

Life at the Museum: Kids in Museums Youth Panel Podcast

Episode Four Transcript: Connected to the Future - PK Porthcurno

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 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, Eilish is at PK Porthcurno, the museum of global communications. She and our guest speakers will be covering career tips on how to break into the heritage sector. Over to you, Eilish.

Eilish Calnan, Kids in Museums Young Trustee:

I'm just now coming up to PK Porthcurno Museum. I drove down into the valley past Morgy, who is the gigantic squid who lives in the PK Porthcurno car park, or the tennis courts rather. He's bright red and he's made of recycled plastic tubing. And he works the same as kind of a can on a string, where you speak into one end of his of his arms, and then someone else can hear you. He's, yeah, he's been there. He was there all summer last year and hopefully he'll be here for a while because he's really, really striking, and a great use of the space on the tennis court. So I'm just now walking up to the Learning Centre, which is where I'm going to be doing an interview with a couple of PK staff members. I've never been in the Learning Centre before, so this is really exciting. So it's all glass fronted, and yeah, I can't really see much. I can just get the reflection of the rest of the valley looking back at me.

My name is Eilish and I'm part of the Kids in Museums Youth Panel. I'm here today in the very depths of West Cornwall, at PK Porthcurno Museum. PK Porthcurno is a museum that explores the story of how the world connects. Housed in a building, just off the beach, PK Porthcurno celebrates worldwide communications, and teaches visitors about the history of connection. The museum won Best Family Engagement Team at the 2022 Family Friendly Museum Award and I'm joined by Charlotte Todd, Head of Collections and Learning, and Maeve Cushla, Young Curator, to learn about museums work with young people. So let's start by meeting you both. Charlotte, can you describe your role here at the museum and how you came to it?

Charlotte Todd, Head of Collections and Learning at PK Porthcurno:

Yes. So I work with all the collections. So we have an object collection and also a huge archive that's a cable and wireless business archive. So I look at everything collection related. So it's sort of the objects and displays, but also visiting researchers come in to look at the archives, anyone that wishes to kind of explore the history. Also caring for the items as well, and also head up the Learning Department, so the learning covers all our kind of school visits, all our holiday activities, other events that we do. It's all about really connecting people and engaging people with collections and the stories we tell.

Eilish:

How did you come to this role? How long have you been in the role?

Charlotte:

So I've been here 14 years now. [Laughter.] So I started off doing archaeology at Cardiff University. And then I went on to volunteer at the Wordsworth Trust up in the Lake District. And I volunteered there for a year and it was kind of a live-in, sort of like, volunteer role. So I was there with a group of I think there were 10 of us all in all, and you got to experience all the different areas of museum work. So I did a bit of like ticket sales, tours of the cottage, which was William Wordsworth's house, also got to work behind the scenes with the collections as well. So you were able just to get experience in all the different areas you might be interested in. And then from there, I got a job down in Exeter at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum as a Documentation Assistant there. So basically doing a lot of the catalogue and the collections before they were about to move it from their new stores. And then following that, job came up here in Porthcurno as, I think it was called Collections Assistant when I came in. So yeah, again, doing lots of work mainly just for the collections, then a lot of catalogue work and some exhibition work as well. And then later on just kind of staff changes meant I became the Collections Manager, and then I got later evolved into Head of Collections and Learning so yeah, that's how I got here.

Eilish:

So you've gradually worked your way further South West [Yes!] and now you're at - is this the most southwesterly museum?

Charlotte:

I think it - ooh - it must be, because there's nothing going towards Land's End so, unless you, well, count the Isles of Scilly. [Oh of course, yes. But on the mainland...] On the mainland, I think you could say we probably were, yeah.

Eilish:

And Maeve, could you explain a little bit about your role and how you came to it?

Maeve Cushla, Young Curator at PK Porthcurno:

Yeah, so, I'm the Digital Media Assistant for the museum, but primarily focused on Planet PK, which is our environmental programme. So that involves, for me, photography around the museum, but mostly of the environment and wildlife, and then also running our social medias. So getting a kind of a lot of content from other people to post about Porthcurno, kind of making connections with other environmental people and groups, and also posting up some of my own photography. And I also helped

organise beach cleans in the summer and spring and have recently been curating and helping to curate some exhibitions with environmental topics.

Eilish:

So how did you come to the role?

Maeve:

So I worked in the café, first of all, as a teen and then started working as a Young Curator voluntarily in the museum. And then when COVID struck, I kind of started getting into wildlife photography, and was kind of volunteering some of my photos up for social media turned into a like a part time role, where I could do that more consistently.

