

ANNUAL REVIEW

2023-24

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NATIONAL
MUSEUMS NI





ABOUT NATIONAL MUSEUMS NI

Welcome to our Annual Review, where we provide a detailed account of the significant and wide-ranging work undertaken by National Museums NI for the financial year 2023-24. As the organisation responsible for managing four diverse museums — Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk Museum, Ulster Transport Museum and Ulster American Folk Park — we are the custodians of the National Collection which includes an extraordinary 1.4 million objects from here and all across the globe, and which spans thousands of years.

Our vision is to celebrate our shared heritage by telling the stories of our past, challenging the present and shaping the future. Guided by our founding legislation, National Museums NI holds several key responsibilities related to Northern Ireland's rich heritage. Our aims include to build awareness, appreciation and understanding of the national collections of art, history and science; the way of life and traditions of people; and the migration and settlement of people.

In this review we will set out how we have fulfilled these responsibilities during the financial year ending on 31st March 2024. National Museums NI's Corporate Strategy 2021-25 outlines four key areas where we have committed to making progress:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Building the Museums of the Future

Throughout this report, we make reference to these four core commitments and how we have set our substantial accomplishments this year against them.

A NOTE FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

As the new Chairman of National Museums NI, it is my great pleasure to present this Annual Review, reflecting on a remarkable year of achievements and looking forward to a future filled with promise for our organisation.

We are dedicated to delivering inclusive and compelling experiences across all four of our wonderful museum sites. Our museums challenge perceptions and encourage discussion across various themes including the conflict of our past and its legacy, our rich cultural heritage and our response to the pressing climate crisis, in a bid to inspire our visitors as they journey with us into a shared future.



Some of our most ambitious plans lie in the ‘reawakening’ of the Ulster Folk Museum – a project which aims to empower individuals to reconnect with heritage and the environment in new ways. The vision and commitment of the team at National Museums NI have been truly impressive, and their dedication ensures that we remain at the forefront of museum excellence.

Collaboration is at the heart of our strategy as we strive to appeal to broader and more diverse audiences. By enhancing our partnerships with various organisations and sectors, we aim to enrich our collections, broaden learning opportunities and promote wellbeing across our community. This collaborative approach is essential as we continue to develop and expand our reach.

Alongside myself, National Museums NI gained seven new Trustees this year, each of whom bring with them a wealth of knowledge, skills and connections. Their collective experience will undoubtedly strengthen National Museums NI, as we champion and guide its future. Together, we are committed to building on the strong foundations that have been laid and progressing with the exciting plans for the future.

Gordon Milligan OBE

Chairman of the Board of Trustees

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this year's Annual Review. I invite you to look back with us and explore our many highlights, successes and milestones as we reflect on the past twelve months. As we move into 2024-25 it marks the culmination of our current Corporate Strategy, providing us with an opportunity to conclude this phase of our journey on a high note.

In spite of the continuing challenges of the financial environment we are in, characterised by political uncertainty, rising inflation and a continued increase in cost of living, our performance this year has been remarkably strong. Whilst success should not be measured by numbers alone, I am deeply encouraged by the results we have achieved and which point to the progress being made across our four sites. Our museums welcomed 724,257 visitors - a 9% increase in comparison to last year. There has been growth in general admission visitors, schools, volunteers, tourists, corporate functions and weddings – all of which demonstrates a real team effort, with each part of our museum service making a positive contribution to our shared success.

We track a wide range of performance indicators that go beyond visitor numbers. We generated 962,614 engagements in total this financial year through a wide range of activity beyond visitors through our doors. Online engagements, stores visits, research enquiries and volunteering are just some of the other ways we engage our audiences.

From motorsports to bluegrass music festivals, foraging to fashion icons, our programming highlights have captured the imaginations of visitors throughout the year. The culmination of our programme marking the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in April was an exhibition that featured some of the inspiring women who have been influential to peace building in Northern Ireland.



In December, we hit a major milestone for the 'Reawakening the Ulster Folk Museum' project by securing full planning permission. It has been encouraging to hear the feedback from visitors, partners, politicians and other stakeholders who have given their whole-hearted endorsement to our plans.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to our Minister and the Department for Communities, our funders, partners, donors and members, and to everyone who has visited and engaged with our museums over the past year. Your continued support is the vital driving force behind our success.

My thanks also goes to my amazing colleagues who bring creativity and hard work to their roles every single day. It is through their efforts that we continue to inspire, educate and engage the public, making a positive impact on our community and beyond.

Kathryn Thomson
Chief Executive

DEVELOPING THE COLLECTIONS

Throughout 2023-24 we have added new strength and depth to the national collection, ensuring it is representative of our people, our times, our environment and the challenges we face in society.

In April 2023, we marked the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and our collecting has captured this milestone moment, looking both backwards and forwards, to our troubled past and the continuing legacy of conflict today.

