

Royal Pavilion & Museums

Research Strategy 2018-2022

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1. Introduction

Everything we do at Royal Pavilion & Museums (RPM) is underpinned by research. Research enables us to develop our understanding of RPM's collections, buildings, visitors and business functions. It helps us provide a better quality of service to our users and to be more efficient in our operations. Everyone who works for, volunteers for, visits or uses RPM's services and collections draws on this knowledge and, in many cases, actively supports its development.

As our 2018-2020 Business Plan spells out, in terms of our value to the city, RPM is a "major contributor to the knowledge economy through research, creating and disseminating knowledge through exhibition, display, publication, public learning and event programmes". In this context, research is vital to achieving our mission to "preserve the past to inform the present" and is informed by our key working values of "creativity, collaboration, citizen and community-focussed, equality, diversity, social justice [and] environmental sustainability".

This Research Strategy, which sits alongside RPM's 2018-2022 Business Plan and Manifesto,¹ highlights some areas of current activity to reflect the diversity and significance of research undertaken by RPM, and establishes general principles which underpin our organisational approach to research. It also makes some recommendations for the development of a more strategic approach to research to be developed over the period 2018-2022.

¹ The 2018-2022 Business Plan is available at: <https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/about-us/policies-plan>. The Manifesto is available at: <https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/about-us/mission-and-manifesto/>

2. Examples of research/current research activity undertaken by RPM

A wide range of research activities is being undertaken by and in partnership with RPM staff at any time. To give a sense of the diversity, scale and significance of these, a few examples are given here:

- As part of the *Our Future City* initiative, Museum staff and pupils for whom English is an additional language researched local histories of migration. Findings were incorporated into Brighton & Hove City Council's Migrant Needs Assessment. The project has been submitted for inclusion as a case study in a Director of Public Health report on Arts & Wellbeing.
- Brighton Museum's new Archaeology Gallery will provide a showcase for findings generated through extensive collections-based research activities, which used RPM's archaeological holdings to build knowledge about the lives of early people based in our area. Partners included the Natural History Museum (DNA analysis), the University of York (osteology, isotope (diet) and dental plaque analysis), Durham University (isotope (place of upbringing)) and the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (C14 dating).
- Research into the Film & Media collection and its significance in the international history of cinema resulted in a new Brighton Museum exhibition (*Experimental Motion, The Art of Film Innovation*), which revealed new understanding of the collection and attracted new audiences, particularly young people, to the subject matter. This research has also informed the development of a new Fine Art collecting strand focussed on Artists' Moving Image.
- Expertise in 3D scanning and printing held by the University of Brighton's Cultural Informatics team is developing new knowledge and enhanced access to RPM's collections. These technologies have contributed to generating new assets relating to archaeology (including for a Stone Age learning resource), to historic African material culture and the Royal Pavilion (including a new fireplace modelled on a missing historic example).
- Work on the Royal Pavilion archive has continued to build staff and public understanding of the building's extraordinary history. A University of Sussex MA student who undertook a placement with RPM wrote her dissertation on a set of architectural plans in the Royal Pavilion archive. Her research fed into two new displays (*Visions of the Royal Pavilion Estate* and *Jane Austen by the Sea*), enriching their interpretation and contributing to a raised profile for these displays through new content and press commentary.
- Genetic sampling of specimens in RPM's Natural Sciences collection is helping researchers develop new knowledge and understanding about the conservation status of certain species (for example, the King Cheetah), the migration of species (Peregrines) and the impact of climate change (birds' eggs).
- Research undertaken by members of a specially-formed collecting panel established to acquire objects which reveal post-1960s African fashion identities, is building knowledge of fashion histories in this period. Outcomes have included a conference (*Creating African Fashion Histories*), new displays and a forthcoming publication.

- Detailed and extensive archival and technical research is underpinning the full conservation and restoration of the Royal Pavilion’s Saloon. In particular, technical analysis of the structure and decorative surfaces of a cabinet designed by Robert Jones and the creation of a new carpet based on original archival sources and the specialist input of a textile historian, will help visitors more fully understand the room’s original design intentions.

3. General principles to be applied to research undertaken by RPM

- Research at RPM is *purposeful*. It addresses clearly-framed issues or problems. It is clearly-defined and makes effective and efficient use of resources and partnerships. It seeks to deliver on RPM’s commitment, articulated in the Manifesto, to “create new windows and insights into the past and reflections on the present to support the creation of a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable future for our city”.
- Research at RPM is *user-orientated*. Whether it’s about restoring our buildings, improving our business functions, or developing new gallery interpretation, research at RPM is focussed on providing the best possible service to our users and stakeholders.
- Research at RPM is *public-facing, transparent and accessible*. Wherever possible, research processes and findings should be shared publicly. Appropriate channels for these might include web blogs, talks, publications, leaflets, trails, reports, learning resources, displays or new gallery interpretation.
- Research at RPM is *collaborative*. In developing our knowledge and understanding we work with appropriate partners, in academia, business, and in the community. We are generous with our knowledge and resources.

4. Recommendations for the development of a more strategic approach to research at RPM

4.1 Be more strategic

Given that RPM staff operate in a context of increasingly limited resources and capacity, the diversity, scale and quality of research activities being undertaken is impressive. However, much of this research tends to be project-orientated and piecemeal, undertaken in the context of individual or section work programmes and rarely communicated more widely.

A more holistic, co-ordinated and strategic approach to research needs to be taken. Such an approach would encompass a mapping of recent and current research activities, the identification of priority areas not currently being addressed and the development of a strategic plan for research activity supported by a communications strategy. The research plan will identify key research themes, questions and priorities for action across the whole organisation. This more co-ordinated approach would help maximise the benefits of research that is undertaken, as well as identify potential partnerships and resources to support needed research.

4.2 Build a research culture

As noted above, everything we do at RPM is underpinned by research and everyone who works for, volunteers for, visits or uses RPM's services and collections draws on this knowledge and, in many cases, actively supports its development. As such RPM staff and volunteers should be supported in seeking to develop and share their knowledge. Support for these should be a key element of the PDP appraisal process and other organisational initiatives which build new knowledge, such as the Workforce Development Programme, should continue to be supported.

4.3 Continue to work in partnership

Increasingly limited resources and capacity make it ever more important to identify effective and appropriate partners who can add value to RPM collections and operations through leading or contributing to research activities. Often these will be academic partners. As an RPM curator notes, "research has changed our understanding massively over the last few years and by forging relationships with research institutions, we're not only adding to the sum total of our knowledge but also getting to know our collections better (and improving their cataloguing!)". Appropriate partners may also be found in business or in community-based organisations.

Having a better understanding, at an organisational level, of research being undertaken and priority areas for the future will help identify potential partners who can support us in our core mission to "preserve the past to inform the present".