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NEED/MAKE/USE

Creating new perspectives on the Pitt Rivers collections

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pitt Rivers Museum is a special place – a world-class research and teaching institution at the University of Oxford, a must-see tourist attraction for thousands of visitors to Oxford, a fixture in the lives of locals, and a uniquely-presented celebration of world cultures. The Pitt Rivers means different things to different people so there must be a balance between preserving its uniquely historic character and improving how our modern users – visitors, academics, teachers, schools, families, local and originating communities, and digital audiences – see, experience and understand the Museum.

From 2012-2017 the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) undertook a major £1.6 million project called VERVE funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and other generous donors. This represented the third phase in the Museum's renewal programme following the completion of the research centre in 2007 and the platform entrance and Clore Learning Balcony in 2009.

VERVE stands for Visitors, Engagement, Renewal, Visibility and Enrichment. The project employed seven staff and had five aims:

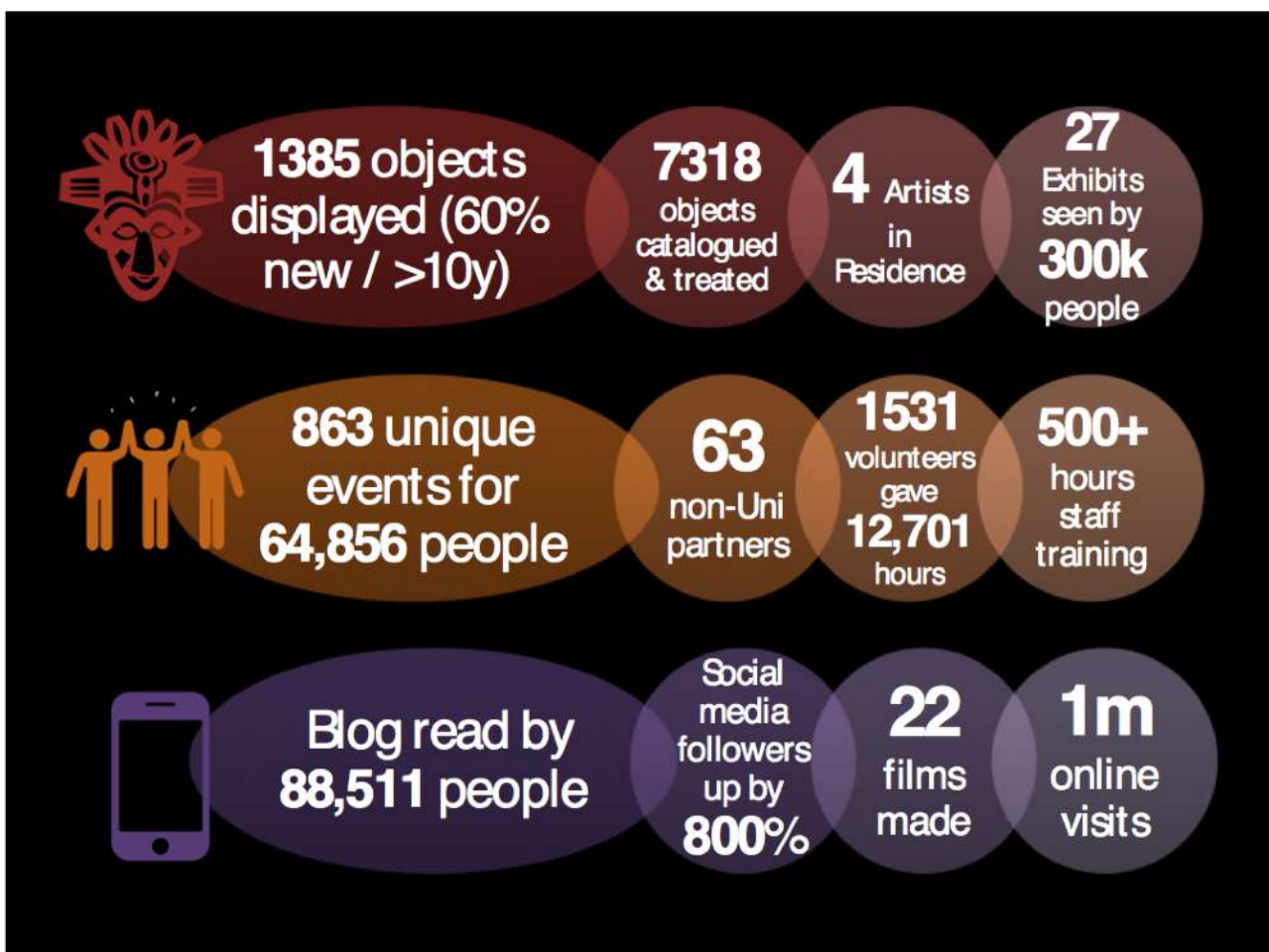
- Deepen understanding of the displays
- Reach out to a wider and more diverse audience
- Exploit under-visited areas of the Museum
- Improve visibility
- Address conservation risks

It set out to achieve this under two distinct strands: 1) the redevelopment of 100 meters of display space across all three floors of the Museum, celebrating human creativity and ingenuity through the themes of performance, traditional crafts and archaeology; and 2) a lively public engagement programme entitled 'Need, Make, Use', aimed at specific target audiences including volunteers, independent young adults and hard-to-reach groups.

VERVE has changed the Museum, both visibly and in terms of shifting working practices. The project met or exceeded many of its original targets: more than 66,000 people attended VERVE events and 1,531 volunteers gave nearly 10,000 hours of their time. The new displays, designed to last a generation, include more than 1,300 objects - many of which have never been displayed before - and we

have improved documentation for thousands more. Having funding for public engagement allowed us to be adventurous, tackle contemporary issues and help set the agenda for a 21st-century ethnographic museum, seeking social purpose, inclusivity and a willingness to deal with difficult colonial pasts. This approach manifested itself in different ways, from allowing young people to co- curate events, undertaking innovative work in supporting LGBTQ+ and mental health awareness, and providing a platform for some of Oxford's migrant communities.

We hope the changes to the Museum have been subtle but effective, and that lessons learnt from this transformative project will inspire future growth and activity as we work with our stakeholders to create a Pitt Rivers Museum for the 21st century.



2. WHAT WAS THE PROJECT?



“We have got record numbers of visitors now, more people coming than ever before and lots of people do love the museum. But their perception might be that it's a jumble of curiosities with no order and they don't know the history or meaning behind it. It's about keeping the magic but making it easier to understand what is there.”

Helen Adams, VERVE Project Curator, Oxford Mail, October 2012

2.1 How was the project conceived?

The Museum benefited from two HLF grants in 2007 and 2009. The first helped to construct our state-of-the-art staff and research centre which adjoins the main museum and houses offices, seminar and lecture rooms, a research library, labs, collections storage space, workshops, a conservation lab, photography studio, and plant and server rooms. The second enabled the creation of the Clore Learning Balcony on the Museum's Lower Gallery, providing a community and research

space right in the middle of the museum itself, surrounded by historic architecture and thousands of objects, not segregated to white space.

The subsequent rise in visitor numbers and profile following these initiatives highlighted deficiencies in interpretation and communication, and missed opportunities for learning. Evidence from visitor feedback and research (see Round 1 and Round 2 applications) revealed that the Museum was perceived as some dark Aladdin's cave: indeed, one third of critical comments in the 2009-10 visitor survey related to lighting alone. Others saw the Museum as a Victorian relic, wrapped up in old-fashioned academic discourse and removed from modern-day life.

We wanted to instead encourage a new image of the museum that better matched how we saw ourselves – a celebration of the ever-evolving material culture of mankind, a trusted and welcoming resource for learners and the local community, and as a place for continual self-reflection and growing responsibility to its stakeholders and audiences, especially those represented in the ethnographic collections and those under-represented in our visitor profile. This ambition aligned with the Museum's mission statement to 'use its unique galleries as a focus for exemplary teaching and research and as an inspirational forum or the sharing of cultural knowledge amongst the widest possible public.'

2.2 What did we plan to do?

We planned to enact a series of transformations both to the Museum's galleries and its public programme. We conceived this as a fresh 'interpretive spine' which would inform our approach to revitalizing more than 100m of permanent displays over the Museum's three floors, and which would also run through the also provided the framework to support the programme of activities, events, workshops, outreach, digital initiatives and other opportunities for participation.

In short, the spine could be summarized as:

Reinterpreting collections to reinvigorate 21st-century audiences' engagement with, and understanding of, man-made objects.

'VERVE' describes the different areas of activity we would focus on:

Visitors: not necessarily increasing numbers but getting over the message of what the Museum is about and its work today.

Engagement: making displays meaningful and relevant, and taking the Museum's message and work outside of the Museum's walls (outreach and partnerships).

Renewal: Addressing neglected areas of display (blank or unchanged for 50 years) and raising conservation standards.

Visibility: This covered several things – improved lighting; greater efforts at digitization and online visibility; and a greater transparency of working practices, letting people know what goes on behind-the-scenes.

Enrichment: Providing wider opportunities for learning and participation - from in-house staff training, to new schools' sessions to community engagement, co-curation and volunteer-led initiatives.

2.3 What difference did we intend to make?

Our Approved Purposes, agreed by HLF, were:

1. The redisplay of the upper tier of cases on the ground floor, including improved lighting, and their interpretation (Phase 1).
2. The redisplay of 17 metres of floor-to-ceiling cases on the Lower Gallery (Phase 2)
3. The reuse of a further 17 metres run of cases on the Upper Gallery to introduce General Pitt-Rivers and his typological system (Phase 3)
4. A vibrant programme of learning activities to include active participation in craft activities
5. A new thread of interpretation based on the core theme of human ingenuity, design, craftsmanship and performance
6. An updated website giving access to multimedia interpretation in accessible
7. An accessible and well-illustrated book on the Museum in the 21st century
8. Increased volunteering opportunities

Quantitative targets (outputs) of the project included:

- roll out new LED lighting scheme across the Museum.
- redisplay 1800 artefacts over 100 metres of cases and open display.

