

meets

MAGGIE APPLETON

With major projects to mark the service's centenary, the chief executive of the Royal Air Force Museum has some busy years ahead. A good time, therefore, to hear her thoughts on the modern-day museum business

Being the head of any major national museum is, in many ways, an unenviable task. On the one hand, there is the privilege and pleasure associated with preserving and promoting part of the country's heritage. On the other, there is the conundrum of how to perpetuate that process among new generations, ensuring that venerable institutions remain relevant to the audiences they must attract if they are to survive. Set that against a backdrop of decreasing state funding, and one can understand the difficulties.

For the Royal Air Force Museum, the RAF's centenary in 2018 presents many opportunities not just to focus on 100 years of history, but also to refresh and renew. This is especially true of the London site at Hendon, aspects of which have, it cannot be denied, begun to look a little tired. The result just under two years hence will be a very different RAF Museum London, its appearance revised, its range of exhibits substantially changed, and its way of interpreting them much revamped. The challenge, of course, is to do this in a way that meets modern-day visitor expectations and avoids alienating the aficionados.

Ever since Maggie Appleton became the RAFM's chief executive officer in January 2015, the centenary has been uppermost on her list of priorities. Maggie came to the job with a broad background in heritage, having graduated in history from the University of Liverpool. At that time, she told me in her Hendon office, she had no thoughts of working in the sector. "It was purely a love of the subject", she says. "I didn't think I'd ever be fortunate enough to make a career of it. In fact, once I'd done my degree I went off and worked in the medical industry, and started being involved with museums as a bit of voluntary work.

"The more I did that, the more I thought, 'This is what I want to do with my life'. I did a Masters in heritage management [at the University of Birmingham], and went from there. My first proper job in the museum sector was at the Royal Armouries, when it was still in the Tower of London. I was the assistant registrar, so I worked very closely with the conservation team there, visiting and inspecting objects that were on loan. Of course, the Royal Armouries collection is fantastic — it was a really great first step. But my love is social history and people history, and a job

WORDS: BEN DUNNELL



ABOVE: Maggie Appleton, chief executive of the Royal Air Force Museum since January 2015. RAFM ▶

came up at Stevenage Museum that had got my name on it.”

From there Maggie moved on to Luton Borough Council, becoming its director of museums and then chief executive of Luton Culture. After 12 years there, the RAF Museum post came up. What made her apply? “On a number of fronts, I was excited about it. For one, cut me up and there’s a museum person inside me. The opportunity to work at a national museum as a chief exec was just fabulous. This place was also dear to me as a visitor — I’d been bringing my family here for years. And my dad loaded bombs on to Lancasters during the Second World War, so there was an emotional connection. He died when I was six, and I was thinking that he’d love it.”

In having no specific aviation or military background, Maggie marked something of a contrast to previous director-general Peter Dye. However, she stresses, “We’ve got a team with such massive knowledge, and the delight is that every day’s a learning experience. What’s also important and exciting for us is that the majority of our visitors who come in aren’t specialist aviation enthusiasts, or former RAF people. They are families on a day out because we’re a free national museum. So, there’s that opportunity to really engage the wider public in what we’re talking about and the storytelling we’re doing.

“The closer you get to a subject, the more you talk to yourself when you’re trying to display it. Coming from a general history background, in some ways, helps us all to question each other on what the best way is to engage the wider public in this subject that we’re all so passionate about.

“It was our trustees’ vision, I guess, bringing someone in who wasn’t a specialist. The trustees had a really detailed think as a board around four or five years ago about which direction the museum should go in and what we should be doing. They were very clear that we should be telling the story of the Royal Air Force in different and dynamic ways. That was my view in our discussions when I came in,

fewer personal connections to it, and opportunities to see RAF aircraft flying are far less numerous. “Being able to engage people in new and creative ways in the work that the RAF has done over 100 years, and is doing every single day, is a real mission for us.”

Other national museums have gone down a different route and brought in bosses with no museum experience. “Our trustees didn’t”, says Maggie, “and I’m glad they didn’t, because my passion and specialism is about how we use our collections to engage with people, to communicate with people and to tell stories. But we are a charity, and we also have to be businesslike in what we do.

“Like all the other national museums, we’re publicly funded, and there is a policy of free admission. It’s great that there isn’t the barrier of admission charges, which we know puts some people off, but when people come in our government funding alone isn’t enough to run this museum. How can we earn money when people are here, to enable us to engage people more with our collections? Our capital programme is completely funded externally.”

