

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.

# Manchester Museum

Manchester Museum had little to do with Manchester. It was created in the Victorian ethic of "general" museums, which meant museums of natural history, ethnography, archaeology, zoology, botany, entomology, and possibly a bit of local history.

It was born in the 1820s with the local natural history society, but in 1862 the society hit the financial rocks, and while the city refused to take on its museum Owen's College, the bud of Manchester University, did, and the museum remains part of the university.

In 1888 Alfred Waterhouse, architect of the Natural History Museum and of Manchester Town Hall, designed a new building which was added to with a third generation later by his son, in 1927.

In the 1890s its archaeological collection began to burgeon, and the great Egyptologist of the period, Flinders Petrie, was sponsored by Manchester magnate Jesse Howarth who made sure that a lot of the more interesting items came north.

It developed a reputation for research, and when in 1984 the body of a man was recovered from a Cheshire peat bog known as Lindow Moss, where it had lain for almost 2,000 years, it was to the Manchester Museum that Lindow Man was brought.

It was a sore point when, after initial research, the remains were moved to the British Museum, but the news is that Lindow Man is going home, if only for a year: the remains are to go on show there for a year from April 2008.

Lindow Man brought the Manchester Museum into the national gaze in the 80s, and in 1987 it was our Museum of the Year.

Much has changed in the last 20 years. The collections themselves – and there are around six million objects – have remained more or less the

same since the early 19th century, but there have been startling presentation differences which are the result of a £21 million make-over, completed with the reopening of the museum in 2003.

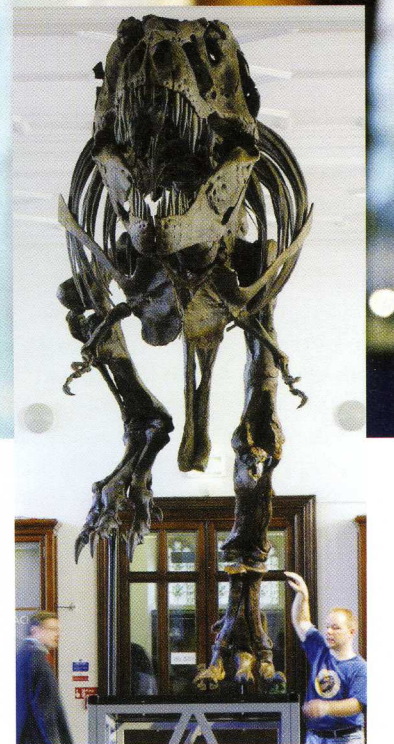
While the change has only provided a marginal increase in gallery space, it has brought an early 19th century notion of public inquiry into the 21st century of popular educational museums.

The emphasis has been on making the buildings physically accessible and appealing, making sure that the displays make sense, reversing the perception of a gloomy atmosphere to an uplifting place.

Meanwhile, although new displays devoted to Living Cultures (pottery, cloth, armour, carvings, masks and a selection of the bows and arrows from the museum's Simon Archery collection), the development of money from the third millennium BC, and astronomy have been installed in light and airy galleries, the Waterhouse architecture has been respected, and even the architect's original 1880s display cases have been kept for some of the galleries. A new bridge links the buildings, and there are proper conservation facilities now.

Teaching amenities – 28,000 schoolchildren, nearly all from primary schools, are catered for in a year – have been greatly enhanced, creating spaces that enhance the experience of the objects and providing facilities to a standard that visitors have a right to expect. A new space will be opening on the top floor in May called Play and Learn, where children and their families can read, draw and relax, and a resource centre will also be opening shortly which will be open to anyone wanting to carry out research on objects in the museum's collection.

The museum may not have been "about" Manchester when it was created, but now it is actively drawing local communities in, with dedi-



cated outreach staff working with the newer Manchester communities, such as the South Asian Mancunians to the city's south.

As well as addressing the needs of ordinary visitors, the museum has also drawn closer to the university. The entrance is no longer from the main road, but a new courtyard shared with college buildings and created by emptying a yard used for storage.

It also allows both museum and university to pay proper respect to the achievements of Ernest Rutherford, who first split the atom in a building which now has its front onto the new courtyard instead of concealed by temporary workshops. With a restructured museum staff the two institutions are also able to collaborate more on subjects such as DNA research.

In 2004 the museum made a spectacular new acquisition, the cast of "Stan" the Tyrannosaurus rex, the second most complete T rex to be found. "Our visitor numbers since Stan arrived have increased from 140,000 to 190,000 per year", said Nick Merriman, the museum's director.

"We are a learning institution used extensively by higher education and schools and have a duty to present collections in the context of recent research. In addition, it does no harm that in order to see Stan, visitors have to travel through the rest of the Museum to get there."

A new exhibition, A Place for Everything: Making order out of chaos, opens on May 5 at Manchester Museum to Mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of the iotanist Carl Linnaeus.