

***After Life:***  
**Engaging Museum Visitors with the Theme of Death and Remembrance**

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**Abstract**

*In August 2015, three pottery vessels were discovered in the River Colne in Colchester's Castle Park. After discussion with the local Hindu temple, these objects were identified as Hindu vessels used during death rites, and subsequently they were entered into the collection of Colchester and Ipswich Museums. These finds acted as a catalyst for an exhibition called After Life, which deployed the wider museum collections, including its archaeological artefacts, to explore how people engaged with death in the past, and how they continue to do so, through the themes of Body, Soul and Mourning. This article outlines the public engagement activities conducted during the development of the exhibition, an overview of the exhibition itself, and a discussion of the 'Death Café' public event, which took place in the museum during the run of the show. As such, the article offers a case study in public mortuary archaeology in the museum environment.*

**Keywords**

*death, exhibition, museum, mourning, Hindu*

## **Introduction**

Following Colchester Museums' acquisition of three vessels associated with Hindu death rites, curators Ben Paites and Emma Reeve created an exhibition that explored the material culture surrounding death and what follows. The exhibition *After Life* showcased fifty objects which collectively explored the ways in which people in Colchester have dealt with death in the past and today.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it was important to consider all current debates on the display of human remains, which are discussed further in this article. The museum teams responsible for the exhibition drew on these studies and their findings when making the decision whether to include human remains in the display.

A key aim of all exhibitions at Colchester Museums is to engage with, and display objects from, the stored collections. The designated archaeology collection is wide ranging, with particular strengths in the Iron Age and Roman periods, due to the central role played by Colchester as the place that urban life in Britain began (Crummy 1997: 5). Many objects from this designated collection are on display in Colchester Castle Museum, but Colchester curators often use exhibition spaces in the other venues to experiment with how this collection can be interpreted in new ways. This, along with the recently created combined role of 'Collections and Learning Curator', has encouraged exhibitions that explore multi-disciplinary themes, involving artefacts from a range of periods and places in the Colchester area.

This article reviews the research conducted in preparation for the exhibition, and the display itself. It also examines how the curators considered the well-being of visitors by providing opportunities for feedback and reflection, alongside a supporting event during the exhibition's duration (5 May–30 November 2017).

## **Museum context**

Colchester Museums are part of a local authority museum partnership between Colchester Borough Council and Ipswich

Borough Council. Colchester and Ipswich Museums (CIMS) is the largest museum service in both Suffolk and Essex and plays a high-profile role in the East of England museum sector.

The museums in Colchester are:

- Colchester Castle: Built on the foundations of the Roman Temple of Claudius, it is the largest Norman keep ever built. This popular museum displays Colchester's nationally important collection of Roman archaeology.
- Hollytrees Museum: This is a Grade 1 listed Georgian townhouse telling the story of Colchester's people since 1700.
- Natural History Museum: Housed in a medieval church, the museum focuses on the rich natural history of north-east Essex. Popular with local families, it highlights key messages about wildlife habitats, biodiversity and climate change to encourage discussion and sustainable living (CIMS 2018).

In the financial year 2016–2017, the three museums in Colchester received 169,777 visitors. The core of Colchester Museums' collections consists of field-collected material, predominantly archaeology and natural sciences. For new acquisitions, the service focuses on collecting items with a demonstrable link to the local area, as informed by its Collections Development Policy (Colchester Borough Council 2018).

Of the three museums, the Castle alone has displayed mortuary remains (see Williams 2016 for one recent discussion of the range of cremated human remains on display). Over the years, the permanent displays have changed multiple times, and in the current iteration the remains are usually situated within excavation groups to place them within their archaeological context. Less contextualized remains have been re-arranged: for example, until 2010 the Castle had an isolated Egyptian Mummy on display with little contextual information. This mummy has now moved to Ipswich Museum, where it is displayed more appropriately as part of a gallery focussing on Ancient Egypt. The mortuary displays in the Castle attempt to accurately represent the rich history of Colchester.

