply relevant – a fitting place to host this year's conference.

Enjoy the read and as ever if you've ideas for a Bulletin piece, or have some feedback please do get in touch!

Matt

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Front cover

Set within rolling parkland just outside Durham, Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens remarkable architecture, internationally significant collections, and warm, inclusive approach offers something genuinely distinctive within the North East's cultural landscape. Its story spans more than 450 years with origins in the upheaval of the Reformation. An English Catholic college founded in Douai in 1568, it was forced to flee during the French Revolution, returning to England and eventually settling at Ushaw in 1808. Over the next century, an extraordinary complex of buildings grew up around the original Georgian house and for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Ushaw functioned as a working seminary. Declining vocations and financial pressures led to its closure in 2011, raising serious questions about the future of the estate. Rather than retreat into silence and be left to crumble into ruins, a new chapter began. Read our profile on page 18.



St Catharine's Chapel, Ushaw Historic House by Graham Prosser



Fragile to Flourishing

Museum operating models in an uncertain world

AIM has just published important new research on the most effective operating models for independent museums. Alongside background to the work, author Dawn Langley from Alchemy Research introduces some key findings.

The past five years, marked by the global pandemic and other significant disruptions, have accelerated change for the museum sector. Visitor behaviours have altered, operating

costs have increased, and charitable funding has become increasingly competitive.

This current context, as reported by those we spoke to during our research, has left many museums feeling problem-saturated and unable to plan positively for the future. As a consequence museum leaders are left feeling increasingly uncertain, overwhelmed and often struggling to motivate their teams while they navigate the white waters of an ever-changing operating environment.

Given the scale and pace of change, AIM, supported by Arts Council England and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, commissioned a report on how museums might look to the future and build on strengths in the sector.

The research underpinning the report considered how some museums are preparing to exploit future opportunities. In reviewing

a diverse group of museums several factors have emerged that might help identify what future flourishing museums look like. The report also considers what external elements are needed to help enable museums to flourish in the coming years.

Developing a future focus

It will come as no surprise to many that traditional operating models for museums are increasingly difficult to sustain and are no longer fit for purpose. Existing funding and governance models are increasingly under strain – new financial models and operating models are needed.

However, some museums are already developing ‘flourishing’ characteristics including adopting growth mindsets, systemic thinking, community engagement, and re-purposing their assets to generate commercial income. The importance of horizon scanning and considering possible futures emerged strongly from the research.



Developing this future focus also needs a supportive and empowering environment. A range of enabling factors to support museums are required including policy alignment, diverse funding models, digital skills development, workforce planning, and strong inter/transdisciplinary networks. Museum leaders recognise that the public funding environment has changed irrevocably; to find new models they need access to R&D and cost of change support.

Why flourishing?

A flourishing framework is not about optimism for its own sake; it is a strategic, ethical, and practical response to crisis. Flourishing provides a way to survive without losing what makes museums worth saving. In times such as these there is a danger of focussing narrowly on survival; flourishing helps provide direction and can aid decisions about what to protect, what to change and what to let go. The framework is designed to support wealth building: socially, culturally, and economically.

What does flourishing look like?

A developmental range – see below – is proposed covering characteristics from fragility to flourishing. We recognise, as George Box said, ‘all

models are wrong but some are useful,’ so this is not intended to be followed slavishly or used as a tick box assessment. It aims to provide prompts for discussion, and it recognises that a museum might have functions that are at different stages across the range.

“ Flourishing provides a way to survive without losing what makes museums worth saving. ”

Flourishing factors:

1. Inspirational leadership, local, regional, or national influence, contributes to sector debates
2. Sustainable surpluses, strong reserves or endowment, invests in R&D
3. Visionary governance, meta level outlook, highly engaged
4. Operations are adaptive, learning focused, support experimentation and are open to change
5. Programme is transformative, co-created, recognised regionally, nationally etc

6. Collection is fully activated, and is an exemplar for stewardship and access
7. Seen as a cultural and social innovation lab, well disseminated impact
8. Is seen as sector influencing, contributes to the debates around museum practice

