

**Wessex  
Museums**

# **Impact Report**

2023-24

# Introduction to Wessex Museums

Wessex Museums is a thriving partnership of museums across Dorset and Wiltshire – Dorset Museum, Lydiard House Museum, STEAM – Museum of the Great Western Railway, Poole Museum, The Salisbury Museum, Swindon Museum and Art Gallery, and Wiltshire Museum.

We believe that by working together we can...

- Strengthen the cultural offer of our museums and our region.
- Push out of our comfort zones to do things in new ways.
- Share important stories from across our region from a range of perspectives.
- Share and learn from successes and mistakes, build relationships, and enhance our reputation with partners and stakeholders.
- Increase our organisational resilience.

**Our charity, the Wessex Museums Trust (WMT), exists to build the resilience and relevance of the museums in our partnership and across the region.**

## **Our mission is...**

To support museums to **connect, inspire and add value** to people's lives.

## **Our vision is...**

**Museums thriving through collaboration.**

## A Message from our Chair, Gill Donnell

It is a real privilege to be the Chair of this partnership and as such, I continue to be hugely proud of the achievements of our staff within the partnership, as well as the many volunteers working in the partner museums and for the Trust.

Significantly, this year, we have achieved our very, long-term aim of becoming a fully independent charity, which together with continued funding from the Arts Council, creates great opportunities to build on the success of previous years. Nevertheless, there have been significant complications in achieving the ambitious aims we set out, not least due to partner museums' closures, albeit for exciting redevelopment projects.

I continue to believe, however, that our strength is in this partnership and **together** we can plot a course through these challenges, continuing to deliver our vision for the people of Wessex.



## Reflections from our CEO, Kristina Broughton

2023/24 marked the first year of Wessex Museums Trust (WMT) operating as a fully-fledged organisation after achieving our long-term ambition to externalise from BCP Council. This coincided with the start of our new National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) programme, helping to stabilise the charity during a period of continued financial uncertainty and change for both our partners and the sector as a whole.

With three of our partner museums closed, or partially closed during the year for capital redevelopments, it has been a challenge to hold space for the work of the partnership. However, despite the challenges around resource capacity, recruitment and museum closures, Wessex Museums continued to deliver its mission *to support museums to connect, inspire and add value to peoples' lives*.

Particular highlights of 2023/24 were three temporary exhibitions and their associated programming with underserved audiences – *Lest We Forget* at Wiltshire Museum, *Fashioning our World* at The Salisbury Museum, and *Elisabeth Frink: A View from Within* at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery – all supported by WMT. All three exhibitions were successful for their respective museums for different reasons, whether to engage new, more diverse audiences, curate with communities, or create home grown blockbusters and grow visitor numbers – they demonstrate the breadth and depth of the partner museums' offer, which WMT aims to enhance through the additional support and economies of scale we can provide by working in partnership.

The economic, physical and political disruptions experienced across the partnership have necessitated flexibility in terms of what exactly the support provided by WMT to our partner museums looked like this year. This 'flex' has also allowed the partnership to recheck progress and reset ambitions in important areas of our work together such as equity, diversity and inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

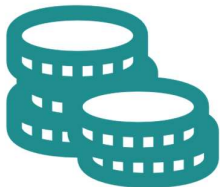
I am proud of the way the partners have come together to navigate through adversity and in the process find compromise and new solutions– not to mention keeping the show on the road during major redevelopments! This, coupled with the unwavering support from Arts Council England for our NPO programme, and other funders who continue to see the value in our work as a partnership, has underlined the value of the Wessex Museums partnership in the most challenging of times.



