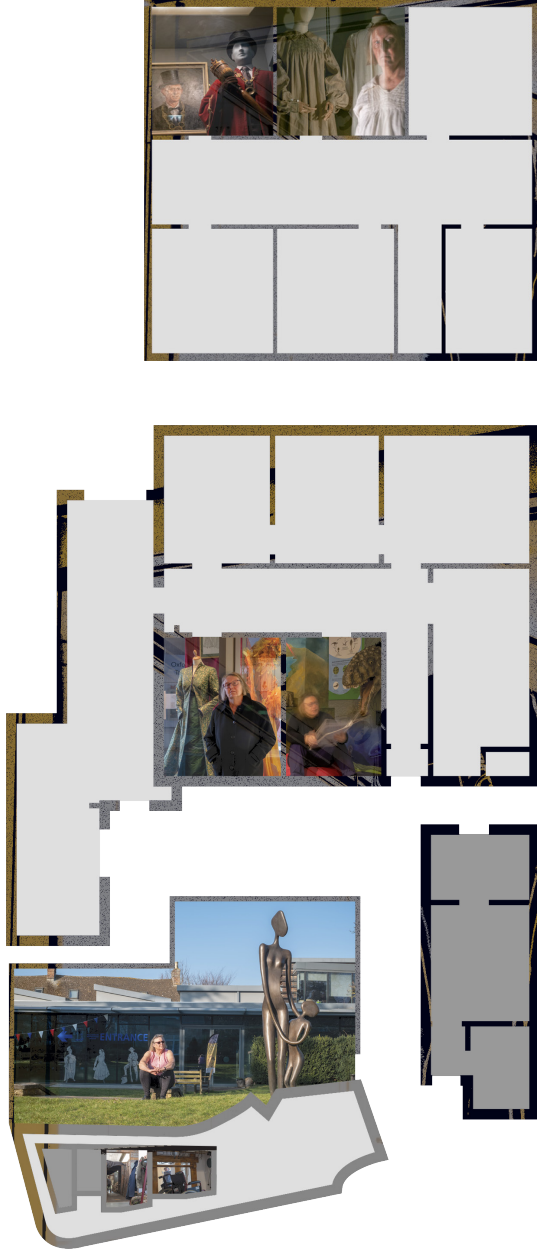


accessible

adj.

able to be (readily) understood / appreciated



Introduction

BY KARREN VISSER

An Unlimited bursary made it possible for me to explore museum accessibility as a partially blind photographer experiencing ongoing sight loss. Thanks to Oxfordshire Museum I was introduced to Liz who has a profound hearing impairment. We were encouraged to visit this regional museum situated in an 18th-century house in Woodstock on Mondays when the Museum is closed to the public. The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum, a military museum on the same site also agreed to us coming in on a Monday to work unhindered. At first, I was considering how much could I see to navigate the Galleries and appreciate the display cases, and whether Liz could hear the audio exhibits. After a while, and **this is where the Unlimited bursary has been so invaluable, I began to think of access as less about the accommodation of inability and more to do with feeling acknowledged.** Both Museums encouraged us and wish to learn from our experiences. This feels like just the beginning with many positives to explore further.

Liz: I have been working as a volunteer at The Oxfordshire Museum since September 2021. I have had moderate deafness from birth but gradually over the years my hearing has worsened to severe and now to profound. My volunteer role is Front of House. This comprises greeting visitors to the Museum, keeping art materials stocked and tidy in the galleries, selling items in the Museum shop, removing feedback cards from their boxes dotted around the museum and using a glass cleaner! I volunteer because I love the building which may sound strange! Most people do so because of the social aspect. In the summer of 2022, I volunteered for VocalEyes. I was one of 50 volunteers working from home checking UK museum and heritage site websites for information on venue access and website accessibility.

Karren invited me to collaborate on her Unlimited Project bursary toward the end of 2022. I have never worked with an artist before. I found words and phrases used by Karren (such as “contrived”) to enrich my perception of art. I have been very open-minded about being photographed in the galleries and I have let Karren include and lead me on her “bursary journey”.

