

‘What to bin and what to keep’

Museums as collective memory

By Scott Keir

The objects seem so old. And I remember being young. Did I think I was young when I looked in the case? How often are we actively aware of our age as we view the world? Many of my friends from my twenties are still my friends, and looking at them, it does not feel that I nor they have aged; we are as we were, friends, old friends. Only photographs, diaries, records, speak to the passage of time. Compared to those photos I am greyer, dustier, less energetic than my sense of self now would like to believe.

So it is with those memories of the objects in the case in the Falconer Museum when I was young. I remember that I was young when I saw them. I know I have changed since I saw them, and my memory has changed too. What did I think of them then? My memories say that I found the museum to be a comforting, interesting place. Is that true, or was I bored? I visited several times for school trips and voluntarily. I drew a picture of the museum on a primary school project book. Perhaps, my brain suggests, I found one of the cabinets – with old items from shops – boring on that trip. Perhaps I appreciated the steady peace of the museum more as a teenager than when I was younger. I am drawn to museums and galleries now, and when I relocated to Edinburgh as an eighteen-year-old undergraduate, I would seek out galleries and museums for some quiet space in a busy city. Perhaps I had done that in Forres too, as a seventeen-year-old, before I left, almost for good? I forget.

I now know that our memory has a team of archivists, constantly evaluating and sorting what comes in through our senses, and what is already stored in our memories, choosing what to ‘thin’ – the archivists’ term for stripping down dense piles of papers to just the essentials, choosing what to bin and what to keep. Do I really need to remember the precise toppings of my porridge this morning (sultanas) compared with yesterday’s (blueberries)? I had breakfast, that will do. As for last week, do I need to remember breakfast at all?

Our memory is autobiographical – we are constantly writing and rewriting the story of ourselves, for ourselves. This is the main thing I remember from a talk I attended over a decade ago, by Douwe Draaisma, author of *Why Life Speeds up As You Get Older*.¹ We tend to remember novel experiences, and as more new things happen when we are younger, we remember less as we age. Unless we do new things – perhaps in retirement, or just because. But even then, those memories will be edited, sorted, revised, and refiled. I can vividly remember much of the parachute jump I made when I was eighteen – or was I nineteen? – and the part of the car journey home when we almost had an accident, but little of the weeks either side, or even the journey to the airfield. Similarly vivid are some parts of a trip back to Forres including a visit to the Falconer Museum in 2013 where I stumbled into a talk by the House of Automata – but not all of it has stuck.

Rather than an archive, perhaps our memory is a *Rag and Bone Shop*, the title of psychiatrist Veronica O’Keane’s book.² A constantly rearranged display of stock around some fixtures and fittings. Each time we visit is a different experience. We see the shop and its contents in

a slightly different way. It is not always reliable – is this genuinely solid silver, not silver plate? In a review of Veronica O’Keane’s book, Douwe Draaisma approves of this conception.³ Perhaps my notion of memory-archivists did not come from his lecture after all.

And like a rag-and-bone shop, some memories that we think of as dusty and worthless, we may reappraise, as if we had taken them on *Antiques Roadshow* to be told they were worth a fortune. “Well, I’d never sell it”, you say, smiling for the cameras, “it stays with the family”. I now recall that museum cabinet of old shop stock, the tins and packets of the high street gone by, with a smile.

I think a lot about memory now. Not only as I am middle aged – 46 at the time of writing – but also as I am back at university as a PhD student researching the history of museums and science centres from the 1980s onwards. This period is within living memory for many, including myself, and one of my research methods is oral history – capturing people’s memories and reminiscences as spoken interviews. Historians must consider memory when interpreting and handling these testimonies. Guides and handbooks for oral historians discuss the role of the brain and memory within a person, how our memories may be prompted by a question, a word, a smell, a sound, an object, or another memory, and how our memories are shaped by where we are when we are remembering. I might be more polite or remember something different about someone at a funeral than at a wedding, for example. What we don’t remember is also something to consider.⁴

What role do museums play in memory? David Lowenthal, the historian who wrote extensively on heritage, describes how history “extends and enriches, confirms and corrects memory through records and relics” in what is probably his best-known work, *The Past Is Another Country*.⁵ In another paper, he sums up the role of museums as being explicitly about memory: “Museums exemplify the urge to remember. It is their *raison d’être*”.⁶ The memory here is both individual and collective, the visitors and the community.

What makes a museum a museum? One of the common definitions of museums is a place where historical objects are preserved and displayed. Unlike a science centre such as Aberdeen Science Centre or Dynamic Earth in Edinburgh where the focus is on objects that are not historical but instead encapsulate concepts. With a PhD on museums and science centres, the devil – and the fun – is in the details, and especially in those cases where those distinctions get blurred.

What counts as historical, for example? You may have experienced the surprise at seeing something from your lifetime in a museum. During a visit to the Falconer Museum in 2013, it was salutary to see computers I had used, now being displayed in a glass case, presented as something from another era, something historic. Because those were. The computer in my pocket was then, and is even more so now, leaps ahead of what was in that glass case. Even very recent material could be historical. For a museum today, one of this year’s Covid-19 swab tests, or a Queen Elizabeth II memorial poster, could be just as much a relevant object to its collection as a Bronze Age sword, or a Jurassic fossil.

