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‘A PERMANENT CIVILISING EFFECT’?

The impact of reforming working-class museum visitors in Liverpool during the nineteenth century

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On 18 October 1860, William Ewart MP (1798–1869) spoke at the opening of the new Liverpool public museum. Ewart was peculiarly well-positioned to commentate on the Museum’s virtues: a native Liverpudlian, he had sponsored the 1845 Museums Act, which for the first time allowed town councils to levy taxation to fund municipal collections. Liverpool’s new museum – which replaced a smaller venue in operation since 1852 – thus represented another step towards meeting Ewart’s ambition that ‘every large town’ should possess ‘a museum of such character as might give sound taste to the population... and enable them to apply the skill they obtain to manufactures’.¹ Ewart believed that the Liverpool Museum would ‘extend the benefits of education amongst the people’ and have ‘a permanent civilising effect on the character of our population’.²

This chapter assesses the extent to which Ewart’s ‘civilising effect’ was borne out by using archival material (newspapers, annual reports, minute books) to evaluate working-class visitors’ experiences during the period from Liverpool Museum’s foundation through to the First World War. The chapter begins by outlining the reforming intent which motivated the creation of civic museums in the mid-nineteenth century before questioning whether the reality matched the rhetoric. The second section demonstrates that in practice Liverpool Museum remained a bourgeois stronghold, remaining closed when working-class men had most free time available to attend.³ Having outlined these points, the final section contends that barriers to entry did not go unnoticed or unopposed, and that working-class visitors occasionally found novel ways to defy the expectations of middle-class museum professionals.

The chapter revisits debates about Victorian museums’ ideological functions. The opening section parallels Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett’s respective arguments regarding museums’ status as instruments of state power. Developing Michel Foucault’s analyses of prisons, Hooper-Greenhill’s *Museums and*

the Shaping of Knowledge (1992) suggested that nineteenth-century museums were ‘disciplinary technologies’ which sought to produce a ‘docile’, governable citizenry through ‘hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination’.⁴

In *The Birth of the Museum* (1995), Bennett nuanced Hooper-Greenhill’s points by proposing that public museums and penitentiaries were the ‘Janus face of power’: where carceral institutions meted out punitive instruction and correction, museums sought to peaceably regulate and reform the working classes through (self-)surveillance and exposure to the ‘educative and civilising’ influence of middle-class morals, tastes and habits.⁵ But while it shares common ground with Bennett and Hooper-Greenhill’s analyses, the chapter ultimately sides with more recent scholarship in querying the extent that their theses stand up to archival scrutiny. As Kate Hill pointed out in *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850–1914* (2005), a lack of sources authored by members of the working class makes it difficult to substantiate how they actually experienced museums, meaning visitors remain ‘the great unknown’ for historians ‘despite the weight of speculation, assumptions and pedagogy targeted at them’.⁶ Without disputing Hill’s general conclusion, the chapter endeavours to make working-class museumgoers three-dimensional and ‘knowable’, in the process arguing that Victorian museums were more contested spaces than historiography sometimes allows.

The birth of Liverpool Museum

Campaigning for a public museum in Liverpool began in response to the 1845 Museum Act. *The Liverpool Mercury* newspaper published various stories in favour of founding a municipal collection, and in 1850 Liverpool town council agreed to establish a museum committee.⁷ The plans gained momentum with the bequest of an extensive natural history collection by the deceased 13th Earl of Derby (Edward Smith Stanley, 1775–1851). Items from the Derby collection first went on show in October 1852, with bigger natural history galleries opening the following March. Construction of enlarged premises began in 1857, funded by Liverpool merchant banker William Brown (1784–1864). The new museum opened in October 1860 at a site renamed William Brown Street. This remains home to World Museum Liverpool (as the public museum has been known since 2005), the Walker Art Gallery (est. 1877) and the city’s central library (built 1879).⁸