## 2023/24 Key Achievements



**Carbon Literacy Training delivered to the first partnership cohort. All participants achieved certification.**



**Wessex Museums Trust secures more than £70k for the Folk exhibition through fundraising.**



**Wessex Museums supports 3x exhibitions and associated community programmes across the partnership – *Elizabeth Frink: A View from Within, Lest We Forget* and *Fashioning our World*.**



**57 new objects from the partner museums' collections selected by staff, volunteers and local communities as part of *Wessex in 100***



**Two new trustees from under-represented groups joined the WMT Board.**



**Wessex Virtual Collection launched on the Wessex Museums website.**

# Our Funding & Income

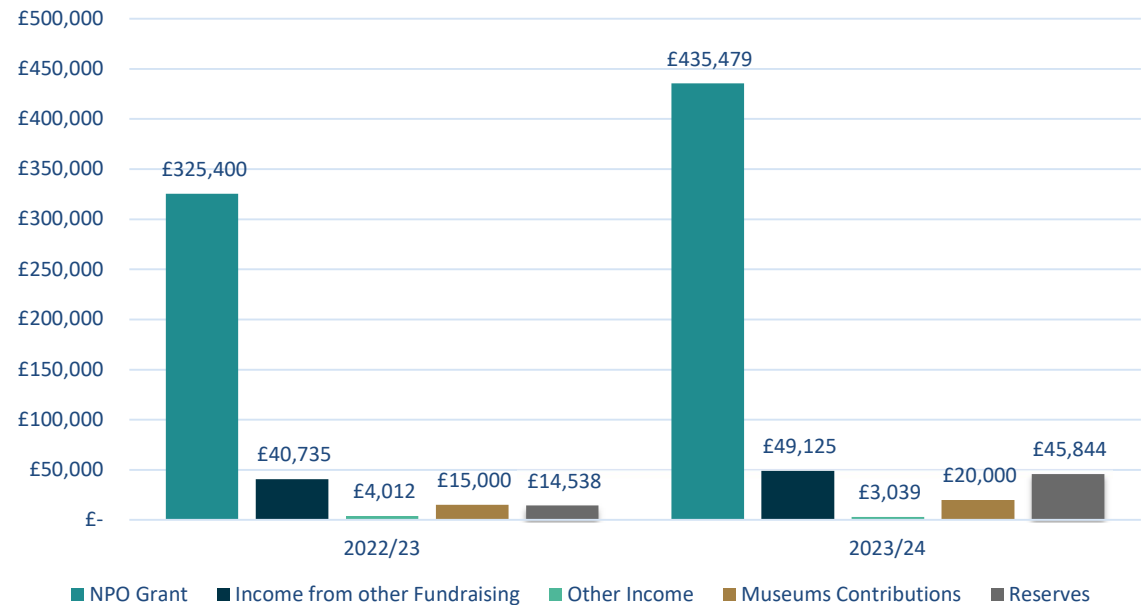
2023/24 marked the first year of Wessex Museums Trust managing all the partnership’s funding, including the funding agreement with Arts Council England (ACE) for the National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) grant for 2023-26.

In 2023/24, Wessex Museums Trust’s **turnover** (excluding match funding and in-kind support) was:

**£553,487**

This represents a **28% increase** from the previous financial year, mainly due to the funding uplift secured for the new NPO period, successful fundraising related to the planned folk exhibition, and the transfer of residual partnership funding from BCP Council which has resulted in WMT’s reserves more than trebling from the previous year.

### Wessex Museums Trust Funding Profile



# Summary of Fundraising & Income Generation for the Year

During 2023/24, Wessex Museums achieved more than **£49k in fundraising**, in addition to the NPO, including a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).

