

NOTES ON THE OPENING OF THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

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Introduction

During the ESRC-funded ‘Relational Museum’ project, which examined the early history of the Pitt Rivers Museum and the network of people who created the Museum’s collections, my colleagues and I gathered together a good deal of new information about what happened at the museum in its earliest years.¹ One of the things that became apparent as work progressed is that there appeared to be no documentation for some expected events. These days the museum holds opening events quite frequently, when special exhibitions open or new areas of ‘permanent’ display are completed. Among the questions I asked myself during the ‘Relational Museum’ project were when did the museum formally open for the first time and what sort of event was held to celebrate its opening? In this article I attempt to provide answers to these questions.

The accepted foundation date for the museum is 1884, the year in which Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers signed the deed of gift. However, on the day this was done (20 May) the collection was still actually on display at South Kensington Museum and there were as yet no premises for the collection to be housed in Oxford, let alone displayed. A new building still had to be erected, staff hired, and much else completed before the collection could be transferred from London. Indeed, it was not until 1892 that the final gallery area was opened and all the new displays were accessible to the general public. One might expect there to have been some sort of formal event to mark either the initial donation of the collection, or the opening of the entire collection to research visitors, students, and the public. It is clear that there are several occasions upon which some form of opening ceremony could have been performed, but it also seems highly unlikely that one was. No record of any such event has survived in the museum’s manuscript records relating to the early history of the museum (the so-called ‘foundation volume’) or in the university’s archives, which contain many documents of university life relating to the museum. By examining the key events between 1884 and 1892, it is possible to understand why there might not have been a public opening of the museum with massed bands, the vice-chancellor in attendance, and a ribbon to be cut.

Alison Petch

Today, opening ceremonies are common, if not essential, for all new museums, large new displays, or re-displays. Depending upon the prestige of the institution and event, opening ceremonies range from informal events (more or less a party for the staff involved in getting the exhibition or the museum open) to large-scale celebrations with VIP guests, speeches, and special events. In recent years, the Pitt Rivers Museum has proved no exception to this general trend, holding a ceremony for the reopening of the upper gallery to the public in May 1995, for example, and another to celebrate the reopening of the museum after reroofing in March 2000—as well as numerous ‘private views’ for special exhibitions and events to launch special projects. Opening ceremonies for museums and exhibitions were also apparently common in the nineteenth century. Certainly, by the mid-nineteenth century opening ceremonies were an accepted part of public life. For example, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was opened by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

From Bethnal Green to Oxford

As is well known, before it came to Oxford, Pitt Rivers’s collection was first exhibited to the public at Bethnal Green Museum, a branch of the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum). Bethnal Green Museum had opened in June 1872, its aim being to provide a home for scientific and artistic exhibitions in a location that was accessible to the people of the East End of London. The venue proved hugely popular; indeed, William Chapman estimates that Pitt Rivers’s collection may have been seen by as many as half a million visitors in its first year on show there (Chapman 1981: 385). We know that Pitt Rivers, then still Lane Fox, attended the opening of the exhibition of his collection there on 1 July 1874 because he addressed a special meeting of the Anthropological Institute held at the museum to celebrate the event. He decided to use the occasion to avail himself

of the opportunity that has been afforded me of explaining the principles of classification that I have adopted in the arrangement of my collection, in the hopes that, by offering them to the consideration of anthropologists, their soundness may be put to the test, and that they may elicit criticism on the part of those who have devoted their attention to the subject of primitive culture. (Lane Fox 1875: 293)

The opening must have lasted quite some time. The published version of Pitt Rivers’s address takes up sixteen closely printed pages of the *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* and must have taken at least forty-five minutes to read. Moreover, he was not the only person to speak:

Discussion having been invited, Mr. John Evans spoke at some length, and was followed by the President, who offered a few observations. The meeting then separated, having voted its thanks to the author of the paper. Colonel Fox then conducted the members of the Institute, and the visitors present, over the Collection described in the paper, and gave

a detailed description of his arrangement of the numerous objects and specimens in classes and sub-classes. (ibid.: 308)²

The first significant date in the history of the museum after the signing of the deed of gift was 10 June 1884 when Symm and Co. signed the contract to build the annexe to the University Museum in which the Pitt Rivers Collection was to be housed. By this time, the authorities at South Kensington Museum (to which the collection had been moved in 1878) were keen for the collection to be transferred so that they could use the display space it still occupied for other purposes. By February 1885 they had lost patience and the collection was packed and stored in one room ready, as far as the authorities at South Kensington Museum were concerned, to be moved by May 1885 at the latest. In fact, however, it was not until a month later that those responsible for the transfer at the Oxford end finally started to take action. Those most concerned at Oxford were Henry Nottidge Moseley (1844–1891) who, as professor of human and comparative anatomy, had been given responsibility for the ethnographic collections at the University Museum, and Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), keeper of the University Museum and reader in anthropology. They were assisted by Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929), later to become one of Australia's most famous anthropologists, who worked with W. J. Hill, who had looked after the Pitt Rivers collection while it was at South Kensington Museum. In a letter he wrote to Howard Goulty in June 1885, Spencer remarked how

the Government people are removing it...but we can't trust them to do the labelling.... We three begin in the mornings and go on till 5.30 with only a short break for lunch. However it is rather interesting, if tiring work: Tylor himself is of course the best anthropologist in England and a very nice man indeed. (Quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 60.)

Tylor and Moseley were not only involved in the day-to-day packing of the collection, but also in the detailed planning of the new building. When funding was agreed for a skilled assistant to be employed for a year to help Moseley to arrange and label the collection, he asked Henry Balfour to undertake the work for a salary of £100 a year. Balfour began work on 28 October 1885, and may have worked for a time with Spencer before the latter left for Australia. As the new building was not yet ready for occupation, the majority of the unpacking, arranging, and labelling of the collection was carried out in the area of the court of the University Museum set aside for the anatomy department, though Balfour may also have worked in the other places where the collection was then stored, including the Clarendon Building, the Divinity School in the Bodleian quadrangle, and the Examination Schools on the High Street. As far as can be told from the surviving records, the new building was finally ready for occupation in the summer of 1886.

It had been generally assumed that the displays that had been mounted at South Kensington Museum would be reinstalled at Oxford, but—despite the fact that

several wall-screens had been transferred with the artefacts still attached to them—it rapidly became clear that this would not be possible. As Balfour later wrote, in a letter to Pitt Rivers (dated 2 December 1890) that he did not send, ‘the collection, when it came into my hands, was in very great confusion, it was distributed in different parts of Oxford, many of the series were completely disarranged and the component elements scattered’.³ The university had also decided to rationalize its collections. This led, amongst other changes, to the consolidation of its ethnographic collections—including much material previously at the Ashmolean Museum—at the new Pitt Rivers Museum. In addition, the new museum immediately began to attract new donations. From 1884 to the end of 1889, some 5,000 objects were added to the Pitt Rivers Collection from elsewhere in the university (i.e. from the other departments of the University Museum and the Ashmolean), while some 3,000 further objects were donated.

Despite the additional work involved in dealing with these additions to the collection, and the difficulties of arranging displays without the benefit of a workshop or demonstration area, Balfour was able to open the court of the museum to the public in February 1887. Remarkably, a long and detailed report—taking up virtually the full length of a column, and offering a valuable glimpse into how the court was viewed at the time—appeared in *The Times* on 7 February:⁴