Through our 'Inclusive Global Histories' programme, to decolonise our museums, we are connecting with newcomer communities across Northern Ireland as well as source communities internationally and embedding their previously marginalised stories within the collection. Across all our museums we are seeking to better represent the different facets of cultural identity and their expression here in Ulster, ensuring our audiences and partners feel that the collection speaks of and to them. In Natural Sciences, the focus on fieldwork is strengthening our understanding of the environmental changes and challenges we face, as well as revealing species that had been unknown to science here. Finally, our Art acquisitions further cement our role as the national art gallery for Northern Ireland, being local, national and international in scope and representing exceptional talent.

We are grateful to the donors who have generously gifted to us this year, and to our funders for their vital financial support – Department for Communities, Art Fund and National Parks & Wildlife Service.

Here are ten of our acquisition highlights from this year:



These iconic sculptures were commissioned from Elisabeth Frink (1930 –1993) in 1962, to be affixed to the façade of the Ulster Bank building that was then under construction in Shaftesbury Square, Belfast. The sculptures were unveiled at the opening of the building in 1964. In 2023, Ulster Bank ended its connection with the building and so decided to gift the sculptures to the national collection, with the aim of ensuring that the public can continue to have access to these internationally important works. Plans are now in development to display the sculptures at the Ulster Museum.

Photo credit: Matt Mackey, Press Eye



These leathers were worn by Robert Dunlop (1960-2008), one of the most famous motorcycle racers from Northern Ireland. In 2022-23, we acquired one of Robert Dunlop's racing motorbikes and these leathers further help us to tell his story. Robert Dunlop's racing career saw him triumph in the North West 200 and the Isle of Man TT, be twice named Enkalon Motorcyclist of the Year, and awarded the Freedom of Ballymoney in 2007. He was tragically killed in a biking accident during the North West 200 in 2008.



This contemporary poster by Belfast artist Niall Conlon is in response to posters that some London boarding houses put up in the 1950s stating 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs'. The artist feels it important to acknowledge the progress that has been made in promoting inclusion and diversity since then. The poster is part of our collecting for our 'Inclusive Global Histories' programme, and helps explore themes of sectarianism and racism in the UK and the ongoing development of decolonisation, inclusion and diversity initiatives.

© Niall Conlon



This collage was created by artist Tony Bell in April 2023, as the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was marked. It is made from the cover and text of original copies of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement referendum booklet, including some Irish language copies. An impactful and emotive piece of artwork, it shows reactions to the 25th anniversary of the Agreement and represents the artist's hopes for the future.

©Tony Bell



Collecting in Natural Sciences is predominantly through fieldwork, such as the targeted survey of freshwater-associated taxa in the Burren that took place in August 2023. Thanks to funding from the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), National Museums NI worked with partners Buglife, staff from the NPWS and several other independent experts to survey water-related habitats and collect, identify and catalogue specimens as voucher material for the national collection.



This contemporary blouse has been made from an early 1900s tablecloth, similar to those found in the Ulster Folk Museum collection. Rosina Hoyland (Spilt Milk) is one of a number of textile designers who have established businesses in the last few years specialising in the reworking or upcycling of mid-20th century household linens into fashion items. An upcycled piece such as this tells a story of the past whilst also exhibiting an awareness of present day issues around sustainability and recycling.



Heechan Kim was born in 1982 in Seoul, South Korea and received a BFA in metal craft from Seoul National University in 2006. Kim's works explore the human desire that wants to keep one's individuality and, at the same time, wish to be in a community or group. His methodology, which is mainly stitching thin strips with metal wire, represents his belief that everyone is connected, bounded and destined to live together against their will. Kim was awarded the Artist of the Collect 2024 Fair for this piece.

Untitled #15 (2023)

Ash wood and copper wire sculpture by Heechan Kim
© Heechan Kim



In 2023-24 we had a rare opportunity to acquire material from one of the buildings we have represented on site at the Ulster American Folk Park. W.G. O'Doherty's, a grocery and public house, has its shopfront on Ulster Street. Establishing his business in 1871, on Bishop Street in Derry/Londonderry, W.G. O'Doherty imported food from all over the world, including tea, sugar, dried fruit and spices for the locals to enjoy. Some of the family involved in the business emigrated to North America in the early 20th century.



John Luke (1906-1975) was a Belfast-born artist who studied at the Belfast School of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, London. His work is well represented in the Ulster Museum collection, but this is his first artwork to enter the Ulster Folk Museum collection. It speaks to themes of religious and cultural identity and their expression within communities.

© John Luke

Jennifer Trouton (b. 1971) is a Northern Irish artist whose practice incorporates paint, embroidery, wallpaper and textiles. Through her charting of spaces, objects and experiences, Trouton creates contemporary coded dramas that subtly express ideas around gender, class and identity within Irish history. *Original Sin* and *Last Supper* are the culmination of eight years' research and development of work that looks at women impacted by the Church and State's attempts to suppress reproductive rights on the island of Ireland.



***Original Sin - Last Supper* (2023)**

Oil on canvas dyptich

© Courtesy of the artist Jennifer Trouton



Image: Eamonn Geraghty and Paul McCauley, from the Collections Logistics Team, transferring a motor vehicle to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre

A NEW COLLECTIONS DISPOSAL PROCESS

Collections review, rationalisation and disposal are part of responsible collections management within museums. Disposal helps us to ensure that our collections are more sustainable in the long term and for public benefit, and enables us to continue to fulfil our statutory obligations to collect and fully record and represent the world around us.

