

Gown and town

Academic research is at the heart of the Hunterian's role, says its director David Gaimster, but there is plenty to intrigue the public too.

By *Simon Stephens*

Photographs by *Phil Sayer*

Scotland's oldest public museum, the Hunterian at the University of Glasgow, first opened its doors in 1807.

Making such established institutions relevant to contemporary life isn't always easy but its director, David Gaimster, has experience of this. Before the university appointed him in 2010, he was in charge of an even older institution, the Society of Antiquaries of London, which celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2007. As part of this celebration, Gaimster delivered a programme of cultural events, including an exhibition, *Making History*, that started at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and went on to tour the UK and North America.

"A lot of work involved repositioning the Society of Antiquaries – a very, very old organisation – for the 21st century," Gaimster says. "And the Hunterian, again an old organisation, also needed repositioning and given a new role. So that's what I've been trying to develop here in the last few years. I wanted to re-establish its relevance to the university and to the higher education sector, and to balance its academic and public roles."

The need to find the right balance between the two is a familiar one for many university museums. Gaimster says that the Hunterian, which is actually an umbrella title for five museums, has a particular context, in that it is in a city with a very large and well-established museum service funded by the local authority.

"We're not like Oxford and Cambridge, where the ►





David Gaimster at a glance

David Gaimster has been the director of the Hunterian at the University of Glasgow since 2010.

Before that he was the general secretary and CEO of the Society of Antiquaries of London (2004-2010); a senior policy adviser for cultural property at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2002-04); and an assistant keeper in the department for medieval and later antiquities at the British Museum, London (1986-2001).

Gaimster is a visiting professor in the school of archaeology and ancient history at the University of Leicester and in the department of cultural studies, University of Turku, Finland. He is a board member of Museums Galleries Scotland and of Historic Environment Scotland.

academic museums are the cities' greatest cultural assets. Here in Glasgow that's not the case. We're in a post-industrial city that was the second city of the British Empire and that, in the 19th century, invested its wealth in collecting. So the civic museums were established in the late 19th century and attracted huge investment. Glasgow Museums is now effectively the biggest civic museum service in the UK."

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, which is a stone's throw from the five university museums, attracts 1.3 million visitors a year. Glasgow Museums, part of Glasgow Life, has eight other sites, including the Zaha Hadid-designed Riverside Museum.

"We're the university's museums, so I have to position us very carefully in relation to the city's civic offer," Gaimster says. "We want to be a partner, we want to be collaborative and complementary, but we're not competing. Visitors that come to us get a different experience. Overall, Glasgow has a fantastic cultural offer in its cultural heritage institutions."

The most obvious manifestation of this collaborative approach is the university's redevelopment of Kelvin Hall. This is a joint project with Glasgow Museums and the £30m first phase, planned to open in September 2016, will see the creation of a collections study centre that will house many of the Hunterian's 1.3 million items that are currently hidden away in storage.

"We can achieve quite a lot on our own, but I think what we can achieve in partnership is really phenomenal," Gaimster says. "The combination of a university partner, civic partners and national partners is really strong. And we've got the opportunity to jointly develop a site, to collaborate around a range of programmes and to share our audiences."

Funding for the first phase of the Kelvin Hall project has come from the university, local and national government and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Scottish Screen Archive, which is part of the National Library of Scotland, will also use the building. Glasgow Life will develop sporting facilities at Kelvin Hall too.

"There is a really interesting dynamic between the different audiences in this city," Gaimster says. "Glasgow has a very strong cultural audience – museum visits are among the highest in the UK. But sporting participation here is among the highest in the UK as well. In the new building, we will combine these two activities and our ambition is to share audience interest. It's going to be quite an experiment and there will be different communities using the building at the same time."

The Hunterian displays 0.2% of its 1.3 million items, so the collections study centre will be a fantastic way to allow the public to see more of the university's material. And the number of artefacts that the Hunterian has will continue to grow, as the university environment means that the arrival of new material, whether that is artefacts, archives or digital material, is ongoing.

The study centre will also be an important resource for university research by academics and students. Plans include the creation of an academy for graduate training and professional development in cultural heritage. A masters in museum education will be launched in 2016 and will be based at Kelvin Hall.

"The university is investing £11m in this project because there is an academic business case behind it," Gaimster says. "And that is predicated on new initiatives in masters training, for example, and significant new growth in lifelong learning teaching."



The Hunterian at a glance

The Hunterian title covers five museums: the Hunterian Museum, the Hunterian Art Gallery, the Hunterian Zoology Museum, the Anatomy Museum and the Mackintosh House (within the art gallery).

The Hunterian, which is part of the University of Glasgow, was established in 1807 and now cares for more than 1.3 million objects in its collections.

The museum was built on Dr William Hunter's founding bequest, and its treasures today include scientific apparatus used by James Watt and Lord Kelvin; monumental sculpture and antiquities from the Antonine Wall; major

earth sciences holdings; Scotland's most important print and numismatic collections; rare 'first contact' artefacts from the Pacific Ocean; and extensive collections of European and Scottish art. The Hunterian is also home to the world's largest permanent display of the work of James McNeill Whistler; the largest single holding of the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and the Mackintosh House, the reassembled interiors from his Glasgow home.

The Hunterian has 33 staff, not including front of house. It had 170,523 visitors to its venues last year, a 20% increase on 2013.



The second phase of the scheme will involve moving all of the Hunterian's public galleries to Kelvin Hall. This is a big undertaking as the Hunterian represents five museums – the Hunterian Museum, the Hunterian Art Gallery, the Hunterian Zoology Museum, the Anatomy Museum and the Mackintosh House. But Gaimster is very excited about the prospect.

“The museum was established in 1807 as an Enlightenment museum, and that is still our number one distinctive feature. We are encyclopedic; we intersect arts, humanities and sciences through our collections,” Gaimster says. “And that is of huge interest to the higher education sector, in terms of interdisciplinarity.

“We’ve got the opportunity to drive that agenda through the collections, the presentation of the collections and our narratives,” Gaimster continues. “Over the 19th and 20th centuries it has become a very dispersed model. Now we want to reconnect the disciplines, to rediscover our foundation mission and to explore the relationships between the disciplines. We will reform them in a much more integrated, coherent, intersecting way, and that’s very exciting for us.”

The interdisciplinarity is important, as this connects to the university’s agenda and gives the Hunterian a distinct identity in terms of the wider cultural offer in Glasgow.

The Hunterian opened in 1807 as an encyclopedic museum that covered many disciplines. Director David Gaimster is keen to emphasise the links between each of the Hunterian’s five museums

“My ambition has always been to enable Hunterian visitors to understand and sense that they’re in a university; that what they are reading and absorbing is influenced by university research and interests,” Gaimster says. “These stories are reflected in the displays and in the narratives that we have developed. We can bring the museum audience together with our scientists, and create a direct dialogue and wonderful opportunities for public involvement and knowledge exchange.”

Gaimster often returns to the relationship between the university and the public, which reflects a concern in higher education that it needs to be more outward looking. The impact that university research has on wider society is now an important part of receiving funding from government. So for the University of Glasgow, engaging more closely with the city, whether that’s local communities, government or business, reflects this more outward-facing philosophy.

Gaimster stresses that this is a two-way relationship and the city knows how important higher education is.

“Glasgow sees its partnerships with its universities as absolutely critical to its future,” Gaimster says. “This is a place that’s had to reinvent itself over the last few decades. It is no longer a city of industry, it is now a city of education, culture and start-ups. It has had to reinvent itself as a large post-industrial community and its educational market is absolutely vital to its success.”