- achieve a modest rise in visitor numbers over the five project years, from 360,000+ to 400,000+ visitors p.a. This was specified as 409,390 visitors in the 12 months after the project finishes.
- A substantial rise from 4% to 14% in the number visitors over the age of 65.
- create new digital interpretation.
- create public programming with a focus on young people, older adults, disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups, D&T teachers, designers and craft practitioners, regional audiences and volunteers.
- offer 2885 separate new / adapted events to 377,415 people over five years.
- achieve organizational change with the establishment of ongoing partnerships, in-house protocols and guidelines regarding display procedures and event management, and a more formalized and even-handed approach to volunteer involvement.
- involve 1315 volunteers and offer 9000 volunteering hours.
- benefit 1.9 million actual visitors and more than 3 million virtual visitors.
- 38,500 followers of project-related blog entries, tweets and Facebook posts.



The VERVE project team selecting toy animals to be displayed next to Noah's Ark
© Pitt Rivers Museum

2.4 Logic model

So how do those outputs relate to change? The HLF considers outcomes in three key areas: Outcomes for Heritage, Outcomes for People and Outcomes for Communities. Our project focused mainly on improvements for the Heritage and

People - as outlined in our application (Round 2 application, Section Four) - but has also had visible impact on Communities too. This table earmarks some of the headline outcomes we looked to achieve, which of our eight Approved Purposes they fell under, and the pathways to delivering and measuring them.

OUTCOME	EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES and OUTPUTS	EXAMPLE PATHWAY TO IMPACT ASSESSMENT	APPROVED PURPOSE
Heritage will be in a better condition:	Conservation audits Anti-pest measures Improved mounts Conservation care given to all relevant collections	Data from museum database re: conservation condition reports and work undertaken Conservation staff blogs Sector standards for environmental conditions and collections care (e.g. SPECTRUM)	1,2,3
Heritage will be more accessible:	New lighting New displays and exhibitions, bringing 'visible storage' back into display Expanded handling collection for learning New interpretation and resources for different learning styles and in-gallery/remote users Greater transparency of working practices	Visitor data – demographics, footfall, comments book Observational data of visitor movements and behaviour with displays Number of sessions using handling collection Attendees at behind-the-scenes tours and views of behind-the-scenes videos.	1,2,3,5

<p>Heritage will be better managed:</p>	<p>Improved documentation and digitization</p> <p>Collections growth</p> <p>Staff training</p> <p>Increased financial sustainability</p>	<p>Data around museum documentation e.g. numbers of objects location coded; accessioned, photographed.</p> <p>Data around new acquisitions and commissions</p> <p>Staff training logs and professional reviews</p> <p>Successful applications for new or renewed funding streams</p>	<p>1,2,3,</p>
<p>People will have an improved understanding of what the museum is about and what we do</p>	<p>New displays emphasizing the ethos of Need/Make/Use</p> <p>Public programming reflecting contemporary practice, issues and society.</p> <p>New book</p>	<p>Visitors report on takeaways from museum visits</p> <p>Testing of messages and interpretive schemes</p> <p>Event feedback</p> <p>Social media interactions</p> <p>Book sales</p>	<p>1,2,3,4,5,7</p>
<p>People will have developed skills</p>	<p>Staff and volunteer training</p> <p>Volunteer activities</p> <p>Public workshops</p>	<p>Staff, volunteers and participants will be able to demonstrate or report new competencies in specific skills (e.g. digital, e, people-based, transferrable, crafts)</p>	<p>4, 8</p>

<p>People will have had an enjoyable experience</p>	<p>Wide range of events and activities suited to different audiences, tastes and learning styles.</p> <p>Varied volunteer opportunities offered, from skilled to unskilled, committed to casual, local to remote.</p>	<p>Visitors, volunteers, staff and stakeholders provide feedback on time spent (e.g. opportunities for social interaction, being part of a team, achieving or celebrating something, and whether they will visit again, recommend to others, are inspired etc.</p> <p>Increased sign up to eNewsletter</p>	<p>4,5,8</p>
<p>A wider range of communities will have engaged with heritage</p>	<p>Targeted events (e.g. for school refusers, older people, or specific cultural / diaspora groups)</p> <p>Co-production initiatives (e.g. takeovers, exhibitions)</p> <p>Formal education sessions developed to tap into design and technology curriculum</p> <p>Born-digital resources for remote engagement (e.g. Craft Film Directory, films)</p>	<p>Visitor data (exit surveys, changes from 2012 benchmark).</p> <p>Data around number and types of events held.</p> <p>Participant feedback and self-reflection</p> <p>Schools uptake and teacher feedback</p> <p>Recognition (e.g. press coverage and external awards)</p> <p>Web stats and user testing</p>	<p>4,5,6</p>

<p>Our organizational community will be more resilient</p>	<p>Staff embedded in departments</p> <p>More responsive and up-to-date marketing and communications</p> <p>Event templates and guidelines that can be reused by colleagues (e.g. posters, feedback forms, planning documents, risk assessments, etc.)</p> <p>Creating new contact lists of trusted suppliers and facilitators</p>	<p>Effectiveness of marketing campaigns</p> <p>Internal decision-making apparatus and working practices change</p> <p>Ability to business case for transition from project to service provision (BAU) including adoption of templates and income generation models.</p> <p>New funding applications (and success rate)</p>	<p>4,6</p>
<p>The Museum will gain more recognition within the sector community</p>	<p>Collaborative initiatives (e.g. outreach events, sector-facing events)</p> <p>Activities to raise local, national and international profile</p> <p>Publications, reports, and presentations</p>	<p>Recognition (e.g. press coverage and external awards)</p> <p>Number of papers and talks given.</p> <p>Consolidation of partnerships and requests for new ones.</p>	<p>4,5</p>

3. APPROACH TO EVALUATION

3.1 Evaluation objectives

The VERVE Evaluation Plan (Round 2 application, Appendix [6], Summer 2012) stated three main aims:

- To inform development of the project, and improve delivery, through front end, formative and summative evaluation.
- To provide quantitative and qualitative proof of benefit or impact.
- To ensure the project remains relevant and vibrant, meeting the needs of target groups, and developing in accordance with their feedback.

This included addressing shortfalls in the current museum evaluation provision to look at specific metrics such as more detailed information about visitation from beyond the ring-road (regional / national visitors) and drilling down to specific measurable impacts such as:

- tracking any shifts in understanding as a result of the new displays and services in the Museum;
- a shift in the use of collections within target groups;
- assessing organizational capacity to support greater volunteer participation in the Museum's activities going forward.



Bread fruit poulder, Marquesas Islands, [1884.128.78](#). Not unusual for the Pitt Rivers – something brown and not immediately obvious what it is. How could we help visitors' understanding of objects like this?

3.2 How the evaluation intention changed

We wrote the evaluation plan in 2012. Whilst much of the integrity of the plan remains intact and we can usefully compare data with our 2012 baselines, there have been shifts in the sector that have changed the way we think about measurable impact. So, instead of just looking at how our visitors' understanding has developed or improved since the project's activities – that is, a cognitive or intellectual impact – we are now very much engaged with what we as a museum can contribute to the wellbeing agenda, and so we are also interested in how the project has encouraged emotional and social engagement, both at an individual and collective level.



Project partners representing Oxford Pride, Oxford University and My Normal during a month of LGBTQ+ events, February 2017 © Pitt Rivers Museum

3.3 Methodology

We employed a mixed methods approach to research and data collection over the course of the project. The wide range of data sources and number of different methods used have helped us achieve a robust picture of quantitative activities and a rich picture of qualitative engagement and reflection.

Evaluating New Displays

- Front end and formative evaluation reports – Archaeology and Introductory Case
- Summative evaluation reports – lower gallery and upper gallery displays

Counting engagement

- Overall museum visitor numbers via electronic counter system
- Manual counting at events and activities
- Number of volunteers
- Event registration processes (e.g. online ticketing)
- Numerical record of additions to database including photographs, related documents and research.

Digital resources

- Google Analytics - page visits, referrals, etc.
- Blog reads
- App downloads
- eNewsletter signups
- User-testing groups
- Social media likes, engagements and hashtag / sentiment analysis

Understanding who has engaged

- Self-completion survey on-site (digital kiosk)
- Comments books and postcode collection
- Face-to-face exit interview (conducted by ALVA)
- In-gallery observation and follow-up interviews

Understanding why and how they engaged

- Focus groups and front-end testing exercises
- Face-to-face interviews
- Post-event feedback forms
- Post-event online surveys
- Vox-pop video
- Post-it walls

Staff and volunteers

- Event debriefs and team meetings

- Volunteer written feedback (e.g. blogs and testimonials)
- Staff Professional Development Reviews (PDRs) and self-reflection
- Videos

Partners

- Steering group
- Verbal presentations
- Written feedback
- Externally-commissioned reports
- Reviews and press

3.4 How did evaluation help change the project over five years?

A five-year project will inevitably alter in practice from the original plans. Issues and changes affecting our project overall were covered in the Completion Report. Often it was evaluation as we went - regular data collection, event debriefs and self-reflection - that helped us adapt the project as we went along, recognizing dead ends and responding to feedback. These are four of our main changes, which were communicated to HLF as part of our progress reporting:

1. We quickly hit a lot of our event targets in terms of attendance. Also, it became evident that a lot of administrative work and staff time was going into putting on specialist events for small numbers of people. Towards the latter part of the project, then, we consciously decided to offer fewer events for more people. This helped create a buzz and exclusivity and lessened the risk of over-regular events losing traction with the public.
2. Our target audiences changed. Originally, we had intended to target D&T teachers with a view to engaging them with the PRM collections as a basis for renewing traditional craft skills in schools. However, after a series of teacher-focused INSET days in Year 1 and continued efforts to push schools' sessions linked to the D&T curriculum, it became clear that D&T does not enjoy the same sort of support as Art & Design and is firmly moving towards teachers, quite unlike Art & Design teachers just don't enjoy the same sort of in-school support, and that digital technologies are dominating in this area. This led to creating school sessions with other curricular links (History and Science).

