Towneley Hall Art Gallery and Museum - the first 25 years

Towneley was the home of the Towneley family for over 500 years but in 1901 it was sold to Burnley Corporation. The family departed in March 1902 leaving behind a building almost completely empty. The park was opened to the public in June 1902 and in May 1903 the Great Hall and the South Wing of the house were opened for a temporary art exhibition. In the first two months there were over 73,000 visitors and the town council agreed to keep Towneley Hall open as a permanent Art Gallery and Museum.

The Town Council established a sub-committee to organise a loan exhibition of paintings that changed every six months. There were many private collectors anxious to display works from their collections and other local authorities who had already establish their own permanent collections were also happy to lend. There was free entry to the exhibitions but a small income from exhibition catalogues and a charge for the custody of umbrellas and walking sticks allowed a start to be made on purchasing paintings for a permanent collection.

The Art Gallery and Museum sub-committee consisted mainly of town councillors but there was also some co-opted members of the public with relevant expertise. One of the co-opted members was Cornelius Foden, who took on the role of honorary secretary. He had recently retired from the post of District Goods Superintendent of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway, so he was ideally placed to deal with the transport and insurance of all the loans.

Foden had also been honorary secretary of Burnley Mechanics Institute for over 30 years and this was of even greater importance in helping to establish the museum. The Institute provided evening classes for working students, mainly weavers. Between 1884 and 1902, sixteen National science scholarships at the Royal College of Science in South Kensington were awarded to these Burnley students. Many went on to establish successful careers abroad and were glad to sent curiosities and natural history specimens back to Foden at Towneley.

The first donation to Towneley came from Herbert Wright, who had won a National scholarship in 1896. In 1900, he went to Ceylon as scientific assistant to the Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Peradeniya. He later helped to establish the rubber industry in Malaya and was knighted in 1930. In 1902 and 1903, he sent "Ceylon Flora and Fauna". Between 1904 and 1914 other former Institute scholars sent objects to Towneley from as far away as Bengal, Nigeria and the West Indies. Most of these museum exhibits were displayed in rooms off the Long Gallery on the first floor of the South wing.

William Taylor took a different course when he left Burnley in the 1890s for the gold mines of South Africa. There he became involved in electrical engineering and moved to the United States and General Electric in Schenectady, New York, where he had his first practical training. From there, as a Fellow of the Institute of Electrical Engineers, he went around the world building hydro-electric power stations. In 1907, while on a visit to his family in Burnley, he visited Towneley and “seeing there of cases of curios and scientific exhibits from Burnley gentlemen in different parts of the world”, he decided to send exhibits to Towneley himself. He started in 1908 with a range of products from Kashmir, followed in 1910 with curios from Mexico, culminating in 1913 with three cases of exhibits from Peru including "a mummy of the Inca period". In October 1913, the Art Gallery and Museum sub-committee presented Taylor with an illuminated address of thanks and opened the "Taylor Room" in the North wing at Towneley to display all his gifts.
The second donation to Towneley in 1902 was an Egyptian mummy and coffin along with other Egyptian antiquities, the gift of Alice Towneley, Lady O'Hagan, the previous owner of Towneley Hall. Lady O'Hagan sponsored John Garstang's excavations in Beni-Hasan and Esna through the Egyptian Excavation Fund and Garstang sent more antiquities from Beni-Hassan to Towneley in 1904 and 1905. Lady O'Hagan was another of the co-opted members of the Art Gallery and Museum sub-committee and she continued to support the sub-committee, making occasional donations to the permanent collections right up until her death in 1921.

Much of what was displayed in 1903 was on loan. Four cases of objects were lent by the Board of Education from the Victoria and Albert Museum. From 1909, these loans were handled by the V&A Circulation Department. The contents of the cases at Towneley changed at least every two years. Most local authority museums made great use of these resources until the Circ was closed in 1977.

Also on loan in 1903 was a collection of carved ivories from George Eastwood of Southport. Eastwood, born in Burnley in 1839, worked in a cotton-mill from the age of 10 until the great Lancashire cotton famine of 1864 compelled him to go to Manchester in search of work. There he established a lucrative business renting marquees and interior decoration for events such as weddings. The loan was originally for three years but when Eastwood died in 1906 the collection became the first bequest to the museum.

In 1905, the chapel and dining room on the first floor of the North wing was opened. On the advice of W W Watts of the V&A, plaster casts were purchased with a 50% grant from the Board of Education for display in the chapel. A further room was opened in the North wing, next to the dining room, initially displaying a loan collection of ceramics but from 1906 also items of local history and for the next 70 years was named the Old Burnley room.

