

Looking Back on Tutankhamun the Boy

The Petrie Museum project *Tutankhamun the Boy* received considerable professional and media attention in the UK and Egypt from its inception in May 2022 to its conclusion in early 2024. The project was funded by grants from the Friends of the Petrie Museum and the Esmée Fairburn Foundation.

In this conversation, Head of the Petrie Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology Collection, **Catriona Wilson (CW)**, talks to PMF trustee, **Rob Whatmough (RW)**, about what the project achieved and the legacy it may have.

RW Please outline your role and what part you play in project leadership.

CW I'm Head of the Petrie Collection, and my role is to facilitate and deliver intellectual access to it, so things like research, teaching and displays. We also have a collections management team whose role is principally focused on physical access and collections care.

In terms of this project, I was the person who wrote all the funding bids, and I was to lead on project management but then I went on maternity leave, only returning in May 2023. Most of the project's implementation and success are, therefore, down to Gemma Tully (Project Co-ordinator), Anna Garnett (Curator) and Susan Mossman (Acting Head of Collection in my absence). Many other people including Lisa Randisi (Curatorial and Collections Assistant) also helped.

Since my return, I've resumed management responsibilities.

RW What prior experience fed into the project?

CW Gemma and Anna had, between them, vast experience of working at Amarna. Anna was the one who brokered the partnership with the Amarna Project (see www.amarnaproject.com) through Anna Stevens and Kate Spence, and through them the partnership with the Amarna Visitor Centre was made possible.

We had to recruit openly for the Project Co-ordinator. Gemma presented as an enormously strong candidate. Just one of the reasons why she's so good is because she has negotiated the many sensitivities of working with communities at Amarna. Because Gemma had already built relationships and trust, the project could be more efficient, and we had greater confidence that it was likely to succeed.

RW In 2022, many organisations were celebrating the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. What gave you the idea of focusing on *Tutankhamun the Boy*?

CW Several anniversaries occurred in 2022: the tomb discovery, as you say, but also the end of the British protectorate in 1922, and the 200th anniversary of the decipherment of hieroglyphs.

Anna and I were mapping out things that we could do to mark these occasions. We had this wonderful day-dreaming session where we just thought about what we would love to do if we had the funding. And one of the things that came up was the Museum's connection to Amarna.

We have a fabulous collection of objects from Amarna, and one of the things that this site tells about Tutankhamun is the story of his early life. We have objects that may well come from the time of his childhood. We also know that we don't get proportionally as many child visitors at the Museum outside of organised school groups. We also don't have many resources for younger children, which is a group we want to offer more to. So, *Tutankhamun the Boy* just seemed like a good fit. The more we ourselves thought about it, and the more we spoke to other people, it built into something that we thought made sense. Learning that members of the Amarna Project were actively interested added to this picture.

RW When we were in the galleries just now, you mentioned that a sandal played a part in your decision. How was that?

CW The many graves found by the Amarna Project have demonstrated how children at the palace site were working really, really hard – so hard that evidence is shown in their bodies, and of course the fact that they died young. This made us think further about the difference between Tutankhamun's life and status and that of other Amarna children.

And then, while just searching through the collections for things that might be relevant, an item I found pretty quickly was this one sandal (shown right). At the time, my child was about the size of the child that must have worn it. This lit up my imagination. I've always found it really fascinating to imagine the lives of people in the past. But then when you come into contact with something as real as an object that was on a child's foot, it just crystallises everything.

RW You had the initial idea and a personal focus through the sandal, but then that grew into an international project. How did you get from A to B especially as B became so big?

CW Yes, it snowballed! Through being very optimistic is my immediate answer. On top of that, we want more



UC769 – woven reed child's sandal, with (behind) UC16055 – wooden cubit rod with the names of Tutankhamun and Ankhnesenamun and (at the back) UC39654 – a scribe's palette.

and more to involve Egyptian and Sudanese people in what we're doing, and not just remotely. Where there's an opportunity to involve an Egyptian scholar or take something directly to Egypt, we'll take it. This was the first time since I started in 2019 that I had a real opportunity to make this happen.

RW Did you worry that the project might become too big?

CW Yes, before, during and since!

RW How did the UCL Widening Participation project fit in?

