



**Unexpected  
Encounters:**  
**How museums  
nurture living  
and ageing well**

Jocelyn Dodd, Ceri Jones, Sarah Plumb, Henry McGhie and Luke Blazejewski



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Dedicated to Mervyn Dodd, at 90, for his enthusiasm and curiosity for life

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A close-up photograph of an elderly person's ear and wrist. The person is wearing a black hearing aid with a thin black cord. On their wrist, they are wearing a gold-toned watch with a white face and black leather strap. The person has short, light-colored hair and is wearing a light blue shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Introduction

Across the world, populations are ageing, turning our conception of society around. Rather than celebrating that more and more people are living longer, healthier lives, the dominant narrative is one of a 'demographic timebomb', a disaster for governments and for society because of the increased social and health care costs associated with older people. Framed by a medical model that focuses on bodily and mental decline – on the frailty and illness that can sometimes accompany ageing – we are taught to fear getting old, seeing older people as socially isolated, fixated on the past, friendless, sexless and ultimately of little use to society. Ageism, the negative perception of ageing and older people, is a pressing social justice issue, limiting opportunities for older people to continue to contribute to society or find meaning and purpose in later life.

*Unexpected Encounters* makes the case for the role that museums can play in supporting older people as individuals to live well, helping them to come to terms with the changes brought about by getting older and challenging negative, deficit models of ageing. Museums' capacity to engage older people has only been partially realised – framed by the same medical model of ageing that focuses on decline, illness and frailty – and we argue here that much more can be done to engage older people, drawing on their experiences and listening to their voices, as well as challenging the negative stereotypes that are so harmful.

Here, we document the findings from our research, an innovative approach to engaging older people with museum collections that seeks to challenge how museums – and society more broadly – perceive older people. It builds on the powerful work done by many museums around memory, reminiscence, health and wellbeing but seeks to significantly extend it. It considers the wider role of older people within society and how museums can contribute to enabling them to live and age well. It explores how this can be achieved through a process of connecting with others and the wider world, finding meaning and purpose in life, living in the moment and being actively engaged, both physically and mentally (depending on personal circumstances). It is based on rigorous and robust evidence emerging from an experimental two-year research project, *Encountering the Unexpected*, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, run by the Museums Association, and informed by a body of previous research around health, wellbeing and inclusion by the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museum and Galleries (RCMG).

RCMG's research stimulates new thinking and creative practice that enables cultural organisations to become more ambitious and impactful in nurturing more equitable and inclusive societies. *Unexpected Encounters* hopes to move conversations about older people and ageing to new areas, and encourage a fundamental shift in the way that many museums and galleries perceive, and work with, older people; to go beyond the deficit medical model that perpetuates negative perceptions of ageing and older people by focusing on a vision of a society where all people are empowered and enabled to participate to their fullest, and where museums actively nurture and support older people to live and age well.

# Big ideas

## ‘The problem with ageing’

### A global ageing population

Across the world, populations are ageing as life expectancy increases and fertility rates decline. By 2020, for the first time in human history, people aged 65 and over will outnumber children under the age of 5,<sup>1</sup> and the proportion of older people aged 60 and over will reach 21 per cent of the world population by 2050.<sup>2</sup> The implications of these changes are huge, particularly in how society views older people. However, rather than celebrate that more and more people are living longer lives, ageing is predominantly seen in negative terms as the failure of the body and mind,<sup>3</sup> of the older body as ‘frail, leaky and unbounded’,<sup>4</sup> and increasing numbers of older people as a burden on society.<sup>5</sup>

Ageism (unjustifiable prejudice and discrimination towards older people) is manifest in a number of ways; from overt hostility to benevolence (feelings of pity or sympathy) to the patronising and infantilising of older people.<sup>6</sup> Older people are seen as being a drain on health and social care resources when, as Claire Keatinge, active ageing specialist and former Northern Ireland Commissioner for Older People points out, they contribute over £40 billion to the UK economy through volunteering, childcare and taxes.<sup>7</sup> So where do these perceptions come from? How can we challenge these negative views of ageing, which are embedded at an early age, are reductive and not reflective of the reality of ageing, of being an older person, in all its rich diversity?





# What do we mean by ageing?

In many parts of the West, the (bio)medical model of ageing has come to dominate how we think about ageing and older people, framing older people through illness and impairment, and shaping negative attitudes towards ageing that are embedded across society and culture.<sup>8</sup> Ageing is presented as an individual *problem*, as 'pathological or abnormal',<sup>9</sup> with medicine providing the 'fix' or 'cure'. The role of other factors (for instance social, cultural, environmental) in understanding the experience of ageing are frequently ignored or diminished.<sup>10</sup> This model encourages a pessimistic view of older age, stoking fears and anxieties of coping (or not) with a failing body, illness, mental decline, loneliness and isolation, dependency and poverty.<sup>11</sup> Emphasising the dependency and frailty of older people can lead to 'compassionate' or 'benevolent' prejudice, the tendency to 'over-help' or 'over-accommodate' (for example, through adopting excessively polite, simplified, slower and louder verbal communication<sup>12</sup>) which can leave some older people feeling disrespected, helpless and patronised. This culture of paternalism and ageism not only shapes the roles that older people can have in society but also who gets to decide what solutions are necessary to meet the 'ageing problem'. Maria Brenton, one of the founders of the Women's Co-Housing Group in London – a radical new approach to communal housing, based on a Dutch model – struggled against a lack of support, even resistance towards the idea of the project from planners and local government. She describes this culture as one which says 'we know what you need dear, and you can put up with it'.<sup>13</sup> It is in the patronising language described by Claire Keatinge, which describes older people as 'nice', 'kind', 'helpful' as though these are specific characteristics associated with older people as a group.<sup>14</sup> It is not only the types of language but also the tone of voice that is used that can demean older people, often an 'infantilising' voice that can contribute to the sense that older people are no longer independent, valued and contributing members of society, fuelling feelings of humiliation, dependency and loneliness.<sup>15</sup>

Other stereotypes attached to older people include them being stuck in their ways, unable to learn new things, or requiring a huge effort to talk to because of loss of mental capacity or hearing.<sup>16</sup> Media narratives too often highlight generational differences that emphasise the potentially negative aspects of an ageing society. For example, older generations are sometimes portrayed as prosperous and politically powerful, yet hedonistic and selfish 'baby boomers', whose interests clash with those of younger 'millennials'.<sup>17</sup> Older people can absorb these negative attitudes, leading to loss of confidence, withdrawal, isolation and invisibility.<sup>18</sup> The idea that ageing is an inevitable, even necessary, decline has been internalised by many older people, as Cathy Ayrton, Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) Project Officer at Southway Housing Trust, Manchester, explains. Older people are not only '*overlooked*' and '*written off*', but '*to a certain extent they do that themselves. They act it out.*'

Further evidence of our profoundly ageist society are the exceptions we sometimes make for important or professional older people. As Claire Keatinge explains, we very often do not see these individuals as 'older people':

'If you look at governments across the world, most of them are stuffed full of older people. They don't think of themselves as older people because they are still important. They still have value, they're still making decisions... So we're defining... older people as the excluded, the vulnerable, the poor, the frail, the ill, the socially isolated, the lonely.'<sup>19</sup>

Donna Young, Curator of Herbarium at the World Museum, National Museums Liverpool, talked about her own experiences of working with professionals in the museum world, describing how she '*did not think of them as older*' because she was focused on their knowledge and expertise. As Donna described '*[If] they are someone who's in their seventies but I know that they have been an ex-University Professor... I would probably have no difference talking to them if they were seventy or if they were fifty or forty because I would assume that they're part of that research community so they have that knowledge.*'

Models of *active, successful* and *productive* ageing have attempted to move away from these stereotypes to provide a positive angle on what it means to age well, summarised as the avoidance of disease and functioning well; maintaining a healthy lifestyle and social connections; continuing to contribute to society; resilience; and retaining independence.<sup>20</sup> The World Health Organisation has adopted the notion of 'active ageing', recognising that individuals (including frail and disabled people in need of care) should be able to realise their potential for physical, social and psychological wellbeing over their life course, and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and capabilities.<sup>21</sup> However, despite the popularity of these models, the focus on *individual* activity, autonomy and responsibility has been criticised for denying the reality of the deteriorating human body and mind, perpetuating the idea that non-ageing or 'agelessness' is desirable.<sup>22</sup> It is the responsibility of the individual to manage their health, lifestyle, body throughout the life course so that they do not become a burden upon others, 'as though preparation for an unburdened death should be the ultimate concern of anyone middle aged or older'.<sup>23</sup> Successful ageing, some have suggested, is therefore 'to some extent the degree to which the movement into old age can be noiseless and untroubling to other members of society by sustaining the activities and process of youth for as long as possible or by accepting the status of old and disengaged'.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, these models do not describe the reality of ageing any more than the medical model. When older people are asked to define what it means to age well, they typically describe a much broader set of categories including spirituality, sense of humour and having a sense of purpose. Older people may feel happy or satisfied with their lives, even in the presence of disease, impairment or adversity.<sup>25</sup> Personal growth, creative and intellectual development can all continue despite a fragile body.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, some have argued that these models have been used by governments seeking to justify the erosion of state-provided health and social care, 'dressed up' in the language of choice, rights, opportunity and empowerment.<sup>27</sup>



We need to 'not only change the way people *think* about ageing, but also how they *feel* about ageing'.<sup>28</sup> Ageing, and age identity, is a fluid and multidimensional concept.<sup>29</sup> Ageing is experienced by individuals – everyone, not just older people<sup>30</sup> – but is shaped by social and cultural contexts.<sup>31</sup> For example, how people adapt to the changes brought on by ageing (loss, illness), and incorporate these into their lives, is subjective and personal,<sup>32</sup> but will be influenced by their background, education, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality.<sup>33</sup> We cannot assume that everyone feels the same about the ageing process or experiences being 'older' in the same way. Gaynor Cox, Housing Arts Officer, Bolton at Home, describes how it tends to be assumed that older people are a group sharing the same interests when someone who is 50 years old may have very different interests to someone who is 80; '*when you've got a group of all different ages it's quite difficult [to find common interests]*'.

Beliefs about ageing are normalised and perpetuated through society but can be challenged, resisted and negotiated.<sup>34</sup> We do not have to accept ageing as a negative process, as Melanie Graaf, Collections, Access and Learning Officer at Bolton Libraries and Museums, realises: '*I think some people think that when they get to a certain age that a life is over and yet it's not. There's just so many things out there... and it's like an exploration.*' Getting older is just one element of the whole life experience, not the defining characteristic of a person. For some older people, age is not, of itself, of interest; one qualitative study exploring spirituality in later life revealed that for participants, '[each of them] had a rich and unique "journey" to report and greeted any specific questions about their experience of old age with some surprise. Their idea of success was linked to their whole life rather than their ageing process.'<sup>35</sup>

We need a concept of ageing that values the diversity of older people's experiences and needs, one which helps us to respond to the changes brought on by ageing in a meaningful way. There is not one experience of ageing but many, formed from a complex interplay between personal, emotional, social, political and cultural perceptions of age and ageing. Some older people retain control over their lives, find greater freedom of expression and improve their social relationships whilst others experience apathy, resignation, isolation and stagnation.<sup>36</sup> We need to unpick and challenge normative models, drawing on thinking from a broad range of disciplines, from the humanities and arts as well as from science.<sup>37</sup>

The causes of mental and bodily deterioration may lie in biology but science does not help us to understand the subjective experience of being an older person, or ageism as a social justice issue.<sup>38</sup> We need a concept of ageing that can help us to accept the transience of life, which understands change is not always easily categorised as a sign of decline or success, as dependent or independent. A new way of thinking about ageing that does not 'attempt to reject and fight old age, but instead seeks a conceptualisation and acceptance of old age in all its diversity'.<sup>39</sup>

**Advantages of Age**, launched in 2016, is an online community developed by Suzanne Noble (56) and Rose Rouse (63) who wanted to address the lack of visibility of women like themselves in the media. As Suzanne Noble explains: 'We've come out of the punk generation, the hippie generation, these societal changes that were all about individualism. And now we're struggling with a sort of invisibility that society has thrust upon us.' Through *Advantages of Age*, Noble and Rouse want to give people the space to be 'seen, be recognised and be acknowledged' and have secured Arts Council England funding to hold events that will help to spread their message.<sup>40</sup>

Critically, we need to listen to, and value, the voices and experiences of older people, to understand ageing from their perspective. The process of speaking and being listened to can be empowering – encouraging people to conceptualise, think through and articulate their views can have an impact on their perceptions of everyday life, including their experiences of ageing and being old.<sup>41</sup> As artist Sheila Tilmouth explains, older age can actually liberate you from many of the concerns you have as a younger person: '*When you're retired, when you're older, you can venture out into things just for a curiosity and not for an end result... I just think that's liberating because so much of the time we feel contained and we feel self-conscious.*'

In developing an alternative model of ageing, we can be clear that the following components are a critical part of ageing well:<sup>42</sup>

- Staying connected – maintaining relationships with friends, family, community, continued social participation;
- Active engagement (body and mind) at a level suitable for the individual;
- Psychological resources – positive outlook, self-worth, self-efficacy or a sense of control over life, satisfaction with life, autonomy and independence, effective coping and adaptive strategies in the face of changing circumstances (resilience);
- Valuing changes across the life course and being valued by others, opportunities for personal growth, having a purpose in life;
- Having meaning and purpose (e.g. spirituality, activity);
- Having a voice and being listened to.

However, it is not only the individual's responsibility to age well or successfully. Ageing well requires a shift in societal attitudes and engagement from a broad range of agencies and organisations. What implications does this hold for museums? How might museums support older people to come to terms with the changes associated with ageing? How can museums help people to age well?



## What (unconscious) assumptions do museums make about older people?

Older people are an established audience for museums and galleries, with significant and powerful work taking place around memory and reminiscence,<sup>43</sup> health and wellbeing,<sup>44</sup> and the arts,<sup>45</sup> as well as the growing evidence of positive benefits from general participation in cultural activities.<sup>46</sup> Yet, there appear to be a number of (unconscious) assumptions that museums make about older people that shape the activities and opportunities made available to them. Judging by the significant focus placed on reminiscence and memory, museums have the tendency to assume that the best of older people's lives have been and gone, it lies in the past. When working with older people, the default position for museums is to use their social history collections as part of a reminiscence session; in a recent mapping of activities in museums connected to health and wellbeing all the examples of projects specific to older people were connected to reminiscence.<sup>47</sup> When museums are thinking about their programming for older people, there is the tendency to focus on their health conditions (such as dementia, stroke), where the emphasis is on making them 'well', or using the therapeutic or healing value of museum collections to alleviate their conditions.<sup>48</sup> This seems to mean that, generally, older people are treated as passive consumers of museum activities, such as talks and lectures, with the aim of providing 'a nice day out' (perhaps linked to the tendency in our paternalistic society to assume that if organisations are 'nice to [older people]... they will be ever so grateful'<sup>49</sup>). Older people are often considered by museums as grandparents or a free workforce for museums in the form of volunteers. Whilst these activities are undoubtedly good and older people will get lots from them, who ultimately benefits?

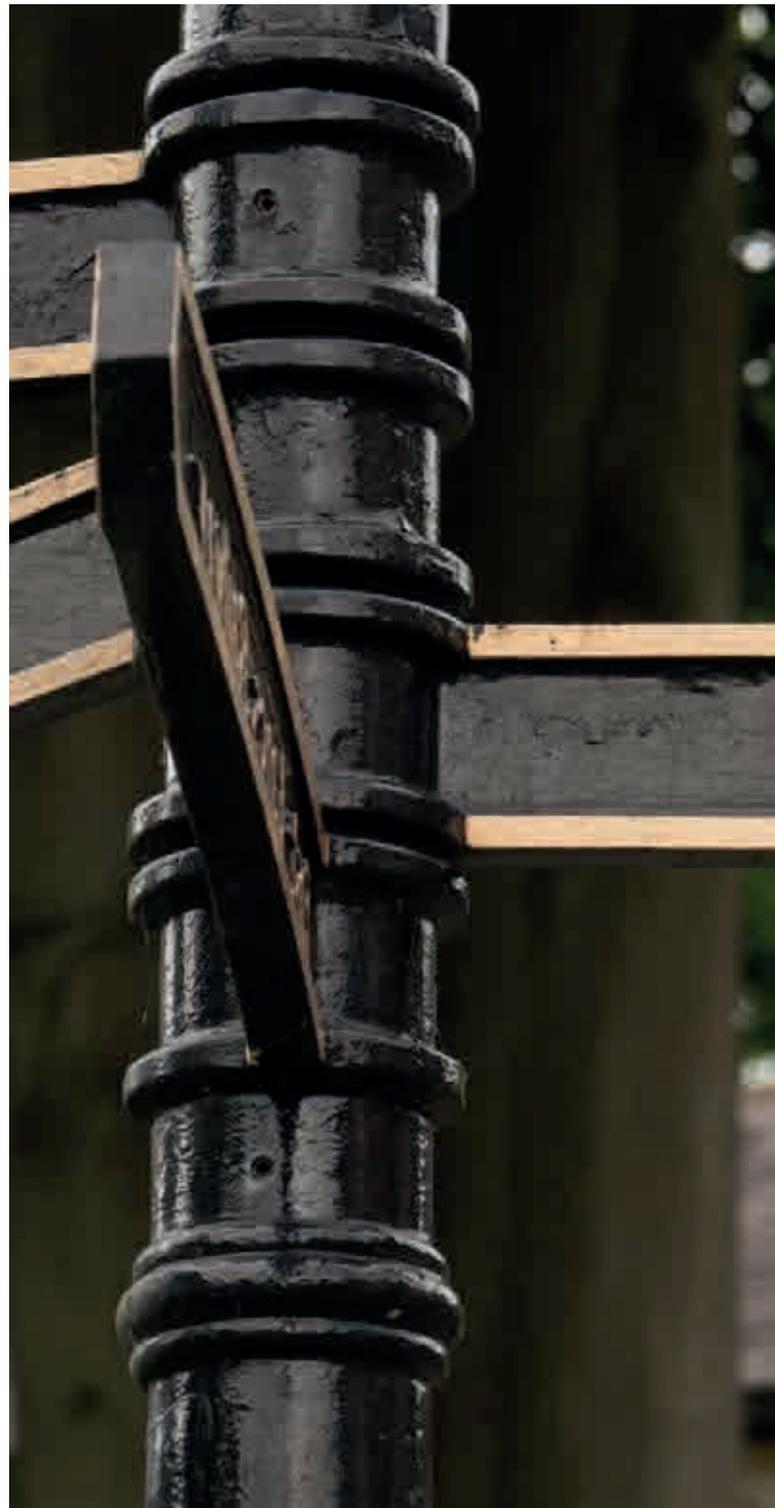
It may not be conscious, but museums' assumptions about older people can lead them to work in particular ways that are ultimately of benefit to museums. A similar situation was highlighted by museum consultant and former deputy director at Manchester Museum, Bernadette Lynch in her examination of museums' work with community groups, where museums revealed a 'centre/periphery view of its communities, in which the organisation is firmly placed in the centre'.<sup>50</sup> The museum presented itself as 'carer', community participants as beneficiaries, as Lynch describes 'an almost nineteenth-century view of the passive subject, outside the institution, awaiting improvement',<sup>51</sup> a view which also fits in with society's paternalistic view of older people. As Claire Keatinge argues, it is easy for museums to continue working with older people as passive consumers: 'There's a very easy market to find of people who will appreciate a "nice day out" and enjoy it, and it will be good for their mental health and their social contact'.<sup>52</sup> However, as she makes clear, the challenge is for museums to work with older people as co-producers, to develop activities and programmes where older people can make a meaningful contribution to arts and culture, as well as benefitting from participation in terms of their health and wellbeing. How might museums begin to make that change?