## Hindu vessels

In August 2015, a member of the public contacted Colchester Museums stating that they had spotted several ceramic vessels in the River Colne in Castle Park, in which Colchester Castle is situated. Due to the town's rich heritage and the location of the river just outside the Roman walls, he wondered whether they may be of some antiquity, and therefore of historical significance.

Ben Paites (at the time Finds Liaison Officer for Essex) attended the site with Emma Hogarth (at the time Conservation Officer for Colchester Museums) to inspect the items. Due to the clarity of the river water, it was possible to determine that no deposits of any kind remained within the vessels themselves and so it was deemed acceptable to recover them for further inspection, without danger of losing any contents (Table 1).

Table 1: Vessels recovered from the River Colne.

Object no.	Description	Dimensions
1	A red ceramic vessel with fine grainy inclusions. The colour is likely a result of iron rich clay. The vessel is roughly circular in shape with a flat base, flaring up to the rim. The rim is pinched in five places, where there is evidence of sooting on the internal surface. There is also sooting on the internal surface of the base. A series of alternating yellow and green vertical lines have been painted around the rim of the vessel.	Diameter – 115.71 mm  Height – 55.07 mm
2 - 3	Two buff ceramic vessels with very fine inclusions. Both vessels have a flat base and flare towards the rim. The rim is pinched at one point on each vessel, with sooting on the internal surface of this area. There is also sooting on the internal surface of the base of the vessels.	Diameter – 74.66 mm Height – 32.20 mm  Diameter – 76.28 mm Height – 33.34 mm

Ben recognized the items as Hindu offerings (Figure 1), having encountered similar objects in his previous role working with the Portable Antiquities Scheme for the Museum of London. This was because Hindu objects and vessels are regularly found along the River Thames foreshore and were often shown to the local Finds Liaison Officer, given that the river is used by London's Hindu community for various ceremonies (Gould 2005). The context of the Colchester offerings was not yet apparent, so it became a priority to find out more about them before deciding what action to take next.

Ben contacted the Tendring and Colchester Minority Ethnic Partnership, who informed him of the existence of a Hindu Temple in Clacton-on-Sea, near Colchester. Mr and Mrs Karia, who run the Temple and Hindu Cultural and Heritage Centre out of their home, were very accommodating and agreed to meet Ben and look at the vessels. They were able to identify them as funerary items by the context in which they had been found. They explained that Hindus burn ghee (a type of butter) in vessels called *diya* as part of the thirteen day funerary ritual *sraddha*, which is also described by Firth (1997: 93–112). The Karias said that biodegradable vessels, often made of leaves (Figure 2), are used as part of the ritual and are subsequently placed into a body of water (usually a river). As the Colchester vessels were made of fired clay, the Karias believed that this indicated an individual or individuals performing an improvised version of the death rites, perhaps following a sudden or unexpected death.

These vessels represent an important part of Colchester's recent cultural history. In 2011, there were 1274 Hindus in Colchester practicing at home or at the temple in Clacton (Colchester Borough Council 2013). However, these vessels represent the first documented Hindu funerary practices in the town. In 2011, 0.7% of the town's population was Hindu (Colchester Borough Council 2013), but the museum's collection did not include any objects representative of this community. It was unanimously agreed through the Museum's Collections Working Group (a group of museum staff who make decisions on potential acquisitions amongst other collections-related tasks) that the Hindu vessels ought to be acquired into the collection. As the original owner was unknown, guidance was



Figure 1: The vessels recovered vessels from the river Colne.



Figure 2: Hindu leaf bowls.

sought from the Hindu Temple in Clacton as to whether it would be acceptable for the museum to keep the items. They agreed it would be appropriate, and that they would provide support to the museum in interpreting the items sensitively. Colchester Borough Council, as the landowner, was consulted and agreed to the items entering the museums' collection, transferring legal ownership.

The discussions surrounding these objects at Collections Working Group inspired the curatorial team to think about the ways they might be used in an exhibition. Due to their likely funerary associations, it made sense to further explore the potential of these artefacts as constituting part of a new death-themed exhibition. While all three Colchester Museums contain objects relating to the broad theme of death (human remains in the Castle Museum, mourning jewellery in Hollytrees Museum and mounted taxidermy in the Natural History Museum), the nature of this material and the emotional impact it may have on people is not addressed in the permanent displays (cf. Williams 2016).