In June 2023, the Museums Association launched new guidance for the sector on the ethical transfer, reuse and disposal of collections. This was developed through a consultative process and National Museums NI was part of the discussions. In response to this guidance, we have developed our own new disposal process, which includes a risk-based approach to assessing and approving disposals. This new process was approved by the Board of Trustees in January 2024.

Where possible, museums will always seek disposal through transfer to another organisation in the public domain. An excellent example of this is the work we have been doing with Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre.

Previous conversations with Hydebank Wood, an educational centre for young male offenders aged 17-24 and a women's prison, had made us aware of their training programmes and their interest in borrowing vehicles to use for a motor vehicle engineering course. Loans had not been possible but disposal offered a new opportunity.

To date four vehicles have been transferred to Hydebank Wood and there are plans for further vehicles, identified for disposal, to be transferred for inmates to work on, enabling them to develop new skills and achieving new qualifications in the process.

COLLECTIONS CARE & ACCESS

We continued to enhance our collections access through investments in the stores, in the Collections Services team and developing online access.

The Collections Online web portal remains a vital resource for public access to the collections, with over 40,000 records now available online. New objects are regularly added, broadening the scope and accessibility of our collections.

This year we made further investment in our collections storage infrastructure including at the Transport and Industry Museum Store, facilitating the relocation of the transport and maritime collection.

During the European Heritage Open Weekend, both the Transport and Industry Museum Store and the Ulster Folk Museum Store were opened with guided tours provided for the public. A further open day event at the Transport and Industry Museum Store in September provided audiences with additional access and engagement with the collections.

Efforts to catalogue the library collection continue, providing increased access for students and researchers. The Library and Archives team have facilitated access for dozens of students and researchers, and collaborated with volunteers to assist in the cataloguing process. With funding from the National Archives, a one-year contract was secured for an archivist to catalogue the Languages of Ulster collection, a project that concluded in March 2024.

The Library and Archives team also successfully digitised the Ulster Folk Life magazine collection and it will soon be available online through the Collections Online portal.



Image: Conservator, Bethany Skuce, analysing an item from the textile collection

Significant strides were made in the redevelopment of the Ulster Museum Collections Store, as well as the Picture Store at the museum. On completion, these works will be transformational in terms of collections access, research, exhibitions and programming at Ulster Museum.

We are committed to continually improving our collections care and management practices as well as developing bigger and better collections storage facilities. Through dedicated investment in collections care, collections management and conservation, National Museums NI safeguards the national collection for future generations. It enables us to connect our diverse audiences and stakeholders more intimately to the national collection, supporting new kinds of exploration and discussion.

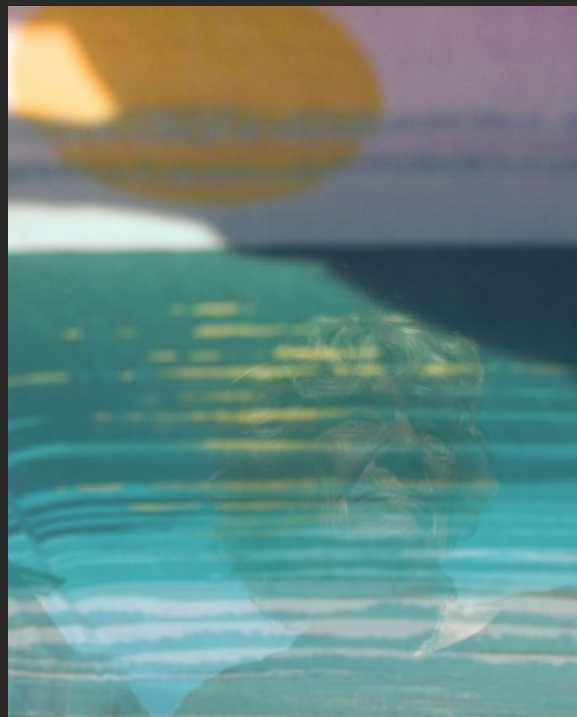
NEW EXHIBITIONS

At National Museums NI we want to use our collections to encourage curiosity, build knowledge and stimulate discussion. Our commitment to enriching cultural engagement was reflected in an array of vibrant exhibitions presented this year. Working alongside partners and with some exciting loans, these exhibitions also brought our rich collection to the fore.



A Century of Style: Fashion Photography from the National Portrait Gallery

This exhibition brought together some of the most famous fashion photographers and models (sitters) to showcase the art of fashion photography and its role in defining style, imagery and contemporary culture. The exhibition was created in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery.



Principled and Revolutionary: Northern Ireland's Peace Women

Working with Belfast Photo Festival, this exhibition was part of our programme to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Showcasing the work of artist Hannah Starkey, it consisted of a series of portraits of prominent women who have helped bring peace to Northern Ireland.



Lavery on Location

The exhibition celebrated Sir John Lavery's connection to his birthplace of Belfast, offering our visitors new insights and a fresh perspective on his work by bringing together an array of his most notable paintings. This major exhibition of Lavery's work was the result of a partnership with the National Gallery of Ireland and National Galleries Scotland.