Oxfordshire Museum

MONDAY, 5TH DECEMBER 2022

Thoughts on navigating Oxfordshire Museum, being deaf in a museum, and museums as safe spaces for people with hearing impairments. As I volunteer as a Museum Assistant on a few afternoons a month in this museum, some of what I say below is informed by that volunteering.

I do have an affinity for smaller museums that celebrate local history. I like to see domestic objects that might have been part of my grandparents' lives. I also seek out more contemporary exhibits that are meaningful to me in some way. I feel quite safe whilst in Oxfordshire Museum which is a converted Eighteenth-century house with rather a grand staircase! I value the chance to volunteer in such a beautiful old building.

The lighting isn't great in all parts of the museum in the winter months. This needs further thought on exactly where the lighting could be improved. I need good lighting to be able to lip-read. The audio files in the video display units all have closed captions. Without subtitles, these audio files would be impossible for me. I would feel excluded. I am not a great fan of transcripts of audio-visual material in ring binders. Around the museum, there are various printed guides to exhibits which I never seem to have the time when volunteering to pick up and read!

As I am a lip reader, I seek out people whom I can lip-read without too much stress to my lip-reading skills. This would include the paid staff and other

volunteers in the Museum. My lip reading skills have declined recently. I am in a position of having to guess a huge proportion of words, so I bluff a lot, and this causes me anxiety which I then suppress. I get tired but on the other hand, I was brought up to be resilient and keep going!

Working as a volunteer I must lip-read members of the public who have questions about the facilities or the exhibits of the museum. I frequently fail at this communication, my facial expression goes blank and the paid member of staff must 'rescue' me by stepping in to answer the question.

People with hearing impairment often are sensitive to sudden loud noises.

“Working as a volunteer I must lip-read members of the public who have questions about the facilities or the exhibits of the museum.”

Hearing aid users often have tinnitus which can be intrusive. I like a quiet environment without a lot of separate noise. The cafe terrace in the summer is good. The countryside gallery has a repetitive knocking noise from a display case which is somewhat disorientating and until I had identified where the sound was coming from, I thought the knocking noise was building work going on outside the museum as it is loud.

The Treasures Gallery, Smocks Room

MONDAY, 5TH DECEMBER 2022



The first photograph I made with Liz was in the Smocks Gallery. Jemma, the Museum Manager helped us set up so that we could work in darkness. I wanted to use my little torch. The incandescent light across Liz reminds me of cellophane across her face and the effect shows the strain it takes for her to hear most conversations. I thumped the floorboards with my foot for Liz to move into position or we called out monosyllabic instructions to one another. It felt like the mannequins in their heavy linen smocks, perhaps once worn as overgarments by shepherds and waggoners in 18th century Oxfordshire, were serene observers behind glass.

The Treasures Gallery, also known as the Smocks Room, of the Oxfordshire Museum, houses a range of calf length shirt style smocks made of unbleached linen twill (in those days called Drabbet) worn by men living in the rural areas of the country for about a heyday period of about 100 years from around 1750 to around 1850.

The smocks were worn over trousers/breeches, shirts and jackets as a form of protection that was harder wearing and could be scrubbed clean – without these underclothes, the smocks on display do look like dresses! The men who wore the smocks were mostly shepherds having to tend to flocks of sheep and waggoners, a term that encompasses, I think, a man with a wheeled animal-drawn cart of various sizes.

Whether it was women or men doing the smocking did pique my interest and I found that it was the women of Oxfordshire that stitched the smocks on show in the Treasures Gallery – however as men are recorded to have embroidered both in medieval times and as First World War veterans, it would not surprise me if men were also involved in smocking garments.

Although these were everyday garments for all weathers and the roughness of daily activity, ones were also kept for wearing on Sunday to church and to

weddings and funerals. There is a very good example of a Sunday Best in the Smocks Room.

A lot of patience would have been required to do the pleating first and then the decorative stitches onto the smock base shapes, which were squares and rectangles, meaning no waste of fabric. There are about five main decorative stitches that would have had to be mastered. Smocking provides some ‘give’ to the garment making it more comfortable to wear, also the smocking made the garment stronger and more waterproof.