William Ewart was not alone in identifying Liverpool’s Museum as an agent of moral uplift. The 1860 opening ceremony was accompanied by a ‘Working Man’s Meeting’ at which a ‘testimonial of the working men of Liverpool’ was delivered by Daniel Guile, a trade unionist. Guile’s speech related the Museum to wider efforts to educate workers. Whereas earlier generations had regarded tradesmen as ‘mere beasts of burden’, Guile reported that more recently ‘spirits had arisen amidst this intellectual gloom ... showing that in the masses there was mind’. Praising the engineering achievements of George Stephenson, James Watt and Isambard Kingdom Brunel – ‘men ... sprang from us, the masses’ – Guile expressed hope that the Museum would inspire comparable excellence. To do so, Guile cautioned that ‘the

power of the mind' needed to win 'complete victory over sensual appetites' and that 'self-denial must be exercised'. He encouraged workers to devote their spare time to 'study, thought, perseverance and industry' at the Museum instead of indulging themselves inside 'the taproom, singing room [or] dancing room'.⁹

Commentary on workers' alcohol habits was a recurrent feature of museums discourse. For instance, the earliest parliamentary proposals for provincial museums came during a Select Committee on Drunkenness in 1834. The committee chair James Silk Buckingham (1786–1855) identified the 'prevalence of drunkenness among the labouring classes' as an 'evil' side effect of industrialisation and urbanisation, suggesting that 'humble museums and collections of works of nature and art' would offer a solution by affording 'opportunities for development of mental faculties and moral feelings'.¹⁰ Arguments for temperance likewise factored into discussions of Liverpool's public museum. In December 1850, the *Mercury* reported that a meeting of people 'favourable to the establishment of a free museum and library' had resolved that 'nothing could be so desirable as to give the lower orders some better mode of spending their time than in the cursed dramhouse saw at the corner of every street'.¹¹ Another *Mercury* editorial recommended that museums might 'cleanse our cities of the moral and physical filth which abounds in them' by providing amusements to rival 'a street row, a dog fight or a quarrel between two men'.¹²

Allusions to 'cleaning the streets' intimate that maintaining law and order was one rationale for creating public museums. In 1850, the *Mercury* urged Liverpool town council to allocate funds to museum collections on the basis that, 'while a police officer is a serviceable person', institutions dedicated to 'self-improvement' were more 'powerful agents of order, morality and wellbeing'.¹³ Reiterating museums' connections to the carceral system, Liverpool's chief magistrate, Thomas S Raffles, was among the invited speakers at the 1860 workers' meeting. Raffles wished the Museum 'every success' in helping 'diminish vice', predicting that if working men spent more time at the Museum 'the court will become comparatively empty and make me an idle man'.¹⁴

Reforming discourse also related museums to urban sanitation systems. In 1851, for example, the *Mercury* published an editorial on 'the water question' featuring a plea that Liverpool town council should fund museum and library collections alongside municipal reservoirs and bathhouses.¹⁵ As Bennett has explicated, investment in public hygiene and cultural institutions was regarded as complementary: specifically, museum attendance and drinking fresh water were each reckoned wholesome alternatives to consuming alcohol inside public houses. Despite this, the utilitarian ethos of museum reformers did not seek to improve workers' physical and spiritual wellbeing as an end in itself. Rather, the ultimate goal was an 'inner or moral transformation' whereby working men actively *chose* to become industrious, economically productive citizens.¹⁶

Such realpolitik was another feature of discussions surrounding the creation of Liverpool's public museum. The *Mercury* reasoned the Museum might 'raise the intellectual standard of that class who contribute most largely to the production of the luxuries and necessities of life' by 'placing discoveries of great chemists,

mechanists, naturalists and inventors ... before every artisan'.¹⁷ Upskilling the working population was also deemed crucial for Britain's industrial competitiveness. At the opening of Liverpool Museum in 1860, Thomas Bazley (1797–1885), MP for Manchester, commented that the ongoing 'prosperity of Lancashire depends upon the increase of intelligence ... amongst all classes of the community', while William Brown stressed 'the importance of putting ... means of instruction within reach of the masses' because 'the more we are instructed, the more value we possess over every other nation'.¹⁸ Patriotic sentiment likewise rationalised that working-class visitors would willingly align themselves with displays of national and civic power encountered at public museums. In 1851, the *Mercury* forecast that the creation of a municipal museum would eventuate a situation where 'the poorest as well as the richest can visit it at all times – look upon it with pride, and, as a member of this great community, call it *his own* [original emphasis]'.¹⁹