Kelpra: Artists and Printmakers

The Kelpra print studio was where Richard Hamilton, Bridget Riley, Eduardo Paolozzi and Elisabeth Frink had their prints produced. This exhibition, with Seacourt Print Workshop, allowed visitors to explore the art of print-making and the collaboration between artist and printmaker.



Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition

The RUA's annual exhibition is one of the most eagerly anticipated exhibitions in the Northern Irish cultural calendar, providing a unique platform for acclaimed artists and emerging talent to showcase their artwork in the Ulster Museum.



Colin Middleton: Among this Peace and Noise

Colin Middleton was born in Belfast in 1910. He came to be regarded as one of the leading Irish painters of his generation. The exhibition examined the artist's relationship with Belfast and his development through paintings and drawings spanning six decades. Works on display were drawn from private lenders as well as our own collection of Middleton's work.



Film as Art: Brian Desmond Hurst Film Director Exhibition

This exhibition celebrated the life and work of a man who is often hailed as one of Northern Ireland's best film directors - Brian Desmond Hurst. His filmmaking portfolio was extensive and well-respected internationally, and he was perhaps best known for the 1951 'A Christmas Carol' adaptation of Scrooge. This exhibition presented film posters, invitations, lobby cards, original press clippings from Hurst's own scrapbooks, film footage and photographs - all of which were on loan from the estate of Brian Desmond Hurst and other friends.

THE TROUBLES & BEYOND

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

We have an important and unique role to play in offering shared and safe spaces that support transformative, as well as reflective, experiences of our contested history through multiple perspectives and voices being curated together. In partnership with community representatives, support groups, academia and others, we are using our collections to encourage discussion and debate, challenging perceptions, building greater empathy and understanding, and progressing peace and reconciliation.

Since opening *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition at the Ulster Museum, we have made substantial progress with the dynamic and ongoing process of curating conflict. From the outset, our aim has been to create a gallery at the Ulster Museum that is dynamic and that offers opportunities for people to respond and contribute their own stories. One such story is that of Marie Therese Rogers-Moloney. When she was two years old she was placed in Nazareth House Children's Home in Belfast, investigated as part of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. She came forward with her story, recorded an oral history interview and donated a photograph and a copy of her book 'For the Sins of My Mother', which are now displayed in *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition.

Working with individuals and community groups, our approach has been an inclusive one, to ensure people have direct involvement in developing our collection and its subsequent interpretation. This year



Image: Marie Therese Rogers-Moloney at *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition

the exhibition has continued to evolve in response to feedback and the development of our collection and collaborative relationships.

Over the last number of years we have developed important partnerships and worked in collaboration with many individuals and groups to progress peace and reconciliation and to allow for better navigation of the conflict legacy landscape in Northern Ireland. The Conflict and Legacy Interpretive Network was established through collaboration between National Museums NI, the Bloody Sunday Trust/Museum of Free Derry and Healing Through Remembering. This network aims to connect museums and heritage organisations actively engaged in conflict and legacy issues, highlighting their important role in promoting dialogue and building mutual understanding of ongoing legacy and reconciliation issues.

The sensitive nature of Troubles related work means it is laden with difficulties and challenges. We continue to work in partnership with organisations like WAVE Trauma Centre, Northern Ireland's largest cross community victims' support group. We commissioned WAVE to provide training in relation to how trauma affects us; dealing with vicarious trauma; how to manage confrontation/ difficult conversations and how to safeguard colleagues and participants.

As a platform for marginalised voices, oral histories help to diversify and enrich the narratives presented at the Ulster Museum. They also facilitate a deeper understanding of complex historical events and the impact of these events on individuals and communities. The Ulster Workers' Council strike of 1974 represented a significant turning point in the history of The Troubles, marking a culmination of the early 1970s descent into conflict. 'Voices of 74' is a project which further expands our oral history collection at the Ulster Museum. This project, in partnership with Nottingham Trent University, is built around oral testimonies from a broad cross-section of perspectives that will seek to develop work already carried out by National Museums NI and our academic partners to date. This work is

particularly significant in relation to the role of oral history in discussions around the broader question of the legacy of the past.

The Education team at the Ulster Museum has developed a new workshop for schools connected to our *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition. Working in collaboration with teachers from Northern Ireland we explored new and better ways of navigating the teaching of this complex topic. This new workshop is a unique, active learning experience designed to enhance KS3 and KS4 pupils' understanding of the background, contested perspectives and impact of The Troubles in Northern Ireland.

National Museum NI has long held a responsibility to play a part in place making, community relations and building a shared society. At the Ulster Museum, The Troubles and Beyond project continues to be the primary vehicle for our work in this area – not solely through the gallery itself, but also through an extended programme of engagement including new exhibitions, schools engagement, community engagement and digital content.



Image: *The Troubles and Beyond* exhibition at the Ulster Museum

INCLUSIVE GLOBAL HISTORIES

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Decolonisation can be a potentially confusing and divisive term in today's world. We have chosen to frame our work in this area as 'Inclusive Global Histories', which brings greater clarity and positive intent. Our Inclusive Global Histories approach is informed by, and respectful to, source and marginalised communities who are prioritising progress and healing. It does not ignore the colonial violence and injustices of the past, but sets out how decolonisation activity can and should be a positive force for encouraging mutual respect and understanding, tackling racism and promoting community pride.