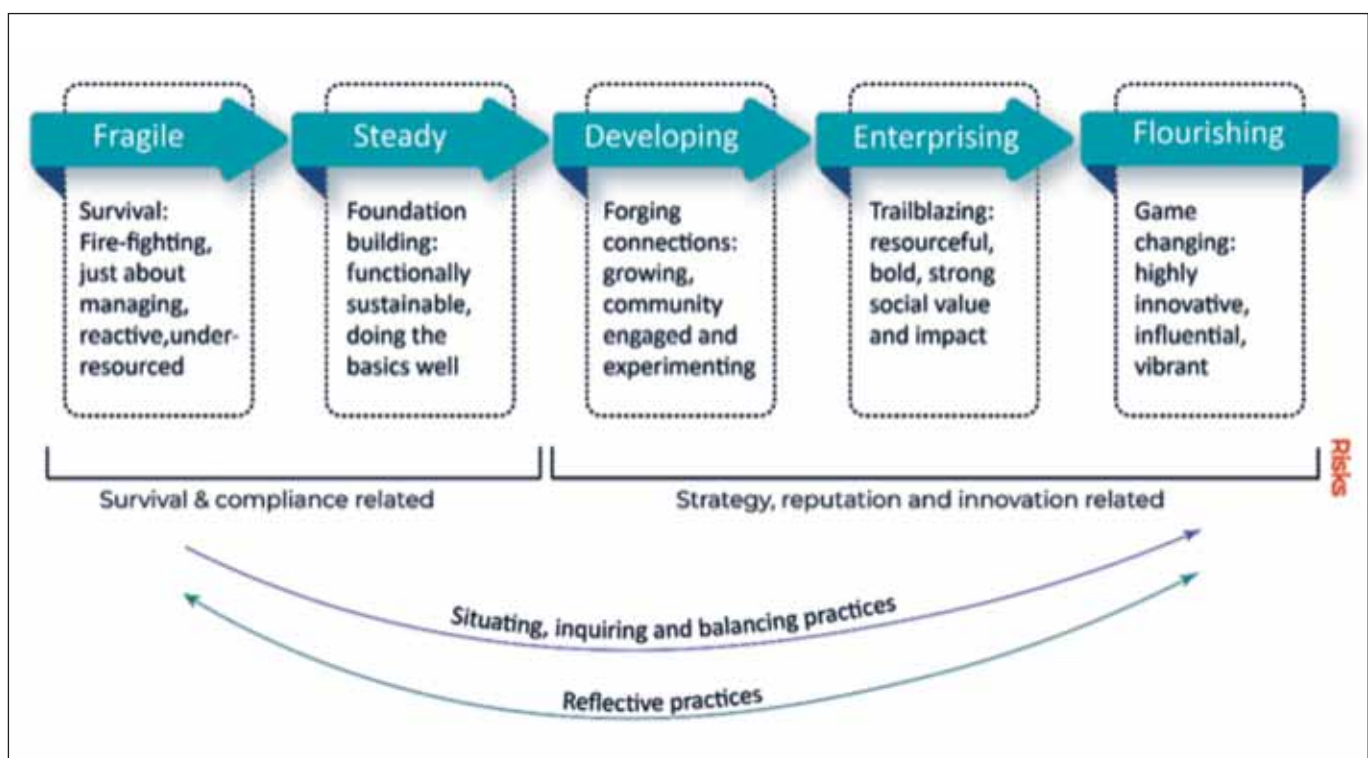
How do we face the future?

Museums face constrained public funding and rising costs, necessitating strategically building on existing assets, considering deaccessioning, re-wiring operating models, enhancing financial and commercial skills, and adapting funding behaviours.

Clarity on business and operating models, flexibility, modular planning, and embedding reflection and research are vital.

Key strategies already being developed include expanding entrepreneurialism, deepening partnerships, and leveraging technology. Museums adopting growth mindsets, embracing social enterprise, and managing risk creatively are likely to be better positioned to flourish.

[Read the full report and access events and tools at aim-museums.co.uk/our-research](https://aim-museums.co.uk/our-research)



AIM Pilgrim Trust Collections Care Audits

In the latest round the panel received 18 applications with nine applications receiving funding.

The basic grant award offers organisations a grant of £1,200 (+VAT and expenses) to work with a conservator for three days. Typically, the conservator prepares a report which considers the agents of decay and how to make improvements to the display and store environment to

improve collections care. The latest recipients were:

- Kent Mining Museum
- Hundred Heroines
- Maryport Museum
- Deaf History Archive Scotland
- RAF Snaith Museum
- Moor Pool Heritage Trust
- Anaesthesia Heritage Centre
- Emery Walker Trust
- Torfaen Museum

The closing date for the next round of Collections Care Audits is 5pm on Friday 27 March 2026. All the details on how to apply can be found at aim-museums.co.uk/grants/collections-care-and-conservation-grants

New resource hub for sharing climate guidance

A common refrain from museums and heritage organisations tackling the climate crisis is no longer “Is there guidance?” but “Where on earth do we start?” The sheer volume of high-quality environmental resources – while a testament to sector-wide engagement – has itself become a barrier to action, leaving many organisations paralysed by choice and complexity.

Recognising this, a consortium led by AIM and the National Museum Directors’ Council (NMDC), and supported with input from Arts Council England, Museum Development England, and Historic England, is now well into developing a practical solution. Their answer is a pioneering online Museum Climate Hub.

From Overwhelm to Action

“Research consistently showed that organisations were keen to take a first step, but struggling to know where to start.” explains Lisa Ollerhead, AIM Director. “We have the will, and we have the expertise, but the signal was getting lost in the noise. This project is about tuning that signal, creating a clear, user-friendly hub of valuable guidance for heritage organisations of every size and type.”