It was decided that Hollytrees Museum was the ideal location for an exhibition of this type. This was partially due to the size of the space required: it was the largest available temporary display space of all three museums. Hollytrees Museum also has permanent displays focused around the social and community history of Colchester, making it an appropriate venue to explore the social and spiritual elements of death.

## **Preliminary research**

As Colchester has a particularly strong Romano-British archaeology collection, this seemed an obvious starting point to explore past attitudes to death. However, we also wanted to cover a comprehensive sample of mourning traditions throughout history, so it was necessary for both curators to gain a greater understanding of approaches to death in other periods and in the present day.

This was embarked on in a variety of ways. Firstly, we revisited the Hindu temple to gain further understanding of how the vessels found in Castle Park were used and how they relate to wider Hindu

funerary practices. It became clear that Hindus living in Colchester had to adapt their usual practices to suit local availability of resources, a tendency also noted by Firth (1997: 109). We were wary of displaying the vessels found in the River Colne as an anomaly without contextualising them within the normal practice of the Hindu faith. To address this, the Hindu temple kindly loaned a range of objects that related to the funerary practices currently undertaken by local Hindus, as well as several items relating to other Hindu death rites.

Another part of the preliminary research for the exhibition included a visit to Colchester crematorium and cemetery. The curators spoke with Penny Stynes, manager of the site, who is familiar with current trends in burial practice in Colchester. Seeing the crematory (incinerator) and cremulator (a machine used to grind cremated bone into ash) in action allowed for a greater understanding of the nature of processing human remains in the modern world. As one aspect of the exhibition was focused on the body, it was important to gain an understanding of how practices persist into the modern day and how practical choices like disposal of the body are still an important factor when planning a funeral.

## **Exhibition development**

A key purpose of museums as stated in The Museums' Association's 'Museums Change Lives' policy is to 'enhance our quality of life and improve our mental and physical health' (Museums Association 2017). This same policy also states that museums are not neutral places and thus can be instrumental in helping the public tackle difficult and sensitive issues. Death is one of these issues and is often remains a 'taboo' subject for many, as demonstrated by a 2014 poll conducted by Dying Matters. The poll found that only 21% of people in Britain had discussed their end of life preferences with friends and family (Dying Matters 2014).

As the subject is one of few universal human experiences, it was very important for the exhibition to be inclusive, academically, emotionally and culturally. This was addressed in large part by the exhibition text, a central component of any exhibition's



interpretation. At Colchester Museums all display text is reviewed in a 'text group', a selection of staff from different museum teams who work together to ensure that a consistent 'voice' is maintained across text in our venues. We aim for all text to be easily readable by a child aged twelve or older, with specialist language only included if it is comprehensively explained. With this exhibition, it was especially important that complicated and difficult themes could be discussed in clear simple terms.

Due to the exhibition's sensitive nature, a decision was made to include information about support networks for the bereaved prominently in the main introductory text. However, visitors do not always read all the exhibition text, and as a result may miss key themes and narratives. A large proportion of the visitors to Hollytrees Museum are either young families or older people (Visitor Finder 2018). For these reasons, it was considered important to ensure that the different sections of the exhibition were well defined and to make sure that each object's relevance was clear without the use of a large amount of text.

### **Displaying human remains (or not?)**

One of the first discussions within the exhibition team was whether to display excavated human remains. The debate over whether to display human remains in museums has been ongoing for some time and continues to be a subject where public opinion remains an important indicator as to best practice (Antoine 2014: 6). The policy at Colchester Museums is to display human remains only if absolutely necessary (i.e. the narrative of the display would change significantly without their inclusion) and, if included, curators must be sensitive in the display methods chosen. This is in line with current museum best practice (Nightingale 2015: 20–25).

The curators wanted *After Life* to highlight the materiality of death (as discussed by Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008: 4), and it was felt that including human remains in such an object-focused exhibition could result in them being dehumanized. This is only one issue of a wider debate on displaying modern human remains in museums, which started in earnest as a result of the Body Worlds exhibition, and expanded to include archaeological collections (Sayer 2010).

