Inspirational women in heritage reveal their top

We spoke to five inspirational women who work in all aspects of heritage. We asked them for the most important piece of advice they would give to other women looking to work or get involved in the sector. They also told us who inspires them today.

Page last updated: 13 July 2022

Ros Kerslake – Chief Executive of The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Ros has been the Chief Executive of The National Lottery Heritage Fund since July 2016.

"I've worked in many different sectors during my career – from the oil industry to heritage – and my advice to women has always been that the key to success is believing in yourself. Above all, don't self-limit. Stretch yourself, take a chance, go for it and if you fail, learn from it and move on. And make sure you support others to do the same.

"There are so many women I admire for the 'firsts' they have achieved. If I had to pick one it would have to be courageous **Rosa Parks** for what she achieved for equality and civil rights, when in 1955 she refused to give up her seat on a segregated Alabama bus to let a white man sit down.

"She said later: 'People always said I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.'"

Hannah Wright – Digital and Marketing Officer, Glasgow Women's Library

Hannah is a digital marketer specialising in the arts. She currently works at Glasgow Women's Library (GWL).

"Visit museums. Visit heritage sites. Find out what it is you like about the heritage sector and where your interests lie. Follow the careers of the people who are where you want to be and see what you can learn from them. Keep an eye on the smaller museums and groups who are doing amazing work and advocating for change in the sector: Museum of Homelessness, Museum as Muck, Museum Detox, Vagina Museum and so many others.

> It's an exciting time for the heritage sector as more organisations are looking at how they can be more inclusive and represent a broader range of voices and perspectives.

"It's hard to choose one inspiring woman in heritage when I'm surrounded by such an incredible team of women every day at GWL!

"But if I had to choose just one who has had an impact on me and the wider sector, I'd pick my colleague **Rachel Thain-Gray**. Rachel coordinates Equality in Progress and Decoding Inequality at Glasgow Women's Library, projects which look at structural inequality within museum objects and the wider sector.

"Rachel is passionate about representation, access and inclusion and has taught me so much about being a champion of these causes in my own role. She is generous with her time and, like all my colleagues at GWL, just the best person to work alongside."

Sara Crofts – Chief Executive of Icon

Sara started 2019 with a new role as the Chief Executive of Icon – The Institute of Conservation.

"I would like to offer three observations that have helped me build my career in the heritage sector:

- Learn how to network effectively and how to make meaningful connections with people – it gets easier with practice!
- Follow your instinct and be curious – every experience will teach you something, even though it might not be much fun at the time
- Don’t underestimate the power of serendipity – but remember that it takes imagination to spot the potential and creative thinking to make the best of the opportunity

"My inspirational women are the five core members of **Ferguson’s Gang**, which was set up in 1927 to raise awareness of the need to conserve England’s heritage and especially rural areas.

"The gang supported the National Trust and raised significant sums of money to protect and preserve important buildings and land that could otherwise have been destroyed. Their publicity stunts made the news headlines as they favoured unusual donation methods such as hiding money inside a fake pineapple and stuffing a £100 note inside a cigar.

"Imagine what they would have achieved if they'd had access to social media!"

Lizzie Guntrip – natural history writer and consultant

Lizzie is a young consultant and writer on natural history. You may also have spotted Lizzie on *Springwatch* or *Autumnwatch*, promoting inclusivity in natural heritage and launching #WildlifeFromMyWindow – a cause close to her heart since her diagnosis with M.E.

She is one of our Heritage Ambassadors, collaborating with us on youth-centric issues, and is also a committee member for the South East.

> Whatever your background, **your** story and experience of heritage is important. Be proud of your voice: we need a heritage sector that is diverse and a true reflection of society.

"I am inspired by the women I've met in the last few years: **Liz Ellis, Katie Owen, Jo Reilly, Maria Adebowale-Schwartz** - for their work in heritage and in supporting young women starting out in the sector.

"Also three amazing women, **Lindsey Chapman, Anne Gallagher and Laura Howard**, whose digital work has inspired me and so many young people in natural heritage."

Esme Ward – Director of Manchester Museum

Esme joined Manchester Museum in April 2018 as their first female director in their 150-year history.

"The best piece of advice I can share is what guides me in my work. In all you do, notice what makes your heart beat faster. Embrace and act on it. Care and dare.

"[As for inspirations, there are] far too many to mention, so here's a shout-out to two Mancunian heroines from the past.

"First, **Margaret Pilkington**, printmaker, educationalist and the first-ever female director of the Whitworth (1935-58).

"Secondly, the extraordinary geologist, fossil collector and children's author **Caroline Birley** (1851-1907) who with no formal qualifications, defied all expectations and amassed a huge fossil collection from her travels across the world.

"I’m inspired by their “indomitable” spirit and devotion to arts, heritage and science. We stand on the shoulders of giants."