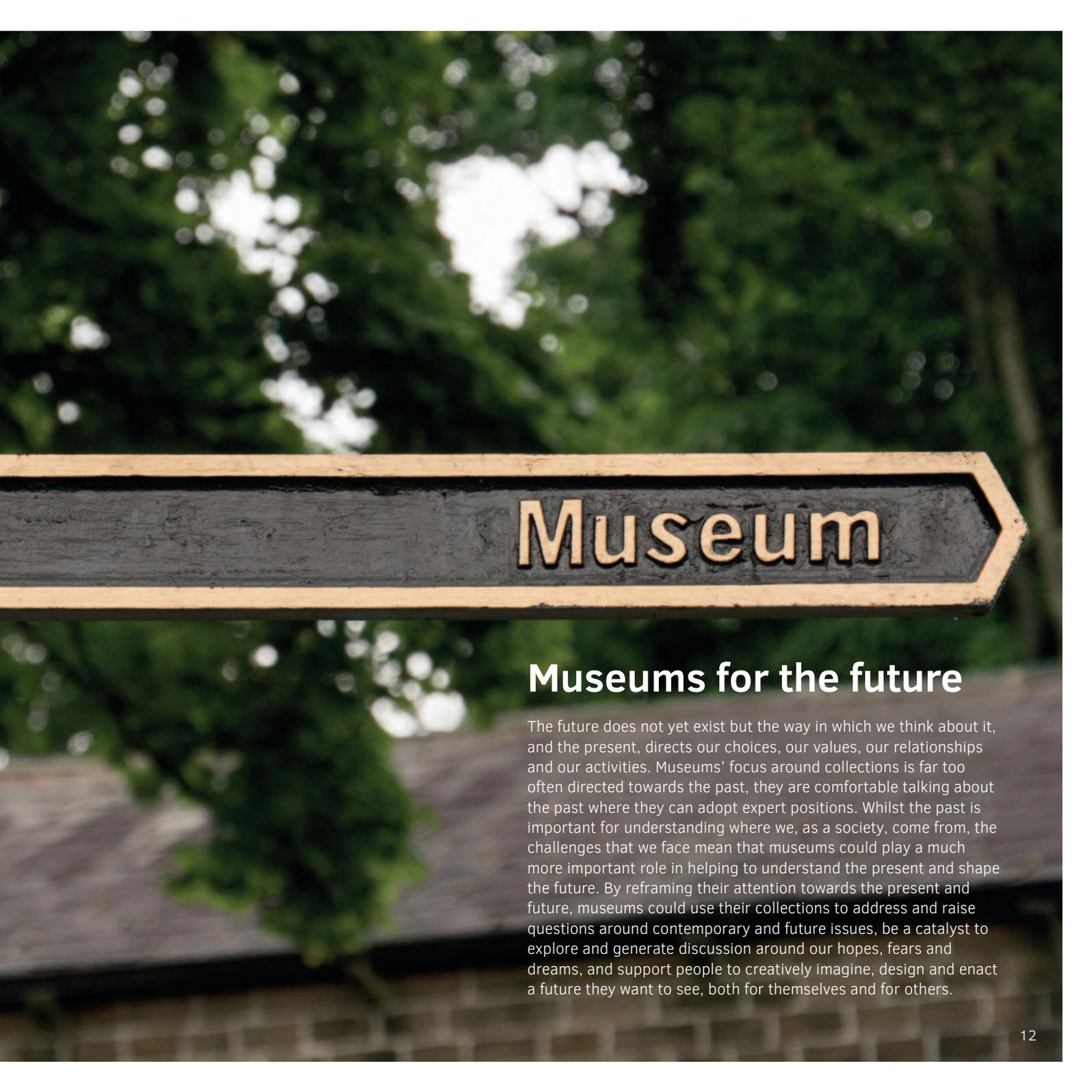
*Grow old  
along  
with me.  
The best is  
yet to be.*

Robert Browning<sup>53</sup>

# The future we want

Museums have the opportunity to be part of a radically new vision of the future, one in which people of all ages are valued and inspired to participate in society to their fullest potential, alongside the need to create a better, fairer, more sustainable world that supports the wellbeing of the natural world as well as our own. In 2015, governments around the world, including the UK, agreed to a transformational programme of 17 Sustainable Development Goals to create 'the future we want' by 2030 through (for example) promoting good health and wellbeing for all, reducing inequalities (which includes the aspiration to empower and promote social, economic and political inclusion irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status), strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage, and to provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces.<sup>54</sup> The goals are profoundly interconnected and cannot be dealt with in isolation. Finding ways to develop programmes that connect the goals together offers a promising way in which museums can contribute to this programme, supporting social justice issues, including the rights of older people and their access to nature and natural heritage, and the valuing of a safe, vibrant and healthy natural environment, which is ultimately beneficial for everyone's wellbeing.



A wooden sign with the word "Museum" in raised, light-colored letters. The sign is dark wood with a lighter wood border and a pointed right end. It is set against a background of green foliage and a stone wall.

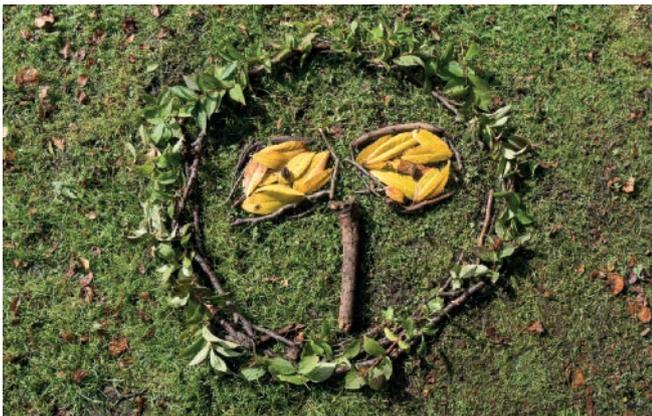
# Museum

## Museums for the future

The future does not yet exist but the way in which we think about it, and the present, directs our choices, our values, our relationships and our activities. Museums' focus around collections is far too often directed towards the past, they are comfortable talking about the past where they can adopt expert positions. Whilst the past is important for understanding where we, as a society, come from, the challenges that we face mean that museums could play a much more important role in helping to understand the present and shape the future. By reframing their attention towards the present and future, museums could use their collections to address and raise questions around contemporary and future issues, be a catalyst to explore and generate discussion around our hopes, fears and dreams, and support people to creatively imagine, design and enact a future they want to see, both for themselves and for others.

# Nurturing living and ageing well in museums

*Unexpected Encounters* challenges museums to think differently about older people. What does this mean? To nurture living and ageing well, museums first need to fundamentally change their perceptions, and expectations, of older people. Instead of seeing older people through the lens of the museum's needs or framed through a medicalised view of ageing, perceptions of older people should instead be shaped by an understanding of a range of factors:



**Human rights** – although the Equality Act 2010<sup>55</sup> legally protects people from discrimination because of their age, older people's rights are not as widely acknowledged or developed in comparison to other groups. The negative experience of older age is a pressing social justice issue. Ageism and a culture of paternalism shape the roles that older people can have in society but also who is allowed to make decisions on their behalf. Society's expectations can also be internalised by older people e.g. the need to withdraw and become invisible.

**Fluidity** – age, and age identity, is felt in many different ways, it is a fluid and multidimensional concept. We cannot assume that one person's experience of age and ageing will be the same as another's.

**Diversity** – older people are not one homogenous group despite what the stereotypes assume, older people come from very different (socio-economic) backgrounds and experiences, represent a range of ethnicities, cultures, and sexualities, and have very different interests, motivations and expectations.

**Desires, hopes, ambitions** – meaning and purpose does not fade away with our younger selves, we continue to have desires, hopes and ambitions as we get older; we have a stake in the present and the future.

**Living in the moment** – many older people talk about the increased possibility of living in the moment as their lives become free of former obligations (e.g. employment, children and families), the opportunity to focus on only doing the things you really want to do. For some older people, living in the moment means doing what you need to do to survive.

**Loss** – older people experience deep, profound loss – of key people, life partners, family, friends, purpose, and identity. Becoming aware of 'one's own mortality is probably one of the most painful aspects of growing old'.<sup>56</sup>

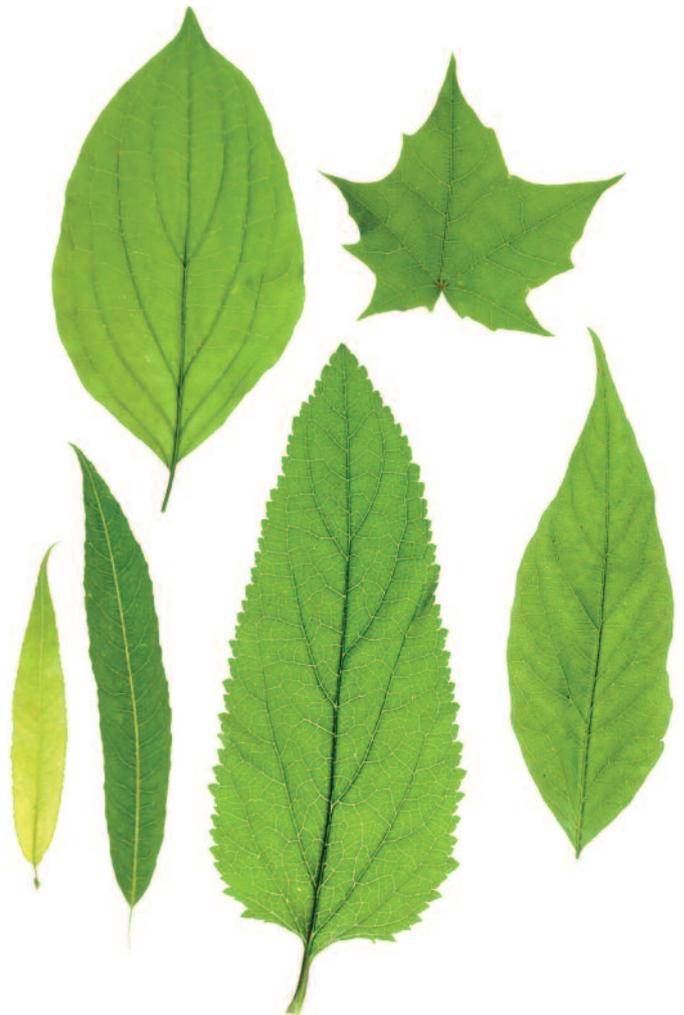
By focusing on the needs of older people, as individuals with agency, museums can start to think more broadly about what they might offer this diverse audience. The Age Friendly Museums Network, led by the British Museum, has considered how museums and older people can mutually benefit and enrich each other, through encouraging and supporting the museum sector to become more age friendly, and exploring and critiquing how museums represent ageing.<sup>57</sup> The characteristics of successful arts and creative programmes with older people focus on enriching their lives, actively engaging older people as contributors and creators, as people of value.<sup>58</sup> In an interview with Jocelyn Dodd, Alice Thwaite of Equal Arts talked passionately about how creativity and being creative is *'there within us, all the way to our last breath'*. Equal Arts' work with older people always has an element of challenge, as Alice explains: *'I think this is where it changes from the traditional work with older people that can be quite safe – I think challenge is a good thing for all of us so surprise and challenge, and asking really open questions to get people's responses'*. Another key element of successful programmes like Equal Arts' *Hen Power*<sup>59</sup> (a creative programme that engages older people through arts activities and hen-keeping to support wellbeing and reduce loneliness), is acknowledging that older people have something to say, that their responses are valid. As Alice describes:

*'I think one of the other things about working with older people is you realise how much older people are invisible, generally, in the wider world. And to acknowledge that everyone has something to say... [and] noticing people and what their response is, those things are really key I think to working well with older people.'*

By changing the frame through which museums view and engage with older people – through their programming, how they target older people and how ageing and older people are represented throughout the museum – museums can play an important role in breaking down damaging ways of thinking that contribute to older people's invisibility and negative perceptions of ageing in wider society. Starting with the personal motivations, concerns and aspirations of older people as individuals, rather than the generic needs of the museum to work with an age bracket, is a step towards this process. As Alice Thwaite explains, the needs of older people are not really that different to the needs of everyone:

*'[What] we all need is to be valued and have a purpose in life... to be connected with our friends and families. Some of the issues of working with older people is about loss and the things that people have been through, which means that they are less able to have access [to all the things they need].'*

How can museums use their collections to 'inspire, include and bring joy'<sup>60</sup> to older people, to enrich their lives?







# Revitalising museum collections for living and ageing well

All museum collections should (in theory) be used with, and be accessible to, older audiences, however in practice much of the work with older people uses social history (for memory and reminiscence) or art collections (e.g. the highly influential *Meet Me at MoMa* programme). *Unexpected Encounters* focuses on using collections that are relatively neglected in work with older people – natural heritage collections. Natural heritage collections are a ‘unique and irreplaceable resource for understanding and appreciating the world around us’;<sup>61</sup> in the North West of England alone there are 7 million natural heritage specimens (shells, insects, plants, rocks and fossils, birds and mammals, bones and skeletons) which include ‘many unique and historic specimens, extinct species as well as the most common and everyday animals, plants and natural materials’.<sup>62</sup> Natural history museums play an important role in connecting people with nature and the natural world, ‘supporting them to develop their own understanding of nature, to appreciate its value, and to have a positive attitude to their surroundings’.<sup>63</sup> This is increasingly critical in the light of declining biodiversity, loss of species, environment degradation and challenges to human health and wellbeing. Framed through ‘nature connectedness’ (the affective, cognitive and experiential relationship that we have with nature based on the extent that our self-perception includes nature and the natural world<sup>64</sup>) natural heritage collections can begin to take on a new significance, helping us to examine the role of nature in our lives and seek out new ways to include it – even in the urban context. This concept of *feeling, thinking and doing* in nature opens us up to more benefits as there is increasing evidence of the value of contact with the natural world for health and wellbeing, which includes helping to meet the challenges of stress and promoting resilience.<sup>65</sup> It can also help to develop pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, and nature needs people to care for it, if it is to survive.

Harnessing the value of natural heritage collections for nature connectedness has the potential to engage and enrich the lives of older people, however this potential remains largely undeveloped. Older people are often disconnected from the natural world, and are less likely to have contact with nature.<sup>66</sup> Natural heritage collections are rarely used to target older audiences, except as grandparents, with museums tending to focus on children and their families. As with other audiences, the majority of older people are also disengaged from the scientific, expert-led approach taken by museums to the use and interpretation of natural heritage collections.

Using collections to nurture living and ageing well requires a massive shift, not only in how museums perceive and work with older people but also in how they use, and understand, their natural heritage collections. However, because these collections are not inherently connected to memory in the same way that social history collections are, using natural heritage collections can avoid some of the traditional, comfortable ways of working with memory that museums are prone to do with older audiences (and also older people ‘performing’ their memories in the way expected of them).

The next part of this publication draws on the experiences of a two-year action research project *Encountering the Unexpected*, which challenged six museums to change the way they work with older people, framing their natural heritage collections through the lens of nature connectedness, and living and ageing well. This work not only has profound implications for the museums sector – with the development of a framework that can support museums in their work with older people and their collections – but also speaks to broader debates about how older people are recognised and valued within wider society, and how the many diverse experiences of ageing can be rehabilitated as an essential part of the life course.







# Our 'experiment'

*Unexpected Encounters'* ambition, concepts and approach emerges from, and builds on, RCMG's interest in nurturing living and ageing well and our experience of interrogating the potential of using collections in new ways to have a positive impact on society. Over the last 20 years, RCMG's research has set out to explore how museums and galleries can meaningfully engage diverse and ever-changing communities and audiences, alongside stimulating public conversations around contemporary societal concerns. This includes, in the last 15 years, an exploration of the role museums can play in contributing to the health and wellbeing of their communities. Museums can make a difference to the health of a community, raising awareness of local health issues and being part of a multi-agency approach that addresses health inequalities and looks for 'solutions beyond the prescription pad'.<sup>67</sup> Museums can act as public forums, opening up debates and exploring the complexity of health matters, such as how social and economic influences impact upon the health of a community.<sup>68</sup>

More recently, the action research project *Museums, Health and Wellbeing* created a network of museums in the East Midlands region of England, supporting five museums to develop projects in response to health and wellbeing needs in their communities.<sup>69</sup> *Encountering the Unexpected: reaching older people in Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Derbyshire* involved taking social history collections out to engage and interest older people – living in the community and in residential and care homes – in the unfamiliar and unexpected. Evidence showed that participating in the sessions significantly increased positive feelings of wellbeing for older people,<sup>70</sup> whilst the broader research demonstrated that museums could have a powerful impact on the health and wellbeing of communities by starting with the needs of their communities and promoting positive health and wellbeing.<sup>71</sup>

Drawing on this previous experience and understanding of museums and galleries, RCMG initiated and developed the experiment *Encountering the Unexpected: people, nature and natural heritage collections*, an innovative action research project that considered the broader contribution museums can make to living and ageing well, in which wellbeing forms one aspect.

# Encountering the Unexpected

The experiment, *Encountering the Unexpected: people, nature and natural heritage collections*, focused on nurturing older people to live and age well, helping older people re-connect with the natural world and encouraging meaningful engagement in the present, through unlocking new possibilities from natural heritage collections. Funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, run by the Museums Association, this two-year action research project, running from March 2016 to April 2018, enabled six museums working in partnership with RCMG and strategic partners specialising in ageing, the environment and nature connectedness, to develop a series of 'museum experiments' that would challenge museum practice and thinking and offer older people fulfilling and meaningful engagement experiences.



## Why 'Natural Heritage' Collections?

Natural heritage is more than dead material found in museums; it is living and breathing beyond the walls of the museum. It is both tangible and intangible, it is our experiences and connections with nature, it is part of our heritage, our present and what we pass on to the future. The term 'natural history' brings to mind people catching butterflies and pressing plants, while 'natural sciences' alludes to an exclusive understanding of nature. The term 'natural heritage', in contrast, reflects a more inclusive and holistic view of nature, natural materials and the natural world, rather than one that is compartmentalised, with humankind and nature as separate entities or one which sees nature only in terms of its material and tangible qualities. Instead of turning 'nature' into a discipline or subject of study, 'natural heritage' is framed in terms of people's individual perceptions, understandings and connections with nature. With this in mind, we have chosen to use the term 'natural heritage' to align more closely with the values underpinning our research.

