

Thursday, August 7, 2025

Museums

# Museums changing lives

Sarah Holland tells **TIM HUGHES** about an extraordinary link between a school and Oxford University's museums

**O**XFORD Universities museums are the envy of the world. Institutions like the Ashmolean, Pitt Rivers and the museums of Natural History and History of Science are justifiably famous for their rich collections and historic significance.

When combined with the university's Bodleian Libraries and botanic treasures such as Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum, they make for an unparalleled collection of cultural gems.

But it is not only academics, science and history buffs and tourists who are benefitting from the university's unique venues.

Since 2016, Oxford University's Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) have been working with staff and pupils at an Oxford school to offer a programme of creative learning opportunities and project work based around their unique collections.

In a groundbreaking initiative, GLAM has forged a partnership with Ifley Academy – a community school for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities.

A core theme of the partnership is to allow Ifley Academy students to articulate their own ideas and enable them to advise on making the museums, libraries and gardens more accessible.

Students have helped develop 'easy read' guides at venues to support visitors with learning disabilities and special needs, along with their families and carers to plan and make the most of their visits.

"The Ifley GLAM Partnership aims to create equitable access to our cultural venues for children with SEND so that they feel comfortable and confident in these spaces," says Miranda Millward, Arts Engagement Officer at GLAM.

"The partnership also encourages students to actively consider careers in the arts and cultural sector with bespoke SEND-appropriate careers days hosted at GLAM venues."

Projects have covered everything from Roman history at the Ashmolean; Tolkien at the Bodleian; calculation, light and Space at the History of Science Museum; insects at the Museum of Natural History; and chocolate at Oxford Botanic Garden & Arboretum.

Among pupils to benefit is Harry, who joined a work experience placement at the Museum of Natural History.

Over the past school year he Harry spent Friday mornings working as a member of the Visitor Services team, mentored by Ellie Talbot and Molly Appleby.

And, says Harry, it was an unforgettable experience.

"I found out about the museum and the visitor services role at a museum careers day," he explains.

"I had never thought about working in a museum, but I really liked the sound of it and asked lots of questions. The school then reached out to Miranda to find out if a placement would be possible."

"The role involves patrolling team



Harry from Ifley Academy enjoyed work experience at Oxford University's Gardens, Libraries and Museums. Pictures by Ian Wallman

meetings, welcoming the general public to the museum, handing out maps to visitors and trails to children, writing emails on the front desk, signing-in visitors and letting them in behind the scenes.

"Sometimes I get pulled away from the routine of the rota to sort out something important – finding a member of staff for a visitor, or looking at building issues and fixing them. "Once, I had to put a cover on a wobbly grate."

He adds: "I've found out much more about animals and other things that you don't learn in school.

"It's fascinating and brings out the truth.

"The museum shows evidence that certain animals existed, which is especially helpful when you can't tell what is and isn't real on the internet these days.

"My favourite exhibits are the dinosaurs – especially the T-Rex. I like the ostrich and bear too.

He goes on: "I've learned so many new skills and the placement has given me independence and confidence – especially when talking to people. I'm more comfortable with flexibility within a routine.

"New things aren't my speciality, but now I'm prepared to give things a go. "Working at the museum has turned my life around and given me a purpose. It was the best decision I've ever made."

Harry will now be heading to college in September.



Harry's mum Gemma says it had been a great experience.

"Harry's confidence has increased since starting work experience at the museum, and it has also made a positive impact on his self-esteem," she says.

"This incredible opportunity has given Harry a great insight into the working environment and left him with a positive outlook towards the future."

Yvette Fay Head Teacher at Ifley Academy also praised the partnership. She said: "Harry has thoroughly embraced this work experience opportunity and his confidence has soared.

"Harry has both learnt and further developed a range of life skills which will support him as he moves into adulthood. The opportunity to use and

develop skills within a real life context are invaluable.

"Since the Ifley School Partnership was established, over 450 students have achieved an Arts Award qualification and a greater understanding of potential careers within the cultural sector. The programme has also had a significant impact on the day-to-day lives of the students enhancing their social skills and self-confidence.

"This innovative partnership, has placed cultural learning opportunities at the heart of the school curriculum to inform teaching across all subjects, including both maths and science.

"It has also transformed teaching practice at the school; our teachers can now plan trips and engage directly with GLAM venues to develop their own projects."