To that end, it was announced during mid-October that the museum is being awarded £4.6 million by the Heritage Lottery Fund towards its RAF centenary programme. The process of transforming the Hendon site began with the opening in December 2014 of the First World War in the Air exhibition, a total revamp of the displays in the Grahame-White Hangar. Much bigger changes are in the offing.



Visitor surveys have helped shape this process, and brought some surprising results. “What we learned in terms of key ‘headlines’”, says Maggie, “is that a very, very large proportion of our visitors didn’t realise that we are based on an historic airfield”. Given the extent of urban development around the Hendon site in recent years, building on the green space and rendering the museum’s surroundings

greened-over, “with runway-type paths connecting the different buildings, to help us bring back those echoes of our historic past.”

By the time these words are read, the restaurant adjoining what was the Battle of Britain Hall — now closed as part of preparations for 2018 — will have been demolished. In its place will be a new glass visitor entrance. Inside the building itself, the museum is planning a major exhibition on the first 100 years of the RAF. The DH9A, a Spitfire, a V1 flying bomb, Gnat T1 XR977 (moving in from Cosford), a new addition in the form of a Sea King search and rescue helicopter, and the full-size F-35 Lightning II replica will provide a broad historical spread of airframes. However, key here will be the use of more modern means of museum interpretation.

“Again, it’s about engagement”, says Maggie. “What I love is the connection to really deep knowledge and specialist research, and how we then use that to tell stories at different levels... We know from the visitor surveys from our First World War in the Air exhibition — which was the first part of our centenary programme — that people who come with huge back-knowledge gain a huge amount from it, but that people who knew nothing before they came are also gaining a lot. That, to me, is the winning combination.”

How to achieve that? “Today we have so many more tools in our toolbox that we can use. As an assistant curator, I can remember building an exhibition and being careful to ‘layer’ the information, so if someone only wanted to read the main panel, that’s fine, but then making it more in-depth. We’d always ask ourselves how we could get more information in — do we have a laminated booklet, do we have drawers for people to look at more objects? Now, with digital opportunities, we can be so much more in-depth without having to put huge books on walls. That’s the way people can access the really detailed research work.”

That’s all very well in theory, but, I put it to Maggie, many a regular museum visitor will have seen digital technology that simply doesn’t work. Of this she, too, is well aware. “I don’t think it’ll ever not be a concern. We need to make sure that the rest of the interpretation — the object itself, the panels and labels and the ‘low-tech’ interactives that are there — means that if the digital does break down you’ve still got multiple ways of accessing and being excited by the object. But digital gives us so many opportunities.”

With smartphones and tablets now a way of life, it is — whether traditionalists like it or not — simply unrealistic for modern museums to ignore that. “Museums tend not to work as competitors to each other”, says Maggie. “We’re all competing

‘The closer you get to a subject, the more you talk to yourself about it... Coming from a general history background helps’

and that was the approach that they agreed... It happened that our views coalesced.”

There are very obvious reasons why, as time goes on, the museum needs to widen its audience. “When we were young, virtually everyone had an RAF link somewhere”, Maggie says, “but now people don’t”. The service has decreased in size, there are

all but unrecognisable, one can see the point.

The Historic Hendon element of the centenary project aims, funding permitting, to address this. The car park will be moved to the entrance area, with the Hurricane and Spitfire replicas as gate guardians. The space directly in front of the original museum buildings is due to be



ABOVE: As part of the centenary redevelopment, this area at the London site will be grassed over. The Spitfire and Hurricane replicas are being moved to the gate, and the marine craft (right) are being shifted too. RAFM



ABOVE: More will be made of the surviving 1931 buildings at Hendon, while the former Battle of Britain Hall (left) becomes the museum's new 'introductory' exhibition on 100 years of the RAF. BEN DUNNELL

BELOW: Hendon's First World War in the Air exhibition has won many plaudits. RAFM



ABOVE: The Westland Wallace fuselage will, sadly, be going into storage. BEN DUNNELL

BELOW: In the historic hangars, Fighter Command and Bomber Command aircraft will in future be more directly mixed, with the arrival of airframes previously shown in the Battle of Britain Hall. BEN DUNNELL



BELOW RIGHT: Opened in 2007, the National Cold War Exhibition remains Cosford's flagship building, but more indoor space is still needed for other large aircraft. RAFM



for people's time, but we're not just competing with other museums. We're competing with other attractions, and people are used to going and visiting places that have up-to-date technology". And, as she acknowledges, "More and more people are using their own technology as well". If this allows them to access still further information during a museum visit, so much the better. "We should use technology not as an end in itself, but to enable us to tell those stories about our collections in better, more engaging and more accessible ways."

