My love of museums dates from the 1950s, when we made regular family visits to the Haslemere Educational Museum on Sunday afternoons. Fast forward to the early 1980s: living in Jakarta, I became a volunteer at the National Museum. It was a delight! On returning to live in Oxford, I knew that the Pitt Rivers was a museum I would like to be involved with. I remember getting quite lost on my way to the first Friends’ lecture that I attended in the ‘Green Shed’, the Museum’s annexe, and being pleased to see the friendly face of Julia Cousins. Later, I was invited to become Secretary, taking over from Sally Owen, the first office holder, who had done all the hard work in the early days of setting up the Friends. It has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience to return to the Council and serve as the Chair.

I’ve always wanted to know how things are made – an interest which dates back to childhood visits to a foundry, a weaver, and a potter. My particular interest in baskets has led me to look at objects in the Pitt Rivers in a very 'Need Make Use' sort of way. Within the Museum one can discover how basketry techniques and indigenous materials have been used to make a huge spectrum of items – not just ‘baskets’ – in response to local needs. My favourite piece is the ‘two-horned’ basket from northern Queensland (1893.38.24), made of finely-twined cane and used for collecting forest foods.

Of course we have Friends was the front page article of the Friends’ tenth anniversary Newsletter. I echo its authors, Julia and Sally, in saying that watching the Friends develop their own distinct identity and momentum has been a source of great pride and pleasure. I look forward to seeing them develop further with Gillian at the helm.

Felicity Wood, Chair of the Friends 2011-2014

It is a great honour to have been asked to serve as Chair of the Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum. I have loved this Museum since I came to Oxford as a University Lecturer in Human Anatomy in 1976. For many years the route from my department to the Radcliffe Science Library involved a short-cut through the (then unlocked) back door of the Museum of Natural History, and it was easy to dally a little in one museum or the other. I loved the atmosphere of the PRM – being surrounded by so many artefacts of human cultural history gave me a sense of being grounded in humanity beyond my personal social context. The eclectic nature of the exhibits was (and remains) part of the charm of the collection, and the subdued lighting added an air of mystery that was quite magical. This has not been diminished by the magnificent recent refurbishment.

During the past two decades my professional research interest has been focused on understanding the genetic basis of normal and abnormal skull growth. This has given me an acute awareness of the significance of facial appearance in human communication. The Museum has much to offer on this subject, especially in the many masks, which are fascinating for their power to change perception of the character of the person behind them, both in the eyes of the beholders and in the mind of the wearer. They link us to the roots of drama as well as to many of the rituals through which humans seek to harness the power of the spirit world.

Felicity will be a hard act to follow, but I am very excited to have the opportunity to become more deeply involved with the Museum and its staff as well as with the Friends.

Gillian Morriss-Kay, Chair of the Friends and Professor Emeritus of Developmental Anatomy, University of Oxford
Welcome to this, The Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum’s 30th Anniversary Magazine. ‘Thirty’ hasn’t always been an auspicious number – think of those ‘30 pieces of silver’, and ‘being on the wrong side of 30’ – but the Friends’ sparkling Magazine can redeem 30’s dismal record. Included are contributions from Friends’ Patrons Penelope Lively, Michael Palin, Philip Pullman, Barry Cunliffe, Danby Bloch and a look at some of David Attenborough’s favourite pieces. There are also articles from Anthony Pitt-Rivers, the General’s great-grandson; from Lola Odell, great-granddaughter of Kenneth Kirkwood, one of the Museum’s greatest champions and Oxford’s first Rhodes Professor of Race Relations; and from William Beinart, the current incumbent.

It’s no wonder the publication has so frequently won the British Association of Friends of Museums’ prize for best newsletter – another victory was scored in 2013. There must be a case for the Friends holding the title in perpetuity.

A glance back at the Newsletters since I introduced the 20th anniversary edition shows how much we, collectively, have been able to accomplish in the last decade. A grand new extension has been constructed, consolidating most of the Museum on a single site. Successive projects – supported by generous donors, the Friends included – have restored the Museum’s entrance and begun the process of rejuvenating the displays. Visitor numbers have almost trebled – we won’t be far short of 400,000 this year. We haven’t, it’s true, won the Museum of the Year award but in tandem with Oxford colleagues we have won pretty much everything else for which we’re eligible: The Guardian newspaper’s award as the country’s most ‘family friendly’ museum in 2005; a Queen’s Anniversary prize in 2009; the inaugural Clore Award for Museum Learning, and the American Anthropological Association’s Ames prize for best museum project in 2011. Last year we were rated 11th in The Times list of the world’s best museums (there seems to be a certain theme here with the number 11, as well as with 30...).

The great value of the Newsletter purely as a historical record has been sharply drawn to my attention recently, as I’ve just completed a short book on the Museum. Time after time, I found myself turning to past copies to check a particular date, or the details of an occasion, only to be reminded of a dozen other memorable events, successes and projects which I’d forgotten. Incidentally (not incidentally, in fact) my book – The Pitt Rivers Museum: a world within – will be out in November and will I hope be seized on by everyone, Friends included, as the solution to those Christmas present dilemmas. I should say immediately that the book is one of the agreed outcomes of VERVE, the Museum’s current Heritage Lottery Fund project, and income from sales will feed back to the PRM as ‘partnership funding’, and will not line its author’s pockets.