Social distinctions and barriers to entry

Liverpool Museum's presumed significance for the city's labouring classes is clear enough. However, we should be cautious about taking the ideology of Victorian museum reformers at face value. As Bennett conceded, although civic museums were typically founded in the name of the working class, they were 'appropriated by social elites' and in practice acted to 'differentiat[e] elite from popular social classes ... rather than functioning as instruments of homogenisation as reforming thought had envisaged'.²⁰ This was, I would argue, true from the outset. For all the talk about the humbler classes, the ceremonies which marked the different stages of Liverpool Museum's opening were highly exclusive occasions. Events were generally ticketed, and offered a forum for merchants, industrialists, MPs, lords, church ministers, judges, colonial officials and visiting emissaries to address members of the working class about their particular social and political interests. The visual record testifies to the power differentials enforced on such occasions: photographs of the Museum's 1857 ground-breaking ceremony show a top-hatted clique segregated from the watching crowd by terracing.

This is indicative of how museum administration acted to reinforce social hierarchies. Patronising cultural institutions like parks, libraries, art galleries and orchestras was a means of the industrial middle classes legitimating their newfound wealth and status.²¹ As Kate Hill noted, a major benefaction like William Brown's left 'one's name attached to a grand and imposing civic building that was moreover a storehouse of knowledge'. More modestly, the middle classes 'proclaimed symbolic ownership' over Victorian cities by 'donating, getting on committees or working for the museum'.²² Evidencing this, throughout the nineteenth century, Liverpool Museum committee was dominated by members of the city's 'Old Families' – consisting mainly of merchant capitalists such as the Rathbone dynasty, the Forwoods, Pictons and Holts but also landed aristocrats like the Earls of Derby.²³ Underlining the social cachet associated with museum connoisseurship, committee activities were given extensive coverage in the local press, including *The Liverpool Mercury* – the 'organ' of the city's Liberal merchant elite.²⁴

Admittedly, Liverpool Museum's bourgeois status did not automatically preclude it from making a positive impact on the lower orders of society. The mechanics' institute movement, which had comparable roots in middle-class philanthropy, proved successful in attracting subscriptions from members of the working class as the nineteenth century progressed.²⁵ Likewise, Jonathan Rose has shown that grassroots 'mutual improvement' networks often conformed to values and sensibilities espoused by the Victorian middle class, especially regarding the latter's belief in the inherent improving influence of art, literature and culture.²⁶ The important distinction from these other forms of adult education, though, is that Liverpool Museum was not readily accessible to working men *at their own leisure*. Throughout the chronology covered in this chapter, the Museum was typically open only during working hours (10am till dusk) and remained closed on the day when labourers had most free time to frequent it (Sunday). Initially, it opened just three days a week, and even when workers' Saturday 'half-holiday' was added in 1857, the Museum remained closed to the public on Tuesdays and Fridays and completely shut on Sundays – the latter omission being noteworthy given that Sunday schools were central to the mutual improvement tradition.²⁷ The introduction of wintertime Monday evening openings marked a partial concession to workers' schedules – although even this proved sufficiently controversial that the practice was terminated between 1871 and 1888 (see the next section). Tuesday opening eventually began in 1890, with Sundays added following the First World War. A full seven-day week was finally implemented in 1922 – seven decades after the first museum exhibits went on show.²⁸

Committee minutes attest that other rules and practices served to shore up unequal access to the Museum. A lengthy disquisition on the opening of new natural history galleries in March 1853 reveals that selective admission was instituted after the volume of visitors – 10,000 people in four days – rendered the exhibitions 'impassable'. The committee thus determined to 'restrict admission to persons presenting some attempts at decency of appearance', refusing entrance to those 'roughest' members of 'the labouring population' who 'flow in during the usual dinner hour 12 to 1'. Reinforcing the point, notice boards were erected bearing the inscription:

It is requested that all parties visiting the museum come clean and in decent apparel to preserve an appearance of order and propriety. All smoking and spitting strictly prohibited. Children in arms not admitted nor children under 12 years of age unless accompanied by an adult.²⁹