3. We also planned to target regional audiences with our pop-up museum. Whilst this programme was hugely successful in on-the-spot engagement, it did not necessarily translate to visits to the Museum (a 3% increase in visits from the county between 2013 and 2016). In 2013 too, as part of its Museums 2020 project, the MA produced *Museums Change Lives*, its campaigning vision for the future of museums, with three main headings Wellbeing, Better Places, and Ideas and People. For the PRM, this meant focusing on social purpose, inclusivity and dealing with difficult legacies (e.g. colonialization) so we decided instead to focus on specifically marginalized groups such as migrants and refugees, dementia groups, and LGBTQ+ communities.
4. In 2014, two years in to the project, we conducted some audience research into our AfterHours programme. By analyzing event feedback and commissioning some focus groups, we implemented the following recommendations: promoted the events more widely through a variety of media including regional 'doughnut' distribution; emphasized the unique atmosphere (e.g. used photos of the magically-lit interior in pre-event PR); created large, distinctive purple external signage (hoods to cover fixed pedestrian signs and portable feather flags) to help direct visitors to our secondary evening entrance; started events earlier (5-6pm) to catch people after work; embraced an enthusiasm for film (e.g. partnering with Cult Screens 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018); and co-curated events with other organizations and groups.¹
5. Whilst we hit our target of square meterage of displays, we didn't display as many objects as we had anticipated (1385 rather than 1800). This is partly because we decided to prioritize larger objects for greater impact and arrange objects slightly less densely than before to give each the room to 'breathe', but also because we abandoned an aspect of the display schema altogether: that focusing on the Museum's history and the role of General Pitt-Rivers. Public consultation carried out in 2016 and in-depth internal staff discussions revealed that this might not in fact be the most helpful way forward.² Visitors reported reasonably high levels of satisfaction with the existing introductory case with its explanation of Pitt-Rivers typological system. In 2015 there also emerged a protest movement called

¹ Lorenzo, Mark, *Pitt Rivers Museum AfterHours Events Focus Group report* (2014), pp.1-6 [[Appendix 8f](#)]

² Clough, Kathy; McGreevy, Zena; & Utting, Rachael, *Introductory Case Interpretation and Display Report* (May 2017) [[Appendix 8c](#)]

Rhodes Must Fall, challenging many of the colonial and post-colonial histories within Oxford, including those inherent in the objects and narratives at the Pitt Rivers Museum. This called for a degree of serious curatorial self-reflection around what messages and themes we want to explore with our visitors and how General Pitt-Rivers, himself the product of Victorian attitudes and beliefs might most usefully be presented and debated. This led to different ideas about what the Introductory case should contain and where it should be located so we decided to pause on this scheme of work, with a view to revisiting it post-VERVE and after further rounds of review and consultation. It was decided that this important but singular display element would be better situated as the germ of a new project for which we would seek specific funding.



The 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign called for Oxford to address its colonial past © Oxford Mail, 2016

4. SO HOW DID WE DO?

4.1 PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Planning and Timetable

- The project benefited from a very detailed Activity Plan. This helped us plan out activity year on year and divide resources accordingly.
- The timetable of five years was about right – we probably could not have achieved as much in any lesser time. We reflect on this further in 'what went well' later in the report.
- We decided to submit progress reports to HLF every six months. This helped us keep a track of progress and achievements (for example, totting up six-monthly digital engagements), as well as highlighting where changes were necessary.
- The team utilized shared tools such as file servers and calendars where we could plan and populate each calendar year as we went and keep a track of staff roles, contacts, number of attendees and feedback.

Staffing

- The project was lucky to recruit a very able, enthusiastic and hard-working team, who enjoyed each other's support and working together to achieve goals.
- We probably underestimated the number of staff required, and as such overburdened the staff we did have. Over time this led to the division of tasks and the creation of new roles within the budget – for example, the Communications and Volunteer Officer needed to be split into two separate roles, and the Collections Assistant role also became two part-time posts to cover the huge amount of collections searching, moving, and documentation.
- The Project Curator and Engagement Officer's role was, in particular, over-ambitious in attempting to be both the sole curatorial staff member with responsibility for researching and writing interpretation for 1000+ objects, overseeing the public engagement programme, creating the majority of digital content, and being the Project Manager in terms of reporting, writing fundraising bids, overseeing finance and staff CPD. This issue was not really resolved during the project and did lead to some inevitable stress and delays.
- Over the course of five years there were inevitable changes of personnel as the largely young team progressed and sought professional opportunities

elsewhere. In total 15 staff took up the six (later seven) roles. This did lead to some loss of continuity and skills, and recruitment gaps.

- By mid-way through the project, the original Project Sponsor group comprising the Director, Administrator, Development rep and Head of Creative Partnerships had disbanded as those individuals left or retired. Though the first two of these roles were replaced, the new incumbents naturally took time to get to grips with the philosophy or mechanics of the project, and this put even more pressure on the Project Curator to 'carry' the project through to completion.

Budget

- The budget in total was about right. It gave us the freedom to be innovative and also seek the best quality products and services without being extravagant or wasteful.
- The budget was reviewed half way through the project and amounts were shifted between different cost headings to reflect the realities of spend and forecast (though this didn't affect the overall budget). For example, we had allocated a huge £20,000 for acquiring objects for the handling collection but our public engagement team revealed they relied a lot on donations or small purchases. By contrast we underestimated the costs of putting on large-scale evening events with considerations of catering, signage, staff overtime, publicity, AV equipment, and paying performers and facilitators. So naturally it made sense to re-apportion costs between the different activity categories.
- We did not allocate enough for Evaluation. Ideally this should have been up to 10% of the project total but in fact was only 0.3% of the entire budget (less than £5000), which limited our ability to commission thorough and regular external evaluation.

Within our Outcomes and eight Approved Purposes we enacted 40+ separate spheres of activity. You can find a detailed account of these activities in the VERVE Completion Report.³ Here, we look at our performance in terms of impact and benefits.

³ Adams, Helen, *VERVE Completion Report*, 2018 [[Appendix 8a](#)]

4.2 HERITAGE

Headlines

- ✓ We hoped the changes brought by VERVE would increase our annual visitor figures from 360,000 in 2012 to 409,390 by 2017 (+14%). In fact, our last annual visitor figures for 2016-17 were 485,755 and our projected annual figures for 2017-18 are 490,000 (+36%) – a figure well in excess of our target and a current museum record.
- ✓ 1385 objects redisplayed, 60% of which have not been displayed in the last 10 years or ever before
- ✓ More than 8000 objects located, web-catalogued, photographed, and condition-checked.
- ✓ New efficient LED lighting installed throughout the galleries
- ✓ A new collections management system for the 1000 objects in the Museum's handling collection

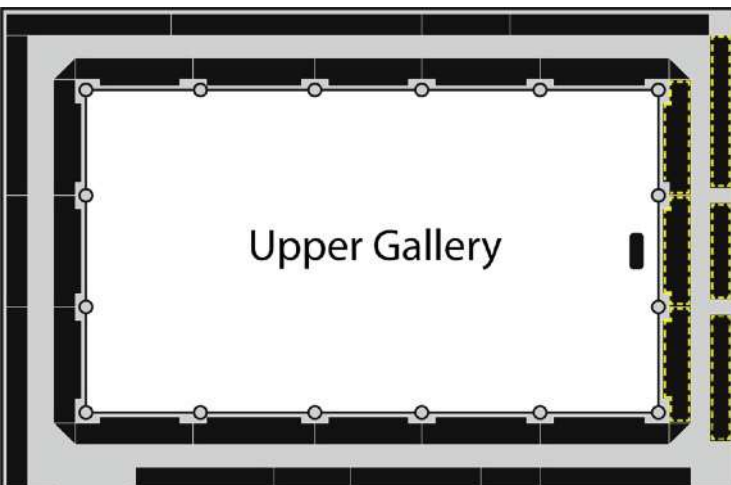
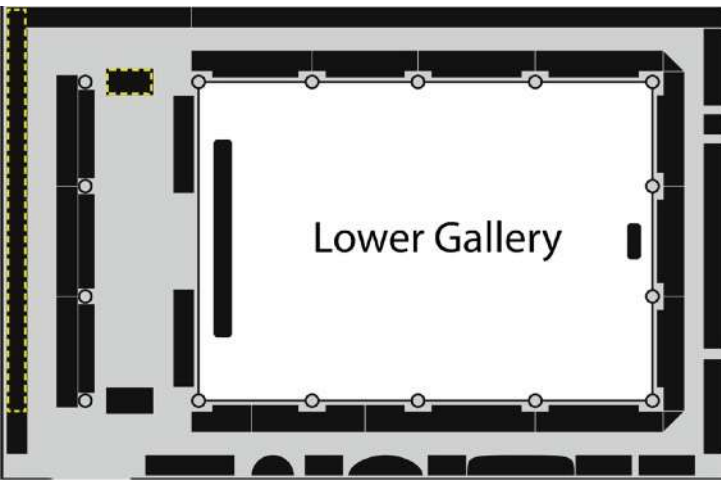
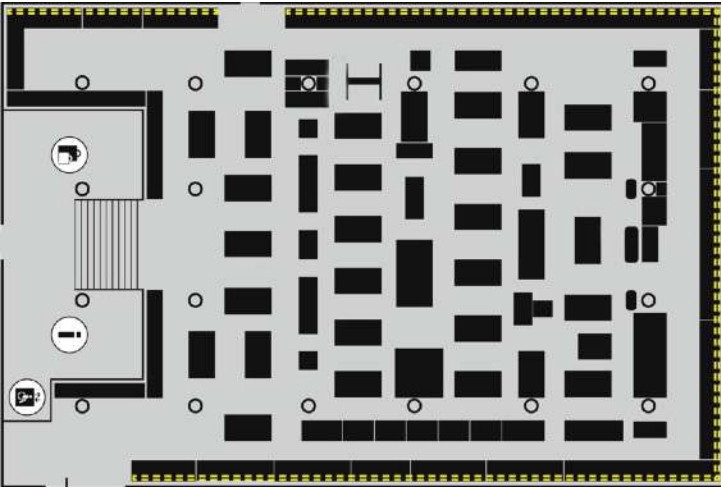
More people through the doors In contrast to falling numbers of visitors to museum and galleries nationally in the UK⁴, the Pitt Rivers Museum has been notable for a consistent increase in visitors over the last five years, from 360,000 to 486,000 (+35%). This is partly due to the high rate of word-of-mouth recommendations among visitors, for which we score the highest among the 240 leading visitor attractions in the UK.

