

River and Rowing Museum Collections Transfer

Ethical Framework

The River and Rowing Museum wishes to transfer its collections to organisations that can offer long-term public access and collections care. We are inviting expressions of interest from museums and other public and not-for-profit organisations interested in taking responsibility for all, or part, of the collections.

1 Background: The Museum Closure

The River and Rowing Museum (RRM) closed to the public on 21st September 2025. Inflationary pressures on costs (energy and employment, in particular) combined with capital expenditure requirements mean it is not financially viable for RRM to remain as the majority occupier of its Henley site.

Most of the workforce has been made redundant. The focus of the Trustees has been to manage this process carefully and respectfully, recognising that many of the employees and volunteers have long standing associations with the museum. RRM has provided enhanced redundancy packages.

The museum still possesses significant funds and the River and Rowing Museum Foundation is exploring options for its future direction. This may include supporting the development of a new probably smaller museum in Henley. Following closure of the building the museum is continuing to offer education provision via an outreach programme and seeking organisations to take responsibility for its collections.

The Trustees are acutely aware of their legal and ethical responsibilities toward the collections and the Foundation more generally and will endeavour to ensure that decisions about the RRM collections deliver the best possible outcomes for the collections and the public benefit, whilst discharging the RRM's charitable objectives. The Foundation has established a Collections Working Group which has started work on putting together a decision-making framework and procedure to support decisions about the future of the collections, rooted in museum sector standards and best practice. A Buildings Working Group is

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exploring options for the building.

2 The Museum Collections

The RRM cares for around 28,000 objects across accessioned, reference and loaned collections. The collections have three interconnected subject areas:

- The Rowing Collection
- The River Thames Collection
- The Henley Collection

The Rowing Collection

The Rowing collection covers the international sport of rowing and is believed to be the largest of its kind in the world. It is the largest of the museum's three collections and also contains the largest objects, including over 50 boats and boat sections. The RRM's collection of boats is unique, encompassing prototype racing boats and boats from significant races or athletes. It includes the boat in which Steve Redgrave won his fifth consecutive gold medal at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. There are also over 100 oars and around 20 rowing machines. The Rowing Collection includes material related to Henley Royal Regatta, and other rowing events across the UK, but also includes various international pieces such as Olympic and World rowing. There is memorabilia, literature, an extensive collection of trophies, cartes de visite and cigarette cards. Items date from the 16th century to the present. A large number of Rowing objects are 2D format, such as photographs, documents, books and magazines. There is also fine art, costume, accessories and recorded media.

The River Thames Collection

The River collection focuses on the River Thames, particularly the non-tidal Thames. The collections feature a large number of paper and photographic material, such as an archive of material related to the development of the Thames Path, natural history collections and fine art, as well as large objects such as equipment and large structures like locks and a lock keeper's building. Some of the boats in our collection are also related to the River Thames, including traditional river leisure craft. The museum has two preserved log boats, from the Anglo-Saxon period and the Medieval period. The River collection includes purchases of art by Frederick Waters Watts, Myles Birkett Foster, William Havell and Joseph Farington.

The Henley Collection

The Henley collection covers the town of Henley-on-Thames and its surroundings. It contains a large number of objects in a paper or 2D format, and also includes social history objects, archaeological finds, and fine art. The Henley collection includes some large objects (such as large signage and oversized paintings). It features objects from Henley and also its environs such as Hambleden and Bix. There are objects and photographs relating to local businesses such as Stuart Turner and Brakspear's Brewery. The fine art collection is relatively small but the museum has made some major acquisitions. The painting 'Henley from the Wargrave Road', 1698 by Jan Siberechts was purchased with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Art Fund in 2001. Following major retrospectives of the work of local artist John Piper in 2000 and 2003 work was acquired. 'String Solo', 1934 was donated by the Piper estate in lieu of tax in 2001, and 'Ruined Castle', 1984 in 2002. 'Gate to the River', 1940 was purchased in 2003. Alongside a small collection of works of art by John Piper there is also archive material (catalogues, books, photographs) relating to Piper. The Museum has collected local archaeological finds through the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

There is also an unaccessioned **Reference Collection** of mainly written material but also including things such as videos, CDs, audio tapes, that may be of interest to other organisations, as well as a corporate archive.

Note that there are overlaps between the collections and some objects could be defined as belonging to more than one collection. For example, an object related to Henley Royal Regatta might be classified under all three. We recognise that there will be some crossover between how our three collections are categorised. Where necessary, we will make decisions on how to categorise individual or groups of objects by consulting with experts, stakeholders and our Board of Trustees.

Approximately one-fifth of the objects cared for by the museum are loaned. The museum has begun the process of returning these loans to their rightful owners.

At this stage we are only seeking expressions of interest for the River and Rowing collections. We are working with Henley Town Council to explore how maintaining this can be best achieved, including the possibility of a new museum in Henley. As such we are not currently looking for interest in taking the Henley collection,

however we would be happy to discuss any ideas or proposals for keeping the collection in its local context.

3 Key Principles and Outcomes for Collection Transfer

These principles and outcomes are based on the Museums Association Code of Ethics and related documents including the Disposal Toolkit and Arts Council England Museum Accreditation Scheme. Together they form the ethical framework which will inform all decisions made about the future of the collections.