By contrast, individuals with the right credentials and connections were granted privileged access to museum collections. Entrance on closure days was extended to people who possessed a 'written order signed by a member of the [town] council', with students likewise permitted during cleaning hours – providing they obtained 'satisfactory references'.³⁰ Committee members also had liberty to use museum collections for private delectation. The Museum keeper, Reverend Henry Hugh

Higgins (1814–1893) and its curator, Thomas J Moore (1824–1892), each on occasion used specimens from the natural history galleries when delivering presentations to members-only associations such as Liverpool’s Literary and Philosophical Society.³¹

These inequities did not go unnoticed, and the committee was periodically asked questions about admissions procedures at town council meetings.³² During the 1880s, the Museum’s policies were concertedly targeted by Liverpool Sunday Society, an organisation which campaigned for public institutions to open on the Sabbath. The Sunday Society’s secretary Robert McMillan sent a series of letters to the *Mercury*, which were later collected in the pamphlet *Workmen and Museums* (1886). Protesting that ‘thousands of people are debarred from museums on the only day they could possibly visit them’, McMillan’s letters sought to draw renewed attention to museums’ educative potential.³³ Echoing pronouncements in favour of civic museums heard during the 1840s–1860s, McMillan estimated that every ‘trade in our city’ would ‘be improved by the education of toilers’, arguing that widening access to the types of instruction available through studying museum collections could prevent ‘our working people losing their supremacy in the markets of the world’. Diversifying audiences was deemed of acute urgency because ‘the average member of the Trades Congress has no more idea of the treasures in our museums than if they were in the mountains of the moon’.³⁴

This verdict prompts re-evaluation of the rhetoric that surrounded Liverpool Museum’s creation; had its ‘civilising effect’ been what it was cracked up to be, McMillan would not have needed to rehearse familiar arguments about museums’ utility twenty-to-thirty years later. Nor did working-class habits become moderate in these intervening decades. Efforts to discourage alcohol consumption (always an unlikely goal) especially seem to have amounted to little. Committee minutes record that ‘drink and signs of drink were occasionally noticed’ among museumgoers, particularly on bank holidays.³⁵ This reflected wider phenomena. In 1874, *The Times* reported that 20,000 people were arrested for drinking-related offences annually in Liverpool, making it ‘the most drunken town in England’. A follow-up editorial condemned Liverpool’s ‘leading citizens’ as ‘negligent of their duties’ for ‘not attempting to exercise proper influence over their fellow townsmen’.³⁶ By framing the matter in these terms, *The Times* pinpointed the absence of precisely the sort of corrective influence Liverpool Museum was supposed to offer.

Working-class agency inside the Museum

The archival record nevertheless attests that *some* working-class visitors managed to attend the Museum irrespective of the limitations and obstacles placed in their way. As noted, however, attempts to interpret visitor working-class behaviour and opinions face methodological constraints. Hill has explained that little effort was made to record visitors’ views in comment books or suchlike, and that surviving sources were

predominantly written by middle-class museum professionals and journalists.³⁷ Consequently, we have a fuller picture of how working-class visitors were *perceived* than of their own understandings of museum-going.

This broadly holds true for documents produced by Liverpool Museum, which contain numerical attendance data but sparing references to visitor's thoughts and actions. Occasional efforts to collate visitor feedback mark a partial exception to this rule. In a paper to the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1884, Henry Higgins discussed 'valuable information' he had obtained by observing and interviewing visitors. Making 'overtures inducing remarks on the objects exhibited', Higgins was able to piece together a general profile of Liverpool Museum's audience. He calculated that of every thousand visitors, 10 to 20 were 'students' 'who come with a definite purpose of improving their knowledge', with around two hundred mere 'loungers' and an overwhelming majority (about 780) of 'observers' 'not conscious of any purpose beyond a wish to see the museum'. Within these broad brushstrokes, Higgins noticed a high proportion of 'emigrants' (classed as 'observers') and children ('loungers'), adding that 'observers' were 'more numerous attracted by the birds than by the invertebrate animals' with the opposite true of 'students'. Higgins differentiated the 'direct' learning undertaken by 'men with a cultivated interest in science' from the 'indirect influence upon the mass of visitors ... hundreds of thousands of whom it was vain to hope were deriving much in the way of scientific instruction'. Tellingly, Higgins regarded the former as museums' core demographic, contending that 'the interests of ordinary observers' ought not 'lead the construction or arrangement' of exhibits. In any case, Higgins curtailed his surveys upon realising that 'conversationally approachable' visitors were 'scattered like flowers amidst the innumerable culms of grass in a meadow'.³⁸