The collection of objects presented to the University of Oxford by General Pitt-Rivers has now been partially arranged, and is thrown open to visitors in the large and convenient hall which has been erected for it by the University. To these objects have been added many others transferred from other University museums, such as the Ashmolean, together with numerous donations from other sources.... The Pitt-Rivers collection belongs to the department under the charge of Professor Moseley, F.R.S., who is superintending its arrangement on the lines laid down by its founder. The essential quality of the museum lies even more in its arrangement than in the value and beauty of the objects exhibited, great as these may be. It is not a cabinet of curiosities but a school of development, in which series of objects are set in order to teach the lesson of how they came to be.... [Pitt Rivers] set to collecting weapons of all ages and all nations, and soon satisfied himself that the principle of gradual development, suggested step by step by what had preceded, runs through their whole history from the rudest stages, and pervades in like manner the whole history of civilization. Thus was started his vast museum illustrative of the stages of human arts and ideas, which soon outgrew the dimensions of a private house, and, after for some years finding a temporary home in the exhibition buildings of Bethnal-green [*sic*] and South Kensington, has now, in a much expanded state, been presented to the University of Oxford, who have built for it the spacious and well-lighted annexe opening out from the main court of the University Museum.

The importance of the collection as a teaching instrument, framing for the student new and rational ideas of culture-history, impresses itself at once on the spectator’s mind. At one end are cases of musical instruments, showing their first rude beginnings leading up to their highest forms. The strung bow of the hunter, in which in South Africa a calabash is fixed as a resonator, shows the primary form to which all the stringed

instruments of the orchestra may be traced back.... Passing to the next group of cases, a series of models, from the rudest 'dug-out' of the savage to the three-decker of the Trafalgar period, displays the successive lines of development on to modern navigation.... To go through the endless trains of reasoning of this kind illustrated in this one museum court would be to attempt prematurely a descriptive catalogue.... Nor is it the industrial arts alone whose rise and progress can thus be followed by the aid of series of specimens. The history of ornamental art shows itself especially amenable to the same treatment as in those brought together by General Pitt-Rivers to show how the figures of men and animals may, by successive stages of breaking down, pass into mere decorative patterns, or how the net or basket originally fitted on to the gourd or earthen pot has, when discontinued, left behind it an ornamental pattern drawn on the vessel it would once have really supported.... In short wherever the visitor turns he finds what he used to set down to arbitrary fancy, to spontaneous genius, is really some particular stage in the course of growth or development sprung plainly and intelligibly from the stage behind it, and ready to serve in its turn as the starting-ground for new ideas and inventions to come.

Such a long and detailed report would surely have included at least a passing reference to an opening ceremony if any had occurred, but there is no suggestion here that any formal event was held.

A year later, in Balfour's first annual report for the museum, it was noted that about 1,500 specimens had been 'fully catalogued'. As Balfour described it: 'a label upon each specimen refers by a number to a separate card, upon which is written an exact description of the specimen, with measurements, where necessary, locality, and all data, as well as references to literature. The cards are numbered and arranged in series in boxes' (Balfour 1889). By this time Balfour was working on the displays in the upper gallery of the museum (Figure 1), which in fact opened the same year, again without any apparent ceremony.

On occasion, Pitt Rivers himself was in touch with museum staff and the university authorities during 1887 and 1888. For example, in 1887 Henry Acland, Regius Professor of Medicine, wrote to Pitt Rivers to ask his advice about Balfour's future and whether he would have any objection to the university guaranteeing to keep Balfour on for a further three years.⁵ On 4 October 1888 Tylor wrote to Pitt Rivers about preparing a catalogue of the collection:⁶

If I remember rightly, I was beginning to speak to you about the idea of a 3d. [i.e. threepenny] Guide to the Pitt Rivers Museum when something else intervened and the subject did not come up again. The idea arose from the old Strangers Guide to the University Museum being now out of print and the Delegates wishing me to make arrangements to get a new one into shape. As this would involve some pages about the Pitt-Rivers Museum, the possibility suggested itself of these pages being also issued separately for visitors. The space (perhaps 10–15 pages 8vo) would be too limited for anything of the nature of a Catalogue but a ground-plan might be given with directions to the stranger where to find some of the principal series. For instance, he might be informed that on entering, he would find in the Court Cases to right and left specimens