Uli Linke acknowledges that displaying anonymous human remains can have the effect of 'negating their humanity' (Linke 2005: 18) and the remains considered for display in this exhibition (Roman cremated remains) would be anonymous. The curators were also keen to consider cremated remains in the same way as they would an intact cadaver, in contrast to a tendency identified by Williams (2016: 295) of museums treating intact bodies with more respect.

Linke also says that the shock of seeing human remains on display can have the potential to evoke 'emotional anaesthesia' in visitors (Linke 2005: 19). As one of the main focuses of the exhibition was for visitors to feel comfortable exploring emotions surrounding death, the curators decided to only use objects where human remains were integral to their physicality, for example Victorian mourning brooches made with human hair.

Colchester Museums follow Hein's constructivist museum model in which people are integral to knowledge, and as a result, each visitor will create an individual understanding of a museum object/display related to their own lived experiences (Hein 1996: 30-37). Graham Black acknowledges that 'people relate to people', so context is of utmost importance, particularly in displays including archaeology (Black 2005: 276). For this reason, *After Life* was structured thematically around the recognizable stages involved in death and mourning.

## **Exhibition design and production**

All exhibitions at Colchester Museums are designed to reuse as much display material as possible and fabricate the design to incorporate it in to a new theme. All cases and internal display stands had been bought for previous exhibitions, along with the temporary wall structures and lighting.

It is also worth noting that all display material, including vinyl-cut lettering for wall text, titles and interpretation, mounted and printed object labels and exhibition handouts are designed and produced in-house by the Exhibition and Display Team. All installations were carried out by this team alongside the Collections and Learning team, which meant that the only costs incurred were for materials.

## **Exhibition structure**

The exhibition was split into four sections: 'Body', 'Soul', 'Mourning' and 'Death in Hinduism.' This draws on Howard Williams's reconfiguration of Metcalf and Huntington's interpretation of Hertz' theory of death as transition involving the relationship of mourners, the body and soul (Williams 2006: 21). It was organized along the same lines as Leeds City Council's *Dying Matters* exhibition, which also contained a similar range of objects from across archaeology and social history collections (Leeds City Council 2016-17).

The first section of *After Life*, 'Body', gave a brief overview of the physical methods used on dead bodies in Colchester (i.e. inhumation or cremation) and each method's prevalence at different historical periods. This section of the exhibition functioned mainly as an objective contextual platform from which the subjective themes of spirituality and human behaviour could build upon.

As Britain's oldest recorded town and once the capital of Roman Britain, Colchester has a wealth of Roman material relating to funerary practices (Crummy 1993: 257). This includes a great number of vessels used to contain cremated human remains. The curators decided to focus on the types of container used to carry the remains of the deceased during this period. The juxtaposition of a locally produced greyware urn (an 'affordable' vessel) with an imported glass flagon (an expensive vessel) showed the presence of cremation in different social classes in early Roman Britain.

Colchester Museums has in its collection a number of Roman lead coffins, which would have been useful illustrations of Roman inhumation practices. However, the display space available in the exhibition was limited. Therefore, a Roman coffin nail was included in the exhibition, in order to represent the gradual transition from cremation to inhumation, which occurred in greater frequency during the third and fourth centuries AD (Crummy 1997: 108; Petts 2016: 669). Another object included in this section of the display was a burial ticket that dated to 1754, which invited the receiver to accompany a dead person's body from their home to the church, where the body would be buried. The exhibition text accompanying this object accentuated the links between Georgian funerary practices and the British custom of bringing a dead person

in a hearse to their former home, before continuing with the family to the place of interment, which is still prevalent today (Penny Stynes, pers. comm.).

The 'Soul' section addressed the spiritual realm of death. Although museums have for a long time been viewed as secular institutions (Duncan and Wallach 1980: 450) they can provide a neutral space where people may engage with spiritual concepts. As a theme, 'Soul' had the potential to be much more complex than its allocated physical space allowed within the exhibition, so we chose to focus on two groups of objects. The first were Roman grave assemblages, including a knife, flagon and jewellery (Figure 3). These were used to represent the idea that Romano-British people might have believed that items included in the grave would follow the person into the afterlife (Toynbee 1971: 53). These objects were also used to illustrate the tradition of feasting with the dead, and the relationship of Roman-period beliefs and practices around death to the concept of a continuation of life post-mortem. A medieval illuminated manuscript, *Graduale ad usum Ordinis Sancti Benedicti* (Accession number - COLEM:1932.221, p. 1R), which included the Requiem Mass (mass for the dead), demonstrated the medieval view of death as a step into another realm: from Earth to Heaven.