I have already alluded to the Friends’ generous financial support of the Museum’s restored entrance. Their most recent contribution was towards the installation of a new case to house one of the Museum’s most important holdings, its Cook-voyage collection, which will be on display next spring. The Friends’ Kenneth Kirkwood Fund assists the PRM’s staff members to attend conferences they wouldn’t otherwise be able to, while their energetic programme of events (culminating in the Beatrice Blackwood Lecture) helps rejuvenate and sustain interest in the Museum and its collections.

The Friends are an essential component of, and asset to, this vibrant Museum and I thank and congratulate them on this 30th anniversary!

Michael O’Hanlon, Museum Director

*We’ve renamed our publication ‘Magazine’ to reflect its quality and content. Past issues will still be referred to as ‘Newsletter’. Ed

…“My favourite museum in the whole world and my first stop every time I come back to Oxford”...
There are three things that particularly strike me when I visit museums: the first is space. Every museum organises space in its own particular way. The impression we have when we enter the space of the museum is an important part of what the museum means, of the connection it makes with our minds and our bodies. Climbing steps to go up into a museum through a large, symmetrical, possibly classical façade impresses us with a certain grandeur; there's a sort of stateliness and deliberation about the atmosphere of the space; and we the visitors have something to contribute to the effect by being the informal element, perhaps, the errant part of the design, even the decorative – more decorative in some cases than in others, no doubt, but a humanising part, anyway. We play the part of the shepherd in a painting tending a flock of sheep among the fallen stones of a Roman temple, or the woman picking up her crying child in a Venetian piazza: we establish the size of it, we provide the casual disorder that offers a pleasing contrast with the formal order.

And the hither-and-thither quality of our movements through it, pausing here to look at this exhibit, going back to look again at that one, crossing and re-crossing galleries, wandering without hurry from place to place – all that imports a sort of curved, loose, frehand element that complements and flatters the straight lines of the building itself.

And large, open, clear spaces present their contents in a characteristic way – there's a public and ceremonial air about the way they hold out this Roman jar,
or that Chinese scroll, and invite us to examine them. They surround them with soft clear light; they display them against backgrounds in neutral colours or on plain and unobtrusive stands, with discreet and neatly-designed placards containing exactly the information we would like to have, and in enough space for us to see all the way round the object and admire it from this angle and that, and come to an informed, measured, thoughtful judgement of it.

Then there are museums you go down steps into. There’s a more secret, private, confiding quality to the kind of space that that movement prepares us for. It seems to say that this is a more curious, off-beat, odd, eccentric kind of space; it doesn’t make such a contrast with the errant, here-and-there, wandering way we move through it – on the contrary, it seems to set itself up to prevent any other kind of movement. Down steps and around a corner and around another corner: we have to trace the steps of a maze, almost.

**Stooping, craning and peering**

Well, you know what I’m talking about. The closely-packed cabinets, crammed to their tops; the narrow aisles between them; the light that filters past all kinds of obstacles before it reaches the level of our eyes; the little tiny cards beside the exhibits, covered in thin spidery writing, that force us to bend over and peer and even hold our glasses above our noses so that we can see through the reading bit at the bottom of the lens without contorting our necks beyond snapping point; the fact that we can’t stand back at a distance and examine a single object in a flattering expanse of neutral space, but we are always close, and the object is always close to other objects that may be similar in form or may be quite different – all those things impose on us a way of moving and looking, of stopping and stooping and craning and peering, which is its own. We’re not separate from things, we’re in among them.

We’re so much in and among that it feels, sometimes, as if we’re being absorbed by the Museum itself. We look into a cabinet and see – what’s that strange mask through the glass among the shrunken heads, so lifelike it’s bizarre, which seems to be looking back at us in such a meaningful way? What distant, lost culture was responsible for something so peculiar? What happened to the mysterious people who created it, and then vanished into the silence of time? What could that grim, ghastly, almost unearthly expression possibly convey? Surely nothing human – this is something that speaks of the cruelty of the ancient gods, the blind and savage hunger of the spirits of abyssal time.

Then, horrible to see, it moves, and – oh, I see; it’s Uncle Charlie, round the other side of the cabinet. Hard to tell, sometimes.

But it makes you think. If one were going to be preserved at all, there would be worse places to end up than in a cabinet in the Pitt Rivers Museum.

And in museums of all kinds, as we become familiar with them, we gradually develop our own pathways, our own stopping places, our own favourite things. I have a favourite painting in the Ashmolean, for instance, and another in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and I always visit them as we visit old friends, and I’m always a little put out when I find that they’ve been moved to another wall or another part of the gallery, and I feel like asking rather cautiously “How do you like your new neighbours? Are they treating you well?” Until gradually the new neighbours become familiar too, and a new pathway, a new negotiation with the space of the museum, is established in its turn.

The second thing I want to talk about is democracy. Museums of the first kind I described embody a particular view of the relations between things, and between things and ourselves. They state publically and unequivocally that there are some objects that are more beautiful, more important than other objects, and that it’s worth celebrating them and protecting them and holding them up for admiration.