This is the aim of a smaller exhibition in the introductory building, one imagining the RAF's future and "looking", Maggie says, "more like a laboratory than a museum exhibition — very hands-on and immersive". Elsewhere, the Sunderland will stay in that building and remain open to public access, albeit disconnected from the old mezzanine-level displays. Underneath the flying boat will be a small café. The mezzanine level is due to include members' and corporate rooms, plus public views across the exhibitions below.

From a new doorway in the glass at the end where the Sunderland is positioned, visitors will enter the rest of the site. The museum's two RAF marine craft will be moved and covered with a 'sun-shade' to afford them extra protection. The vessels' current position

blocks views of the 1931 buildings behind. Building 51 will be used for small object conservation, Building 69 for volunteers, and Building 52 — an old supplies store which bears some wartime camouflage paint — as the museum's new restaurant, once it has been restored.

What is now the Milestones of Flight building is scheduled to be turned into a new exhibition called Age of Uncertainty, focusing on the RAF since the Falklands War. Incorporated at one end will be a learning centre. Of the aircraft showcased in Milestones, some — such as Eurofighter Typhoon DA2 — are relevant to Age of Uncertainty, but most will be going elsewhere around both the Hendon and Cosford sites. Details of the final airframe disposition in Age of Uncertainty are still to be confirmed.

This will all have a knock-on effect on the displays in Hendon's other hangars. The source of most disquiet has been the recent loss of the dedicated Battle of Britain Hall, on which topic Maggie says: "It's really understandable that people are concerned about it. The exhibitions in the historic hangars and the Bomber Command Hall are part of the next phase of development, but what we're looking at now is how we can reconfigure those displays so that the Fighter Command story can be told next to the Bomber Command

story, which does justice to both their importance."

To that end, the Messerschmitt Bf 110G-4/R6 will be positioned with Lancaster I R5868, so as to better depict the Luftwaffe night fighter force's role against Bomber Command. The Battle of Britain 'fighter four' of Fiat CR42, Bf 109E-4/B, Hurricane I P2617 and Spitfire I X4590 will be exhibited together.

Going to Cosford is Defiant I N1671, owing to its West Midlands production heritage. It is also believed that an example of the Boulton Paul fighter shot down the museum's Dornier Do 17Z-2, the wreck of which continues to undergo conservation treatment, adding a further local link. With it will move Gladiator I K8042, while Bf 109G-2 'Black 6' and the Junkers Ju 88R-1 will augment Cosford's already impressive line-up of Axis aircraft. Lysander III R9125 is making the same journey, albeit for attention in the Michael Beetham Conservation Centre.

There won't be space for everything in the revised halls. The fuselage of Wallace II K6035 is going into storage, and the same may be true of Seagull V A2-4. However, the RAFM's head of collections Ian Thirsk, who joined Maggie for our interview, confirmed that the museum "would like [the Seagull] to remain on public display, so we're examining options for that."



ABOVE LEFT: In mid-October, the Battle of Britain Hall having closed, the Bf 110G-4/R6 and Ju 88R-1 were being readied to move, the former into the historic hangars and the latter to Cosford. **BEN DUNNELL**

ABOVE: A rare chance to see the Defiant minus various sections. Given the type's West Midlands connections, its transfer to Cosford is very appropriate. **BEN DUNNELL**

LEFT: Already there have been changes at Cosford, with the Sopwith Pup, replica 1½ Strutter and Bristol M1C forming a World War One display there. **RAFM**

This possibility brings up another topic, namely loans and disposals. As Maggie says, "We have objects on loan at 130 other organisations". Among them are Typhoon Ib MN235 at the Canada Aviation and Space Museum in Ottawa, and Spitfire PRXIX PM651 in Bahrain. Next year, Spitfire FRXIVe MT847 is off to the Pima Air & Space Museum in Tucson, Arizona. However, the museum's wider collection includes many aircraft held in store at Cosford and Stafford that have in some cases never been restored or put on public display, or have not been exhibited for some time. Is there scope to loan or sell any of them?

