

The Priest's House Museum

John Newth visits one of Dorset's most successful town museums

Few of Dorset's town museums are better situated than Wimborne's: surrounded by shops in the middle of the High Street and opposite the iconic twin towers of the Minster. The oldest parts of the grade II* listed building date to the 16th century; originally there would have been an open courtyard at the front, but it was enclosed about 200 years after the house was first built. Despite its name, there is no record of a priest living there, and the present name in fact appeared for the first time on an Ordnance Survey map only in 1889.

From the second half of the 19th century, the building was mainly an ironmonger's shop, taken over by Tom Coles from his father in 1899. Tom was born in the house and, in 1907, so was his daughter, Hilda. Hers was a lively, intelligent personality, but she saw it as her duty to help her father in the business and to take over the running of it on his death in 1953. In 1960 Hilda took the decision to close the shop and, having inherited her father's passionate interest in everything connected with the history of Wimborne, fulfilled her long-cherished wish to make the building into a town museum. She worked in association with the Wimborne

Historical Society, whose leading light, Sir Kaye Le Fleming, a local doctor, had deposited his collections at the Dorset County Museum on the understanding that they would be returned as soon as Wimborne had its own museum. That was achieved when the museum, consisting initially of just three rooms, opened on 31 July 1962.

Part of the building had been let to the stationery business run by the Low family. When John Low closed the business in 1872, he gave the eccentric instruction that the shop was to be boarded up and remain untouched until his death. When he died thirty years later, Tom Coles found and kept a range of items of Victorian stationery which in due course came to the museum. Among them were more than 350 Valentines which now form one of the best collections in existence and are regarded as of national importance. The room that was the stationer's shop forms one of the displays in the museum.

In fact, the way the museum displays its collections is based on the rooms of the original building. Thus the front hall contains a display of ironmongery of the type that Tom Coles used to sell. In another room, appropriately

Elizabeth King
interviews John Mitchell
in the Georgian room

Photography by Peter Baxton



in the oldest part of the building, a 17th-century hall is depicted, designed to follow a contemporary description of Wilksworth Farm, just north of Wimborne. One of the most elegant rooms is the Georgian room. Above its panelling runs an earlier, 17th-century frieze, discovered by Hilda Coles, which includes the pious motto, 'All people refrain from sin'. In the tableau in this room Elizabeth King talks to her plumber, John Mitchell; a water pump in the collection bears his name and her initials. The King family were silk merchants who owned the house at this time.

One of the most popular rooms is the Victorian kitchen, where genuine Victorian dishes are sometimes prepared, with public participation. The open fireplace of the Georgian period is evident, although it was later occupied by a Victorian range. Beyond is a scullery, and beyond that a gallery, previously an outhouse, which is devoted to East Dorset villages – this is a museum for the whole region, not just the town of Wimborne. At the end of the gallery is a forge, a logical adjunct to an ironmonger's shop, which can still be fired up.

On the first floor is the Roman room, whose outstanding exhibits come from a villa at Tarrant Hinton excavated by the Wimborne Archaeological Society. They include important wall paintings and a rare water pump. Across the landing is the childhood gallery, a delightful room decorated in bright primary colours and exhibiting toys and games. One of the best touches in the whole place is the doors at child level, behind which pictures and artefacts are waiting to be discovered by inquisitive little eyes.

One of Hilda Cole's principles was that the museum should include some frequently changing exhibitions to avoid staleness. Two rooms on the first floor are used to follow this principle. One normally draws on the museum's extensive costume collection and this summer is dedicated to wedding dresses and customs. The other is currently occupied by 'Seeds for Change', an exhibition on food and farming put together by museum students from



The ever-popular Victorian kitchen

Bournemouth University. This sort of collaboration is integral to the museum's view of itself.

Hilda Coles also wanted it to be a community museum, which is still achieved by links with organisations throughout the area and by making display cases available to the East Dorset Antiquarian Society and the Stour Valley Search and Recovery Club, a metal-detecting organisation.

But of all the principles Hilda Coles held dear, the most important was education. Emma Ayling, the present curator, says that Miss Coles wanted it to be 'a centre of culture and learning and a place where children are welcome', pointing out that this was an unusually enlightened view for the early 1960s. 'Learning is at the heart of all we do,' Emma goes on, and reports with pride that this is the smallest institution in the country to have won the Heritage Education Trust's Sandford Award for excellence in heritage education. 'If the collections inspire a love of learning, we are doing our job,' says Emma.

It is not surprising that children respond so well to the Priest's House. They can dress up as Roman soldiers or Victorian kitchen maids and enjoy the experience of living out history. The museum also makes 'loan boxes' of artefacts



The gallery which has displays from East Dorset beyond Wimborne



Nostalgia a-plenty in this display in the childhood gallery

available to schools, publishes education packs on subjects such as crime and punishment and employs a part-time learning officer. In keeping with its founder's passion for education, the museum celebrated its fortieth birthday in 2002 by sponsoring a local student on the Bournemouth University museum studies course.

The next major project for the museum continues the educational theme: an open learning centre to be

built in the garden which will provide both teaching and display space. A Heritage Lottery Fund bid has been unsuccessful but a new one is being prepared and vigorous fund-raising is going on to meet the six-figure sum required.

The full title is 'The Priest's House Museum and Garden', and what a garden it is. Marking out a medieval 'burgage' plot, it runs long and narrow down to a stream almost a hundred yards from the house. As well as some beautiful plants, tended by volunteers (the museum can call on the services of no fewer than 160 volunteers altogether), it provides space for the display of some larger agricultural implements and includes the Boathouse Tearoom, named for the Stour skiff which is wedged into its rafters.

The principles that Hilda Coles laid down are the basis of the museum's success and, as Emma Ayling says, 'Our philosophy is to carry on her philosophy.' With this in mind, young people interested in the museum have been encouraged to form a group called the Forge to support its work and increase their own enjoyment of the collections. Their current activity is to design a 1970s bedroom display for the childhood gallery. At the other end of the age-range, there has been great mutual benefit from taking artefacts from the first half of the 20th century into rest homes and sparking the memories of residents: education is not only for the young.

Some 14,000 visitors come through the doors every year, of which perhaps a third are children or young people. There is a thriving Friends organisation with 400 members. Building on this success, and demonstrating that the days of museums as dry, dusty, boring places are long gone, the Priest's House will continue to fulfil its role of being a lively and accessible reflection of life and society in east Dorset.



The garden is not the least of the Priest's House's attractions