National Museum

Marlene:

Hi, welcome to Walking Woods. I'm Marlene Cramer and I'm taking you for a walk. Not in the woods but in Edinburgh.

Welcome again. It's great to have you along for a stroll in the city centre. We will dive into the history and the wood of Edinburgh. So which place would be better to start than the National Museum of Scotland. That's this modern building in front of you. Of course, the National Museum of Scotland shows countless artefacts that have to do with this Scottish history. But there's just so much to see and everyone remembers something different. So, I've asked my colleagues what comes to their mind first when they think in National Museum.

You'll hear from. Mark Milne, Wojciech Plowas and Dan Ridley-Ellis.

Mark:

I seem to remember a big Blue whale skeleton hanging from the ceiling. That’s the thing I remember the most. It’s been a few years since I've been there.

Wojciech:

Well, apart from the whale, what's the most memorable for me is the industrial revolution kind of mechanical demonstrations. That's what I remember, you know, they got those hot ,air balloons, they’ve got Formula One and how the steam engine works. And it's very interactive, for kids and adults.

Dan:

There's all sorts of things in the National Museum, covering all sorts of interesting stuff from Scotland's history, from the very early days onwards.

Marlene:

OK. Before we talk too much about Scottish history, though, we are mostly here for the wood, right? So, what about wood in the National Museum? There must be some! If you filter the collections by material, you see that there are 17,138 wooden object in the museum. So, let's see what my colleagues remember.

Mark:

There might have been some petrified wood somewhere, but I don't remember seeing any displays with any wood. I can't remember. Can’t remember even if the structure has any wood in it. The structures a lot of wrought iron and whatnot, isn't it?

Marlene:

The structure is indeed made in steel, but it's very impressive to see. So do go and have a look at the Grand Gallery, even if you only have 5 minutes to spend, because it's just up one flight of stairs and you just need to have a look at it to appreciate it. And you'll also see my favourite object in the museum. There are little circular radiators that wind around the steel columns. They're just too cute. But they're not made from wood either, I'm afraid.

Luckily, one of my colleagues seems to remember something more about some interesting wooden artefacts in the museum. (Or maybe he asked me to Google a detail or two just before recording this.)

Dan:

So in 1836, some boys were searching on Arthur’s Seat for rabbits. They were digging in the burrows. And they found a little slate cover and underneath, when they opened it up, there was a little cave. And inside there were 17 little wooden coffins… in piles. And inside the coffins, under the lids, little figures. Wooden figures. Dressed in clothes.

There were all sorts of theories about why they were up there. Some of the early speculations were to do with well, if your relatives died abroad or at sea, you might make a little symbolic burial. They were thought to have been buried over a period of time because some of them were quite decayed and some of them looked quite new. But more recent research has supposed that actually, this was just because they were in layers and the bottom layer degraded faster because it was more exposed to water than up.

There's been some quite interesting recent research on them. They know that the coffins were carved out of Scots pine, and they probably haven't been on Arthur’s Seat very long because they could look at the type of cloth. They knew that the figures were originally toy soldiers. They could look at the handmade pins and kind of date it, and they've probably been up there only a short while. Maybe five or six years. And that dated them to around the time of Burke and Hare. So the working theory now is that they're representing the 17 victims of Burke and Hare.

So if you don't know who they are: Around that time in Edinburgh, because of the popularity of the university teaching surgeons, there was a shortage of cadavers, corpses, to do anatomy classes on. And there was the famous rise of the resurrection men, the body snatchers who would dig up the bodies and sell them to the surgeons. Well, Burke and Hare quite famously shortcutted the process by making the corpses themselves… out of living people… by a process known as murder.

Marlene:

They were eventually caught and Burke was executed on the 28th of January 1829.

Dan:

And Burke's body, well his skeleton is still in in Edinburgh. And there is a book said to be bound with his skin at Surgeons Hall, which is where the WSE conference was held in 2014.

Marlene:

So if you do want to see an artefact that has to do with Scottish history, with wood, and in a roundabout way also with the Northern European Network for Wood Science and Engineering, do go and find the Arthur’s Seat coffins.

Dan:

In a roundabout way, they ended up in the museum. Not all of them. I think they're only eight in the museum now because boys, being boys, they did supposedly throw them at each other when they found them. They're quite hard to find in the museum because they're quite small.

Marlene:

Well, if you do have the time, just get lost in the many exhibitions of the museum on your search for the coffins. If you don't, you will find them in the Industry and Empire exhibition on levels four and five.

And while you're on it, also try to find a roof terrace of the museum from which you have a brilliant view of the castle. You can listen to episode 3 from there if you want. For episode 2, make your way down towards Grassmarket via Greyfriars Kirkyard.