⁴ ALVA visitor figures 2017 compared to 2012 <http://www.alva.org.uk/details.cfm?p=608>

Improved lighting Light levels in the Museum are kept low deliberately to help protect fragile materials such as textiles and fur from irreversible light damage, but this has been the single largest source of visitor criticism in recent years. With support from DCMS/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvements Fund (partnership funding) we invested more than £100,000 in 100 metres of new LED lighting to make displays and labels more visible, and to enhance the architectural drama of the interior. LED lighting is energy- and cost-efficient: the 500+ Soraa VIVID MR16 LED lamps are estimated to have saved the Museum £45,000 in the five years since their installation, helping us reduce our carbon emissions 44 tonnes each year. In addition, LEDs do not emit heat, which is good news for museum objects. Complaints about lighting used to comprise 35% of our visitor feedback - now that has reduced to less than 10%.

New permanent displays We have refurbished areas of the Museum that had been screened off or overlooked for the last fifty years. New displays of objects such as masks, sculpture, tools, footwear, bellows, ornaments, saddles, jewellery, weapons, and art span more than 100 meters on all three floors of the Museum. More than half of the 1,385 objects on show have never been on public display before, or not in the past 10 years, initiating a planned programme of refreshment and renewal of all permanent displays and visible storage areas. The displays are a conscious rejection of 'anthropological analysis' and instead focus on materials, techniques, and the people behind the objects – those who made, used, traded, owned or collected them. Each object has a story to tell and it was VERVE's job to bring that to life. New lighting, colourful presentation, a large central object and dynamic arrangement encourage the viewer to appreciate the displays as a pleasing 'whole' but were not so over-crowded so as to prevent each object from speaking for itself.

Thousands of database records created and improved The Museum cares for more than half a million items. It's important that the information we hold about them is accurate and up-to-date. During VERVE we processed 8,000 objects for display, loans, storage relocation, conservation treatment and research. We took the opportunity to improve the information for those objects, which is available on our website via our [online catalogue](#). We also created a database for the 1,000 items in the Museum's education handling collection.



The yellow dotted areas show the 110 linear metres of displays created as part of VERVE on the three floors of the Museum with some of the highlight objects – a 200-year-old Japanese *oni* figure ([1964.1.1](#)); a chalk shrine figure from Papua New Guinea ([1907.60.22](#)); and a Neolithic jadeite axe ([1929.51.2](#)).

Focus on creativity and ingenuity The PRM is truly a global museum but we knew visitors sometimes came away unsure about what the Museum is trying to do or say. Although the Museum has Victorian origins, our goal today is to celebrate humanity's many ways of knowing, being, creating and coping in our interconnected worlds: exploring how people everywhere 'need, make and use' things. The new displays - centred on materials and ingenuity rather than chronology or geography - support this idea, and were the touchstone for all our workshops, educational sessions and events.

Contemporary collecting The Museum continues to develop its collections to ensure the stories we tell remain fresh and relevant. Through VERVE we made exciting new acquisitions for both the permanent collection and the education collection used for handling and learning sessions. These included a set of carved Japanese *noh* theatre masks and replicas of Mayan ceramics, a Stone Age adze and medieval shoe lasts.



Head of Education Andy McLellan (left) demonstrates the new handling collection to (from right): Michael Cook (Arts Council England), Chris Gosden (Chair of the Board of Visitors) and Dr Oliver Douglas (Curator, Museum of English Rural Life, Reading), 2018 © Pitt Rivers Museum



Photos showing the 'before' and 'after' view of spinning wheels displayed high up in the Court
© Pitt Rivers Museum

Improving scholarship and generating research interest VERVE worked with subject specialists to improve institutional knowledge about the collections through correspondence, visits and public talks, notably: anthropologist Jill Salmons (Masks from Cameroon); Dr Fiona Kerlogue, Senior Curator, Horniman Museum (Balinese / Javanese carvings and masks); Professor David Pratten, Professor in Social Anthropology (Nigerian art and culture); Alan Raistrick, (spinning wheels); designer-maker and academy tutor Philip Koomen (wood joinery and tools); Rachel Hopkins (medieval archaeology); Dr Olaf Bayer (prehistory and landscape archaeology); Dr Carlyne Larrington (Icelandic culture); and two experts in Naga basketry techniques.

The project engaged with each year's intake of Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology MA students at Oxford University and directly assisted with the following research enquiries:

- Emily Feltham, Sainsbury Research Unit, UEA, completing an MA in the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. Dissertation on performance in museums.
- Rana Ibrahim, University of Birmingham, completing an MA in Cultural Heritage. Research into Islamic collections in UK museums.
- Zariq Jasni, completing a MArchD at Oxford Brookes University. Dissertation about the lighting of space and how it affects human emotions.

Improved profile of the heritage Over the course of the project staff endeavored to reach out - and respond - to media coverage. This included inviting journalists to review [events](#) and exhibitions, advertising on local radio, highlighting the Museum in the University of Oxford's [philanthropic campaigns](#), and also securing national coverage on BBC radio programmes broadcast by [BBC Radio 4](#), [BBC World Service](#), and BBC Arabic.

Project Curator, Helen Adams, photographed for VERVE: 'A very 21st-century Victorian Museum, Oxford Thinking Campaign ([p10-11](#)) © University of Oxford



4.2.1 Front-end and formative evaluation of new displays

The front-end and formative evaluation on the archaeology displays – where we were starting with a ‘blank canvas’ - included consultations with subject specialists and a piece of work looking at the family friendliness of any new display. Dr Alice Stevenson, Curator, Petrie Museum, London, had advised:

‘Keep the dense and cluttered look and make the most of that aesthetic. In displaying stone tools, choose a range of colours, not only flint, but also jadeite, obsidian and chert, and mention the stone tool technologies of Scandinavia, Pitcairn and Rapanui. Stories are key for engagement and it’s helpful if these reflect the visiting families e.g. include women, children, older people and people from a variety of backgrounds.’⁵

39 children aged 3-17, as part of half-term visiting families or the Oxfordshire Young Archaeologists’ Club, were consulted on the new displays using a mixture of games, quizzes, reactions to existing display styles, and an exercise to design one own’s museum display. One child aged 8, talking about an old display of tools, said, ‘it’s very messy - you can’t even see all of the objects as some are on top of the others.’ The report benchmarked vocabulary and prior knowledge to help us write interpretation.

‘The children had heard of coil and wheel methods of making pottery but had no cultural or chronological reference for glass, they didn’t know when or where glass was first made’.⁶

Meanwhile, a separate study on the Welcome or ‘Introductory’ case, involving visitor surveys, observation and two focus groups with young adults and older adults revealed that:

‘The ‘pulling power’ of the current display is relatively high with almost two thirds (62%) of those walking past it stopping to have a closer look. (I.e. 44% of total museum visitors stopped at the Intro case)⁷.

⁵ Biddulph, Kim, *Family-friendly world archaeology displays at the Pitt Rivers Museum* (2016), p.7 [Appendix 8b]

⁶ Ibid., p.14

⁷ Clough, Kathy; McGreevy, Zena; & Utting, Rachael, *Introductory Case Interpretation and Display Report* (May 2017), p.26 [Appendix 8c]

And that whilst 'cross-cultural' was a recognized theme, there lay a great challenge in "shift[ing] visitors' core understandings of the museum as being more (in substance and relevance) than its infamous collections of 'shrunken heads'."

This piece of work was hugely beneficial in laying out recommendations for how the Museum might want to think about presenting its values on research, scholarship and ethics in the future, but most importantly showed that there was little point devoting large amounts of time and effort as part of VERVE redeveloping a display that already does the job it is meant to do.

4.2.2 Summative evaluation of the new displays

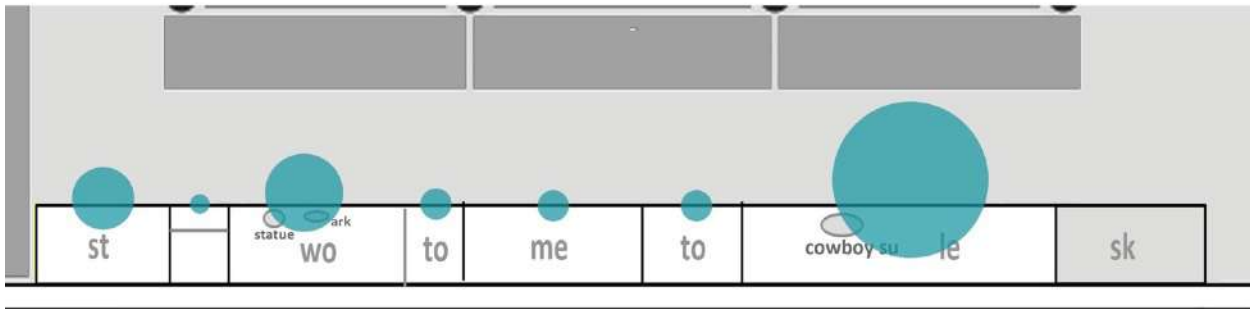
The Court (ground floor) redisplay, though extensive, were primarily intended to replace unlit, unlabelled objects with visibly accessible collections. Therefore whilst great thought and energy went into creating the displays - from prioritizing 181 artefacts with faces and eyes to challenge the ethnographic gaze and create the effect of 'other cultures looking back at us', or the hundreds of hours of conservation work on fragile Japanese *oni* figures – ultimately these displays are too high (3m+) to be enjoyed as traditional displays so we focused our evaluative efforts on the 42 metres of new displays on the first floor Lower Gallery (traditional crafts) and second floor Upper Gallery (archaeology).