Higgins's comments betray wider reservations about working-class visitors. Befitting Hooper-Greenhill's theories about museums' disciplinary functions, museum professionals tended to view visitors as nuisances and threats that they needed to exert control over. The dress codes issued in 1853 (see above) were part of an attempt to 'organise a system of discipline and supervision so as to carry on the institution with order and regularity'. This involved employing attendants and policemen to monitor the public's behaviour plus the use of 'direction papers ... to keep visitors moving in the right direction'. The committee gauged these measures' success by inspecting exhibition cases and finding 'not a single square of glass in the slightest degree damaged ... the very best test of quiet and orderly conduct of spectators'. On the contrary, visitors' 'greatest fault' was their 'very free indulgence in an exportation' – i.e. spitting.³⁹

Such squeamishness hints at the broader body politics which governed visitors' engagement with museum space – the most obvious example being prohibitions against touching exhibits. Besides enacting legitimate conservation concerns, regulations on handling objects reflected social prejudices about working-class bodies specifically. As Fiona Candlin has observed, banning touch only became commonplace when museums began freely admitting the general public in the

nineteenth century. Prior to this, touch had been deemed congruent to eighteenth-century museums' Enlightenment ideals and remained so as long they maintained de facto exclusivity. Only once efforts were made to democratise museum audiences did it become expedient to determine who could handle artefacts, when and on what basis – typically using class distinctions.⁴⁰

Classing of touch is discernible in Liverpoolian museums discourse. When, for example, Liverpool Royal Institution considered opening its national history galleries to non-members in 1826, an objection was raised about the 'mischief' likely to result from the 'too prevalent habit' of 'lower classes ... examining objects of curiosity through the medium of their fingers'.⁴¹ The cleanliness of working-class hands too represented a cause for concern. Liverpool Museum's first annual report, published in 1853, remarked on the 'slight degree of disorder and irregularity' arising from visitors arriving 'direct from their occupations with unwashed hands and negligent attire'. Lavatories were thus installed 'to leave no excuse for this conduct' – a contingency which was said to have improved the hygiene of the 'operative classes'.⁴² This presents a vivid example of museums' civilising intent; here, visitors' bodies were literally *cleansed* inside the museum.

Yet the archive also contains instances where working-class visitors appear far less pliant to museum professionals' instructions. A striking example pertains to the Museum's experiments with evening openings. Beginning in 1863, the initiative – which provided extra visiting hours from 7pm on Mondays during the winter months – initially proceeded with little incident. This changed in January 1870, when Thomas Moore notified the Museum committee of 'the great inconvenience' generated by 'large and increasing numbers of young people' using evenings 'for promenading and conversation rather than for the inspection of objects'.⁴³ That December, youngsters again caused 'annoyance and crowding out [of] well-conducted persons' via a litany of 'irregularities' such as 'persons wandering about without any object', 'idlers ... occup[ying] seats to the exclusion of others', and visitors 'spitting on the floors, lounging about and obstructing passages'.⁴⁴ After further instances of 'gross misconduct', the Museum committee discontinued evening openings in September 1871.⁴⁵

Descriptions of the evening openings support Hill's suggestion that working-class visitors tended not to regard museums as 'different, quasi-spiritual spaces', instead adopting patterns of behaviour familiar to other recreation activities.⁴⁶ In 1888, the *Mercury* recalled the 'rough play' of 'rowdies' which characterised evening openings, noting that 'flirting' by 'young men and women' had been commonplace.⁴⁷ A reader's letter drew attention to the 'open and gross misconduct by a multitude of girls and boys – of course generally of the lowest classes' who 'flooded in such enormous numbers as to be practically unmanageable and uncontrollable'. Respectable museumgoers, the reader added, were put off by 'roughs of the same class as those who ... at certain times make the boulevards, Newsham Park, and the landing-stage unfit for decent people to use'.⁴⁸

