

Media Reviews

George Marshall Medical Museum, Worcester

The George Marshall Medical Museum's new exhibition 'The Infirmary', which has recently opened in Worcester in the UK, aims to develop public understanding of the History of Science. It is housed on the site of the former Worcester Infirmary which, established in 1771 and closed in 2002, is where Charles Hastings founded the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association in 1832. Based in a building which is now part of the University of Worcester, the museum offers great scope for school children to be introduced to medical history in a university setting. The six sections of the museum include 'Science and Technology' and 'Storyspine', which utilises the life stories of doctors, nurses and volunteers who worked at the hospital, to recount both the history of an the institution and of the professionalism of medical care. Appropriate themes given explain the Provincial Medical and Surgical Association's role as the forerunner of the British Medical Council (BMA).

The narratives which make up 'Storyspine' owe much to the peoples and oral history movements of the latter part of the twentieth century and the personalisation of the past popularised by television programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC 2004–). If the preponderance of medical men in the 'Storyspine' does not necessarily offer history from below, the inclusion of Doris Kershaw – a volunteer helper for 33 years – is a step forward on the histories of the great and good that once shaped such museums. Yet this approach is not unproblematic, for the 'authenticity' and the truth claims of personal testimony negate any scope to present alternative versions of the past. The life stories also support the museum's aim to cater for local and regional residents, school children, and university students alongside the general public and tourists as does the emphasis on accessibility in the text that frames the displays of a range of medical artefacts. The incorporation of a number of innovative, interesting and interactive tools encourages learning through pleasurable inquiry and provides scope to form, ask and answer questions. Hi- and low- tech displays enable youngsters to look under flaps to discover if there is a cure for smallpox, peer at screens and X-ray plates or try on clothes worn by different health workers to raise their career and educational aspirations.

The museum is a development of the already established George Marshall Medical Museum, housed in the post-graduate centre at Worcestershire Royal Hospital. It was and was funded by a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant of £537,000. Like many other HLF funded projects it is inevitably subject to the challenges and compromises of contemporary trends in heritage which attempt to turn scholarly engagement with a contested past into an accessible, consumable pastime as befits culture's pre-occupation with history as leisure. Within such a discursive construction of the past, intellectual debate is elusive. Nevertheless, there are points in the museum which offer scope for those with a deeper understanding of the history of medicine to affirm their knowledge. The 1897 skin atlas opened on the page discussing syphilis rests on baby weighing scales and acts as a reminder, to the informed viewer, of the horrors of children born with syphilis. Indeed, the commendable willingness to engage with difficult subjects, such as mental and sexual

health, is another indication that the museum has been informed by current debates on the history of science and medicine.

Mental Health and Powick Asylum make up one of the six featured areas of the exhibition. The inclusion of the history of this local asylum through brief details of individuals who were inmates, interspersed with photographs of staff and patients, serves to humanise those who were defined as insane. This section brings into the open the experiences of those who were simultaneously protected and hidden away from the rest of society in asylums. However, once again, interpretations which focus on individuals leave limited space for debate and discussion about the social construction of mental illness or the social, cultural and political structures of power which framed ideas of sanity and the treatment of those whose behaviour was deemed not to be 'normal'. In the interplay between past and present, that characterises much popular history, the section on mental institutions is framed by an explanation of the taboos that surround mental illness in contemporary Britain. Stephen Fry is presented as an example of a television celebrity whose openness about his own bi-polar disorder has challenged popular perceptions. Indeed, controversy is generally reserved for the present; visitors are encouraged to engage with ethical debates through a 'Debating Space', where opinions are invited on current ethical issues, such as assisted suicide. It is to be hoped that this museum will also encourage further public engagement with the history of science, some of which will be at the larger George Marshall Museum nearby.

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Canada Science and Technology Museum, Ottawa, Canada

Technology exerts a constant presence in our daily lives, involving us at every moment in a lengthy and complex narrative of scientific progress. Despite our dependence on relatively recent technological advances and changes, it can be easy to lose sight of our place in this narrative. The Canada Science and Technology Museum works to reacquaint us with the foundations of the technology that now runs much of our world. The museum places the contents of its collection in their scientific and historical context, allowing visitors without a background in the history of science and technology to draw their own conclusions about the significance of the physical materials before them and their relation to the contemporary experience of technology in everyday life.

The permanent exhibit 'Connexions: The Plugged-in World of Communications' skillfully demonstrates this integration of artefact and context, past and present. Rather than simply presenting its wide array of nineteenth- and twentieth-century telephones, radios, and television sets as curious relics of a foreign past, the exhibit continually encourages visitors to view the material contents of the collection through the eyes of the past, with a focus on the experience of the average Canadian living in these centuries. The visitor does not merely observe the exhibit's collection of antique radios through the dissociating barrier of a glass case; instead, he or she can relax in a miniature furnished sitting room to listen to a radio from the 1920s play audio recordings of popular songs of the era. The written descriptions accompanying the collection do not merely identify