Older people remain an untapped audience for natural heritage collections, which are strongly associated with children and their families, and with people who have a specialist interest in the subject, making it a challenge for museums to raise awareness of the importance of these collections across the whole of the life course. Our experiment, *Encountering the Unexpected*, set out to explore the great potential of these collections and to better understand how natural heritage collections can be used to enrich lives. Experiences from RCMG's earlier research, *Mind, Body, Spirit*, also revealed that using social history collections often meant that practitioners tended to slip into well-established, familiar and comfortable working practices of reminiscence and memory work to engage older people. Whilst powerful work is being carried out around memory and reminiscence in museums, we wanted to challenge museum practice and thinking around working with a broader population of older people, who might have important things to say about the present and future, as well as the past. *Encountering the Unexpected* deliberately chose to work with natural heritage collections to avoid the association with memory, exploring the considerable potential of these vast collections to test out and capture new possibilities and opportunities to engage older people in the present and encourage a stake in the future.





The six museums that accepted our invitation to participate in the experiment were – Manchester Museum, World Museum Liverpool, Bolton Museum, The Whitaker in Rossendale, Gallery Oldham and The Atkinson in Southport, who are all part of the North West Natural History Museums Partnership, a group of 31 accredited museums with significant natural heritage collections. Many were founded in the nineteenth century and range from very large national museums with multiple sites (Liverpool), the largest university museum in the UK (Manchester) to small, volunteer-reliant museums. There are 7 million natural heritage specimens in these museums alone, ranging from insects to shells, plants, rocks and fossils, birds and mammals and bones and skeletons.

Collections come from all around the world, with many unique, historical, and extinct specimens, but there are also collections which are firmly rooted in their locality, representing common and everyday plants, animals and natural materials – some of which were collected by local amateurs in the nineteenth century. As Andrea Winn, Curator of Community Exhibitions at Manchester Museum explained, these were '*ordinary people who had a job and used to meet in the pub and talk about what they found*'. There are also scientific illustrations, beautifully written and illustrated journals, extensive archives and scientific equipment. Most of these collections are 'behind the scenes' but represent 'both cultural heritage and our shared heritage... a unique and irreplaceable resource'.<sup>72</sup>



So how can we make these collections more relevant to older people? The benefits of engaging with natural heritage collections for older people are potentially substantial, both in terms of health and wellbeing, and understanding the importance of the natural world to their everyday lives, leading to action, however small, to help nature thrive (for example, putting out a bird feeder, planting wild flowers to attract bees). However, as natural heritage collections are not associated with older people, it is a challenge for museums to raise awareness of the importance of these collections across the whole of the life course. We needed a new way for older people to engage with natural heritage collections and our frame was 'nature connectedness', a theory about the relationship between humans and the natural world which is increasingly being used to promote a greater connection with nature.

Rooted in interdisciplinary research developed over the last 15 years, the **Nature Connections Research Blog** <https://findingnature.org.uk/> by Dr Miles Richardson, Deputy Head of Life Sciences at University of Derby, looks at ways of improving our connection to nature through creating everyday interventions, and explores the associated benefits of nature connectedness in wellbeing.

Nature connectedness refers to the 'affective, cognitive, and experiential relationship individuals have with the natural world or a subjective sense of connectedness with nature',<sup>73</sup> based on the extent to which 'their conception of self includes nature'.<sup>74</sup> It is subjective, formed through individual and social experience, and shaped by a number of factors including cognitive, affective, and personality.<sup>75</sup> An influential theoretical model relevant to nature connectedness is Wilson and Kellert's 'Biophilia Hypothesis' (meaning 'love of life'),<sup>76</sup> which posits that people have an innate and fundamentally important relationship with nature as a product of our evolution, interaction with, and experience of the natural world. Nature can be thought of in terms of how we understand, experience and use the natural world, as well as how we use it to support our creativity, imagination and thought. This can lead to a number of different responses to nature from positive (beauty, awe, compassion) to negative (aversion, fear).<sup>77</sup> Although we may be born with an inherent affiliation to nature, this needs to be nurtured and supported, and felt through experience.<sup>78</sup> Theories such as nature connectedness and Biophilia can provide alternative frames for engaging with natural heritage collections than the more traditional, scientific and expert-led knowledge and identification activities, which are often used by organisations when engaging the public with nature.<sup>79</sup>

### Thinking outside the (reminiscence loans) box

Getting museums to think outside this 'box' was a key aim of *Encountering the Unexpected*. As Jemma Tynan, Volunteer and Skills Development Officer at The Atkinson in Southport commented, the use of reminiscence sessions or loans boxes to provoke memory with older people is very rarely questioned as it is assumed that older people '*want to think about the past*'. However, her involvement with the project made her think differently about what museums can offer older people, particularly as co-producers: '*[Older people are] still learning, still inquisitive and it shouldn't just be that we're telling them what they can and cannot do, they should be telling us really.*' It also made her think differently about what is meant by 'older people' and how museums could be developing a diverse range of programmes for people across the life course.

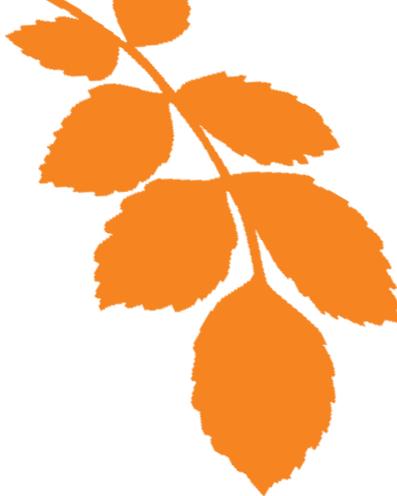




## Exchanges

The experiment *Encountering the Unexpected* brought together experts from different fields, including museum curators and engagement staff, strategic partners with an interest in active ageing, nature and the natural environment, and RCMG researchers, in a series of day-long exchanges that drew on a 'trading zones' approach. A 'trading zones' model is a way of working that encourages a non-hierarchical, democratic and equitable approach, allowing everyone to bring their expertise to the table without any one voice dominating.<sup>80</sup> The group was made up of a mix of ages (including older people), backgrounds and expertise, where no single person held all of the answers. Rather the collective input generated valuable discussions around how museums could utilise their natural heritage collections in new and unfamiliar ways to work with older people and support them in reaching their full potential.

The exchanges were an open process, a forum for the sharing of ideas and stimulating new ways of thinking that worked towards defining, interrogating and connecting the concept of 'encountering the unexpected' in natural heritage collections to support older people to live and age well. Encouraging creativity and imagination through interaction and practical activity, the exchanges helped to develop skills in collaborative partnership working, both across curatorial and engagement teams and with external partners. The exchanges offered both support and constructive challenging, whilst carving out dedicated time and space for museum staff to plan their experiments and develop their practice, drawing on their expertise and knowledge of collections and engagement work with older people.





## Museum Experiments

Many organisations are realising that older people want more than a *'standard coffee morning'* (Cathy Ayrton, Southway Housing Trust) or luncheon clubs, where often the only thing that people have in common is the fact that they are 'old'.

*Encountering the Unexpected* was an opportunity for museums to challenge default approaches to working with older people, to experiment and take risks, framed by a set of values around living and ageing well, and nature connectedness. We wanted museum staff – both curators and engagement practitioners – to use their natural heritage collections in new and imaginative ways, and to develop skills and confidence to stimulate and meaningfully engage older people with both the extraordinary and the familiar of the natural world – to 'encounter the unexpected'.

Each museum experiment was very different. Museums worked in partnership with a range of organisations to reach older people including progressive housing associations in Manchester (Southway Housing Trust) and Bolton (Bolton at Home), and community groups such as the 'Golden Oldies', a group of women aged between 66 and 90 years old who enjoy activities together such as theatre trips, armchair yoga, and music. Olwyn who runs the group explains that the group was formed to prevent *'social isolation and mental isolation because a lot of them live in flats therefore they would probably just be looking at four walls and a telly, but my aim is to get them out and about'*. National Museums Liverpool worked with an established group of older people who had been meeting for about a year.



As Emma Furness, Visitor Host, explained: '*[we started up] a group for older visitors, just drop-in, have a cup of tea and a chat... there was no real set-up except we'd organise something, maybe do some reminiscence.*' The Whitaker made the most of their popular and highly regarded café, advertising their experiment workshops to a captive audience in order to attract new participants and making food and drink an integral part of the activities. Other museums such as Gallery Oldham developed activities for their public programme alongside an offer for residential and care homes in the area, using their marketing contacts to advertise to, and recruit, older people.

The experiments reflected a range of themes associated with the natural world and 'encountering the unexpected' within nature. Natural heritage collections were not always the starting point but broader themes such as bees, trees and seas were explored. Many facilitators used natural materials in their sessions, including wool, plants from gardens and parks to food and drink such as honey. Sessions involved experts and curators but required no natural history knowledge. Rather the sessions were underpinned by knowledge and understanding, creating opportunities for greater depth through exploration of the collections and natural specimens. Connections were drawn across disciplines, bringing science and art together such as at The Whitaker which delved into the microscopic world of plants as the inspiration for artworks.

Experiments took different approaches to the process of connecting participants to nature and natural heritage collections. Museums used artists, creative practitioners, curators, engagement and front of house staff. Partners such as the Lancashire Wildlife Trust (who worked with The Atkinson) brought different perspectives from outside the sector. Sessions were one-off, part of a series investigating different themes, or a series of workshops on the same theme which enabled in-depth exploration of a topic or creative activity. Some sessions were very intense, giving the opportunity to develop interests in new areas or learn new skills, others were much lighter, giving a flavour of the collections or a particular topic through open-ended conversation. The settings for these sessions took place in a range of inviting environments, including museum spaces, 'behind the scenes' in the collection stores, community venues, and the outdoors, including parkland, communal meadows and museum gardens.

One hundred older people participated in the museum experiments. Museums did not specifically target older people through their medical conditions (such as dementia) or those with a specialist interest in natural history which enabled them to attract a breadth of older people, representing a great diversity of life experience and background from engineers and factory workers to former teachers and advertising professionals. Some were more mobile than others, many were living with medical conditions which affected them physically and/or mentally. Regardless of their backgrounds, many participants were very active in their local communities, they loved nature and were still actively interested in politics and global issues, with a range of interests including music, photography, walking, singing, cooking, arts and craft, theatre and culture. There were different levels of experience of museums and galleries, from those who visited museums regularly to those who had not been prior to taking part in a museum experiment, and very different experiences of natural heritage collections. Their ages ranged from fifty years to late eighties, most (but not all) were retired. Many older people had experienced loss and bereavement including family (husbands, wives, children) and friends; some experienced a deep loneliness, often because of the loss they had experienced. They lived in different places, some in their own homes, some were housing association tenants, some in very urban and some in semi-rural environments.

*Encountering the Unexpected* involved a shift in museums' thinking and use of their natural heritage collections, asking them to reconsider the ways in which they view, frame and approach working with older people. Whilst this proved challenging for some curators and engagement staff, evidence captured throughout the experimental process demonstrated that museums can make a difference to individual lives through nurturing living and ageing well, going some way towards challenging negative and reductive perceptions, and expectations, of older people.

## Capturing impact

An important element of the experiment was to capture the impact on older participants. Considering the experiences and perspectives of the older people participating in the museum experiments, as well as the impact on museum practitioners and partners, we used a range of methods to answer the following research questions:

- How can natural heritage collections support 'successful' ageing?<sup>81</sup>
- What are the opportunities and the challenges of this work?

We carried out forty-one semi-structured interviews with participants, museum staff, key workers, museum partners, artists and creative practitioners, using open-ended questions to encourage dialogue and reflection. Designed response cards asking 'What does nature mean to you?', were also used with all older people participating in the museum experiments to elicit thoughts, feelings and responses in written or drawn form. During the Exchanges, museum curators and engagement staff were asked to reflect on their experiences and keep a creative project journal. The project team also observed and captured reflections during the Exchanges, as well as throughout the whole process of *Encountering the Unexpected*.

# Living and Ageing Well

## Evidence from the Experiments

Evidence from the older people's experiences of the museum experiments reveal many of the key components of what it means to live and age well: connecting with people and the wider world; keeping actively engaged; retaining a sense of meaning and purpose in life; and living in the moment. It was also evident that being in nature and being connected to the natural world can support people to achieve these aims.

The majority of participants had busy lives, making the most of opportunities coming their way, including people who needed to make adaptations in the light of illness or mobility issues (which are all too familiar in old age). Many participants also made time for contemplation and reflection away from the busy-ness of life, which often took place in natural settings. For several participants, older age was a very positive experience with more time to take part in activities and develop interests that would have been impossible in previous stages of their lives, when they experienced more time pressures or obligations. Older people often had a different sense of time to when they were younger – they were able to live in the moment, to reflect on where they are in life now, rather than focusing on the past or the future. This change in perception is not always easy but brought great satisfaction when it was realised, as Mavis explained:

*'I found retirement really hard and it kind of narrowed me down... the work ethic was so ingrained that I couldn't stop doing it... but after a while I realised that there were other options and this is where I'm quite happily getting into this frame of mind where you can embrace what's going on around you.'*

This did not mean that older people were not interested in the past or the future, but the *now* was more important – they wanted to make the most of life. Connecting with others, being involved in the community, and pursuing passions or interests were at the heart of their ability to 'live in the moment'.

Older people were enjoying life – they loved being in nature, gardening, photography, their families, socialising. They found happiness in helping others and helping to make a better world. Some participants remained politically active, whether this was campaigning for social justice for older people, for the environment or for the community. The older people we spoke to retained an interest in the wider world and were aware that their actions mattered. There was a sense that older people should not be written off simply because they were no longer engaged in paid work. As Julie McKiernan (writer and creative practitioner, The Atkinson) explained, people should not underestimate older people or think that they *'want to stop learning because they've left work, therefore they can just switch off and just vegetate somewhere. But actually a lot of older people want to keep learning, want to keep developing skills, want to be doing things that keep them active and be creative and be valued for it as well.'*

These busy lifestyles did not mean that older people's lives were always positive. Older people have to cope with, and adapt to, changes associated with ageing and older age and some faced very adverse circumstances. People had experienced loss and bereavement, loneliness, mobility issues, poor physical and mental health, and the challenges of survival following retirement. People coped with these experiences in different ways, making changes to their lives, and showed different levels of resilience, being very open about the challenges they faced or had overcome. Mavis talked about the difficulties of breaking the habit of working – how she thought she was going to *'curl up and die'* if she wasn't able to work. Tommy considered the impact of growing up in *'abject poverty'* in inner city Manchester on his educational experiences and subsequent opportunities. Ian and Barbara shared their experiences of mental health issues and how they coped with it, whilst Elma talked about her loneliness. Keeping older people engaged and active is critical – Olwyn (participating in the Bolton Libraries and Museums' experiment) described the activities offered as part of the *'Golden Oldies'* as a way of preventing isolation and encouraging people to get out and about.

The importance of having a meaning and purpose in life was demonstrated by the participants, many of whom had developed their own sense of purpose to keep them going, even if their interests were not shared by their peers. *Encountering the Unexpected* tapped into these interests and motivations, enabling participants to see themselves – as well as nature – in new ways. As Mavis explained, taking part in a museum experiment not only changed the way she thinks about nature and the natural world, but also how she thinks about herself: *'It's the opportunity and the mind-set, with a bit of encouragement from doing a project like this, and it actually changes the way you think about yourself, the way you relate to things around you.'*

## Unexpected encounters

Unexpected encounters meant new and surprising encounters with other people, with the natural world and with natural heritage collections. Through the experiments, participants were able to explore intriguing and unusual specimens and collections. But, perhaps, more remarkably, participants experienced the very familiar and 'everyday' in unexpected ways, where the ordinary was transformed into the extraordinary. The act of looking more closely at nature as part of the experiments supported these experiences. Participating in a creative writing session at The Atkinson gave Dorothy a newfound appreciation for the smaller, almost invisible elements of nature, small insects, and wildflowers, things that she thinks people take for granted. As she explained: *'I mean it's easy to think of nature in terms of seeing a red squirrel or a fox or spectacular things, but it's brought the small things out... it's made me appreciate them and make sure they live as much as anything else does.'*

Complexity and detail in the seemingly simple was also revealed. After investigating specimens from Manchester Museum through a magnifying glass, Don talked about how surprised he was to encounter so many different species of insect from a local park, but also the complexity of their anatomy:

*'I was surprised when we were looking at the specimens which were brought today... all the insects had come from Whitworth Park, which was amazing because there was such a huge range of butterflies and other things. And it made me think, I should be more aware of nature... when you're focusing on something you see the incredible complexity of the design in a creature as supposedly simple as a butterfly.'*

The experiments sparked participants' interest and curiosity in the everyday, encouraging them to slow down, take notice, and spend time reflecting in and considering nature. Ann, who participated in the museum experiment at The Atkinson, reflected how the experience encouraged her to take notice of her surroundings more. In particular, she talked about how closer looking and investigation enabled her to answer a 'nature puzzle' which otherwise she would have put down to a farmer's actions:

# *The beauty of the natural world lies in the details.*

Natalie Angier <sup>82</sup>



*'I went to my daughter's and there were butterfly wings lying on the ground all around and I thought "Why are they there? What happened to them?" And my daughter said they'd been crop spraying and she thought that they'd killed the butterflies. So I was sat there and I was watching a bird and it was a pied wagtail and it swooped down and scooped up a butterfly, ate the middle and left the wings. So it wasn't the crop-spraying it was the birds eating the butterflies. Now I wouldn't have taken any notice otherwise, but it's making me see more, making me look more.'*

These new skills in looking extended out beyond the museum experiments into participants' everyday lives, with several participants describing 'seeing more' and taking more time to look carefully and closely. For Ian, a keen photographer, working with artist Sheila Tilmouth and using stereoscopic equipment as part of an experiment at The Whitaker *'opened up another world to me'* of colour, texture and life at the micro level. Another participant at The Whitaker, Joan, spoke of seeing the world with fresh eyes, describing her encounters with nature and the collections as a *'magical experience'* and *'It just opens up a new world, it does feel very playful. It is like a child... it's that same quality of... looking at things in a different way... very childlike, new experience.'*

The experiments were not there to give all the answers – Sheila, who took part in an experiment at Gallery Oldham, talked about how her experience only raised more questions about the intricacy of nature. She puzzled over *'the mystery of [nature], you just can't explain, it's so intricate isn't it...? The more you look into it the more you get more and more bewildered. How did this evolve, how did that evolve? It's just a fantastic experience I think!'*

Encountering the natural world through the museum experiments enabled participants to access, and become interested in, natural heritage collections in ways that they hadn't previously imagined possible. Connecting with nature and collections through their senses and in ways that didn't rely on having a specialist knowledge or background in this field, the experiments offered participants opportunities to be engrossed and engaged in nature, to see its complexities and wonders up close, stimulating further interest and questions.