By this time, however, evening openings were judged the lesser of two evils. In October 1888, the *Mercury* reported that the Museum committee had agreed to

temporarily reintroduce evening hours as 'a counterblast to the effort being made to open the place to the masses on Sunday'.⁴⁹ Addressing visitors at the first of the resumed evening openings, committee member GH Ball refuted allegations that 'the working classes had no opportunities of seeing the museum under present circumstances', and challenged visitors to adopt appropriate 'conduct ... to show how much they appreciated the place'.⁵⁰ Not leaving this to chance, Henry Higgins reminded attendees of their duty to 'aid staff in protecting against all unnecessary interruption', while the *Mercury* advised that 'all rate-paying adult visitors constitute a vigilance committee to keep in order the young savages who frequent every place warm, light and free during the winter nights'.⁵¹ Such precautions made a satisfactory impact. Confirming the absence of 'disorderly conduct ... levity and boisterousness', the committee agreed to permanently reinstitute evening openings during winter months – a policy which remained in place throughout this chapter's timespan.⁵²

The debates about evening openings exaggerate the gap between rhetoric and reality which characterised Victorian museums. Testament to this, the *Mercury* reports featured an aside lamenting the high price of museum catalogues – something which had not been a problem 'so long as the museum was reserved for genteel visitors ... but should be looked into now an attempt is being made to induce the poor'.⁵³ This statement amounts to tacit admission that the Museum contravened the principles espoused at its inception, which ought to have translated into attempts to 'induce the poor' from the get-go. Indeed, exhibitions becoming *too popular* was a somewhat perverse bugbear for committee members. After an influx of '6730 excursionists' in August 1863, Thomas Moore was empowered to 'close the doors' whenever the 'pressure' of visitor numbers 'jeopardise[d] the safety of the property under his care'.⁵⁴ Worries about visitor volume too had factored into the committee's decision to suspend evening openings. Explaining the ban, Ball cited statistics that showed that where the average nightly attendance was 'only 954' during the winter of 1864, it 'had been 2000' in 1870–1871.⁵⁵

Discussions of evening openings also provide a rare glimpse of Liverpool's working classes *speaking back* to the discourses surrounding museum attendance. The *Mercury* recorded that Ball and Higgins's speeches on the resumption of evening openings provoked 'two working men' to make 'very strong remarks as to the foolishness of expecting artisans to come to such a place after a hard day's work'.⁵⁶ One of the (unnamed) men objected that he was 'too tired to appreciate the beauties of the place', highlighting various impracticalities associated with evening attendance:

As most working men live a mile or two from their work, it was impossible for them to get home after a hard day's work, get cleaned and get tea, then go to the museum with his wife and children, especially as he had to go to bed early in order to rise at five in the morning.

The second man clarified that he sacrificed a day's work in order to bring his family to the Museum, drawing applause when affirming a preference for opening on Sundays, 'our only leisure day'.⁵⁷

These snatches of dialogue reiterate that members of the working class took an active interest in museums, while also hinting they were wise to some of the vacuities associated with Victorian reforming ideology. Furthermore, working-class Liverpudlians do not appear to have accepted the Museum's rules and regulations as non-negotiable. One remarkable incidence of this is found in the 1897 *Bulletin of the Liverpool Museum*. An article headlined "'Medicine"' at the Museum' recounted how:

A few days ago, an Irish lad suffering badly from scrofulous sores was brought to the museum by his parents, who earnestly besought that they be allowed to touch the child's neck with an Irish Stone Celt exhibited in one of the cases. It was unavailing to try and persuade the deluded and superstitious couple that no possible good could follow such an application. [But] as their faith in the efficacy of the Stone could not be shaken, and they were loath to go away without being allowed to try this, in their behalf, unfailing remedy, opposition was finally, and not without some hesitation, withdrawn, and the ancient implement placed in their hands. After the operation, the parents departed happy, grateful, and in the most perfect confidence that their child would be healed, and not without expressions of surprise that so great a boon had been conferred without fee.⁵⁸