At the Ulster Museum, the *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition positions the need to better understand the complex stories of thousands of items within the World Cultures collection - how and why they came to be here, how they may be shared with audiences, and what options there might be for their future.

Our programme of Inclusive Global Histories events this year enabled people to explore cultures different to their own, developing mutual respect and understanding and also, importantly, empathy. We have developed an Inclusive Global Histories trail which includes objects, from the permanent galleries in the Ulster Museum, such as our Chinese ceramic collection on display in the George and Angela Moore Applied Art Gallery, our display of migratory birds in the Natural Sciences gallery and the Cook Atlas on display in our Modern History gallery.



Image: An Inclusive Global Histories event at the Ulster Museum

An important part of our Inclusive Global Histories work this year was the culmination of the Global Voices, Local Choices project. National Museums NI, in partnership with the African and Caribbean Support Organisation Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Museums Council, worked together on this ground-breaking decolonisation project, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund.

One of the aims of the Global Voices, Local Choices project was to provide people, from all communities and backgrounds, a fair opportunity to make choices relating to Ulster Museum's World Cultures collection, and how the objects within it might be interpreted in museum spaces in the future. The project was designed to engage marginalised communities.

The project has equipped us with a deeper understanding of the collection, enabling us to present more nuanced and informed representations. The partners have also developed a united and informed approach to decolonisation, through the project itself and through dialogue and learning from one another.

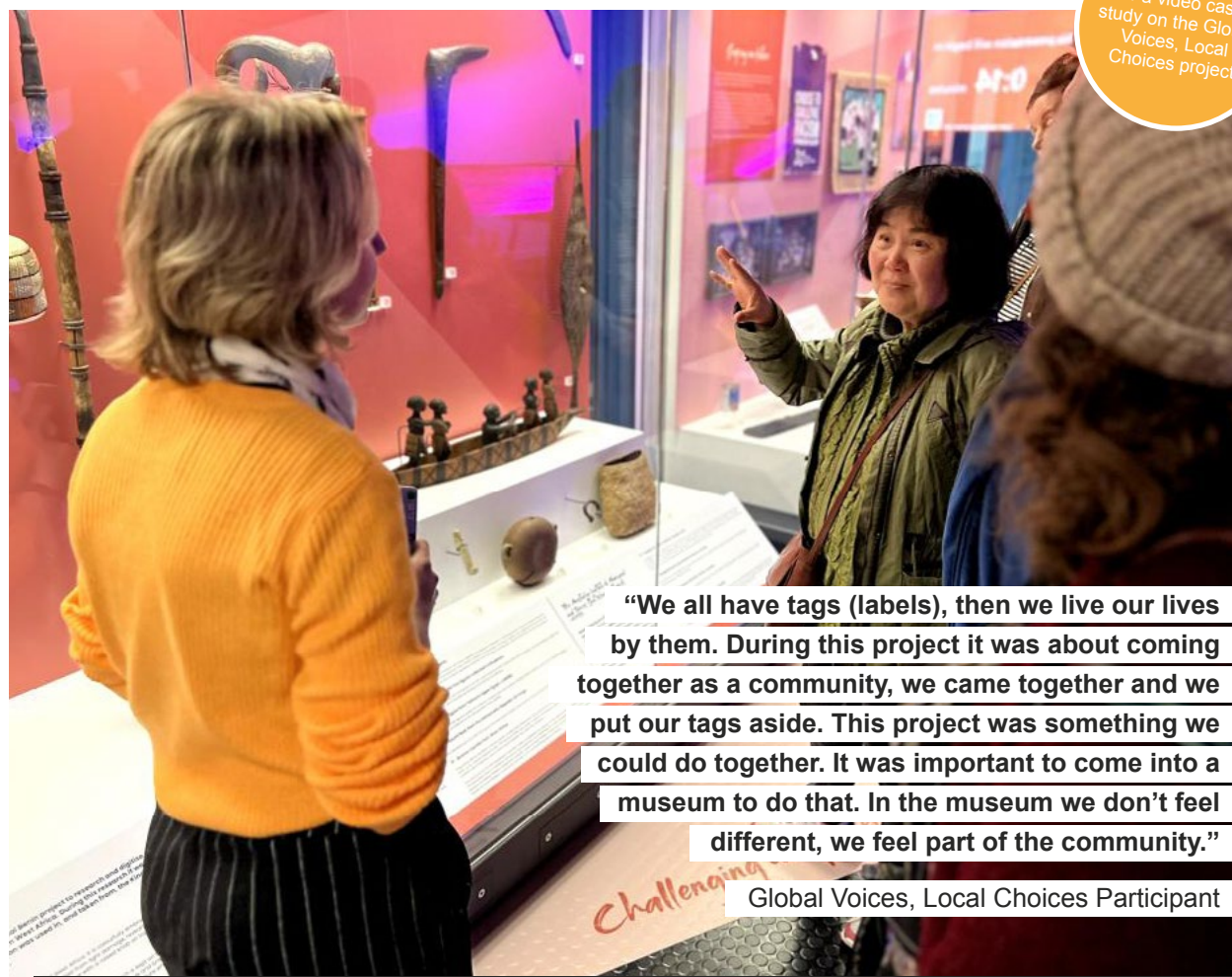
The reflections of the participants, whether through art and crafts, music and dance, poetry or creative writing, were displayed and interpreted in the museums to encourage better public understanding and celebration of diversity in Northern Ireland.

