After six years of development and a total investment of £8.9 million, ‘Birmingham: its people, its history’ is Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery’s biggest and most ambitious development project in recent decades. It has seen the restoration of large parts of the Museum’s Grade II* listed building, and the creation of a major permanent exhibition about the history of Birmingham from its origins to the present day.

‘Birmingham: its people, its history’ draws upon the city’s rich and nationally important collections to bring Birmingham’s history to life. Birmingham has been built upon the self-reliance, creativity, inventiveness and hard work of its people – rich and poor – over many generations. This is the first time that Birmingham’s important story has been celebrated in a dedicated permanent exhibition. Around 1,500 objects are on display, most of which have never been seen by the general public before.

In these stunning new galleries, visitors can discover how Birmingham became an industrial powerhouse, the vital role it played during the world wars, and what it’s like to live in the city today. The unique qualities of Birmingham people are reflected throughout these galleries, through object displays, community projects and the personal contributions of local people.

The new Birmingham galleries are Phase 1 of a long-term plan for the refurbishment of the museum and gallery. As the new Birmingham Museums Trust we aim to make this a priority for our flagship museum and its world-class collections.

Simon Cane, Interim Director, Birmingham Museums Trust.
Between 1550 and 1700 Birmingham's population grew from 1,500 to 11,500. By 1700 it was the fifth largest town in England with a national reputation for metal working. This rim lock by John Wilkes is an example of the high-quality work produced by Birmingham's skilled craftspeople. Birmingham offered flexibility in employment and trade. Religious tolerance and freedom from guild restrictions attracted non-conformists and entrepreneurs. Among many Quaker migrants, the Welshman Sampson Lloyd settled in Birmingham in the seventeenth century, and went on to found Lloyd's Bank.
Among the many colourful personalities in eighteenth-century Birmingham, John Baskerville was one of the most significant. Baskerville (1705/6-1775) was one of the many thousands of people who came to Birmingham in search of work. His first job, after arriving in Birmingham from Wolverley near Kidderminster, was running a writing school in the Bull Ring. He later worked in the japanning trade and more famously as a printer, inventing a new typeface which still bears his name. By the time this snuff box was made Baskerville was a household name in Birmingham.

For those about to give birth Thomas Birch’s services would have been especially valuable. He lived in Digbeth and worked as a midwife and surgeon in the 1730s and 40s. Male midwives were sometimes called on to attend difficult births where the use of the newly-invented forceps was required. This medal could have been intended as a way of promoting his business as it shows him amputating an arm on one side and with a newly-delivered baby on the other. Thomas Birch died in 1746 and was buried in St Martin’s graveyard.

Birmingham’s industries contributed to the transatlantic slave trade. Birmingham supplied guns, shackles and knives, as well as ‘manilas’ that were used as currency in Africa. Birmingham people also consumed tobacco and other goods produced by enslaved labour. There were black people living in Birmingham although very little is known about their lives. A Swedish visitor in 1749 noted an enslaved man working at Lloyds’ Slitting Mill, and in 1774 a black man called George Pitt Charry was buried at St Martin’s church. Place names can indicate what was happening in a particular area. The Black Boy Inn in Jamaica Row once had a carving similar to this tobacconist shop figure above its entrance.

Eighteenth-century Birmingham had its share of celebrity figures. Isaac Perrins was an ironworker who worked as a foreman at the Soho Manufactory and in his spare time he was a boxer. Perrins was nicknamed the Gentle Giant because at 6’2” and 17 stone he often towered over his opponents. At the fight with Tom Johnson in 1789 Perrins’ tenacity and courage outweighed his skill and after 62 rounds Johnson emerged the victor, taking away the major part of the 250 guineas (£262.50) winnings. Afterwards, Perrins quit both boxing and Birmingham and moved to Manchester where he died in 1800.
FORWARD: 1830 – 1909

‘Forward’ explores life in nineteenth-century Birmingham. During this period Birmingham became an industrial powerhouse. It made everything from pen nibs to steam pumps, and exported its products across the globe. Most homes in Victorian Britain would have contained at least one object made in Birmingham. Meanwhile, many of those who worked in the town’s booming industries lived in dire poverty. Birmingham’s successful entrepreneurs devoted time and resources to social reform. Birmingham claimed a place in national politics, demanding representation in parliament and campaigning for the abolition of slavery. Women and working people started to make their own voices heard.