And I agree with that. I’m very happy that someone is looking after Van Gogh’s Sunflowers, or Titian’s Bacchus and Ariadne, or exquisite pieces of Chinese porcelain, or beautiful bronzes from Benin; keeping them in humidity-controlled rooms, and lighting them skilfully, and surrounding them with scholarship, and cataloguing them meticulously, putting them carefully in a context that tells us about their origins and the meanings they had for their makers and their first owners. I’m glad that museums on our behalf make statements about the supremacy of great art and superb craftsmanship. I’m delighted to see my nation express a pride in the beauty of human achievement.

**Democracy of everyday objects**

But I’m also glad that that’s not the only kind of museum. I love those grand public formal spaces; and I love the cramped and jostling spaces too. I love the majesty of great art, but I also love the democracy of the everyday object. I love the fact that in the Pitt Rivers Museum we can see case after case after case of ordinary things: knotted strings; bits of weaving; tools; weapons; rough wooden pipes that shepherds might have cut to play music on – perhaps the very shepherd in the painting of the sheep among the ruins; cooking pots; masks; tobacco pipes; surgical instruments; clothes; little tin toys; obscure little things with nails stuck in them for working spells with – how
many things? I couldn’t even begin to
guess. How many kinds of things? Again,
the speculation defeats me. But here they
all are, all these human everyday working
things, everyday things to play with, all
preserved and catalogued, and all equally
important to me, all sharing a space, all
having the right to be heard, all talking to
us and to each other about what it means
to be human.

The last thing I want to talk about is
charm. Children and puppies and kittens
are charming, we know, but it isn’t a
quality that belongs only to children and
young things; the two old ladies, Aunt
Anne and Aunt Susan, in Penelope Lively’s
*The House in Norham Gardens*, the one
78 and the other 81, are as charming as
anyone in fiction. Old people, old things,
can be charming too. It’s an odd thing,
charm, and perhaps it’s a dangerous thing
to talk about, in a way, because of all the
facts about human beings, one of the most
curious is this: that the instant we become
aware that we’re charming, we stop being
charming. We become calculating instead.
We become knowing.

So I hesitate to talk about the charm of
the Pitt Rivers Museum; but I’ve started,
so I’ll finish.

It is a place that casts a powerful spell –
the word ‘charm’, after all, can also refer
to magic, and the Museum is full of objects
connected with that strange human activity.
There is something about it, not just the
space (which I’ve already referred to) and
not just the contents (which I’ve also
mentioned), but something that includes
those and goes beyond them – something
about the whole of this Museum that
makes one fall in love with it. I respect the
Ashmolean; the University Museum holds
my profound admiration; I cherish the
existence of the Museum of the History of
Science; but I love the Pitt Rivers. I’ve loved
it since I first found my way in, as a callow
undergraduate, nearly 50 years ago. When
Shakespeare was describing Cleopatra, and
looking for a phrase that summed up the
magic of her presence, he said “Age cannot
wither her, nor custom stale Her infinite
variety.” Infinite variety – that’s the Pitt
Rivers, all right.

So my character Lyra, from an imagined
Oxford in another world entirely, an
Oxford where they aren’t lucky enough
to have a Pitt Rivers Museum, regards
this place with approval when she arrives
in our world and sees it for the first time.
It’s a real Oxford-looking place, she
thinks; and when she’s looking around,
she finds to her astonishment that in one
of the cabinets:

“…was a photogram showing some
Samoyed hunters, the very doubles of
the ones who’d caught her and sold her
to Bolvangar. Look! They were the same
men! And even that rope had frayed
and been reknotted in precisely the
same spot, and she knew it intimately,
having been tied up in that very sledge
for several agonizing hours… What
were these mysteries? Was there only
one world after all, which spent its time
dreaming of others?”

I don’t know about that. But it wouldn’t
surprise me a bit if among all these
extraordinary things there were some
little object, or even more than one,
some unassuming little bit of stone or
metal or wood or string, whose purpose
is obscure and whose origin is unknown,
and which arrived here, through one of
those windows made by the subtle knife,
from another universe altogether. Or even
more than one. There would be no better
and safer place for it to end up, after all,
than in the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Philip Pullman, Patron of the Friends

...“Lack of chairs and scary lighting. Loved it other than that. Thanks”...
The first Inspector of Ancient Monuments

ANTHONY PITT-RIVERS looks at his great-grandfather’s other notable achievement

Five years ago I came across Our Ancient Monuments on a bookshelf in my house at Hinton St Mary. The album is an illustrated record of my great-grandfather’s early work as the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments. It was kept with his second collection at the Farnham Museum on his Dorset estate until its closure in the 1960s. In 2012 along with related notes and letters, I donated the album to the Pitt Rivers.

In late Victorian England, the preservation of the nation’s ancient monuments was causing concern and, after several unsuccessful attempts, the first Ancient Monuments Protection Act was passed in 1882. Its main sponsor, Sir John Lubbock, MP, was a senior banker, an economist, and a polymath with an interest in archaeology. The following year General Pitt-Rivers, a friend and colleague of Lubbock’s, was appointed inspector. He was a natural choice being a prominent archaeologist, who could speak with the authority of a retired general. More importantly, as the owner of a large estate himself, he could negotiate with other landowners, understanding their attitude to this intrusion onto their property.