NMDC’s Suzie Tucker adds: “this new resource fulfils a key recommendation from NMDC’s 2023 ‘Museum COP’ event, which identified the need for clear signposting to existing resources to enable the urgent action needed to decarbonise



Artworks from ‘Quente/Frio’ Curated by Julio Dolbeth, BOIL Climate Festival, Porto, August 2025.

the sector and mitigate the impacts of the climate and biodiversity crises.”

Me3, selected for their expertise in user experience design and sustainability within the cultural sector, have curated the vast landscape of existing guidance to design an intuitive navigation system that responds to an organisation’s specific needs (such as size, budget, and starting point), and wrap it all in an engaging, accessible digital interface. The new resource is being developed as a strategic pilot with two main aims: to provide immediate, practical help to the sector and to serve as a live testing ground. Every user interaction and piece of feedback will directly inform the blueprint for a potential future, larger-scale standalone platform.

The Museum Climate Hub launches in Spring ’26, sign up to either NMDC or AIM’s regular newsletter to find out more.



Independent advantage

Rethinking your museum operating model

What defines a truly successful museum? This perennial question lies at the heart of this year's conference. Drawing on groundbreaking new research into the sector's most effective business models (see page 3 for more on that) we will unpack the essential strategies and practical steps your institution needs to succeed.

When

10, 11 June 2026 (pre-conference study day 9 June)

Where

Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens are hosting our conference sessions and expo and Beamish, the Living Museum of the North our social events and a pre-conference study day. Ushaw is a short distance from Durham City in County Durham.

Ushaw is a majestic historic estate of five hundred acres, in the heart of the Durham countryside. Formerly a seminary

college, now a unique heritage and cultural visitor attraction, its glorious Georgian and Victorian Gothic architecture and stunning grounds make it a perfect place for conference.

Art Fund's Museum of the Year 2025, Beamish is a world-famous open-air museum which brings the history of North East England to life at its 1820s Pockerley, 1900s Town, 1900s Pit Village, 1940s Farm, 1950s Town and 1950s Spain's Field Farm exhibit areas.

Social events

Both our pre-conference (Tuesday evening) and conference (Wednesday evening) social events will be held at Beamish, The Living Museum of the North. You will have the opportunity to explore this wonderful, storied site with your friends and colleagues discovering fascinating stories of everyday life in the region through time.

What to expect

This year promises a dynamic mix of inspiration, practical advice, and sector-wide collaboration. Two days of learning, networking, and sharing strategies that will act as a catalyst for change.

Expect hands-on sessions tackling challenges including creative ways to refresh tired displays without breaking the bank, practical strategies for leading transformation while keeping teams engaged, how assistive technology is transforming visitor experiences, and how museums are embedding genuine inclusion. Sustainability also takes the spotlight, with sessions on building climate resilience and using collections to spark conversations about the planetary emergency.

Core to the conference theme, business resilience, and entrepreneurship feature strongly, from rethinking governance to unlocking retail potential. Legal and operational essentials are not overlooked either with a session on employment law reforms and commercial contracts that will help you navigate risk and seize opportunities.

Finally, dive into inspiring case studies from museums just like yours. Whether you are looking to strengthen

partnerships, refresh interpretation, or future-proof your museum, this year's conference offers actionable insights and energising ideas.

Who should come?

You! AIM Conference is for anyone working in the heritage sector and we welcome colleagues from all career stages and from all types and size of heritage organisations from right across the UK, not just independents.

Training Grants

A number of Training Grants are available. To find out more visit aim-museums.co.uk/grants/aim-training-grants

Grab your tickets!

AIM's recent conferences have sold out so it is worth booking early on the link below! It is also cheaper – early bird tickets are on sale now, with discounts available until the end of April. A limited number of expo stands and sponsorship packages remain, get in touch to find out more.

Thanks to our sponsors

Thanks to our Headline Conference sponsor Bloomberg Connects and our Gold Sponsors Minerva, Hayes Parsons Insurance Brokers, and the UK's Research Infrastructure for Conservation and Heritage Science (RICHeS).



Potters at work at Beamish, the Living Museum of the North.

aim-museums.co.uk/the-aim-conference

News in brief

Pilgrim Trust Director recognised in New Year's Honours

Sue Bowers, Director of Pilgrim Trust has been recognised with an MBE in the latest New Year's Honours. The Pilgrim Trust will be well known to many readers given their longstanding support of independent museums through AIM's Collections Care and Conservation grants, and more recently AIM Museum Fundamentals awards. National Trust director-general, Hilary McGrady, has been awarded a CBE for services to heritage and Dr Tristram Hunt, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum was awarded a Knighthood for services to museums.

