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Mar 21 People's History Museum, Manchester

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A £12.5 million pound refurbishment has successfully married the old with the new: on paper it shouldn't work at all – a modern, glass structure with state-of-the-art Corten shell grafted on to an Edwardian pump house – but it does and remarkably well as Olivia Greenway finds out.

The museum entrance is flooded with light from floor to ceiling glass walls, encouraging an atmosphere of space and calm. To one side is the welcoming café, a little hive of activity when I visited. Take a seat and watch

the river Irwell over a cup of very good coffee.

If the thought of history and particularly politics, make your eyes glaze over and reminds you of those dreary lessons at school, this bright, modern museum might change your mind. It covers a relatively short period of 200 years, charting the fight of the working man to get a right to vote. Some of us take our political freedom for granted and may even think it's been around since medieval times. However, it's all fairly recent; it's hard for me to believe that my own grandmother did not have a right to vote when she turned 21; women could only vote from 1928.

Arranged over two floors and divided into themes, the first floor covers the period from 1819 to 1945 and then the second floor from 1945 to the present day. You are able to dip in or out as you please, looking at things that interest you in more detail: there are 1500 exhibits in all. I was very impressed with the labelling of exhibits, which were simple, concise and easy to understand. Further research shows that this system of plain English was pioneered by Ekary, who gives it its name.

The first floor gallery kicks off with the Peterloo Massacre. Thousands of working class people had to work in the cotton mills. Conditions were appalling – for men, women and children. Hours were long, wages were low and it was often dangerous. A peaceful meeting to air their grievances was arranged in St Peters Fields, but magistrates panicked when so many mill workers turned up and sent in soldiers. 17 people were killed and over 400 injured. This killing of innocent, unarmed people marked the beginning of the slow road to political reform.

Workers organised themselves into unions and when they held processions, marched behind a banner. The oldest banner in the world is exhibited here, dating from 1821. These textile antiquities need to be carefully looked after and the only Textile Conservation Studio in the country is based here. You may see the work in progress to protect and preserve the banners.

The second floor covers politics from 1945. Famous election posters, such as "Labour isn't working" of 1979 showing an unemployment queue, Michael Foot's "donkey jacket" (actually bought at Harrods) and the famous Gone with the Wind poster produced in 1981 by CND casting Ronald Regan as Rhett Butler and Margaret Thatcher as Scarlett O'Hara may be viewed here.

Changing exhibitions are held in the Pump Room and escorted tours are organised regularly with particular themes. Re-enactments are also performed, literally bringing the particular period to life. (A rehearsal was in progress when I visited).

It might be considered ironic that with the advent of more leisure time and the consequent distractions of television, the internet and particularly social networking sites, some of us may have allowed politics to take a bit of a back seat. A visit to the People's History Museum might be a timely reminder of how important our right to vote is. Best of all, it's centrally placed and admission is free.

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