The General took up his duties with enthusiasm in spite of the meagre annual salary of £250 and between 1883 and 1885 personally surveyed more than 30 monuments all over the country from Kent to the Isle of Lewis. He recorded these surveys in the album which is illustrated with a similar number of watercolour paintings and drawings by his chief assistant W S Tomkin, and many photographs. We don’t know who took these but the General bought a camera in 1889 recognising it as an invaluable aid in his work and had an employee trained to use it.

The surveys were done at his own expense. All the staff were his employees and many had worked for him on earlier excavations, but travelling the length and breadth of the country with the heavy surveying equipment was costly. Another problem, the General quickly discovered, was other landowners had reservations about allowing their monuments to be inspected. Even Sir John Lubbock (shortly to be his son-in law) was reluctant for Silbury Hill on his estate to be listed and the General’s brother-in-law Lord Stanley refused permission for Plas Newydd to be included. Nevertheless he persevered and 90 monuments were surveyed by 1889 with 40 listed; 22 landowners refused consent.

In 1895 the Office of Works instructed my great-grandfather to stop canvassing for monuments at risk as they no longer had the resources to take any more into care. This highlighted the two main weaknesses of the Act: the inspector had no compulsory powers and the whole operation was hopelessly under-funded. The Act became a dead letter and the General gave up his salary. By the time of his death in 1900 only 43 monuments had passed into Government care and no new inspector was appointed.

However, in 1900 a further Ancient Monuments Protection Act was passed allowing Commissioners of Works and County Councils to give financial assistance for conservation. In 1910, another Act allowed monuments to be accepted as gifts and made their damage a criminal offence. A consolidating act was passed in 1913 whose sponsors were Lubbock (now Lord Avebury) and Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India, where he was active in conservation. The Act enabled commissioners to make compulsory preservation orders, gave them stronger powers of guardianship and initiated the scheduling of ancient monuments; it also created separate inspectors for England, Scotland and Wales.

Although the General’s tenure as Inspector of Ancient Monuments came to an inauspicious end, it was the beginning of a series of laws preserving the nation’s heritage which continue to this day.

Anthony Pitt-Rivers, the General’s great-grandson

Our Ancient Monuments has recently been digitised and once cataloguing is complete, will be available for viewing on the PRM website.

...“Sometimes a nightmare, isn’t it? But it is us – human kind”...
A Lively evocation of time and place

On her June 2014 visit, PENEOPE LIVELY rediscovered some inspirational objects

I most appreciate the Pitt Rivers for its eloquence. Here is a collection of objects. Things. Silent, inanimate things. But they speak of those who made them, used them. You consider that hooded cloak of reindeer skin — thick, heavy, with elaborate green and red patterned trim — and at once you wonder about the Inuit man who wore it sometime in the 19th century. And of the woman, I imagine, who laboriously worked that difficult, cumbersome material. This then becomes so much more than an object on display — it evokes a culture, a people.

Everything here suggests craftsmanship, work, and use. Take those two display cabinets of keys. An infinitely familiar object — we all have them. But here are 17th century keys with elegant latticed heads, a huge one 18 inches long, keys from the 13th and 14th centuries. A tiny inch-long key (who lost that, I wonder?) And Roman keys — the concept of the key is that ancient. Elaborate, various, and entirely functional. People used these, put them carefully away, they evoke the doors, chests, cupboards with which they were associated. And for me, there is a personal resonance. I lived for many years in a 17th century farmhouse; we had two keys to the heavy oak door — hefty six inch-long iron keys very like some of those in that cabinet. The original keys, perhaps, passed down from hand to hand through the centuries.

My own association with the Pitt Rivers dates from the 1970s, when I spent many happy hours filling in time before collecting my children from school. Those were the days when the Museum was sternly costive with its opening hours, prompting James Fenton’s wonderful poem:

“The Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford
Is shut
22 hours a day and all day Sunday…”

You mostly had the place to yourself, since few managed to hit on the elusive opening hours. And, for me, it inspired a book — The House in Norham Gardens — which lifted from the New Guinea tamburans (the ones on display today are called spirit boards), strange stylised carved faces on elongated wooden shields that I found hugely evocative. Somehow, an entire story spun from these, linking a North Oxford teenager with 19th century Papua New Guinea.

So much here can be strangely emotive. I look at the collection of coiled baskets; everywhere, at all times, people have made containers or mats out of long strips of material, coiled round and round. There are mats from Ancient Egypt, 2,500 to 3,000 years old. And, as I look, my childhood comes smoking up: plasticine. You rolled plasticine into a long strip, and then coiled it round and round to make a basket. Now, had someone shown me, or does a child inherit some atavistic instinct about manufacturing technique?

Objects as currency — another display. And, for me, childhood again. Here are cowrie shells strung as long necklaces, cowrie shells heaped up as revenue. What is it about the cowrie shell? I remember collecting them avidly, voraciously, on a beach in Palestine, as it then was, in 1942, while around us the Middle East seethed in war, but for my nine-year-old self all that mattered was the acquisition of cowrie shells. More atavistic behaviour?