The Trustees' wish is that the collections are retained for public access, where they can be easily accessed on a regular basis, in organisations that are properly constituted in line with Museum Accreditation requirements (or equivalent for archives) and able to care for them appropriately as part of their charitable purpose.

Where it does not prove possible to meet all of these criteria, remaining options for those collections will be judged against how closely they meet the RRM's charitable objectives.

The priority is to secure the best public outcome for the collections and the best outcome for the charity. These outcomes will form the basis of criteria for decision making.

3a Outcomes

Outcome 1 Public access

There is long-term public access to the collections and they can be easily accessed on a regular basis.

Outcome 2 Collections care

The collections are cared for to appropriate standards to ensure their long-term public accessibility.

Outcome 3 Collections kept together

The collections are kept together as far as practicable.

The ideal solution, from the museum's point of view, is that the entire collection transfers to a new owner. However, we recognise that this is unlikely.

A The three collections

If possible, we would like to see single custodians for each of the three main collections to maintain their integrity and collective value. That is, if possible, the Rowing Collection is kept together, the River Thames Collection is kept together and the Henley Collection is kept together.

We encourage expressions of interest for transfer of the Rowing, River Thames and Henley Collections together.

B Sub-collections

If that is not possible then an acceptable outcome would be for sub-collections to be kept together. These sub collections might be defined by regional locations, themes, or object types. As an example, for the Rowing Collection this could include:

- Sub-collections by theme: Olympic rowing, university rowing, regional rowing, coastal rowing, international rowing etc.
- Sub-collections by object type: boats and boat parts, photography, art collections, books and media etc.

We also encourage expressions of interest for sub-collections, as defined by the organisation expressing interest.

We accept that some rationalisation of material transferred by recipients might be desirable, for example where there are clear outliers. This should be done on a sound curatorial basis in line with sector best practice. We would have done (and may still do) the same ourselves.

C Small groups of objects and individual items

We are also interested in expressions of interest for smaller groups of objects or individual objects. We are uncomfortable about 'cherry picking' but recognise that there may be cases where transfer of an individual object or small group of objects will give the greatest overall public benefit.

Outcome 4 Appropriate organisations

The collections are owned by suitable organisations.

Our ideal outcome is that the collections are held by organisations that are properly constituted in line with Museum Accreditation requirements (or equivalent for archives). There are likely to also be other public or not-for-
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profit organisations that can provide suitable standards of long-term care and public access. Exceptionally, a satisfactory outcome may be achieved by transfer to private organisations or individuals, where legally binding guarantees can be made about public benefit and long-term care and public access.

3b Principles

The Trustees have identified the following key principles which will guide decisions about the future of the RRM collections:

Principle 1: All decisions will take full account of the RRM's Collections

Development Policy (including our policy on disposals), museum sector ethics and standards, and its charitable obligations. If deemed necessary, any sale of collections will not be financially motivated.

Principle 2: The collections will be kept publicly accessible, whether in our ownership or moved to other public or not for profit organisations.

Principle 3: All decisions will be made by the Board of Trustees informed by the specialist advice of staff and key stakeholders.

Principle 4: Consideration and decision-making about options for the collections will be structured and consistent – not ad-hoc – to provide transparency and confidence. Any decision-making outside of this structure will be documented with sound reasoning.

Principle 5: Any collections considered for disposal will be advertised openly on the Museums Association website and journal and any other appropriate open forum, with a clear process for expressing interest and key decision-making criteria.

Principle 6: We will endeavour at all times to deal with interested parties and the public with transparency, openness and fairness.

Principle 7: We will continue to work closely with sector bodies and key stakeholders in order to support the best possible public outcomes.

Principle 8: The ability to care for collections will be maintained throughout this process. Professional conservation advice will be sought when necessary to ensure the collection is safeguarded both while decisions are being made and beyond that point.

Principle 9: We recognise that we need to follow legal obligations, for example any legislation from the Charity Commission, or particular legal constraints on outcomes for individual collection items.

4 How to Obtain Further Information

The majority of the collection is available at <https://collection.rrm.co.uk/explore> FAQs about using our online collections database can be found on [our main website](#).

In May 2025 RRM completed a full audit of the collection and carried out other important documentation work such as digitising the Object Entry, Exit and Transfer of Title forms. The audit gives RRM the fullest understanding of the collection that it has ever had. The priority was to ensure that every object seen had an identifiable database record. Some systemic issues were noted, such as a general lack of consistency in the application of terms/fields that should have been standardised, and over 4,000 temporary records were created. The audit project brought all identified records up to Inventory standard, but some lack contextual or provenance information.

For more detailed information about the collection, and the transfer process, please contact curatorial@rrm.co.uk

5 Expressing Interest

To express an interest in all or parts of our collection, the interested party will ideally be an accredited museum, working towards accreditation or be another public or not-for-profit organisation that can provide suitable standards of long-term care. Interested parties will be asked to fill out a formal expression of interest form where they will be able to demonstrate how they fit into our preferred outcomes.

The expression of interest form can be found [here](#).