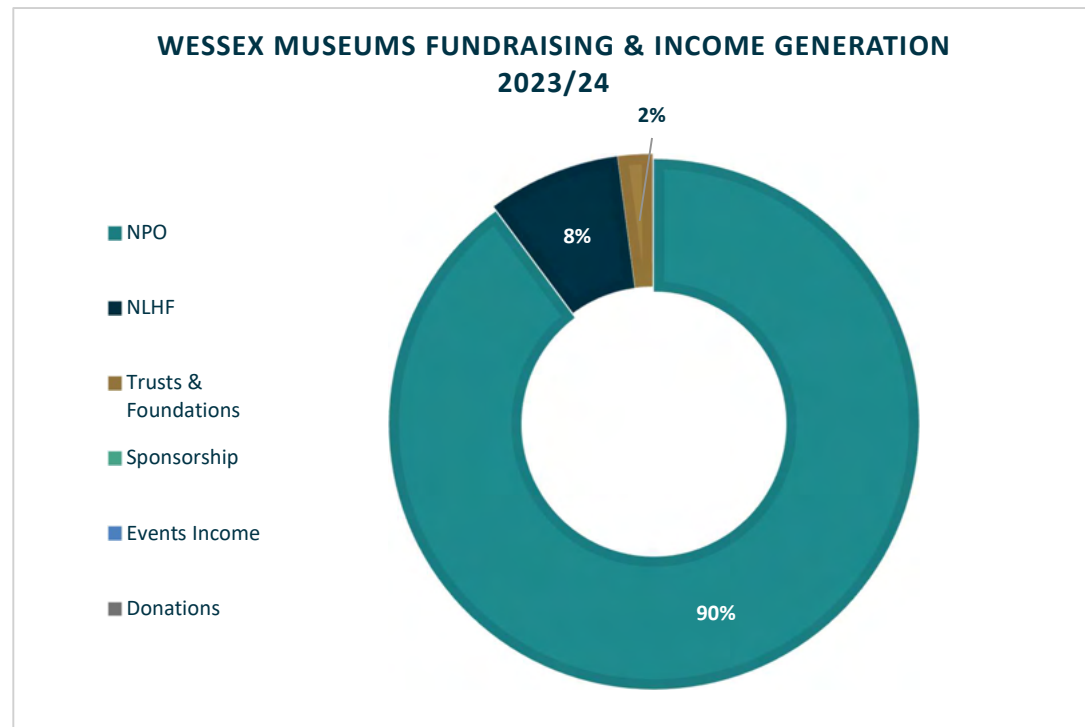
NPO funding continues to be the partnership's main source of funding and accounted for 90% of our total funding profile in 2023/24 and represents critical core funding for Wessex Museums Trust to continue to operate effectively as an independent charity.

Sponsorship, events income and donations were all down on the previous year, as WMT were not directly delivering programmes in 2023/24.

Diversifying the charity's income is an on-going priority.

### Sources of income in 2023/24 have included:

- **£39k** from NLHF (total grant award £62k) for the Folk exhibition
- **£10k** from **trusts and foundations** for the Folk exhibition.

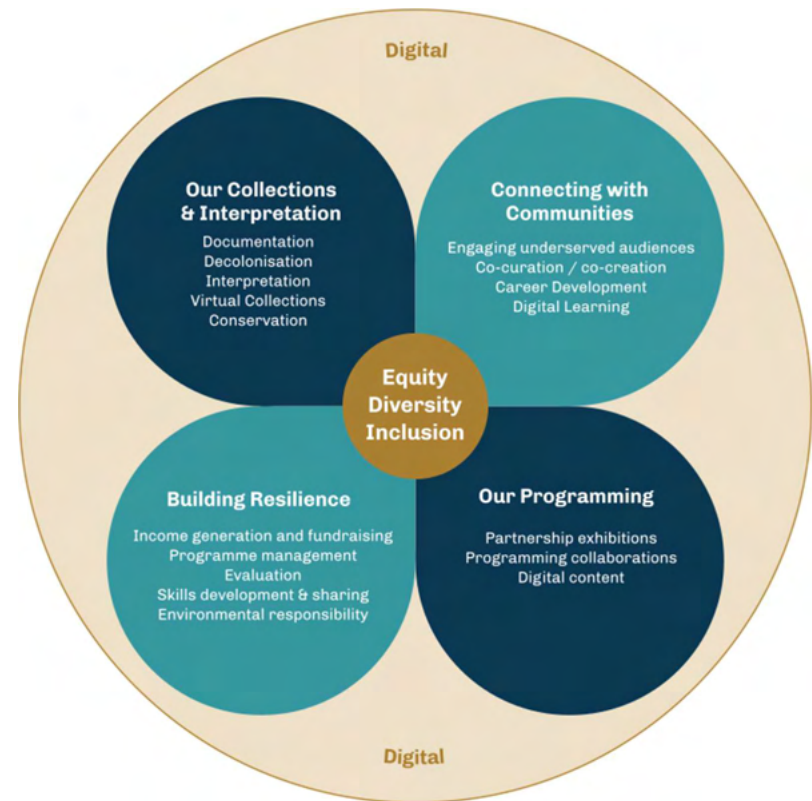


# Delivering our Strategic Plan

Wessex Museums started the year with a new three-year strategic plan and NPO grant funded programme. The four strategic aims for the work we do together through the partnership remain unchanged and continue to form the basis for our collaborative programme.