CW Widening Participation is what all universities seek to do through raising aspirations and encouraging young people from *all* backgrounds to think of university as, potentially, a place for them.

The UCL Widening Participation team, including Emma Bryant (Senior Schools Engagement Officer), used to be part of our team, and we still work really closely with them. Egyptology is such an interest for schools. Tutankhamun is always on the curriculum, and it's such a great story even if it's not always told in the best way. There's usually a focus on the white men and the discovery, the western organizations that funded it, the so-called curse, and the mummies, all of which interest and capture the imagination of children but we want to move beyond this.

We realised that we could work with the George Mitchell Primary School with which Emma and her team have a long-standing relationship. When we asked if this was a possibility, Emma bit our hands off!

RW What wider impact might the project have on other schools?

CW We have, for example, a series of films that are about how to look at some of the objects from this project. Anna speaks to camera and asks questions to prompt critical thinking. There is also a series of worksheets that help pupils to interrogate the project's 3D prints that Roberta Livingstone-McDonald, a STEP trainee in the Widening Participation department is currently working on. This is all in the process of being tidied up to post on the website. Some Tutankhamun-related material is also being created for sharing by (I hope) the end of this academic year.

Tutankhamun the Boy: Facts and Figures

In total across 23 individual events and workshops, the project directly engaged 460 UK primary schoolchildren, 571 Egyptian school-age children, 47 Egyptian workers and heritage professionals, 20 teachers from George Mitchell Primary and Secondary School and 20 UK heritage professionals, as well as 700 members of the Friends of the Petrie Museum, around 30 UCL staff members, and 627 attendees at 3 virtual exhibition events. In addition, 22,615 public visitors viewed the two temporary exhibitions in 2022-23.



*George Mitchell Primary School students attending Tutfest
(C) Kirsten Holst 2023*

In terms of distribution, we have an enormous mailing list. We send learning and teaching materials to schools. We also run events for teachers at UCL in tandem with the Widening Participation team.

RW The project obviously presented challenges. Were there any that you thought might overwhelm your team's ability to keep on track? How did it turn out?

CW Yes, I think especially the Skills Exchange with colleagues from Egypt and the UK.

The UK border control system presented some challenges, and we became increasingly aware of the complexities of the paperwork and that visas can get turned down for all kinds of reasons. So, it wasn't until Gemma had confirmation that all the visas were done and every Egyptian colleague had landed that we knew we could go ahead. Once everyone was gathered though it was wonderful.

RW Taking that a bit further, how confident are you that the impact in Egypt will be seen in, say, two or three years' time?

CW I don't think anybody can be certain and, inevitably, it won't be straightforward. There are many short-term contracts in museums in this country. People move around and circumstances change. Projects tend to hinge on the person, or people, involved. The same is true for Egypt. However, the Amarna project and the Amarna visitor centre are more established and these, together with the Petrie Museum, which is also well established, should help.

The whole experience helped the Egyptian delegation to realise that their ideas were worth listening to. They stated this explicitly to Gemma and to the evaluation consultant. Also, because we're attached to the



Left to Right: Catriona Wilson; Gemma Tully; Anna Garnett; Lisa Randisi. Behind the group and to the left: part of the Tutankhamun project special display; to the right, the permanent display of shabtis.

Amarna Project, everything we've done feeds through that project and has a life with them afterwards.

For example, we gave the Amarna Visitor Centre 3D prints of objects in the Petrie Museum collection. Colleagues there selected the objects, and we printed them and sent them across. We've also provided children's materials, books, and other resources.

RW What did you learn from the project evaluation?

CW Our evaluation report was assembled by an independent, external consultant, Annabelle Jackson, who has worked with the British Museum and many others over some 30 years. The report gives an assessment of the various activities that we carried out as well as the structure and process of the project. Impact is measured through surveys and participant interviews as well as Annabelle's own observations. It will help us to apply learning from the project to future activities within the Petrie Museum as well as future partnerships and community activity.

I was particularly pleased with Annabelle's assessment of the two temporary displays, not only in relation to their content but also the thought processes that lay behind them. The report noted especially that structuring the display around children's questions was innovative. Using questions also created open-ended communication with visitors to the Museum as well as with the children who participated in the project.