OBJECTS IN FOCUS

Birmingham men and women played a significant role in the movement to abolish the institution of slavery. The leading light of the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society was Joseph Sturge. He visited the Caribbean twice to see the realities of the ‘apprenticeship’ system at first hand, and his report was part of a successful campaign to abolish apprenticeship in 1838. The first women’s anti-slavery society was started in Birmingham in 1825 and led a nationwide campaign, which included boycotts of sugar and cotton. Throughout the nineteenth century Birmingham played host to black anti-slavery campaigners, including Frederick Douglass who visited in 1846.

This magnificent piece by Hardman is an example of the high quality of Birmingham’s products. Hardman & Co made church metalwork and stained glass, and their work was in demand across the world from South Africa to North America. The displays feature some of Birmingham’s most famous companies, including Elkington, Osler and Tangye, alongside the hugely successful pen nib trade which revolutionised writing throughout the world. Successful businessmen engaged in philanthropic work, investing resources in welfare and in Birmingham’s cultural life. Birmingham Town Hall was built in the 1830s to house the triennial music festival, which raised money for the General Hospital.

In the early nineteenth century industrial towns like Birmingham had no MPs, and even in areas that were represented in Parliament, women and ordinary working people had no vote. Thomas Attwood, a Birmingham banker, formed the ‘Birmingham Political Union’ in 1829 to fight for ‘real and effectual representation of the lower and middle classes’ in the House of Commons. Attwood’s movement helped push the Government towards the Great Reform Act of 1832. This enabled Birmingham and other industrial towns to elect MPs.

Birmingham continued to play a major role in the campaign for political representation, from the Chartists to the Suffragettes.

The dreaded workhouse was the place of last resort for those who could not support themselves. It was generally assumed that people became poor through their own fault. The workhouse regime was harsh, although Birmingham workhouse was considered better than most. Life was hard for the poor in Victorian Birmingham. Thousands lived in cramped and overcrowded ‘courts’ with poor sanitation. Immigrant communities including the Irish and Italians congregated in the poorest areas, and were regarded with suspicion. Anti-Catholic riots erupted in 1867.

When Joseph Chamberlain was Mayor of Birmingham in the 1870s he transformed the way the town was run, taking gas and water supplies into public ownership and improving health and sanitation. His controversial ‘improvement scheme’ demolished thousands of slum dwellings to make way for Corporation Street. Concerns about poverty and inequality prompted movements for reform. Joseph Chamberlain, George Dixon and others played a national role in the campaign to provide elementary education for all. The Birmingham ‘Board schools’ became a model for the whole country.
**AN EXPANDING CITY: 1909 – 1945**

‘An Expanding City’ explores two key aspects of Birmingham’s history during the first half of the twentieth century: the development of the suburbs and the impact the two world wars had on Birmingham and its people.

In a ‘Vision for Birmingham’, displays explore how the suburban estate reflected the changing social and political ideals of the time in an attempt to improve the way people lived. Personal stories are used to convey what the new suburban way of living was actually like.

‘Birmingham at War’ looks at both world wars, exploring the shared experiences, expectations and realities of war, both on the home front and overseas.

**OBJECTS IN FOCUS**

**Motivated by their Quaker beliefs and keen business sense, Richard and George Cadbury relocated their factory from Bull Street in central Birmingham to Bournbrook in 1879, renaming the area Bournville. Bournville village and factory was a social and industrial experiment. George Cadbury believed the social and moral welfare of the factory worker was the responsibility of the employer. Leisure, education and welfare facilities were as important as improving the working environment. Cadbury’s advertising often featured an idealised view of the factory, like this one, as well as its female employees.**

**At the end of the first world war Prime Minister Lloyd George pledged to make ‘Britain a fit country for heroes to live in’. For the first time local authorities were required to build houses. Birmingham built over 50,000 council houses between the first and second world wars, one of the largest schemes in the country. Private house building in the suburbs was also significant during this period. This doll’s house was based on a style of house built in Handsworth during the 1930s.**

**Personal stories told by the people of Birmingham play a key part throughout ‘An Expanding City’. The central feature of ‘Birmingham at War’ is an installation combining oral history and archival imagery. ‘When the war came see of course, my parents being Italian, we had to sort of go a bit easy because the people were rather hostile to Italian people you see.’**