## Our focus was on:

- **Engaging underserved audiences** in our local areas.
- **Improving access** to our world-class collections, including **digital**.
- Delivering excellence through our **partnership programming**.
- **Fundraising** to support our partnership ambitions.
- Continuing to embed **equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)** in our organisations.
- Taking meaningful action on **environmental sustainability**.
- **Developing the workforce** and **skill sharing** across our partnership.
- Developing an **evidence base** for the impact of our work through informed **evaluation**.

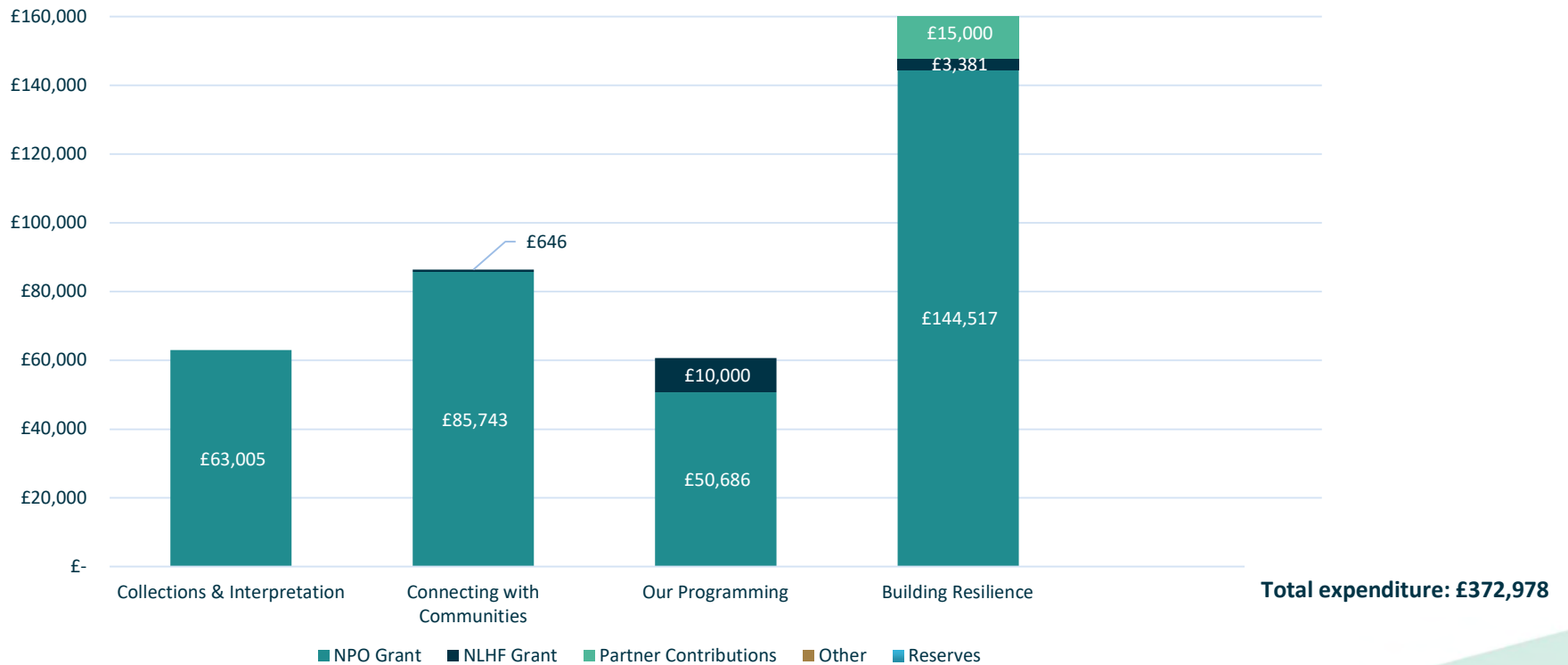




## Investment Against our Strategic Priorities

Wessex Museums Trust invests the funding we receive against the four priorities in our strategic plan. The graph below illustrates expenditure against each of the priorities during 2023/24.