This anecdote is rich in detail about how museumgoers and curators cohabited. On the face of it, the power resided with the 'authorities' who were able to guard access to the Stone Celt. The *Bulletin* likewise retained the capacity to name and frame the visitors' experience, with the choice of language ('deluded', 'suspicious') affecting disdain towards the visitors and their apparent mysticism. Yet, far from being cowed into obedience, the Irish family ultimately emerged triumphant. Acting despite themselves, the curators acquiesced to the 'deluded couple' and allowed them to handle the Celt – thus breaking the taboo on visitors touching exhibits. Moreover, the family then proceeded to use the Celt to administer an act – one of religious devotion or rudimentary medicine – that went totally against the grain of a publication produced by a purportedly modern and scientifically rational institution.

Conclusion

The Stone Celt incident provides a singular example of visitors' propensity to confound museum committee edicts and expectations. It also conveys the sense of mutual unintelligibility which characterised working-class museumgoers' interactions with middle-class museum professionals. Henry Higgins conceded this in an 1892 speech which affirmed that Victorian society was 'divided into

various classes each of which has its own habits and modes of life, and between them exists a good deal of the spirit of Oriental cast'. For Higgins, this lack of common comprehension presented museums with a dilemma 'now we are supposed to be bidding for visitors from all classes'.⁵⁹

Higgins's statement exposes the fallacy behind sentiments originally expressed in favour of civic museums: had the lofty ideals of Ewart et al. materialised, museums like Liverpool's would have been bidding for working-class visitors from their very inception. The reality, as we have seen, was that numerous obstacles and practicalities inhibited working-class attendance at the Museum, and the kneejerk response to 'misconduct' tended to restrict access rather than trying to correct or re-educate. Nevertheless, as also demonstrated, working-class Liverpudlians showed enthusiasm for the educational opportunities offered by the Museum, and proved adept at circumnavigating barriers to accessing its collections. Restrictive opening hours were contested, and, once inside the Museum, working-class visitors often acted in ways which challenged middle-class etiquette. This, I would argue, allows us to recover a fuller appreciation of working-class *agency* than is provided by Hooper-Greenhill and Bennett's interpretations of public museums. In sum, we should neither *overestimate* the ingenuousness of museum reformers nor *underestimate* working-class visitors' potential to resist museums' 'civilising effect'.

Notes

- 1 HC Deb, 6 March 1845. Accessed 4 April 2020. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1845/mar/06/museums-of-art>.
- 2 *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 October 1860, 5–7.
- 3 Museum audiences were conceptualised in highly gendered ways. Because civic museums were (in theory) geared towards the 'working man', female visitors initially received relatively little attention in museums discourse. This held true even though femininity itself was considered an auxiliary of museums' 'civilising' influence (Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 28–33). Women increasingly challenged these norms as the nineteenth century progressed (Hill, "Women and Museums 1850–1914").
- 4 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 168–90.
- 5 Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 5–66, 86–88.
- 6 Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums*, 125.
- 7 See: *Supplement to the Liverpool Mercury*, 28 November 1845, 1; 12 December 1845, 1; *Liverpool Mercury*, 16 January 1846, 12; 6 July 1846, 6; 29 February 1848, 5, 7 December 1847, 6; 5 April 1850, 3.
- 8 A word on nomenclature. Although for simplicity this chapter refers to 'Liverpool Museum' or 'Liverpool's Museum', various titles (Derby Museum, Brown Library and Museum) denoted different sections of the Museum during in the nineteenth century. Note also: the library, museum and art gallery were part of the same institution before the 1870s.
- 9 *Mercury*, 18 October 1860, 3.
- 10 HC Deb, 3 June 1834
- 11 *Mercury*, 13 December 1850, 3.
- 12 *Mercury*, 30 April 1850, 4. On alcohol and street entertainments in Victorian Liverpool, see Macilwee, *The Liverpool Underworld*, 103–17, 272–86.
- 13 *Mercury*, 30 April 1850, 4.
- 14 *Mercury*, 18 October 1860, 5.
- 15 *Mercury*, 12 September 1851, 6.

