



HISTORY IN THEIR HANDS

At Stonyhurst, the rare, historic collections can be touched, examined and brought vividly to life during lessons, giving even the youngest pupils the opportunity to learn from the past

Nestled impressively within the historic halls of Stonyhurst College, lies a museum and archive like no other. It spans centuries, crosses continents and holds within it not just rare and priceless objects, but the power to educate and inspire. The Stonyhurst Collections, now one of the most significant educational collections in the UK, began humbly in 1609 with a single golden cope.

That first object marked the beginning of a story shaped by upheaval, devotion and resilience.

“During the Reformation, the school, which was then in the Spanish Netherlands, received precious objects through the parents of English boys who were sent there,” explains Dr. Jan Graffius, the curator of the Stonyhurst Collections. “These objects were connected to the Catholic faith and were being destroyed in England along with the abbeys and monasteries.”

Now, more than 400 years later, the collection has grown into an extraordinary archive of around 100,000 books, 40,000



manuscripts and 70,000 artefacts. Each piece tells a story, whether it’s a 4,000-year-old flint spearhead or a fossilised tooth of a woolly mammoth.

“The Jesuits have always recognised that objects have the power to illuminate and inspire. Many objects are of symbolic value,” explains Jan who firmly believes in making history come alive for pupils – not as untouchable artefacts behind glass, but as part of their daily learning.

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To that end, Jan created the Junior Curators Scheme. Aimed at pupils aged nine and 10, it introduces them to the fundamentals of curating – from object handling to interpretation.

“These are all transferable skills that encourage communication,” she says.

Children may find themselves holding a Greek drinking cup from the first century AD, discovered in the ashes of Pompeii.

“The whole point of a Jesuit education is to observe, absorb and learn.”

And learn they do – be it through books, ancient manuscripts, fossils, flint and even taxidermy. Stonyhurst houses part of the Waterton Collection, a notable array of preserved animals collected by Victorian explorer Charles Waterton.

“Pupils get a bit freaked out by them sometimes!” Jan laughs. “But they learn about methods of preservation, how they come to be in the collection and how explorers back then travelled the world to learn about them. They went to the jungles of India and the forests of the Amazon – so this teaches pupils about the natural world.”

In a typical lesson, Jan may present a 50-million-year-old fossilised tooth from a megalodon shark: “What do you think that is?” she asks pupils. The answer is rarely guessed but always sparks curiosity. “The tooth opens a door to palaeontology – just one of many subjects woven into the lessons.”



She also shows them a Neolithic flint spearhead, pointing out the slightly curved shape. “Cavemen were far from stupid,” she says. “The curve makes the spearhead spin, giving it torque – so it does more damage when hunting.”

“Pupils look at and handle these objects and see there is reason for everything – they are carefully designed and engineered.”

Stonyhurst’s Shakespeare First Folio sits proudly in a sturdy glass cabinet along a busy thoroughfare within the College, allowing

daily viewing of this rare treasure. Housed in the Do Room’s permanent exhibition, it’s joined by rotating displays curated by pupils – like Womanuscripts, showcasing women’s roles in history, through letters, recipes and theological manuscripts.

The display has been put together by 17-year-old girls in Poetry (Year 12): “I think they have found it quite liberating,” says Jan. “I am so proud of them!”

As pupils grow older, the scope of learning widens. Sixth Form pupils use the collections to explore historical and societal changes. International Baccalaureate (IB) pupils are required to present displays using museum artefacts, while A level biology and art pupils also draw inspiration from the collection, particularly the natural specimens of the Waterton Collection.

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Supporting Jan in this vital work is Esther Rollinson, the Museum Education Officer. Together, they have developed hundreds of ‘banked’ lessons based on the museum’s contents for Stonyhurst pupils, as young as three years old – their efforts also extend beyond Stonyhurst, with local schools encouraged to visit and engage with the collection.

Stonyhurst’s educational mission is grounded not just in preserving the past, but in helping pupils understand it – and their place within it. The legacy is reflected not only in objects but also in the names etched into the very furniture of the school. One such name is Arthur Conan Doyle,

the creator of Sherlock Holmes. His name is carved into a heavy oak desk, a tangible link to the school’s illustrious past. Inside a museum glass case sits one of his school reports, describing him rather unflatteringly, as a ‘quarrelsome buffoon with dirty habits’.



But behind the quirks and curiosities lies a deeper purpose. “It’s about understanding the world through the things left behind,” says Jan who adds that many of the objects give pupils access to people’s thoughts, values and experiences – allowing them to walk in someone else’s shoes – whether that’s a Roman soldier, a Victorian explorer or a Neolithic hunter.

At Stonyhurst, young minds are given the rare and unique opportunity to hold the past in their hands and carry its lessons into the future. ■



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