

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION MUSEUM

*Jean Roberts**

*Director of Operations for the emerging National Education Museum
talks to Mark Deacon*

What do Estelle Morris, Christine Blowers, Jim Al Khalili, Stephen Morgan and Gervase Phinn have in common?

They are all patrons of the proposed National Education Museum. The National Education Museum aims to tell the story of education in Britain through documents, artifacts and recorded experience. This looks at how and what we have learned will enable us to build a deeper understanding of ourselves.

Jean Roberts is the Operations Manager explains more about the vision and progress toward that vision for the National Education Museum.

Whose idea is this? Where did the idea come from?

The idea began with Hank Roberts, a lifetime teacher and campaigner for education accessible to all, a man who has repeatedly demonstrated his passionate commitment to the idea of education, to the belief that the communication of knowledge and understanding provides us with the means to keep striving for a better fairer world in which no-one is denied a good education and the chance of a good life. He organised a meeting of interested colleagues at an education union conference and the National Education Museum was born.

Why do we need a National Education Museum?

There is not a national education museum which we feel is a big loss. We have other national museums, yet education seems to always be sidelined. Learning and teaching take place indoors, outdoors and increasingly online with virtual experiences. The museum will actively stimulate a better understanding of the purpose and value of education and promote debate for improvement and change.

Where has the development of the NEM got to? Buildings? Artefacts in storage?

Currently we are looking for a starter premises in Portsmouth. Portsmouth is a great city for Museums, and we have good support from a wide range of

*Corresponding author: e-mail: mark.deacon@buckingham.ac.uk

people and from the University, the City Museum, and other bodies. This starter premises will not be the Museum in itself but it will be a place to safely store our growing artefacts that people all over England and Wales want to donate. Some of these are currently stored in London and also Portsmouth plus still being held in lofts! There will be space equivalent to a small shop for events and receptions with a small changing display. There will be office space and the basic amenities.

What time period will the Museum cover? Back to Roman occupation? Monasteries? Victorian? Is there a key period on which you are focussed?

The Museum will reflect the policies and practices, some highly contested, that have shaped the history of education in England and Wales. We will aim to cover from when schools were first organised in the 6th Century, though obviously there is more information and artefacts in the more recent times. We have already started this collection. The Museum will also cover the wide variety of learning opportunities such as home schooling, forest schools, as well as from nursery up to university.

Education is inherently political – does the museum take a stance?

This can be a sensitive area. Our collections policy does include this type of check and we are very aware that our education Museum needs to cover mainstream political views related to education over the years. It has been very politicised over the years so this can be difficult. We want visitors to feel that they can explore and learn and then make up their own minds as to what is ‘good’ for children in the world of learning.

Are you considering particular “heroes” of education e.g. Robert Raikes?

We held an exhibition of ‘heroes’ a few years ago at various conferences and at events. The heroes chosen individually by Trustees included John Pounds, Maria Montessori, Fred Jarvis, Margaret McMillan, Michael Rosen, Rab Butler and Lady Plowden.

Conversely will you examine the impact of “villains”? E.g. Michael Gove?

Our education over the centuries has seen a real churn in ideas and methods being applied to teaching. I remember when the National Curriculum arrived and infant teachers (as they were called then) struggling to teach all the required subjects and still spend enough time on reading, writing and arithmetic. It took a few years to find a reasonable balance of what should be taught. Now we have academy chains that have their own curriculum and methods of discipline etc. The Museum would aim to cover all such areas and the exhibitions would invite questions and debate as our museum is all about the future as well.

We will let visitors decide on who was the villain or the hero rather than give our own view!

Do you have any special collections?

The Harold Silver collection is our latest acquisition. This is one of the most high-profile donations we have been given. Storage of this important collection is explained below. Harold Silver wrote and researched extensively on educational history and policy. He collaborated with his wife, Pamela, on research projects and co-authored articles, reports and books. This included undertaking a research project funded by the Social Science Research Council entitled, 'British and American educational strategies against poverty in the 1960s and 1970s'. The results were eventually published as *An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policymaking, 1960-1980*. This book examined attempts in the States and UK to use education to break the 'cycle of disadvantage'.

What do you hope the impact will be of the NEM?

We had a very useful away day for Trustees in October 2024. It was agreed to drop the word "inform" from our vision statement making it snappier and more appropriate. The three E's.

"To Educate, Enlighten and Entertain – a museum for the 21st Century". Our strap line is – *"to better understand the past in order to shape the future"*.

These phrases really sum up what we are aiming for our impact to be. Our hope is that in the future the National Education Museum will be an equivalent national treasurer as the Science, Natural History and British Museums.

Describe your relationships with other museums?

We are aiming to establish mutual relationships with Museums that deal with education matters either in their entirety or with exhibitions within a more general museum. We have, for example, built strong links with the British Schools Museum in Hitchin and they are currently housing a very important donation given to us which is the Harold Silver Collection.

Are there items you particularly want? Is there lost gold somewhere?

Already our store has a wide range of artefacts, some very special and unique. What is particularly interesting for the public we find are the details of the person or people who used these in the past, anything that brings objects or books to life.

Is there anything to which you wish to give a special emphasis?

Just to have a museum that is exciting to visit and you come away from feeling enlightened and educated. So, lots of interactive displays and activities to get involved in.

