

Life at the Museum: Kids in Museums Youth Panel Podcast

Episode Three Transcript: Full Steam Ahead - London Museum of Water and Steam

Mohammed Miah, Kids in Museums Youth Panel Member:

Welcome to Life at the Museum from the Kids in Museums Youth Panel. I'm Mohammed. Dust off your ideas of what a museum is and join me and the rest of the Youth Panel as we explore museum life behind the glass. Future focused conversations bridging the gap between young people and old institutions, from career tips to climate activism. What can museums offer young people today? And how can we shake things up? In this episode, Ria heads off to the London Museum of Water and Steam to learn more about their tactics for tackling the climate and ecological emergency. Over to you, Ria!

Ria Mehta, Kids in Museums Youth Panel Member:

Hi, I'm Ria, my pronouns are she/her. I'm from the Kids in Museums Youth Panel. I'm joined here today at the London Museum of Water and Steam with Emma Canterbury. Emma, would you like to introduce yourself?

Emma Canterbury, Engagement Coordinator for Learning and Families at the London Museum of Water and Steam:

Hi, everyone. My name is Emma, my pronouns are she/her, and I am the Engagement Coordinator for Learning and Families here at the museum.

Ria:

Now, if I've got it right, you've been here for about two years?

Emma:

Yeah, give or take two years. I started off as maternity cover for my wonderful colleague Gemma, who's just moved on to an amazing new role with Westminster Abbey. And I've only got about four weeks left until I go on maternity leave myself. So it's all very interesting times and changes here at the museum.

Ria:

It seems like quite a busy period for you now, so thank you for joining us today. So I wanted to know how you got into the sector. How did you start in museums and heritage?

Emma:

So I originally started my career as a teacher. I taught Year Five for a few years. And kind of after that, I decided I wanted to go do my Masters, which had always been the grand plan. And I just didn't know whether to do like, my NQT year or my Masters. So I did my Masters a little bit later, I did that in education. And whilst I was doing that, I left the classroom, and I started to work in heritage for the National Trust. And then from there, I've moved into various learning and engagement roles at various places, and then I ended up here two years ago.

Ria:

I really love how you kind of didn't start in a super traditional museum academic background, and instead, you went through the learning approach. Now, as we are in the London Museum of Water and Steam, you probably know that it was shortlisted for the Best Small Museum award. However, you do have the world's largest collection of stationary steam engines. [Yes] I'd love to know what your favorite part of the collection or your favorite space of the museum is?

Emma:

Oh, it's like trying to pick your favorite child! All of the stationary steam engines are amazing. I've even been trained to run a couple of things - under electric power rather than steam power, which is incredible that I can do that. But my favorite space, I fell in love with the first time one of our volunteers took me to it. And that is our belt driven workshop. So this is the original workshop of the museum. Unfortunately, it's not open to visitors at the moment, but we're hoping to be able to open it up, maybe through guided tours, maybe through other means. But it's just when you turn on the belts, and you see the belts and you see them driving this old machinery, just the sound of it is incredible. And kind of the first time I was in there, I just got this rush of ideas for how we could use this with schools and families and young people. And it's an incredible part of our history. It was bombed during the war, and then kind of rebuilt. It did all the maintenance on the engines when we were working waterworks. And then when we turned into a museum, it did a lot of the restoration work until our new workshop was built a few decades later. It is just incredible. It's like stepping back in time. But don't tell the engines I said that, otherwise the engines might not like me anymore.

Ria:

If you ever have another day where you're willing to train people, I'd love to. I don't think they'd trust me! [Laughter.] But I think that's really interesting that you say that these objects almost transport you back into time because I felt that too when I came into the museum. I could feel it. There's an atmosphere here. [Yeah.] You very much feel the contrast of the building compared to its surroundings. [Yeah.] And it's so interesting that it's such a heart of the community considering that. At the moment you have the exhibition, Brentford at Work, Rest and Play [yeah], which I know is a collaboration with a local artist.

