



History in THEIR HANDS


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

Nestled within the historic halls of Stonyhurst College lies a museum and archive like no other. Spanning centuries and continents, the Stonyhurst Collections hold not only rare and priceless objects, but also the power to educate and inspire. Today, they are recognised as one of the most significant educational collections in the UK, beginning in 1609 with a single golden cope. That object marked the beginning of a story shaped by upheaval, devotion and resilience. During the Reformation, when the school was based in the Spanish Netherlands, the parents of English boys entrusted precious Catholic artefacts to the Jesuits for safekeeping, saving them from destruction in England.

Four centuries later, the collection has grown into an extraordinary archive of around 100,000 books, 40,000 manuscripts and 70,000 artefacts – from a 4,000-year-old spearhead to the fossilised tooth of a woolly mammoth. “The Jesuits have always recognised that objects have the power to illuminate and inspire,” explains Dr Jan Graffius, curator of the Stonyhurst Collections. To make history come alive for pupils, Dr Graffius established the Junior Curators Scheme for pupils aged nine and ten, teaching them to handle, interpret and communicate the stories behind objects. Children may find themselves holding a Greek drinking cup unearthed at Pompeii or examining the carefully engineered curve of a Neolithic spearhead. “The whole point of a Jesuit education is to observe, absorb and learn,” adds Dr Graffius. Learning extends far beyond history.

Stonyhurst houses part of the celebrated Waterton Collection, assembled by Victorian explorer Charles Waterton, whose preserved animals open conversations about natural history, preservation and global exploration. In lessons, a 50-million-year-old megalodon tooth sparks discussions about palaeontology, while Shakespeare’s First Folio, displayed prominently on campus, introduces pupils to the foundations of English literature.

Older pupils use the collections to deepen their studies. Sixth Formers studying the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme are required to curate exhibitions using artefacts, while A-level pupils in art and biology draw inspiration from the Waterton specimens. Recent displays, such as *Womanuscripts*, curated by pupils, have explored women’s roles in history through letters, recipes and theological manuscripts. Supporting Dr Graffius in this mission is Museum Education Officer Esther

Rollinson. Together they have developed hundreds of lessons, adapted for pupils as young as three, and frequently welcome local schools to share in the experience. The legacy of Stonyhurst’s collections extends beyond the artefacts themselves. Names carved into desks connect pupils to alumni such as Arthur Conan Doyle, whose school report – on display in the museum – memorably describes him as a “quarrelsome buffoon with dirty habits”. Behind such curiosities lies a profound purpose: to help pupils understand the world through the things people have left behind – their values, struggles and ideas. Whether handling the tools of a Neolithic hunter, the writings of Shakespeare or the explorations of Victorian naturalists, Stonyhurst pupils are given a rare opportunity to hold the past in their hands – and carry its lessons into the future. 

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