

The image shows the exterior of a large, classical-style building, identified as Shire Hall. The building is constructed from light-colored stone or brick and features a prominent triangular pediment at the top. The facade is characterized by two rows of windows: the upper row consists of eight rectangular, multi-paned windows, and the lower row consists of six arched windows. The central entrance is a large, arched doorway with a decorative pediment. The sky above is a clear, deep blue. The overall image has a dark, semi-transparent overlay, making the white text stand out.

Shire Hall: a new courthouse museum

DR ROSE WALLIS

Project details

Researcher: Dr Rose Wallis, Senior Lecturer in British Social History

Department: ACE – Creative and Cultural Industries

Date of output: 2020

Type of output: Museum exhibition

Unit of Assessment: 28

Research Centre: Regional History Centre



Supporting statement

Shire Hall: Historic courthouse museum

This output consists of the creation of a new museum in a Grade I-listed historic courthouse in Dorset. Shire Hall is an architectural gem and plays an important role in British judicial and social history. At its heart is one of the best-preserved Georgian courtrooms in the country. In 2015, the Heritage Lottery Fund (now NLHF) awarded Shire Hall £1.5m, match-funded by West Dorset District Council, to renovate and redevelop the site as a centre for public engagement with criminal justice, social justice and human rights.

Research process

Wallis' research and published work explores the dynamic nature of regional courts of law, considering them as sites of social contest – places where people from all walks of life interacted and sought redress. Her research underpins the narrative at Shire Hall, which offers visitors nuanced perspectives on historic criminal justice rather than the sensationalist approach often adopted in the interpretation of crime. Working in close collaboration with heritage professionals, Wallis played a pivotal role on the project team, leading the archival research and using this research to guide the development of the interpretation strategy and design scheme.

Research insights

The result is an immersive visitor experience, which is engaging and thought-provoking. Wallis' research features prominently throughout the museum galleries, bringing the archive to life in an enjoyable and informative way. Shire Hall is now a centre for public engagement with criminal justice, social justice and human rights, and Wallis continues to be involved in shaping the learning programme. Since opening in May 2018, the museum has been well-received by the public and the press and has won many heritage sector and tourism awards. Wallis has participated in conferences and workshops, disseminating the research and development behind the project, and has worked with sector partners to produce best practice guidelines for those working to communicate criminal justice history to the public.

Phase 1: Developing the interpretation strategy and plan

A collaborative process by the core project team: an interpretation consultant, a Shire Hall trustee and the managing director, with Dr Rose Wallis as the historical expert and research lead.

Exploring different approaches to interpreting and displaying criminal justice history, reviewing comparable heritage sites, and discussing ways of engaging different audiences with archival research.

This body of research informed the interpretation strategy and plan approved by the NLHF and Board of Trustees in September 2016.



Site visits to the People's History Museum, Nottingham Galleries of Justice and the Tower of London.



A new approach to interpreting criminal justice histories at Shire Hall

The vision and overarching theme for Shire Hall developed by the core project team:

To engage, inform and entertain a wide range of audiences with the history of law and order, and past and present efforts to achieve justice for ordinary people.

The new interpretive approach drew on key elements of Wallis' historical research, which informs the overarching theme underpinning the exhibition narrative:

Justice in the balance



Phase 2: Developing the interpretive design scheme

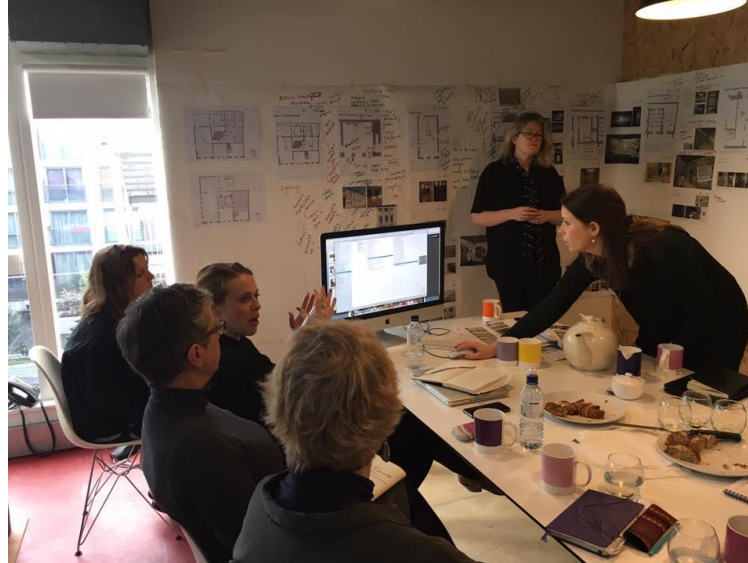
A more in-depth process to develop the detailed narrative content: Wallis and the project team worked closely with award-winning exhibition designers, Nissen Richards Studio, and a team of digital content developers.