All the original smocks in the Smocks Room use a grey thread for the decorative stitching – the colour perhaps was an introduction in the latter days of the popularity of the smock or when coloured thread became available in the country markets of the time.

There is some research by Dr Alison Toplis, a dress and textile historian, of an association with smock-wearing and being a “rural radical” in the 1840s in England. There was a lot of hunger and food poverty in rural areas, and it was symbolic to wear a smock as a form of protest against the dreadful living conditions. Altogether a fascinating room and one of textile and embroidery history which is so important not to lose.

Dinosaur Gallery

MONDAY, 16TH JANUARY 2023



I have no idea how I made this photograph in the interactive Dinosaur Gallery, one of Liz and my favourite rooms that is particularly popular with visiting families. What I visualised beforehand was Liz blurry and life in Jurassic Oxfordshire on the blue-green walls in sharp detail. Liz

was turning the pages of a children's book as she read out loud very fast. She couldn't hear me ask her repeatedly to slow down, which made me laugh and go with the flow. I love the exuberant expressions of the dinosaur heads and the cosiness of the space kitted out for children.

“It feels like a safe non-threatening place for me.”

The dinosaur gallery has very dim lighting and a low ceiling and it is, in its own way, a celebration of dinosaurs being discovered for the very first time right here in Oxfordshire by the geologist William Buckland. The rest of the world followed suit with new discoveries of other dinosaurs but it was here in Oxfordshire that the fossilized bones of the Megalosaurus were first found!

The overall colour scheme is greens and browns of the dinosaurs and the first thing that hits you as you enter the room are the life-size dinosaur heads jutting out into the room. The room is quite “busy” as there are activities such as colouring in sheets, hand puppets and dressing up costumes, books to read and browse, as well as wall-mounted life-size dinosaur heads that are part of the “feed the dinosaurs”.

It feels like a safe non-threatening place for me. It is incredibly popular with families with young children – they

often take up residence for an hour or longer in the gallery lounging about on the blue and red bean bags (one each of each colour) and the dinosaur tail cushions that are arranged to jut out into the middle of the room in a curve.

I would say that it is easily the most utilized room of the museum due to the hands-on activities. Sound-wise there are three sources – the life-size heads of dinosaurs that roar when you feed them, the larger-than-average audio-visual screen which requires you to wear headphones. Headphones don't work with hearing aids but from what I can recall, there are closed captions, and thirdly there is a grey unattractive donation box by the door that supposedly makes a noise when you drop a coin in it.

I really like working as a volunteer in this room, tidying it seems like tidying a sitting room at home, a lot of bending down to pick things up and put them back in place!

Woodstock Gallery

MONDAY, 30TH JANUARY 2023



The Woodstock Gallery has a particular smell, old clothes and worn leather may be, and the air conditioner keeps the room cold. Its background hum and the acidic lighting above the display cases made me think of a Hitchcock film. Liz and I found the session draining, so I suggested that

I try to convey the unsettling atmosphere alone. Instead, her notes with a recorded excerpt accompany my photograph. The sense of relief I felt as soon as I left this Gallery is summed up in the reflection of the exit sign in the Mayor framed portrait behind the mannequin.

The Woodstock Gallery is not heated and is chilly to spend time in. It also has a pervasive aroma that hits you as you enter through the door and is not noticeable in any of the other galleries of the museum. It is akin to the smell of some kind of oil. As a volunteer, I am mainly drawn to the gloves and glove-making display which is furthest from the entrance door. The cabinet drawers contain some pristine examples of unworn kid leather elbow-length cream-coloured gloves that look impossible for modern-day hands and arms to wear. The contrast between the small size of these gloves and my own hands and arms is astonishing.

There is a circular moving display (if you push it around on its axis) of examples of situations when gloves are worn.

The next cabinet contains a wooden template for cutting out the leather for the gloves. I would like to know what sort of wood the template is made from. It is quite polished. When you construct

a glove, you need gussets. Does this template include the gussets?