A Masterwork by John Singer Sargent Returns to Broadway

An important portrait by the internationally celebrated artist John Singer Sargent has been accepted by HM Government in Lieu of Inheritance Tax from the estate of the Honourable Jane Cohen and allocated to the Broadway Museum and Art Gallery.

The portrait has not been on public view since 1926, when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in the Sargent Memorial Exhibition. German-born Elizabeth Eberstadt (1844-1931) married George Lewis (1833-1911) as his second wife in 1867. Lewis, who rescued Edward VII from various legal scrapes, was knighted in 1893 and created a baronet in 1902. Lady Lewis was a summer renter in Broadway, and a close friend of the American actress Mary Anderson de Navarro at Court Farm. She was to die at nearby Orchard Farm, the home of her friend Lady Maud Bowes-Lyon, aunt of Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother. Her unmarried daughter Katie inherited the portrait and during World War II moved to Wychwood House (now Hawstead House), Broadway, where the portrait hung, with her own portrait by Sargent, until her death in 1961.



John Singer Sargent, Elizabeth Eberstadt, Mrs George Lewis, 1892 Accepted by HM Government in Lieu of Inheritance Tax from the estate of the Late HONORABLE JANE COHEN and allocated to Broadway Museum & Art Gallery, 2025.



Historic Shakespeare House Damaged in Car Crash

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has launched a fundraising campaign to conserve Hall's Croft, one of England's most significant Jacobean buildings, after a car accident caused severe damage to the property late last year. The Trust is seeking to raise £500,000 as part of a Phase 2 conservation programme to safeguard the 400-year-old timber-framed house for future generations.

Hall's Croft, the former home of William Shakespeare's daughter Susanna Hall and her husband Dr. John Hall, was struck by a vehicle on the morning of 17 October when a driver accidentally reversed into the side of the building. The impact shattered several oak beams and left a gaping hole in the roadside wall, exposing the building's interior to the elements.

While no one was injured, the structural damage to this Grade I listed house is not inconsiderable. As seen in the above image, emergency scaffolding and supports were put in place within hours by the Trust's conservation team to stabilise the site. Immediate repairs will be funded by the driver's insurance, but the Trust now needs to move quickly into an unfunded £2.5m conservation programme.

Winner of Heritage Volunteer Group Volunteer Leader of the Year Award 2025

Michele Armstrong, Head of Volunteering at The Auckland Project was announced as the winner of the Heritage Volunteer Group Volunteer Leader of The Year at their recent annual conference.

The judging panel, made up of HVG board, advisory group members and previous winners highlighted Michele's work and that of two highly commended volunteer leaders, Helen Russell, North East Museums and Apapat Jai-in Glyn, The Portico Library.

Judge Chris Martin, Managing Director of Team Kinetic, sponsor of this year's awards said

"Volunteer leaders are the true rock stars, the architects, and the compassionate superheroes of the voluntary sector! As judges we saw how Michele beautifully leads a volunteer programme that is fully integrated into the organisation's core mission. Her holistic approach, truly stood out to the judges because she ensures volunteering isn't a separate function but the very fabric of the organisation."

heritagevolunteeringgroup.org.uk



Teeth Exhibition at Cresswell Craggs

A vibrant series of new mixed media works inspired by the collection has gone on display at Cresswell Craggs. Artist Lucy Stevens, working alongside curator Angharad Jones, chose to work with a selection of mammal teeth from the collection of nearly 38,000 objects including reindeer, wolf, horse, bear, hyaena, vole along with extinct mammals like the woolly rhino and woolly mammoth, learning more about each species' habitat and lifestyle to inspire the new artworks.

Based in Leicester, Lucy's work explores our relationship to the natural world, often drawing inspiration from ornithology, museum collections, and her own experiences in nature.

The exhibition also includes photographs and a video documentary showcasing the journey of the project, including Lucy in her art studio, and exploring the collections in the storeroom with curator Angharad Jones at Cresswell Craggs.

The exhibition continues until Sunday 28 June.

www.cresswell-craggs.org.uk



Flying High

The Army Flying Museum, based in Middle Wallop in Hampshire, scooped the silver award for Tourism Event of the Year at the Beautiful South Awards organised by Tourism South East in December for its *Wallop Wheels and Wings*.

The awards celebrate excellence within the tourism sector, with 75 finalists from tourism and hospitality businesses in South East England gathered for the ceremony.

This is the second consecutive year that the Army Flying Museum has reached the final.

Chief Executive of the Army Flying Museum, Lucy Johnson said: "The last year has been a very special one at the Museum with us celebrating 40 years and we continue to go from strength to strength. I am incredibly proud of all the team and to be presented with the silver award by Tourism South East was the icing on the cake."

A Beer for a Pioneer

Dr Jenner's House is raising a glass to celebrate a new collaboration with their friends at Mills Brewing, who have crafted a limited-edition beer made with grapes harvested from the historic vines in Dr Jenner's garden. This unconventional brew marries the character of traditional beer with the unexpected brightness of grapes, a playful nod to the spirit of curiosity that defined Jenner's work, and a reminder that great things can happen when science and creativity meet. A percentage from every bottle purchased is donated to the museum.