**Wessex Museums Trust NPO Expenditure Profile**



# Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Wessex Museums' EDI framework guides the practical actions we are taking to dismantle prejudice and discrimination in our organisations.

## Key achievements against our Wessex Museums EDI action plan for the year:

- **Diversity Data** compiled for trustees, staff and volunteers across the partnership.
- **2x new Trustees** under the age of 35 appointed to the WMT Board.
- **Guidance** for hosting **work placements for underserved audiences** created.
- Partnership formed with Multaka Oxford to **support inclusive engagement practice** with underserved audiences.
- 60 objects selected for Wessex in 100 through **co-curation with underserved audiences**.
- **Decolonisation of collections action plans** in place in each partner museum.
- **Menopause policy framework** adopted by the partnership.



## Connecting with Communities

Wessex Museums continues to prioritise the investment in inclusive engagement practice with underserved audiences, through the partner museums. Despite challenges with vacancies in the LEX Co-ordinator and Community Curator roles during 2023/24, the partnership continued to engage new and more diverse audiences through a range of projects and programmes. We also formed a new partnership with Multaka Oxford to continue to provide strategic mentoring for inclusive engagement following the agreed departure of our Wessex Engagement Lead.



Our partner museums engaged and collaborated with more than **4500** people from our underserved communities.



Wessex Museums invested **£86,389** in our Connecting with Communities workstream.

## Connecting with Communities Highlights from 2023/24

### **Multaka Oxford**

During the development of our NPO programme for 2023-26, Wessex Museums formed a new partnership with Oxford University Museums who were interested in extending their work into the northern parts of the Wessex region. Multaka Oxford is based at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the History of Science Museum, part of Oxford University Museums. Multaka Oxford's key aim is to bring people and communities together, to strengthen understanding through inter-cultural dialogue through the mutual sharing of art, stories, culture and science in the museums. To date, through our partnership with Multaka Oxford, Wessex Museums has benefited from training, action learning and mentoring support specifically related to inclusive engagement practice and decolonisation. Colleagues from Multaka Oxford began providing 1-to-1 mentoring for the new Community Curator in Swindon in January 2024 and this relationship will continue through the life of the NPO funding period.

### **Lest We Forget**

*Lest We Forget* was a project led by Wiltshire Museum to tell the story of the Black contribution to the World Wars in Wiltshire culminating in a co-produced exhibition that will tour to two more of the partner museums. The project supported Wessex Museums' Connecting with Communities theme – *Hidden Voices* – and aimed to work collaboratively with new, underserved, local communities to give them agency over how their stories are told by the museums. The Wessex Museums' funded Community Curator at Wiltshire Museum was the project lead and working closely with Wiltshire Race Equality Council, they were able to build relationships with Black and military communities who were new to the museum, to co-produce the exhibition at Wiltshire Museum between November 2023 and March 2024. The exhibition moved onto Lydiard House Museum in Swindon in April 2024.

### **Fashioning Our World**

A project led by The Salisbury Museum, *Fashioning Our World*, showed young people how sustainable fashion choices can be inspiring and addressed Wessex Museums' strategic aims to use our collections to better tell the stories of the Wessex region, and to engage underserved audiences through relevant and co-curated events and activities. Support from Wessex Museums was specifically focused on extending the model of best practice for engaging young people in co-production using fashion collections developed by The Salisbury Museum, to Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, who hosted a vibrant programme of workshops and after-school clubs for young people to learn about traditional methods of repairing, reusing, and redesigning clothing, rather than discarding it, thus promoting a resourceful approach to creating sustainable fashion for the future. The work by the young people culminated in a temporary exhibition at The Salisbury Museum and a small co-produced display at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery.

