

Philip Taverner

Marketing director who pioneered sell-out exhibitions in London with people queuing to see treasure from afar

2 July 1929 - 6 February 2016

Philip Taverner, the exhibition planner and designer who died on 6 February, 2016 aged 86 after a long battle with cancer, was a stalwart of National Heritage for more than two decades, and was closely involved until just before his death.

Having been a judge for the NH Museum of the Year Award he joined the executive committee, and when the charity became a trustee body he remained as a valuable adviser whose sage considerations were always a propos and just.

Born in Chelmsford in 1929 the son of a Bank of England executive, at the age of seven Philip took command of his father's large garden sealing what was to be a life-long passion. Two bouts of childhood rheumatic fever meant him spending long hours alone with

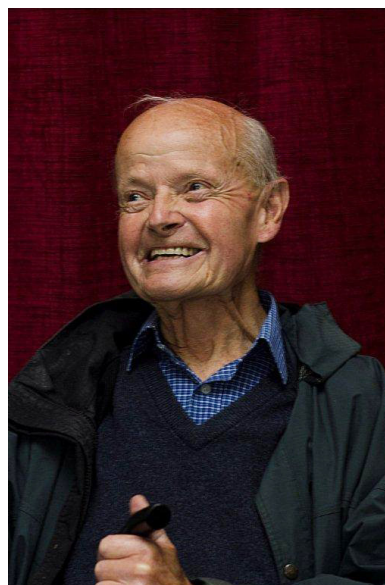
encyclopaedias giving him an early layer to his education before he went to Bryanston School in Dorset - spending his holidays working as a farm labourer.

After national service Philip went to University College, Oxford, to read politics, philosophy and economics, and also took to acting with enthusiasm in the Oxford University Dramatic Society, even touring with Dame Maggie Smith.

After Oxford Philip went into industry as a sales manager and then into public relations, before becoming marketing director of Times Newspapers.

One day he was called into a meeting with the paper's chairman, Dennis Hamilton, and the Egyptian ambassador who wanted him to organise an exhibition of Tutankhamun's treasures at the British Museum, to mark the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the tomb. It was to be the first of the blockbuster exhibitions, running for eight months in 1972 bringing almost 1.7 million visitors to London. Queues of people snaked around the British Museum's courtyard and in nearby streets, when 7000 people a day came to see the treasures. It changed Philip's life, and was followed by *The Genius of China* exhibition at the Royal Academy.

With a colleague he set up his own exhibitions company, Carlton Cleeve. More blockbusters were to follow, including *Pompeii AD 79* (Royal Academy 1976-77), *1776* (National Maritime Museum in 1976), *The Gold of Eldorado* (Royal Academy 1978-9), *The Horses of San Marco* (Royal Academy 1979), and the Burlington International Fine Art Fair. An exhibition could cost



more than £1m to mount, but they were all organised from a modest office near Marble Arch Station.

But exhibitions were by then seen as major parts of museums' operations and their mounting was taken in-house. Philip left the business and set up his own garden centre in Hampshire, but before long he was invited to become director of the new British Empire and Commonwealth Museum – the inspiration of John Letts who had also founded National Heritage – at Bristol's Temple Meads Station which opened in 2002. It was after he retired and had withdrawn as a trustee that the museum began to founder, and finally closed in 2008.

But Philip remained a staunch supporter of National Heritage, and

when in 2003 the award was taken over by a separate trust and the executive committee considered winding the charity up, he was at the forefront of proponents for maintaining it, insisting that museum visitors still needed a champion and that as such National Heritage stood alone. It was with his enthusiastic approval last year that

the trustees decided to concentrate resources on the training of volunteers.

He leaves his wife, Zan, and their three sons Rupert, Jonathan and Crispin.

by Simon Tait

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Photos of Philip both courtesy of Zan Taverner. Above: HM Queen Elizabeth looking at the death mask of King Tutankhamun, at the opening of the exhibition at the British Museum, 29 March 1972 courtesy TopFoto / Keystone Archives / HIP.

The queues of visitors to the exhibition snaked around the British Museum and in nearby streets, when 7000 people a day came to see the treasures. The blockbuster exhibition ran for eight months and brought 1.7 million to London. *Treasures of Tutankhamun* was the most popular exhibition in the museum's history. It took a year of negotiations between Egypt and the United Kingdom, and an agreement was signed in July 1971. Fifty pieces were chosen by the directors of the British Museum and the Cairo Museum, including 17 never before displayed outside Egypt.

For insurance purposes, the items were valued at £9.06 million. In January 1972, they were transported to London on two civilian flights and one by the Royal Air Force, carrying, among other objects, the gold death mask of Tutankhamun.