"Edward Jenner was known for challenging assumptions and experimenting in ways that transformed the world," said James Rodliff, Director. "Working with Mills Brewing felt like a wonderfully fitting tribute to that inventiveness."



Nantgarw China Works Trust awarded multi-year funding from Postcode Community Trust

Thanks to funds raised by players of the People's Postcode Lottery the Trust has been awarded a total of £45,000 over three years offering much-welcomed unrestricted funding at a time when cost pressures on museums are mounting.

Strategic Development Manager, Mari Lowe, said that "with costs rising, independent cultural and community venues like ours are at risk. We feel extremely lucky to have secured this support which means the charity can face the next few years with renewed confidence."

Nantgarw China Works Trust operates and maintains an independent museum and heritage visitor attraction; the old pottery works at Nantgarw includes a Grade II listed house and Scheduled Ancient Monument which includes the remains of three 19th century bottle kilns.

www.nantgarwchinaworksmuseum.co.uk

RICHeS Access Fund Catalyst Projects underway

The RICHeS Access Fund Catalyst Projects represent the first phase of the RICHeS Access Fund, and will help shape the recently launched full Access Fund.

Five Catalyst Projects are now underway, addressing a wide range of heritage science challenges from improving accessibility in scientific analysis to unlocking nationally significant archaeological archives:



1. Embedding Accessibility: Making Scientific Analysis Tactile for the Visually Impaired: Manchester Metropolitan University and Portland Basin Museum
2. Moving Pictures: Preserving Automotive Film Heritage: English Heritage and the British Motor Museum
3. Unlocking the Sulgrave Archaeological Archive through Community Science: University of Exeter and Northamptonshire ARC
4. Charred Plant Remains and Wood Charcoal from the Late Neolithic Village at Durrington Walls: University of Sheffield and Durrington Walls
5. Romans at the Tweed: Returning to Trimontium to examine a crossing point at the northern limit of the Roman Empire: University of Bradford, AOC Archaeology and the Trimontium Trust

Find more on the projects and the RICHES Access Fund at www.riches.ukri.org

Autonomy Project Shortlisted for Awards

Sunderland Culture's Autonomy Project – one of AIM's Connected Communities projects – was recently shortlisted for the North East Culture Awards 2025, recognising its impact in reducing social isolation and creating meaningful creative pathways for autistic young people across the region.



Project lead Vicki – right, above – said: “Being named among the finalists for this highly respected regional award reflects the strength of Sunderland Cultures’ partnership with our funders AIM, Education Partnership North East (Sunderland College), Autonomy participants, families, and local neurodivergent artists.

The awards celebrate outstanding cultural initiatives that enrich and transform communities. Autonomy’s nomination acknowledges the project’s role in developing accessible, co-designed opportunities; removing barriers to participation; and building a sense of belonging for young autistic adults within Sunderland and beyond.”

Find out more about the project at www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ2FLUPrHvs

Harbour Master’s Beaulieu River patrol boat is new investment for Buckler’s Hard Yacht Harbour

In the latest investment in Buckler’s Hard Yacht Harbour, a Harbour Master’s RIB (see image below) has been purchased to give improved access to all reaches of the Beaulieu River. The Highfield RIB has been named *Snipe* and, with a 150hp Honda engine, will be used by the yacht harbour team to carry out routine checks, patrols, and maintenance, as well as respond to emergency incidents.

Harbour Master Wendy Stowe said: “We’re excited by the purchase of a more powerful RIB, which will provide improved access along the full length of the river. It will be a huge asset to our team.”

The seven-metre RIB, with ‘Harbour Master’ branding, will also be a more visible presence on the Beaulieu River as the team goes about its daily tasks.

The recent purchase follows completion of the yacht harbour’s £2m redevelopment of its boatshed, creating stunning waterfront offices, meeting rooms, and workshop bays.

See the RIB in action at <https://youtu.be/f2BYGqnQysM>



The British Deaf Association and the British Deaf History Society have announced a new partnership which secures the long-term future of the UK's Deaf heritage.

Securing the long-term future of Deaf heritage in the UK

The Deaf Heritage Centre, based at Manchester Deaf Centre, became part of the British Deaf Association's (BDA) national heritage programme in December 2025, ensuring that the history, stories, and achievements of Deaf people continue to be preserved, celebrated and shared for generations to come.

Since 2006, the British Deaf History Society's (BDHS) volunteers, staff and trustees have played a vital role in documenting and safeguarding Deaf history, collecting invaluable artefacts, artworks, photographs, and archives that reflect Deaf life across the UK. Under the partnership the collection will remain in Manchester, and the current member of staff has been retained.