As you enter the Woodstock Gallery there is a wall of doors that can be opened with artefacts behind – one is an elegant sword with a broken blade tip that the Curator suggests might have been used in a duel at Blenheim!

The ceremonial regalia of a past mayor of Woodstock – red robe, neck chain – and the portrait and the photograph of past mayors seem very ‘male’ and very ‘Establishment’.

High up as you enter through the door to the Woodstock Gallery, and easily not seen, there is a banner that says the Woodstock in Oxfordshire was the very first Woodstock – a reference to the now many places called Woodstock around the world. I think of residents of other Woodstocks coming to this museum and finding something that is of personal interest to them and their own Woodstock.

Oxfordshire Museum Garden

LATE WINTER, EARLY SPRING VISIT ON MONDAY, 13TH FEBRUARY 2023



The walled garden, maintained by volunteers, is modelled on a Victorian garden and has a life-size fibreglass model of a Megalosaurus and dinosaur footprints hidden amongst Jurassic plants. It was mid-February, and the trees were still bare, but as Liz's notes mention the earth was "pushing forth white snowdrops,

mauve crocus, yellow aconite and blue scilla" and there was a sweet scent of the winter-flowering box. Behind Liz is the low-rise glass-fronted building that houses the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum. I was aware of the birdsong as I tried to observe Liz lost in thought looking at the mother and child sculpture.

Too cold and slippery still for the cafe terrace to be used. This triangular area of wooden decking with direct access from the Museum cafe is a particularly sunny spot in fine dry weather and people linger and chat for hours here.

The lower garden now – the trees are bare, but the earth is pushing forth white snowdrops, mauve crocus, yellow aconite and blue scilla. The shrubbery has many white hellebores. If you were to stand in any of the four corners of the lower garden, it would be possible to see the whole garden from each viewpoint – therefore it feels quite open.

At the far side of the garden is the low-rise glass-fronted building that houses the Soldiers of Oxfordshire independent museum. An artist has etched figures onto the glass front which probably also acts to prevent birds from flying into the glass.

The upper garden is shrubbery and terrace. Notable in the shrubbery is the winter-flowering box which is highly scented. To the side is the walled dinosaur garden where two summers (2021 and 2022) of punishingly hot temperatures

have killed off much of the striking mono-planted tall dense borders of the "living fossil" plant called Horsetails or Mare's tail around the huge Megalosaurus model. It took five gardeners to clear the dead Horsetail out of the borders this winter (2022–2023) and it is hoped the Horsetails will regenerate from the pockets of remaining existing live plants.

This garden does seem to have comfortably found its purpose as a public space – for individuals and groups, a play space, a space for meeting and chatting and a place for just sitting and doing nothing. I'm not envisaging it as it was as an eighteenth-century private garden of Fletcher's House.

There is wooden bench seating and tables, but this "furniture" can be moved around. It's not fixed. Over the summer it certainly does get moved to suit people's wishes and the garden is well used. People sit on the grass if all the wooden bench seating is occupied.

I never see the garden volunteers working in the garden! Obviously, they do come but our times don't overlap. A secret band of volunteers!

Introducing Oxfordshire Gallery

MONDAY, 6TH MARCH 2023



On the Oxfordshire County Council website, the Introducing Oxfordshire Gallery lists

- items representing 500,000 years of human history and natural history of Oxfordshire,
- carnival costume,
- and amazing 3D display.

I saw the carnival costume only. Instead, my vision took in what I imagined once to be the Fletcher's House sitting room with its sash windows overlooking the garden. Liz and I were interested in the formal AnnaBelinda dress in the glass display case. Accessibility has a wonderful hook to draw everybody into the museum, *storytelling*. The AnnaBelinda dress represents Belinda O'Hanlon. I would love to hear her story.

The Oxfordshire Gallery is the first room on the left as you enter the Oxfordshire Museum and there is 'something for everyone' — both archaeological and contemporary. It is even a parking space for visitors' prams and a storage space for the Museum's wheelchair next to the large glass cabinet displaying an Iron age mirror. The lighting is quite good in this Gallery, with two large windows.

