

Museums Worcestershire in 2023-2024

At a glance:

Total visits – 113,858

12% increase in visits on 2022/2023

Visitor satisfaction up from 72% to 79%

Visitor welcome – 87% say very good

20% improvement in visitor wellbeing

39% - Visitors came to Worcestershire specifically to visit the museums

1,700 beds at paid accommodation – Commandery visitors' overnight stays in Worcestershire.

£3 million – Visitor spend brought into Worcestershire

Comparison figures taken from 2018 audience research

“At a loss on what to do with the kids on a rainy April day, we chose to come here. SO glad we did. A very reasonable entrance fee for a family with friendly staff who are enthusiastic about the place and its history.”

“A lot to see, try on and interact with, inside an amazing building that in itself is a gem. It kindled an interest to find out more about the civil war and Worcester in particular. Top visit!” *Commandery visitor*

The Commandery

Visitor satisfaction from 59% to 78%

Value for money increase 13% to 64%

2023-2024 highlights:

- 22% increase in summer visitors following a national heritage marketing campaign in partnership with *Visit Worcestershire, Visit Worcester, and Worcester BID*.
- South Asian, Afro Caribbean and Eastern European communities came together at The Commandery for a celebration *Mela* event.
- Central Government Towns Fund award to Worcester enabled a reconfiguration of the old shop space which will house part of the future *Worcestershire Soldier* exhibition and created an inviting new retail and welcome area.
- *Commandery Quest Escape Room* exceeded income targets in its first full year of opening. Further commercial improvements included the ability to offer weddings in the Solar Room.

Visit England Visitor Assurance Quality Scheme (VAQAS) Award.

The Commandery was awarded Visit England's coveted *Gold Visitor Attraction* accolade for the first time, following an "impressive period of improvement" (VAQAS report 2023). The award celebrates the high-quality visitor experience and the standard of informative exhibitions, cleanliness, and visitor welcome.

The assessor praised the staff team and exemplary standards of customer care,

as well as the “proactive approach to continuous improvement and quality visitor experience”.

“So much history, interactive displays, staff go above and beyond, and everything is told in so much detail, all at a price that is easy for families to afford during the cost-of-living crisis. Simply amazing.” *Commandery visitor*

Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum

More than 74,000 visitors

Highest visit numbers since 2008-9

The *Paint the Streets* exhibition brought important street art works by artists Banksy, Goldie, TKid and Chrome to Worcester, alongside the work of Paint Festival artists and stories of the street art heritage of the Midlands. The exhibition was a collaboration with *Worcester Paint Festival*, and welcomed younger, more diverse audiences to the Art Gallery.

The programme also included the *Cornish Coast to the Malvern Hills* exhibition of Worcester’s outstanding British Impressionism art collection; an exhibition focusing on Kidderminster-born Formula 1 racing driver Peter Collins; the engaging and nostalgic *I Grew Up 80s* summer exhibition, and *Aotearoa*, sharing research into Worcester’s small collection of Māori artefacts and significant specimens of New Zealand natural history.

Highlights in 2023-24 from the growing events and activities programme:

- A sell-out specialist talks programme about Dame Laura Knight has delved deeper into the life and work of this important artist.

- A great core offer in school holidays including trails and activity bags.
- Fun family sessions have included *Fossils with Mary Anning* and *Poo Detectives*.

“It is a great public place for all to visit – the Museum, the Art Gallery, the exhibitions and talks and activities for all, the hardworking staff and volunteers, the building itself, and the café. Going from strength to strength. Good to have in Worcester.” *Art Gallery & Museum visitor*

Worcestershire County Museum at Hartlebury Castle

More than 24,000 visitors

25% higher than pre-pandemic

2023-24 highlights:

- Over 300 visitors joined in with Castle celebrations to mark King Charles III’s Coronation, enjoying fantastic falconry displays, following the Royal Trail and experiencing what it might be like to be crowned like a monarch in Hartlebury Castle’s Great Hall.
- As part of a commitment to making the museum more accessible for SEND (Special Educational Need and/or Disability) visitors, new sensory backpacks have been provided for visitors and their families to use during a visit. These include fidget toys, ear defenders, maps, trails, a magnifying glass, and a puppet Hartlebury Hare to guide them around Hartlebury Castle.
- A group of Looked After Children from *Children First Fostering* enjoyed their own Pirate Fun Day.

- New *Hands-on History* sessions led by knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers give visitors the opportunity to handle objects from the museum collections and learn more about them. Visitors benefit from the volunteer's knowledge, and it encourages generations to discuss the items together and share ideas and memories.