Figure 1. View of the south side of the upper gallery at the Pitt Rivers Museum in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (circa 1898–1910); from a photograph taken by Alfred Robinson (PRM 1998.267.280). Courtesy and copyright, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

illustrative of the development of fire-arms from the matchlocks to the wheel-flint, and percussion types. Further to the left, he would come to the wall-case showing the development of the shield from the parrying-stick, and of metal armour from...defensive coverings. When he gets this information, the large labels on the cases, so far as Balfour has done them, will tell him more about the meaning of the series.... I feel sure that your going over the Series with him [Balfour] will promote their being arranged so as to be open to the public.... I think your active cooperation would do more than anything else to push it forward.... P.S. I have just seen Balfour returned from Finland and looking forward to your visit.

Unfortunately it seems that Tylor never wrote such a guide, or at least it was never published and no trace of any copy has survived. However, a photograph of a text-panel that used to be on display in the museum giving an explanation of the 'Arrangement and Object of This Collection' has survived (Figure 2). It is not clear when or by whom this was prepared, and it may indeed predate the transfer of the collection to Oxford; nevertheless, it does give a sense of how visitors were expected to understand the museum.

ARRANGEMENT AND OBJECT OF THIS COLLECTION.

The Specimens, **ETHNOLOGICAL**, and **PREHISTORIC**, are arranged with a view to demonstrate, either actually or hypothetically, the development and continuity of the material arts from the simpler to the more complex forms.

To explain the **CONSERVATISM** of savage and barbarous Races, and the pertinacity with which they retain their ancient types of art.

To show the **VARIATIONS** by means of which progress has been effected, and the application of **VARIETIES** to distinct uses.

To exhibit **SURVIVALS**, or the vestiges of ancient forms, which have been retained through **NATURAL SELECTION** in the more advanced stages of the arts, and **REVERSIONS** to ancient types.

To illustrate the arts of **PREHISTORIC** times, as far as practicable, by those of **EXISTING SAVAGES** in corresponding stages of civilization.

To assist the question as to the **MONOGENESIS** or **POLYGENESIS** of certain arts; whether they are exotic or indigenous in the countries in which they are now found; and, finally,

To aid in the solution of the problem whether **MAN** has arisen from a condition resembling the brutes, or fallen from a high state of perfection.

To these ends, objects of the same **CLASS** from different countries have been brought together, but in each Class the Varieties from the same localities are usually placed side by side, and the geographical distribution of various arts is shown in distribution maps.

SPECIAL FINDS, serving to illustrate the correlation of the arts, or of forms, have been kept together.

The collection was commenced in the year 1851, and has accumulated gradually.

Figure 2. Public notice formerly on display in the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; author and date unknown. Courtesy and copyright, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

Alison Petch

In 1890 Balfour was appointed curator of the collection, though on a temporary basis, his position having to be reconfirmed at regular intervals thereafter. In the eight years between the deed of gift in 1884 and the opening of the lower gallery in 1892, some 28,000 artefacts were catalogued, labelled, and put on display by a maximum of three 'hands-on' staff, Balfour, his assistant J. T. Long, and a 'servant', i.e. an attendant, William Beale.

