Wooden case containing 60 small phrenological heads,
© Science Museum Group

Bringing the past back to life

Caroline Holland on how contemporary curatorial practices in our thoroughly modern museums are delivering new perspectives on dentistry and medicine.

Largest. Oldest. Weirdest. Any one of a long list of superlatives could describe the UK's medical and dental museums. The collections we have in this country are simply unrivalled. Gone are the days when a museum was simply a collection of historic items with labels attached. Today we want more from our museums. We want to feel or understand what it was like to walk in the shoes of our forebears.

The last two years have been revelatory for all those with a fascination for dentistry and its history. Among the events have been:

- The Teeth exhibition at the Wellcome Foundation
- The opening of new medicine galleries at the Science Museum
- The BDA library marking its centenary
- The British Orthodontic Society Museum and Archive being accepted as a member of the London Museums in Health and Medicine (LAMHM) network <http://medicalmuseums.org>.

For centuries, medicine and dentistry have

Wax teeth carved in the 1940s from Lifebuoy soap and wax, BDA Museum

been separate disciplines. It's gratifying to note that in the era of 'putting the mouth back in the body', the dividing lines between the two professions are disappearing; there are now two dental museums which belong to the London Museums in Health and Medicine (LAMHM), a network of 30 specialist collections. Meanwhile, dental artefacts and history are included in the spectacular new

galleries at the Science Museum: Medicine: the Wellcome Galleries.

At 3,000 square metres and with around 3,000 objects on display - mostly belonging to the Wellcome Collection - this is the largest gallery of its kind in the world. With several themed galleries, which include a Victorian pharmacy, vast display cases and newly commissioned artworks, it's a stimulating

visitor experience designed so you can dip in and out on any visit to the Science Museum.

Curator Stewart Emmens explains: 'This is not an encyclopaedic attempt to plot medical history, it's a more thematic approach which is designed to inspire reflections both on how our ancestors lived and how we live today.'

'It's tempting to think that the problems we face are unique to our times but there are health and social issues which recur consistently to challenge us in a different way.'

Such issues are well explored in the galleries and some are topical, for instance the inclusion of the full body protective clothing worn by a health worker who treated patients with Ebola in Africa - representing the treatment of epidemic disease.

Pain is explored and naturally dentistry is the portal, being the most common cause as well as the home of the general anaesthetic.

Stewart is responsible for the Medicine and Communities Health gallery which amongst other themes examines public health messaging. Posters with tooth care advice are included. Said Stewart: 'Visitors can make up their own minds on how well some of the public health messages come across'. By this he infers that posters published in the last century can be ... well very last century and the manner in which they are displayed invites visitors to make comparisons with our more patient-focused era.

The birth of the NHS in 1948 is represented and for many people in the UK this meant free healthcare for the first time and the opportunity to get glasses, dentures or hearing aids.

The transformative impact of the NHS on the nation's health is also reflected in the British Dental Association Museum, the largest collection of dental heritage in the UK. Curator Rachel Bairsto excels in gathering and building histories and narratives around objects in the collection, numbering about 20,000, but with only a fraction on display at any one time.

The challenge is to appeal to and engage with different audiences, the profession, and the public who are seeking accessibility.

The museum has a regular flow of visitors, as groups or individuals; some want to connect with the lives of their antecedents, some are intrigued about dentistry and some are dentists themselves, travelling from overseas to gain an understanding of what their profession might have been like over the last few centuries. Rachel says she never ceases to be amazed by the stories that are revealed, the questions asked or the searches being undertaken into dental lives and history.

Removable appliance fixed by patient with a hairclip, BOS Museum

'Gone are the days when a museum was simply a collection of historic items with labels attached. Today we want more from our museums.'

Rachel Bairsto, BDA Museum curator

Watkin orthodontic welder, BOS Museum (<https://bit.ly/2PxJ98u>)

She had a key role, supported by her team of volunteers, in helping the Wellcome Trust with its exhibition called *Teeth* in 2018. The high visitor numbers for the exhibition reinforced how much interest there is in dentistry, which after 17 years of working at the BDA came as no surprise to Rachel.

One of the most recent donations to the BDA museum is a set of teeth carved in the 1940s by a dental student from Lifebuoy soap! Now in his 90s, the donor dentist is due to feature in the BDA museum's oral history archive, explaining the background.

BDA's Wimpole Street HQ alongside the library which has just marked its centenary. It has an awe-inspiring collection of books, undoubtedly the largest in Europe, as well as a collection of rare books, the oldest dating back to the sixteenth century. Librarian Helen Nield says the library is keeping up-to-date by building a collection of ebooks which are available to BDA members for reading online or downloading. This is limited to BDA members but dental care professionals are able to drop in and use the library for reference.

'It's reassuring to witness the artful curation of these unrivalled collections; they connect us with the lives of patients and professionals from the past'

The oral histories are an example of a specialist museum making history accessible. Rachel says that visitors are not content to view an object with a label, they want or expect QR codes, videos or enactments. This is something that she wants to build on.

The BDA Museum is located within the

Rachel and Helen sometimes collaborate to get answers to questions from the media, from BDA members or other collections. Says Rachel: 'We are a mighty force of dental expertise. We like to think that whatever a person wants to know about dentistry, we are able to find it'.

Research is a key skill for curators and one that Sophie Riches has had to call upon in her role with the British Orthodontic Society (BOS) Archive and Museum. She was appointed curator in 2013. Supported by changing committees of retired orthodontists, she has transformed the BOS collection, to the extent that it is now a member of the London Museums in Health and Medicine network.

The BOS Archive and Museum has been limited to associate membership because it's only open to the public by appointment. Nevertheless, it has been warmly welcomed into the fold by the Chair, Katie Dabin, also one of the curators for the new Science Museum medicine galleries: 'We are thrilled that the British Orthodontic Society archive has been elected to join. It's been fascinating to get to know Sophie, the collections - and the wealth of stories embedded in them about orthodontic practice, treatment and research'.

There is a strong appetite for understanding the history of the specialty with many thousands of hits on the website annually. Started in 1907, Sophie believes it's the only orthodontic museum in the world. It grew haphazardly until it was adopted by BOS some 15 years ago. Rachel advised the BOS Archive and Museum committee until a decision was taken to appoint a professional curator.

Sophie has created a database of all the objects and is trying to ensure that all aspects of orthodontic research and practice are represented. Last year, 378 objects were donated so the museum's scope and influence is growing all the time. She has various projects underway, including a plan to digitise the collection. She is collecting oral histories of senior orthodontists and trying to get these inspiring interviews online.

One of her favourite objects in the collection (pictured in this article) is an upper removable appliance made with apron springs and C clasps. The strings had become detached and were replaced with a hairpin by the patient who, at the time, was just 15-years-old. Amazingly, the appliance continued to work after the home adjustment.

This typifies the contemporary approach to curating which is about capturing and sharing the information that gives objects their meaning. For all of us with a passion for the world of dentistry, it's reassuring to witness the artful curation of these unrivalled collections; they bring the past back to life and connect us with the stories and lives of patients and professionals from the past.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0254-8>