“Absolutely fantastic! We thought it might be a nice place for a quick stop on our way to our holiday destination and 4 hours later we are no closer to leaving! It's been educational and entertaining. What a gem!” *Hartlebury Castle visitor*

Supporting our Communities

The *Paint the Streets* exhibition at Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum provided an opportunity to collaborate with several community groups including *Action for Children*, *Onside*, *Platform Housing* and *Oasis Academy*.

- At Oasis Academy, Warndon, located in one of the country's highest areas of deprivation, fourteen locally young people created a mural for their community gardening project, working with two local veteran street artists, including one who was themselves from Warndon.
- Local professional artist Oly Bliss worked with nine young people through Action for Children's LGBTQ+ groups across Worcestershire. The young people viewed the exhibition and created work around positive words.

Holiday Activities and Food Programme

The HAF programme is funded by the Department for Education and offers children eligible for benefits-related free school meals experiences during school holidays, so they are:

- receiving healthy and nutritious meals,
- maintaining a healthy level of physical activity,
- being happy, having fun and meeting new friends,
- taking part in fun and engaging activities that support their development,
- feeling safe and secure,
- returning to school feeling engaged and ready to learn.

We've received funding from Worcestershire's HAF to be able to welcome children and their families to all three museum sites. They were able to take part in artist-led workshops and hands-on-history sessions, having fun exploring their museums.

"Today was epic! Thanks to the AWESOME Worcester Paint Festival artists, Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum and Platform Housing Group. We have created an amazing piece of original work together!

"The backdrop to our new veg patch & yet again something we can all be proud of and enjoy together when visiting Hub HQ." *Oasis Academy workshop attendee*

Developing Museum Audiences

The Arts Council England-funded *Museum Voices* project at the Art Gallery & Museum began co-curation with under-represented members of the community or those who find obstacles to engaging with heritage, to give them a voice in the development of a refurbished Museum Gallery.

Partners include *Worcestershire Children First*, *Worcestershire Care Leavers*, *Ginny Lemon – Queering the Museum*, groups and individuals involved with *Black History Month*.

Worcestershire Care Leavers reported a 20% improvement in wellbeing after engaging in workshops for the project.

Positive feedback from the popular bookable blacksmithing courses at Worcestershire County Museum has led to an additional intermediate course being offered.

The introductory course has now been adapted so it can be undertaken by under 16s and SEND participants.

As well as contributing to income generation and supporting the wellbeing of participants, the course combines a taste of blacksmithing with an in-depth look at the metalwork of the Bromsgrove Guild, enabling participants to engage with items of the museum collection currently in store.

Museum Volunteers

47 volunteers

3621 hours donated

Volunteers develop the museums in many ways including through gardening, welcoming visitors and interpreting the buildings and their history, helping with school sessions, and event preparations.

A huge thank you to all our volunteers, who contribute significantly to all our museums.

“As a visually impaired person it can be difficult to access detailed information and Carl was knowledgeable and completely engaging for the whole one and a half hours that he was with us. Please thank him for his time so freely given, it made such a difference. I have gone away inspired. Thank you so much for a memorable visit.” *Visually impaired visitor who was given a bespoke guided tour from one of the Commandery volunteers*

Museum Collections

Building on the Art Gallery & Museum’s aspiration for Worcester to become a centre for British Impressionism, acquisitions into the City’s collection include *The Farm Boy* and *Little Meg* by Sir George Clausen and *Cutting Corn* by Dame Laura Knight.

Important acquisitions into the Worcestershire County collection enable better understanding of the Gypsy Vardo collection. Supported by the John Ellerman Foundation, acquisitions include artwork by Beshlie Heron who documented

Romany life and *The Dialect of the Gypsies of Wales* by John Sampson, 1926, a rare book on the Romany language, originally owned by artist Augustus John.

Exhibition Research

Museums Worcestershire has been selected as one of 23 organisations nationally to take part in the Art Fund's *Going Places* project. It aims to develop major touring exhibitions with environmental sustainability and community consultation at their heart.

Aotearoa at the Art Gallery & Museum continues a series of spotlight exhibitions which build on research into the museum's funders, founders and collectors. The exhibition was developed in consultation with the *tangata whenua* of New Zealand including Māori curators from *Te Papa*, the national museum. Previous spotlight exhibitions included *Return to Oceania* and *Mayflower 400*.

Museum Learning

School visits increase 27% on 2022-23

Outreach boxes used by 4300+ children

"It was perfect, it gave the children the starting knowledge of our new topic in an exciting way."

"Excellent team of staff who were skilled in their knowledge of WW2 and made the learning exciting for the children through their perfectly rehearsed role play. The best school trip I have ever been on – professionally led by experts in

the field and all staff extremely friendly and helpful". *Teachers' comments, Worcestershire County Museum*

"Very knowledgeable staff leading the workshops and tour and lots of hands-on opportunities for our children."