An external evaluator spent time observing visitors near these displays, mapping their movements and dwell times, and interviewing them about their experience.⁸

- ✓ 71% first-time visitors – a good indicator that visitors who are unfamiliar with the museum are finding their way upstairs
- ✓ 44% aged 16-34 – a good indicator that we are hitting our target audience of young adults
- ✓ Increased dwell time increased. In 2012 the average dwell time in this part of the Lower Gallery was 94 seconds (Round 2 application, appendix 1). In 2017 it was 150-180 seconds
- ✓ Higher number of families engaging with craft displays
- ✓ 84% rated displays 'excellent', 13% rated 'good', 13% satisfactory
- ✓ Strong central object aided recall (see below)

⁸ Lorenzo, Mark, *VERVE Displays (Lower and Upper Galleries): Summative Evaluation Report* (Autumn, 2017) [[Appendix 8d](#)]

Example of observed dwell times at Lower Gallery craft displays:



Stone (st)	Wood (wo)	Tools (to)	Metal (me)	Leather (le)
16 secs	20 secs	16 secs	8 secs	40 secs

Popular objects measured by mentions in interviews and observations:

Cowboy suit*	14	Metal Plates	5
Wooden ark*	11	Saddles	4
Wooden statue*	10	Buddha statues*	4
Exotic leather objects	8	Wooden spoons	4
Moccasins	7	Bellows	2
Lost wax heads*	6	Stone water purifier	2
Musical instruments	5	Stone hieroglyph	2

These observations show that the Leather display, nearest the gallery entrance, is doing a good job of drawing and holding attention. Dwell time across this run of cases has increased by 56-86 seconds.

Those objects marked with (*) are objects placed centrally to structure the displays. That three (cowboy suit, ark and statue) are the top three recalled items (out of 600+) suggest these are indeed attracting the viewer's attention and were memorable.



Here we can see that there were different responses to the different types of display - namely that the craft displays were more attractive than the archaeology displays, but the latter were easier to understand.

Positives

Finding 1: the craft displays were full of variety with appealing objects, many with personal resonance

Example: 'It covers so much, so many styles, not clean and clinical I like that...such intriguing objects that draws you in.' *Female 55-64*

'My father would hoard lots of old tools now I know what they are used for.' *Female, 55-64*

Comment: Thematic displays are a good way of counter-balancing the singularity of typological displays elsewhere in the Museum (e.g. a case full of spears or flutes) whilst still allowing the Museum to posit objects from different time periods and cultures next to one another.

Finding 2: the archaeology displays were well-labelled (with a key system) and easy to understand.

Example: 'I'm a designer and I find this really works. The way it is laid out really helps you focus, it catches your eyes. There's a lot of symmetry and it's well labelled.'

Female, 25-34

'I think the display is really natural to look at...and the way the descriptions are put on either side is really well done...simple and easy to find.' Female, 25-34

Comment: Drawing on suggestions from the family-friendly report (Appendix 8b), the archaeology displays were created to be visually stylish and contemporary with acyclic mounts and panels, with quick, easy-to-read tombstone labels to the side so as not to crowd the objects themselves.



A new archaeology desktop display of bone, tooth, horn and shell © Pitt Rivers Museum

Negatives

Finding: 3 some visitors found the craft displays well-labelled but difficult to understand

Example: 'Really well-labelled...but I'm wondering why is it all together, I mean look here - lizard skins, swords...all interesting but no obvious connections - it is all a bit confusing.' Male, 16-24

Comment: This study took place before the display headers had been installed, which now cross-connect the large displays under their different material titles – leatherwork stonework, and so on. We did not have enough time to create separate in-case introductory panels but instead focused on detailed labels, but it might be good to look to include these later.

Finding 4: the archaeology displays lacked variety and colour, and individual objects did not stand out.

Example: 'Nothing really grabs me to be honest.' Female, 25-34

'That's funny...[laughing at the USB stick]...never noticed that before, that's not really old. If I hadn't been so anxious wanting to see everything and took more time looking, I might have stopped and realized how it fits in better.' Male 16-24

Comment: Whilst efforts were made to make the archaeology displays appealing, unfortunately what often survives in the archaeological record is neither brightly-coloured nor always intact. We could investigate ways of making the lighting in this area more dramatic and help pick out interesting stories with flash cards / extra info.



Pitt Rivers Museum
@Pitt_Rivers

Follow

#Archaeology is being created all the time. This USB stick was dug up in London in 2012, loaded with Amy Winehouse music, Bhangra dancing & content from adult websites, giving a snapshot of life at a certain point in time. **#ObjectoftheMonth** 2016.47.1 bit.ly/1YoZqs1



2:59 AM - 13 Jul 2018

149 Retweets 310 Likes



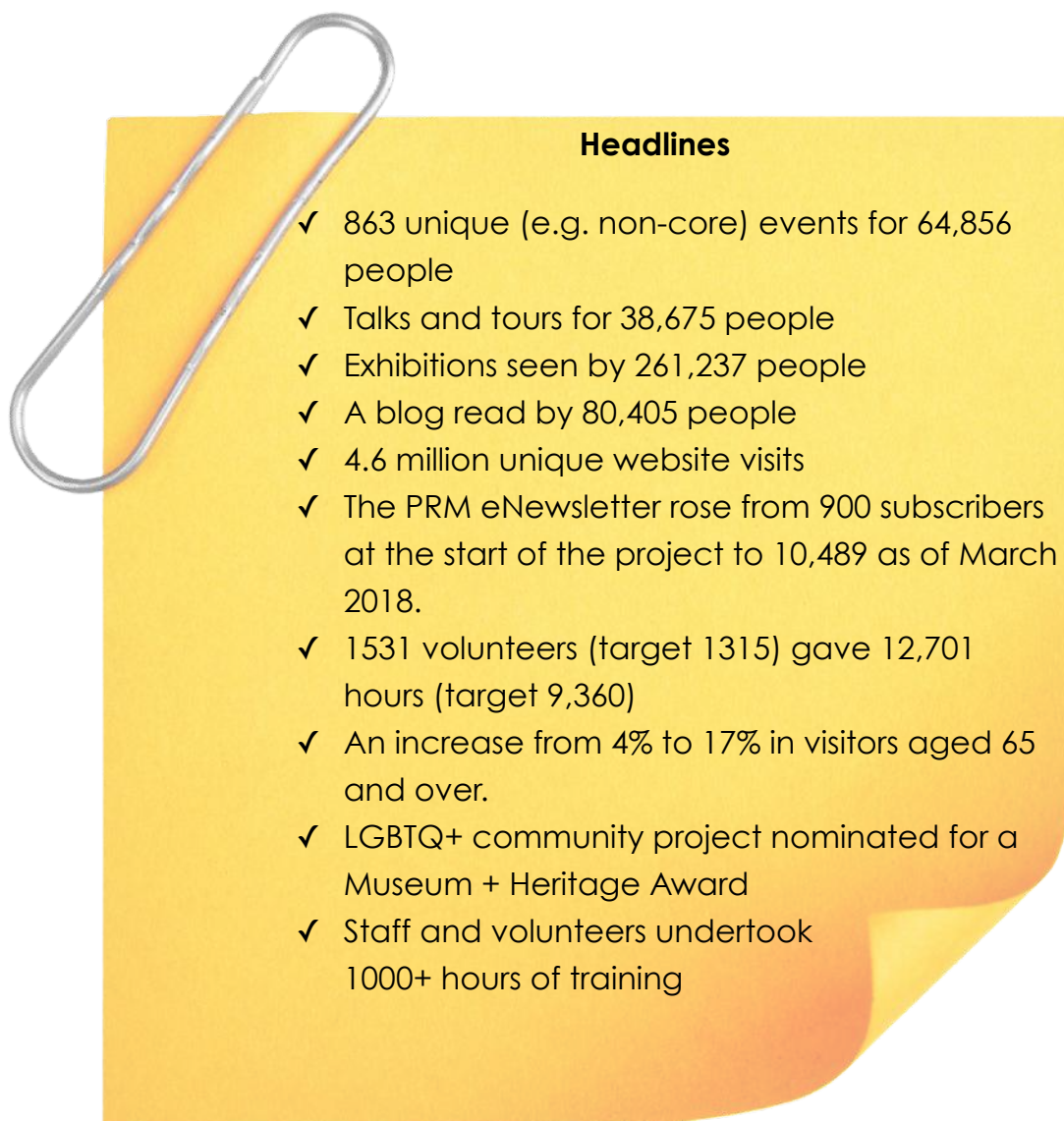
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149

310

The 'archeological USB stick' was a hit on social media, but we needed to make its story more prominent in the display.

4.3 PEOPLE and COMMUNITIES



What was Need / Make / Use? It was clear early on that 'VERVE' was an internal term and did not mean much to our audiences. The interpretive spine was all about celebrating the creativity and ingenuity illustrated by how people have used the knowledge and resources available to them to solve the problems of everyday life – how to keep warm, how to deal with misfortune, how to store and transport food, how to venerate their gods, etc. In short, how people everywhere need, make and use things. For example, in our Leather display we didn't just want to show smoked hides; we wanted to tell the story of Thelma Bird (below), one of the last women in the Peawanuck Cree community of the Ontario region of Canada still brain tanning and smoking hides the traditional way.



Volunteer involvement Volunteers were an essential part of the VERVE project and 1,531 individuals gave 12,701 hours of their time. Tasks ranged from collections research and documentation, assisting with marketing campaigns, organizing events, face-painting at our Pitt Fest festival, creating digital resources, devising and delivering family-friendly activities, and giving gallery tours. The project also mentored six work placement students from other HEIs (e.g. Oxford Brookes University and Cardiff University). VERVE has helped the Museum create a suite of opportunities for volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, from those who seek experience and skills, to those who simply want something fun and worthwhile to do in their spare time. We value every one of our volunteers and they are integral to the Museum's future.