**Families across Britain and Europe were torn apart by war and in some cases were never reunited. Birmingham has a long tradition of providing refuge to those fleeing conflict or persecution, and refugees came to Birmingham throughout both world wars. The Birmingham Belgian War Refugee Committee dealt with over 4,000 refugees between 1914 and 1918. Many stayed in Birmingham. The committee provided welfare, housing and employment, with the support of local people, religious communities and trades unions. This jester’s bauble was made by Dr Crew to entertain Belgian children who were billeted at his home.**

**Birmingham’s engineering and munitions industries were central to the British war effort during both wars. Aircraft, armoured vehicles, machine guns, rifles, ammunition, bombs, explosives and hand grenades represent only a small sample of what the city produced. Prior to the Conscription Act, 1916, propaganda campaigns called for men to ‘do their bit’ and volunteer for the armed forces. Women were encouraged to shame men into volunteering by publicly giving them a white feather, a symbol of cowardice, if they were not wearing a military uniform. During both wars skilled jobs in industry were classed as ‘reserved occupations’. People in these roles were often exempt from active service. During the first world war badges like this were issued to distinguish them from conscientious objectors.**
Birmingham since 1945 is presented in the ‘Your Birmingham’ gallery, featuring a series of personal objects and interviews collected from Birmingham people. The gallery focuses on Birmingham ‘Places’, ‘Events’ and ‘People’. The contributors to this gallery represent the rich diversity of Birmingham’s community. The stories they tell offer an insight into what it’s been like to live and work in Birmingham from the late 1940s to the present day.

**OBJECTS IN FOCUS**

**Places: Mothers Nightclub**

Pink Floyd recorded part of their live album ‘Ummagumma’ at Mothers nightclub in 1969. Mothers nightclub, ‘the home of good sounds’, opened in the former Carlton Ballroom in Erdington in 1968. The club aimed to provide live progressive music for the city’s younger generation. Membership of the club was 2 shillings and 6 pence (12.5p) a year. The club quickly became a cult venue attracting performances by bands such as The Who, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. Mothers gained an international reputation and was ranked ‘best rock venue in the world’ twice by US-based ‘Billboard’ magazine. The club closed in 1971.

**Places: Lewis’s Department Store**

This box contained a bridal veil and headdress purchased from Lewis’s department store in 1966. In 1885, Joseph Chamberlain invited Lewis’s to open a store on his new Corporation Street. Popular aspects of the Birmingham branch included the pets’ corner, children’s entertainment, rooftop gardens and a Christmas grotto. By the 1960s, the store was famous for its Bridal department. In 1991 Lewis’s closed. The building has since been converted for many different uses including offices, shops and restaurants.

**Places: HP Factory**

The illuminated HP Sauce sign was a feature of the HP Factory at Aston Cross until its demolition in 2007. The sign was rescued by BBC WM. Opened as the Midland Vinegar Company in 1875, HP Sauce employed 920 people including factory workers, office staff, delivery drivers and blacksmiths. The factory produced the full range of HP Sauces. Following the building of the A38, a pipeline carried vinegar from the Top Yard on one side of the road to the main Tower Road factory site on the other. Production created a distinctive smell which pervaded the surrounding area.

In 2007 new owners Heinz decided to move production of HP Sauce to the Netherlands.

**Events: The March for Longbridge**

This placard was carried by a Longbridge worker during the March for Longbridge in 2000. Hundreds of placards were issued to marchers by the T&G Union. Workers felt betrayed by owners BMW who planned to break up the Rover group and cut production. On 1 April 2000, 80,000 people marched in protest. People gathered in the city centre and marched to Cannon Hill Park, where speeches and a concert took place. Despite this, Longbridge closed in 2005 and over 6,000 jobs were lost. Longbridge re-opened in 2007 under new Chinese owners, producing MG cars.

**People: Benjamin Zephaniah**

Benjamin Zephaniah, one of Britain’s leading poets, was raised in Handsworth, Birmingham. In 1976 he was given this typewriter by a friend. Zephaniah was born in 1958. Despite leaving full-time education by the age of 13, by 2008 he was listed as one of the UK’s 50 most important post-war writers. He writes about themes such as identity, injustice, personal relationships and his early life in Birmingham. While he was growing up, Zephaniah considered Handsworth as a ‘cold suburb of Kingston Jamaica’. The music and oral tradition of Jamaica strongly influence his poetry.