

The River and Rowing Museum, Henley

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

The architecture in green oak cladding, concrete and glass was controversial, by a young designer who had never had a building completed in this country. The subject was no less of a talking point – for some, the elitist pastime of messing about in boats.

The architect, David Chipperfield, has become a leader of his profession, winner of a series of awards and in 2004 the CBE, but the museum had more of a point to make and in the year that it won the Museum of the Year accolade, less than 12 months after it opened, Paul Mains became its chief executive.

"It was hard and we were learning as we went" he says, and the nearest museum they had as competition was the Ashmolean at Oxford, the oldest public museum in the country. But this would be a museum of Henley, yes, but at just two miles from where three counties meet, it would be the museum of "Berks, Bucks and Ox".

"The first thing we have achieved is survival" Mains says now, "and then that we've established a reputation that reflects the profile we want – a reputation for innovation but also for excellence that we've tried to generate since the opening."

The idea was born at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics when a few rowing enthusiasts were impressed by a temporary exhibition on the history of rowing. Rowing had a high profile there, the third largest Olympic sport after track and field, and swimming, and the enthusiasts came back with idea formulating around Henley. It would be, one of them said, one of those "Bet you didn't know..." places.

Bet you didn't know that trouser turn-ups developed from the habit Victorian Sunday rowers of rolling their wet trouser bottoms up; or, bet you didn't know that blazers were first the glar-

ing scarlet jackets of the Lady Margaret Rowing Club of St John's College, Cambridge; or that Baron de Coubertin based the rules of the International Olympic Committee on the unashamedly undemocratic administration of the Henley Royal Regatta; or, indeed, that most sporting rules are descendants of the strict disciplinary code adopted by the gentlemen who rowed the first University Boat Race in 1829.

But, led by local businessman Martyn Arbib – now Sir Martyn – the museum was to be more than that, Mains says. It would tell the story of rowing, but equally of the Thames and of Henley – and to do it, a new kind of building would have to be invented. Chipperfield called it a "resolution between convention and invention" using the influences of traditional local architecture found in Thames boathouses and Oxfordshire barns with a modernist flare, and Henley gave them Mill Meadows, a bankside rubbish dump to put it on. Despite being turned down for lottery funding, the trustees raised £14 million.

The Museum of the Year judges found galleries examining every aspect of getting round on fresh water, and even not very fresh water. The star exhibit was the section of a full-size Greek trireme, 25 feet high by 25 feet wide, in which visitors could feel the kind of cramped conditions mariners spent their lives in three millennia ago. An entire floor of the museum was dedicated to computers in which you can build your own vessel and find out if it works.

And the Thames section was not merely a trip up the river, it examined riparian environment, with computers linked to the Ecology Agency's monitoring of the river above and below the water's surface.

"This is a model of a museum" said one judge "It shows how a special interest can be given a broad and unforced appeal"



Credit: Mole, Andy Wilson © The River & Rowing Museum

A third achievement, Mains says, is visitor figures. It's first year clocked up 60,000 and the numbers were about the same until rather controversial permanent Wind in the Willows gallery opened in 2004 – purists thought it was not serious enough subject matter – but Mains gives it credit for boosting and is maintaining visit numbers, which last year had risen to 105,000: "Toad, whose 100th birthday we're celebrating this year, is a great recruiting sergeant".

Education was a key proviso for Arbib's support, and the museum's work with children has multiplied so that 20% of visits are by children, 10% in school groups.

Art, too, has always been a commitment of the River & Rowing Museum, and has hosted major exhibitions of tgh work of such artists as John Piper and Elsbaeth Frink. This summer's exhibition, of the work of Chris Gollon, tackles the difficult subject for sports people, defeat.

"It was a bold theme for him to tackle, based on Henley Regatta, but a genuine issue which has made an exhibition we are extremely pleased with" Mains says.

The museum relies on constant fundraising activity but is now secure, with an endowment fund safeguarding its future. The rowing gallery was redisplayed in 2006, and the museum is working in a £1.9m recasting of the Thames gallery for 2011, in time for the 2012 Olympics.

"In future we will concentrate more on the environment and conservation" he adds. "We think we have a unique aspect of what is pretty crowded territory."

View past the statues of Sir Steve Redgrave and Sir Mathew Pinsent towards the museum.



River & Rowing Museum exterior, Jaap Oepkes © The River & Rowing Museum