A museum for all A modern museum cannot just be a room full of inanimate artefacts. It must be a living, social and flexible space where visitors can learn, create, reflect, express themselves or simply feel welcome. VERVE reached out to identified audiences, many of whom are often under-represented or socially excluded, such as refugees, the homeless, those with learning disabilities and mental health issues, school refusers, and minority ethnic communities. Often this meant taking the Museum outside these walls, delivering outreach sessions in care

homes or taking a pop-up Museum tent on the road to 12,170 people on 35 occasions.

Empowerment and co-production Museums are often good at talking about people but less good at talking with them. The VERVE project looked to collaborate with individuals and groups, allowing their voices and stories to be heard. In total, the project delivered 863 events which included student takeover evening events on themes such as love, fashion and magic; displays created by circus workers, Irish travellers, furniture students, Syrian refugees, dementia sufferers and artists in residence; inviting subject specialists and originating communities to help interpret collections; and nationally-recognized work to support LGBTQ+ awareness through our 'Out in Oxford' city-wide trail and events exploring gender identity.

Relationships with other organizations The Pitt Rivers Museum is part of the University of Oxford but we also want it to be part of a much wider network of connected individuals, groups and organizations. We actively sought to establish relationships with external groups, be they hip-hop collectives from East Oxford, folklorists from Yorkshire, First Nation communities from Canada, or other museums and arts venues around the UK. We also nurtured relationships with schools, teachers and higher education institutions (such as Rycotewood and Langtree Academy) so they come back year after year to use the Museum as a reliable and inspiring learning resource. Such relationships enrich the Museum by extending the pool from which we draw knowledge, broadens the impact of the collections, and enhances ways visitors can engage in a contemporary cultural experience.

'Evaluation shows that the types of visitors coming to events have diversified and people who have never come to events or ever visited the Museum before are now connecting to us thanks to socially-relevant programming.'

After Hours focus group report, 2015⁹

Digital The VERVE project improved the Museum's digital presence. A new website launched in 2015 now receives more than 1 million visits a year from 200 countries and territories, whilst mobile apps and tools allow visitors to make more of their visit using their own devices. Our social media followers have increased by 735% since 2012 (nearly 45,000) and this has provided new channels for marketing and

⁹ Lorenzo, Mark, *Pitt Rivers Museum AfterHours Events Focus Group report* (2014) [[Appendix 8f](#)]

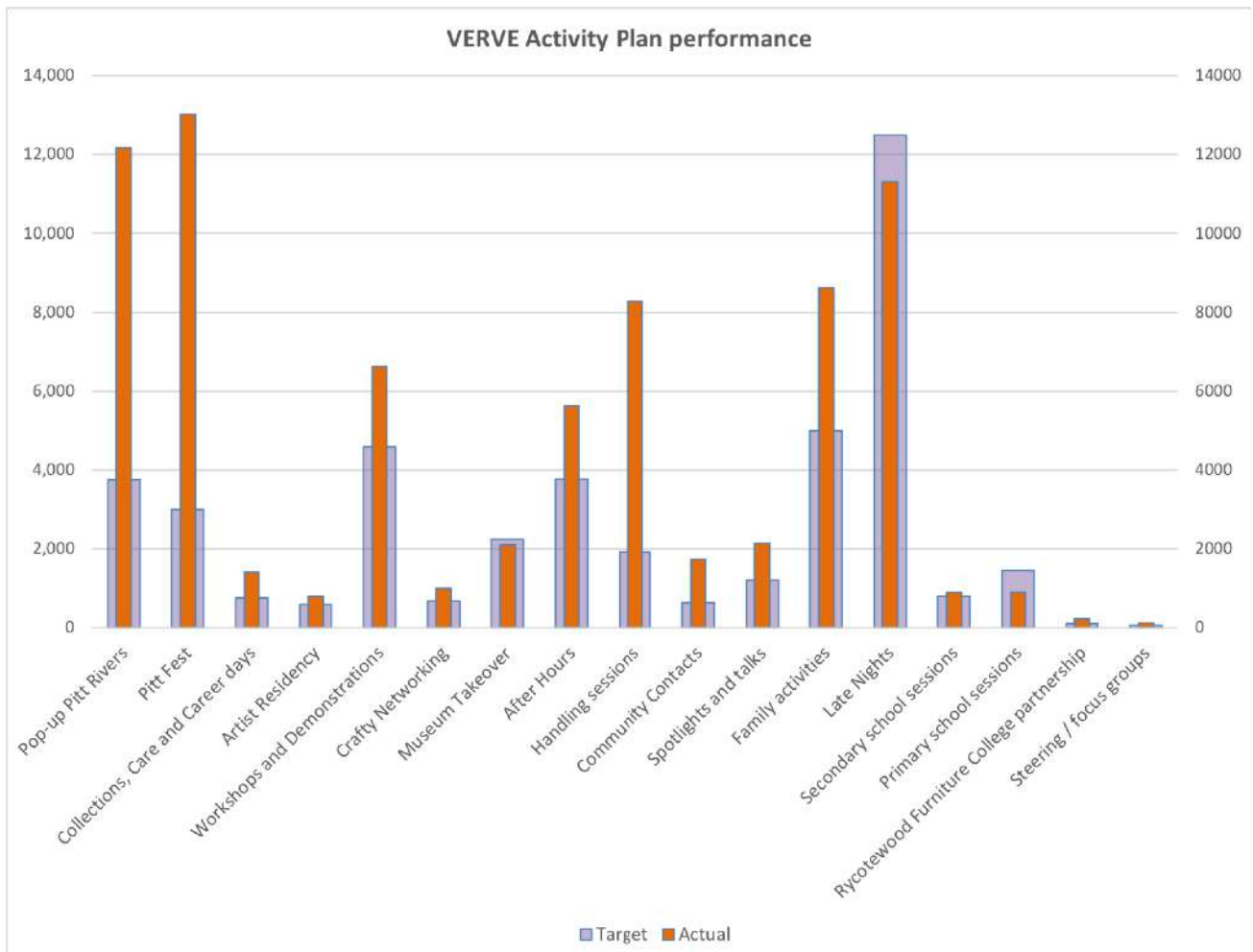
communications, whilst staff and volunteer blogs and behind-the-scenes films have provided greater transparency and dialogue around working practices.

What?	Target	Actual
Attendance at new activities	48,300	64,856
Attendance at adapted core activities	262,000	282,000
Exhibition attendance	283,675	300,387
Website hits	3,000,000	4,600,139
Digital content	75,000	124,118
Social Media followers	38,000	44,996

This table shows how VERVE exceeded its targets in all its major Activity Plan areas.

Staff have been an integral part of VERVE's people plan. The team – and support staff - have undertaken training in a variety of skills and knowledge areas ranging from LGBTQ awareness, digital media, interpretive planning, using a laser cutter, volunteer management, leather dyeing techniques, proof-reading, first aid, databases, face-painting, spreadsheets, audio description and UX techniques. The team have shared best practice at sector conferences and seminars, delivered sessions for MA Museum Studies students, and led on culture change at the Museum (see Legacy section).

4.3.1 Performance



This table shows VERVE’s targets and actual performance across 17 different activity stands. The project had especial success with its tented outreach programme and Pitt Fest festival. It hit or exceeded all of its targets except school sessions. Why was this? The formal education partnerships went well – e.g. our annual metal casting project with Langtree Academy in Reading and jeweller Kate Coker resulted in nine girls opting to take Design Technology GCSE (whereas only one student had taken this option in the previous year) and evaluation with the students showed that they were immensely proud of their amulets and valued the sense of recognition that came from having their work displayed in the Museum. However, those facilitated sessions designed as menu items for primary and secondary teachers just didn’t catch on due to lack of curricular relevance and the popularity of exiting ‘tried and tested’ content.

4.3.2 Feedback

We were mindful to gather feedback from as part of our public programming and created a database to store and sort this data. Of 542 recorded responses:

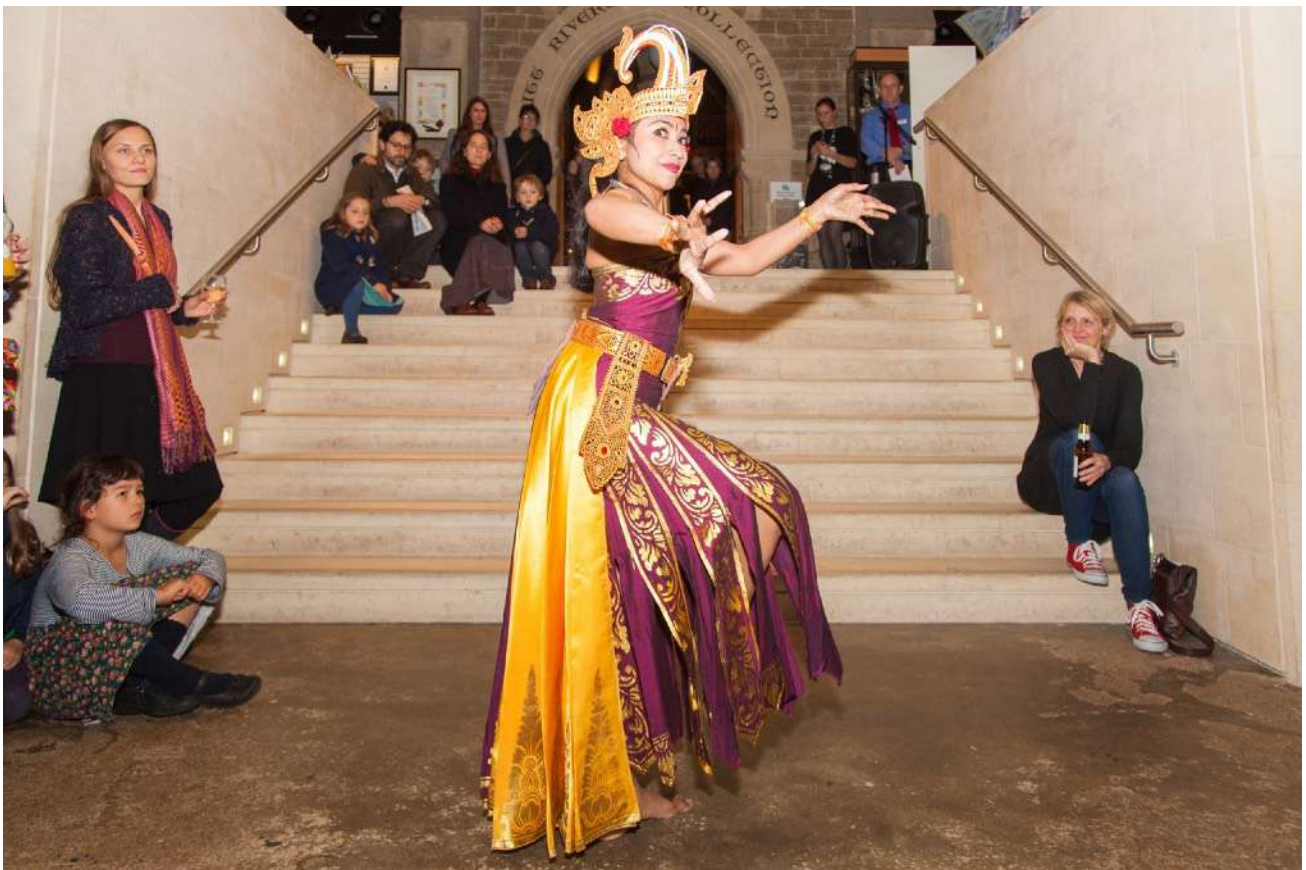
- High satisfaction - 48% of respondents rated events as 5/5 and 43% of respondents rated events as 4/5.
- Our programme had a local appeal – 72% of attendees at Museum-based events lived in the Oxford area (OX1, OX2, OX3, OX4) whereas just 15% came from the rest of Oxfordshire and 11% came from the rest of the South East. This might be thought to represent the high density of students in the area but they only made up 7% of our total respondents, so this suggests a high take up among residents (permanent communities).