Museum stores are not all filling up with every Covid-19 swab test ever produced however, nor with every crisp packet found on the High Street, because the role of the museum – and specifically the museum curator – is to be selective. Like human memory, the museum

memory selects, edits, sorts, revises, and refiles. Memory objects arrive in smaller numbers than human memories arrive in the brain, but museums still assess, filter, store, or dispose. (There is a dedicated classified ads column in the Museums Association's *Journal* for paintings, objects, plane cockpits, and the like, though UK museum standards usually require that objects no longer considered necessary for a collection are given away to another museum and not sold.) Objects can also leave a museum if the purpose, and the memories, are greater elsewhere. The return of ancestral Māori human remains to the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa by the Falconer Museum in 2016 is a beautifully clear example of this. Whatever memories and histories that object provided to the community around Moray pales into insignificance compared with those of the communities of its descendants. Museums have a role then in being our external memory, for us as individuals, and collectively as a community, as a society. Historian Susan Crane argues that museums are a way we can delegate remembering to something outside our head, with the museum selecting "some memories to retain in the perpetual present".⁷ But, as with the memories inside our heads, each time we visit the museum, even if we have been there before, the experience is different. We are different and we experience this preserved memory stored and displayed in the museum differently.



Hugh Falconer's grave in Kensal Green Cemetery, London. Photo © Scott Keir

Who gets to remember, and who gets to choose? Yesterday, I visited Hugh Falconer's grave. He is buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, the first of the 'Magnificent Seven' Victorian graveyards built around London to address – and profit from – the rising population. The Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery claim it as 'Britain's most prestigious cemetery'.⁸ Hugh is buried in illustrious company, alongside familiar names including Brunel, Birkbeck, W. H. Smith, Twinings, and more – over 1500 names are listed on the Friends' list of notables.⁹ The cemetery is still operational.

Hugh Falconer's grave marker is a tall pedestal on the Central Avenue, in the innermost circle, tucked under some tree branches. Hugh gets top billing, then his sister, "Louisa Falconer, widow of James Milne", their brother Charles Falconer, and their sister Grace Falconer. The gravestone acts as a memory store of some of the Falconer family's existence. As the historian Sheldon Goodman puts it, "Cemeteries are museums of people ... spaces of memory".¹⁰ The cemetery company and the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery work to maintain these memories for years to come.

But what of Alexander Falconer, Hugh's brother, whose bequest founded the Falconer Museum? His name is not on that pedestal. Little seems to be known about him, or his work. There are traces, including a portrait by an artist. Which artist? That too is unknown.¹¹ His name and identity lost to our current understanding, our present memory.

Much of what we know and remember about Hugh Falconer is thanks to his friend Charles Murchison, who after Hugh's death published in two volumes a biography together with Hugh's unpublished material.¹² Though the books remain, the original papers are missing. Palaeontologist Victoria Herridge has looked hard for them and hopes they are still out there.¹³ The whereabouts of the originals are forgotten, but a record is remembered.

Sometimes these acts of forgetting are due to chance and accident, and sometimes to our own behaviours – burning letters or deleting text messages from ex-lovers, for example. Sometimes the forgetting, or the remembering, is the result of the acts and behaviours of others. Hugh's historical memory has been aided by Charles Murchison and all who supported, bought, and preserved the two volumes, and by all who planned, built, championed, and maintained the museum. These actions usually require elements of power: time, money, prestige, access. Luck helps too. For evidence of this, think of a cemetery that is not maintained, perhaps one that was for poor people, or that has no community of friends. Or think what Hugh's legacy would be like if all that remained was a single letter containing the assessment of his contemporary, Joseph Dalton Hooker, that Hugh Falconer did "mischief" and his name was a "scandal"?¹⁴

That letter, a private correspondence between J D Hooker and Charles Darwin, discussing how much money to donate to Hugh Falconer's memorial appeal, was not made public at the time, of course. It emerged later, from its careful archival store, into academic and then general view. Though some aspects of history may be lost or may fade in our collective memories, other aspects can and do emerge.

It is now more widely known what the East India Company did before and during the time that Alexander Falconer was a merchant in Calcutta, and Hugh Falconer was in charge (despite whatever Joseph Hooker thought) of the botanical gardens. Our understanding of

the history of Indian tea has improved, and the effects of the colonial empire are more deeply understood.

This does not mean we should forget all about the Falconers, erase the memory. Rather, our understanding is enriched by this new knowledge, and the stories we tell will adapt. Hooker's letter casts insight into the scientific fights going on at the time in Falconer's circle. Our greater awareness of the East India Company helps us assess those times more honestly.

