

Swansea Museum Report



Figure 1. *Swansea Museum building*. Image sourced from *Swansea Wales*, accessed 13 January 2026.

Introduction

This report seeks to highlight and analyse the arguments for and against adding or removing monuments, displays and artefacts to the safekeeping of Swansea Museum, with some attention to the strengths and weaknesses of their collection rationale. Museums play a vital role in shaping how heritage is accessed, interpreted and preserved, raising critical and valuable questions concerning the addition or removal of features and objects.¹ Due to the dynamic cultural, political and social nature of our society in Wales, museums must constantly ensure suitable adjustments are made to their collecting, interpreting and presenting practices, in order to suit the given moral and political frameworks, successful delivery of information to audiences and changing understandings of heritage value.² According to Ofcom, UK adults spend an average of four and a half hours online, which is why it is imperative that museums and other conduits of knowledge adopt a framework which can convey information to audiences

¹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 2–5.

² Rhiannon Mason, *Museums, Nations, Identities: Wales and its National Museums* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 1–5; Simon Knell, *Museums and the Future of Collecting*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 1–4.

as accurately as a physical visit can.³ This piece is based on personal interaction through the online presentation of Swansea Museum website which includes access to a blog, a digital gift shop, collection, events and activities, museum background and context, online exhibitions and a free digital guide.⁴