Here are some of the words used to describe the activities, with frequencies ranging from 10 to 100¹⁰



¹⁰ 542 recorded responses, 2014-2017, including feedback from 191 participants in 15 workshops

We were grateful of critical feedback, seeing them as opportunities for improvement. This included complaints about long queues at late night events and lack of advertising in central Oxford for Pitt Fest. So we remedied these with staged entry and twin-centre bars at events, and allowed a greater timescale and budget for Pitt Fest publicity the following year, even marking a route on the pavement for the half mile from the city centre.



Dancer Ni Madé Pujawati performs at Java & Bali, our most successful AfterHours event attracting 600+ people (2015) @ Pitt Rivers Museum

'The cooperative nature of Pitt Fest is what helps make it such a success – staff, Friends, volunteers and other collaborators (some travelling over 100 miles to take part) – all giving up their time to help visitors not simply to 'look' but also 'do'. One of the primary aims of VERVE has been to find ways to bring the collections to life and Pitt Fest is a wonderful example of that.'

Helen Adams, VERVE Project Curator

'I jotted down some tweaks to the activity I could make if I was to run it again. I feel they would make the activity more successful and more of use for the museum.'

Jack, volunteer, Pitt Fest 2017



'My quilt piece was inspired by a small model of a Saami cradle from Sweden. I was super happy to find it; it brought back happy memories of Sweden where Abel was born on the first day of snow in winter. For me, the little cradle became a symbol of happy times carrying, nursing and caring for my newborn in nature while being free to go anywhere.'

Pieterneel, mother to Abel (4), Crafternoon, 2014

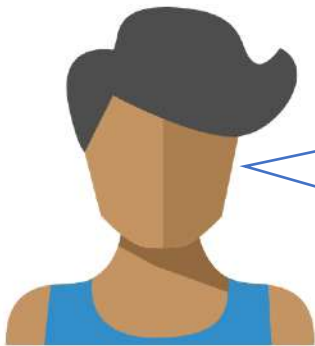
'I would like to thank you as the experience you gave me in museum-based outreach and engagement inspired me to go on to complete a dissertation entitled 'How can UK Museums Best Engage Refugees and Asylum Seekers', in which I received a strong first-class mark. I would never have picked such a topic if it were not for the inspiration and drive I gained whilst working with VERVE at the Pitt Rivers.'

Dom, Cardiff University placement student, 2016



'I signed up to work with an expert and gain new skills. I loved everything about it – I delivered a beautiful work of art, Simon is an expert craftsman and teacher. I couldn't improve anything – this was the best week in Oxford ever – and I would have paid much more too.'

Pete, participant in Nessmuk canoe-building workshop, 2015



'Inspiring theme, great tour around Pitt Rivers to find inspiration from a subject I didn't know anything about. I would love to do more workshops like this.'

Jessica, participant in Naga millinery workshop, 2014

'I liked the actual handling museum objects because you usually wouldn't be able to touch anything in a museum. I liked smelling them and feeling them as well.'

Year 8 student, 'Imagine, Invent, Make' study day, 2015



'I learnt that you can make paint out of a rock and that they used salmon eggs to make paint for the totem pole'

Year 4 student, 'Light and Colour' pilot session, 2014

4.3.3 Partners brought creative energy, new voices and audiences, and pushed our conceptions of what the museum is for and how it is seen and used by others. Here is a list of the exhibitions curated with or by partner groups, organizations and individuals.¹¹



¹¹ * In-depth: Firth, Liz and Anne Pirie, The Vessels Project: Evaluation (October, 2015) [[Appendix 8e](#)]

4.3.4 Films



We created a series of short films within the main categories of activity to provide a highlight of our activities for those who couldn't be there or remote users, capture participant and partner perspectives, and create a visual record of what happened.

Click to watch - ** we've starred our favourites... 😊 **



[INTRODUCING GENERAL PITT-RIVERS](#)



[PITT FEST*](#)



[AFTER HOURS: PACIFIC*](#)



[INSTALLING A NEW DISPLAY](#)



[AFTER HOURS: DAY OF THE DEAD*](#)



[ARTIST IN RESIDENCE: FOREST + FOUND](#)



[NESSMUK CANOE WORKSHOP*](#)



[ARTIST IN RESIDENCE: KINTSUGI*](#)



[OUTREACH: FLO-FEST](#)



[TAKEOVER: MASQUERADE*](#)



[EXHIBITION: ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART](#)



[TAKEOVER: RHYTHM & POETRY](#)

5. CASE STUDIES

Out in Oxford

Out in Oxford was a project to uncover queer histories in the University of Oxford museums and collections. Working with volunteers and community partners, the project sought to give voice to marginalized groups and celebrate diversity. Outputs include a 22-page booklet with a foreword by Stephen Fry, a dedicated [website](#), top billing at Oxford Pride, and [TV coverage](#). VERVE funded the public programme, creating a safe space in the Museum for LGBTQ+ members and allies and putting on five events for 1000 people and 50 volunteers.

As a result of the project, VERVE staff and lead partner Dr Clara Barker (career scientist and Vice-Chair, OU LGBT Advisory Group) have given talks and presentations at the Continuing Education Department and an HLF South East Advice and Networking Evening on Funding for LGBT+ History Projects at Reading Museum. The project was shortlisted for a national Museums + Heritage Award 2017 and Dr Barker received a prestigious [Points of Light award](#) for her voluntary work by the Prime Minister's Office.



'I want to say that, as a young gay woman who is really passionate about these things, it is so wonderful and heartwarming to know that these events are being planned and with so much time being put into them - I really appreciate it, even just on a personal level.'

Participant, Party at the Pitt, 2017

Meet Me at the Museum

This three-year programme was developed specially to meet the needs of the elderly and those living with age-related conditions such as dementia. Run in association with a community artist and facilitators from the Creative Dementia Arts Network, the programme comprised an initial outreach session to a local care home, followed by a visit to the Museum. Participants were provided with transport and given refreshments, and they engaged in tours, handling sessions and group reminiscence on topics with links to the anthropological collections, such as lifecycle journeys (how cultures from around the world mark birth, puberty and marriage) or travel and souvenirs. The project culminated in a co-curated display at the Museum and was warmly received by participants as a social and stimulating experience.

Follow on projects include 'Armchair Gallery' (with Nottingham City Arts), developing tablet-based collections interpretation for older people unable to visit the Museum in person, and the development of a part-time engagement role across Oxford's Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) with responsibility for wellbeing and older people.



'Lois could not stop talking about the session all the way home and knocked on my door this morning with a bit of paper to write down the date of the next one. She graduated in History in 1946, cannot remember what she had for lunch, is doing well on Aricept [medication] and was in sheer heaven yesterday -especially the tour. I just had to keep her from keeping on putting money in the museum collection boxes!'

Carer, Meet Me at the Museum session, 2016

Migration project

The VERVE team joined forces with the Oxford University Museums community engagement team to run a series of exhibitions and activities which looked at how the Pitt Rivers could activate its collections, support different refugee communities, and forefront multi-layered and multi-vocal interpretations of heritage to build relationships and break down stereotypes. Working with experienced partners Asylum Welcome and Refugee Resource, VERVE supported participants of Chinese, Kurdish Syrian and Nigerian origin with access to the collections and their research in choosing objects for a display entitled *Identity without Borders*, and writing their own labels and podcasts.

Another major exhibition was *Syrians Unknown*, featuring portraits by photographer John Wreford (formerly based in Damascus, now Istanbul), challenging media stereotypes of Syrian refugees and allowing the individuals depicted to reclaim their own voices and stories. Events that took place with grass-roots community groups Exiled Writers Inc., Confluence Collective and African Dance Oxford included poetry workshops, private views, musical performances and a Syrian families day, providing parents with a space to meet, socialise, eat and feel welcomed, and children with opportunities for craft, museum treasure hunts, and teaching the Museum staff some Arabic! Read more at: <https://identitywithoutborders.web.ox.ac.uk>



'I haven't seen anything else in the Museum on current affairs and in general about understanding human struggles - it's interesting to see.'

Visitor commenting on 'Syrians Unknown' exhibition, 2017

Chinese app

Oxford receives more than 13,000 visits from Chinese tourists each year, and Oxford University is home to more than 1000 Chinese students. VERVE partnered with Summit Education Enterprise and UESTC (University of Electronic Science and Technology of China) in Chengdu to make knowledge about the collections in Oxford more accessible to Chinese speakers. Over the course of one month, 31 technology students worked closely with the Museum to design a bi-lingual Chinese-English language mobile application for marketing not just the Pitt Rivers Museum, but all four University Museums among Chinese audiences overseas and here in the UK.