Pitt Rivers himself made few visits to see the museum, visiting Oxford perhaps only three times after signing the deed of gift. In 1886, he was awarded an honorary DCL, and he is known to have visited again during 1888. What seems to have been his final visit was on 30 April 1891, when he lectured in the University Museum on 'The Original Collection of the Pitt-Rivers Museum: The Principles of Arrangement and History'. It seems that the lecture was something Pitt Rivers had been planning to give for some time. On 28 November 1890 he had written to Balfour, 'I of course object to anything whatever being published about the Museum or any part of it by any of the officers charged with the arrangement of it, until I have had the opportunity of describing the collection and explaining to the University its principle of collection, arrangement and history'.⁷ No account of the lecture or of the visit more generally exists in the museums's manuscript collections, but one local paper (the *Oxford Chronicle*) provided a short account in its 'University Intelligence' column:

On Thursday, April 30th, General Lane Fox-Pitt-Rivers gave an interesting lecture at the museum on the history of the formation of the collection which he presented to the University in 1884, and for the subsequent rearrangement of which in accordance with his views he expressed an obligation, first, to Professor Moseley, and then to Professor Taylor [*sic*], the keeper of the museum, and to Mr. Balfour. The museum, as illustrating the historical development of tools and instruments may be regarded as unique. The lecturer described how the development of the rifle had first called for his attention professionally, and how he had followed up the same method of inquiry with other weapons, from the celt onwards, with musical instruments, pottery, boatbuilding, and the like. The lecture was illustrated by elaborate diagrams, one of which analyzed Dr. Schliemann's famous owl-faced Athene with the gradual degeneration of the human figure. The General took the opportunity of expressing his regret that no collection had been made as yet to illustrate the development of the art of shipbuilding. His lecture was an interesting comment upon the collection which he has so liberally bestowed, and of which the development has been carried out in so spirited a manner by the University. (Anonymous 1981)

The only other account of this occasion that has been found so far is that given by John Linton Myres in an address to the 500th meeting of the Oxford University Anthropological Society in 1953:

When I came into residence in 1888, the Pitt Rivers Museum, acquired by the University in 1883, was nearly ready to be opened. General Pitt Rivers himself came to inaugurate it, with a vivid account of his own introduction to technology, through his membership

of the Small Arms Committee after the Crimean War, when he observed that devices not acceptable themselves, became the starting points of other lines of invention, and so explained the numerous discontinuous series. Lantern-slides were still rather magical, and his lecture was illustrated by large drawings on cartridge paper, which are reproduced in the Oxford edition of his essays. (Myres 1953: 5)

Myres's choice of the term 'inaugurate' is particularly interesting here, as its use implies both formality and the beginning of something. The museum, or at least the court, had already been open to the public for four years, but it seems that Pitt Rivers's lecture was regarded as in some way formally marking the fact that the collection was now part of the university. Frustratingly, however, neither the account in the *Oxford Chronicle* nor Myres's reminiscences more than fifty years after the event tell us anything much about the nature of the event. One can surmise, however, that the university would have been well represented at the lecture and that it did in some way mark the formal passing over of the collection. Whatever the exact nature of the event, it seems to have been the last occasion on which Pitt Rivers visited the museum. No further artefacts were received from him and little correspondence took place.

In the winter of 1892 the last area of permanent display was opened to the public. In the same year an extension was erected on the south-west of the museum to house an office for the curator, a workshop, and storerooms. Of course, even though the museum was now fully open to the public, work on the displays was not finished. Each subsequent annual report provides details of the changes made to the displays to take account, amongst other things, of new acquisitions. In 1902 electric light was installed in the extension and in 1904 in the museum itself, so that for the first time work could take place in the galleries and the court after nightfall.⁸

As is well known, the museum's displays have always included an element of what would now be called 'visible storage'. Balfour explained the idea in his *Annual Report* for 1904:

in both Galleries a number of drawer cabinets with glazed doors have been erected underneath the table-cases, and these will be of great use in providing space for specimens, which, while not exhibited to the public, can be kept in proximity to their respective series, and can be classified in connexion with the exhibited specimens, for use as research material. (Balfour 1905: 568)

Thus, to all intents and purposes, the Pitt Rivers Museum was set on its unique course. While the displays have been changed time and time again since then, and the typological series (with their evolutionary assumptions) replaced with less didactic, but still type-based, 'celebrations of human creativity and ingenuity', the basic 'look' of the museum was fixed.