It is the archetypal museum, the Pitt Rivers, the crowded cabinets and cases faithful to their original arrangement, for the most part, and how right and proper that the old labels are retained, with their tiny, meticulous handwriting — almost, now, a display in themselves. The collective effect of this place is extraordinary — an evocation of other times and other places, and every imaginable human activity.

Penelope Lively, Patron of The Friends

... “Magical place where we had our first date, three children and eight years ago; it’s still as wonderful”...
Over the last 25 years, during which by good fortune and licence-payers’ money, I’ve been lucky enough to see an awful lot of the world, my affinity with the Pitt Rivers Museum has grown. I always regarded it as a special place, a dazzling display of human ingenuity, but now it is more than that. There is something here that reminds me of every journey I’ve ever done.

Beads from Nagaland evoke powerful memories of visiting an ancient, head-hunting culture straddling the forested hills on the Indo-Burmese border. Toucan feather armbands take me back to the caressing heat of the Brazilian jungle through which we followed the Yanomami hunters. Drinking gourds from West Africa, aprons from Tibet, fishing spears from the Amazon all remind of diverse crafts, skills and rituals now practised by fewer and fewer people. Some have fallen out of use altogether, like one of my favourite Pitt Rivers’ artefacts, the chunky carved wood stocks from Littlemore village. They squat rather menacingly, the work of the local carpenter who was also the local constable. Presumably, if he wanted to try out his handiwork, he just went out and arrested someone.

When I last was in the Museum my eye was caught by a little truck made from a Coca-Cola can. It’s from Tanzania, put together by people who throw nothing away. I have something very similar in my own tiny collection of traveller’s treasures. In Uganda in 1994, I visited a nomadic pastoral people called the Karamojong on the Kenyan border. Their life was very simple and their circumstances, in scrubby savannah on the edge of desert, very poor but they had fashioned a whole range of toys for their children from discarded aluminium cans. One was a precise and accurate model of the single-engined Cessna in which we’d arrived. Considering they had seen the plane only briefly on its occasional visits, the detail was precise even down to the registration markings on the wing.

Another of my much-treasured items is also from that visit – a tiny portable stool carved from a single piece of wood. The seat is a mere 22 x 9cms wide and connects to a chamfered circular base only 11cms across by a single leg through which a skin handle is threaded. The whole thing is just 15cms high and the weight of an empty beer tankard. For the Karamojong men such stools are a vital part of everyday life, to be used for their group discussions, deliberations and exchanges of gossip and banter. It’s by far the smallest seat I’ve seen outside a doll’s house, and yet must carry the weight of men who, like many Nilotic peoples, are often well over six foot.

They carry them casually, as you might a bunch of keys, and set them down where needed, folding themselves onto the tiny seat and using their legs for balance. It all seems so easy and so natural until you come to try it.

I once took my Karamojong stool into our local primary school, and though the children were able to sit on it quite securely, the most popular moment came when I asked the teachers to have a go. Western adults are not geared for deft balancing of the posterior, and seeing the teachers sprawling on the floor was greeted with much mirth. I should add that I’m no better at squatting on it than anyone else. But I’m determined to get it right in the hope that I shall never need to hire a deck-chair or book a seat at the theatre again. I shall go Karamojong and take my seat with me.
DAVID ATTENBOROUGH has been a patron of the Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum since 1989. In the 1990s he recorded the Museum’s first audio tour. Here are some of his observations...

“This is a place of pilgrimage, really, for anybody who cares about the Pacific”

David is referring to the Forster Collection, one of the world’s greatest collections of 18th century Pacific art and material culture. Reinhold Forster and his son George were the naturalists on Cook’s second voyage and the quality of the original documentation makes it the most important collection from Cook’s three expeditions. Included are: ornaments (left), clothing, utensils, weapons, and musical instruments from Tahiti, Tonga, New Zealand, Rapa Nui (Easter Island), the Marquesas, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Tierra del Fuego.

“Breast ornament, (tahi poniu) of wood, seeds and breadfruit gum, Marquesas Islands; Forster Collection 1886.1.1269”

“All photos © Pitt Rivers Museum

“The Museum is a treasure house... it’s got everything”

David Attenborough at the opening of the new extension, 1 May 2009

“Well, I think the thing that delights me particularly is to see what I take to be one of the first gramophones”

In fact, the ‘gramophone’ is a composite of an Edison phonograph 1951.10.37, a horn 1951.10.41 and a wax cylinder of The Silver Trumpets March 1942.11.13

“That’s why it’s wonderful to come to a museum like this”

David admires the wooden figure of the mythical Kaliipayu creature used to cure disease or preserve good health, Nicobar Islands, India. 1983.7.1

“This is a place of pilgrimage, really, for anybody who cares about the Pacific”

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Breast ornament, (tahi poniu) of wood, seeds and breadfruit gum, Marquesas Islands; Forster Collection 1886.1.1269

…”Possibly the most fabulous place in the world – nightmare with a buggy though!”...
The island of stone currency

In an upper gallery of the Pitt Rivers is one of the strangest exhibits – a large stone disc with a central hole from the island of Yap in Micronesia. It’s called a *fei* and was once the island’s currency. The PRM’s collection of different kinds of money contains bulky coins or objects that could not possibly fit into your pocket or purse.

