

MuseumsMonthly

The latest news and announcements from Southend Museums Service.

This month...

**From the Planetarium:
Aurora Borealis**

Wunderkammer

Southend's Cabinet of Curiosity
Open to the public until Oct

Spotlight on Architecture

In this new, regular feature we take a
closer look at what makes our
buildings so special.

Southend Museums

Southend Central Museum

The Beecroft Art Gallery

Prittlewell Priory

Southchurch Hall

www.southendmuseums.co.uk



The northern lights seen from a garden in Cumbria, Britain on Feb. 27, 2014.
Tom Hughes/AP Photo

Aurora Borealis

Lights! Camera! Action!

As the temperature of the Sun rises and falls, particles escape from the surface into space, known as solar wind.

The particles are drawn towards Earth, colliding with various gases. This creates the spectacular colours seen as dancing lights in the sky.

In 1619 Astronomer Galileo Galilei used the name Aurora Borealis to describe the lights, taking the name from the mythical goddess of Dawn - Aurora, and the Greek name for the north wind - Borealis.

Wunderkammer: Southend's Cabinet of Curiosity



Painted turtle shell, Southend Museums Service.
© Tessa Hallmann

An intriguing new exhibition opened at Southend Central Museum celebrating the history of collecting and humanity's timeless desire to collect and view curiosities.

'Wunderkammer: Southend's Cabinet of Curiosity' features an eclectic mix of objects from the museum's collections that are rarely on display to the public.

A mummified cat, a collection of colourful tropical shells and corals and even a full-length replica of the Bayeux Tapestry are just some of the items that are on display highlighting the fascinating array of artefacts the museum has been collecting over the years.

Wunderkammer is literally translated from German as 'room of wonder' and in English it is usually referred to as a 'Cabinet of Curiosities'. Cabinets of Curiosities acted as a precursor to museums and this exhibition will explore the evolution and the continued mass appeal of museums today.

The exhibition will highlight the stories of early collectors including one of the earliest female collectors, Isabella d'Este, and will also feature objects from the collection of Charles Nicholson, who was born in nearby Hadleigh.

Whilst this immersive exhibition will provide fun and engagement for our younger visitors, it will also consider a more critical view of the history of collecting. Wunderkammer acknowledges and explores the impact of colonialism and instances of exoticism, providing an introspective look at museums and their collections.

Wunderkammer: Southend's Cabinet of Curiosity is on display at Southend Central Museum, Victoria Avenue and runs for a whole year from Saturday 2 October 2021 to Sunday 2 October 2022. Opening hours are 11am to 5pm, Wednesday to Sunday.



Shabti, from Charles Nicholson Collection, Southend Museums Service.
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Spotlight on Architecture

The buildings that make up our museums service are fascinating time capsules, reflecting the changing landscape of Southend through the centuries and in this regular feature, we hope to highlight and celebrate the artistry in architecture that makes up our built heritage.

'Transform' ceramic tile cladding c.1974 Beecroft Art Gallery Fritz Steller 1941-2015

Upon entering the gallery, visitors cannot fail to notice the imposing tile-clad panels that wrap around the central core of the building. The creation of the sculptor, Fritz Steller and commissioned when the building was being constructed as the town's central library, this vast art installation is a fine example of post-war, modernist design.



Detail of the Beecroft Art Gallery's striking tile-clad wall

Steller was born in Dresden, Germany, in 1941 and in 1959 travelled to England to study at the Birmingham College of Art where he developed his skills with a diverse range of materials including clay, steel, bronze, plaster and stone.

During the 1960s Steller established the Square One Design Workshop; a collective of like-minded young artists and in 1969 he was awarded the contract to produce nine 18ft by 18ft sculpted ceramic panels to be erected on the roadside elevation of the new Queensgate Market Hall in Huddersfield where they remain to this day.

The size of the panels, combined with the difficulty and expense of the production and fixing methods, led to the development, by Steller, of 'Transform', a new approach to the ceramic cladding of buildings. The Transform Ceramic Company's system of architectural tile cladding offered a product that was adhesive, light, moisture resistant, grout and pointing free, plus the panels could also be easily handled and assembled.

The patent for Steller's innovative technique was published on 24th March 1972 and during this period the borough architects for a new popular library for Southend were looking at ways of enhancing the central service core of the building to complement the overall design of the structure. The finished application needed to be durable and low maintenance and so Transform panels were chosen.

The installation was completed in late 1973 and consisted of three sizes of extruded fireclay, asymmetric concave tiles, with colours running from tan through to rich browns and purples, sometimes within a single tile. The finished work has been described as "...burnt tiles giving an impression of hundreds of book spines or a giant chimney..."

In the mid-1970s, the decline of architectural interest in ceramic cladding led to the closure of The Transform Ceramic Company and the patent was not renewed.

Sadly, much of Steller's public art has now gone and so these walls are rare surviving evidence of his ground-breaking work with architectural ceramics.



Detail from the Transform Catalogue (Transform Ceramic Company, 1971).