Emma:

So it is with Karen Reader, a member of our community. She's a neighbor, she lives kind of just in the tower blocks next to the museum, and it's a real celebration of Brentford and Brentford's community. And Karen's worked with the wider Brentford community and collected all these photographs and memories and objects that have all been loaned to the exhibition, all from private collections and private homes. So it's the first time that people are able to see a lot of it. And it'll probably be the last time, too because they're special things, they're special memories to people that live in Brentford. We're really honoured that we're able to have it here. And it's on until the summer. So if anybody is kind of down in West London, down Brentford, do pop in and see it. It's a real celebration of the community by the community.

Ria:

That's beautiful. Like I honestly one of my favorite things is when museums say this is for the community, by the community, and this space embodies that. I'd love to know about what you offer to young people. That's something that we are very interested in here at Kids in Museums Youth Panel.

Emma:

So like you've already said, we were shortlisted for the Kids in Museums award this year, which was incredible. We do an awful lot for families, in fact, under 18s make up just under 50% of our audience, so making sure that we have an amazing offer for them is really good. A lot of what we do is kind of aimed at younger children, under sevens. So we know that there is a little bit of a gap in our older children and young people provision. So we've been thinking a lot about what can we do, what are we able to offer. And one of the incredible projects that I've been able to do this year is our STEAM Explorers. So STEAM Explorers is essentially a young engineers club. It started off as a tiny little dream about a year ago. And thanks to the Cultural Recovery Fund, we were able to pilot it. The pilot went really well. And then thanks to the amazing support of the Water Conservation Trust, we've been able to run it this year as a whole year programme. So it's open to 11 to 15 year olds in the local area, particularly young people that are interested in science and technology and engineering. And thanks to the support of the Water Conservation Trust, we're able to offer it to those young people completely free of charge. So our hope is that we can really get young people who might not be able to access those sorts of activities normally to come and join us. We've done three months' worth of sessions. Now that's kind of one Saturday afternoon on a monthly basis. And we've looked at hydraulics, we've done a trip to Tower Bridge, which was actually this weekend just gone, and the kids loved it. In our hydraulic session, they made hydraulic power draw bridges out of craft materials, so like wooden sticks, or wooden cubes and glue guns, and they were absolutely incredible. So we've got about 12 young people in the club at the moment. In fact, I had another application for somebody to join today, which is really exciting. And that will run until July, and we're gonna have a big celebration of everything that they've done in it. And then hopefully, we'll be able to run it again next year and the year after and make it a really core part of our offer for young people.

Ria:

That's such a wonderful opportunity, Emma. And I think it's brilliant that you're targeting young people within the local community. How did you reach these schools and these children?

Emma:

So we, for this kind of year-long cohort, we contacted the people who were interested for our pilot earlier last year. We contacted our target schools in the local area. So whenever we offer an activity like this, we also do a bursary for schools where the young people may not be able to afford to come, so we have certain kind of eligibility criteria to contact those schools so we feel we're reaching the audiences that we want to. We also kind of advertised it through social media, through word of mouth.

Ria:

That's brilliant. I'd love to know, the kind of thinking that went behind STEAM Explorers?

Emma:

Oh, so it was one of those little ideas I had, and it was a tiny seed. And I had to put a pin in it because I didn't have the time. And then as time and opportunities come up, it's grown into this beautiful club. I come from very sciency, engineering background. There's three engineers in my family. So I'm very kind of aware of science and technology and engineering as an industry. But I'm also very aware that young people are the future and without having young people who are interested in museums and our heritage, then those kinds of places are slowly going to decline. We've got some amazing volunteers at the museum, some of whom have been here 20, 30 years. We've got one who was here since he was 12 years old himself. So being able to engage and enthuse young people, through things like our STEAM Explorers Club, is hopefully going to get them engaged and enthused with our history and with our heritage, and they'll hopefully be able to take it on for future generations and future young people. So it's giving them skills and experiences that they're going to enjoy, but also kind of fostering this love that we all have for heritage.

Ria:

That's amazing. And actually, he was just in here just a few minutes ago! [He was!] He did interrupt our recording, which is completely fine. But I think what he said really kind of embodied what we need to take forward as a sector is we need to make people care about museums. [Yes.] And I think that's brilliant.

Emma:

And I can confirm no bribes were made in that conversation. That was completely organic from him, so you can kind of see that the passion expands across the whole site. It's our staff, our freelancers, our trustees, our volunteers, they all kind of see the importance of getting young people involved.