- 16 Bennett, 'The Multiplication of Culture's Utility' in *Museums, Power, Knowledge*, 68–71.
- 17 *Mercury*, 8 October 1852, 6.
- 18 *Mercury*, 19 October 1860, 5.
- 19 *Mercury*, 19 August 1851, 4.
- 20 Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 28.
- 21 See Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class*.
- 22 Hill, *Culture and Class*, 50–60.
- 23 Lane, *Liverpool*, 53–84.
- 24 *Mercury*, 1 January 1850, 8. On museums and newspapers see Flanders, "Early Museums and Nineteenth-Century Media," 72–81.
- 25 Walker, *The Development of the Mechanics' Institute Movement in Britain and Beyond*, 40–81.
- 26 Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class*, 38–48, 58–91.
- 27 Rose, *Intellectual Life of the Working Class*, 62, 64.
- 28 Millard, *Liverpool's Museum*, 2, 114–20, 31, 46. Liverpool's libraries and art gallery enacted Sunday opening earlier than the city Museum. See: Woodson-Boulton, *Transformative Beauty*, 69–73.
- 29 Liverpool Record Office [LRO] 352 MIN LIB 1/2 Library and Museum Committee Minutes, 17 March 1853, 84–86.
- 30 LRO 352 MIN LIB 1/5, 10 September 1863, 371; 19 January 1871, LRO MIN LIB 1/8, 192.
- 31 See for example the Higgins paper cited below and Moore's contributions to *Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool Vol. 16: 1861–1862*, 10, 26–27, 45.
- 32 LRO 352 MIN/LIB/1/4, 21 April 1859, pp. 105–6; 352 MIN/LIB/1/7, 21 October 1869, 405–6.
- 33 Robert McMillan letter, *Mercury*, 9 June 1886, 7.
- 34 McMillan, *Workmen and Museums: Being Selections from a Series of Letters Contributed to the Liverpool Mercury*, 2–7.
- 35 LRO 352 MIN LIB 1/19, 29 March 1888, 159.
- 36 *The Times*, 25 December 1874, 9; 26 December 1874, 7.
- 37 Hill, *Culture and Class*, 125–53.
- 38 Henry H. Higgins, "Museums of Natural History," *Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool*, Vol. 38: 1883–1884, 183–89.
- 39 LRO 352 MIN LIB 1/2, 17 March 1853, 84–86.
- 40 Candlin, "Art, Museums and Touch," 58–90, 110–11.
- 41 *Mercury*, 17 February 1826, 3.
- 42 *Report of the Library and Museum Committee of the Town Council of the Borough of Liverpool*, 6–7.
- 43 LRO 352 MIN/LIB/1/7, 20 January 1870, 448.
- 44 LRO 352 MIN/LIB/1/8, 10 March 1870, 474.
- 45 LRO 352 MIN LIB 1/11, 23 February 1871, 14 September 1871, 214, 331.
- 46 Hill, *Culture and Class*, 125–42.
- 47 *Mercury*, 30 March 1888, 5; 27 September 1888, 7.
- 48 *Mercury*, 31 March 1888, 3. The letter refers to a public park, opened 1868, and the shipping depot at Liverpool's Pier Head.
- 49 *Mercury*, 4 October 1888, 7.
- 50 *Mercury*, 2 October 1888, 5.
- 51 *Mercury*, 27 September 1888, 7.
- 52 *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report of the Committee of the Free Public Library, Museum and Walker Art Gallery the Borough of Liverpool*, 3–4.
- 53 *Mercury*, 15 November 1888, 7.
- 54 LRO 352 MIN/LIB/1/5, 20 August 1863, 363.
- 55 *Mercury*, 2 October 1888, 5.
- 56 *Mercury*, 4 October 1888, 7.
- 57 *Mercury*, 2 October 1888, 5.
- 58 *Bulletin of the Liverpool Museums*, 1:1 (1897), 28.
- 59 Higgins, "On the Cultivation of Special Features in Museums," *Report of Proceedings with Papers Read at the Third Annual General Meeting Held in Manchester*, 39.

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