Wallis was able to ensure the historical messaging was retained in all elements of the interpretation, and guided the selection of objects and archival material for public display.



The project team on site during construction

Research Process



Workshops with the app developer, Digital Opportunities, and exhibition designers Nissen Richards Studio.



Volunteers test-driving the family app at Shire Hall



Filmmaker, Nick Street, shooting archive material for the introductory film.

Research Output: Making the archive visible



Archive material is used throughout the museum, informing all aspects of the interpretation and design. Making it visible supports visitor engagement: a sense of authenticity and accuracy in the stories told.

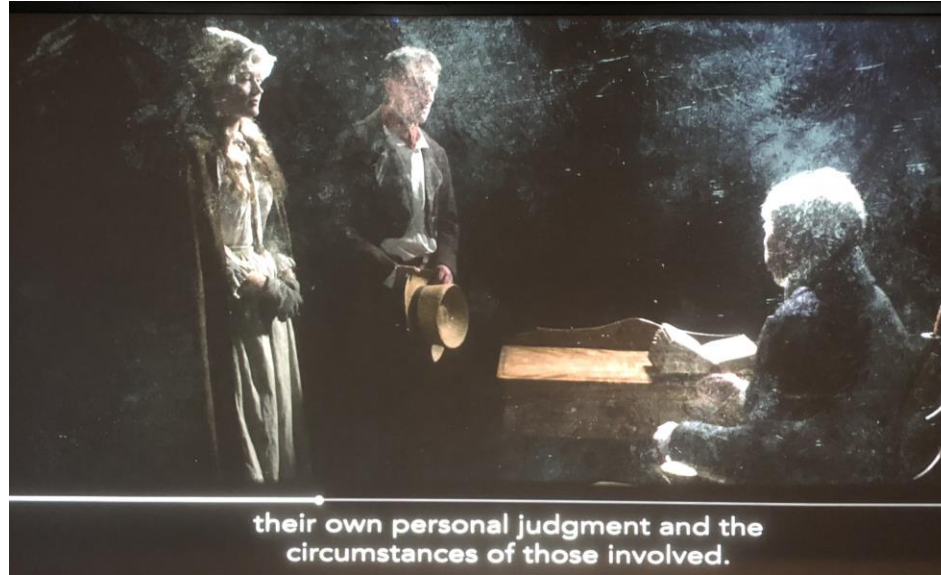


Research Output: Object loans



Research at Dorset County Museum revealed objects which are now on long term loan to Shire Hall – from drinking vessels used to represent the social structure in late Georgian Dorset, to objects that speak to the pattern of crime, changes in its treatment, and understandings of criminality over the 18th and 19th centuries.

Research Output: Digital interpretation



Digital interventions around the museum:

- A [short film introduces](#) visitors to Shire Hall to the operation of the criminal justice at the end of the 18th Century.
- An [animated timeline](#) places local events into a wider national and international context which influenced the justice system in this country.
- In the Tolpuddle Martyrs' cell, extracts from George Loveless' account of their trial at Shire Hall are reproduced as ambient audio.



Research Output: 'Peopling' the courtroom



Props with contextual labels around the courtroom represent the types of people who took part in court proceedings and which spaces they occupied. Research outlining the 'anatomy of the courtroom,' and the interactions it framed, informed this interpretive approach.