"At the moment", Maggie states, "we've officially closed our loans programme for the next 18 months to two years, because all our team is working flat-out on the centenary. Part of my job is about caring for our team, so in the short term we are focusing on loan commitments made some time ago or on urgent requests. But generally, and philosophically, the answer is a big 'yes' to loans. The more of our collection that can be shared and enjoyed, the better.

"Like every other museum I know of, we've collected voraciously in the past. Some of our collections don't tell the RAF story at all. They might be aircraft and objects that have no relevance to it. Now, when we talk about the 'RAF story' we mean the broad RAF story, so it includes partners we've worked with, prototypes that have influenced it. We're not narrow in how we interpret that. But there are some objects in our collection that have absolutely no link, or that are duplicates."

In the latter case, the museum had three Phantoms on its books but has now gifted FGR2 XV408 to the Tangmere Military Aviation Museum. Likewise, it has donated Meteor NF14 WS838 to the Midland Air Museum. From recent disposals lists, the North-East Land, Sea and Air Museum acquired Skeeter AOP12 XM555, and it is hoped that Miles Hawk Major DG590 will end up with another museum, though its destination cannot be confirmed as talks are still ongoing. The CASA Jungmann from the Battle of Britain Hall is entering storage and will, in due course, leave the collection too.

"As part of the museums community", says Maggie, "we sign up to the Museum Association's code of ethics, which means that we have to go through very clear processes for disposals. When a museum takes an object on, we're promising to look after it in perpetuity. It's about public trust in museums. There have been some high-profile examples — none that I know of, necessarily, in aviation museums — of museums being stuck for cash, selling objects and losing accreditation, which means that they lose opportunities for funding and all sorts. But that doesn't mean we can

never dispose of or sell objects, because there is a very clear process.

"The first thing we have to do as part of that process is offer the object free to another accredited museum, or a provisionally accredited one. From there we can go down the list. We will always talk to people and do condition checks, look at how accessible the museum is to the public, how well objects will be cared for and so forth. There's a range of criteria. If there's not a home for the object in that arena, then, absolutely, we could consider sale. It's then our responsibility to sell it in as businesslike a manner as we can, so that the funding that comes from that goes to support the rest of the collection.

"We have an acquisitions and disposals committee, a professional team, that considers disposals... and any decisions made there to dispose of an object have to go to our board of trustees for final approval. What we can't have is the public thinking that they're not going to give a museum a precious object or document because they've seen someone do that and the museum's sold it."



There is a need for acquisitions, too. As Maggie says, "We're putting a call out for people with an RAF story or an object — it doesn't need to be an aircraft, in terms of size — from the 1970s onwards. We've got a real dearth of material on that". With the Age of Uncertainty exhibition in mind, an ex-RAF Jaguar is considered a priority. The only Jaguar in the museum's collection is the Active Control Technology fly-by-wire testbed at Cosford.

Of course there's a longer wish-list. The museum would love to have a Fury, a Stirling, a Whitley and a Hornet, but how? The Vickers Vincent composite under restoration in New Zealand was looked at but not pursued, Ian Thirsk says, "for curatorial reasons, principally". Coming more up-to-date, Maggie stresses the need at some point to acquire a suitable unmanned aircraft.

'We will tell the Fighter Command story next to Bomber Command's, which does justice to the importance of both'

Some projects have not led to an airframe joining the collection. In the case of A-20G Havoc 43-9436 *Big Nig* — once, according to an RAFM press release, due to be finished by Precision Aerospace Productions of Wangaratta, Victoria in the summer of 2010 — numerous attempts to push towards completion proved unsuccessful, and an exchange deal for a couple of the

museum's stored Spitfire XVI's came to nought. The A-20 never entered RAFM ownership.

And what of Kittyhawk III ET574, discovered in the Egyptian desert and the subject in 2012 of a joint recovery project between the museum and Kennet Aviation, in exchange for which Kennet obtained Spitfire F22 PK664? Says Maggie, "Again, [the Kittyhawk has] never been in the museum's ownership. We understand that the Egyptian government would like to display it in the El Alamein museum in Egypt, and if they do we have offered that, if they need any conservation or interpretation advice, then we could help with that. Obviously, it was before my time with the museum, but if the museum hadn't stepped in at that time the aircraft would have been looted, and potentially have been lost."