Agrippa Njanina, Assistant Curator and former Project Engagement Officer for Global Voices, Local Choices, summed up his own reflections of the project, saying “It’s been wonderful to witness how this project has raised awareness and understanding of the World Cultures collection and amplified the voices of people from various ethnic backgrounds. Our museums are for everyone, so this commitment to community engagement is crucial. By bringing diverse cultures

and perspectives into Northern Ireland’s local and national museums, our hope is that marginalised global experiences are represented as we consider and develop our decolonisation approach.”

The success of the Global Voices, Local Choices project was celebrated at an event in Parliament Buildings at Stormont in November 2023. The project’s legacy will be significant to our work long into the future. By increasing representation and facilitating respect, tolerance and understanding, we are strengthening the considerable role National Museums NI plays in promoting diversity and inclusivity.

[Click Here](#)
for a video case study on the Global Voices, Local Choices project



“We all have tags (labels), then we live our lives by them. During this project it was about coming together as a community, we came together and we put our tags aside. This project was something we could do together. It was important to come into a museum to do that. In the museum we don’t feel different, we feel part of the community.”

Global Voices, Local Choices Participant

Image: Global Voices, Local Choices participants with Curator of Modern History, Triona White Hamilton, at the *Inclusive Global Histories* exhibition



Image: Ballintaggart Court Tomb at the Ulster Folk Museum

BALLINTAGGART COURT TOMB

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

In September, we officially opened the newly reconstructed Ballintaggart Court Tomb at the Ulster Folk Museum. The Ballintaggart Tomb first entered National Museums NI's collection more than 50 years ago when the ancient site was threatened by a quarry expansion.

The site was excavated by Laurence Flanagan, then Keeper of Antiquities at Ulster Museum. He was able to save the tomb's stones and reconstruct it outside Ulster Museum. When Ulster Museum was renovated in 2006 the stones were brought to storage at Ulster Folk Museum, and there they stayed until earlier this year when the restoration project began.

The tomb's journey to Ulster Folk Museum began with the assistance of researchers from the Centre for Community Archaeology at Queen's University Belfast, who created models of each of the stones of the court tomb. These models were then 3D scanned, which provided a full 360-degree examination of each of the stones allowing them to be accurately situated and installed on-site.

Following this reconstruction process, the tomb now stands prominently at the Ulster Folk Museum. The Ballintaggart Tomb provides an important new layer of 'pre-history' at the museum and illustrates how the museum can connect Ulster's unique heritage spanning thousands of years to the present day.

Joe Garvey, who supported the project in his role as Chairman of Richmount Rural Community Association reflected that "It's important that people can understand the rich local history of County Armagh through the Ballintaggart Court Tomb, or 'Giant's Grave' as it is known locally. We're proud to be involved in seeing it reconstructed at the Ulster Folk Museum where people will be able to enjoy it for generations to come."

REAWAKENING THE ULSTER FOLK MUSEUM

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Building the Museums of the Future

This year we made significant progress at the Ulster Folk Museum through the ‘Reawakening’ project, which has begun to unlock new potential for the museum as a dynamic heritage and environment resource. The term ‘resource’ carries significance in how we want to shape the future of the museum and how people engage with it. For us, a resource is a place where individuals can tap into new knowledge, gain insights and find relevance pertinent to their lives and interests.

In December Ards & North Down Borough Council Planning Committee gave full approval to the planning application and unanimous support for the redevelopment of the Ulster Folk Museum. This was testament to the clear rationale for the project, the high quality of design and the wider economic and societal outcomes it seeks to achieve.

We continue to improve the visitor experience at the Folk Museum. In June we were able to serve our very first drink to visitors in McCusker’s Pub, a replica exhibit building at the museum, which is now a fully licensed premises.

We have built support with key stakeholders and have strengthened our Reawakening engagement programmes including education, volunteering, events and digital content.



Click Here
for a video case
study on the Making
Festival at the Folk
Museum

Image: Heritage Carpenter, Peter Sloan, at the Ulster Folk Museum

Epitomising all of the progress, we successfully delivered an inaugural ‘Making Festival’ at Ulster Folk Museum which took place over the weekend of 19th and 20th August. The two-day event celebrated traditional crafts and supported the continued revival of our most cherished heritage skills.

Planned in partnership with the Construction Industry Training Board NI, the event included exciting and informative demonstrations from many traditional craft makers in woodturning, thatching, musical instrument making and stone masonry, to name a few. We had an array of talented makers sharing their crafts in signwriting, stained glass and straw rope making; as well as our own fantastic team of in-house craft demonstrators who work in blacksmithing, willow, textiles, wood and much more. The Festival also hosted a craft fair in collaboration with Craft NI, coinciding with August Craft Month.