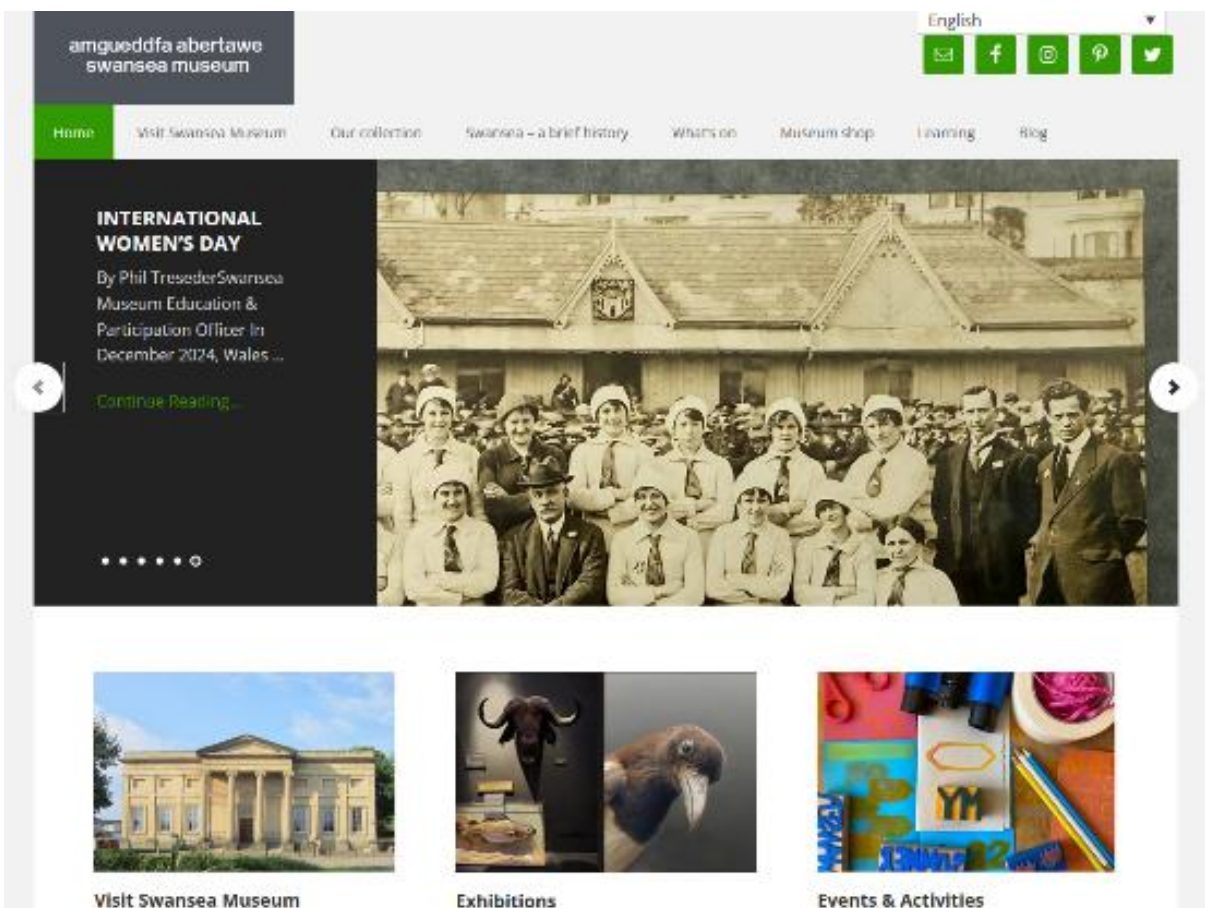


Figure 2. Swansea Museum website, “Home” page. Screenshot taken by the author from the Swansea Museum website, accessed 13 January 2026.

Theoretical background

Museums have some obligation and responsibility to actively construct and deliver digestible knowledge to diverse audiences through processes of classification, selection, and display, whether presenting physically or online⁵. Considering these expectations and the dynamic environment which museums must constantly navigate, it could be argued that the successful online presence of Swansea Museum as a suitable interpretive heritage space requires

³ Ofcom, *Online Nation 2025 Report* (London: Ofcom, 2025), accessed January 11, 2026, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2025/online-nations-report-2025.pdf?v=409837>.

⁴ Swansea Museum, “Home” page, accessed 11 January 2026, <https://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/>.

⁵ Michael M. Ames, “Cannibal Tours, Glass Boxes and the Politics of Interpretation,” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London: Routledge, 1994), 105.

continual amelioration through curatorial decision-making. Hooper-Greenhill critiques earlier models of museum communication, wherein they existed primarily as spaces of information transmission, lacking interpretive environments which actively involved the audience in the production of meaning.⁶ In contrast to some of these undesirable earlier approaches, some attempts have been made to construct this online museum as a mediating framework which selectively organises narratives, objects, and institutional values to offer a pathway which guides the user to engage with heritage in the absence of an authentic spatial experience. This attitude is almost a digital

extension of Bennett's conceptualization of museums as technologies of culture which regulate interpretation and meaning through structured environments and guided itineraries.⁷ Despite facilitating such a pathway, I contest that the digital mediation offered by the Swansea Museum website is limited in its ability to truly convey the full material, sensory, and spatial dimensions experienced through visiting the institution in real life, since elements such as the digital collection shows only a mere fraction of what truly exists

(see Fig. 3). This does not render the museum website as insignificant; but instead, presents an opportunity to build and improve, further highlighting the potential it holds as an evolving heritage space, capable of adopting new modes of access, representation and engagement with Welsh heritage, to the benefit of the public in conjunction with the safekeeping of the museum itself.

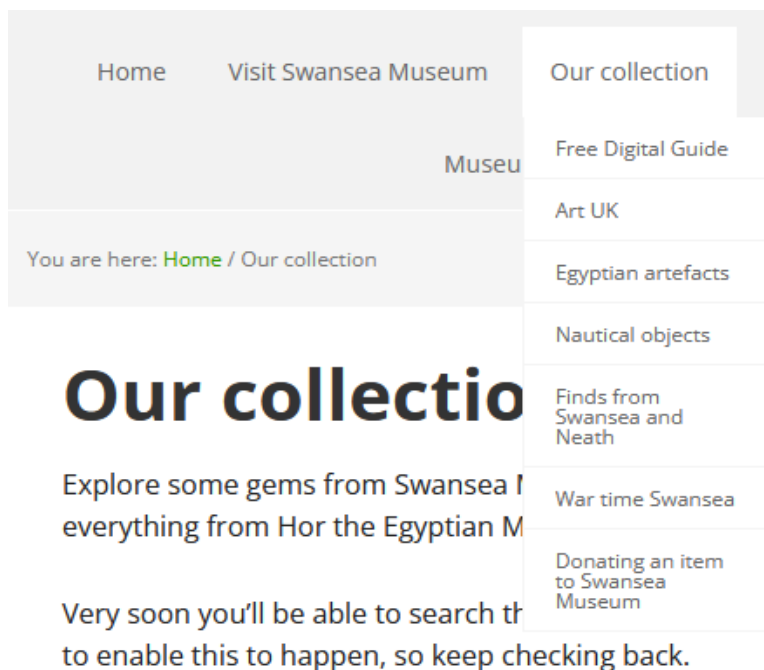


Figure 3. Swansea Museum website, "Our Collection" page. Screenshot taken by the author from the Swansea Museum website, accessed 13 January 2026.

⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 1–4.

⁷ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 6–8.

Controversial items and repatriation

The question of potential adjustments towards Swansea Museum and its website intersects with broader questions of collection management and museum safekeeping, particularly those in relation to the long-term ethical responsibility museums hold towards objects in their care.⁸

Debates surrounding the ownership, provenance and repatriation of such objects are particularly significant when considering collections formed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when our standards and understanding of acquisition, consent, and documentation were drastically different from those expected to be today. Greenfield's analysis of the Parthenon Marbles and other classical antiquity demonstrates that many objects are now subject to rational repatriation claims, grounded in the injustice of the context of acquisition.⁹ Although controversy around objects in Swansea Museum's collection is limited now, several

sources describe the accelerating process of repatriation across the UK, with advocates calling for mandatory policies to ensure museums are prepared for repatriation claims – indicating that Swansea Museum may soon come under criticism for certain objects in its collection.¹⁰ On the “our collection” section of the



Figure 4. *Egyptian mummy of Hor (Ptolemaic period) on display at Swansea Museum.* Image sourced from the Swansea Museum “Meet the Mummy” webpage, accessed 13 January 2026.

website, there is an “Egyptian artefacts” page, which leads to three artefacts: the Egyptian Mummy, Ibis amulet and Sepulchral Figure. This page describes the museum as having “many” Egyptian and Greek artefacts, yet only displays the aforementioned three, which severely undersells the museum.¹¹ To a potential visitor, a quick browse on this page might

⁸ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 2–8.

⁹ Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Gareth Harris, “As restitutions slow across Europe, UK may be poised for progress,” *The Art Newspaper*, 14 January 2025, accessed 13 January 2026, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/01/14/as-restitutions-slow-across-europe-uk-may-be-poised-for-progress>; Amy Shakespeare, “Repatriation is urgent work – it needs to be part of the Accreditation scheme,” *Museums Journal*, Museums Association, July 2025, accessed 13 January 2026, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2025/07/repatriation-is-urgent-work-it-needs-to-be-part-of-the-accreditation-scheme/>.

¹¹ Swansea Museum, “Egyptian artefacts,” accessed 13 January 2026, <http://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/our-collection/egyptian-artefacts/>.

result in a disappointing and underwhelming image of the museum, resulting in lost interest in the institution. One antidote to this might be to expand the digital catalogue of Egyptian artefacts, whilst actively including Greek ones, since they are mentioned in the heading. However, this decision may not be straightforward, since many of these artefacts “purchased” from Egypt by Sir Francis Grenfell in the late 1800s; although legally framed at the time, often reflected unequal power relations, and are increasingly subject to ethical reassessment.¹² Another idea, as explored by Simpson, could be to contextualize and reinterpret such displays in a more sensitive manner, especially where removal or repatriation is complex or unresolved.¹³ This requires careful balancing, as repatriation would likely help to frame the public image of the museum as a considerate, ethical, and sensitive institution, however this course of action risks forfeiting one of the Museum’s most recognizable and prominent objects, which, according to the website, draws in many visitors.¹⁴ A mediating solution which could protect the institution of multiple angles might be to gradually repatriate some of the more controversial items to align with evolving ethical and professional standards, whilst replacing returned pieces with local artifacts which still draw in visitors.

Removal to accommodate?

Swansea Museum website includes some interesting details about various chronological periods, but excludes Roman and Viking periods, which raises the question: should some of the less relevant periods be removed or replaced to make space for the aforementioned? The Romans constructed *Letocetum settlement* around 75CE, now found in nearby Loughor, whilst the Viking activity in south Wales and the Swansea region is attested archaeologically and linguistically through coastal contacts and Scandinavian-derived place names.¹⁵ The omission of these two significant periods poses risks privileging selected chapters of history, whilst marginalizing others, which demonstrates the way museums can construct meaning through processes of selection within institutional narratives – an approach widely critiqued due to the limiting nature over

¹² Suzanne Keene, *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), chap. 3; Swansea Museum, “Meet the Mummy,” accessed 13 January 2026, <http://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/our-collection/egyptian-artefacts/meet-the-mummy/>.

¹³ Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1–5, 15–18.