The 'Mourning' section of the exhibition was split into three smaller subsections; 'Mourning in the Victorian period', 'Memorials', and 'Collective Mourning.' Following his early death in 1861, Queen Victoria's mourning of her husband Prince Albert resonated emotionally with the people of Britain and the British Empire, which resulted in widespread religious and quasi-religious behaviour rarely seen before (Wolffe 2000: 196). The subsection 'Mourning in the Victorian period' showed objects relating to Prince Albert's death (e.g. a commemorative silk ribbon) alongside items which aimed to represent the widespread costume conventions and rituals of mourning which were observed at the time, such as jet brooches and jewellery containing human hair taken from the deceased.

The wearing of jewellery made with human hair, represented in the exhibition by a Victorian example (Figure 4), originated in the seventeenth century (Amnéus 2006: 64). There is extensive evidence for the use of human remains carried on the person in the form of reliquaries, including human hair, as far back as the

early medieval period (Hills 2011: 16). In fact, early Christians had a fascination with people or things that could have once been physically connected with Christ. These items were thought to be imbued with a special significance and thus were highly sought after (Klein 2010: 56). Bachmann (2017: 85) writes that hair jewellery represents a 'private communion between the wearer and the deceased' because only the person wearing the jewellery has intimate knowledge of their relationship with the dead person. There has recently been an increasing prevalence of the use of human remains, such as hair and ashes from deceased loved ones, in the creation of jewellery (Penny Stynes pers. comm.). This was referenced in this exhibition by a pendant containing human ashes in resin created in 2016 (Figure 5). Although methods of creation of such objects may have changed, the principle of keeping a part of a dead loved one close to the living has persisted.



Figure 3: A Roman grave group on display in the exhibition.



Figure 4: A Victorian brooch with Human hair.



Figure 5: A silver pendant made using human ashes encased in resin.

As Parker Pearson (1991: 124) notes, the way we choose to dispose of the dead can be both a conscious effort to remember and forget their lives. A significant section of the exhibition looked at the ways in which people in Colchester have chosen to remember the dead in memorials. The concept of a memorial is intrinsically tied to physical things, sometimes imbuing everyday items with powerful emotional charges. The inclusion of a Roman memorial plaque created a link to the tombstones of today, as well as bringing attention to the rates of child mortality in Roman Britain – to illustrate this point a plaque was included in the exhibition to commemorate a woman and her young child.

The 'Collective Mourning' subsection included a modern paper remembrance poppy with information about Armistice Day: an annual act of collective international mourning. These items were displayed alongside tributes left at Colchester's war memorial after the death of Princess Diana. These objects were chosen to demonstrate how people come together to experience loss, and not just to remember the war dead.

The 'Death in Hinduism' section of the exhibition centred on the original vessels found in the river by the authors, and other items which were on loan from the Hindu temple. This section of the exhibition demonstrated its relevance to present-day Colchester by highlighting the practices of a small local community. The case was arranged to emulate the layout of the Hindu temple in Clacton. The objects formed a powerful display (Figure 6), showing the many elements and stages associated with Hindu mourning practices. The vibrant colour in many of the items provided a stark contrast to the darker tones of other areas in the exhibition, such as the Victorian section. By drawing attention to the juxtaposition between the views of death explored in previous sections of the exhibition, and the Hindu belief in reincarnation, it was hoped that discussion and debate could be initiated with museum visitors.