The value of the stone coins from Yap depended mainly on the size but also on the fineness of the grain and whiteness of the limestone. It seems that the stone was originally quarried on another island some 300 miles away.

Unlike most coins, physical transport from one owner to another was rare and not considered necessary. Families incurred debts, which they offset against credits with other islanders. Even when a large debt was outstanding, it seems that it was enough to acknowledge the change in ownership of the *fei* without moving the stone disc itself. There was even a *fei* that lay at the bottom of the sea for two or three generations without losing its utility as money.

The *fei* in the Museum weighs a few kilos, but some weigh several tons and measure two or three metres across. The concept of loose change in any physical sense was clearly not familiar to the inhabitants of Yap, or at least they considered it to be unimportant.

Axes work their magic

Whenever I go into the Pitt Rivers, for whatever reason, I usually end up peering into my favourite case – sympathetic magic – presenting a wonderfully eclectic mix of artefacts, reminding us not only of our deep-seated human need to protect ourselves against evil and misadventure but also the universality of certain belief systems.

I was particularly struck by the use of stone axes, either real axes reused or symbolic miniature axes, in these practices. One Breton neolithic axe, we are told on the gloriously informative handwritten note, was found under an ‘old house’ near Carnac. It was considered to be a thunderbolt (*pierre de tonnerre*) placed there in the belief that it protected the house from lightning. Nearby is a not dissimilar stone axe from Obuasi, Ashanti Region, Ghana, found in the wall of a native house, also to deter lightning strikes. Something about these ancient axes sparked the same thoughts in two 19th century communities thousands of miles apart!

Axes of polished stone featured large in sympathetic magic. One, from Carchemish in northern Syria, carefully mounted in silver with dangling silver discs, was worn by a female to promote fertility. All the miniature polished axes, collected from Brittany to Burma, will have offered some protection or benefit to the wearer.

What is it about the axe that exerted such power on the human mind? This is a question I am wrestling with now, having recently returned from excavating a Late Bronze Age site on Sark in the Channel Islands. The inhabitants carved miniature axes from soft serpentine to wear as pendants, copying axe types used 2,000 to 3,000 years earlier. Perhaps there was some sense that these artefacts of the distant past offered the protection of the ancestors. That showcase tucked away in a corner of the Museum sets the mind racing with questions and speculation.

Barry Cunliffe, Patron of the Friends and Emeritus Professor of European Archaeology, University of Oxford
Kenneth Kirkwood remembered

WILLIAM BEINART takes a look at the work of his predecessor at St Anthony’s College

Kenneth Kirkwood was the inaugural Rhodes Professor of Race Relations at the University of Oxford from 1954 to 1986. He was born in 1919 and brought up in South Africa, where he studied geology at university. During WWII he served in Kenya where he discovered the Coryndon Museum, met Louis and Mary Leakey and joined them on a visit to the Olduvai gorge. He also met Deborah who nursed him in a Nairobi hospital; they married in 1942. She later reminisced: “in my courting days, his passion for early artefacts... sometimes competed with his interest in me.” Deborah wrote of Nairobi’s Museum: “it was a revelation and made a lasting impression on him.”

When Kenneth came to Oxford, after retraining and lecturing in sociology, the role of the new chair was a little uncertain. The endowment was made by the Rhodesian Selection Trust group of copper mining companies; their primary concern was race relations in Southern Africa. Although he developed global comparative interests, Kenneth initially focused on apartheid and the debates about the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He started a research seminar on Africa at St Antony’s and used the chair to run an African Studies programme at the College, in parallel with its other area studies centres. He also helped initiate two student societies: JACARI (Joint Action Committee against Racial Intolerance), which gave a focus to anti-apartheid activity, and the Africa Society. Both the seminar and Afrisoc are still going strong more than half a century later.

The chair, however, gave him considerable scope for other interests and initiatives. It was located in Anthropology and Geography and he soon made contact with the Pitt Rivers Museum staff, including the legendary Beatrice Blackwood who had done so much to document and catalogue the collections. He was particularly engaged in Museum management during the tenure of Bernard Fagg, who came from an earlier post in Nigeria, and was curator from 1964 to 1975. During this period, major building plans were mooted, some of which materialised – extending the storage and exhibition space for the rapidly growing collection. Kenneth was deeply involved in these and served as temporary Director for six months in 1968 when Bernard suffered a stroke. The reserve collections were then scattered in diverse storage spaces through the university. His daughter Marion Dew recalls her father finding artefacts in the basement of the Examination Schools which he described later as: “vast crypt-like cellars” holding “many of our possessions, coated with grey dust, but safe.”

Another daughter Nicky Moeran recalls that Kenneth’s passion for the Pitt Rivers meant: “He never passed up an opportunity to enlist another Friend. Even before we could walk he made sure museums were part of our childhood — and when family and friends visited he always insisted the Pitt Rivers was top of their itinerary. He would have been absolutely delighted when a recent international league table of museums listed it as the 11th best in the world.”