Some big projects come off, others don't. The Do 17 recovery from the Goodwin Sands off Kent in 2013 proved highly successful, and its remains are a big visitor attraction at Cosford. It has helped contribute to public attendance figures across the two sites of "about three-quarters of a million" per year, split almost evenly between both. Maggie expects "a massive uplift" at Hendon following 2018's changes.

Past investment in Cosford, for instance on the new visitor centre, landscaping and the National Cold War Exhibition, has left it in very good stead. "In many ways", says Maggie, "it's further ahead of Hendon. That was really why the centenary focus was placed on the London site". Yet Cosford remains very much in her mind. "We're doing some early master-planning work to think about what we could do, part of which will be how we can bring more of the aircraft under cover. It worries us to have some of them outside". The RAFM's annual report adds that the work "includes plans to develop a learning centre and investigating options to bring an increasing amount of our stored collections into public view."

There was some potential for extra hangarage at Cosford, but the RAF decided to retain the Shropshire airfield

for technical training purposes, and indeed to move another training school in. The museum works very closely with RAF Cosford, not least in relation to the annual airshow, and positive discussions continue. In Maggie's words, "If and when the RAF decides it doesn't want hangars, particularly if they're in spaces just by the museum fence-line, we're poised."

By then, the transformation of Hendon will long have been completed. There is still money to find — a bid for the Historic Hendon element will go in to the London HLF regional committee at the end of November, while Age of Uncertainty and the learning centre are a separate part of the project in fundraising terms. But all remains on

national museum, and we take our responsibilities as a national museum seriously”, Maggie stresses. However, the immediate locality is key as well. “It’s very important to the local area that they’ve got a national museum here... We can play a part in being the community ‘glue’. We’ve got 30,000 new residents moving in here over the

think a lot about our very committed visitors who do have a great love of aviation, or were part of the RAF, or both. We’ve got to make sure they still feel that it’s their museum too.”

There are, understandably, those who fear that modern interpretation techniques risk turning museums into little more than heritage ‘theme parks’, and that Hendon’s new look is another example. “We’re all human beings, and we’ve all got different likes and dislikes”, responds Maggie. “For us, that absolute focus on engaging more people with the story of the RAF does mean that we will be using techniques which are more ‘hands-on’, that involve different ways of learning about an object.

“Probably my favourite thing in a museum is standing quietly and reading everything I can find, because I’m a museum curator. The majority of our visitors are not museum curators. I hope that people will come along with open minds, and really think about what they feel when they get here. So, yes, it’s about active and accessible engagement, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not based on better research than ever has been done before. To me, that’s a potent combination.” **A**

‘The focus on engaging people means we will be using ‘hands-on’ techniques’

track for an opening in June 2018, part of the RAF’s centenary programme.

Maggie says that the museum is “thinking about how we respond helpfully to” requests to send aircraft to external RAF centenary events in 2018, such as the Royal International Air Tattoo, at a time when the staff will be very busy with the museum launch. “We want to say ‘yes’ to our colleagues if we can — again, it’s about sharing our collection and it’s good publicity for the museum — but we need to plan so that we’ve got the right people and aircraft in the right places at the right time.”

Attracting new visitors to Hendon has to be a priority. “We are a

next few years, coming from different backgrounds, different places. They can have a new common heritage by living here — somewhere that is massively significant.

“If local people come in because it’s free to walk in the door and to sit here and enjoy a beautiful space, for me that’s great. If even half of them think, ‘I might have a look at that exhibition’, again we’re engaging new people who would never have considered coming to the museum, and hopefully turning them into regular visitors who bring friends and family.”

Even so, Maggie adds, “I’m more evolution than revolution. We also



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Computer-generated renderings of how aspects of the new-look Hendon site will appear in 2018. The view from the road outside shows the new grassed area and the much-remodelled building that used to be the Battle of Britain Hall, which will house the museum’s main entrance and, inside, an exhibition on the first 100 years of the RAF. The new ‘visitor orientation’ space will be the first thing seen on entry. Interactive displays will be much to the fore. Sunderland V ML824, though, will be staying where it is. Numerous aircraft will be displayed in that building, including a Sea King helicopter that’s still to arrive. **RAFEM**