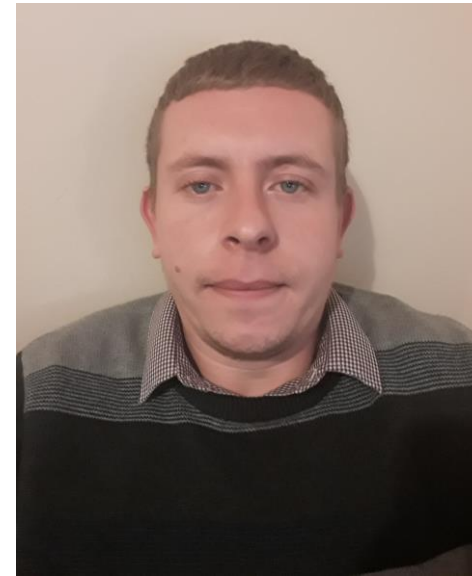
Research Output: Multimedia guide



The multimedia guide, on iPods, is offered to all adults on arrival. Visitors can choose one of four trials to follow throughout the museum. Archival material and expert commentary is also accessible through the guide.



Jeremy Corbyn and Dominic Grieve QC talk about the legacy of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the importance of criminal justice history to British society today. Listen here:



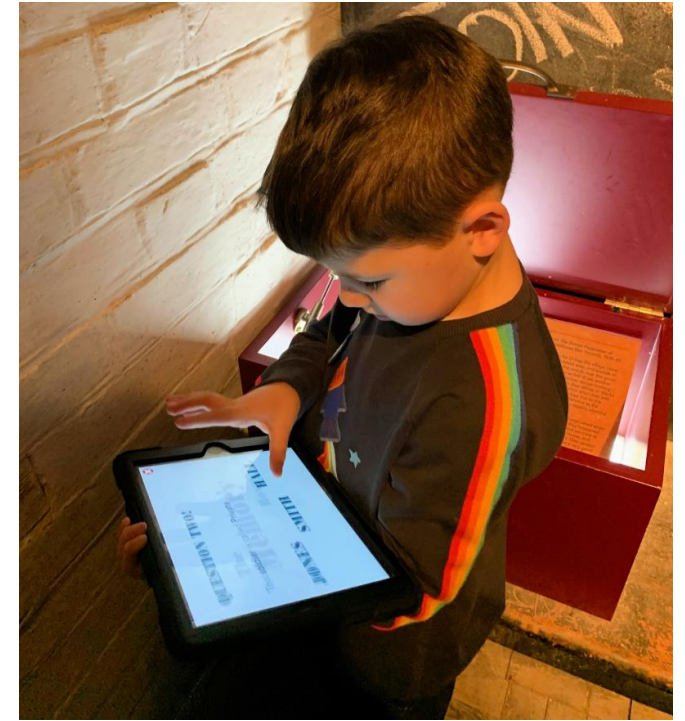
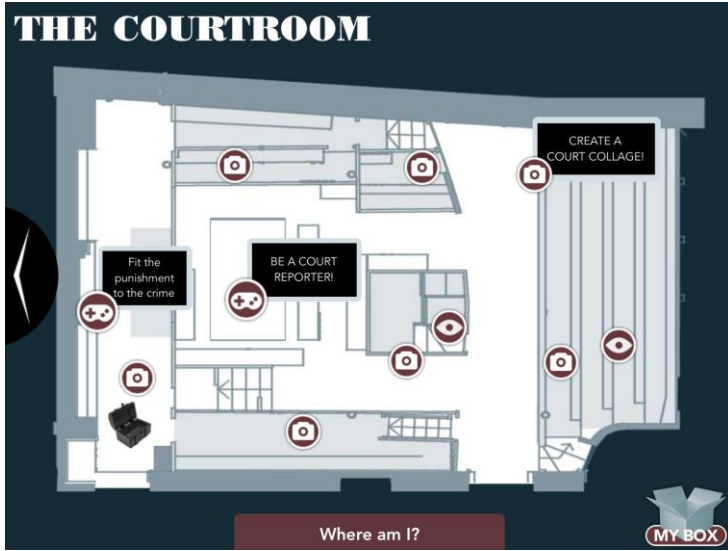
Gareth Evans, ex-offender and academic, talks about his personal experience of the justice system. Listen here:



Dr Rose Wallis provides the context for the trial of 11-year-old Elijah Upjohn. Listen here:



Research Output:
Family app



The touchscreen app on iPads is offered to all families as a shared experience. Following the trial of Elijah Upjohn, families can play games, answer quizzes and become a court reporter as they visit the museum. All of the activities are based on archival and contextual research to help younger audiences engage with the operation of criminal justice.