Dr Robert Adam, Chair of the British Deaf Association:

"For nearly two decades, the BDHS has played a vital role in safeguarding our shared heritage, and we are humbled to continue this important work alongside them."

Melinda Napier, Chair of the British Deaf History Society, added:

"The Deaf Heritage Centre has been a labour of love for many within BDHS, especially Peter Jackson. I am pleased that the BDA will now lead the next phase of this journey. Together, we will ensure that the museum continues to grow and that our Deaf heritage remains safeguarded for future generations."

Lydia Gaines, Heritage Coordinator

"Deaf heritage is a deeply important part of our shared history so it was understandably concerning to see such a unique collection facing an uncertain future. Over the past year, the museum has worked in close partnership with the British Deaf Association to secure a strong and sustainable future. Thanks to the commitment and collaboration of museum staff, volunteers, and BDA colleagues, the transition has been both smooth and successful."

Lynsey Jones, MD North

"The Deaf Heritage Centre was able to use consultancy support through the



Irfan Yusuf, BDA Vice Chair with Melinda Napier, Chair of BDHS.

AIM Higher programme at a critical time to consider the different transfer options available between the BDHS and the BDA and make an informed choice on the most suitable one for the museum's long-term sustainability."

What is AIM Higher?

Good governance is key to well-run, successful museums. Yet we know being a trustee can sometimes feel daunting. Through our AIM Higher consultancies we offer practical, hands-on support to help your board develop and your museum thrive. Whether your museum is already

confident about its governance or if you are facing hard decisions about your future, we are happy to help. Participating boards receive one-to-one support from a specialist consultant, who will work to identify and address areas for development.

aim-museums.co.uk/programmes/aim-higher



Museums: Scotland's Stories, Scotland's Future

Senior Advocacy and Public Affairs Manager, David McDonald encourages independent museums in Scotland to make their voices heard ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

With just three months to go until the 2026 Scottish Parliament election, the political conversation is intensifying. Now is the time for AIM's Scottish members to make their voices heard and take part in Museums: Scotland's Stories, Scotland's Future, the national advocacy campaign designed to ensure museums are visible, valued, and recognised for their vital civic role.

We know that our independent museums are central to their local communities. They support education, health and wellbeing, fair work, local pride, and economic recovery. They safeguard Scotland's local and national

collections, provide spaces for people to come together, and help communities understand their past and imagine their future. Yet these contributions are often overlooked in national policy discussions.

Museums: Scotland's Stories, Scotland's Future aims to give museums a collective voice. The campaign combines four national priorities:

- Multi-year support for Museum Futures
- Recognition as forces for social good
- Museums as trusted civic spaces for inclusion
- Capital investment to reduce carbon footprints

Together with a fifth ask, developed by you.

The success of the campaign relies on each museum to identify one "ask," a clear, action they would like the next Scottish Government to take for their museum and community. When gathered, these asks create a national

picture of the sector's social, cultural, and economic need.



Your local ask will give politicians a clear understanding of the issues that matter most.

Whether it relates to local partnerships, collections care, visitor engagement, workforce development, or sustainability, your voice adds weight to the collective story.

In recent years AIM members have been clear about the importance of advocating for your work, AIM's 2025 Annual Report highlights advocacy as a top three priority for members. So we invite you to join the campaign and make your voices heard. Independent museums have particular strengths and needs, and this campaign is an opportunity to make sure these are included in national debates.

Your story matters. Your voice matters.

By participating, you will help show the sector's collective impact, scale, diversity, and civic value. So, visit our website, add your ask, and join the campaign for a stronger, more resilient future for museums and communities alike.

www.museumsgalleriescotland.org.uk/election2026



Nora Venezky, left, at the opening reception at the National Capital Trolley Museum.

Championing resilience

Meet the Small Museum Association

We spoke with Nora Venezky, President of the Small Museum Association, to uncover parallels between the challenges and solutions faced by colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic.

Across the United States small museums are quietly shaping local communities in profound ways. The Small Museum Association (SMA), an entirely volunteer-run organisation is dedicated to empowering these organisations, in ways strikingly familiar to AIM and its members.

SMA's story began with a conference in Ocean City, Maryland – a seaside town in the off-season. "It really started as a conference with some local museum folks in the middle

of February," recalls Nora Venezky, SMA's President. "A beach community in winter tends to be affordable! They held a conference there for 30 years, and it became this incredible network of small museum professionals."

SMA doesn't define "small" by metrics. "If you feel like you have a limited budget, limited staff capacity, limited space – we welcome you with open arms," says Nora. The focus is practical: tips, tricks, and resources

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

**Sunderland Culture
£186.82**

Support for Good for Me, Good for FE Awards

Sunderland Culture and Education Partnership North East (Sunderland

College) are grateful to AIM for the award of £186.82, which enabled our teams to attend the Good for Me, Good for FE Awards Celebration at the House of Lords on Friday 5 December. Our joint Autonomy Project was one of four shortlisted nationally for Volunteering Project of the Year, a category judged by a panel chaired by The Rt Hon Baroness Morgan,

former Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Education Secretary, and Minister for Women and Equalities.