In the centre of the room, there is an impressive circular display of three garments — two dresses and a carnival costume. The one dress, a floor-length green and gold raw silk gown was made as a wedding dress by the dressmaker AnnaBelinda who owned a bespoke women's clothing shop right in the centre of Oxford — its heyday was the 1970s and 1980s. The piping on the dress was a characteristic of AnnaBelinda.

It's brilliant that the curator has an AnnaBelinda dress on display! I moved to Oxford in 1983 to work in an office in

St Giles and AnnaBelinda dresses were very much prized in my twenties, but I never owned one!

Next to the wedding dress is a bright orange bird costume from the Cowley Road, East Oxfordshire Carnival, which is an annual event that started in 2001. Cowley Road has Afro-Caribbean shops and cafes and restaurants representing communities from all over the world. I think the Cowley Road Carnival is sort of modelled on the Brazilian Mardi Gras.

The final garment is a pale mauve dress worn by May Morris, younger daughter of William and Jane Morris who were incredibly successful designers. May Morris lived in Oxfordshire at Kelmscott Manor from 1917 to 1938 with Mary Lobb, who was a Land Army Volunteer. At the back wall of this Gallery is a recreation of the drawing room of Fletcher's House — a comfortable chair by the fireside, a grandfather clock, a rug, and some display cases of wallpapers found used in the house over the years.

Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum

MONDAY, 27TH MARCH 2023



My initial interest when I entered Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum was to experience the effect of sunlight through the glass façade etched with life-size figures of men and women. Duncan, the Front of House and Marketing Supervisor agreed to switch off the lights which hampered my ability to see to photograph. Liz can be seen in a model of an Anderson shelter, based on the shelters used in WW2 by families as a place to hide when the air raid siren sounded. Liz had a vastly different impression of the gunshots’ soundscape to mine, and she shares this in her recording.

The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum is accessed through the garden of the Oxfordshire Museum. It is a separate independent museum in a purpose-built, architect-designed building with extensive use of glass. The building has an inner exhibition space and an outer exhibition space.

Wandering along the outer space, which is a corridor that encircles the inner, I walk through hessian drapes into a reconstructed First World War trench. Museum sound effects on a motion sensor sound like the wind until Karren tells me it is gunfire. I probably would not have noticed the sound effects on my own, but she notices it straight away and asks, “What can you hear?” This question actually frightens me a bit as I am surprised and think: *What have I missed and why am I so stupid?*

I did notice the writing on the reconstructed trench wall – I think this must be location details of the trench’s position at the Western Front, one of many trenches that were the ‘theatre of war’. Clambering over the top of the muddy trenches, hearing gunfire, and going forward must have been the most terrifying thing in the world. Inside the reconstructed trench it is quite narrow

although there are bench seats and sandbags. I think it is a very powerful exhibit despite my not hearing the sound effects!

The Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum have a loanable manual wheelchair that lives in front of a very large mirror in a rustic wood frame and under a shelf for storage of perching stools. The positioning of the wheelchair here makes it look bigger than it really is, and I just feel that wheelchairs are not the most attractive objects that need to be ‘enlarged’! For the person wishing to use the Museum’s wheelchair they would get a full view of what they looked like sitting in it before departing off around the museum which would be quite challenging mentally, I think.

There are certain exhibits of interest to me in the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum – the display on the Fiennes family for example, and I also appreciate that military museums are nationally important repositories of medals, campaign materials, and written archives of men and women who have served as soldiers in the past. I personally like to get to the stories behind the individuals though, to make military museums ‘come alive’ for me.



The Unlimited bursary gave me time to think about what defines accessibility. Near the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum reception tucked in an alcove is a large mirror at the same level as the wheelchair stored under a rail with coat hangers and a folding stool. It appears a well-designed, functional space

that considers visitors with mobility impairments and a place to hang coats. As I experience an increasing sense of isolation because of diminished sight and not wishing to be a burden to others, I gravitate to where the shared conversation is unexpected, often humorous, even if the access is poor.

