

Arts&Heritage

Blue Sky Museums

Blue Sky Museums is an Arts&Heritage project established in 2020 during the Covid-19 crisis, which invites artists to create unusual and ambitious project responses for some of the Meeting Point museums that A&H has worked with since 2016. The project is an opportunity for artists to engage in untethered idea development, without the restrictions of practical delivery or limitation of a budget.

Museum: Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum



Short History

Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum is housed within a 13th century building, originally dedicated to praying and singing mass. Its colourful history also includes it being used as a grammar school, a cholera hospital and a mineral water factory before being restored as a home for the Bagpipe Museum in the 1980s.

The Bagpipe Museum was formed around the Cocks Collection, comprising around 100 sets of bagpipes and a library of books, manuscripts and historic ephemera. William Alfred Cocks (1892-1971) was a member of the Society of Antiquaries of



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Newcastle upon Tyne and his enthusiasm for collecting bagpipes helped keep folk culture alive in the north east. Upon his death in 1971, his collection, which also incorporated clocks and archaeological finds, was bequeathed to the Society of Antiquaries and displayed in Newcastle's Black Gate.

A little over 15 years after William Alfred Cocks died the collection was transferred into the care of Castle Morpeth Borough Council. Today the museum is managed by Museums Northumberland, a charitable trust which is based at Woodhorn in Ashington.

Current Situation and Audience

Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum sits in a prime location on Morpeth's main shopping street and in easy walking distance to the railway station. The medieval Chantry once marked the local monks' tollgate to the market town. It is a local landmark and houses both the museum and a Tourist Information Centre with a shop. Access to the museum is via a staircase up to the first floor, internal glazing allows a view on the retail space below. The museum attracts a local audience, tourists and special interest groups.

William Alfred Cocks' collection of bagpipes is presented in a series of glass cases in two rooms on either side of the stairwell. The artefacts are accompanied by text and images contained on large information panels within the display cases. The collection is designed with security in mind, as the small museum has no curatorial staff on site and is reliant upon shop staff to open and lock up on a daily basis. The museum is not able to exhibit work requiring supervision or requiring security and this informs what can and cannot be displayed. Its visitors do not have the opportunity to engage with knowledgeable staff therefore the interpretative material is of vital importance in telling the collection's story.

The curator of the museum has identified strong connections with international and local pipe festivals and groups meet regularly in the Bagpipe Museum. The museum also works with the Morpeth Northumbrian Gathering which is led and delivered by another organisation and is an annual parade within the town, featuring musicians, traditional clog dancing and other entertainment. This approach positions Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum within a living culture of folk musicians, gatherings and piping societies.

The **Northumbrian small pipes** (also known as the **Northumbrian pipes**) are bellows-blown bagpipes from North East England, where they have been an important factor in the local musical culture for more than 200 years.^[1] The family of the Duke of Northumberland has had an official piper for over 250 years, and in more recent times the Mayor of Gateshead and the Lord Mayor of Newcastle have both re-established the tradition by appointing official Northumbrian pipers

Location

This small museum is located on the first floor of the former Chantry Chapel of All Saints in the market town of Morpeth in Northumberland. Previous commissions



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have included a performance during the Morpeth Northumbrian Gathering by Northumbrian Pipers and the Baghdaddies, whose exuberant and rampant brand of world music is an exhilarating cocktail of Balkan melodies, ska and latin grooves and sizzling brass played with furious energy and theatrical humour, making them as unforgettable on stage as they are when performing as wandering brass troubadours.

Key words/phrases:

- Small – small museum above a Tourist Information Centre and shop
- Unique – a charming collection of bagpipes and associated artefacts
- Location – historic building in a central and busy location in Morpeth
- Hidden gem – a pocket sized museum with potential

Other Resources

Museum website: <https://museumsnorthumberland.org.uk/morpeth-chantry-bagpipe-museum/>

Original Meeting Point commission:

<https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/projects/morpeth-chantry-bagpipe-museum/>



Spannan by Ziad Jabeto and the Baghdaddies at Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum
© Jonathan Turner, Meeting Point

Blue Sky Museums response

Music is key to this artist's brief: the silent bagpipes lying in their museum cases; the regular meeting of the Northumbrian Pipers in the adjacent room, the exuberant and eclectic response of the former commission that resulted in a performance down the streets of Morpeth and at the Sage Gateshead.

Arts&Heritage is looking forward to receiving any ideas from artists, musicians, filmmakers, performers, writers etc reflecting upon this museum's unique collection and its current international connections with the global piping community.