Other exhibitions about death, such as Bristol Museum and Art Gallery's 'Death and the Human experience' (24 October–13 March 2016), provided visitors with a space to reflect upon what they had seen. Luckily, the temporary exhibition space in Hollytrees is in a small quiet room, already a 'safe space' for quiet reflection. We also had an exhibition journal, which we invited visitors to fill with



memories, thoughts and feelings triggered by the exhibition. Initially conceived as a similar device to an exhibition comment book, this journal soon started to take on a more personal and emotional nature. As it was not structured like a traditional comments book, with spaces for names, addresses and comments, visitors began to share their experiences and thoughts on death with each other (Figures 7 and 8) by replying to, and/or challenging other people's comments. The evolving nature of the journal led the curators to see it as an important insight into the way people visiting the museum could engage with an exhibition about a challenging topic. These insights could then be used to inform future exhibition programming, and better understand the needs of visitors to such exhibitions. Therefore, Collections Working Group at the museum will now consider the journal itself for accession into the permanent collection.



Figure 6: The display case for the "Death in Hinduism" section.

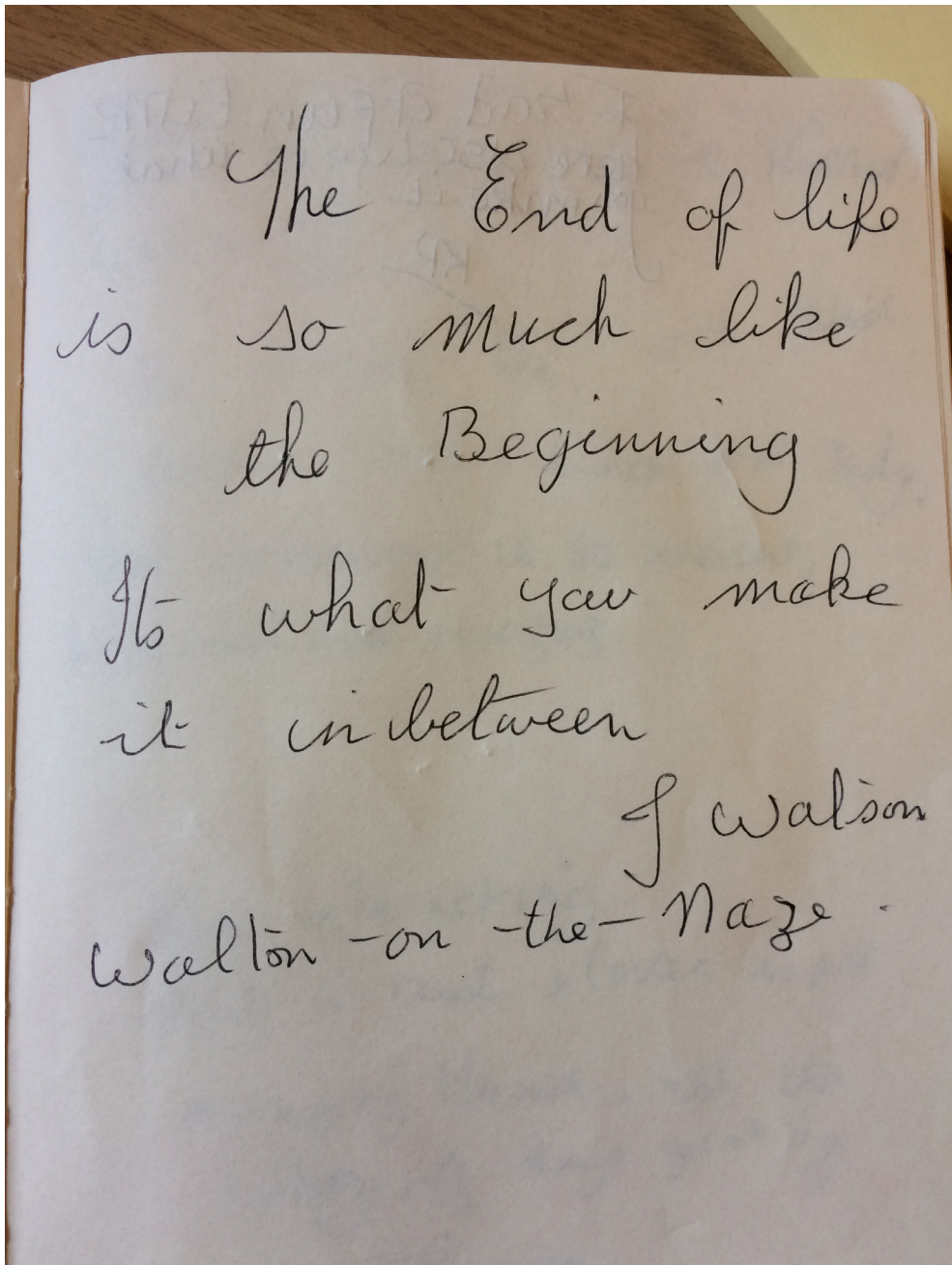


Figure 7: An entry in exhibition journal.

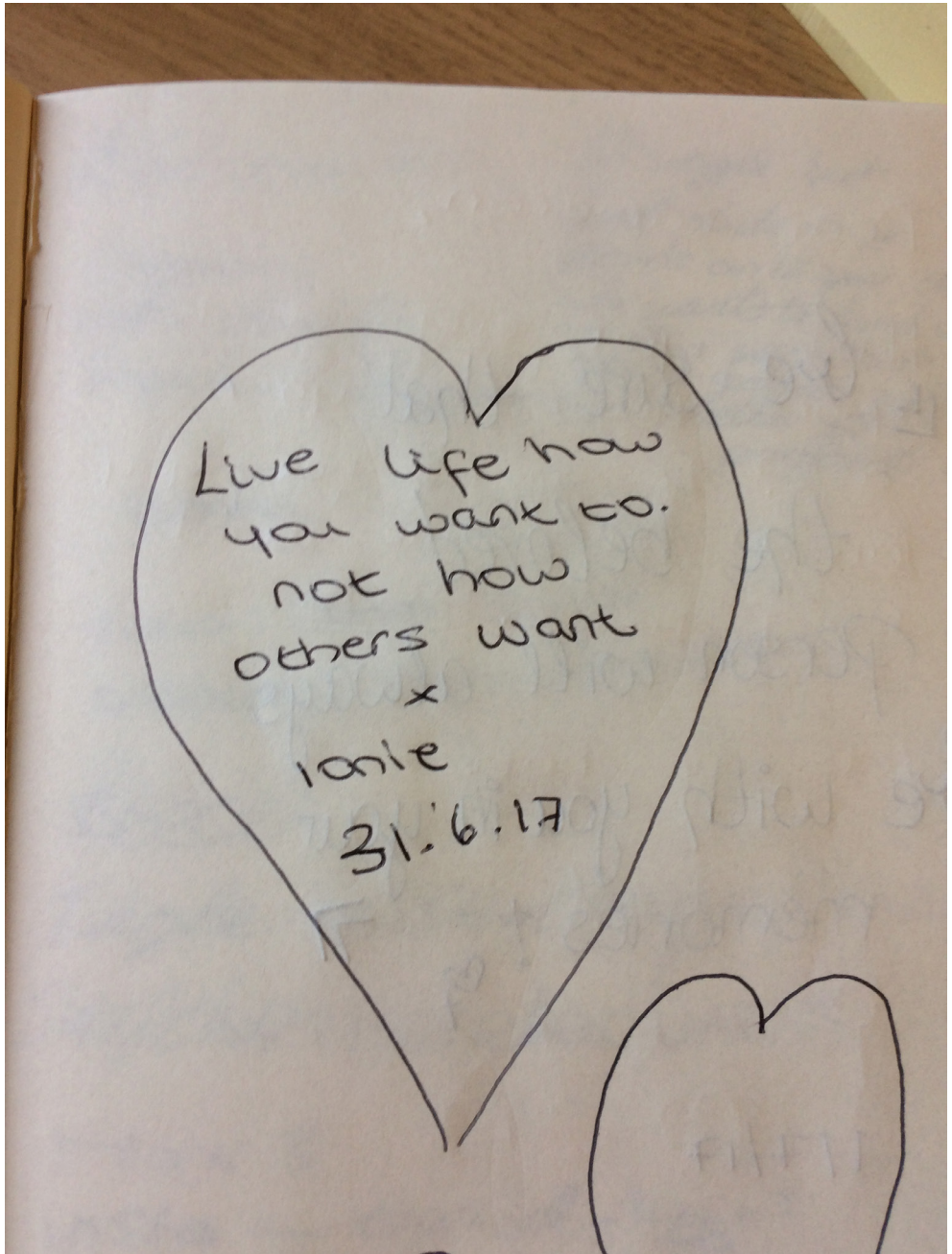


Figure 8: An entry in the exhibition journal.

