Title Maidstone Museum & Bentlif Art Gallery, Kent

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There can’t be many curators who have been forced out of their bedrooms because of a museum donation. But that’s exactly what happened to William Lightfoot of Maidstone Museum following the death of Julius Lucius Brenchley.

Brenchley, who was born in Maidstone in 1816, spent three decades travelling the world. His vast ethnographic collection filled Lightfoot’s bedroom before being accessioned into the museum.

Nearly 140 years have passed since Brenchley died in 1873. But his name lives on in Brenchley Gardens next door to the town’s museum. I wonder what he would make of the place if he were alive today.

The museum is housed in the same Tudor and Elizabethan building that it has occupied since 1858. A west wing had to be added as a result of Brenchley’s generosity.

This has now been matched on the eastern side by a remarkable new extension. The copper-clad building is an undeniably striking addition to what is a Grade II-listed building. I loved the stark differences in colour, shape and material.

Prince Charles, on the other hand, might be less impressed. Gazing at the golden cube, I recalled his condemnation of the initial design for the National Gallery’s Sainsbury Wing as “a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend”.

Whatever your views about the outside of Maidstone Museum, the contrast between past and present is just as dramatic within. Visitors are greeted by a gleaming white foyer and shop.

One of the first objects on show is John Thomas’s fantastic equestrian statue of Lady Godiva. The plastercast bodies of the horse and naked noblewoman really resonate with the pristine interior of the new wing.

But it’s all change as soon as you push open a heavy wooden door and move into the older parts of the building. It’s like entering ye olde museum that time forgot, complete with labyrinthine wood-panelled galleries crammed with objects and texts.

Yet things are stirring even here. The cafe is being renovated and the Bentlif art collection – named after the brothers Samuel and George – is being reinterpreted.

**Canoe bequest**

On my visit this sense of transformation was reinforced by the temporary photography exhibition: All Change? Maidstone’s Past and Present in Photographs.

This revealed that, while a few bits of Maidstone have stayed the same, its industrial landscape and narrow streets have been mostly swept away by roads and retail.

I saw this exhibition as an attempt to make the museum’s audacious addition easier for the locals to stomach. The extension is clearly meant to be a catalyst, with the stated aim of increasing visitor numbers by 40%. The project has faced problems and delays and the east wing was meant to be ready in March 2011.

The building was open when I visited nearly a year later, although the galleries were not quite finished. The museum’s extensive Japanese collection, for instance, was yet to be completed.

One tenant that had taken up residence was Brenchley. His marble bust is tucked into a corner with an inscription explaining his significance to the museum.

This long-winded Victorian panel ought really to be replaced by a shorter and more up-to-date version to match its modern surroundings: “Julius Lucius Brenchley, hoarder. I died and left Maidstone Museum so much stuff that its curator had to give up his bedroom and move into the attic.”

On a wall next to Brenchley’s bust hangs a large portrait and, beneath it, an even larger canoe that came as part of the 1873 bequest. Its journey to Kent has been eventful.

Brenchley brought it back from the Solomon Islands, and it must have been one of the main reasons why poor old William Lightfoot had to give up his bedroom. The canoe spent many years on loan to the now defunct Museum of Mankind in London. It is nine metres-long and was too big to show in Maidstone – until now.

**Opening up the museum**

The canoe is used to emphasise how the new wing has opened up exciting possibilities. In addition to extra exhibition space, the extension offers improved facilities for other activities.

A large part of the extension is taken up by what looks like a very chic conference suite. This aptly named Glass Room has panoramic windows opening out onto Brenchley Gardens.

The museum now has a nice new front door facing the shopping centre, which is far more accessible than the former cramped entrance, which was reached by a flight of steps leading from the park on the other side.

However, in its rush to embrace the future, it would be a pity if the museum opted to abandon its old-world charm. Without my early encounters with dinosaurs and curios in cabinets it’s doubtful if I would have developed an interest in museums.

With this in mind, I do hope that Maidstone Museum retains the same wow factor in the minds of all the kids I saw running amok in the shop during their school holiday.

Perhaps the fact that the place was filled with so many young people was the reason why one member of staff approached me and – in front of everyone – asked if I was taking photographs of the children.

Some might applaud this vigilance, but I felt that more discretion was necessary. It brought my visit to an abrupt end.

Putting this aside, if I had to pick one object to sum up Maidstone’s marvellous museum, I’d choose Brenchley’s Lost Species. This is the title of an artwork by Joshua Daniels, a student at the local art college.

Exhibited among the museum’s natural history collection it consists of a pretend book of illustrations inspired by Brenchley’s real-life studies. Visible on the open page are drawings of imaginary animals that Brenchley could conceivably have glimpsed on his travels, such as the “lizard chicken”. This weird mutant might be made up of wildly different parts, but it looks oddly complete.

The same could be said of Maidstone Museum: a 16th-century manor house complete with a canoe in a 21st-century copper wing. Long may it continue to mutate.

**Project data**

Cost £3m

Main funders Maidstone Borough Council; Heritage Lottery Fund £2m

Garfield Weston Foundation; Monument Trust

Architect Hugh Broughton Architects

Project architect Gianluca Rendina

Building contractor Morgan Sindall

Structural/services

engineer, lighting, security AECOM

Quantity surveyor GB Fitzsimon

Japanese Gallery concept Ralph Appelbaum Associates