Annabelle also spent time talking to participants at project events. Verbatim comments from teachers at George Mitchell School were really encouraging. The teachers all spoke about how the project as a whole and the object-based learning central to it have really changed the way history is taught in their school. This was so encouraging to learn.

RW If you were to start afresh, what would you be most eager to repeat and what would you devote more time to if you could?

CW I'd like to do the project again because I missed a lot of it through being on leave. And I didn't get to go

From the Evaluation Report

The Tutankhamun the Boy project was successful in helping the Petrie Museum to make its collection more inclusive and develop participatory practice with the community. In particular, the project:

- Modelled a co-creative process for exhibitions that started with the questions of the community partner, so that objects and interpretation were inspired by their interests.
- Developed a strong relationship with a school in a deprived area of East London. The UCL team took the time to develop a rapport with teachers and pupils.
- Included a takeover day in which children from primary school acted as museum assistants. This strongly communicating that the museum is for them and helped to break down the hierarchy in museums.
- Included an open day/Tut Fest which engaged parents and helped inspired them about ancient History and eased the way for them to visit the Petrie Museum. The school was also hoping the project would help parents value higher education.
- Presented an accessible and approachable perspective on Tutankhamun in an important year with many other exhibitions.
- Connected to university work on archaeology, so emphasising the continuing nature of historical discovery.
- Informed the practice of officials from the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, especially in showing ways of engaging the local community. Interviewees also emphasised the benefit to them of seeing that their culture was valued and that Tutankhamun was understood as a person, with an important context in their society and customs.
- Brought new visitors to the Museum and gave them an experience that motivated them to return.

This was a complex project with many layers. This project generated lessons into timetabling, communication and logistics that will inform future projects at the Petrie Museum.

to Egypt! I'd happily do it all again from the beginning tomorrow.

I met Gemma for what we call a 'Keeping in Touch' day when you're on maternity leave. It was in Cambridge, and I was accompanied by my youngest. Gemma gave me a project update. Over a long lunch, she showed me a video that Ahmed, who's an Egyptian student at UCL, had made with the kids in London and set to music. I just cried. It was so amazing that this "thing" that I'd imagined and organised funding for, but had only seen on a page, had suddenly become reality.

And then Gemma showed me photos of her work with children in Egypt. And not only the children but also the Egyptian workforce and their children. I was blown away – it was everything I had hoped might be possible.

RW What would you do differently?

CW I would make the Skills Exchange a full week especially if cost were no object. Because we had to pack everything in, the lecture day was great but extremely intense. Everyone was very tired at the end of that day especially, myself very much included, and the heatwave that week didn't help! It would have

"The project has pushed History to the forefront in the school. The teachers feel more confident realising that teaching isn't about worksheets. They are thinking more scientifically and creatively about History. For example, I might ask, "If the object could speak, what would it say?"

Teacher at George Mitchell School

been great to have time for more space for reflection and discussion but I hope that everyone who joined took away ideas and inspiration.

The object-based learning workshops the next day was fabulous. For example, we did some "slow looking", where we had 15 minutes just to observe something and then another 10 minutes to observe it again and realise just how much more we could see. It was absolutely brilliant. We also tried object-blind dating where you describe an object to the person next to you, who can't see it but has to draw it. When you're the one doing the drawing, you feel that you're drawing nonsense but it generally turns out that you are drawing the object correctly after all, it's amazing. Again, more time to reflect on our own learning and what this type of activity can offer would have been welcome.

RW What next for the Museum?

CW We are trying to figure that out! One thing that may possibly be developing off the back of the project is another exciting potential partnership in Egypt. I can't say more as yet, and nothing may come of it. However, it just shows how success in one venture can create new opportunities. So, yes, the team wants to do more!



Skills Exchange: top left – Hamada Mohamed Abd Elmoeen Kellawy, Fathy Awad Reyad, Catriona Wilson; top right – Campbell Price, Ian Trumble; bottom left – Hesham A. Abdel Kader, Gemma Tully, Hamada Mohamed Abd Elmoeen Kellawy, Joseph Qased Fanous, Mazher Khalifa Mohammed, Catriona Wilson; bottom right – Hamada Mohamed Abd Elmoeen Kellawy