

Out in Oxford and beyond the binary: LGBTQ+ stories in the Pitt Rivers Museum

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What comes to mind when you think of the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford? As archaeologists, does it make you think of the great man himself, 'The General', that 'Father of British Archaeology' and coiner of 'typology', Augustus Pitt-Rivers? For some it's lauded as a grandfather's attic or a treasure trove. For others it's a dark, violent, colonial space. Its collections have inspired writers like Colin Dexter, Penelope Lively and Philip Pullman, and yet its antiquarian atmosphere still tricks its audience into thinking its displays lack dynamism. This is not so!



Francis Turville-Petre (right) with Theodore McCown (left) and Dorothy Garrod (centre) at Wady el-Mughara, Israel, in 1931 (PRM 1998.294.609). Credit: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

The Pitt Rivers Museum is a museum of anthropology and world archaeology, founded in 1884 with a donation of some 30,000 objects from Pitt-Rivers' first collection. Although his name, as stipulated, is still etched over the door through from the adjoining Museum of Natural History, its collections have continued to grow to around 400,000 objects. These objects have come from across the world and are as varied as an obsidian Acheulian handaxe from Kenya collected by Louis Leakey (PRM 1929.45.1) to a piece of concrete from a Soviet hangar in Cuba (PRM 2016.46.1).

We all know that objects have stories to tell and that stories can be told using objects. Few of the collectors, donors and excavators of those objects, however, probably anticipated that they would be revisited in the 21st century through a queer lens. This changed in February 2016 when I went to a lecture by Professor Richard Parkinson for

LGBT History Month (<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/great-unrecorded-history-lgbt-heritage-and-world-cultures>). Richard is an Egyptologist at the British Museum in London and at the Oriental Institute in Oxford, and the author of *A Little Gay History* (2013). His lecture, probably the most emotive I have ever been to, called for all museums to have at least one object on permanent display identified as relevant to LGBTQ+ history.

With the help of friends and colleagues, around 25 active volunteers who identify as LGBTQ+ or as allies, and funding from the Oxford University Museums Partnership, we created *Out in Oxford: an LGBTQ+ trail of the University of Oxford's collections*. This trail features 51 new interpretations of 35 items from the Ashmolean Museum, Bate Collection, Bodleian Libraries, Botanic Garden, History of Science Museum, Museum of Natural History and Pitt Rivers Museum. It has a website (www.glam.ox.ac.uk/outinxford)



Natufian bone pendants from Mugharet el-Kebarah, Mount Carmel, Palestine (PRM 1932.65.203-.209). Credit: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

and a booklet with forewords by Stephen Fry and Richard Parkinson, a logo designed by local LGBTQ+ youth group My Normal, and a trail app with audio descriptions for blind and partially sighted people. It was the University's first cross-collections trail and the collections' first LGBTQ+ project.

Some of my favourite objects on the trail are a set of Natufian bone pendants dating from 13-10,000 BC, excavated by Francis Turville-Petre (1901-1941) in Palestine with Dorothy Garrod. Turville-Petre was an openly gay archaeologist and famous for discovering the *Homo heidelbergensis* fossil, Galilee Man, in 1926. From 1928 to 1931 he lived at the Institute of Sexual Research in Berlin, run by the renowned sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), who hoped his research would encourage understanding and tolerance of homosexuality. Turville-Petre was fictionalised by his friends Christopher Isherwood and W H Auden.

The trail was launched in LGBT History Month 2017 and the atmosphere in the Museum on those nights was electric! 2017 was especially important as the 50th anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales, and the 60th anniversary of the Wolfenden Report that advocated that change in the law. John Wolfenden (1906-1985), Chancellor of the University of Reading

at the time, later became the Director of the British Museum from 1969 to 1973. The committee he chaired was founded after popular opinion started to change after several high-profile witch hunts and court cases, including that of Michael Pitt-Rivers (1917–1999), the great-grandson of the Museum’s founder.

In March 1954, Michael was tried alongside his cousin, Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu (Third Baron Montagu of Beaulieu) (1926–2015) and their friend, journalist and novelist, Peter Wildeblood (1923–1999), for ‘conspiracy to incite certain male persons to commit serious offences with male persons’. Montagu founded the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu, in 1952 and later became the head of English Heritage from 1984 to 1992. Although the Pitt Rivers Museum has objects donated by Michael that belonged to his great-grandfather, none of them were on

display at the time of the project and his story could not be included.

The *Out in Oxford* trail was almost award-winning, having been shortlisted for a Museums and Heritage Award, University of Oxford Vice Chancellor’s Diversity Award, and an Oxfordshire Charity and Volunteers Award. There have been two further parties at the Pitt to celebrate LGBT History Month and LGBT History Month 2020 was launched there jointly with the Museum of Natural History in November 2019. My Normal now uses the Museum for its monthly meetings. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive and sometimes incredibly personal.

A further legacy of the project came with the announcement in October 2018 that the Museum had been awarded significant National Lottery Heritage Funding for a new project, *Beyond the binary*

(www.prm.ox.ac.uk/beyond-the-binary). This funding has allowed for the recruitment of a dedicated project team, who, with support from community volunteers, are more thoroughly queering the collections, enhancing the database, and commissioning and purchasing new objects for the Museum. A free exhibition will open later this year to showcase this incredible work. Michael Pitt-Rivers’ story can now be told.

Archaeological archives may initially be destined for the shelves of museum stores. They may seem unremarkable. They may appear uninspiring. They may not be revisited for years. In the future though, they may be emotive, even controversial. They may be the last part of the jigsaw of someone else’s life and have a value we cannot imagine. So pack those boxes carefully, archive managers, and stay creative, curators. Our future’s in our past!



Mini Pride parade during the party at the Pitt trail launch event, February 2017. Credit: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford



General Pitt-Rivers’ unused excavation ‘medalets’ donated by his great-grandsons, Michael and Anthony Pitt-Rivers, in 1971 (PRM 1971.30.5). Credit: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford



Project team, volunteers and visiting speakers after a showing of Paris is Burning, February 2017. Credit: Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford



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