¹⁴ Swansea Museum, “Meet the Mummy,” accessed 13 January 2026, <http://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/our-collection/egyptian-artefacts/meet-the-mummy/>.

¹⁵ Mark Redknap, “Viking-Age Settlement in Wales: Some Recent Advances,” in *Viking Age Settlement in Wales: Research Framework and Strategies* (Cymrodorion/Bibliotheca Celtica, 2017), 5–12, accessed 13 January, 2026, <https://www.cymrodorion.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/1-Redknap-Viking-Age-Settlement.pdf>; Roman Britain, “Loughor (Letocetum) Roman Fort,” accessed 13 January 2026, <http://www.roman-britain.co.uk/places/leucarum/>.

interpretive balance and inclusivity.¹⁶ On 12 January 2026, Archaeologists confirmed the presence of a large Roman Villa underneath Margam Park, Port Talbot – just around the corner

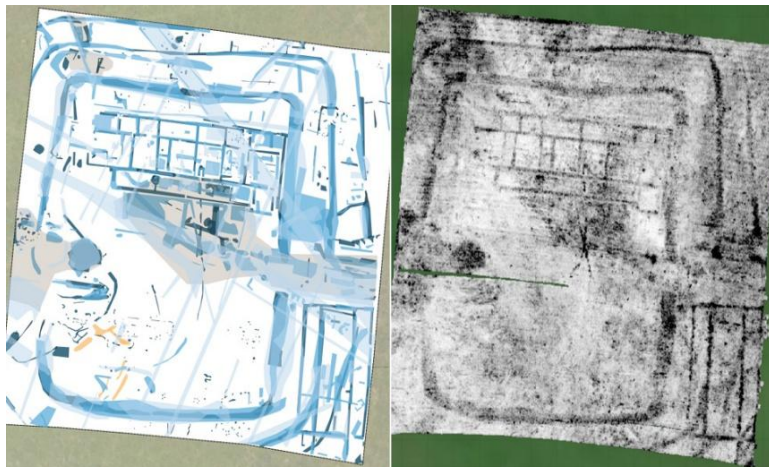


Figure 5. Geophysical survey image of Roman Villa discovery. Image reproduced from BBC News, 12 January 2026.

from Swansea.¹⁷ This discovery offers a unique opportunity for Swansea Museum website to include future findings, digitized artefacts, interactive maps, and even contextual interpretation, presenting a more inclusive and continuous account of the region's past. It would not be logical to remove pre-existing periods documented on the website, since this simply shifts the imbalance to a

different historical chapter, whilst undoing the hard work of a digital curator.¹⁸ This approach would acknowledge the deep temporal layering of landscape, improve chronological balance, and historical inclusivity, whilst improving the credibility and visibility of Swansea Museum's website.

Implications of removal on inclusion

When I visited Swansea Museum in December 2025, I was met by a riveting exhibition called *Triumph and Tragedy Swansea VE 80*, an emotionally and visually engaging display exploring life in Swansea during WWII. This included historic maps, photographs, and objects from this period. When viewing this same exhibition on Swansea Museum's website, only a mere glimpse is shown: one historic image of Swansea, one 45-second video describing context and

¹⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 5; Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 48–58; Ames, "Cannibal Tours, Glass Boxes and the Politics of Interpretation," 98–106.

¹⁷ Steven Morris, "Newly discovered 'Port Talbot Pompeii' may have been Roman centre for agriculture," *The Guardian*, January 12 2026, accessed January 15 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2026/jan/12/newly-discovered-port-talbot-pompeii-may-have-been-roman-centre-for-agriculture>; Swansea University, "Swansea University heritage project recovers evidence of a major archaeological find," news release, 12 January 2026, accessed January 15 2026, <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/press-office/news-events/news/2026/01/swansea-university-heritage-project-recovers-evidence-of-a-major-archaeological-find.php>.

¹⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 5.