The project was intense and genuinely collaborative with a series of user requirements, research, wireframe and design sprints interspersed with regular debriefs and feedback sessions. The resulting app offers highlight object tours, resources and facilities with branding for each museum. The students achieved an incredible amount in just one month. Together they created a digital resource containing 110 pages of 30,000 words and 200+ images, backed up by more than 200 programming files and 2.46459 line codes. They got to apply their knowledge and skills in electronic science and technology in a real-world setting and gain a meaningful social engagement experience, whilst VERVE benefited from leading on a cross-Museum project and responding to a new audience need. Six months after the release, the app had received 90 downloads from Google Play (modest) and 1272 from Baidu, a Chinese app platform, suggesting take-up among Chinese users is high. Read more at: <https://bit.ly/2v4lBwx>



'Many thanks to everyone involved for making the project possible and successful. I am sure many Chinese visitor will benefit from this app. We look forward to opportunities for collaboration in the near future.'

Dr Yi Samuel Chen, Summit Education Enterprise, 2018

6. LEGACY AND SUSTAINABILITY

How will VERVE ensure its outputs are recognized and sustainable?

- New displays have been created using high quality materials, lighting and stable objects that should last a generation (25 years), though are flexible enough for some content updates to occur.
- Towards the end of the project, VERVE shifted its public programme towards fewer, higher quality and targeted events to ensure a gradual reduction – from the public's point of view – from intense project delivery to more realistic BAU delivery of one event per month.
- Event formats have been consolidated - for example the raft of evening events (AfterHours, Museum Takeover, Late Nights, Crafty Networking) have become a single After Horus programme, and co-production helps take organizational pressure off core staff.
- Where possible future events will be programmed in line with national and international dates (e.g. International Women's Day, LGBT History Month, Refugee Week) for increased impact, topicality and piggy-back publicity.
- Some partnerships naturally ended with the project but key VERVE successes have been isolated and re-crafted into smaller follow-on projects requiring seed funding. For example, the Migration project was the stimulus for new Esmée Fairburn funding for Multaka Oxford, a project called helping forced migrants engage with Oxford collections.) This helps build the PRM's reputation for being a place that strives to make a difference for local minority communities.
- Documentation for the project has been good. Moreover, the Museum has worked hard to retain project staff where possible – four of the seven core staff have taken up follow-on core or project-funded posts at Pitt Rivers, whilst two others have gone on to take up roles at other Oxford GLAM institutions. This ensures skills, knowledge, experience and contacts accrued through the project will not be lost.
- Protocols developed during the project have been adopted by the Museum as good practice – this includes the process for designing displays, interpretation guidelines, and compliance with regulations and professional delivery of events such as poster templates, a regular What's On leaflet, risk assessments, volunteer management and event debriefs and feedback.
- The philosophical approach of VERVE has been adopted into the Pitt Rivers Museum's Strategic Plan such as the commitment to return 'visible storage' to

display and to be 'an inclusive, thought-provoking and reflexive museum built upon open, engaged relationships with diverse audiences and communities.'

- The contribution by funders, including the major funder HLF, is acknowledged on a new donor board in the Museum.



VERVE's pop-up Pitt Rivers tent, here pictured at Salisbury Festival of Archaeology 2015 will still be used for local outreach events such as Cowley Road Carnival. © Pitt Rivers Museum

7. SUMMARY: WHAT WENT WELL and LESSONS LEARNT

7.1 What went well and why?

Timeframe and remit

- The project timeframe (5 years) was long but it allowed staff to grow in knowledge, confidence and seniority, permitted the setting of short- and long-term goals, afforded time to develop and sustain relationships, and meant we could deliver a phased redisplay programme without ever having to close any galleries.
- The tight parallel relationship between the redisplay programme and public activity kept the latter focused, relevant and allows us to say 'no'.
- Regular six-monthly reporting to HLF allowed for self-reflection, checking progress against goals, and adaptation to change / challenges.
- Evolution nor revolution – the Pitt Rivers Museum is a place of charm, uniqueness and nostalgia. The VERVE approach was to make subtle, not sudden changes to ensure harmony with the rest of the museum and so as not to alienate existing audiences or stakeholders. New displays were carefully planned to look contemporary but not out place, and the public programme was creative – bringing dance and performance into the galleries – but all the time respectful of the historic space.

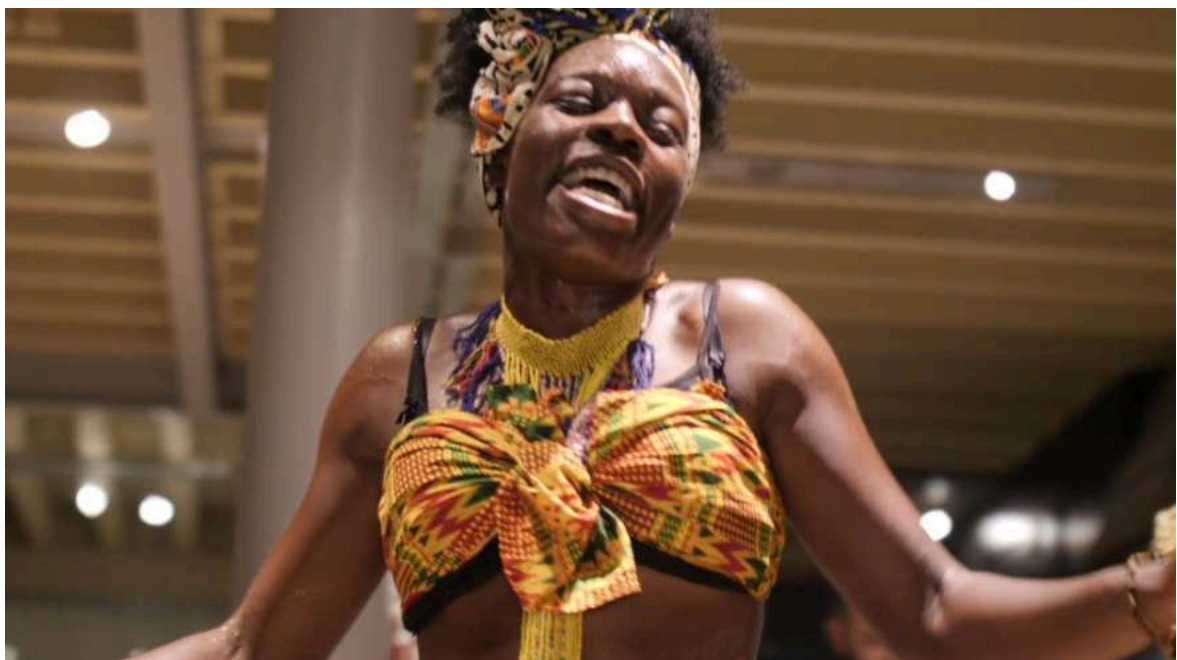
Working with others

- VERVE helped improve relationships with the GLAM outreach team and other Oxford arts and community organizations (e.g. Old Fire Station, Museum of Oxford) through genuine co-working and sharing of resources.
- On the whole, relationships with communities have been successful and productive, based on direct contact between staff and community representatives, built on personal trust.
- VERVE has transformed the way the Museum works with volunteers by empowering them to shape and deliver events through co-production (e.g. Museum Takeover and exhibitions) and provide repeated and extended opportunities (e.g. student placements). To succeed, this relied upon consciously 'letting go' of curatorial monopoly, professional ego, and some of the intellectual baggage that surrounds Oxford.
- An end-of-project celebration event helped draw all the various communities, partners, academics and funders together to reflect on achievements.

Team

- Project team members embedded in departments – rather than based together in one room / floor - enabled a more holistic approach, cross-departmental working below management level and fostered better communication and relations between the project and other staff.
- The team management approach was non-hierarchical team where we were 'all in it together' and allowed members the space and confidence to take risks, experiment, develop skills and make decisions.
- Most roles were conceived as full-time posts. This helped with capacity, simplified the scheduling of work, and encourages staff retention.

Staff and institutional learning is best summarised by this short film:



HOW VERVE CHANGED US (04:26)

The VERVE team self-reflect on how they feel the project has helped their professional development and how the Museum has transformed as an institution.

7.2 Overall what didn't work well and why?

- The project and associated budget did cause some resentment among some other staff so we needed to work hard at relations.
- Evaluation was not as robust, comprehensive nor objective as it could have been as we did not allocate enough money to evaluation. Project underspend could have been remedied in this area.
- The first-concept schools sessions were not successful because they didn't marry up well enough to curriculum requirements.
- Attendance at evening events was affected by poor (unlit, unsigned, uneven) access to the Museum after hours. It is a priority for the Museum to tackle this issue with the University's Estates Services.

7.3 What would you do differently next time?

- Work harder to reach regional audiences.
- Undertake user consultation to find out what supplementary interpretation (especially digital) they would actually find beneficial and through which delivery platforms (e.g. the [Craft Film Directory](#) was a nice idea but unrooted in any articulated user need and therefore under-used).
- Build in time to source external academic support to contribute to displays and research. Too many fascinating collections research avenues went untapped because we didn't have the time or expertise to pursue them.
- We could have achieved more with more staff – for example a member of Front of House to help with public engagement and audience advocacy, and the creation a Project Management and Administration post separate to curatorial or public engagement duties.

There wasn't much 'deadweight'. It is possible that some of the changes such as tackling out-of-date displays and responding to shifting sector and cultural priorities would have happened anyway but much slower due to a lack of capacity among core staff. More ambitious 'nice-to-have' activities such as the pop-up museum and Pitt Fest festival certainly wouldn't have happened.

CONCLUDING REMARK

The Pitt Rivers Museum is now a more diverse, reflective and welcoming place. The VERVE project has been about talking with people rather than about them, allowing their voices to be heard, and it has changed the way the Museum defines itself forever.