Kenneth was a key figure in the establishment of the Friends of the Pitt Rivers in the early 1980s and Chairman from 1988 to 1992. He recruited Mary Leakey, who had received an honorary D Litt in 1981, Yehudi Menuhin, Hugh Kawharu, David Attenborough and Julian Pitt Rivers as the Friends’ first Patrons. After his death in 1997, the Friends inaugurated the annual Kenneth Kirkwood Study (now Memorial Lecture) Day in recognition of his contribution to the Museum over a long period. It has been a very valuable vehicle for presenting research by Museum staff and others to a broader public.

“it’s a jewellery box! I love the fact that so much is squashed into a small place”...
VE VERVE on an upward curve

“VE VERVE, n. – intellectual vigour, energy, or ‘go’; great vivacity of ideas and expression.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

As well as being a natty acronym for our current Heritage Lottery Funded project, the word itself then is a fitting descriptor – and aspiration – for the bustling pace and wide ambitions of the project.

So what exactly is VERVE? In summary, it aims to conserve and reinterpret selected artefacts and engage modern audiences with the collections as man-made objects, not simply curios. The project runs until 2017 and having completed the first of three phases (the Court), we’re now tackling the run of neglected craft and technology displays on the Lower Gallery.

This seems like a good moment to reflect on what has been achieved so far, and look forward.

One major aim is to deepen Visitors’ understanding of what the Museum ‘is about’. A great example has been the AfterHours series, which provides free after-work access for adults, and introduces them to lesser known aspects of the collections; from currency to shadow puppets, wax cylinders to masquerade. A key to the AfterHours initiative is collaboration – indeed, many have been joint ventures with the Friends – and future events will no doubt yield unexpected partnerships.

Ensuring the Museum remains relevant by Engaging new audiences has been one of the project’s standout successes. VERVE’s public programme – under the moniker ‘Need, Make, Use’, emphasising problem-solving and design – has made a great impact: to date we have delivered 600 talks, workshops and events to 30,000 people.

The optimistically titled Pop-up Pitt Rivers tent (in fact, more a five-person exercise in marquee assembly) undertook its inaugural summer tour of Oxfordshire last year, raising awareness of the Museum among hundreds of families through handling objects, demonstrations or activities. We now plan to focus tented outreach on under-represented suburban and rural communities, eschewing large festivals in favour of free events and unusual venues such as shopping centres.

Back in the Museum, you may have noticed the new lively displays of masks and figures adorning the high levels of the Court, alongside reconfigured boats and Naga baskets. Renewal of underused gallery space is the main ‘capital’ aim of VERVE; more than 1,000 objects have already been decanted, catalogued, photographed, conserved, stored or redisplayed. Since many visitors make it no further than the Court, we hope that the refreshed displays in the Lower and Upper Galleries will encourage greater circulation and discovery. We’re currently looking to complete a new case of hide and leather by the autumn, which will include a leather violin, E. B. Tylor’s Mexican riding outfit, and the Museum’s first dedicated display of shoes.

New gallery lighting has brought marked improvements (even if the effect is now somewhat dulled by the dazzling brightness from the OUMNH’s recently-cleaned roof), but Visibility is more than that. It relates to expanding online resources, such as ‘Object of the Month’, and greater transparency of working practices through blog updates, career advice days and installing new displays during opening hours.

In my view, VERVE represents a more general shift by the Museum to become more outward facing, more inclusive and more accessible, providing an Enriched visitor experience within and without its walls. A key to sustaining this approach will be expanding the roles of volunteers – many of whom are Friends – to deliver updated highlight tours and new VERVE school sessions, and seize opportunities to get involved. With three years to go and final bits of partnership funding still to secure, there is a long road ahead but one that I’m truly looking forward to travelling down.

Helen Adams, VERVE Project Curator / Engagement Officer
I arrived at the Pitt Rivers as a lecturer-curator in the year the Friends celebrated their 10th Anniversary. Much was different in 1994. Schuyler Jones was Director, and Julia Cousins Administrator, of the Museum and Kenneth Kirkwood, though retired as Chairman, was still deeply involved with the Friends. The Green Shed, which housed the overspill, was still competing to be the oldest temporary structure in Oxford, with pessimists believing the extension to the Museum would never be built. Much has changed and mostly for the better.

Looking back over the Friends’ Newsletters I’m not only amazed at the range of events they have organised, but also how many of them lodged in the memory. The Beatrice Blackwood Lectures on their own would form the basis for a decent course in anthropology, with personal highlights such as Howard Morphy’s Hunting Art which he gave before leaving the PRM for University College London. Not long after, Donald Tayler and Schuyler Jones retired, opening the way for new Lecturer-Curators, Clare Harris and Laura Peers. Jeremy Coote and Julia Nicholson (Curators and Joint Heads of Collections) arrived at almost the same time as me, making for a considerable staff turn-over in an institution which people don’t leave very willingly.

The nineties and early noughties were exciting times to teach and work in the Museum, with debates about the role that material things play in people’s lives, the nature of art and its effects, issues of repatriation and the engagement with communities of origin. Students came from all areas of the world and provoked their lecturers to thought and action. Looking through the Newsletters reminded me of the engagement of students (mainly graduate, but some undergraduates) in the Friends’ activities, which added considerably to their more formal course offerings and also had a beneficial effect on the Friends.

