

Chris Walker (compiler), *Treasures of Burford Tolsey Museum*, Burford: Tolsey Press for Burford Tolsey Museum & Archive, 2024, 98pp., £10.

Burford is a small Oxfordshire town beside the River Windrush. It has existed in various ways since Saxon times. There were around two hundred inhabitants recorded there in the 1086 Domesday Book. It developed into a busy market town after receiving a market charter in the twelfth century. Its High Street is valued for the picturesque historic buildings which line it and the arched medieval bridge, which is still in use. The Tolsey is a sixteenth-century building, with dendrochronology dating it to 1525. The building has had various uses, from a market hall, where traders paid tolls, to town hall and meeting place. It became the home of the Burford Tolsey Museum in 1960 (complete with display cases from the Ashmolean, the book I am about to review proudly tells us).

In *Treasures of Burford Tolsey Museum*, the authors look at the history of Burford via the objects from the local museum, based in the Tolsey building. You may have come across the book's format before; exploring history through a disparate collection of objects. I find it an accessible, insightful and engaging way to explore how humans have shaped the world around them. The foreword by Susan Ashton includes the statement that 'the museum records the history of Burford in everyday objects' and this book fits the same format as the museum.

The book starts with a brief history of Burford Tolsey Museum and then divides into five chapters, covering "Arts and crafts", "Commerce and manufacturing", "Everyday life", "Notable people and events" and "Rural life". Grouping the fifty-four objects thematically means the reader does not require knowledge of dates or the development of the town in the same way a chronological approach does. In fact the book rather revels in the haphazard nature of the museum collection – the blurb on the back even states: 'Where do the following objects come from? And what is their connection to Burford? Civil War order, a stone mason's seventeenth century daybook, parish pump, dolls' house, the golden dragon, a school desk and needlework samplers'. Anyone who picks up the book knows that they are going to learn about a somewhat random collection of objects that all claim connection to the Burford area.

Each page shows an image of the artefact, a succinct description and an explanation of the history of the object placing it in the context of Burford. Further information is given in grey boxes, and other illustrations give different perspectives. If a building is being discussed often there is a modern-day photograph, allowing the reader to compare how the building has changed. The grey fact boxes give a brief introduction on an incredibly wide range of subjects, from the British pre-decimal currency, the National Fire Service and the English Civil War to the BBC, the traditional system for counting sheep and the importance of clean water to stop scarlet fever. I appreciated this inclusive way to reach the readers – there is no assumption that everyone will automatically have background knowledge of that particular topic, there is no historic snobbery and it is a very democratic way to engage people.

It is interesting to see how the book uses local history to reflect societal change across the whole country, for example the comments on child chimney sweeps and the Chimney Sweepers Regulation Act on the page with the Burford chimney steps, items which at first glance simply appear as twisted pieces of metal. The Compulsory Vaccination Act certificate page feels timely and relevant even 169 years later.

There were particular artefacts in the book which left an impression on me. One was the page that took an engraving of Charles Beauclerk to explain the background to the title of Earl of Burford, which rather tickled me. The connection between Burford and Charles II and Nell Gwyn, while royal, is not maybe as 'proper' as you might expect! I was drawn to the heart patterns and swirl motifs on the country smock at Burford Tolsey Museum as it looks like a rather attractive version. I have seen smocks on display in the Museum of Rural Life, the Oxfordshire Museum and the West Berkshire Museum so it caught my eye as a typical artefact of the local area. Smocks have gone from a purely practical garment in rural England to now being valued as an important part of costume history and folk art. I included Helen Byrne Bryce's *Impression of Burford High Street* artwork in an Oxfordshire art talk I gave to the Burford Tolsey Museum and Archive in January 2024 so it was wonderful to see it included in the book and to learn more about her life. It was clear then how much the artist and this local scene meant to the people of Burford. After the focus on this local artist on pages seven to nine, it makes sense that the famous Burford dolls' house be the next object explored, on page ten, seeing as it was made by the Burford Committee of Arts and Craftsmanship, led by Helen Byrne Bryce. The details are incredible, down to plasterwork ceilings and the costumes of the figures. Made in the 1930s, the dolls' house has been on display since the museum opened in 1960.

There are detailed acknowledgments of donors, with pages telling the story of where the objects came from and how the museum acquired them. This clarity of acquisition is very important for museums, as well as telling the story of why that particular object is significant. There have been well-publicised news stories of artefacts that have been taken during wars or with morally-dubious acquisition trails. These Burford donor details add a layer of substance to the objects, raising simple every day objects into valuable doorways into particular eras of history, celebrating the local people and industry and remarkable connections across Britain. By contrast, the story of a museum visitor revealing the Bristol orphanage source of particular nineteenth-century needlework samplers is a curator's dream. Sometimes visitors can fill the gaps in object histories and that is absolutely to be celebrated. Museums rely on their visitors in many ways, not just to buy souvenirs from the shop! This is why including a mysterious board game with the hope that 'a reader has an answer' to what it is, is a great inclusion, even if currently there is not much to say about it!

There is an index on the penultimate page as well as the contents page at the front to guide readers around the artefacts, if you wish to dip in and out of the book rather than read it through from the beginning. Both approaches would work well.

I gave an Oxfordshire art talk at Burford Tolsey Archives in January 2024, shortly after the museum and archive suddenly lost their curator, Chris Walker. They were still reeling with the shock so it feels exceptionally pertinent that they have produced this compendium of the treasures he held so dear in his memory. The project feels like a great celebration of Mr Walker's life work, especially as his colleagues were able to use his research and descriptions of the artefacts selected. The Museum and Archive team have done a great job to celebrate the collection and its history and the people that worked so hard to set up and run the museum.

Marie-Louise Kerr ([*Curator Without Museum*](#)), 2025