



# Going crackers The weird and wonderful world of toy museums

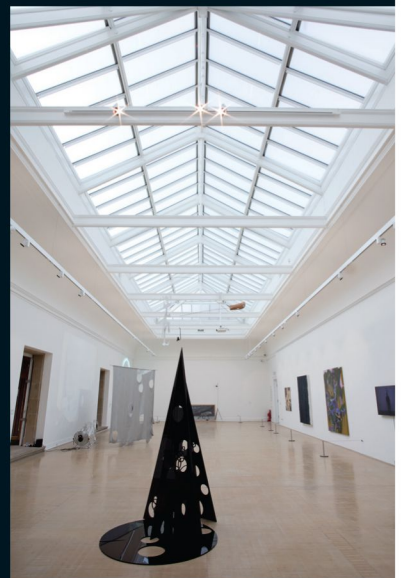


**Profile**  
Steph Scholten, director,  
the Hunterian, Glasgow

**News**  
Museums in  
a digital world



**Reviews**  
Leeds Art Gallery







## Trendswatch

# Seasonal soirées

*Laura Rutkowski* gets into a festive mood as museums put on inspired events to celebrate Christmas with their visitors

We have Henry Cole, the founding director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, to thank for the tradition of exchanging Christmas cards – he sent the first one in 1843. The museum houses more than 30,000 examples, with over half depicting Christmas festivities.

After Cole enlisted the help of his friend, the artist John Callcott Horsley, to design the card, copies were made available to the public for a shilling each. This was a luxury at the time, but now Christmas cards fly off the shelves, with about a billion bought each year in the UK.

Museums are increasingly enticing visitors to mark the festive period in different ways as venues are transformed into magical places shaped by the ghosts of Christmas past. York Museum Gardens, run by York Museums Trust, has had a new

addition to its calendar since November – an evening in collaboration with the live entertainment producer Lunchbox Theatrical Productions – which runs until the beginning of January.

The gardens are normally closed when darkness falls – as early as 4.30pm in the winter – but for the first time this year, visitors are able to explore them at night. They can enjoy art installations, illuminated trees and projections and sounds that enhance the historical buildings. Father Christmas tinkers away in his workshop in the designated storytelling space and visitors can go on a vintage fair ride and drink mulled wine.

York Museums Trust is also running a Victorian Christmas at the Castle event, where York Castle Museum's recreated Victorian street, Kirkgate, has

been decorated to replicate how Christmas would have been celebrated 150 years ago. A one-man performance of *A Christmas Carol* delivers a dose of Dickensian charm.

“Christmas is a time of traditions and many of those we do today became popular during the Victorian period,” says Richard Saward, the head of visitor experience at York Museums Trust. “A Victorian Christmas has helped attract visitors at a traditionally quiet time of year. Our plan is to build on the experience, with an enhanced offer and marketing.”

The Black Country Living Museum in the West Midlands has also attracted visitors for its Traditional Christmas Evenings in December, which have sold out already. With actors re-enacting festive stories as well as carol singing and bell ringing, 300 years of Christmas history is played out among the gas-lit streets of the open-air museum.

The venue also hosts

**Top: York Castle Museum has gone back to Victorian times for its Christmas celebrations**

**Right: flapper rag dolls created by volunteers for the Christmas season at the American Museum in Britain, Bath**

Christmas on the Homefront, an event set in the 1940s. Visitors are invited to experience Christmas during the height of the second world war at a time when the “make do and mend” mentality was at the forefront of everyone’s minds, as was the determination to make the big day merry despite the war.

In Bath, visitors learn how those across the pond celebrated Christmas through the ages at the American Museum in Britain – the only museum of Americana outside the US. This year’s theme is *A Little Party Never Hurt Nobody* (until 17 December) for a jazz-inspired Christmas.

“The title’s double negative is intentional, with the literal meaning being ‘a little party always killed somebody’,” says Stephanie Forbes, the assistant curator at the American Museum in Britain. “It is exemplified by the untimely end of the protagonist of one of the most famous jazz-age novels from the US, the *Great Gatsby*.”

The glitz and glamour of the Christmas displays are mirrored with the “hedonism and excess” of that time too – there are even volunteer-crafted flapper ragdolls on display. The museum’s period rooms – from the 17th century to the 1800s – are curated to illustrate popular winter activities in the country, such as a display of a family sharing a meal with friends to give thanks for the bountiful harvest provided by the New England autumn.

While museum trends come and go, certain Christmas ones are timeless, such as being surrounded by good food and company. And Cole would surely approve of museums getting in on the act.

*Laura Rutkowski is a freelance writer*

