The National Maritime Museum’s Sammy Ofer Wing opens

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Opening on 14 July 2011, the £36.5million wing is the largest development in the National Maritime Museum’s history and a catalyst for the organisation to change completely the way it presents its galleries, exhibitions and visitor facilities. This major project has been made possible through a generous donation of £20m from international shipping magnate and philanthropist Sammy Ofer and an award of £5m from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The project includes a special exhibitions gallery, allowing the museum to stage a full programme of temporary shows; a permanent gallery, Voyagers, introducing the story of Britain and the sea; a restaurant and café with views over Greenwich Park; and a state-of-the-art library and archive bringing much of the museum’s world-renowned archive on site for the first time.

The building gives the museum a new main entrance from Greenwich Park, enhancing its connections with the park, the Royal Observatory, and the rest of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site.

The new wing gives the museum an opportunity to focus on the stories of adventure, discovery, tragedy, courage and disaster that make it distinctive, leaving visitors with a richer understanding of Britain’s maritime heritage.

Symbolic of this new approach, the Sammy Ofer Wing’s Voyagers gallery acts as an introduction to the extraordinary depth and range of the museum’s collections. It combines over 200 objects, many of which have never been on display before, alongside cutting edge audio-visual installations.

A 30-metre long object wall tells stories of Britain and the sea from the 16th to the 20th century. Sir Francis Drake’s sun jewel sits alongside the diary of a 19th-century whaler; the 200-year-old love token of an engraved ship’s biscuit is displayed beside Nelson’s last letter to his daughter; and Tracey Edwards’ teddy bear takes its place with the toy pig that survived the sinking of *RMS Titanic*.

Illustrating the contemporary significance of Britain’s maritime histories and highlighting key themes from across the museum, Voyagers is dominated by a dynamic, wave-like structure featuring bespoke video projections and a specially-designed soundscape. Intensely coloured patterns of images and text wash over its multi-faceted surface, creating a constant sense of movement and engagement. The personal stories of this island nation are featured in a series of video ‘portraits’ from people from all over the world - coastguards, émigrés, naval officers, schoolchildren - each telling their own story of the sea.

Different elements of the Sammy Ofer Wing interact to create new connections, and the collections displayed in Voyagers lead visitors towards the Reading Room and Compass Lounge. Here they can unlock the rich treasures of the museum and discover the stories behind the great events of the maritime past. Iconic material from the archive and library collections includes Captain Cook’s handwritten journals and the log book of Robert Maynard, the man who killed Blackbeard. Shackleton’s personal copy of Browning’s poems, which he carried with him to the Arctic, is also held by the museum, as is the log book of the slave ship captain, John Newton - writer of *Amazing Grace*.

The museum has the world’s most important maritime archive, containing 100,000 books and nearly two miles (3.2 km) of shelved manuscripts. Professional researchers, students, community groups and those exploring their family history will have unprecedented access to a vast range of journals, letters, records, charts, prints and drawings as the new wing enables key archives to be stored on the Greenwich site for the first time.

The new wing is the first step in the museum’s plan to create a more coherent narrative for visitors which will enhance their understanding and enjoyment of the organisation’s unique cluster of historic venues. Over the next few years, a series of redeveloped permanent galleries will refresh the museum’s key themes, appealing to a wider and more diverse audience, complemented by a schedule of major charging exhibitions and supported by an integrated learning and events programme.

In September 2011 the first of these, *Traders: the East India Company and Asia*, explores the history and continuing relevance of Britain’s trade with Asia, looking at this complex story through the lens of the East India Company and the commodities it traded. Following this, the museum will open a redeveloped Royal Navy gallery, a new Maritime London gallery, and a new children’s gallery.

Lord Sterling, Chairman of the National Maritime Museum, said: "Our maritime story is Britain’s national story. And understanding the way the past has shaped the present never been more important in enriching our understanding of the world and providing inspiration for the future. In the Sammy Ofer Wing, our new exhibition space will introduce new generations of visitors to the many rich narratives bound up in our maritime story. This visionary transformation would not have been possible without the support of Sammy Ofer and the Heritage Lottery Fund."

Kevin Fewster, National Maritime Museum Director, said: "The Sammy Ofer Wing creates a spectacular contemporary environment in which more people can appreciate the wonders of our world-class collections and their stories of human endeavour and discovery. The opening of this new wing is only the start of our five-year programme to revitalise and refresh our permanent galleries and exhibitions. Through this, we will be able to transform the experience we offer to the two million visitors from Britain and overseas who visit us each year. It will help to ensure that current and future generations from all over the world understand the rich and complex story of these islands and the crucial role played by the sea in our history and the lives of those who depended upon it."

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said: "The National Maritime Museum’s spectacular archive now has a proper home thanks to the creation of the Sammy Ofer Wing. Packed full of priceless manuscripts and records of history’s great figures and moments in time, the building provides ample space to tell the story of Britain’s global influence through the sea, ships, time and stars. The Heritage Lottery Fund is proud to be a co-funder of this visionary project which complements our significant investment into many other elements of Greenwich’s World Heritage Site."

Notes to editors

The Sammy Ofer Wing provides 7,300m2 of new floor space and returns 580m2 of outdoor space to public use. It features four key elements:
- An 820 square metre special exhibitions gallery, allowing the museum to stage a full programme of major temporary shows
- A state of the art library and archive complemented by digital resources
- New entrance through the park, enhancing the museum’s connections with the rest of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site

- A new café and brasserie featuring attractive terraces with views over Greenwich Park

The National Maritime Museum holds the world's largest maritime collection. It is housed in historic buildings forming part of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site. It incorporates the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, and 17th-century Queen's House. The museum works to illustrate for everyone the importance of the sea, ships, time and the stars and their relationship with people. The museum welcomes over 2million British and international visitors a year and is also a major centre of education and research.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 30,000 projects allocating £4.5billion across the UK.

Further information

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