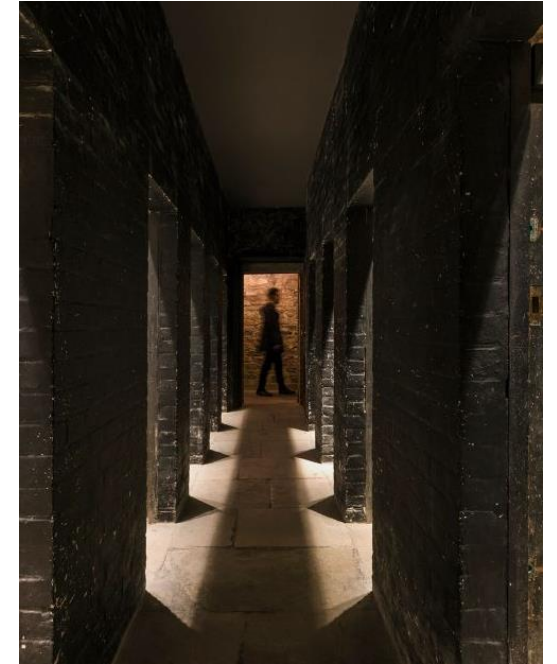
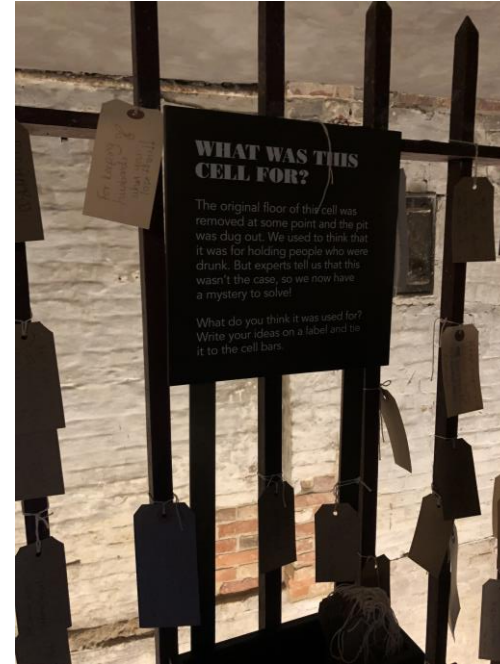
Research Output: Immersion and empathy



The experience was designed to be immersive, eliciting empathy and encouraging visitors to imagine what it was like to have been involved in the proceedings at Shire Hall.

People are free to explore all areas of the building, entering cells and inhabiting the different spaces in the courtroom. The route takes visitors down to the dimly-lit holding cells and up a narrow staircase into the dock, at the heart of the bright, high-ceilinged courtroom.

The archival material and the sensitive use of multi-media technology is aimed at connecting visitors with the physical space; encouraging exploration and imaginative empathetic engagement with past lived experience.





Dr Rose Wallis has given several talks about the project, to professional sector audiences including:

- A workshop at the SWFed 2018 conference and a talk at the Association for Heritage Interpretation 2018 conference alongside interpretation consultant, Iona Keen
- A paper presented at the Twelfth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum, Muntref, Museum of Immigration, Buenos Aires, Argentina. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/6845434>

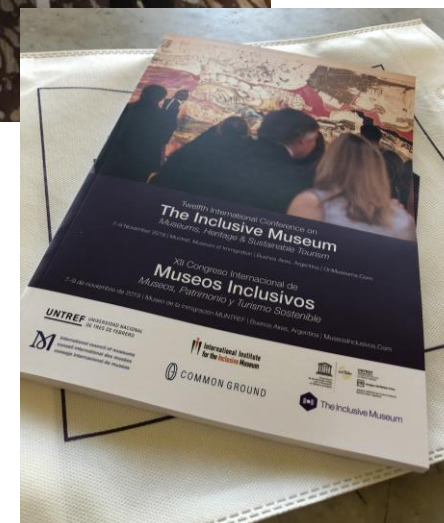


Jess McKenzie @je... · 04/07/2018 ...
 Amazing workshop by the team behind @ShireHallDorset! Interesting balancing between visitor experience and historical accuracy! Thanks to all! #SWFed2018 #history #heritage #MoreThanHorribleHistories

Rose Osmond-Wa... · 04/07/2018
 Great turnout for @SWFed workshop on #MoreThanHorribleHistories engaging visitors @ShireHallDorset Thanks all! #SWFed2018



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Dissemination



In February 2020, Wallis and Keen ran a workshop for museum and heritage professionals, interpretation specialists, and social and public historians, exploring how to engage the public with criminal justice histories in heritage contexts.