The Making Festival helped to showcase the Folk Museum’s potential to connect with more people in new, meaningful ways. By inviting the public to see firsthand what goes into caring for and conserving heritage buildings, we can demonstrate the museum’s vital role and the importance of the heritage it protects. In doing so, we can inspire people to engage, learn and reconnect with the customs, skills and traditions that define us.

CHAMPIONING SUSTAINABILITY

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Building the Museums of the Future

At National Museums NI we believe it is incumbent on us to lead by example, promoting sustainable practices and encouraging visitors and stakeholders to join us in safeguarding the environment for future generations. We are custodians, educators, enablers. By adopting sustainable practices ourselves, by offering opportunities for others to get closer to nature, by informing people and encouraging awareness about environmental issues we are offering solutions, thereby fostering a culture of sustainability.

The *Climate Change (Reporting Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024* have recently introduced new requirements for climate change reporting duties for specified public bodies. National Museums NI will continue to show leadership by playing our role in delivering and supporting climate action in Northern Ireland. Our sustainability practices are helping us reduce operational costs and resource consumption, improving our long-term viability in the context of the climate and biodiversity emergency.

We have committed to reduce our Scope 1 (direct) and Scope 2 (indirect) emissions by 50% towards net zero by 2030. As signatories to 'Pledge to Net Zero' we have published our calculated carbon emissions on our website.



Image: A sustainable gardening workshop at the Ulster Folk Museum

Carbon emissions within National Museums NI have remained relatively stable for Scope 1 and 2 at 2,010 tCO₂e in 2023/24 against a target of 1,804 tCO₂e. Although our carbon intensity has reduced from 34.25kg/m₂ in 2018/19 (when we undertook a baseline audit) to 32.42kg/m₂, we have had an increase of 3,500m₂ in our estate.

During spring and summer 2023, we implemented the 'No Mow May' and 'Let it Bloom June' initiatives at Ulster Folk Museum and Ulster Transport Museum, by not cutting nearly eight hectares of meadow, as part of our commitment to the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan. In December 2023 we established our Environmental Sustainability Working Group with a team drawn from across the organisation. This group will continue to drive forward our environmental sustainability action plan, making progress on sustainability issues throughout our museum estate.

We are building partnerships to support our environmental sustainability and biodiversity efforts. We have been working with The Conservation Volunteers to revive previously dormant green spaces across our museum sites, inviting volunteers and visitors to actively participate in initiatives like native tree planting, creating willow walkways and learning about sustainable practice.

We have been also working with the Woodland Trust to activate and deliver a woodland restoration management plan at Ulster Folk Museum and Ulster Transport Museum. This year some of this work entailed identifying specific conservation threats and determining ecological priorities including the removal and control of damaging invasive species.

This work will also help to clear the way for the Woodland Walkway entrance to the Folk Museum, planned as part of the 'Reawakening' project. We have been working with Hedgerows Ireland and other conservation organisations to research the history of hedgerows in Ireland and also obtain details that can help us to authentically recreate hedgerows on-site.

As part of our commitment to the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, within the last year, nature sensitive management techniques have been trialled on meadows and hedgerows. These are vitally important habitats for our pollinators and many other species, providing food, shelter and refuge.

As a result of our work to improve sustainability standards across our estate we have continued to build on our accreditations. This year, Ulster Museum

and Ulster Folk Museum have both achieved a Bronze Award in the Green Tourism programme which recognises the commitment of tourism businesses which are actively working to become more sustainable. National Museums NI also achieved a Silver Award in the Business in the Community NI 2023 Environmental Benchmark Awards.

We care for a vast natural science collection. By using this collection, our museum landscapes and using heritage crafts we are raising awareness about the importance of biodiversity and sustainability.

Working in collaboration with other organisations, institutions and partners, our natural sciences curators continue with vital fieldwork. Some of this work is leading to important new discoveries, new additions to the collection and contributing to new species records for Ireland. One such example is work completed during the year following a bioblitz in The Burren in Co. Clare which took place in August 2023. This work has provided many new records for Burren, bringing important new material to the natural science collections and has contributed new species records for Ireland. It shows that undiscovered species can still be found.



Image: Bluebells in bloom at the Ulster Folk Museum



Image: *STEAM Studio* at the Ulster Museum

ACTIVE LEARNING

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

Engaging people of all ages through learning has always been one of the cornerstones of National Museums NI's mission. It underscores the pivotal role of education and learning to inspire and engage diverse audiences.

The Education team had a remarkable 2023-24 year, demonstrating fantastic engagement and achieving new heights in the quality of our educational programmes. We had 48,600 engagements in total for the year for our schools programme. We achieved our highest ever quality rating from teachers for both our blended learning programme *'Museum on the Move'* and the on-site education programmes at each of our museums.

Our Discovery Centre team, based at the Ulster Museum, delivered the very popular programme of 'Discover More' learning sessions for schools whilst also delivering a daily programme of family-focused activity in our Art, History and Nature centres.