## Making nature and natural heritage accessible

One of the most surprising elements of the museum experiments for Mavis was that it made a very scientific subject, natural history, much more accessible. As she explained, she had always connected natural heritage collections with having to know specialist language and knowledge – *'I have grown up in a world where I've been taught to value and respect people's expertise, which can be a bit of a boundary really, thinking that you can't engage with it because you haven't got a PhD in botany.'*

This need for specialist language and expertise creates real barriers to engaging with nature from Mavis' perspective – *'Because I'm aware, like everybody else in my culture, puts things in boxes, so nature was out there, it was a discipline that I didn't understand and didn't have any expertise in.'* What was unexpected for Mavis was that the museum experiment at Bolton enabled her to access nature in new ways, even fun ways such as a bug hunt which *'started to engage me in the reality of nature'*. It reinforced her idea of learning as a much more open, creative process that is closer to 'real life' than the 'narrow boxes' of education: *'life isn't like that, it's random, chaotic, creative, and just full of wonder really. And I think it's connecting you to the wonder that gives you the clue that our education needs to be focused more creatively.'*

Using a project journal, provided as part of the experiments, also enabled Mavis to creatively respond to the collections and natural world, and keep a record of how she engaged with *'nature from a personal perspective.'*

Mavis was keenly inspired by the museum experiments, seeing it as *'catalyst for potential change'*. She has since gone on to start a discussion around local cultural provision for older people, developing her own collaborative research project in Bolton – *Arts for the Third Age* – that investigates the benefits of access to culture and recognises that some older people face more barriers to accessing culture than others and that the current offer in Bolton does not cater for the *'entire range of older people in the town who also have a right to all the forms of expression in their culture.'*



## Living in the moment

Being aware of the here and now, being mindful – was critical to encountering the unexpected in collections and in nature. Living in the moment was important to participants. There seems to be a connection between growing older and having more time to appreciate the here and now, of being absorbed in the moment – but also more poignant meanings connected to loss, awareness of mortality and the need to survive from day to day – as described by Ann: *‘Well it’s even more important when you get to a certain age... because you don’t know what the next moment is going to be. Living in the moment is making sure you have things in order in your life and also trying to get as much as you can out of life.’*

Living in the moment has connections to being ‘mindful’. With its roots in Buddhism, mindfulness-based programmes and ideas have become popular in the US and Europe in response to the need to address the stresses of everyday life, which can lead to worry, apprehension and anxiety ‘linked to incessant thoughts about the past or future’.<sup>83</sup> A number of museums and galleries in the UK have started to adopt mindfulness approaches, including Manchester Art Gallery who are working towards becoming ‘The Mindful Museum’, through integrating mindfulness across their learning and engagement work and public programmes, including with older audiences. As Louise Thompson, the gallery’s Health and Wellbeing Manager, explains, ‘Older people have told us that mindfulness has helped them to see life in a new way, and how they have become more aware of the curious, the strange and the beautiful. They are therefore enriched by the realisation that, irrespective of age, there is still so much left to see and appreciate in the world. And they are able to do this with a renewed sense of wonder.’<sup>84</sup>

Being mindful involves some form of relaxed, ‘nonreactive awareness that encompasses both inner experience and the outer world... [which] helps develop an appreciation for the constant flow of stimulation that occupies our waking hours’.<sup>85</sup> Being ‘present’ in the moment enables time for contemplation and reflection – whether alone or with others – which can help reduce stress by providing a sense of balance in life, a deep understanding and acceptance of ‘the true nature of things’.<sup>86</sup> Often, these experiences take place in nature or natural settings, or involve activities such as gardening, walking, or taking care of animals, activities that force people to slow down.

As Elsie, a participant of The Whitaker experiments, explained: *‘I feel if you are living in the moment it takes a lot of stress away, because you’re not worrying about what happened yesterday or what you’ve got to do tomorrow or what someone thinks about you or anything, you’re just being, rather than doing and I think that’s what it really means.’* Being in nature was one way in which participants could be very ‘present’ or absorbed in the moment. For instance, Joan, whose emotional connection to nature comes from *‘walking or just sitting or just absorbing’*, found walking in nature was *‘a way of just processing what’s going on and just being mindful of what I’m feeling’*. Ian too talked about how he liked to look up out of the skylight in his back room, *‘look up at the clouds... and I just let my mind wander’*.

### How to be mindful and enjoy an encounter with nature...

Take a pause.

Slow down.

Breathe in the air.

Relax your shoulders.

Get in the right frame of mind.

Go and look at nature.

Look intently.

Look close up.

Look from far away.

Look at the colours.

Look at the patterns.

Look at the texture.

Look again.

**Put yourself first, make time for the things you love, make time for nature.**<sup>87</sup>

Responses from the participants in *Encountering the Unexpected* strongly suggested that older people not only live in the moment, with some also having a stake in the future, but are much more engaged in the present, in the 'here and now' than at any other time in their life. This is a powerful understanding for museums to embrace in their activities for older people to support them to live and age well.

Living in the moment enables individuals to not only *encounter* the unexpected, but to *engage* with it too because otherwise 'You can miss it completely', according to Mavis, because of time pressures and having to plan. Living in the moment was important to her 'Because I want to live as much as possible... It feeds me and it brings things out of me. I can grow in the experience of engaging in the moment. It's a very useful tool to have in your kitbag of life.'

The vast majority of participants interviewed spoke about an imperative to live in the moment as you get older. As Elsie commented, living in the moment enabled her to enjoy life from day to day rather than '*rushing about thinking I must do this next, I must do that next, just trying to absorb as much as you possibly can all the time*'. As she went on to say, the sense of not having as much time left led to the realisation that '*now is the time to enjoy whatever there is around you to enjoy, because, you know, you'll be gone...*' Similarly Kathleen (World Museum Liverpool) talked about how she had developed a 'can-do' attitude: '*I look to the future and my attitude is – if you can do things, do it... That's the way I look at life now, because you know I'm getting older and there's going to be a time when you can't do these things, so whatever in your life you want to do, try and do it.*'

For some people, one of the benefits of getting older was having more time to do (and enjoy) the things you actually want to do and not feeling obliged to do things. They could have more choice over how to spend their time. Living in the moment is, therefore, a pleasurable experience for many older people, although it was only possible because they were getting older. As Mavis explained: '*I have a very precious commodity at the moment, I have time. I'm very free. This is the first time in life that I've been free of obligations so that I can take notice of what's going on around me and engage with things as I want to, without feeling guilty that I should be doing something else.*'

For Don, living in the moment is making the most of the opportunities available to you, to have a rich cultural, community and family life: '*I think there's no shortage of things for people to do to ensure that they are engaged fully in their community and the world around them.*' Don is involved with Manchester's Culture Champion programme, 150 volunteer ambassadors who 'advocate, lead and programme activities for their peers. They participate, promote and advocate, advise arts organisations, plan and organise their own events, takeovers and festivals'.<sup>88</sup> This is part of Manchester's role as the UK's first Age Friendly City, which focuses on an 'active, citizen-based approach to ageing... [shifting] the focus away from traditional medical and care models around provision to developing programmes that are led by older people as active citizens.'<sup>89</sup>

For some older people living in the moment was not such a positive experience, associated with just surviving or getting by. For Elma, who like many older people had experienced great loss (losing her husband and, more recently, her close friend), living in the moment meant surviving from day to day: '*keeping yourself going, trying to keep as healthy as you can... just keeping yourself going, paying your bills and keeping your head above water and helping, if I can help anybody I will.*' Bill was clearly still grieving for his wife, talking about how important it was for him to keep himself clean and to eat. But he also spoke about the fact that he was happy with his life, despite his grief: '*I'm quite happy about living at the moment... I don't make plans for a couple of years ahead... and I live each day as it comes and I'm happy about that. Glad to see the children and the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren and make them happy... yeah I'm happy overall, I'm happy about the way I live.*'

The importance to participants of living in the moment shows that older people do not always live in the past, they are more than their memories. Living in the moment values older people now – values them in their own right, not as grandparents and not because of their past. It gives value and meaning to their lives now, not just their memories or their younger selves. Yet, this is not to dismiss people's pasts; as Dorothy explains, '*the past is what's made you who you are today.*'



## **‘You don’t know what the next moment is going to be’**

Ann is a member of Southport’s U3A group and participated in The Atkinson’s experiment, ‘Look what’s around you’, working with Julie McKiernan, a creative writer, to explore nature and collections. The experiment helped her to take notice of nature in the everyday and to look in a different way. Ann shared her aspirations for enjoying every moment for what it has to offer and now makes plans for herself and for the future.

Here she reflects upon just how important living in the moment is for her, especially since reaching an older age and grieving after the death of her daughter:

*‘Well it’s even more important when you get to a certain age, living in the moment because you don’t know what the next moment is going to be. It’s making sure that you have things in order in your life and also trying to get as much as you can out of life. You just sort of ride it, like a wave if you like, when you’re younger and you don’t notice time go by... Then suddenly you’ve reached a certain stage and you think “oh I’ve missed out on this” or “I’ve missed out on this”. So you start planning more to do things that you’ve missed out when you were younger and I think that’s living in the moment.’*

Having a stake in the future is rarely talked about in relation to older people, who are often depicted as fixated on the past, which the evidence for living in the moment clearly dispels. Generally, older people 'are not necessarily depressed about their age and... they still see themselves as having a future in which they can fulfil some of their hopes and dreams'.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, there is evidence that having a positive relationship with the future can support older people's health and wellbeing,<sup>91</sup> (although there is not always a straightforward connection and an overly optimistic sense of the future can, conversely, be harmful to wellbeing<sup>92</sup>).

Thinking about the future was important to some participants, particularly in terms of thinking about the legacy for their children and grandchildren and their impact on the wider world, perhaps encouraged by the project's focus on nature and the environment. As Don explained, he felt that he had a strong motivation to care about the future as a father and a grandparent but also because he was strongly politically motivated and engaged: *'We're talking about commitment to the future, I'm still engaged politically as well. I still think, like a lot of older people, there's still a lot of things that need attending to in our society to ensure that we and our successors have got a safe and secure future.'*

For Elsie, her stake in the future was based on her concern for the future of nature and the natural world, which she considered was heightened because she did not have a family to worry about:

*'If you say to a lot of people what about the future, they're thinking about THEIR future, not the future of the planet and that is what really grabs me... I have always had this attitude that we have to look at the future as the ongoing world that we live in and if we don't look after it there's eventually not going to be a future... if we're not careful we'll destroy it ourselves.'*

Many participants expressed a concern for the future, whether in conventional ways (such as the desire for world peace) or problems they saw developing within society. Many cared about local issues (Ian, Joan and Dorothy) but also wider issues such as social isolation and social justice for older people (Tommy, Olwyn). Thinking about the future was quite challenging for some participants, reflecting the abstract nature of it, as something that we cannot see but can only hope for.

## Connecting to people, connecting to nature

Older people made connections through the project in a number of ways – to other people, to museum collections, to the wider world, and to themselves. The museums worked hard to make a welcoming and inviting environment for participants, and many talked about the enjoyment they found in meeting like-minded people. Through the experiment at The Whitaker, Elsie was thrilled to meet people that *'had a lot of my own beliefs'*, as she reflected nature and the environment was not something that she could talk about freely in her daily life:

*'[Normally] from day to day you find very few people that you can talk to about nature and the environment and so on and once you start that they very quickly get bored and change the subject. So it was lovely to be in amongst the people and I didn't quite know what sort of people to expect here and... I was very, very pleasantly surprised and happy to be amongst them.'*

Describing herself as a 'voice in the wilderness', through *Encountering the Unexpected* Elsie found people she could share her passion with, explaining that it was the *'first time ever I have walked into a situation where I can talk to people and know that they're taking on board what I'm saying and possibly, at least in part, agreeing with me...'* Mavis talked about the importance of finding shared interests with others and having the opportunity to talk about, and deepen, those interests – being surrounded by like-minded and interested people was inspiring, commenting that *'to find people of my own age, in my peer group, who are just as interested as I am, and you can see the question marks popping up through their brains all the time and it's kind of motivated them. It's been a very nice thing to see that.'*





## Feeling welcome

Being made to feel welcome at the museum was very important to participants, for instance, for Sheila and Louise who took part in the museum experiment at Gallery Oldham. Sheila and Louise enjoyed taking part in a session about bees – and sampling some beer made from honey produced from a hive in the museum – learning all about the different species of bees and wasp, and the roles they have. As Sheila commented, *'I thought a wasp was a wasp but it's more complicated – they have lots of different jobs to do and help each other'*. Both Sheila and Louise were made to feel very welcome at the museum, commenting how friendly and helpful people were.

This was extremely important to them, as Sheila explained: *'When you don't know what you're going to and it's all strange, to have somebody to come and greet you, and say "I'll take you here" or "I'll take you there", you know, or find your friend, and things like that...[it makes you feel welcome].'*

The importance of maintaining social connections in particular was repeated by many participants as a way of combating loneliness and social isolation. These are pressing social issues for older people as life transitions and changes put them at risk of loneliness – recent estimates suggest around 1 million people over 65 often or always feel lonely.<sup>93</sup> Social isolation and loneliness is consistently associated with depression, reduced wellbeing, health and quality of life in older people.<sup>94</sup> Social isolation can contribute to loneliness but there is not always a link because people can feel lonely even if they have contact with family and friends; other people might have few contacts and not feel lonely.<sup>95</sup> Elma, in particular, talked movingly about her acute feelings of loneliness following the loss of her husband eight years ago and, more recently, her close friend: *'Everyday, I hate everyday [Because you're on your own?] Yes... I mean I wake up in the morning and think "oh my God another day".'* Group activities, such as a coffee morning run by Southway Housing Trust, are a *'God-send'* to Elma because she can connect with others. Many participants realised the danger of isolation and the importance of keeping connected, recognising that even small things (telephoning a friend, having a hobby, learning to use the computer) could make a difference.

## Finding a new meaning and purpose as life changes

Having a sense of meaning and purpose was clearly important to the older people involved with the museum experiments. Some participants were engaged in political activism, caring for the environment, advocating for the needs of older people, helping others in their community and responding to wider, global issues. Others were involved in local, community activities, or were helping with their families. People found meaning and purpose in different ways.

In the light of the project's focus, caring for the environment was a common concern for many participants. In particular, Elsie was very committed to caring for the environment and spoke passionately about her concern for the planet's future. She was concerned about the seeming disconnect between current generations and the plight of the environment, thinking it was too late to leave it to younger generations. She explained:

*'I feel that the present generation is very removed from the environment... and that it's going to be a long time before these little children are old enough to do anything and to have any influence... it does worry me that it gets more and more urgent as time goes on.'*

*Encountering the Unexpected* was interesting for Lucy Burscough, artist, who worked with Manchester Museum on their experiment, because, in her opinion, it opened up a new topic for discussion with older people, *'the natural environment and how we feel about our natural world'*. She considered that older people might *'not actually be talking about that and acknowledging that to the same extent as perhaps young people might do'*. However, participants were thinking about their impact on the local environment. Dorothy, for instance, recognised that she was part of a wider ecosystem, and that humankind needed to take action in order to maintain that ecosystem:

*'Well I suppose the prime example is the bees isn't it? If they don't pollinate the flowers, we don't have a lot of our vegetables... And then you have the trees giving off the oxygen, absorbing the carbon dioxide, things like that. It would be difficult to survive without these things. I feel we should be taking more care of our ecology.'*

People were also taking action to help the environment in different, often small everyday ways. Barbara picked up litter in her local park and tried to buy food with less packaging. Joan considered that she couldn't do much about the destruction of the planet but could act locally in order to effect change. Mavis had given a bee sugar water to revive it and Teresa talked about how taking part in the museum experiment inspired her to start thinking about how she could contribute by changing how she used her garden. She described how she was *'beginning to learn a lot more about our surroundings and the environment... I've got a bird box... it's sitting on a fence in the garden and the bees are in it, not birds, bees. I can't touch them because they're a protected species now...'*

Other participants were concerned about political and societal issues such as the impact of capitalism, materialism and greed (Elsie, Dorothy), and some were still active in politics (Don, Tommy). There may be an assumption that people become more introspective as they get older, that they might not be as interested in political and social issues as younger people, but the older people we spoke to continue to be engaged in wider political and social issues that are relevant to everyone, giving them a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Don, a presenter for All FM, a community radio show, commented that whilst his radio show is meant to be for older people it can be *'very difficult to sometimes identify issues that are only for older people and not for general interest'*. Concern for the political issues of the day, and for the future, is not confined to younger people. In fact, the Intergenerational Commission analysed voting patterns from 1964 to the current day and found that a generational gap has opened up since the late 1990s, with those described as 'baby boomers' turning out in higher numbers to vote than those from younger generations X and millennials. For example, 'at the last General Election in 2015, 67 per cent of baby boomers voted, compared to 56 per cent of generation X and just 46 per cent of millennials of voting age'.<sup>96</sup>



## Taking action on a local level

Like many of the older people participating in the museum experiments that we spoke with, Barbara cares for the natural world and 'does her bit' by looking after her community and local environment. She described herself as 'highly interconnected' to nature and each morning gets up early to pick up litter in her local park. She's been doing this for years, inspiring neighbours and children and young people in the area to do the same. Here, she reflects on the reasons why she does this:

*'I live quite close to a park, and... roughly about 4 years ago, I just felt bored at home, so I was walking in the park... around 6am and on the little children's play area there was a lot of broken glass, so I went home and got a big brush, and a dustpan and brush, and cleaned it up. And then I just used to go round for a walk every morning, every evening, and take a carrier bag and pick the litter up and I did that for quite a long while just for exercise... now it's just once a day because I'm suffering with arthritis and I just go and walk around and pick up the litter... There's a lot of people who walk their dogs around the park and they're all very friendly because they've got to know me and they always say good morning... I think some of the children are [seeing the difference] because sometimes when I pop to the shop, some children said to me "are you the lady who picks the litter up?" Yes dear, "Thank you" she said, this young girl, "I see you nearly every day"... Then she went off playing – it's nice to see the children realise that someone is keeping their park really clean and tidy.'*



## Being actively engaged

Most of the older people taking part in the museum experiments were very active people, although the scope and the extent of this activity varied depending upon their personal capacity, and some had greater access to opportunities than others. Tommy campaigns in connection with Southway Housing Trust for greater social justice for older people and is interested in combating social isolation, helping older people, for example, to learn to use the computers for free at their local library. Eleanor had run a botanical interest group for a few years – *'we'd go into the countryside and identify all the various wildflowers... I enjoy doing that'*. For Ann, it was important to keep active despite her family telling her to slow down; *'but if I slow down I'm frightened I might stop!'* Horatio had the ambition to walk along both banks of the River Thames, whilst Carole enjoyed the museum experiment in Bolton so much that she offered to deliver a creative writing and poetry session at the museum when the artist and facilitator Michelle was on holiday. As Don commented, *'there is this image of retirement when everything becomes peaceful and quiet and so forth, when in fact most of the people here – we feel we're getting as busy as ever'*. In fact, Don was surprised that taking part in the experiment with Manchester Museum enabled him to slow down, focus and look more closely – *'it got me to concentrate and focus in a relatively short period... to the extent that I didn't want people to distract me'*.

