

In this feature in each issue we look at one of the winners of National Heritage's Museum of the Year Award and what has happened to them since.

Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery

It is particularly fitting that the Museum of the Year we remember this time is Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery, because the exhibition that has just opened there, *Pursuits and Joys*, is devoted to its founder, Frederick Corbin Lukis, and his family who left their remarkable collection to the States of Guernsey to found the museum.

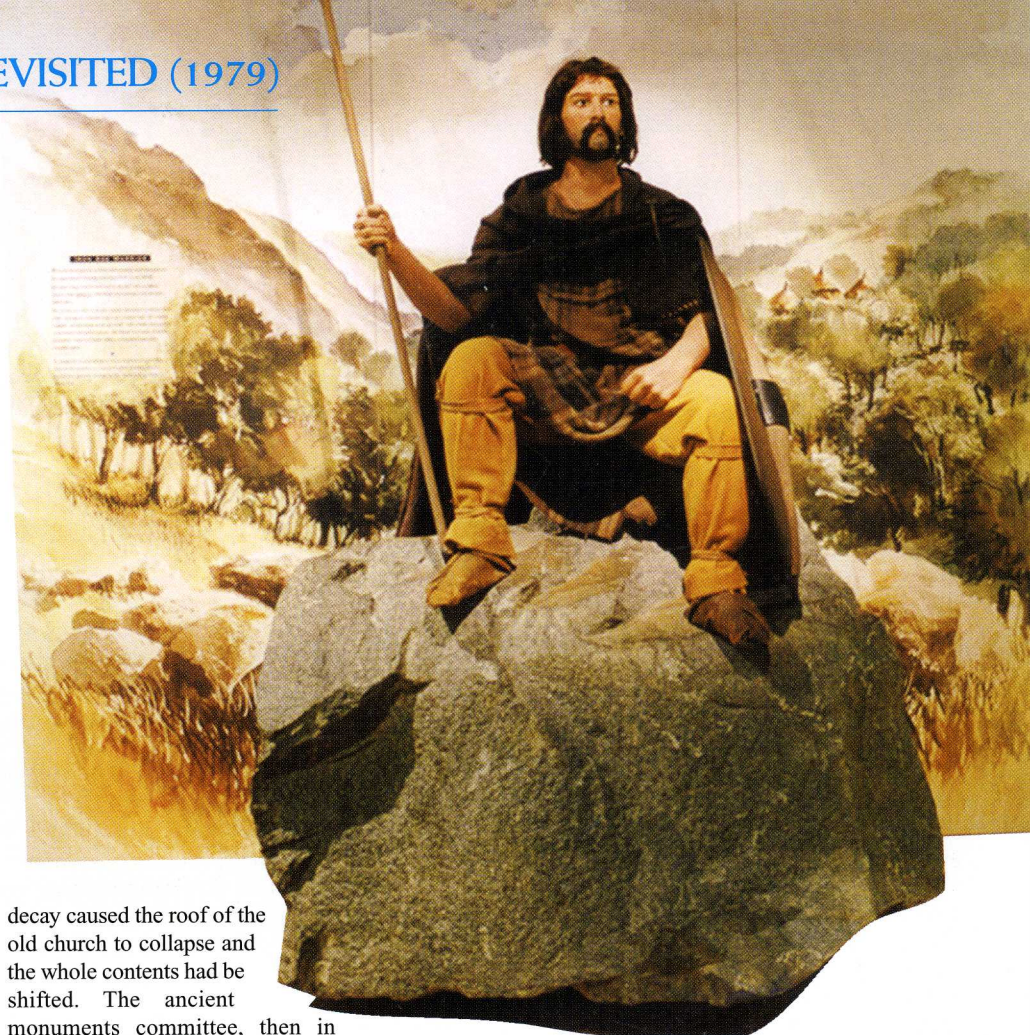
And the exhibition is in the Rona Cole Gallery, an important addition since the museum won the award and which its then director, Mrs Rona Cole, worked tirelessly to achieve but who was to die suddenly, in 1994, just before the gallery was completed.

Frederick Lukis inherited wealth from his father's wine and spirits trade on the island and devoted much of his time to tinkering with scientific experiments. But his collections started when a prehistoric tomb was found and he went home with a human skull under his arm. He became an archaeological pioneer, recording the finds on Guernsey in his *Collectanea Antiqua* which his daughter illustrated, and he became an obsessive collector.

His four sons inherited his fascination, and the family, home, Lukis House, became a museum when, four years after the death of the youngest son, Frances, Guernsey bought the house.

More collections were left to the States which had to be housed in a new museum, a few yards from the present one in Candie Gardens, and in 1938 the two burgeoning collections were united in a former military church as the Lukis and Island Museum.

And so it might have continued, but in 1971



decay caused the roof of the old church to collapse and the whole contents had been shifted. The ancient monuments committee, then in charge of museums, decided on a radical solution: they would have a modern museum, one that was not merely a random accumulation of artefacts bequeathed by enthusiasts, but a proper representation of the island's history, its nature and its geology.

Rona Cole had spent 12 years setting up a museum in Namibia, south-west Africa, before returning to Britain, and she was appointed the first director. She worked closely with the architect Ivan Phillips and interior designer Robert Read in what she described as a model of how such a job should go.

"The brief from the committee was simply that the decision had been made that the museum was going to be about the island – which sounds obvious but was a complete turn around from the old museum, which seemed to have everything except anything about the island in it" she said. They used a run-down old bandstand from the gardens as a theme of the new building, which was devised to blend into the relaxed mood of Candie Gardens and its trees – the whole museum had to be shifted a foot to avoid destroying an ancient oak.

The museum was ready to be built in 1975, but an oil crisis intervened and there was a two year delay before the scheme was finally agreed. The wait gave Mrs Cole the chance to start creating a collection for it. "The museum went through fairly reluctantly at the time" she said. "There was a credibility problem in that the old museum was a typical Victorian one, full of good things but not exciting, so when people thought about a new museum being built that's what was in their minds."

But the bright new museum opened in 1978, having cost just £320,000, won the Museum of the Year Award a year later and got a special men-

tion in the European Museum of Year competition too. There was a dramatic turn around in public opinion. Objects began to be donated in dozens, then scores, then hundreds, until most offers had to be politely declined.

"We've got a large local population of 55,000, a seasonal tourist population of about 350,000, and a very small museum" Rona Cole said. "We were very anxious not to be something just for the tourists, but because we were small, how were we to attract local people back once they'd been?"

The answer was a lively temporary exhibitions programme, and one which marked the museum's tenth anniversary in 1988, *Renoir in Guernsey*, for which the museum borrowed from all over the world, pushed attendances up by 200%.

What was most lacking, though, was a separate art gallery, and this has been rectified by updating and minimalising the building's plant so that the original plant room could be converted into the Rona Cole Gallery.

The governance of the museum has changed, coming in to the empire of the department of culture and leisure with the demise of the old ancient monuments committee, which has given the museum – about to welcome a new director – access to different funding sources.

Fine art has become a much more important part of the museum's work, says Alan Howell, one of its longest serving curators, with an art curator now. "The Renoir exhibition gave us a lot of credibility worldwide" said Alan, who worked closely with Rona Cole and though he is the natural history manager his brief takes in the museum's public relations activities too. "There's a creative programme of exhibitions using good designers, and I think Rona would have approved of the way we have developed."