### **Exploring Engineering at STEAM**

Wessex Museums supported a project at STEAM that aimed to inspire more girls to understand the value of engineering and to welcome new, more diverse audiences to the Museum. STEAM worked with Girlguiding Southwest England (GGSWE) to develop the project over 8 months focused on engaging girls, from areas of Swindon that experienced multiple indices of deprivation, in a day of exciting engineering-based activities at the museum. The girls gained a specially designed STEAM badge for participating in the event. The event was popular with 82 girls attending and resulted in requests from other Girlguiding units wishing to attend a similar day. As a result, STEAM is running further events this year on Saturday 16th March 2024 and Saturday 7th September 2024. The model of working developed through the project and in partnership with GGSWE is also being explored by the other partner museums as an opportunity to offer similar events in their venues.

### **Work Placements for Young People from Underserved Groups**

In the period of our current strategic plan 2023-26, Wessex Museums has committed to creating work placement opportunities for young people from underserved groups, to be available every year in each of our museums. Three placements were hosted by partner museums and WMT during 2023/24, involving young people who identified as disabled, neurodiverse and LGBTQI+. Each

placement has been shaped with the young person working within each organisation, to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes. Work undertaken by the young people included game design, 3D modelling, social media campaigns and object photography.

### **Digital Learning Platform**

Building on the review of the learning offer across the partnership last year, Wessex Museums embarked on building a centralised online platform for digital learning resources. The digital learning platform will provide teachers with a searchable database of learning resources across a range of subjects and Key Stages provided by our partner museums. 2023/24 has been a year of research and development for the digital learning platform. Wessex Museums' Marketing & Digital Lead has been researching similar platforms and working with learning colleagues in the museums and our web developers to develop the platform and map resources. A staging site was created, and resources will be added to the platform next year before testing it with teachers.

# Building Resilience

## Diversifying our Board of Trustees

Under our new governance arrangements, Wessex Museums Trust (WMT) was able to appoint two new independent trustees to the Board. With an eye on diversifying our board, we aimed to recruit trustees from groups underrepresented on the Board, specifically people,

- between the ages of 18-35 years old
- from low-income backgrounds
- from ethnic minority groups
- who are LGBTQI+

Following a targeted and successful campaign, we appointed two new independent trustees, representative of one or more of these groups, to the Board in September 2023.

## Skills Sharing & Training

Wessex Museums continues to support professional development for the workforce in our partner museums. During 2023/24 we funded access to training and development opportunities in areas such as community engagement, evaluation, co-production, digital skills and carbon literacy.

We also started work to develop a streamlined and flexible evaluation framework for partnership exhibitions. The new framework will help the partnership to evaluate our exhibitions for impact across several areas, to help inform our future programming and ensure that partnership exhibitions continue to add value to the partner museums. The framework can also be used flexibly by the partner museums to evaluate their own exhibitions.

## Digital

Wessex Museums continued to deliver our digital strategy, which in 2023/24 was primarily focused on reframing our online interfaces and content to our target audiences.

Building on the 2022 website review, Wessex Museums continued to develop and improve the website's navigation and new areas that are more relevant to the target audiences, with a sector focus. The website now hosts project pages showcasing partnership projects, and improved content on our 'About Us' and 'Our Work' sections.

During 2023/24, a focused social media strategy was developed primarily using LinkedIn to connect with our sector audience. This approach has resulted in increased followers from 135 to 626.

Wessex Museums hosted a university placement student to explore the possibilities for expanding our digital content creation. The student's work included developing content relating to the collections and filming new content with Dorset Museum & Art Gallery. This project served as a proof of concept, demonstrating the potential for further development of digital content-based projects in the future.

## Environmental Responsibility

During 2023/24, Wessex Museum refocused on the aim of our partnership Environmental Responsibility Framework to respond to the climate emergency by reducing our environmental impact. Priorities this year have been to support better understanding of carbon emissions and help partner organisations to reduce their carbon emissions through practical action.