Despite this intense activity, it was clear that some people have made adjustments as they age, particularly in terms of physical activity. Patricia commented that *'there's lots of things I would like to do but my body just won't let me do them... I read and watch films and try to do a bit of walking as much as I can'*. Bill talked about being independent, *'being able to go where I want to go, mostly do what I want to do'*, but also reflected on how he was unable to travel as far as he used to and relies more on other family members. Too often, loss of independence is seen as a 'problem', closely linked with individualism and dependence as a 'burden' on others:

'If we can regain a more interdependent definition of independence we can start to develop a policy of mutual care and release the potential of older people to give support and comfort as well as meet their needs for support and comfort.'<sup>97</sup>

There was evidence that some participants had internalised the pressure to retain independence, expressing concern not to burden their friends or families with their problems or concerns. However, there was also evidence of strong mutual support and care within their communities and friendship groups. Mavis talked about being a 'grandma' to her friends' and neighbours' children: *'people borrow me and I borrow them'*. Elma and Barbara talked about their willingness to help others and concern for their friends, whilst Don and Tommy supported their communities through their work with Age Friendly Manchester. Barbara, in particular, talked about how she liked to put a smile on people's faces: *'I like seeing people smile, because I have suffered with depression for a long while since my son died... I realised that other people would suffer with depression and not say... sometimes people have got so many trials and problems in their own family life they need some release.'*

A real challenge was encouraging older people experiencing social isolation to get involved in projects like *Encountering the Unexpected*. Tommy, in particular, talked about the challenge of encouraging men who live on their own to take part:

*'It's very difficult, particularly if you're a man on his own. You saw that this morning was dominated by women. To get a bloke to come into that... [they would be like] ooh, not that keen really... I know women are lonely but it's... mainly men that we're trying to get out into these activities.'*

Whitworth Art Gallery have produced *A Handbook for Cultural Engagement with Older Men* which addresses some of the specific challenges to engaging older men in cultural activity. Some of these include lack of confidence and low self-esteem, the perception that you need to be educated or have formal qualifications to take part in cultural activity, that museums are for middle or upper class people, and also that men might not be part of existing networks or community groups which makes them harder to reach.<sup>98</sup>

## Older people and nature

Evidence from the *Encountering the Unexpected* experiments showed that, despite being one of the social groups (over 65 years) that are less likely to engage with the outdoors,<sup>99</sup> older people have a rich, complex and varied experience of, and relationship with, nature. Nature, narrowly defined, includes wild places, plants and animals. A broader view takes in people's surroundings and the way they are experienced, the air we breathe, the resources we use, as well as wilder places and wildlife. Nature is not necessarily confined to the countryside, but includes parks, gardens and other green spaces in towns and cities (which is generally increasing as towns and cities become cleaner, less industrial). Nature is not necessarily something directly experienced: people's concern for nature farther away, or in the future, can be important in giving meaning to their lives and in shaping their identity.

'[Even] more magical was the nearby woodland sloping down to the river, carpeted with bluebells which were responding to the rising sun by releasing a great wave of scent – a wave more powerful than I'd known their flowers could possibly produce. The little new leaves on the branches above them were that first green, which looks as though made by light, and which will be gone in a day or two, and blackbirds had just started to sing. Those few minutes in that wood were so piercingly beautiful that I ought not to be surprised at their still being with me.'<sup>100</sup>

Our relationship with the natural world is complex, made up of different values and associations, the meanings we attach to it and the benefits we derive from it. The term 'Biophilia' is used to describe the inherent inclination to affiliate to the natural world.<sup>101</sup> It is suggested that all human life, society and culture are fundamentally a product of our relationship with nature. Not only do we rely on nature for our everyday living (raw materials, water), but our senses, emotions, and intellect – our capacity to feel, think, communicate, solve problems and find meaning and purpose in our lives – have all developed in connection with our relationship with the natural world.

*In the  
spring,  
at the end  
of the day,  
you should  
smell like  
dirt.* Margaret Atwood<sup>102</sup>



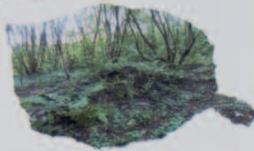
# Our Back field - 1st visit



Don with the group on our Back field



ence at the north lane side



Flea under the microscope  
I found one on my jeans  
walking through  
12/10/18



Caterpillars



SHAPE



The benefits of contact with nature include positive mental and physical health and wellbeing; purpose and meaning (e.g. caring for the natural world); feelings of restoration, creativity and inspiration; reduction of mental fatigue, blood pressure, and anxiety; increased attention and focus, vitality and happiness; and greater life satisfaction. An emotional connection to nature can lead to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour.<sup>103</sup> Attitudes that suggest a high level of connection to nature include; positive experiences of nature, finding meaning and beauty in the natural world; feeling embedded in the natural world, being part of nature not separate from it; feelings of personal fulfilment in nature; ethical responsibility towards the natural world and emotional connection to the landscape and the life within it. The restorative effect of being in nature is well documented, whereby following 'emotional or cognitive stress, solitude and being alone with nature is considered a desirable state with positive effects'.<sup>104</sup> Being in remote or wild spaces gives a sense of being away from the everyday world, enabling people to enter 'a whole different world from the usual daily life, escape and solitude enabling them to relax, refresh, meditate, reflect and experience a sense of peacefulness within themselves'.<sup>105</sup>

Connection to nature is therefore an important element of wellbeing, however we increasingly define ourselves through technology and see ourselves as separate from nature. For the benefit of nature and the wellbeing of humankind, there is a need to engage people with the natural world and to help them understand their place within it.



## Nature Connectedness

Nature connectedness is one way of thinking about these ideas that is being explored at the University of Derby. Through online surveys, structured around the nine values of the Biophilia Hypothesis, researchers found that effective pathways to nature connection include: contact, emotion, meaning, compassion and engagement with natural beauty. All of these pathways were found to be predictors of connection with nature, whereas knowledge-based activities were not.<sup>106</sup> This has profound implications for how museums use natural heritage collections.

Connecting with nature through museum collections was an important element to *Encountering the Unexpected*, but a relationship with nature was not confined to the museum experiments. Participants described their relationship with nature in very sensory, emotional, and visceral ways, connected to a sense of wellbeing. Participants talked about it being '*part of my soul*' (Dorothy), about '*feeling*' (Sue), being close to, or part of, the natural world (Ian, Joan), feeling uplifted (Joan) and helping them to relax (Tommy). Nature was enriching – '*the mystery of it all, you just can't explain, it's so intricate*' (Sheila) – and could be comforting or soothing – '*I always think of it as being very peaceful and comforting*' (Carole). Nature could be '*amazing*' (Elsie) but it could also be '*familiar and simple*' (Patricia and Teresa). Nature is all around us and creates '*a sense of belonging*' (Sue).

When asked 'what does nature means to you?' participants used words and terms such as '*freedom*', '*comforting*', '*soothing*', '*simple and complex*', '*wonder*', '*special moments*', '*enriching*', '*a luxury*', and '*everywhere*'. Some people had a very broad concept of nature, including Elsie, who commented that nature '*is all around us and you don't have to go far to find it*'. Other participants had a much more local, everyday concept of nature including Olwyn:

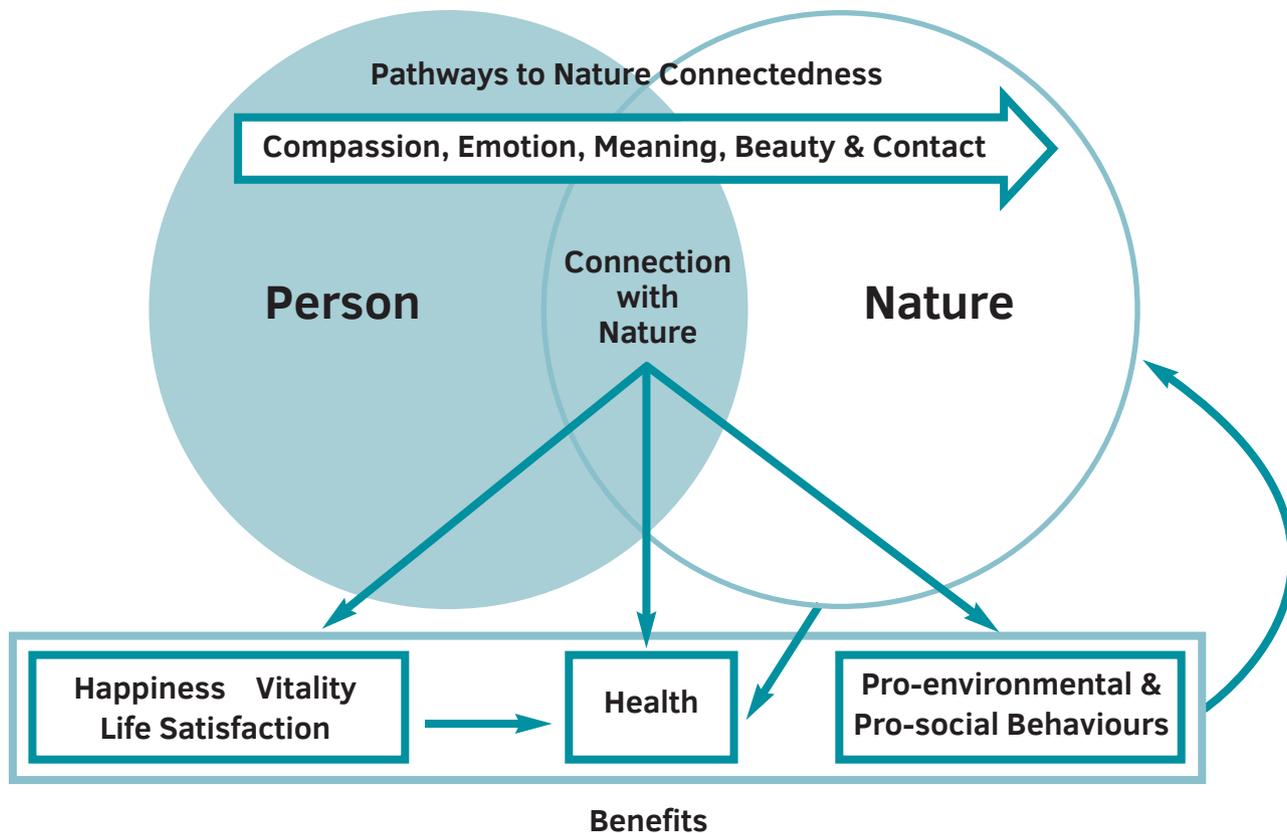
*'Nature, well to me it means the flora and fauna of the area, I also live in an area near to where we've just been bug hunting [during the museum session], we get some lovely flowers, we get insects, we also have wildlife – deer, foxes at night, different variety of birds.'*

For Barbara, it meant '*butterflies, gardens, flowers, trees, any wildlife, when you watch these programmes on television, be it deer or hares or rabbits or... basically any wild animal*'. Horatio, who grew up in Hong Kong, had a slightly different concept of nature, describing it as a '*luxury*' and that he '*finds that Great Britain has natural beauty, I don't understand why anyone has to go abroad for their holidays*'.

Alongside these conceptions of nature, participants connected and engaged with nature in a variety of settings including in *their garden* (Louise), *walking the dog in the woods* (Joan), *smelling flowers and grass* (Elma), *on their doorstep, thinking about life cycles* (Carole), *being in the park* (Tommy), *looking out of the window* (Ian), *through creative activity such as artwork* (Joan) and *photography* (Ian), *being on their own* (Horatio and Sue) or *with other people, on the moors* (Sue), *in local woodland* (Joan), *at the beach* (Ann), and *being out in the elements*.

Some of these experiences reflected that the changes associated with older age meant that older people could not always enjoy being in nature as they used to, or had to change their experience of it. Eleanor, for example, commented: *'As you get older you haven't the energy to go walking as I used to do. But I like pottering around in the garden and looking at the thrushes come, and the sparrows.'*

## The connection between the person and nature, and how that delivers a range of benefits around wellbeing, health and pro-environmental behaviours.<sup>107</sup>



# People's relationship with nature

Participants described their relationship with **nature** as **sensory**, **emotional**, in terms of their **wellbeing** and **viscerally**.

## Visceral

'I can't tie it down, it's **everywhere**, it's big, the **sheer hugeness** and **beauty** of it. **I am part of it, I'm not separate from it**' Sue

'**(Nature)** is **part of my soul**, it's always been there'  
Dorothy

'I just feel really **relaxed**. I feel at **home**, and I just feel as if I **belong there**' Elsie

'It's about being, it's about **feeling**, it's **not about putting it into words**... so **living in the moment** is the experience of **being out there**, with everything taken away except the thing I **belong to** most, which is the **environment**' Sue

## Engaging the senses

'The **closest connection** is when I'm really, really **noticing** and **smelling** and **hearing** and **listening**' Joan

'I think it is when I'm really able to **be absolutely in the present with nature**... I'm really **noticing** all the **subtle changes**, all the **light on the water**, all the **different colours**... so that's when I'm **feeling closest**, when I'm very, very aware of where I am' Joan

'When you've got the **backdoor open** you **hear birds** and the **wind through the trees**, so you **don't actually have to be out in it**, do you, **to feel close to it**' Ian

'Freedom, **smells**, **I love being outside** and **smelling the grass** and things, and the birds' Elma

Tellingly, none of the participants spoke about engaging with nature through museums or natural heritage collections. Older people were not interested in becoming subject specialists and none of the participants spoke about nature in a scientific way (even those who did have a specialist interest). We found that, for many participants, a scientific approach to nature is a barrier, off-putting or even harmful, the research revealing a tension between, on the one hand, people's sensory, everyday interest in, and relationship with nature, and, on the other, how museums tend to interpret their natural heritage collections through an expert-led, scientific lens.



## Emotional

'I have quite an **emotional connection to nature** as well because I really use my time of being in (nature) **walking** or just **sitting** or **absorbing**' Joan

'Well I **created a garden** over 35 years and then last year we downsized and it was **almost like a bereavement**, until we came to our new house where the garden was beyond beautiful and I've **done a huge amount** in it to **bring it back to life**... so my husband and I have **worked tirelessly to create something utterly lovely**' Sue

## Wellbeing

'If you're **alone sat on a park bench**, it could be a **bench at the seaside** and just let **your thoughts drift** with all the noise that's about, whether that's the **sea washing up on the shore** or the **birds twittering**, that I find very **peaceful** and I do **feel very close to nature**' Tommy

'**Immersing** myself in **nature** means **I don't have to deal with humans**' Horatio

'Noticing that there is **something outside of me**, I suppose, I find really, really **helpful** and **uplifting**' Joan

'Once when I was having disturbed sleep and problems those **(nature) tapes helped tremendously**, they really did... if we put a **nature background** this is going to **relax** this person' Tommy

The sun has put his hat on,  
so a motley crew collects -  
off to 'capture' nature  
and, maybe, reconnect.  
Slogging through the nettles,  
dodging sticky buds,  
we leave behind hot tarmac  
for the earthy squelch of mud.  
The sun-baked ginnel leads us  
to the welcome shade of trees  
and traffic noise gives way, at last,  
to the sounds of birds and bees.  
We take the trail slowly,  
sharing what we know,  
picking out a detail here...  
sketching as we go

Finally, sunlight ahead,  
a tranquil space revealed,  
the light breeze sways the  
grasses  
that cover Our Back Field.  
The outside world has faded,  
we move at a different pace,  
where a little patch of nature  
has reclaimed an urban space.  
I used to press those flowers,  
I used to name these trees,  
But my memories, now, are as  
paper thin  
as the specimens.

This poem was written by Carole, who took part in the museum experiment with Bolton Libraries and Museums, about a piece of land at the back of a suburban area, locally and affectionately known as 'Our Back Field'. Many members of the group participating in *Encountering the Unexpected* cared deeply about their local environment, campaigning against green spaces being built on. For Carole, who writes, loves the sea and has many plants, the experiment inspired her creative nature and love for writing, leading her to offer to facilitate creative writing workshops for the group during a two-week break in the summer holidays.

# Connecting collections

## Natural heritage, nature, and living and ageing well

Making the connection between natural heritage collections, the natural world and living and ageing well was at the heart of *Encountering the Unexpected*. Engaging people in nature is not only critical to developing or strengthening pro-environmental attitudes and associated behaviours, there is growing evidence of the benefits of contact with nature for people's health and wellbeing.<sup>108</sup> However, although many older people would benefit from contact with nature, they are less likely to visit the outdoors.<sup>109</sup> We wanted to use natural heritage collections as a vehicle to help nurture living and ageing well by engaging older people in the natural world.

Natural history museums have great potential; through exploring the complexity and diversity of life on Earth, museums can help us to understand our place in the world,<sup>110</sup> promoting 'critical thinking and reflexivity' and connecting us with nature.<sup>111</sup> Natural heritage collections can help us to understand wider issues that affect the planet over time (the Long Now) including loss of biodiversity and degradation of the natural environment,<sup>112</sup> human impact on the natural world, climate change, the ethics of collection and biological conservation and extinction.<sup>113</sup> By creating opportunities for dialogue, debate and challenge,<sup>114</sup> and as trusted institutions, museums can provide settings in which people are more likely to be receptive to environmental information and can think about how they will take personal action.<sup>115</sup> They can help people explore their identity and connection to one another through the lens of nature.<sup>116</sup>

'Now is never just a moment. The Long Now is the recognition that the precise moment you're in grows out of the past and is a seed for the future. The longer your sense of Now, the more past and future it includes. It's ironic that, at a time when humankind is at a peak of its technical powers, able to create huge global changes that will echo down the centuries, most of our social systems seem geared to increasingly short nows.'<sup>117</sup>

However, this requires a radical shift in the way in which natural heritage collections tend to be displayed, understood and used with audiences. Traditional approaches to natural heritage collections create challenges for engagement and use with a range of audiences, including older people. Natural history museums are very often conservative in their display and interpretation: collections are framed around a scientific approach that includes collecting, categorising, identification, classification, set and specific knowledge. Objects are sealed behind glass, described using empirical, 'objective' and authoritative language, and arranged using biological classification (zoology, botany) or time (geology, palaeontology).<sup>118</sup> As Sheila Tilmouth, the artist working with The Whitaker, explained, this approach is very disengaged from how we experience nature today:

*'[When] the collections were brought together people hadn't encountered those sorts of animals, creatures, and they were mysterious and wonderful originally. And I suppose it rounded [out] a collection that our own indigenous things were also taxidermied and put behind glass. But somehow there's a sort of divide and there's such an alienation from the natural world in the culture that we live in nowadays.'*

Very didactic, factual displays rarely ask questions of visitors, and often fail to make the connection with wider social or ethical issues,<sup>119</sup> or encourage a sense of wonder and awe.<sup>120</sup> Museums struggle to talk about science in a compelling way and 'represent its wonders convincingly'.<sup>121</sup> In order to remain relevant for the future, natural history museums are repositioning themselves to be about people and natural heritage, which 'transforms their role from being about preserving things in the past... into one that embraces the exploration of the present and indeed the future as key concerns...'<sup>122</sup> Natural heritage collections need a new meaning and purpose, and connecting collections to wider themes such as nature connectedness, environmental sustainability and human impact is an opportunity for reinvigorating them for the twenty-first century.<sup>123</sup> Whilst most museums grasped the concepts behind *Encountering the Unexpected* to develop their museum experiments, we still found many challenges and barriers to using natural heritage collections with older people, with some museums continuing to struggle over how to make their collections relevant to non-specialists.