There are histories to be written of the recent expansion of the Museum and its activities, not least the links between the Friends and the educational programme. Early voluntary efforts provided the basis for the more professionalised approach of today, which is still enriched by the Friends’ contributions. The crest of a wave of energy has lifted museums and their collections into a more central place within the national consciousness, benefitting every museum. But the PRM has added to that energy through an intellectual engagement with the collections, based on superb documentation and archival work, and the cultivation of a series of cultural sensitivities necessary for a healthy engagement between the Museum and the various communities from which its collections come.

The role of the current Director Michael O’Hanlon must be acknowledged, as well as his close relationship with the Friends who contribute to both aspects but are particularly culturally engaged. This is partly due to their own experiences and backgrounds, but also to the range of poetic, literary and artistic events they support, which offer broader ways to appreciate the collections.

All who have been engaged with the Museum over some part of the last 30 years feel privileged. The collections themselves are the basis of the attraction the PRM holds for many. The Museum is a gathering of objects and also a gathering of people. The Friends form a key network, with close relationships to those working in the Museum and those outside. Many Friends are skilled in their own right in making or using artefacts. Their activities over the last three decades are definitely to be celebrated, with considerable anticipation for what the next 30 years might bring.

Chris Gosden, President of the Friends and Professor of European Archaeology, University of Oxford
Children’s choice

My name is Lola Odell. My great-grandfather was Professor Kenneth Kirkwood, who was a founding member of the Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum. Although there are lots of his great-grandchildren now, I was the first to arrive and I love the Pitt Rivers just as he did and I spent hours in it looking for the perfect object; I wanted something representing dark magic but not warding it off. Then I found an object about five and a half cm long and completely black apart from its huge eyes, gruesome-looking teeth and strange orange markings on its face and back.

I started to read about it and found it was a sculpture of an East Greenland tupilak, an evil spirit sent by a sorcerer to kill his biggest enemies. I’ve always loved ghost stories and objects said to be linked by dark magic and this drew my interest at once. I wondered who his enemies were, what they had done to receive such an awful fate, how they were killed and whether anybody had caught the spirit or the sorcerer.

These tupilaks are made from bone, skin, hair and sometimes parts of children’s corpses. They were brought to life by the power of ritualistic chants. However, if the spirit was sent to someone with greater power it could be persuaded to change its mind and hunt its own instead. Different representations of tupilaks are found in all kinds of shapes and sizes but, although it is very small, this has to be one of the scariest.

When looking at objects in the Museum I always wonder whose hands they have been through before they reached Oxford and I think of all the people who have looked at them since. What would the sorcerer who owned this tupilak think if he knew it had ended up here?

The Pitt Rivers has always felt different to me from all the other museums I’ve been to because I love the dark, cluttered way the objects are arranged with labels covered in tiny spidery writing. It feels mysterious and exciting. Lola Odell, age 11

Beatrice Blackwood Lecture 2014

Welcome to new Friends

A warm welcome to Rafaela Mottram from Salisbury who becomes a Life Member. Also to new members De Lloyd and Katherine Guth from Winnipeg, Canada; Judith Herrin and family; Gordon and Rosalind Hurn from Leighton Buzzard and family; Anthony and Penelope Kirkland, from Northamptonshire; and the following who live in Oxford: Emma Fitzsimons and Damian Ryan; Diana Martin; Jane Mellanby and family member Harriet Impey, author of A Bowl of Happiness which is on sale in the shop; Jill and Kingsley Micklem; Patricia Sandars; and Juan Gu and Zhaodong Wang.

For details about becoming a Friend, please contact Rosemary King: rhking17@gmail.com

Welcome to new Council members

Gillian Morriss-Kay (Chairman) came to Oxford in 1976 as a University Lecturer in Human Anatomy, and is now Emeritus Professor and an emeritus fellow of Balliol College. After a first degree in Zoology she spent three years in New Zealand and became interested in Maori culture and history. Her major current interest is the origins of human artistic creativity; she has established a link with the Archaeology Department, University of Tübingen, where excavation of the local caves has revealed the oldest known human art and musical instruments.

Jonathan Bard (Emeritus Professor, University of Edinburgh) spent 38 years in Edinburgh as a research embryologist with the MRC and the University, moving to Oxford in 2007 when he retired. He then became a Friend of the Pitt Rivers as he loves museums and has an interest in writing and its history (case PR106). He is proud to serve on the FPRM Council and has appropriate experience as committee member, then treasurer of the British Society of Developmental Biology and as current vice-president of the Oxford Jewish Community Council where he co-chairs its adult education committee.

Friends enjoy a glass of wine in the Museum before hearing biographer Victoria Glendinning give the 2014 Beatrice Blackwood Lecture on Sir Stamford Raffles and his collections, subject of her recent book. The event attracted an audience of over 150 and made a profit for the Friends.

“As an anthropologist this was a trip to the motherland”.

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“The Museum is exceptionally fortunate in having such a loyal, energetic and supportive body of Friends. It’s no wonder that their magazine has so frequently won the British Association of Friends of Museums’ award. I thank and congratulate them on this 30th anniversary!”
– Michael O’Hanlon, Museum Director

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– Lola Odell, 11