WMT agreed a new Environmental Responsibility (ER) action plan in January 2024 and has two trustees participating in Julie's Bicycle Board Environmental Champions programme. New members of the Wessex Museums team achieved carbon literacy certification. The Environmental Responsibility Working Group was restarted after a period of hiatus and all the partner museums began meaningful work with their teams to develop ER action plans for their organisations.

Wessex Museums began the roll out of Carbon Literacy for Museums training and trained 12 members of staff and trustees across the partnership, all of whom achieved their certification through the Carbon Literacy Project. The training will support all levels of the museums' workforce to take practical action to reduce carbon emissions in their organisations.



## Our Programming

Wessex Museums supports a range of delivery models for partnership exhibitions. In 2023/24, the partnership supported individual partners to develop exhibitions that will later tour to other partner museum venues. Wessex Museums provides important match funding for the partner museums to build the significant funding profile necessary to make these exhibitions happen.

### **Elizabeth Frink: A View from Within**

Led by Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, *Elizabeth Frink: A View from Within* is the first exhibition to focus on the significant body of work produced from Elisabeth Frink's Woolland studio in Dorset between 1976 and her death in 1993. The exhibition aimed to increase knowledge of the outstanding collection held by Dorset Museum & Art Gallery and to strengthen lending and knowledge exchange relationships with other organisations and partners. The exhibition opened at Dorset Museum & Art Gallery in November 2023 and received more than 15k visitors during its run.

**Total WMT Investment: £28,769**

Wessex Museums funding was used to support curatorial development, exhibition design, marketing and costs associated with touring the show to Museum & Art Swindon.

## Lost & Found: Rediscovering Folk Art & Traditions of Dorset & Wiltshire

This year, Wessex Museums launched its ambitious project *Lost & Found*, which will culminate in a temporary touring exhibition at four of our partner museums between November 2024 and April 2026.

The project received important support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Adrian Swire Foundation, which, along with the NPO grant, will see the project delivered in line with our ambitions, which include:

- New research and conservation on the museums' folk collections
- Contemporary collecting
- Film and photography commission to capture the seasonal folk traditions of the region
- Community co-production with non-traditional audiences to create 'new folk art' which can be collected by the museums
- Reinterpretation of regional folk songs to be presented as a folk song map
- A temporary touring exhibition and associated events programme
- A digital exhibition

The project, led by Wessex Museums, will be delivered over the next two and a half years.

**Total WMT Investment: £148,606**

# Our Collections & Interpretation

## Virtual Collections

The Wessex Virtual Collections database was launched in November 2023 with more than 250k collections records, with more than 28k images, from the partner museums. This launch marked the end of a 3-year project to build the infrastructure and provide an accessible, searchable database of our partner museums' collections. But it is only the beginning, as the database will continue to grow as more records are added by our museums all the time.

The Virtual Collection web page is one of the most visited pages on the Wessex Museums website. It has received more than 2500 views since launch (7 Nov 2023) with visitors spending an average of 2 minutes 2 seconds on the page. The page has been accessed from 39 different countries. The age demographic of users is younger than that of the general website, with the most popular user age range of 25-34, followed by 18-24. As such the Wessex Virtual Collections have been successful in extending our museums' reach with digital audiences.

## Wessex in 100

*Wessex in 100* is a project that aims to engage audiences with our museums' collections through a co-curated approach and to deepen knowledge and understanding of the heritage of the region. The project brings together objects selected by communities to tell the story of Wessex through new digital content that will extend our reach, diversify our audiences and encourage museum visits.

Throughout the year, the partner museums have been working with volunteers and a range of diverse community groups to engage with and select objects that they feel represent Wessex. To date, 57 objects have been selected and the collection continues to build. The *Wessex in 100* objects have been represented through new digital content in the Collections Showcase on the Wessex Museums website. The project will continue throughout the period of Wessex Museums' current strategic plan, culminating in new digital content and in-gallery displays.