## Engaging with natural heritage collections

### Living and ageing well through natural heritage collections

- New encounters (often with the very familiar)
- Living in the moment, not thinking about the past
- Focused and active experience
- Nurturing your soul
- Socially connected
- Desire to do more
- Following dreams
- Looking forward.

Critical to the success of the museum experiments was forging a relationship between the collections and nature connectedness. This created lots of challenges for museums in developing sessions but facilitated engagement for participants because it is based on a non-scientific approach. Using nature connectedness as a frame through which to use the collections works because it enables people to connect with nature in their everyday lives, helps people to connect in diverse ways (not only those who are passionate about nature) and because it takes a non-specialist, non-scientific approach. Michelle Sheree, the artist who worked with Bolton Libraries and Museums, talked about how it was much better to take the participants outside the museum and into nature, as this allowed for a new perspective: *'In terms of the environmental side of it, which is getting them out and about and getting them doing things, that's definitely really good for "in the moment", it makes you do something now, so you're not stuck in a setting and looking at pictures someone has brought to you'.*

The participants could then use their experiences out in nature when looking at the collections, which allowed for close up encounters that were not always possible out in the 'real world', as Michelle explained:

*'They loved the ferns in the collections and how they'd been pressed and preserved and they looked beautiful how they'd been presented and they had no idea, it was very unexpected for them to see... they were kind of over-awed about how many species they had in their book.'*

The museums created a space in which participants could venture into their curiosity, exploring the natural world in-depth through looking closely, in very focused experiences. Michelle described using the collections to *'light a fire in people'* and Gaynor Cox, of Bolton at Home, considered it was *'great to find a way of getting people to go and see what's there and to engage in a creative way, and think about it in a creative way, rather than all this material just being sat in the basement'*. The collections helped to highlight the wonder of nature, particularly in the everyday, as Mavis explained: *'[The sessions] have just brought the connection [of nature] into reality, into everyday life ... so you're in what would be a very ordinary place and you can experience the extraordinary.'*

Taking part in the museum experiments with other, like-minded people was also important – it was a shared, and social, experience as Barbara described: *'And being in other people's company, it's really nice, it lifts your spirits, it makes you feel happier about yourself, it makes it so I think you've got a purpose in your life.'*

**Looking and noticing...** effective museum experiments created opportunities to look closely, reflect and process on what has been seen within a well-defined structure, in some instances adapting approaches utilised in the arts including visual thinking strategies and visual literacy.<sup>124</sup> It was a slow process – one of slowing down and really looking, not glancing and moving on but really taking the time to look. Participants took this *focused looking* into their everyday lives, encouraging them to notice more around them, for example Kathleen commented that, ‘*It makes you think more of what’s going on around you*’, and Eleanor considered that the experience ‘*has made me look at things more closely, then perhaps I did before*’. Sue had taken more time in her garden to look at nature describing how, ‘*you can almost have an interior monologue going on with nature and I’ve certainly taken a lot more notice on a minute by minute basis of moments in the garden... by literally finding space, finding time to just sit and listen and look*’.

**Challenging traditional approaches to natural heritage collections...** creative experiences were used as a mechanism to help people to look closely, to slow down, think differently, and be in the moment, to notice nature in a different way through the collections and to value the support of specialists who were able to bring the collections ‘alive’ in an accessible way. Participants valued being able to explore nature at their own pace, being able to contribute and their contributions being valued as part of the sessions. Sessions did not rely on traditional forms of knowledge and engagement (such as identification, classification), and the opportunities for open conversation acknowledged that many people do not want to be specialists and, do not want to feel inadequate. As Sheila Tilmouth, artist, described: ‘*I suppose it’s about having some awareness of how I would feel myself. And how I felt as a non-specialist in certain situations and you’re given things to look through like a stereoscopic microscope, I’m aware that I’m floundering with that and don’t know which knob to turn, don’t know what I expect to see or any of those things.*’

**Modelling...** using older facilitators such as Sheila Tilmouth at The Whitaker was important for museums thinking about how to challenge damaging assumptions and stereotypes made about older people.



### Inspiring others<sup>125</sup>

Derek, who lives in Old Moat, Manchester, is described as an incredibly inspiring person by Cathy Ayrton of Southway Housing Trust. One of the Cultural Champions for Age Friendly Manchester, at 90 years old, Derek is one of the oldest ambassadors for the scheme. As Cathy explains: ‘*We use him as a real ambassador*

*because he moved home at 89 and to move home at any age is no mean feat. But to do it at that age and to leave everything behind... he’s a real ambassador for active ageing, he’s inquisitive... It’s that “never say never” – you can look at people like [Derek] and it’s aspirational.*’ Derek decided to write a set of ten top tips for reducing loneliness, simple things he does to keep himself active and connected. Derek says: ‘*From time to time we can all feel lonely. I’d like to share my top ten tips, which helped me to feel less lonely:*

- 1 *Make an effort to make new friends.*
- 2 *Join a hobbies club.*
- 3 *Visit your local community or resource centre and find out what’s on offer.*
- 4 *Learn to use a computer at your local library.*
- 5 *Seek help from your local social services.*
- 6 *Consider taking in a lodger or paying guest.*
- 7 *Use your telephone more often to contact people; don’t wait for people to contact you.*
- 8 *Contact friends and relatives you haven’t spoken to recently.*
- 9 *Make friends with your neighbours.*
- 10 *Do voluntary work if you are able to.*



Address any reply to  
Director  
Kew, Richmond, Surrey  
Telephone: 01-949 1171

ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS  
Kew, Richmond, Surrey  
Telegrams: Kewgar, Richmond, Surrey  
Telephone: 01-949 1171  
6th January, 1970

Dear Madam,

Though somewhat decayed and discoloured the fungus forwarded with your letter of New Year's Day is undoubtedly Panellus serotinus (Schrad. ex Fr.) Kuhn, for the lamellae bear the characteristic embedded pleurocystidia with yellow contents.

Yours sincerely,

*M.M. R. Jones*

Sir George Taylor  
Director

N.B.  
See note BK no 16, page 101 for a similar drawing found in Dunham Park  
See note from Kew on T. 105 r.

Also found in Cotterill Clough on Jan 31. 1970.

Miss B. Harthorn,  
2, Derbyshire Lane,  
Stratford,  
Lancs. M32 8BJ

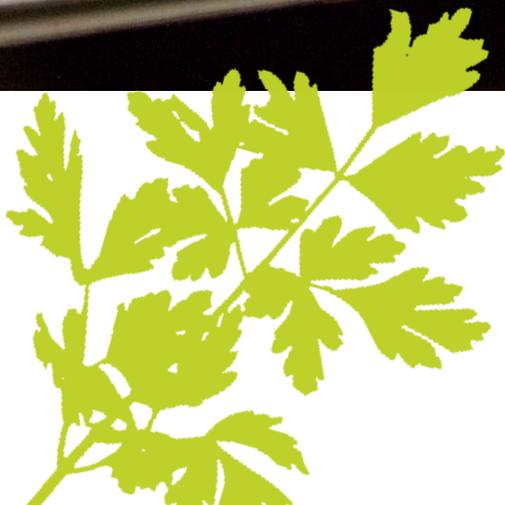
have large oil drops - 3 or so. but very  
indistinct. 5-6 x 1-1 1/2 μ

June 29 1969 (19)



Panellus  
serotinus

Says Kew who saw here so



**Playful**... encounters were personal, participants were encouraged to be curious and see where their curiosity took them. As we've previously seen, Joan described how the session at The Whitaker opened up a new world to her that provoked memories of how it felt to be a child really noticing something for the first time.

There is an assumption that older people 'have seen it all' and cannot learn anything new. Ann alluded to this in her comment about having an almost 'childlike' experience in terms of how it felt, as though discovering something for the first time and being open to a new experience. She described: *'The wonder is the wow, something you've discovered, something new. I think that is in the children's eyes, I think as you get older you miss that, you don't have the wonder as much anymore because you've seen it all, but you haven't seen it all.'*

**Visceral**... sessions engaged the senses and emotions. At The Whitaker, Elsie was able to touch the collections, coming up close with an owl and stroking it. Up close to the collections, participants such as Dorothy were able to see, and appreciate, the detail of nature: *'The fact that you can learn from them [stuffed bird collection] and get a really close up view that you wouldn't get from outside.'*

Elsie talked about being able to 'see a glimpse of what's underneath the surface' and how using a stereoscope opened up the 'actual detail of all these wonderful things we brought in, the flowers and the insects... [it] is totally fascinating'. Gaynor Cox, Bolton at Home, described how the museum experiment at Bolton Libraries and Museums gave participants a newfound understanding of, and interest in, the natural world that was reflected in their artwork: *'It was amazing how everybody was really focused on selecting different leaves, plants and materials and things and spending time turning them into different intricate designs.'* Ian really appreciated working with microscopes and a stereoscope at The Whitaker, helping him to see that what otherwise looks like a dead plant is in fact teeming with life:

*'I mean, we think they're dead when you look at them from the stem... because they've gone all brown, but you look at them through these instruments I reckon there's still something in them, they're not gone completely.'*

**Absorbing**... participants talked about being absorbed in nature, having the time to look, think and reflect on its beauty and wonder, to see things differently. Joan talked about the magical experience it created for her, to be able to notice completely new things about something familiar, illuminating that for her, *'It can feel quite magical, even though there's very scientific reasons as to why it's happening, it's about something that you've seen for years, but you suddenly really notice it or notice something different about it... it is very uplifting when that happens'*.

Some of the participants noted that keeping a journal helped to continue their absorption in nature – the act of looking and making notes was enjoyable. As Olwyn commented, *'it's educating me, it's making me look for things, keeping me active as well'*. Sue talked about the importance of keeping records for the future: *'I think it's very important for us to have moments in time recorded that we can relate to and as the world changes there's a record of what it was like.'* Keeping a record of '3 good things you have seen in nature' for 5 days (using a similar template to the one on the following page) is another exercise that can help people connect to nature around them.



**Adult-focused**... participants thrived when sessions were focused on them as adults, not as grandparents or carers, and when they were not 'infantilised' as sometimes older people can be (even if in a well-meaning way). They were made to feel welcome at the experiments, feel valued and part of something important. In particular, Mavis' comments about how the sessions (that were aimed at non-specialists) helped to open up nature and engage with it in a new way – are really critical to what *Encountering the Unexpected* set out to achieve. As Mavis noted, it has changed her whole attitude towards being in nature:

*'When I go round my local walks, which I used to do just for health to begin with, then I started to do it to keep my art practice up... I'm much more aware of the community aspect of Doffcocker Lodge, for instance, where I walk, on a good day where if it's nice weather it's time to talk to people, and the opportunity to discuss what's in front of us. It might be the elegance of the terns and the way that they make patterns in the sky or it might be the fact that I've not observed until now that baby coots are red, whereas the parents are black. So it's the opportunity and the mindset that come together, with a bit of encouragement from doing a project like this.'*

## Notice and record 3 good things you have seen in nature each day for 5 days... <sup>126</sup>

| Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|       |       |       |       |       |
|       |       |       |       |       |
|       |       |       |       |       |

# The Kit...

Participants from the experiments used a range of tools and equipment to support their engagement with natural heritage collections and nature, they used:

## Cameras

## Butterfly binoculars

## Viewfinders / frames for looking

## Journals

## Bug nets

## Petri dishes

## Microscopes

## Humane moth traps

## Binoculars

## Fisheye and flyeye lens for smartphone cameras

## Loops

## Magnifying glass

**GPS tracker and messenger** – these devices are excellent for lone walkers



## Nature connectedness and collections work together well when

- Nature connectedness and collections are embedded, not two separate elements
- An investigative approach is taken
- The process is open-ended
- The process enables a personal and individual journey
- There is no set agenda (but there is a framework)
- The process offers opportunities for discovery.

## Barriers and challenges experienced along the way

Participants involved in the *Encountering the Unexpected* experiments talked about how the traditional, scientific approach to natural heritage collections could be a real barrier to engaging with those collections. The amount of specialist knowledge they perceived was necessary to understand them could make people feel inadequate, overwhelmed or switched off. Horatio talked about how 'boring' botany is, '*you know, the Latin names*'. Barbara was very respectful of the knowledge which Don Stenhouse, Curator of Natural Sciences at Bolton Libraries and Museums, possessed but considered that, '*he goes so quickly and gives you so much detail, you're bombarded, and you just can't take it all in and remember it, which I'd love to*'. Some participants talked about the challenges they experienced when visiting museums and galleries generally.

Tommy had visited the art galleries in Manchester but found that he could not appreciate the paintings without a curator helping him to understand them. He enjoyed more contemporary museums like the People's History Museum. Sue struggled with museums and did not find them easy to visit: *'Largely because there's too much information... I tend to keep away from museums because I find them very difficult and claustrophobic very often.'* People needed support to enjoy the natural heritage collections and not to be bombarded with too much information.

The way in which natural heritage collections are used and interpreted is often disengaged from the everyday, from people's experiences, from other disciplines (art, humanities) and is also disengaged from the way in which the majority of people engage with nature, which is often emotional, sensory and visceral. Whilst participants could see the historical relevance of some museum collections, they did not always see the relevance of the collections for the present and future. For instance, Dorothy considered that the taxidermy collections at The Atkinson had a relevance for understanding nineteenth century life, however, *'I wouldn't like to see it done today... I presume taxidermy still exists, but I don't know much about, and probably they would take dead animals rather than kill them and I think that's the difference really.'* Dorothy admitted that she found the collections difficult; *'I'm not fond of stuffed birds'*.

The museums involved in the project also struggled with how to use their collections in new ways. Although many curators were passionate and knowledgeable about the collections, the way in which collections are traditionally used created a barrier for engagement staff when thinking about how to develop their museum experiments. Many engagement staff had not worked with natural heritage collections previously, were non-specialists and felt anxious about using these collections with groups, for example because of the ethical concerns around using taxidermy objects. Other barriers included curators being steeped in scientific understandings and a lack of confidence around how to make collections more relevant, and assumptions and expectations made about older people that did not match reality.

Museum staff expressed concerns about how they could use the natural heritage collections. For example Glenys Walsh, Learning and Outreach Officer, Gallery Oldham, described how she was very uncertain at first how she could engage older people with their collections in new ways: *'I thought – taxidermy – how am I going to get people to come and look at taxidermy? I had no ideas at all... just bone dry.'* Patricia Francis, Natural History Curator at Gallery Oldham, elaborated on why it was such a challenge to engage people with taxidermy collections:

*'That is really difficult because some people are switched off even at the thought of seeing dead things. They would just turn away at the door, they wouldn't even consider it. And certainly with those few things downstairs I've had reactions of 'that's cruel' and people do switch off.'*

The process of being part of *Encountering the Unexpected* and being part of a network of museums developing new ways of engaging with natural heritage collections supported the museums to work through these challenges. For Rachel Webster, Curator of Botany at Manchester Museum, the project reminded her of the wealth of collections that the museum holds and helped her to think about new ways in which those collections can be used with audiences:

*'It's reminded me more of the variety of things that we can do with [the collections], you can get a bit blasé about having several miles of corridor of interesting things... it does serve to remind you that other people do also like these things, find them interesting and can make a connection with them in a way that's meaningful to them.'*





Rachel's colleague, Andrea Winn, Curator of Community Exhibitions, focused on the stories behind the collections as a pathway in to engaging participants: *'rather than presenting it as a scientific collection for research purposes, thinking about the collectors behind it. The collection we used were collected by three 'working class' collectors, men who had full time jobs but who went out in the Victorian era to collect and document the flora and fauna of the local area.'* She considered that this approach helped to start conversations with participants that were able to bring in their own experiences of nature in their local area.

Julie McKiernan, the creative practitioner working with The Atkinson, was very positive about how being involved in the project helped her to think *'quite profoundly'* about how she could use natural heritage collections in her future practice, describing how she's *'done a lot of work with history and historical artefacts, but not necessarily natural history – that's something that's very interesting, to think about how I feel about those collections and how valuable they are and what people might do with them in the future'*.