Although it was a significant achievement to be shortlisted, travel and subsistence were not covered by the organisers. The AIM award ensured that three representatives

that members can implement immediately. “We’re here to provide skills that are very hands-on and useful for those working with limited resources.”

Why Small Museums Matter

Small museums are deeply embedded in their communities. “They’re the ones that can really make an impact at the local level,” Nora emphasises. “That’s a really exciting opportunity – to support those folks and give them resources to do that work.” These institutions often serve as cultural lifelines, preserving local history and fostering dialogue. But their size comes with challenges, with funding

“ Small museums are deeply embedded in their communities. They’re the ones that can really make an impact at the local level. ”

the perennial hurdle. “We’re working on small budgets; we can barely pay our people the wages they deserve,” Nora admits. “People are doing amazing work for pennies.” Beyond pay equity, small museums grapple with collections management,

educational programming, and the ever-present need to stretch resources.

Political change has compounded these struggles. Significant cuts to federal museum departments and humanities councils have tightened grant opportunities. Yet, SMA sees a silver lining: independence. “It’s almost fortunate that we don’t depend on federal funding because we aren’t having to follow some of the rules coming out,” Nora notes. “At a local level, we can keep pushing diversity and inclusion, even though at the federal level DEI has been cut.”

SMA’s annual conference is a lifeline for members. Far from being a passive event, it’s a forum for tackling tough issues – social justice, political climate, and even mental health. “Our theme for February is climate change – not just weather, but political climate,” Venezky explains. “We have a speaker on mental health and museums, focusing on treating yourself well and giving yourself grace.”

Education sessions are particularly popular. Many attendees wear multiple hats – collections manager one day, fundraiser the next. “The favourite sessions are the ones that say, ‘Here are resources, here are tips, here’s what you can take back and apply,’” says Nora. Practicality is key.

Behind the Organisation

SMA operates with a voluntary, lean but dedicated structure: a 12-member board, committees for fundraising, membership, governance, and marketing, plus a robust conference team. Most of the work funnels into supporting the annual event, which serves as both a professional development hub and a morale boost for members.

“ These institutions often serve as cultural lifelines, preserving local history and fostering dialogue. ”

Interestingly, Nora herself isn’t currently in a museum role. She works as a development director for a charity serving adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. But her roots run deep in the museum world. “I know what it’s like to be the only staff member – or one of three – doing it all,” she says. As Nora puts it: “We want to be leaders, not afraid to step up and give people hope,” it’s an approach that reflects the passion that fuels SMA’s mission.

smallmuseum.org

could attend: Michelle Patterson (Curriculum Manager for Creative Arts), Peter Monaghan (Associate Principal: SEND and Inclusion), and Vicki Kennedy (Head of Learning & Participation, Sunderland Culture).

The funding supported essential travel across London and a meal, allowing all partners to take part in the celebration, represent the North East, and share the impact of the Autonomy Project, which tackles social isolation among autistic young people through creative, community-based opportunities.

We extend our thanks to AIM for making this possible.



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Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (detail), 1882,
Courtauld Gallery, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust)



Ushaw has developed into a mixed economy organisation that balances conservation with programming, enterprise, and community engagement.

Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens

Set within rolling parkland just outside Durham, Ushaw is a place where history, culture and people come together to create experiences beyond belief. Once a Catholic seminary, Ushaw is now a registered charity operating as a vibrant heritage destination and creative hub. With its remarkable architecture, internationally significant collections, and a warm, inclusive approach, Ushaw offers something genuinely distinctive within the North East's cultural landscape.

Ushaw's story spans more than 450 years. Its origins lie in the upheaval of the Reformation when an English Catholic college was founded in Douai in 1568. Forced to flee during the French Revolution, the college returned to England and eventually settled at Ushaw in 1808. Over the next century, an extraordinary complex of

buildings grew up around the original Georgian house representing some of the finest examples of Gothic Revival architecture in the country, including the largest collection of work by four generations of the Pugin family.

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Ushaw functioned as a working seminary. Declining vocations and financial pressures led to its closure in 2011, raising serious questions about the future of the estate. Rather than retreat into silence and be left to crumble into ruins, a new chapter began.

From 2014 onwards, Ushaw gradually opened its doors to the public, initially through guided tours and music events led by volunteers. Demand grew quickly, and Ushaw has since developed into a mixed economy organisation that balances heritage conservation with cultural

programming, enterprise, and community engagement.