## Decolonisation

In 2023, the partners agreed a Decolonising Collections Framework to guide the museums' on-going work to decolonise their collections. This aims to acknowledge and respond to the crucial role that British colonialism played in the creation and development of our museums, and to reassess whether the stories told using our collections recognises this history. Wessex Museums also recognises the importance of returning objects that have been illegitimately or illegally taken from their country of origin.

The goal of the framework is to embed decolonisation in all aspects of collections work to meet our aims:

- **Better understand our collections** and how they are connected to colonial history.
- **Deconstruct our museums' own history** to promote fairness and understanding.
- To **ensure that diverse and hidden voices and histories are fairly represented** within the museums, and that all communities and cultures are made to feel welcome and valued in our museum spaces as a result.
- **Continually improve our decolonisation practice** by keeping up-to-date and sharing best practice, then applying the learning to the work in our museums.

## Decolonisation Pilot Projects

The decolonisation pilot projects started in 2022 and reached fruition in 2023/24, using research-based approaches exploring decolonial themes, the provenance of collections, museum legacies and working alongside underserved communities to undertake contemporary research. As a result, the projects have produced new research, established new connections with museums around the world and engaged new and more diverse communities in reinterpretation and redisplay in our partner museums and online.

**Dorset Museum:** A project highlighting key people that have been underrepresented in Dorset's history, starting with a local man, John Brown who escaped slavery and ended up in Dorchester as a practicing herbalist. The project produced new research, interpretation and a display in the museum.

**Poole Museum:** Improvements were made to collections documentation as part of a broader multi-faceted approach to decolonisation of the World Cultures collection, to increase transparency, encourage debate and gain a better understanding of the museum's origins.

**Salisbury Museum:** Linked to the museum's major redevelopment, a Black History Interpretation Group worked with the museum to explore and interpret stories, shaping the narrative of Black history and slavery in the new Salisbury Gallery.

**Wiltshire Museum:** A project to retell the story of the Britton 'Celtic' Cabinet, which was commissioned by an extremely wealthy Jamaican sugar plantation owner, owning 2-3,000 slaves, and was part of Wiltshire Museum's founding collection. Conservation, new research and interpretation led to a redisplay of the cabinet in the Story of Devizes gallery.

Case studies from each of the pilot projects will be published on the Wessex Museums website in 2024.

## Looking Ahead

Wessex Museums is looking forward to continuing delivery of our NPO programme over the next couple of years. In 2024/25 we are particularly excited for the re-openings of two of our partner museums – The Salisbury Museum and Museum & Art Swindon, which will provide more opportunities for the work of the partnership to connect, inspire and add value to peoples' lives.

### Our plans for 2024/25 include...

- **Elisabeth Frink: a View from Within** - Home grown, touring exhibition on the life and work of the Dorset based artist Elisabeth Frink, led by Dorset Museum & Art Gallery, will go on tour to Museum & Art Swindon as their opening show in their new venue.
- **The return of Hardy's Wessex** – Our partnership exhibition on the life and work of Thomas Hardy will open at Museum & Art Swindon in August 2024, bringing together all 4 of the original exhibitions into a single touring show.
- **Lost & Found Community Co-production** – Our museums will be working collaboratively with underserved audiences and artists to create 'new folk' art, as part of our Lost & Found project, starting in Swindon in summer 2024.
- **Un/Common People: Folk Art & Traditions of Wessex** – Touring exhibition set to premier at Museum & Art Swindon in November 2024 to March 2025.
- **Work placements for underserved communities** - extending the programme delivered through our successful *Bridging the Gap* project with placement opportunities in each of our partner museums.
- **Wessex in 100** – We hope to reach 100 objects in this community co-curated digital collection representing the Wessex region.
- **Digital Learning Platform** – A searchable database of digital learning resources from our partner museums aimed at teachers, will launch early in 2025.
- **Additional Carbon Literacy Training** - Three more cohorts planned for 2024/25, along with a digital bite-size version of the training aimed at volunteers.

# Wessex Museums

Sharing • Collaborating • Enhancing



[wessexmuseums.org.uk](http://wessexmuseums.org.uk)



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