Being part of *Encountering the Unexpected* and being supported to think about how natural heritage collections can be used to nurture living and ageing well really helped some museum staff to think differently about how they would use their collections in the future, including re-running *Encountering the Unexpected* or thinking about how to redisplay the collections in the museum. Don Stenhouse, Curator of Natural Sciences at Bolton Libraries and Museums, felt that the project had opened his eyes to working in new ways, and generated new ideas, particularly around the redisplay of the natural heritage collections that was taking place in the museum. As Don explained, it was because the group he had worked with had changed his expectations of what could be achieved when working with older people: *'The group that we're working with have got a more diverse range of experience and ideas than I first thought they might have and it's given me more scope for ideas in the new natural history display whereby we want to have a section on what local people are getting up to.'*

*Encountering the Unexpected* also had a very positive impact on Jillian Ireland and Emma Furness, Visitor Hosts and part of the front of house team at National Museums Liverpool. Although they were working with a very well established group of older people (who had been meeting at the museum for around a year), most of their sessions had been focused on social history topics or reminiscence. The museum experiment gave them a chance to work with a completely new collection in a new way, as Emma explained, usually the natural heritage collections are *'in storage, in boxes, and are only used occasionally for handling, usually for people who are specialists'*. It was the first time that Jillian and Emma had worked with natural heritage curators too, they were surprised at how accessible the collections were and how engaged the group were in the three sessions that they developed. As Jillian explained, having a more specific theme to focus on was really enjoyable for the participants because unlike memories, which are very personal, they could all connect to nature:

*'Everyone remembers things differently – some people might have grown up and had quite a lot of things when they were younger, some people didn't... everyone hasn't got the same [experiences]. But if you're talking about a flower or something that you've passed around, everyone sees the same – everyone might think differently about it but it's the same kind of flower.'*

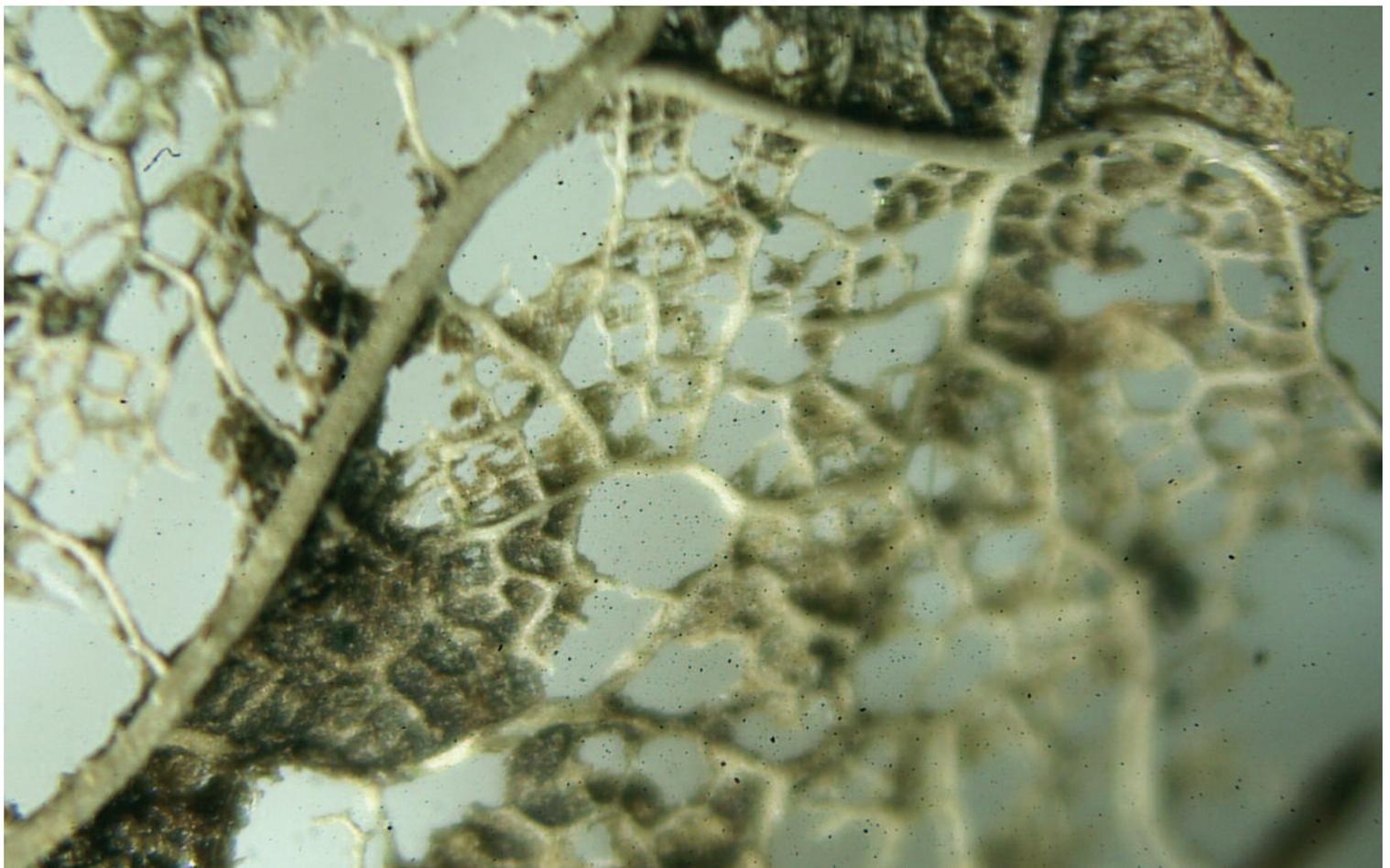
Jillian and Emma are keen to develop more sessions around nature connectedness and natural heritage collections because of the impact on the group, they described how, *'When they first came along I don't know whether they thought it was going to be more like a school session... but it wasn't, they were allowed to touch everything and connect themselves with nature. They were coming back, telling us about their walking... it's really had, I'd say, a good impact on people.'*

It was clear that nature connectedness as a route into engaging people with nature could have a profound effect on how natural heritage collections are displayed and used in museums, but also how museums develop their offer for audiences across the life course. As Mavis described earlier, life is not neatly ordered like the classic museum approach to natural history specimens, *'it's random, chaotic, creative and just full of wonder really. I think it's connecting you to the wonder that gives you the clue that our education needs to be focused more creatively.'* What implications does this have for museums?

#### **Nature connectedness and collections do not work when**

- The focus is on facts/information/knowledge and the approach is didactic
- There is a lack of opportunities for interrogation
- Collections are incidental, being used to illustrate a point
- The experience ends with the session
- There is no opportunity for development
- There is no meaningful connection with people's lives.





## Creating unexpected encounters

### Implications for museums

*Encountering the Unexpected* raises a number of issues for museums and museum practice in using collections with older people, and specifically using natural heritage collections, to nurture living and ageing well. How can museums adopt different models of working with older people? How can we go beyond the deficit model which makes damaging assumptions about older people – which shapes our expectations of what older people are interested in and capable of?

How can we ensure social justice for older people – how can we see them as more than grandparents or potential volunteers, as more than their memories and the ghost of their younger self? As Melanie Graaf, Collections, Access and Learning Officer, Bolton Libraries and Museums, commented, the emphasis on reminiscence in museums seems to suggest that, '*when you're older that's all we'll be thinking about... our memories... that life's passed us by*'.

How can museums ensure that they will respond to the challenges of future social changes, to ensure that they are relevant and appropriate to the needs of individual older people? How can museums empower and support older people to live and age well? Museums could learn from organisations such as Southway Housing Trust who are ensuring that the communities they support are 'age friendly' and prepared for the future, as Cathy Ayrton explained: *'It's about future proofing. It's about improving the quality of life for our older residents, but also making sure that that translates and follows through for the people who are moving up into that generation now.'*

There is no one model but we found that the following characteristics were important to older people when living and ageing well, themes which were threaded through their experiences of life, of the projects and of nature:

#### **Active engagement**

Open-ended engagement experiences (no curriculum, no end point); Keep learning (in the widest possible lifelong way); adult, not childlike, activities; venturing into curiosity; self-directed, active process; being playful, seeing new things, feeling wonder / magic / awe

#### **Connecting**

To people, things, nature, the wider world; family, friends, community; nature connectedness; to wider issues, political issues; with experts, specialists (in an everyday, accessible way); museum collections to wider social issues

#### **Living in the moment**

Immersion; being absorbed in activity; engaged in the present, the now; sense of flow; part of the life course, older people as themselves (not as grandparents, carers); this moment in time; taking notice; seeing things differently; being mindful; contemplation, reflection

#### **Meaning and purpose**

Feeling valued by others, by organisations like museums, and by wider society; satisfaction with life; activism and political engagement; being listened to and having a voice; giving; something to think about and focus on

Although these characteristics have been explored in relation to natural heritage collections, the collections were not the starting point – potentially these approaches to engaging older people in museum collections can be used with all collections.

## **Facilitating engagement**

An important part of *Encountering the Unexpected* was experimenting with different approaches to engagement, supporting museums to find new ways of working with older people, rather than the tried and tested approaches. Some museums struggled with using nature connectedness as a route to engaging with nature through their collections but as part of the learning process we found that the following characteristics were essential to creating high quality engagement experiences.

**High quality creative practitioners** from a range of backgrounds and perspectives, including visual arts, writing and so on, are able to disturb the status quo, encourage alternative ways of looking and thinking, therefore helping people to see familiar things in new ways. Finding practitioners who share the same values as the project is critical, as Sheila Tilmouth, the artist working with The Whitaker said: *'Because encountering the unexpected is how I work!'* Practitioners did not necessarily need specialist knowledge about the collections but it helped if they were excited about nature and art, themes that Sheila Tilmouth and Michelle Sheree bring together in their own creative practice.

**Specialists** are important and valued for their **knowledge**, and **passion of the area**, participants have great **respect** and **admiration** for this. It's not about their own agenda, however, but enabling others and enabling a space to be opened up in which the participants can explore for themselves. It's about judging the group and their experience, and what they can bring to the session, as Michelle Sheree explained:

*'The challenge of that is then, right who's my user group? Let's meet them. Right they're elderly, I've got to think about that. And the challenge is making all these wonderful possibilities that I've initially got excited about accessible to those people who are actually engaged in the project, because without me making it accessible... I'll just be deflated. Because I'm about them getting as passionate about the project as I am.'*

**Relationship building is key** to high quality engagement, where trust and **personal connections** take place and where the **welcome** and **hospitality** of the experience is deeply considered and delivered. As Sheila Tilmouth explained, creating a respectful and equitable environment where everyone can participate is key: *'The fact that we're doing an activity, no one has higher status or ranking, we're just different and being involved in that activity, that no one was a specialist, we all came together and shared what information we had or curiosity that we had.'*

Artist and practitioner Julie McKiernan talked about how the sessions at The Atkinson created an environment that gave value and importance to the creative work being done by the participants (which included an installation on the gallery wall):

*'The fact that it's being run here at The Atkinson, with the building, with the staff, with people like Luke, a professional photographer coming in and people from Lancashire Wildlife Trust, [the participants] feel like they're part of something important, that it's not just... a time filler. It's actually something that's interesting and valuable and could be something that will hopefully interest other people.'*

Engagement needs to be **structured** whilst working within a **framework** that allows for open-ended exploration. Approaching engagement through **layering**, more **challenging** opportunities taken in **stages** was helpful to supporting participants and building their confidence. Again, this was a strong approach taken by Sheila Tilmouth at The Whitaker:

*'The workshops, I very definitely took in stages and layers, where it was an introduction first of all to the collection and people wouldn't have seen the collection close up so just being able to move towards it was a new experience. And then to have a magnifying glass, which most people will have used that's a non-challenging situation for them, but begins to engage in a different way with the specimens that we had. Move on to the loop that's a really quite a specialist thing to work with, but hopefully because we're all in this together people could feel confident... at each one of those stages it's taking them to a level that they haven't experienced before.'*

Michelle Sheree described how she took participants on 'a visual adventure discovery', building up slowly to using the more specialist equipment.

**Being open-ended**, so that it is not prescriptive, it encourages a diversity of responses and a structure is created in which unscripted and unplanned experiences and encounters can take place. This creates a space for opportunity and individual creativity. Julie McKiernan explained her approach in detail:

*'Whenever I do work with community groups, I think ownership is very important, that people recognise their own creative ideas, so they don't feel that they're being told "you just have to do this", somebody's just saying to them "look you've had that idea and I think that's really good and this is what you maybe could do with it, or you could do that" and then they take it and they run with it, so they've developed it, they've just been assisted along the way. And that's important for value, for making them feel like they've not just been taught something, it's been in them, it's just been brought out of them.'*

Curators Rachel Webster (Manchester Museum) and Patricia Francis (Gallery Oldham) talked about the value of taking a conversational approach with participants, rather than lecturing them on a subject. As Patricia described, it was about engaging people's curiosity, *'it's not prescriptive – we're not saying "this is a, b and c", we're saying "what do you think about this?"'* For Rachel, it was about the participants' experience of the objects rather than talking about the objects themselves: *'We used the collections to start conversations... just generally talking about them and making connections with things.'*

At the same time, engagement needs to be **adaptable** and **flexible**. Also flexible in relation to what engagement means.

**Getting into the flow** – providing opportunities for participants to become absorbed, to be immersed in the experience, to slow down and really concentrate. There are parallels between creating art and being in nature; both can elicit a sense of being in the moment, of mindfulness.

**Appropriate environments**, understanding the importance of the physical space, in terms of accessibility, atmosphere (staging), stimulation. Creating a reflective, calm and safe space for exploration, opportunity and creation. As Sheila Tilmouth described: *'People would feel contained and safe to move forward... but there would be an increasing opportunity for them.'*



**Draws on the skills and experiences of the participants** – valuing, acknowledging and recognising their skills, experiences, interests. Values people as people, participants have the opportunity to shape content.

**Challenging**, whilst being supportive. Not underestimating older people, ensuring that activities are not just a way of passing the time or time filling but are meaningful, purposeful, encouraging people to venture into the new and go out of their comfort zones.

**An adult approach** – not childlike, not school-like, not patronising, or prescriptive or a 'make and take'. Lucy Burscough, the artist who worked with Manchester Museum talked about how *'quite often it's tempting with older people to infantilise' them, to try and encourage them to take part in an activity even if they are not very willing: 'if somebody's not enjoying the activity, not to make any sort of insisting or try to encourage them to do it too much... if someone has made the decision not to be involved then that's valid, so I think it's important to not insist.'* Similarly, participants were very adamant that they did not want to be infantilised or treated like they were at school, as Eleanor explained:

*'I just want to say that sometimes it's like being at school and I don't think they realise that we have lived and we have experience and a lot of things are pretty obvious... I think, that perhaps they ought to realise that we're not children.'*

Whilst Eleanor did not think that people set out to deliberately treat older people like children, she considered that people assumed they would need greater guidance or explanation, when this was not the case: *'I mean I was the same when I was young, anybody over 50 you thought was ancient. But as you get older... you're just as active mentally, hopefully - apart from forgetting people's names - as you were when you were younger.'*

**Where sessions relate** and connect to the rhythm of **individuals'** lives beyond the museum, there was the greater potential for them to be appealing. Horatio enjoyed the sessions at National Museums Liverpool because he was *'looking for something sedentary and intellectual to do... something interesting and not physically demanding to do'*. Gaynor Cox of Bolton at Home talked about how the sessions at Bolton Libraries and Museums created opportunities for engagement outside in participants' everyday life: *'Everybody in the project last week, were apparently talking about encountering this and encountering that*

*and a few people have been sending me things saying "ooh look I came across this which is encountering the unexpected".'*

Providing **learning opportunities** – in a lifelong learning and broad sense, new opportunities, new ways of working, new things, intellectually stimulating, new relationships, not scientific, highly personalised and serendipitous. As Julie McKiernan, creative writer, explained, often people underestimate older people and think that they do not want to learn anything new: *'They think that they want to stop learning because they've left work, therefore they can just switch off and just vegetate. But actually a lot of older people want to keep learning, want to keep developing skills, want to be doing things that keep them active and be creative and be valued for it as well.'*

### **Reaching older people**

Instead of reaching out to older people who have a specialist interest in natural heritage *Encountering the Unexpected* set out to attract a broader population of older people from diverse contexts and socio-economic backgrounds. Reaffirming the vision and ambition of the research project, we also actively moved away from targeting older people with particular and acute health conditions and discouraged museum provision framed through a medical lens.

The museums approached their experiments in different ways, some as one-off events and workshops promoted in the museums' public programme material, some as a series of workshops taking place over several months with a newly formed group brought together for the project, and others through working with established groups, such as coffee morning and church community groups. They reached a diverse range and broad population of older people through working in partnership with local housing associations, working with older people as ambassadors for the museum, and encouraging established groups to take part in something new and unexpected.

As with any museum activity that works with people within the community, getting to the 'right' partner is critical; finding the key contact is essential, someone who can help get in touch with or recruit people, someone who has experience and knowledge of working with the target audience and knows how best to reach them. *Encountering the Unexpected* worked best where relationships were made between the museum and a strong, experienced partner.

Spores. large oval with germ  
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Some are thick walled

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## Typography of *Encountering the Unexpected* Groups

Here, we map out a typography of the groups who engaged in *Encountering the Unexpected* to offer some examples and help museums to think about how they might set about connecting with a broader population of older people:

### Established museum group for older people

For example, National Museums Liverpool, 'Meet Me at the Museum' programme

- General group of older people with a range of interests, backgrounds and experiences – diverse
- Regular, weekly meet-ups
- Pre-existing group
- Already know the museum, feel comfortable there
- Usual focus is on memory

### Project specific group

For example, Bolton Libraries and Museums and The Atkinson, Southport

- Recruited through housing association arts officer (Bolton)
- Recruited through older person museums' ambassador (The Atkinson)
- Participants already engaged in pre-existing community groups, e.g. Church Group, 'Golden Oldies' or pre-existing interest groups, e.g. U3A, NADFAS
- Series of sessions over several months taking place both in the museum and offsite
- Bolton – diverse, more deprived area
- Southport – affluent, privileged, less diverse (context – retirement setting, large older population)
- Bolton – forms part of local strategy Ambition for Ageing

### Coffee morning group

For example, Manchester Museum

- Pre-existing group
- Regular, weekly meet-ups taking place in a local church and community centre
- Specific neighbourhood (NORC)
- Led by housing association
- Facilitated sessions
- Mixed backgrounds and experience
- Age friendly Manchester and cultural champions and auditors

### Public events

For example, Gallery Oldham, The Whitaker

- Advertised through general programme and marketing (The Whitaker)
- Individuals attending, less likely to be recruited through pre-existing groups
- Very mixed (dementia, mental health, specialist knowledge, range of demographics)
- Non visitors, regular museum visitors, volunteers
- One off events and workshops
- Café in museum plays a part

It was sometimes a challenge to recruit older people for museum sessions. Developing sessions and programmes that can reach people with a broad range of interests can be helpful, as Gaynor Cox, Bolton at Home, explained: *'It's trying to find that common interest in a group that has varied interests and even in [Encountering the Unexpected] there are some that are interested in the natural history and the wildlife... and there's some that are really interested in the art side, the ceramics and others that just want to get out for the social side... This project has ticked a lot of different boxes.'*

Drawing on the experiences of older people involved in the project also suggests that they are more likely to only engage in activities that they really want to do – museums need to work hard to think about what will appeal to older people, what will stimulate their interest and willingness to attend or participate? For Don Stenhouse, Curator of Natural Sciences, Bolton Libraries and Museums, it was about not making assumptions about what people might be interested in: *'I've realised that... older people can be more interested than I thought they would be. I almost imagined that we'd have to make people interested, because the aim was to involve... people who hadn't shown that much interest before... It's made me realise that... there are older people who might be more 'engage-able' than I perhaps thought... It's easy to imagine that when people are older that they're not as receptive to new ideas and that's an opportunity for me to see how receptive people can be.'*



# Encountering the Unexpected: our journey

*Encountering the Unexpected* was a two-year journey, an experiment into how we could use natural heritage collections in new ways to support and nurture living and ageing well. There were many challenges along the way, however if you want to engage older people and work with natural heritage collections in new ways, everyone has to think differently. It needs a radical shift in how museums think about and use their natural heritage collections and an equally massive shift in how museums work with, think about and respond to the personal motivations, concerns and aspirations of older people as individuals. The challenge has been how to do things differently, how to disrupt museum practice and support museums to think and act in new ways.

## Museums framework for living and ageing well

### We need to change our perceptions of older people

- Ageing is a social justice issue, older people's rights are as important as everyone else's
- Ageing and age identity are fluid and multidimensional
- Ageing is experienced by everyone – shaped by social and cultural contexts (including background, education, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, personality)
- Older people are diverse (age intersects with other aspects of our identity including ethnicity, culture, sexuality, LGBTQ)
- Older people have desires, hopes, ambitions (now and in the future)
- Loss can shape people's lives, we need to acknowledge and understand this

### Older people and museums: questions to consider

- What is it about older people that makes them different to the rest of the population? What is it about ageing and the ageing process that liberates us, but that limits us?
- What will enable older people to feel welcome, feel enjoyment, feel challenged, make them think and give them ideas? How can museums enrich their lives?
- What will make a difference to someone's life from engagement with collections?
- Why do you want to engage older people in museums and galleries? What is in it for older people?
- What will encourage older people into museums and galleries? What is it about your work that's going to bring in people who wouldn't otherwise come?