Ushaw is home to a broad collection of fine art, textiles, church plate, and rare books. Among the highlights are paintings from the Nazarene School, scientific instruments, recusant chalices, and the Westminster Vestment – produced in the second half of the 15th century and believed to have once belonged to Richard III. Our Library, described by historian Eamon Duffy as “unquestionably the most important Catholic library in Britain,” contains over 50,000 volumes, including unique early manuscripts and rare first editions. Some items are on permanent display, while others feature in carefully curated temporary exhibitions, offering fresh insights into history, science, art, and faith.

Ushaw today operates as a mixed economy charity, generating all of its

income through a combination of activities. These include admissions and memberships supported by an events and exhibitions programme; venue hire; bed & breakfast accommodation; a business hub providing serviced offices and creative studio space; land income from its 500-acre estate, as well as the generous support of donors – individuals, business partners, trusts and foundations. This diversity supports financial resilience while ensuring the estate remains active and relevant throughout the year.

The charity is supported by a small, dedicated staff team working across heritage, operations, commercial activity, and visitor experience, alongside more than two hundred volunteers who play a vital role in welcoming visitors and caring for the collections and estate. Annual visitor numbers have grown steadily over the past decade, and today Ushaw welcomes over 100,000 visitors each year.

Looking ahead, Ushaw's focus is firmly on sustainability and inclusion. Plans centre on growing the visitor offer



Today Ushaw welcomes over 100,000 visitors each year.

for diverse audiences, investing in long-term repair and maintenance, and addressing buildings currently at risk.

Above all, Ushaw is a place shaped by people – past and present – and by a belief that heritage can enrich lives. As it celebrates its first decade as a

public-facing organisation, Ushaw continues to look forward, balancing ambition with care, and ensuring this remarkable place can flourish for generations to come.

ushaw.org
meet@ushaw.org



The Library, described by Eamon Duffy as “unquestionably the most important Catholic library in Britain,” contains over 50,000 volumes.

Starting strong

Our partners at Charity Finance Group highlight the support they can offer in response to ongoing economic challenges.

As 2026 unfolds, partnership and mutual support matter more than ever.

When we surveyed recently our members about the top three challenges facing their own organisations, the economic outlook dominated, with nearly two-thirds (66%) citing this as their primary concern.

Regulatory changes came second (41%) followed by finding funding opportunities (32%), recruitment and retention issues (31%) and VAT concerns (27%).

We also asked our members about the biggest three challenges facing the charity sector as a whole, where even more respondents (77%) cited economic outlook and (58%) highlighted regulatory changes as major issues.

These findings reflect what we're hearing from our museum members and others from across the sector: rising costs, declining incomes, complex compliance requirements, and the constant challenge of doing more with less.

Looking back at 2025

Despite these headwinds, last year saw some positive developments. Our Gift Aid Awareness Day campaign was successful in continuing to highlight the importance of donors ticking the box, as well as helping charities to get to grips with the claims process – thanks to an insightful webinar with HMRC, and other helpful resources.

Our ongoing work to improve banking services continued to address issues that disproportionately affect smaller organisations, and we published a handy guide to communicating with your bank. We'll also be launching our 2026 Banking Challenges Survey soon!

Our 'Hallmarks at Home' webinar series for AIM members launched late in 2025, kicking off with a session on the autumn budget. The value of practical, sector-specific sessions is clear to see, with lively discussions on minimum wage increases,

salary sacrifice schemes, and the Museum and Galleries Exhibition Tax Relief (MGETR).

If you are interested in exploring MGETR, we have partnered with Mo Suleman whose deep technical expertise helps museums secure substantial additional funding. Get in touch at membership@cfg.org.uk to find out more.

Our focus for 2026

This year, we will continue to focus on the issues that matter to you. Tax remains a priority, and we know how complex this can be. Our work on banking continues. We'll also be looking at how we support charity leaders in an increasingly demanding regulatory environment and take a fresh look at risk management.

With the new SORP now published, charities will need to get to grips with changes quickly. Our interactive SORP clinics will be running throughout February and March and these will provide focused, practical insights into key changes.

And we'll be exploring how AI might help to streamline operations, increase productivity, improve storytelling, and where human expertise remains irreplaceable.

Support when you need it

In this difficult economic environment, CFG's free helplines represent genuinely valuable support that is increasingly important. If you've ever been stuck for the right advice or had a burning question you just can't answer, you'll know what a relief it is to have access to a trusted, expert partner.

Our helplines currently cover accounting and tax, HR and employment law, managing financial difficulties, general legal advice, pensions, property, and recruitment. These services are provided free of charge to all CFG members by our corporate partners so it's good to know that confidential, expert advice is just a phone call away.

As we navigate 2026 together, we encourage you to make full use of these resources. Whilst the challenges ahead are real, you don't have to face them alone.

CFG membership is free to AIM members as part of our partnership. Not yet a signed-up CFG member? Already a member and wish to find out more? Get in touch with the team on membership@cfg.org.uk. We look forward to supporting you in 2026!

AIM Bulletin

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