"Sessions were interactive and pitched perfectly to ensure that all of our children could join in, thank you." *Teachers' comments, The Commandery*

Worcester's favourite artwork, *Chadding on Mounts Bay* by Stanhope Forbes was the inspiration for the *Starting Points* partnership between *Worcester Region Art Party for Teachers* and the Art Gallery & Museum.

Worcestershire schools responded to the painting, creating their own wonderful 2D and 3D works as a class.

"The art gallery was well set up and the children felt welcome. For most of them it was the first time they had been to an art gallery, so this was important." *Year 4 teacher, Art Gallery & Museum*

Worcestershire Heritage, Art & Museums Registered Charity

Following the founding bequest by Professor Rolf Olsen, a second very generous donation came from a New York donor who grew up in Worcester. This will enable the museum to display Worcester's important glove collection, support an internship to continue to develop specialist expertise within the museums and introduce an art prize.

The Trustees are developing an ambitious strategy to support Museums Worcestershire for the next three years based on:

- supporting the art collection,
- inclusion, education and succession planning,
- health and mental wellbeing.

WHAM funded an audio guide recording and handset for the *Paint the Streets* exhibition. The audio guide was designed to support access to the exhibition by people living with sight loss, and those who find listening more comfortable than reading labels and panels.

A *Sight Concern* group visiting the exhibition and using the audio tour reported a 28% improvement in their positive mental wellbeing.

Museum Membership Scheme

The scheme has been in place for seven years, with over £14,000 raised from membership fees and donations. A proportion of this funding enables conservation, acquisition, exhibition and learning projects at the museums.

A particularly successful year for the scheme, in 2023-2024 the number of memberships increased by 71% and the renewal rate was 73%, with more than half of members coming from outside the city.

In 2023-24 Art Gallery & Museum Membership fees and donations have supported:

- Acquisition for the City collection, a line drawing *Man Standing in a Doorway* by Worcestershire-born artist Laurence Housman.
- The *Museum Voices* project to redisplay the museum gallery.
- Conservation of a Māori skirt from the City's World Culture collection for the *Aotearoa* exhibition.

“I joined to show support to the gallery I am very fond of and where I have derived much pleasure from exhibitions.”

“4 year as a Member. I have been a regular visitor for about 9-10 years. Main reason for joining: I wanted to be closer to the Museum and Art Gallery by becoming a Member.” *Art Gallery & Museum Members*

Looking Forward

Museums Worcestershire is developing big transformational projects for all three museums, which will come to fruition over the next few years:

- At The Commandery: a new Victorian spotlight exhibition in 2025 and then a new Worcestershire Soldier display, supported by Worcester’s Towns Fund, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and many individual donors.
- At Worcestershire County Museum: a new Gypsy Vardo gallery, new facilities for learning and activities, environmental sustainability interventions and developments for the existing displays.
- At the Art Gallery & Museum: improved facilities to support the visitor experience in 2024 and 2025 and then new galleries for the City’s art and glove collections supported by major benefactors.

Thank you to all our visitors, our Councils, and funders for enabling us to make a positive impact on the lives of so many of our communities.

Museums Worcestershire is a partnership between Worcester City Council and Worcestershire County Council and the commitment of the two local

authorities, their elected councillors and senior officers has been fundamental to Museums Worcestershire's successes in 2023-24.

- Our joint working with Hartlebury Castle Preservation Trust continues to support the vision of a unified visitor attraction at Hartlebury Castle with regional and national appeal.
- Museums Worcestershire is supporting the Mercian Regiment (Worcestershire) Museum and the Worcestershire Yeomanry Museum to develop a new Worcestershire Soldier display at The Commandery, which has received development funding from National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Thank you to all the organisations who have made project funding awards to Museums Worcestershire in 2023-24. Together, we have made wonderful things happen for the residents of Worcester and Worcestershire:

- Art Fund
- Arts Council England
- Dame Laura Knight Society
- Elmley Foundation
- John Ellerman Foundation
- Malvern Hills District Council and Visit The Malverns
- Marches Network legacy fund
- UK Research and Innovation/Museums Association
- Visit Worcestershire
- West Midlands Museums Development
- Worcester Paint Festival

- Worcester's Town Deals Programme (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities)
- Worcestershire HAF Programme (Department for Education)
- Worcestershire Heritage, Art & Museums, including the Shirley & Rolf Olsen Art Purchase Fund

Thank you to the team at Museums Worcestershire who pour their enthusiasm, knowledge and dedication into welcoming visitors, working with our communities and making our museums great places to be.