The workshop was used to produce a 'manifesto' and discussion of best practice that can inform the ways in which we communicate criminal justice histories to the public, and as a precursor to establishing a more formal, funded network that will facilitate collaborative partnerships in new interpretation projects.



Art and Activism 2019



Wallis continues to act as a consultant to Shire Hall and has been involved in shaping the learning programme and participating in the public programme, including a talk on [Shire Hall in Context](#), and sitting on a panel on [Art and Activism](#) (2019) with artist Bob and Roberta Smith and human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith.

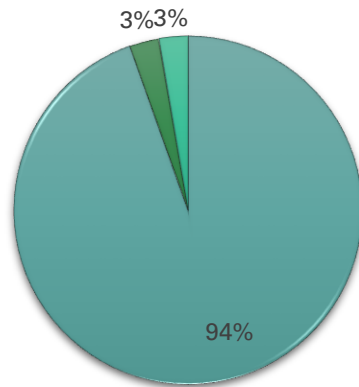
Learning Manager Anne Brown has incorporated the archival research into Shire Hall's educational programme



In its first year Shire Hall welcomed more than 17,000 visitors.

In 2020, visitors said:

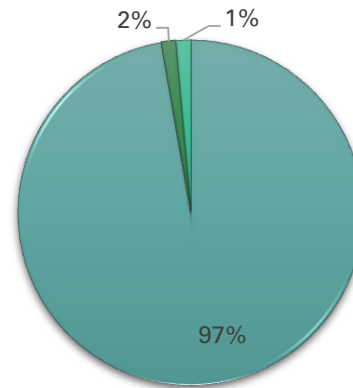
Have you learned something on your visit today?



It made me appreciate the modern justice system and how important it is that the reasons behind what caused people to commit crime are looked into or considered

It is down to a few people our future. I just hope they are sound and just.

All the stories at SH are based on real people's experiences, has that enriched your visit today?

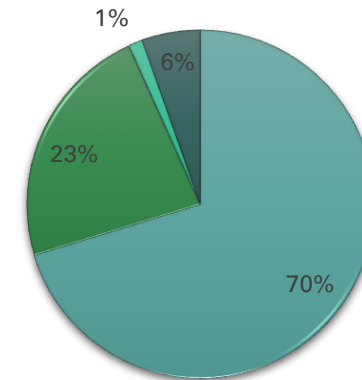


Made the experience more real-life and authentic.

Brings the building to life

It makes it more lifelike to see and hear stories of real people

Has the museum made you think differently about the role of law in our lives?



■ yes
■ no
■ yes and no
■ no answer

Indicators of reach:
Public acclaim



Sean L wrote a review Oct 2018
Dorchester, United Kingdom • 55 contributions • 9 helpful votes



Ingenious exhibition

This new museum has been so brilliantly thought through. The free audio guide makes this a fascinating step into local history, and there history of criminal justice more generally. The central courtroom is atmospheric and the organisation and information couldn't be better.



WelshWonder47 wrote a review Feb 2020
Norfolk, United Kingdom • 72 contributions • 50 helpful votes



History Week goes to Court!

Social injustices, class difference, an elite who ruled the poverty stricken and non existent rights for women are not confined to 2020! This was the backdrop to so many of the crimes. The cells still seem to bear the imprints of the souls who were detained as you creep round feeling the dampness regaled by these very real tales of justice/injustice in years gone by.



FlowerGirls08 wrote a review May 2018
Dorchester, United Kingdom • 44 contributions • 36 helpful votes

'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.'

Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968)



Unusual Place to Visit - Excellent

The narrative

really was very good and even had different dialects, I sat on one of the more comfortable courtroom benches enthralled with the case and soaking up the atmosphere of the room. I understand that there are four different case history's to listen to, so I shall return again to listen to the Tolpuddle Martyrs Case



When life gives you lemons wrote a review Jul 2018
5 contributions • 8 helpful votes



Outstanding new museum

This was almost a perfect trip to a local museum.