Ria:

That's really interesting. You mentioned before that there aren't that many young people programmes within the museum in moment. Do you have any plans to change that?

Emma:

So we've been looking at kind of our family programming and what we can introduce within kind of our school holiday activities. So last summer, we tried kind of some pre-bookable workshops for families to try just to test out the water and see how those went. Like I mentioned, I'm going on maternity leave in a few weeks. So I can't categorically say what the team is going to do whilst I'm not here. But I really hope that we kind of keep going forward to that and see, what can we offer in a more facilitated way for older children and for young people. A lot of what we do is very much self-led, just because of time and staffing capacity, it's very difficult to offer facilitated activities every single day of the week when you're only part time. So we're going to do that. I've been planning a few things in for kind of February half term, which our wonderful learning facilitators are going to deliver. So we've got kind of family tours, which we hope will reach a whole range of age and interest. And then we're also going to try giant art attacks, so basically using all sorts of random resources - and trust me, there are random resources in this museum, cupboards full - in our Steam Hall, which is this big space with four engines around it. And the idea would be to get families in and try and get them to recreate a 2D version of one of these engines from all of those sorts of resources. There's a mezzanine in there, so they can look down and see what they're creating. So I'm hoping those sorts of activities will really engage kind of older children and young people in what we're doing. So we'll just have to wait and see. We're trying a lot of little things out. But hopefully, we're going to be able to keep building our programme, and taking feedback from our community and our audiences to make it the best it can be. Well, we also found this really amazing resource in the bottom of a drawer. But kind of back in 2019, I think it was we had a local member of our community who was on parental leave, and came with this app and these images of our engines, and he created these augmented reality kind of engines, and you can look at it through your phone, and it builds up this 3D image and you can see the engines working. And like I said, they were at the bottom of the drawer. Not very happy about that. But we're going to look at how we can add those to our interpretation. And hopefully we can then have people come in with their phones and they can see the engines working, which is amazing, because at the moment we can't actually steam. Our boiler needs maintenance, following a bit of a dodgy rivet. So be able to introduce that as well. And being able to use technology that's just in our pockets to see the engines run might be really engaging for young people too.

Ria:

I've actually used one of those apps before in a museum and it was like it showed me a dinosaur, like it felt like the dinosaur was about to attack me!

Emma:

What's really incredible is one of them is for our 90 inch engine, which doesn't run at the moment. So it's actually the only way to see that engine move, which is really incredible. The engine is so big, you can't actually see it on your phone. Like you've got to really move it around to see the whole thing. But yeah, dinosaurs, engines that don't run, it's a great way of engaging with history that otherwise is sometimes say flat on a page.

Ria:

Yeah, yeah, I think that's that's such a good way of saying it to kind of bring it to light. [Yes, yeah.] I also really love how you've kind of blended crafting with science and technology, which is like the best combination of all things. And I was looking on the website, one of the things that really kind of stood out to me in this museum is your café. Could you tell me a bit about it, and why it's so special?

Emma:

So our amazing Pump and Grind Café is run by Our Barn community. So they're a local charity who supports young people with kind of various learning difficulties or autism, and they use it as a training cafe. So we don't charge them any rent, they don't give us any cut of the profits. It's this pure kind of simple relationship. And the young people that Our Barn support are able to go in, they're able to learn key catering and hospitality skills, but then also employability skills. They've done things like food hygiene certificates that they can take away with them. And it gives these young people all the skills that they need to then go out and find employment. So as well as providing what we think is some of the best cake and coffee in Brentford, they've had some real success stories of their young people going on and finding jobs. So it's a really lovely relationship. They're really special parts of the museum. And they don't just offer a café. They use the space to support their users and members, as well as the community. So we have lots of community groups that meet on a regular basis. They do an inclusive stay and play for under fives on a Friday morning. And they've run their own projects out of there, so their digital inclusion has recently been run out of there and their carers project has been run out of there as well. So it's a real kind of hub for community and for support when it's open. It is always busy, always full of people chatting and laughing, and smiling. And it's really incredible that we have that here at the museum.

Ria:

I like how the café has become a lot more than just a café. It's a place for people to meet and it's a place for community. Going off of that, I'd love to know, your future hopes for the museum and the museum sector in general, seeing as you guys are doing so great at the moment.