In 1908, an art gallery was created on the top floor of the North wing by removing many of the former bedrooms. Jesse Haworth, a Manchester textiles wholesaler, had loaned a set of 121 proof engravings after Landseer in 1905. He now donated this collection to Towneley to mark the opening of the new gallery. Haworth was one of the greatest benefactors of Manchester Museum, having donated over £40,000 for a building to house that museum’s collection of Egyptian antiquities. At the time the Landseer prints collection was considered to be worth over £2,000 but their popularity was in decline and in 1919 much of the collection was circulated to local schools.

In 1912 there were 20 oil paintings in the permanent collection. When "Cromwell after the Battle of Marston Moor" by Ernest Crofts was purchased in September of that year, the sub-committee lent it to Sunderland Corporation as their first loan out "to repay the kindness of lenders over the previous 10 years". This painting was in great demand going out next to Nottingham Art Gallery and then in 1915 to the Guildhall Gallery in London for A G Temple's War Exhibition. In return, Towneley were loaned 40 paintings by Sir John Gilbert from the Guildhall Gallery together with 30 paintings of the Chantrey Collection from the Tate Gallery, London. The sub-committee in turn was able to lend 15 of its own paintings to Rawtenstall.

The Summer Exhibition of 1915 was to be the last loan exhibition before 1919. The government had already cancelled all museums’ purchase grants in December 1914. Then in June, the V&A reported that, due to difficulties with transport of collections by railway, there would be no exchange of circulating collections until the end of the war.
The end of the war was a time of great change for Towneley. First, in December 1918, Foden died and was succeeded by Frank Walmesley as the honorary secretary. In 1920, the ground floor of the North wing was opened to display the Regency kitchen and two more rooms opened, one as a War Trophies Room and the other as the Egyptian Room for the antiquities previously displayed in a room off the Long Gallery. The War Trophies Room was not popular and by 1925 had been swept away by another great change which began in 1921.

Edward Stocks Massey was an early benefactor of the museum. He presented a series of marble busts for display in the Great Hall between 1904 and 1909 but died in December 1909. In his will, after providing for his wife during her lifetime, he bequeathed the disposal, at her decease, for the benefit of the inhabitants of Burnley. A wide discretion was to be left with Burnley Corporation on how it was to be spent except not in the reduction of rates. In November 1919, the Massey Bequest trustees agreed money from the bequest could be made available to Burnley Corporation prior to Mrs Massey's decease. Burnley Corporation decided to share the annual income between the Municipal Orchestra, Towneley Hall and education grants to local individuals. The Art Gallery and Museum sub-committee was initially granted an annual sum of £750 for the advancement of Art at Towneley. The first purchases for Towneley Art Gallery under the Massey Bequest in 1921 were four oil paintings and two watercolours. Mrs Massey died in October 1921 at which time the full capital sum of about £103,00 became available to Burnley Corporation. By 1928, the annual grant had increased to £1,500 with another £500 to accumulate annually for the purpose of acquiring more valuable objects as opportunity offered.

Lady O'Hagan died in November 1921 and her son, Maurice, 3rd Lord O'Hagan, was co-opted to the Art Gallery and Museum sub-committee in her place. In the following June, Lord O'Hagan offered a collection of ecclesiastical vestments for sale at Sotheby's in London and part of the collection was bought by the sub-committee for Towneley with funds from the Massey Bequest. They included a chasuble and dalmatic said to have been made for Whalley Abbey around 1425 and brought to Towneley for safekeeping by Sir John Towneley (1473-1540) around 1537 at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. These together with a second matching dalmatic, not offered for sale in 1922, represent the only set of English High Mass vestments still remaining from the middle ages. It is clear the sub-committee were not fully aware of the importance of these vestments. In September 1923, Lord O'Hagan offered to sell Burnley Corporation the second dalmatic but the offer was refused as the sub-committee decided they already had enough vestments. It was eventually purchased by Sir William Burrell and is now in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow.

By August 1922, the collection of oil paintings and watercolours had risen to 55 and it was decided to create a second gallery for the watercolours on the top floor of the North wing to replace the remaining bedrooms. The Edwards Stocks Massey Gallery was opened by Viscount Leverhulme on April 26th 1923. It was needed to display the items now flooding into the collection, (10 additional paintings in that year alone).

Walmesley, the honorary secretary, proposed the purchase of antique furniture in 1924 after a loan collection from the V&A had been greatly admired. Needhams of Manchester provided twenty piece of oak furniture and two Persian rugs in September, 1924 and the sub-committee continued to purchase furniture regularly from Needhams up until 1946 by which time 94 items, mainly 17th century oak furniture, had been added to the collection.