It is easy to think that we should not judge the past, but to that I offer two responses. We must judge the past; comparisons between then and now are helpful, allowing us to reflect on what has changed, what should change, what should stay the same. And secondly, the past judged the past. People and societies are not monotone and dominant histories, and memories of the past do not represent the whole picture. The effects of the East India Company were known about and condemned at the time by some. The first meeting of the British India Society in 1839 saw speakers condemn the Company for its neglect and oppression.¹⁵

This shift in memory and understanding can happen at a personal level too. I was absolutely convinced that I attended two memorable events in the same year; I told people I had, I would have sworn that on oath. I was wrong. When I looked in my diaries earlier this month, these two events were a year apart. My memory, that shuffling archive, that rag-and-bone shop, had summarised not quite as it should. With that new knowledge, from those diaries, I now remember differently. Better.

Institutionally, that shift in memory and understanding is happening across the museum sector. I live near to another museum with a link to tea, the Horniman Museum, founded by the tea trader Frederick Horniman. Nick Merriman, the museum's director, committed in 2020 to "tell his story – and that of the collections – in as full and fair a way as we can", which includes talking about how Horniman tea was made and by whom, and how the objects in the museum came to be there.¹⁶ Nick Merriman does not want to remove the Horniman family from the stories the museum tells, but instead, to look again at what is said. Time has that effect, of changing the lens through which we look at the past, like an optician with their testing kit. And what about now, better, or worse? A, or B? I thought of this as I left my optician one sunny Wednesday lunchtime, after she valiantly tried to balance my distance vision with my reading vision for my prescription. As with history, we need to balance the big picture with the local, the headlines writ large with the fine print in the margins.

The big picture for Forres is that Hugh Falconer was a significant figure in Victorian science, and the Falconer family – including Louisa, Charles, Grace, and the mysterious Alexander – contributed to the life and fortunes of Forres and beyond. Within that, we should talk about the society in which they lived, the employers they had, the power and access they were given, the effect they had on the world, and more.

Hugh Falconer, his life and work, and the society he lived in, should be remembered alongside those of other Forresians. These stories should be told. Our personal memories are the stories that we tell ourselves. Our collective memories are the stories that we want to tell others, our communities, our descendants. We do this through words, sounds, pictures, and, crucially, objects. Museums and their stores are important because they contain the memories that we have decided to keep, collectively. And when we see these objects, they

help us to tell the stories linked with each memory, and most importantly with our communities. They should not be forgotten, and nor should the Falconer Museum.

About the author

Scott Keir is a PhD student in the department of Science and Technology Studies at University College London, funded by a Royal Institution Philip Freer Studentship, researching the modern history of science communication in museums and science centres. He previously worked for the International Centre for Mathematical Sciences in Edinburgh and at the Royal Society and the Royal Statistical Society in London in science communication and education policy roles. He grew up in Forres and has been a member of the Friends of the Falconer Museum for several years. www.scottkeir.com

¹ Draaisma, Douwe 2004: *Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older: How Memory Shapes Our Past*, trans. by Arthur Pomerans and Erica Pomerans. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

² O'Keane, Veronica 2022: *Rag and Bone Shop: How We Make Memories and Memories Make Us*. London: Penguin Books.

³ Draaisma, Douwe 2022: Seahorses in the blob: What gives us our sense of time. *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 May 2022, 20.

⁴ Drawing on Thompson, Paul, and Bornat, Joanna 2017: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford Oral History Series, 4th edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Lowenthal, David 2015: *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 334; <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139024884>.

⁶ Lowenthal, David 1993: Memory and oblivion, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 12.2 (1993), 171–82, 171; <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647779309515355>.

⁷ Crane, Susan A. 2006: The Conundrum of Ephemerality: Time, Memory, and Museums, in Macdonald, Sharon, ed., *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 102.

⁸ 'Britain's most prestigious cemetery', *The Telamon*, 2020, 3.

⁹ <https://www.kensalgreen.co.uk/notables.php>, accessed 15 September 2022.

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/CemeteryClub>, accessed 15 September 2022.

¹¹ The restoration of Alexander Falconer's portrait – The Falconer Museum, <http://falconermuseum.co.uk/the-restoration-of-alexander-falconer/>, accessed 15 September 2022.

¹² Murchison, Charles 1868: *Palaeontological Memoirs and Notes of Hugh Falconer, with a Biographical Sketch of the Author*, compiled and edited by Charles Murchison. 2 vols. London: Robert Hardwicke.

¹³ Victoria 'Tori' Herridge, Hunting for Hugh Falconer's notebooks in Forres..., reprinted in this anthology. See also: <https://toriherridge.com/2012/08/02/hunting-for-hugh-falconers-notebooks-in-forres/>, accessed 18 August 2022; Tori Herridge, "His lost notes and diaries plague me. If anyone finds them, please let me know!", <https://twitter.com/ToriHerridge/status/1560190531350810624>, accessed 15 September 2022.

¹⁴ Darwin Correspondence Project, "Letter no. 4773", accessed 15 September 2022, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-4773.xml>

¹⁵ Mehrotra, S.R. 1967: The British India Society and its Bengal branch, 1839–46, *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 4.2 (1967), 131–54; <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946466700400203>.

¹⁶ Merriman, Nick 2020: Frederick Horniman's colonial legacy, *Horniman Museum and Gardens*; <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/story/frederick-hornimans-colonial-legacy/>, accessed 15 September 2022.