Emerging from this journey is the *Unexpected Encounters* framework which will help museums to work with older people in new ways and support older people to live and age well. Drawing on evidence from across the Exchanges, Museum Experiments, interviews with participants and practitioners, and contextual research into ageing, wellbeing, natural heritage collections and nature connectedness, alongside professional expertise from our project team and strategic partners, we developed the following framework to support museums who want to use their collections in new ways with older people.

We think this framework makes a valuable contribution to understanding how museums can use their collections to support older people to live and age well, but also change their expectations of older people, what they are capable of and what their needs and interests might be. One of the biggest challenges is encouraging museums to look beyond the expected, to get out of their comfortable ways of working with older people and provide stimulating, meaningful activities that get everyone thinking differently and provide a starting point to encountering the unexpected in the everyday.

## Engaging older people

### Active engagement

Open-ended engagement experiences (no curriculum, no end point); keep learning (in the widest possible lifelong way); adult, not childlike activities; venturing into curiosity; self-directed, active process; being playful, seeing new things, feeling wonder / magic / awe

### Connecting

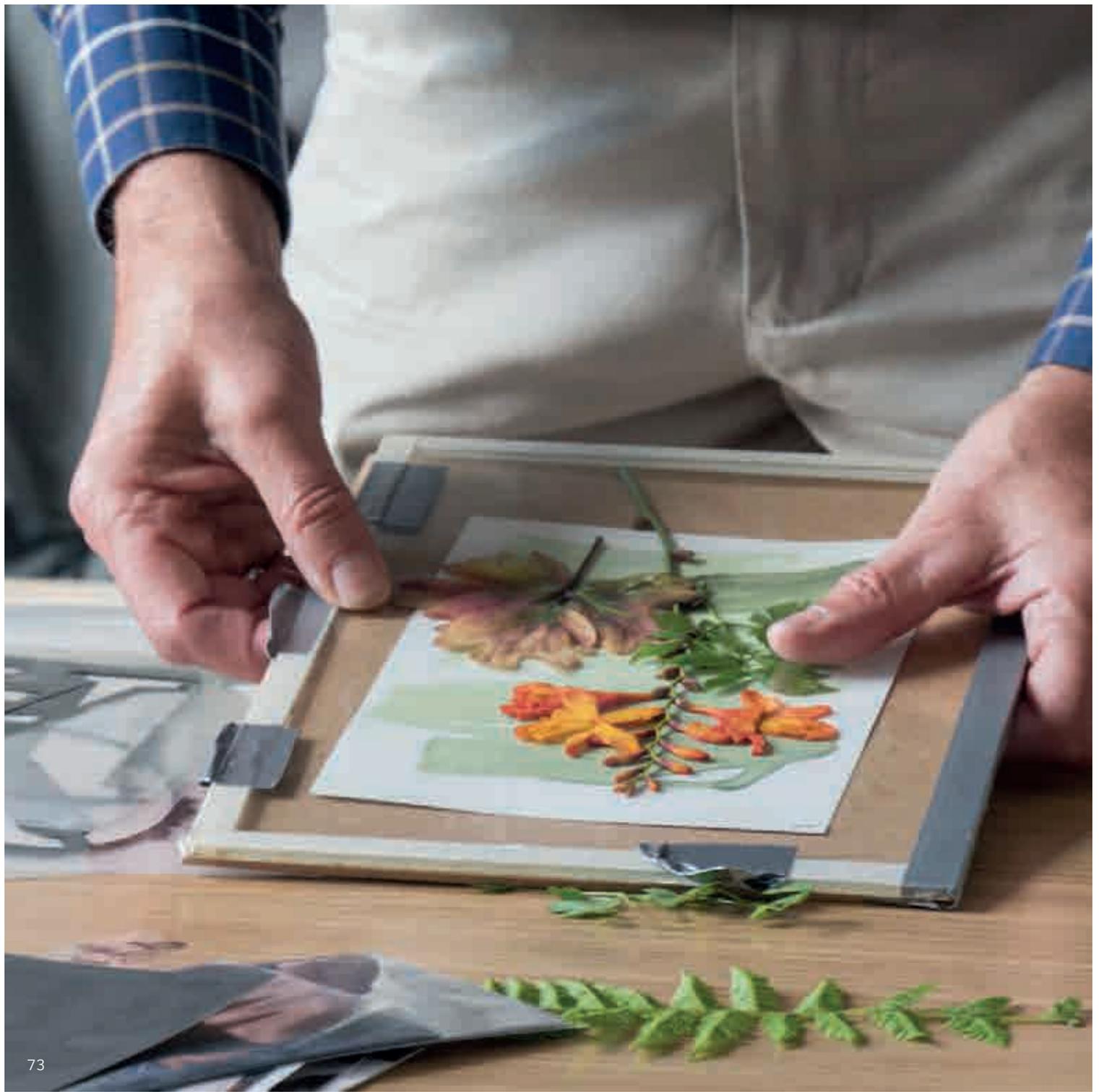
To people, things, nature, the wider world; family, friends, community; nature connectedness; to wider issues, political issues; with experts, specialists (in an everyday, accessible way); museum collections to wider social issues

### Living in the moment

Immersion; being absorbed in activity; engaged in the present, the now; sense of flow; part of the life-course, older people as themselves (not as grandparents, carers); this moment in time; taking notice; seeing things differently; being mindful; contemplation, reflection

### Meaning and purpose

Feeling valued by others, by organisations like museums, and by wider society; satisfaction with life; activism and political engagement; being listened to and having a voice; giving; something to think about and focus on; element of challenge



# It's not the end, it's just the beginning



*Unexpected Encounters* is the first step in a journey. We do not have all the answers but want to provoke dialogue, questions and contemplation around the issue of a changing population, offering up opportunities for further thinking and practice around issues that are not only significant for museums but for society in general:

'The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them, changes both the maker and the destination.'<sup>127</sup>

## Challenging the medicalised framing of older people and ageing

Older people have been fighting the negative perceptions of ageing in society for many years but society is taking time to catch up. The medical model that focuses on the negative aspects of ageing – mental and physical decline, frailty, the need for withdrawal – seems to be all pervasive in a society where you are more likely to see an advert for ‘anti-ageing’ than one which celebrates ageing. We are encouraged to start planning for our ‘older age’ earlier and earlier to ensure that we are not a burden on the younger generations (although it increasingly looks likely that the idea of retirement will disappear).

Museums too unconsciously ‘buy into’ this medical model through the opportunities and activities they offer older people and the way in which older people are perceived by the sector. Whilst there is significant work taking place in museums with older audiences, all too often these are comfortable and default ways of working around reminiscence and memory, or which tend to focus on those with acute medical conditions who need the therapeutic potential of the museum space / object handling. As Claire Keatinge makes plain, there are plenty of older people ‘out there’ looking for interesting and creative things to do, however the majority of them do not visit museums and galleries. How can museums appeal to more older people? What happens when we look beyond the medical model and see older people as people in their own right? What happens when we change the perceptions we have of older people?

## Asking different questions about older people

Rather than asking what older people can do for museums, museums need to ask what can they do for older people? What can they offer such a diverse group – diverse not only in terms of age (as people aged between 50 – 100+ years of age should not be assumed to be a homogenous group) but in terms of background, life experience, interests, sexuality, ethnicity and so on. As Claire Keatinge points out, we tend to put older people together as a group and attach characteristics to that group, which are often based on damaging stereotypes. By changing their perceptions of older people – to be focused on rights, diversity, the present and future as well as the past, whilst acknowledging how loss can shape individuals’ lives – museums can start from a new way of thinking about older people. But it is essential that this perception changes first and museums tackle the assumptions they make about older people because, as some of the museum staff realised during *Encountering the Unexpected*, the reality can be very different.

## ‘Living and ageing well’: a new approach

By changing their perceptions of older people, museums will also change how they engage with older people. The museum framework for ‘living and ageing well’ identifies a number of actions that are meaningful to older people – connecting, living in the moment, meaning and purpose, and active engagement – and offers a new approach to working with older people and collections in museums. What can museums do to nurture these actions for older people through the core of their activity?

## Nature connectedness: a pathway to engage with collections

Nature connectedness works powerfully as a frame to engage people with natural heritage collections because it replicates how they engage with nature in the everyday, in familiar ways (including emotional, visceral and sensory experiences). Rather than starting with the 'science', thinking about the relationship people have with nature helps to shape the activity, programme or conversation – and enables people to get much more out of the session because they can understand, enjoy and relate to it.

Nature connectedness offers a huge opportunity for museums. Specialist language and dry didactic displays that simply convey facts can be off-putting to all but the most committed visitors and naturalists. This is not to disparage subject specialism as people do value, highly respect and want access to expert knowledge, and subject specialisms are essential for the care and understanding of collections.

We need a more nuanced approach, that draws on specialists, both in terms of collections and engagement, and that supports people's connection with nature as an ongoing state of connectedness, enriching their lives, promoting participation and ensuring that museums provide public service for all. We need an approach that connects with people as individuals, head, heart and soul, that acknowledges people's personal experiences, and that connects them with broader topics and perspectives in emotionally intelligent ways. By valuing people's personal perspectives and involving them in the conversation, and by connecting people with the topics that matter to them, and encouraging them to act on their concerns, providing a platform for their interests and ideas, we can begin to realise a future where museums work with people to realise their fullest potential.

## Museums and older people's rights

*Unexpected Encounters* makes a contribution to broader debates around the role and value of older people in society. It is not a plea to replace the work that museums and galleries are already doing with older people; rather it offers new approaches, and nuanced practice and thinking about the ways in which museums work with this growing group. It offers ways of perceiving older people differently and ethically, which in turn, shapes museums' expectations of, and opportunities and activities offered to, older people. By interrogating the way in which older people are perceived by society, *Unexpected Encounters* speaks to the much broader issue of how to challenge negative and deficit perceptions of older people that pervade within society, and which shape the roles older people have and the value that is placed (or not) on their contribution to society.

There is the need for a much more complex understanding, and acceptance, of ageing within society and museums have the opportunity to take a role in challenging the negative perceptions we place on ageing and on older people. As the global population ages, this becomes a more and more pressing social justice issue. Museums can play a proactive role by helping to shape a radically different future that places value on people of all ages, as part of a fairer, healthier, more sustainable society in balance with the natural world.







## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> He, Goodkind and Kowal 2016: 3
- <sup>2</sup> United Nations 2013
- <sup>3</sup> Lamb 2015
- <sup>4</sup> Sandberg 2013: 11
- <sup>5</sup> Estes and Binney 1989
- <sup>6</sup> Abrams, Swift, Lamont and Drury 2015
- <sup>7</sup> Transcript, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population>
- <sup>8</sup> Kishita, Fisher and Laidlaw 2015
- <sup>9</sup> Estes and Binney 1989: 588
- <sup>10</sup> Estes and Binney 1989
- <sup>11</sup> Lindauer 2003; Sandberg 2013; Erber and Szuchman 2015
- <sup>12</sup> Giles, Fox and Smith 1993
- <sup>13</sup> Zhuravlyova 2017
- <sup>14</sup> Claire Keatinge, Transcript, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population> [retrieved 27 February 2018]
- <sup>15</sup> Arluke and Levin 1984
- <sup>16</sup> Erber and Szuchman 2015: 2
- <sup>17</sup> Macnicol 2015
- <sup>18</sup> Twigg and Martin 2015
- <sup>19</sup> Transcript, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population> [retrieved 27 February 2018]
- <sup>20</sup> E.g. Rowe and Kahn 1997
- <sup>21</sup> Clarke and Warren 2007
- <sup>22</sup> Sandberg 2013
- <sup>23</sup> Fristrup and Grut 2015: 271
- <sup>24</sup> Mowatt 2004: 54
- <sup>25</sup> Bowling and Dieppe 2005; Bond and Corner 2006; Kimmel, Rose and David 2006
- <sup>26</sup> Lindauer 2003
- <sup>27</sup> Macnicol 2015
- <sup>28</sup> Ray 2007: 70 quoted in Zeilig 2011
- <sup>29</sup> Laslett 1989
- <sup>30</sup> Mowatt 2004
- <sup>31</sup> Twigg and Martin 2015
- <sup>32</sup> Bond and Corner 2006
- <sup>33</sup> See Markides and Mindel 1987; Walker and Foster 2006
- <sup>34</sup> Ylänne 2012
- <sup>35</sup> Mowatt 2003: 47
- <sup>36</sup> Lindauer 2003
- <sup>37</sup> Twigg and Martin 2015
- <sup>38</sup> Small 2007
- <sup>39</sup> Sandberg 2013:35
- <sup>40</sup> Zhuravlyova 2017: 22
- <sup>41</sup> The Hen Co-op 1993; Bond and Corner 2006
- <sup>42</sup> See Carroll and Bartlett 2015
- <sup>43</sup> For example see Fountain 2015; National Museums Liverpool, <https://houseofmemories.co.uk/> [retrieved 28 November 2017]
- <sup>44</sup> Chatterjee and Noble 2013
- <sup>45</sup> Hamblin and Harper undated; All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing 2017
- <sup>46</sup> O'Neill 2010
- <sup>47</sup> Chatterjee and Noble 2013: 55; also see pages 39-40
- <sup>48</sup> Robertson, 2015: 441
- <sup>49</sup> Claire Keatinge, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population>
- <sup>50</sup> Lynch, 2011: 16
- <sup>51</sup> As above
- <sup>52</sup> Transcript, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population>
- <sup>53</sup> *Rabbi Ben Ezra* by Robert Browning (1864)
- <sup>54</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goals: 17 Goals to Transform Our World, <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
- <sup>55</sup> Equality Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
- <sup>56</sup> Rollig 2017: 9
- <sup>57</sup> Age Friendly Network, <https://agefriendlymuseums.wordpress.com/about/>
- <sup>58</sup> Claire Keatinge, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population>
- <sup>59</sup> Hen Power, Equal Arts, <https://www.equalarts.org.uk/our-work/henpower>
- <sup>60</sup> Claire Keatinge, RCMG Event March 2016 'Museums and an Ageing Population,' <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/museums-and-a-n-ageing-population>
- <sup>61</sup> McGhie 2015
- <sup>62</sup> As above
- <sup>63</sup> McGhie (in press)
- <sup>64</sup> Nisbet, E. K., Zelenski, J. M., and Murphy, S. A. 2011: 304
- <sup>65</sup> Richardson, Cormack, McRobert and Underhill 2016
- <sup>66</sup> Natural England 2015
- <sup>67</sup> Dodd and Sandell 2001: 77-81
- <sup>68</sup> Dodd 2002
- <sup>69</sup> Dodd and Jones 2014
- <sup>72</sup> McGhie 2015
- <sup>73</sup> Nisbet, E. K., Zelenski, J. M., and Murphy, S. A. 2011: 304
- <sup>75</sup> Lumber, Richardson and Sheffield 2017
- <sup>76</sup> See Kellert 2012
- <sup>77</sup> See Lumber, Richardson and Sheffield 2017
- <sup>78</sup> Kellert 2012
- <sup>79</sup> Lumber, Richardson and Sheffield 2017
- <sup>80</sup> Dodd et al. 2017
- <sup>81</sup> Initially we used the term 'successful' ageing until it became clear that this model is equally problematic to the medical model – see Big Ideas section
- <sup>82</sup> Angier, N. (1995), *The Beauty of the Beastly: New Views on the Nature of Life*, Peter Davison, Boston and New York
- <sup>83</sup> Salmon and Matarese 2014: 341
- <sup>84</sup> Thompson 2017: 29
- <sup>85</sup> Salmon and Matarese 2014: 337
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*: 341
- <sup>87</sup> Inspired by the artwork of artist Rachel Howfield Massey and her 'Other Ways to Walk' walking project, <https://www.otherwaystowalk.co.uk/about>
- <sup>88</sup> Ward undated
- <sup>89</sup> Esme Ward, talk on Ageing, Ambition and Wisdom in Museums, emailed December 2017
- <sup>90</sup> Erber and Szuchman 2015: 5

- <sup>91</sup> See for example, Prenda and Lachman 2001; Ouwehand, de Ridder and Bensing 2007
- <sup>92</sup> McKee, Kostela and Dalhberg 2015
- <sup>93</sup> Cutler 2012
- <sup>94</sup> Greaves and Farbus 2006
- <sup>95</sup> Bolton 2012; Cutler 2012
- <sup>96</sup> Gardiner 2016: 2
- <sup>97</sup> Mowatt 2003: 56
- <sup>98</sup> Whitworth Art Gallery, <https://documents.manchester.ac.uk/display.aspx?DocID=24251> [retrieved 19 December 2017]
- <sup>99</sup> Natural England 2015
- <sup>100</sup> Athill 2015: 3
- <sup>101</sup> Kellert 2005; 2012
- <sup>102</sup> Atwood, M. (1983) *Bluebeard's Egg*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto
- <sup>103</sup> See Richardson, Cormack, McRobert and Underhill 2016
- <sup>104</sup> Korpela and Staats 2014: 352
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*: 356
- <sup>106</sup> Richardson, Cormack, McRobert and Underhill 2016
- <sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>108</sup> McGhie (in press)
- <sup>109</sup> Natural England 2015
- <sup>110</sup> Dorfman 2017
- <sup>111</sup> McGhie (in press)
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>113</sup> Carnall, Ashby and Ross 2013
- <sup>114</sup> McGhie, Mander and Underhill 2018
- <sup>115</sup> Arbuthnott, Sutter and Heidt 2014; Janes 2009
- <sup>116</sup> Dorfman 2017
- <sup>117</sup> Brian Eno, Musician
- <sup>118</sup> Carnall, Ashby and Ross 2013
- <sup>119</sup> Carnall, Ashby and Ross 2013; McGhie, Mander and Underhill 2018
- <sup>120</sup> Valdecasas, Correia and Correias 2006
- <sup>121</sup> Rader and Cain 2014: 4
- <sup>122</sup> McGhie (in press)
- <sup>123</sup> McGhie, Mander and Underhill 2018
- <sup>124</sup> See for example, *Engage Journal: Visual Literacy* 2016
- <sup>125</sup> Age Friendly Manchester, [http://www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/6534/living\\_in\\_manchester\\_our\\_age-friendly\\_city](http://www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/6534/living_in_manchester_our_age-friendly_city) [retrieved 19 March 2018]
- <sup>126</sup> Inspired by 3 Good Things in Nature in Richardson, Hallam and Lumber 2015
- <sup>127</sup> John Schaar, futurist

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# Unexpected Encounters: How museums nurture living and ageing well

