



Recreating a Victorian display for the Secret Museum exhibition



Early 20th century displays at the museum

Pictures:
TORQUAY MUSEUM

Recreating piece of Victorian museum

While Torquay Museum was founded in 1845, the society that created it didn't have a building to call home until the current site on Babbacombe Road was built in 1876.

The purpose-built museum would have been a place of learning and wonder but the displays would have been very different to what we expect to see now.

As part of the Secret Museum exhibition, staff at the museum are attempting to recreate a display in the style of the original Victorian museum.

Museum archives contain some early images of the interior of the museum although none of the displays as they were in the Victorian period.

There are early 20th century images and many show the galleries roughly as they were when the museum was built.

The Victorians had a very different idea of how museum specimens should be displayed.

BARRY CHANDLER
Torquay Museum

The galleries would have looked much more like displayed storage with rows of specimens densely packed into cases and even more stored in draws under the cases.

A Victorian display like this still exists in Britain at Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. It is incredible for its density of objects with around a million items housed in the gallery spaces.

Torquay Museum has just one surviving drawer of items displayed in this manner, an artistically arranged selection of bones from Torbryan Cave collected by James Widger in 1880. This single drawer has around 200 specimens.

Recreating a Victorian display has been a challenge worthy of TV's *The Repair Shop*. Scattered around the building in the stores were remnants of the Victorian display cases and a few early 20th

century ones which looked the part.

Most were in a state of decay having previously been used in a workshop so finding enough salvageable parts was a challenge.

Luckily, all of them were securely glazed but not to modern safety standards so anti-shatter film had to be applied to the glass.

Most still had all of their wonderful details of brass embellishments, ceramic handles and tooled leather labels still intact.

These told staff what the cases originally housed: 'Madrapores', 'Granite and Trap Rocks' or 'Fossil Woods' all showing the early geological specialism that drove the founding of the museum.

All of these old displays required complete repainting and lacquering to bring back their original black and gold appearance.

One collection of tiny items, which was collected by a mysterious Admiral Bedford could be pieced back together in its original display case.

The minerals, gems and curios still have their beautiful handwritten labels and viewing this case is like looking back in time at how curious travellers saw and categorised the world.

All that is left to do now is pack these cases with a range of Victorian items that might have been seen in the early museum. The finished display cases will eventually be put back in the stores and used as display storage as part of our behind the scenes tours leaving a lasting legacy of this renovation work.

The Victorian museum will be part of the Secret Museum exhibition that opens next month.



An artistically arranged selection of bones from Torbryan Cave collected by James Widger

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