Friendly but unobtrusive staff and volunteers; excellent audio guides; good gift shop selling the usual 'tat'. The gentleman who greeted us and took our money was superb!

But it was the small things that really made it: the tour of the cells and courtroom was utterly immersive - I was utterly gripped and learned a huge amount about local/national history. The story of Martha Brown almost left me in tears (listen right to the end!). The larger cell in which the Tolpuddle Martyrs were kept is a crucial part of our political history; the graffiti in the cells was fascinating.

I also liked the way that new volunteers were being trained while we were there - it was great to see key skills being passed on to the next generation.



ATC147 wrote a review Dec 2018
London, United Kingdom • 116 contributions • 32 helpful votes



Excellent

The Shire Hall has recently been restored. The museum focuses on the uses of the Hall, particularly as a courthouse. The cells area is well lit and gives a good idea of the conditions that people were held in prior to there appearance in court. In addition, there is plenty to learn about the system of justice prevailing at that time. We may ponder about the bias and inequality of that "system". The stairs from the cells area bring you up into the court and land you "in the dock", much the same as prisoners would have done hundreds of years ago. The museum demonstrates the importance of maintaining these historic buildings as a way of understanding the past, and bringing that into the future. The cafe at the end is a welcome place to reflect on your visit. High recommended.



Tom H wrote a review May 2018
1 contribution • 4 helpful votes



Just great!

Intelligent, innovative and ironically set the past free and brought it to life. A highlight in Dorchester.



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Shire Hall Historic Courthouse Museum, Dorchester: 'The youngest prisoner tried here was seven' - review

Kari Herbert
@kariherbert
Tue 7 Aug 2018 11:30 BST
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▲ Dorchester - View from inside of Shire Hall, Dorchester. Photograph by Terry Hill

This Dorset museum lifts the lid on injustices handed down at the historic court with interactive guides and some grisly facts

In a nutshell
A new museum in the imposing Dorchester Shire Hall. Following a well-curated route, visitors walk through 150 years of justice (and injustice) and discover the stories of those tried here for crimes ranging from rabbit-poaching and stealing underwear to arson and murder. The most famous case was of the Tolpuddle Martyrs: 19th-century Dorset agricultural labourers turned activists, whose highly-publicised trial and conviction led to the foundation of modern-day trade unions. Kids are provided with their own tablet devices - loaded with digital interactive guides, quizzes and games - and can choose to be a tour guide for the whole family, or become a journalist for a trial. There are "memory boxes" to discover, cleverly-hidden around the museum, and magistrates' gowns, hats and judges' wigs to try on.

Fun (if slightly grim) fact
Casts of convicts' heads were made for phrenologists to study. They believed that personality traits could be determined by measuring different parts of the skull. The cast on display at Shire Hall is of Edwin Alfred Presley, who was executed on site for murdering a warder.



Prison life in Dorset

Dorchester Prison is a two-minute walk from the town's courthouse, from where prisoners would have taken the short route to start their sentence, or be held until transported out of the country or hanged. The Shire Hall Historic Courthouse Museum in Dorset, which reopened in April, offers a multimedia guide that tells the stories of four prisoners.

One of these is Martha Brown, an abused wife who murdered her husband and was hanged at the prison in 1856, and whose bones may have been found on the prison site during archaeological investigations by the heritage developer City & Country. Brown is reputed to be the inspiration for Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* - Hardy is known to have seen Brown's execution as a 16-year-old.

"We tell her story in a conventional way, but end with a contemporary reflection on domestic abuse, and relate her story to the new offence of

coercive control in a relationship," says Anna Bright, the director of Shire Hall. "She was vilified in the press of the time and we look at how those cases would be treated today."