Wilfred Dean, a local manufacturer of wash boilers, donated 10 drawings by John Millais in October 1924. He had a great interest in art and owned a large collection of watercolours. In December, he was appointed as a co-opted member of the sub-committee. He greatly influenced the policy of purchasing watercolours and by the time of his death in 1949 had donated another 24 watercolours and 6 oil paintings.
Since the first opening of the museum there had been one room in the Long Gallery taken over to natural history, mainly stuffed birds. Initially most of the birds on display were loans but over the years these were replaced by gifts. It appears to have been rather a motley collection ranging from birds shot locally in the 1860s to birds from Australia. In December 1924, due to the alertness of the honorary secretary, the sub-committee were able to purchase a collection of birds that allowed a complete new display to be created.

This collection had been put together over a period of thirty years by George Albert Booth, an iron founder from Preston, who had died in August. Although Booth appears never to have loaned his collection for public display, he was well known as a nature photographer. He gave a number of lectures in the Burnley area supported by slides of his photographs. He recommended taking photographs of birds as infinitely more fascinating than shooting them.

The Booth collections contained over 300 birds in 143 cases, most of them being unusual varieties of common birds, or as the local newspaper called them "freak birds". The collection included 20 varieties of house sparrow, 18 different albino blackbirds and 15 different larks. In order to display all the natural history collection, three more rooms were opened on the ground floor of the North wing. J. D. Charnley, a colleague of Booth, and author of a well-known book on the preservation and mounting of birds was employed to set up the new display.

The opening up of the ground floor of the North wing was itself part of a plan to improve the circulation of visitors around the museum. The annual number of visitors had rarely dropped below 100,000 before the war but was never more than the record of 136,000 in the first year. In 1919, a new record of almost 138,000 was achieved and visitor figures continued to rise each year. In 1924, the number of visitors rose to over 200,000 with between 3,000 and 4,000 people often visiting on Sunday afternoons. The opening up of the servant's staircase, in the back part of the North wing, relieved the congestion by providing a circular route around the house. In 1925, the annual visitor figures rose to 233,000 and averaged over 200,000 for the next ten years.

The next step of the sub-committee, rather than to purchase existing objects, was to commission new work from Alfred Gilbert (1854-1934). Famous for Eros in Piccadilly Circus, London, Gilbert had started the Clarence Tomb at Windsor Castle, in 1892 but left the country without finishing the work, following to a disagreement with the Royal Family. Now his friends in England were making efforts for him to be forgiven by King George V so he could return to England and complete the Royal commission.

In April 1925, the sub-committee commissioned Alfred Gilbert to execute busts of Lady O'Hagan and Edward Stocks Massey at the price of 250 guineas per bust. Alfred Gilbert was unpractical with money and the financial side was handled by Walter Gilbert, a sculptor working in Birmingham. Walter Gilbert himself was also responsible for the design of the War Memorial in Towneley Park, completed in partnership with Louis Weingartner and unveiled in December 1926. The money for the Alfred Gilbert busts was paid in instalments, the last instalment being authorised in February 1927. However, when the busts arrived in Burnley, the work did not meet with approval. Lord O'Hagan pointed out that the female bust did not look remotely like his mother. Gilbert had intended the works as personifications of their characters rather than photographically accurate portraits. This was not what the sub-committee wanted, so in March 1927 they sent photographs to Walter Gilbert to enable him to create recognisable busts. The two busts by Walter Gilbert were on show at the Summer exhibition in 1928 but the Alfred Gilbert busts were nowhere to be seen. It was not until 1936 that the exhibition catalogue recorded, in the Edward Stocks Massey Gallery, "The Chatelaine" and "The Virtuoso" by Sir Alfred Gilbert, M.V.O.
This was the sub-committee's only effort in commissioning new works of art. From now on they only purchased work that other people had collected. One such collection was book illustrations built up by James Hardcastle of Halifax over a 20 year period and loaned out to museums and libraries across the North of England. One part of the collection was first on display at Towneley for the Winter exhibition of 1919. The honorary secretary managed to secure another part of the collection to remain on long term loan. He explained to the audience at the opening of the Spring and Summer exhibition in 1920 that the illustrations "were got with the idea of creating an interest in art amongst the scholars, and to assist them in such work". A local newspaper review of the exhibition in April 1922 highlighted these book illustrations, remarking that they were easily understandable and suggesting they were among the most interesting pictures in the whole exhibition. When the entire collection was offered for sale by Hardcastle's widow in October 1927, the sub-committee had no problem in agreeing their purchase.

For the 25th anniversary opening of the exhibition in 1928, the sub-committee were proud to announce the objects on display all belonged to the Corporation with no need for any loans. The golden era of Towneley's purchasing reached its climax in June 1939 when Zoffany's painting of Charles Townley and friends in his library at Park Street was bought at auction.

From the 1970s onwards the purchase policy has been to collect works by professional artists from the local region, works of local topography or works with Towneley family connections. Towneley Hall still receives money each year from the Massey bequest although in relative terms this cannot buy as much as in earlier years due to the great increase in the price of objects at auction. Now in the 21st century, the main concern is the conservation of those objects acquired in the 20th century.