This year we were delighted to announce a new multi-year partnership with Liberty IT and the Nerve Centre to support STEAM learning for young people across Northern Ireland. The *STEAM Studio* at the Ulster Museum is an initiative designed to ignite young minds and cultivate their technological acumen. It is an exciting collaborative workspace where schoolchildren are upskilled in coding that will enable them to design and create their own arcade game inspired by the rich tapestry of the museum's applied art collection.

Another highlight of the year was the *Explore: Urban Nature*, a partnership project with the Natural History Museum, which continued to engage local schools for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) at the Ulster Folk Museum. The aim of this project is not only to provide these students with new opportunities to engage with the nature around them, but to better inform the development of our future education programme at the museum.

Our approach to the project saw a combination of outreach visits to the participating schools, and on-site visits by the classes to the museum. Each school then designed and planted their own nature plot,

increasing the biodiversity of the museum site. Throughout the project teachers also had opportunities to improve their professional development by attending training sessions at the museum to discover ways to take science learning outdoors.

As a result of innovative learning projects like *Explore: Urban Nature*, in September we were thrilled that the Ulster Folk Museum was awarded a prestigious Sandford Award for Heritage Education for the first time. The Sandford Awards focus on formal, curriculum-aligned, heritage learning programmes that take place in an historical setting or natural environment and use the history and collections or natural resources to engage, inform and inspire visitors.



Image: A young learner at the Ulster Folk Museum

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: VOLUNTEERING

Feature project showcasing our commitments to:

Diversity, Inclusion & Accessibility

Creating More Ways To Get Involved

Extending the Impact of our Collections

As part of our current Corporate Strategy, we made commitments to champion inclusion, diversity and accessibility and also to create more ways to get involved with our museum service. The development of volunteering has been one of the key enablers to achieving significant progress against both these commitments.

By fostering meaningful engagements and creating a supportive environment we are empowering volunteers to make a positive difference in our museums whilst providing them with a real sense of connectedness and wellbeing. In a recent survey, 95% of our volunteers said their experiences with us have had a positive impact on their wellbeing.

Nine new Volunteer Champions have been recruited across our organisation. The role of a Volunteer Champion is to help their department colleagues to develop new volunteer roles and opportunities. Volunteer Champions are a welcoming point of contact and are invited to feedback and contribute to volunteer resources.

We have grown our volunteering opportunities across all our sites, inviting communities to play a meaningful role in shaping what we do. This year over 200 people have contributed more than 21,000 hours to our museums through a myriad of diverse ways including cataloguing collections, research, engaging visitors, assisting with events and much more.



Image: Family volunteers at the Ulster Folk Museum

By unlocking new understanding of the Ulster Folk Museum's potential as a rich heritage and environmental resource, we have been able to expand volunteering opportunities and deepen partnerships with a wider range of stakeholders. During the development phase of the Reawakening project, volunteers have supported our living, making, growing experiences at Ulster Folk Museum. Supported by our staff, volunteers have been involved in growing heritage fruit and vegetables in our cottage gardens, supporting seasonal events, getting hands-on experience of heritage farming, dying and spinning our sheep's wool.

We continue to work in partnership with The Conservation Volunteers, activating our green spaces through initiatives such as the 'TCV Green Gym at the Folk Museum', bringing our heritage gardens back to life as well as tree planting opportunities.

At the Ulster Folk Museum in January, we launched our Saturday volunteering offer with The Conservation Volunteers, which resulted in different groups, individuals and families creating a willow walkway and a folklore tree trail for our visitors to enjoy.

Bogs are an integral part of this island's natural landscape and we are fortunate to have native bog land at the Ulster American Folk Park. As a whole ecosystem for wildlife and plant life, this is an important resource for biodiversity. This year we extended our partnership with The Conservation Volunteers to the Ulster American Folk Park where we hosted three volunteering action days, carrying out maintenance on our precious bog.

This year, as part of our commitment to inclusion and accessibility we launched our Access Pledge. This new initiative sees us provide supported placements within National Museums NI, where we work with an

access partner, to facilitate short term placements for individuals who may require some additional support. We have facilitated a number of these placements to date with some of the participants going on to become regular volunteers.

Volunteer Scott is a great example. Scott initially carried out a six week placement with our Education team at Ulster Folk Museum carrying out research, as well as supporting the family crafts on offer over the summer months as part of the Reawakening project. We are delighted that Scott is now a regular volunteer in the Discovery Centres, as well as carrying out some observation studies at Ulster Museum.



“Being part of the museums has been a long-time dream for me. The opportunity to do different things with different departments has taught me so much. Everyone has been so accommodating and welcoming. I’ve been able to make connections and contacts to be able to put my skills to their fullest potential.”

Volunteer Scott

Image: Volunteers at a bog conservation project at Ulster American Folk Park



THANK YOU

We extend our gratitude to our funding partners, with special recognition to our principal supporter, the Department for Communities. We are also deeply appreciative of the tremendous support from all our stakeholders and partners, board members, our staff, our members, our volunteers and, most importantly, to everyone who has walked through our doors or engaged with us this year – thank you.

Image: Conservator, Jill Kerr, cleaning the Edmontosaurus at the Ulster Museum

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