Title “Birmingham: Its People, Its History”, [Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery](http://www.bmag.org.uk/)

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What’s the best way to get to know a city? The direct approach is to immerse yourself in the streets, savour the sights, meet the people.

Alternatively, it is possible to experience it second hand in the local museum. I prefer the real thing, so I was a bit dubious about the idea of an exhibition called “Birmingham: Its People, Its History”. But things began to look up even before I reached the new history galleries at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

At the heart of the building was a makeshift throne with a living exhibit sitting on it. This was the first in a series of real-life residents invited to inaugurate the permanent display by telling their city stories.

This theatrical gesture carries on into the exhibition itself. The designers have sought different ways of bringing the past to life.

This includes a diorama of the 18th-century Freeth’s Coffee House. Elsewhere, the splintered metal backdrop to Birmingham at War reminded me of the multimedia show at [Imperial War Museum North](http://www.iwm.org.uk/visits/iwm-north).

Birmingham’s story is a play in five acts that follow a chronology starting from the city’s prehistory right up to today.

A splendid model of Birmingham in the year 1300 kicks off the show. Various medieval residents are introduced next to buttons that light up their miniature homes or workplaces.

The case containing the model is cut away at the front to ensure that everyone gets to peep into the past. Nearby are reproductions of pots enabling us to feel that past too. This use of copies worked brilliantly – I saw a couple expressing their surprise at the weight of civil war weaponry.

**Interactives**

I was less convinced by the more costly interactives. A group of kids were having great fun playing table hockey on one of the touchscreens. At another a mother’s engagement with an audio-interactive was cut short when her daughter pressed a different option.

It would be fascinating to carry out tracking exercises to see if visitors actually use the interactives as intended. Is all the money museums spend on creating and maintaining them worthwhile? And is technology used effectively?

Birmingham’s history galleries can be approached from two directions, both of which start with an audio introduction consisting of just a single handset. This was limited and ineffective.

A short video for all to see would be a far better way to welcome visitors, explain the five themes and set the scene for what is an entertaining and imaginative piece of interpretation.

My visit came shortly after the opening and there was a real buzz in the air. I overheard one retired man telling an invigilator how much he appreciated this celebration of his hometown.

His local pride confirmed the fact that the museum has responded to popular demand for more about the city – and not just the centre but the suburbs, too. The research behind this was a collaboration between the museum, the city archives and the University of Birmingham.

A touchscreen allows visitors to request emailed links to some fascinating archival documents via a [dedicated website](http://www.suburbanbirmingham.org.uk). Throughout the exhibition are a series of flipbooks highlighting the city’s other heritage sites.

But there is no indication of further reading and a notable lack of local history books to consult during the visit. This leads to my biggest criticism. The exhibition is a good example of public history. It is accessible and family friendly.

But where are the facts that support the story? Take the model of medieval Birmingham at the start. We are told that all the characters really existed. This appears to be based on a “recently discovered document dating from 1296”.

Yet we don’t get to see it, nor are we told where it can be found. All we are given is the model that it inspired.

But how accurate is it? Are the biographies of the residents factual and can we be certain that the lights shine up their real homes? Does this matter? I think so, because this seductively believable history of Birmingham is used to support current political and social agendas.

The Birmingham of 1300 merges seamlessly with that of 2012: “Birmingham was created by migration. Birmingham continues to attract migrants today,” reads one text.

**Parallel history?**

I don’t take issue with this ideology. But it reveals that this is a far from neutral treatment of history.

While the displays appear to be about the past, their main focus is the multicultural present. Indeed, the exhibition is strikingly “presentist”.

The story of 18th-century Birmingham is expressed entirely in the present tense. And the audioguide linked to the medieval model consists of interviews with present-day traders. This risks giving the impression that the Birmingham of 700 years ago is just like the city today, only without the smartphones.

Meanwhile, there are indications that the less successful aspects of Birmingham’s past are marginalised. Take William Davidson, a cabinetmaker who originated from Jamaica. Only in the flipbook do we learn that he was executed for treason in 1820.

In the next section is a large display case devoted to politician, former city mayor and local hero, Joseph Chamberlain. Only by digging deeper elsewhere does it emerge that Chamberlain was criticised for failing to accommodate people left homeless by his slum clearances.

**Adding the people**

I started to wonder if I was reading too much into something that is intended to be popular and populist. But then I came across an exquisite painted portrait of the museum’s first director, Whitworth Wallace. Impeccably dressed and with pen and guidebook in hand, this ghost from the past is a reminder of the institution’s origins.

Of course, our museums need to change with the times and appeal to a wide audience, but they remain rooted in scholarship and critical thinking. This means they ought to be emphatic about the basis of their arguments.

And if museums are to fulfil their popular mandate, they need to find ever more effective ways to empower the visitor.

There is scope for this in “Your Birmingham: 1945 to Today”. This, the final section of the show, feels empty compared to the other parts. It features objects chosen by a range of local people. But strategies ought to be found to add the audience to this story.

After all, isn’t their visit to the museum part of the city’s history? Wouldn’t it be great to mimic the “living exhibit” I saw at the start by accessioning visitors’ stories into the collection? This genuinely public history would then provide a living record of Birmingham: its people, its history.