Alison Petch

Conclusion

I have attempted to show here that although there were a number of significant moments in the early history of the museum between 1884 and 1892, the University of Oxford seems to have failed to make the most of the opportunities that occurred to hold a formal opening ceremony. The three most obvious occasions would have been the opening of the court to the public in 1887, Pitt Rivers's lecture in 1891, and the opening of the final areas of permanent display in 1892. Perhaps, indeed, it was the fact that these three occasions were so separate from each other that meant that no formal opening ceremony was held. The museum opened bit by bit and, according to Myres, Pitt Rivers's somehow 'inaugurated' the museum with his lecture, but no formal ceremony was held.

What needs to be remembered is that Pitt Rivers had very little involvement with the University and his collection after he signed the 'deed of gift' in 1884. He was consulted by letter about some practical matters, and he did give two small collections of further objects, but his attention turned to his archaeological excavations on his own estate, to his private museum at Farnham and to the other developments there, such as his public garden at Larmer Tree. In addition, from 1884, his health began to deteriorate, which might have deterred him from travelling to Oxford. Moreover, no one had anticipated that it would take such a long time to open the museum. Pitt Rivers himself was deeply disappointed at the delay, apparently writing to Balfour that he considered '6 years an unreasonable time for the collection to have been kept in the background in Oxford'.⁹ It may well be that in 1887 it was considered too embarrassing to hold an event that would draw attention to the fact that only part of the museum was open, while in 1892 it was considered too embarrassing to hold an event that would draw attention to the time it had taken to get the whole museum open. Finally, it should not be forgotten that during the period in question the Pitt Rivers Museum was, in fact, a department of the University Museum. Its present independence and renown should not make us forget that during its early history, it was a part of a larger institution with other concerns. And, in this regard, we can note that the University Museum itself also does not seem to have had a formal opening; there was a ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone on 20 June 1855 but there is no record of any opening ceremony having been held.

In retrospect, it seems a shame that the museum did not have the opportunity to hold a large public event to celebrate all the hard work done by Balfour and his staff. The current plans for opening the new £7,000,000 extension to the museum later in 2007 suggest that, this time at least, some form of public event—or, more likely, series of events—will be held to mark what is probably the most momentous moment in the museum's history since it was opened to the public (whenever that was).

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Notes

1. For information on the ‘Relational Museum’ project, see Petch 2004 and 2006; see also the project website at <<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/RelationalMuseum.html>>, the related site at <<http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/>>, and Gosden and Larson forthcoming.
2. Pitt Rivers spoke formally at at least one other museum opening, this time at the Dorchester Museum. Despite, as he freely admitted during his speech, being previously unacquainted with the collection, he again read a long address, the published version being some fifteen pages long (Pitt Rivers 1884). One cannot help but wonder if it was the apparent length of Pitt Rivers’s addresses at museum openings that deterred the University from suggesting a similar event for Oxford.
3. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Manuscript Collections, ‘Foundation Volume’.
4. This report was reprinted in the local *Oxford Times* five days later (Anonymous 1887b).
5. Oxford University Museum of Natural History, Archives, 1885/1, box 2.
6. Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, Pitt Rivers papers, L541.
7. Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Manuscript Collections, ‘Foundation Volume’.
8. Rather bizarrely, the provision of electric light in the museum—‘the most important event of the year’, according to Balfour—was made possible ‘through the generosity of the Executive Committee of the British Medical Association...in recognition of the facilities and hospitality accorded by the University on the occasion of the meeting of the Association held in Oxford during the summer of 1904’ (Balfour 1905: 568–9). The event was commemorated by the erection of a plaque in the museum in 1905, though its present whereabouts are unknown.
9. Pitt Rivers’s complaint is quoted in the letter Balfour wrote to Pitt Rivers on 2 December 1890 but never sent; Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, Manuscript Collections, ‘Foundation Volume’.

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Alison Petch

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