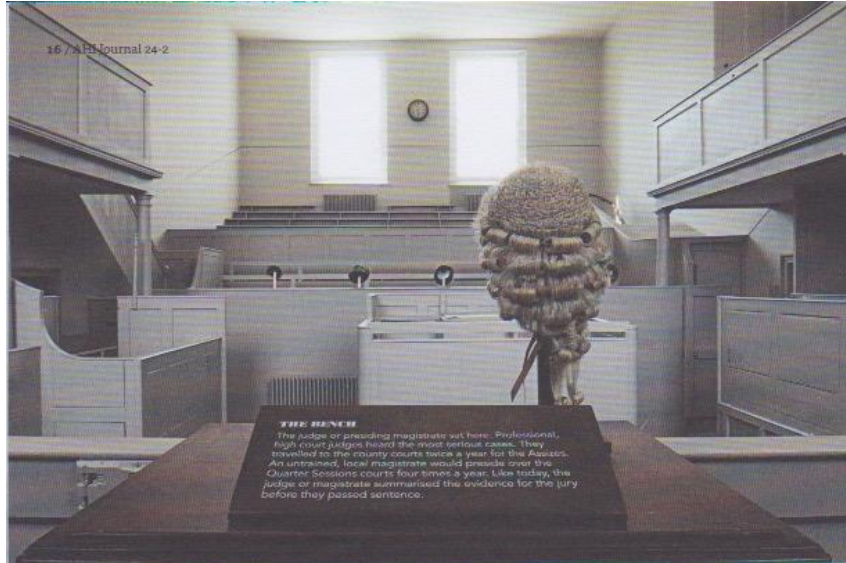
The other prisoners whose stories are told at the museum are the Tolpuddle Martyrs, who were transported to Australia in 1834. "The social and employment conditions they faced have many echoes in today's gig economy, and we are able to use their story to look at social justice and human rights in a broader way," Bright says.

The stories are told in a nuanced and balanced way, avoiding sensationalism and acknowledging that prison life was part of the town's history, but not fetishising it.

"Our aim is to create an immersive experience where visitors understand how it feels to be in a cold and claustrophobic prison cell, and how spine-chilling it is to walk from the cells to the dock to be sentenced," says Bright. "We are not shocking people for the sake of it - our approach is about increasing visitors' empathy while creating contemporary relevance."



Indicators of reach: Awards



Runner-up
**SHIRE HALL HISTORIC
COURTHOUSE MUSEUM**



Shire Hall is a fascinating building with equally fascinating stories to tell about people from all sections of society and about society itself.

There is a sense of stepping back in time in the entrance hall, but it is really once visitors reach the cells that they find themselves immersed in the building. The courtroom space is popular, where visitors can sit and feel part of the courtroom drama with props (hats and clothing) suitable for all age groups and abilities. This definitely feels like the final part of the visit where the full case and ruling on the defendant (of your choice) is now to

be revealed. All the defendants' stories are really interesting, in particular the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

The interpretation offers a clear story about the Shire Hall and 'justice in the balance', allowing visitors to compare and reflect upon similar issues raised today. The chosen media engage visitors with particular physical, sensory and intellectual needs.

Shire Hall Historic Courthouse Museum
High West Street, Dorchester, Dorset
DT1 1UY



Here, in these cramped spaces with low light levels and a damp smell, is where the first real connection to people and the enormity of the justice system is revealed.



VisitEngland®



Shire Hall has won and been shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards:

- Silver for Access and Inclusivity and Gold for Tourism Innovation at the Dorset Tourism Awards, 2018
- Silver for Accessible and Inclusive Tourism and Gold for Small Visitor Attraction of the Year, at the Dorset Tourism Awards, 2019
- Highly commended for Access and Inclusivity, Silver award for Small Visitor Attraction and Silver Award for Tourism Innovation at the regional Tourism Excellence Awards.
- Finalist at the 2018–19 AHl awards
- Bronze Visit England award, 2020

References

Shire Hall historic courthouse museum <http://shirehalldorset.org/>

Visitor Survey conducted August-September 2020

Trip Advisor https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g186263-d6658397-Reviews-Shire_Hall_Historic_Courthouse_Museum-Dorchester_Dorset_England.html?m=19905

The Guardian, 7 August 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2018/aug/07/shire-hall-dorchester-courthouse-museum-dorset-day-trip>

Museums Journal (October 2018): 29.

AHI 'Winners' *Interpretation Journal* 24:12 (Winter 2019): 16.

Dorset Tourism Awards <https://www.dorsettourismawards.org.uk/winners>

South West Tourism Excellence Awards <https://www.southwesttourismawards.org.uk/winners>

Visit England Awards for Excellence 2020 <https://www.visitbritain.org/business-advice/awards/visitengland-awards-excellence-2020-winners>