Eilish:

Cool, thank you. Okay, I know this is a horrible question, but I have to ask: do you have a favorite object in the museum? So Maeve, we'll come to you first. Do you have a favorite object or favorite story maybe?

Maeve:

I mean, my favorite object isn't actually on display. It's George Sprats' scrapbook and photo album. He was one of the first engineers I think, at the cable station, and kept a diary throughout his time, but also had a scrapbook with some of his own photography, and some other photography and some kind of flyers of the time. And he did really lovely illustrations around some of the photos. I just think it's really nice to kind of glimpse into into the history of the cable station.

Charlotte:

For mine, 'cause I work with all the collection, it's very difficult to pinpoint one. But I think like for point of view of the kind of displayed objects, I think it's probably the working equipment we have in the region. So you have that kind of in our World War Two tunnels. So as visitors walk in, because it's working equipment from the 1920s, you get to hear all the clicking and the clacking and you really get a sense of what the inside of a working telegraph station in that period would have sounded like. And there's kind of smells as well, kind of like grease and slight oils come off it. So I think it's, it's just one of those kind of moments, which really captures the kind of sense of the history of this place, really.

Eilish:

Cool. And now on to kind of the work that PK's been doing with young people. Can you describe a little bit about the programmes that have been running and just the work in general?

Charlotte:

Yeah, so we've, as Maeve mentioned, we've had young curators working with us. We've also had student placements from Exeter University. So a couple of placements have been working with items from the archives. So for example, we had a collection of letters written by an employee of one of the early telegraph companies who was stationed in Brazil. And he was writing back to his mother, basically, he had just been sent out there and started his career with the telegraph company. And it was about, you know, his experiences travelling there and then what he found that at the station, and this is all from the 1920s. So again, it's a really nice glimpse of that period. So we basically asked the students to transcribe these letters for us, to type them up. And in doing so, we asked them to kind of put together a little film from the letters, but they could choose actually, what they wanted the film to be about, what they wanted to focus on from the letters. So it's very much up to them to make that decision. And yeah, they put together a lovely film that kind of focused more on almost like worldwide events that were happening, because of course, it was leading up to the First World War. And so they were kind of picking out kind of how he responded to the kind of world events that we do know about. So it was really nice and quite a nice way of just letting them kind of free to do what they wanted with the bits from the collection. Likewise, we recently had a project, PK 150 Connected Collections, and that connected students from Exeter University, with students at other universities around the world to again access the archives. So they worked as pairs, so you had one based here in the UK, others based, we had southern India, Australia, South Africa and Portugal. And they work together to access the archive, and then again come up with their own outcomes - it was entirely up to them what they wanted to do, so some did blog posts, others did, again, films, one pair did some artwork as well. So it was just a really interesting way to just again, let them interpret the collections as they wanted, from their own viewpoint and perspectives. We've also had recently, a student, Bianca, who was a modelmaking student at university. And she approached us about making a model of an item that would be useful for our visitors. So she actually created a model of a cable sample, which was for people with visual impairments. So she worked on making it quite tangible. So you can kind of really get a feel of the different layers in the cable, you can pull it out and really explore it. And also, she did it in a different kind of color palette as well. So very much again, focusing on people with visual impairments. So we have lots of kind of projects like that with students. We've also done Digital Takeover Days, so one of our students, Bianca, she did it. The theme of it was wellbeing, so she did a nature trail around Porthcurno Valley, but very much based on the senses. So what you hear, what you see, what you smell. And so on the Digital Takeover Day, she did all the artwork for this trail and so we kind of released some of the artwork throughout the day on social media. And she wrote about kind of how she came to do the artwork, what kind of inspired her to do the drawings. So again, it's a really different way of kind of approaching the the collection and our environment as well.

Eilish:

Yeah, and I think that's really important: being able to, like, quantify collections and like getting involved with them, rather than just seeing museums as something behind a case.

Charlotte:

I think that's it. We really want, kind of, the voices of young people to come through. So, you know, it really challenges the way that we approach how we interpret our collections and our stories. Because, you know, I've been working in museums for so long, you know, I realized that I'm probably a little bit kind of narrow in the way that I approach how we interpret it. So to bring in kind of fresh eyes to look at the collections and explore them in different ways and pull out different stories, is just really beneficial.

Eilish:

So you kind just answered my next question, which is what why do you value the work with young people? Like, we know that young people are getting things out of it and this is great for young people to get involved in museums. But what does the museum gain from involving young people in the process?

Charlotte:

I think it's making sure we stay relevant as much as anything. So we do remain a place that young people want to come to, want to explore, and they feel like it is a place they can come to as well. And something which you know, the benefits work both ways.