Emma:

So I think it's probably worth mentioning one of the big projects that we embarked on about 12 months ago, which is our sustainable steam project. So for anyone listening, who hasn't been to the London Museum of Water and Steam before, we are a big industrial site. We have stationary steam engines that pumped water into London. And we have almost a 200 year legacy of contributing to climate change through the fuels and the technologies that were in use over the history. So we're doing a big project to see how we can get our carbon footprint down to zero. So that's looking at how can we replace our gas boiler that's the size of single decker bus. That is how can we power the daily operations of the museum without having carbon emissions. And we're going to bring our visitors, our families, our young people on that journey with us. So I'm literally coming to the end of a project of creating new learning programmes for Key Stage Two and Key Stage Three, all about climate awareness and sustainability, and those are going to launch after February half term. So that's a really big project and as an industrial museum, it is no mean feat to achieve. That's kind of a big aim going forward. And of course amongst that, we want to continue working with our community, finding new ways to see how we can help them and how we can support them and how we can engage them. Liz Power, our former Director, left, just a week before we recorded this, has always said that the museum should look the same inside as the bus that drives past. And we know we need to do more work. So being able to make us look more like the number 65 bus, it's kind of a big aspiration. And that's not just as visitors, that's as staff and volunteers and trustees too, making ourselves a much more inclusive museum. We've done so much work, but we know we've got so much potential. So it's going to be really interesting to see what happens going forward over the next kind of few years, five years, 10 years. It's really exciting.

Ria:

That's such a powerful statement: the fact that you want the museum to reflect your visitors, but not just as you know, I just think that's brilliant.

Emma:

The museum wouldn't be here if it wasn't for our visitors. We've got this amazing collection, this fantastic piece of industrial heritage that we're looking after. But we have to think, why are we looking after it? And personally, for me, it's for our community, it's for our families, it's for our visitors, for them to come and engage with. And if the first time they come through the door is literally because they want to go to our Babcock Room, and chill and play with the toys with their families, and then they start to grow and they love the heritage, that's really important. But for me they're kind of why we're here and why we're doing what we're doing.

Ria:

I love that any form of visit thing is valid, [yeah] and that's great. And I think the values that you've said in the community that you serve shows that you're gonna have so many more volunteers, just like the

one that's been here since they were 12. I'd love to know if you have any advice to young people who want to get involved in museums, especially coming from a background that isn't museumy?

Emma:

I think the first piece of advice that a lot of people are given is to volunteer and I think that is perfectly valid. But it's also really important to remember not everyone can volunteer. There's time limitations, there's financial limitations. So whilst that is really valid, it's worth remembering there are barriers around that. For me, like you said, I don't come from what some people deem a traditional volunteer or traditional museum, background. I'm all about learning and engagement and education. My original career was education. I'm a scout leader, too. I know lots of people that have done play work and forest schools, and all these other experiences. And it's remembering that there's all these transferable skills. Museums, to me, is such a diverse sector. We can bring all of these different people in these different skills and experiences in, but there are barriers within the sector as well. We are all aware of things like low pay, and that does make it more difficult. So it's if you're wanting to get into museums, it's finding that balance and thinking what do you really, really love, develop that and then look at how you can bring that in. You might love being an illustrator. That's still a way in to work with museums and to work with different peoples. It's finding what you love is the most important thing. Don't just volunteer because it's a foot in the door.

Ria:

That's a great way to end this. Thank you so much, Emma. That was a wonderful, insightful chat. It's always lovely to chat with you. Thank you for taking the time especially so close to you leaving from maternity leave.

Emma:

Thank you so much for coming to the museum. It's been lovely chatting.

Ria:

I love it here. [Laughter.]

Mohammed:

Thank you again to our guests for taking the time to speak with us, and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, there are several more in the playlist featuring some really interesting museums. Don't forget to share the podcast with your friends and your families and we hope to see you again. And for those aged 16 to 25, we would like to extend an invitation for our upcoming Youth Summit, an event designed and delivered by young people, for young people. The Future is Now: Museum Youth Summit is a space where peers can discuss the future of young people's work in the heritage sector with plenty of opportunities to network and plenty of coffee breaks in between. If that sounds interesting, you can find more information through the link in the description below.

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