Figure 6. *Costumes in Triumph and Tragedy* Swansea VE 80 exhibition, Swansea Museum. Photograph by the author, December 2025.

showcasing the exhibition room, and seven sentences.¹⁹ This digital flattening of the original product shares parallels with what Bennett identifies as the regulation of knowledge through structured visibility and absence, wherein the curatorial absence becomes more noticeable.²⁰ Although it is unlikely to be intentional omission of information of nefarious motivation, the lack of information and resources in the virtual environment actively limits the audience participation in meaning-making and accessing knowledge. The lack of tactile, costume-based, and sensory forms of engagement pose the risk of excluding certain audiences, as Falk and Dierking emphasize that museum learning is often shaped by the interaction of personal and physical contexts – including visitors’ developmental levels

and preferred methods of interaction.²¹ To expand on this, it could be said that the online presence has missing pieces, which might be filled with interactive maps, digitized photographs, and multilayered media to promote inclusivity to more members of our society. This diversification of information could help to expand the accessibility and digital reach of Swansea Museum, alongside reinforcing the institution’s position as being inclusive and present.

Protecting, replacing and rearranging pre-existing artefacts and displays

From a collections-management perspective, an alternative to permanent removal or static display would be to adopt further use of selective rotation and digital substitution as strategies for long-term safekeeping.²² When visiting the Natural History Gallery room, the air smelt damp and musty. Certain items presented in this room are fragile and sensitive to environmental conditions (see Figure 7.), so it might be sensible to remove them from continuous physical exposure, by employing selective rotation and digitization, ultimately balancing conservation

¹⁹ Swansea Museum, “Exhibitions,” accessed 13 January 2026 <http://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/>.

²⁰ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 59–63.

²¹ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 27–29.

²² Julian Spalding, *The Poetic Museum: Reviving Historic Collections* (Munich; London; New York: Prestel, 2002), 51.

priorities with public access in an increasing digital world.²³ There are limited traces of displays from this gallery on the website, however one potential development would be to create and upload 3D scans of these artefacts to the webpage – a practice successfully employed on the fragile German Tendaguru Collection, which is an effective compromise to permanent removal.²⁴ By complementing a temporary or reduced physical presence with strong digital presence, Swansea Museum could reduce conservation risks, whilst simultaneously maintaining transparency in its collection – thus reinforcing a dual responsibility of collection protection and accessible heritage.²⁵



Figure 7. *Taxidermy specimens on display in the Natural History Gallery, Swansea Museum.* Photograph by the author, December 2025.

Conclusion

This report has demonstrated that Swansea Museum's digital presence plays a considerable role in shaping public understanding of the city's past, yet requires some careful adjustment to combat the uneven representation, inclusion, controversies and preservation of their collection. Whilst it can be said that many of the existing artefacts, displays and monuments offer valuable insights, their digital counterparts often lack accessibility, contextual depth and sensory engagement. Rather than prioritising removal of some artefacts or displays in favor of museum safekeeping, this analysis argues for the promotion of selective addition, rotation,

²³ Keene, *Fragments of the World*, 1–5, 21–23.

²⁴ Verónica Díez Díaz, Sara Akhlaq, Amy Campbell, Marion Depraetere, Kristin Mahlow-Tillack, Ina Heumann, and Daniela Schwarz, "Risks and Responsibilities: The German Tendaguru Collection as Cultural Heritage and Its 3D Digitisation," in *3D Research Challenges in Cultural Heritage IV: Risk Prevention and Monitoring Methods*, ed. Marinos Ioannides, Giovanni Issini, and Daniel Oliveira (Cham: Springer, 2025), 69–82. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-93753-8_5.

²⁵ Paul F. Marty, "Museum Informatics," in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, 3rd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), 3717–3725, <https://doi.org/10.1081/E-ELIS3-120043944>.

reinterpretation, recontextualization, and digitization. By expanding the digital content, including further context and narratives, and expanding the depth of existing exhibitions, Swansea Museum's website has the potential to present a more inclusive, transparent, and socially responsive account of its heritage, reinforcing and protecting its standing as a respectable and well-regarded institution.

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Figures

Figure 1. Swansea Wales. "Swansea Museum." Accessed 13 January 2026. <https://swanseawales.co.uk/swansea-museum/>.

Figure 2. Swansea Museum. "Home." Accessed 13 January 2026. <http://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/>.

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Figure 4. Swansea Museum. "Meet the Mummy." Accessed 13 January 2026.

<http://www.swanseamuseum.co.uk/meet-the-mummy/>.

Figure 5. BBC News. "Roman Villa Discovered Near Port Talbot Revealed by Geophysical Survey." 12 January 2026. Accessed January 15, 2026.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgk8j1gkxelo>.

Figure 6. *Costumes in Triumph and Tragedy: Swansea VE 80 exhibition*, Swansea Museum. Photograph by the author, December 2025.

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