Eilish:

Yeah, cool. Okay, so the next question is, can you describe any future work that is planned that involves young people?

Charlotte:

I mean, we really want to have quite an active group of young people. That's what we would aspire to, actually. So we've done lots of, like, individual placements or pairs of students. But I think what we'd really like to have is like a kind of group of young people who kind of come here meet regularly, explore the collections, explore the stories, the site, and actually then co-produce outcomes with us, you know, which could be anything: exhibitions, blog posts, photography, trails. We even had actually some students who actually did a workshop with some Year Six children as well. They kind of had some training with our Learning Team. They produced this workshop all on deforestation as part of our Planet PK environmental programme. And then they actually led a workshop for some Year Six children from Falmouth School. So, you know, I think we're really open to the ways that young people can get involved with us. So it's something that we want to just continue to work on. So, you know, we offer work experience here. We can do like a week work experience or you know, longer periods of work experience. We offer volunteering opportunities, and we do that both either in person or remotely. And yeah, it's just we really just want to keep encouraging young people to get involved with us and obviously what we can kind of do together really, you know, we're really open to what new projects we might be able to come up with.

Eilish:

Yeah, that co-creation is so important as well, especially for staying relevant and making museums more and more accessible [Yes, definitely.] for young people. It's so hard going into a museum and being like, this is really boring and you don't see yourself in the space.

Charlotte:

Yeah, I mean, it's bringing in young people, it kind of challenges the way that we work at the moment. And they come up with ideas that I hadn't thought about. And also, they come up with different ways to share in it. So especially when it comes to more digital technologies, you know, they, they get oh, yeah, we could try to this or so you know, it's just it's just taking that risk to explore different ways that just again, it's come back to that relevance thing again.

Eilish:

Yeah. Great. Okay, the next question is, and maybe this is one for you a bit, Maeve, about how young people can get involved with their local museum?

Maeve:

Yeah, I think the key to that is just going into your local museum, getting to know it, and then just talking to the people there, because there will be work experience opportunities available, and there will be ways you can volunteer. And I think especially now museums are very open to having young people involved. And you will have like, a lot of strengths as a young person or different interests that museums might need. I think it's just being in that environment and kind of helping out however you can. I think volunteering for me, definitely kind of got me into it more.

Charlotte:

Yeah, I think Maeve kind of covered it. Yeah, I was basically saying, yeah, volunteering is better. And that's how I got into museums as well. It is that volunteering, gaining that experience that really helps to set you on your path if that's where your interest lies as a career in museums.

Eilish:

Yeah, I think there's definitely something really helpful, what you touched on earlier, about having flexible volunteering, and not just coming to a museum between the hours of 9am and 4pm and volunteer your time on a weekday, and that's not realistic or doable for everybody and so I think being able to volunteer online, especially, is so great.

Charlotte:

Yeah, and I think that's something we definitely want to kind of build on, especially following the success of the Connected Collections project, which was very much a remote project, because five of

them were elsewhere around the world. And I think from that project, it will be, you know, that was a way of us first exploring that and thinking this actually really works. And it really, you know, gave some amazing outputs from that project.

Eilish:

I was just seeing how long we've been talking to you. Okay, so the last one is, I wanted to ask you, what's your like, number one tip, if anybody is looking to say, wants to begin a career in museums, or is at the early stages of their career? What if you could summarise one tip, what would it be?

Charlotte:

Well, we've kind of touched on it already, but it would be volunteering. It's the best way to just gain skills in different areas, especially as you move around different departments, you really get a sense of the whole museums, how they work. And also then you know, where your interests really lie, as well. So you might go into museums thinking, you want to actually just work with the collections. But actually, you find, once you're working with a learning department, and actually engaging people with the collections in a different way, is of more interest to you, and a bit more creative. So definitely trying to get a good skill set and experience in different areas. I think that's the best way to really start kind of working towards a career.

Maeve:

Yeah, so in my experience, pretty much the same, just getting in the museums, volunteering, and just kind of hanging out, maybe being a bit annoying. Keep kind of persisting. But yeah, just, you know, doing whatever interests you around the museum and get involved however you can, really.

Charlotte:

And usually through the volunteering as well, that's usually when you get more training opportunities as well, I found that you know, all of a sudden, I could get on to different training courses, or could be put forward for it. And also therefore then you get a chance to network with people at other museums. And that's also really, really important in the museum world, I think to create a network of people based at different ones.

Eilish:

Yeah, definitely. Definitely. It's very, very important, especially down here.

Charlotte:

Especially down here. Yeah.

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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