## **Public engagement: Death Café**

Lois Silverman acknowledges the importance of museums as providers of a kind of 'social work' surrounding death (Silverman 2010: 85). The 'Museum of the Mind' report by Culture Unlimited draws attention to museums as places of sanctuary and how this can underwrite mental well-being (Culture Unlimited 2010). With this in mind, it was decided that the museum should host an accompanying event to the exhibition, which would provide visitors with a safe space to speak openly about death. This approach is also aligned with the philosophy of the 'Death Positive' movement, which is spearheaded by the Order of the Good Death: a collective of death professionals from across the world. One of the key beliefs of this movement is that the culture of silence surrounding death in the Western world is damaging to society and should be challenged (Order of the Good Death 2017).

Related to this, Death Café is a worldwide movement established in 2011 in which people come together over tea and cake to start a conversation about death and dying (Death Café 2017). The curators decided that this event would work well in the available spaces at the museum. Freedom Funerals and KAT Marketing, both Colchester-based companies, ran a previous Death Café in Colchester in February 2017. Emma approached these companies for advice and support on hosting a Death Café at the museum. The event took place in June 2017, and was attended by seventeen people. Elements of the event were discussed in depth beforehand, including how to lay out the room to help visitors feel most comfortable in what, for some, could be an intimidating situation. Death Cafés are normally hosted in more informal spaces such as cafes, so a 'café-style' layout was decided on and created in the museum's education room. Cakes and refreshments were kindly provided by Waitrose Colchester, who had been sponsoring the museums' adult event programme for some time previous.

During the event, conversation focused mainly on the practicalities of death: costs of funerals, embalming, coffins and cremation. Lee Jaschock from Freedom Funerals, who hosted the session, was very happy to answer questions. Participants came for a variety of reasons, but most had in common the experience

of a recent loss of a loved one. Verbal feedback collected from attendees after the event suggested that they enjoyed having the space and encouragement to speak freely about death and people to discuss it with. Most participants had also come specifically for the event, rather than the exhibition, but many did go on to see the exhibition after taking part in the Death Café.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the objects in the collections that relate to death on permanent display at Colchester Museums may not evoke emotional engagement. Therefore, the choice of exhibition sections in *After Life*, stemming from the human experience of death, allowed visitors to explore the collections through the viewpoint of their own lived experience. The object stories are given greater resonance by displaying them in this way, as is shown through the responses written in the exhibition journal. Moreover, *After Life* achieved dealing with death effectively and across multiple periods of the human past without the deployment of human remains.

Although many exhibitions have visitor feedback or comment books, the presence of a journal to allow visitors an emotional outlet during their visit was something new for Colchester Museums. Visitors were more willing to share their emotional reaction to the displays when provided with a specific form of recording this in the journal. The accessioning of this journal is also something new to the museum service, validating the views and reactions of visitors to the exhibition, along with their personal stories.

The response to *After Life* was incredibly positive, with a diverse range of visitors of all age groups sharing their own emotional experiences. The Death Café event added an extra layer of emotional connection to the exhibition, allowing people to supplement the themes explored with examples from their own lives.

The decision to omit human remains from the exhibition was not questioned in the visitor responses. Whether the absence of human remains allowed visitors to engage with the objects on a greater emotional level is impossible to determine. Comparing it to

an exhibition that did include human remains and had a journal to record visitor feedback would be perhaps the best way gauge the impact of presence of human remains on the visitor experience.

Future exhibitions covering similar topics could include similar means of capturing visitors' emotional responses, in order to understand the impact they have on visitor experience. As more museums do this, we will be able to reevaluate best practice in relation to both the choice of displaying human remains, as well as the impact on visitor wellbeing that such decisions might have.

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