

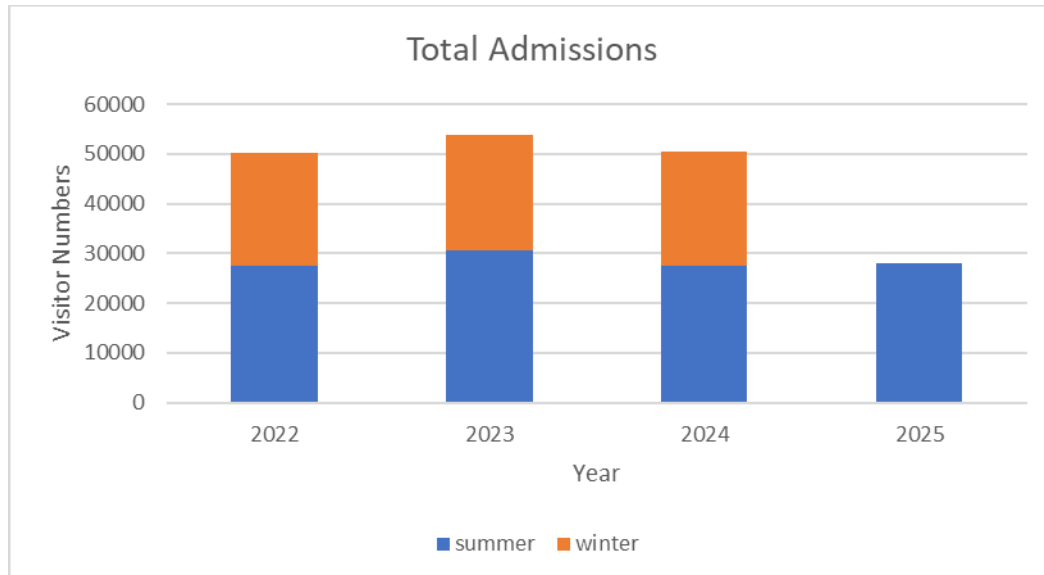
RUSSELL COTES ART GALLERY AND MUSEUM MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



Report subject	Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum Update Report (1 April – 30 September 2025)
Meeting date	27 October 2025
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	The Museum has had another successful 6 month period (1 April – 30 September 2025). After a slow start to the season, the summer has been extremely busy due to the popularity of the Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Award exhibition throughout the house and the 'May Morris: Art and Advocacy' exhibition in the main galleries. The café has benefited from the good weather attracting visitors to the terrace and garden. The Museum's accreditation review has been completed by the Arts Council England and been awarded full accreditation.
Recommendations	It is RECOMMENDED that: The Management Committee accepts the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum Update Report for the period 1 April – 30 September 2025.
Reason for recommendations	To demonstrate the fulfilment of the committee's responsibility to provide strategic oversight of the Russell-Cotes as the designated governance body for the Charity.
Portfolio Holder(s):	Cllr Andy Martin, Portfolio Holder for Customer, Communications and Culture
Corporate Director	Glynn Barton, Chief Operations Officer
Report Authors	Sarah Newman, Museum Manager
Wards	Not applicable
Classification	For Update

Visitor figures

1. There was a poor start to the financial year, with visitor numbers down slightly in April, May and June (probably partly as a result of the superb weather) but they have improved in the final 3 months thanks to the popularity of the Self-Portrait Prize, May Morris exhibition and good weather. Visitor numbers for this period (28,000) are comparable to previous years (better than 2022 and 2024 but not as strong as 2023).



Financial performance

2. Although visitor numbers are strong and the admissions price was increased in 2024, income from admissions has been static at best. Investigation of the data suggests that there has been a reduction in visitors paying the Gift Aid admission fee (£9.50 for an adult) and more opting to pay the equivalent lower Standard fee (£8.60) resulting in a loss of income. This may be due partly to increased price sensitivity amongst our visitors but much is probably due to the messaging on the front desk. Training has been increased to address this as £9.50 represents extremely good value for money and discounts are available for Friends, children, students, those in receipt of means-tested benefits, etc.
3. The Café has performed particularly well over the summer and there has also been good performance in the shop.

Accreditation

4. The Museum was awarded full accreditation by the Arts Council in October, following its submission in January 2025.
5. Accreditation sets standards for governance, collection care and user experience and is a requirement for much vital museum activity, such as inter-museum loans and grant applications.
6. The review has outlined no areas of concern but asked for reporting at the next return in about 5 years on: governance change; conservation and building improvements; documentation and signage.

Building

7. There were 37 building faults reported (compared to 23 previous report), many of which were minor and have been resolved eg repair of Study Centre door and window, door handle repairs etc. Remedial actions from the recent 5 year electrical test are being actioned.
8. However there are still a number which are outstanding after more than 6 months, the bottom gate is collapsing and unusable and the mould in the café store is not resolved.
9. After a fire on the cliff top in front of the Miramar Hotel and in the beach huts below the Museum we have concerns about the risk of wildfires linked to anti-social behaviour in the area which puts the building and collections at risk. Staff were either on site or on standby at the recent fires. The Museum staff have asked to connect with any planning by Seafront Operations and the Fire Service on the ongoing response to this risk.
10. In mid September, an extremely heavy period of overnight rain caused water ingress through the Study ceiling, damaging a sculpture and desk and has caused water ingress through the tanking in the Picture Stores. The Study leak was caused by a minor blockage in the gutters and we were very lucky that on a Saturday, contractors came on site to unblock this. This will be an ongoing risk as the gutters are regularly cleaned but they require specialist contractors as they are very difficult to access and are not large enough to handle the rainfall we are now experiencing. The leak in picture store 1 is an old problem, but it is again very difficult to access and to remedy. Though raised, no remedial action has yet been taken.

Garden

11. The refurbishment of the much-loved sculptures on the railings outside the museum has been completed (funded by neighbourhood CIL), which has also funded repairs to the fountains and bridge.
12. Bike stands have been deployed near the front door but far enough away to satisfy the Fire Officer.

Pavilion

13. Bournemouth Civic Society donated £37,000 for the reconstruction of one of the play pavilions originally in the garden. A design was commissioned and pre-planning advice was sought. Though the Conservation Officer was delighted with the idea, she had a number of concerns and changes. So we engaged an architect to revise the plans in light of the conservation officer's response (which I attach), so it is more authentic to the original (based on photographs etc).
14. When we went out to tender again, the quotes had increased beyond the generous donation made by the Civic Society. So we have been trying to resolve how to find the additional funding needed to proceed, mindful of our financial position and BCP Council regulations.

Collections and Conservation Care

15. The leak in the study has caused damage to one desk only which is undergoing conservation.
16. The Russell-Cotes has been awarded £3000 by South West Museums Development 'On Display!' to fund the repair/replacement of plinths for sculptures currently on the Sculpture Terrace so that they can be moved to the conservatory for improved display (and in preparation for the Terrace's renovation through MEND 4 work in 2026).
17. In April 2025, two volunteers supported the Curator to audit 9 Eustace Nash cartoons held in the Study Centre and 17 Chinese ceramics on display in the Museum. On 24 September the Council auditors, Grant Thornton, carried out an audit of 5 randomly chosen items (3 paintings, 1 watercolour and 1 Chinese robe) from the collection. All were satisfactory.

Interpretation and Display

18. The Learning gallery redisplay has not been completed because of lack of capacity, but should be finished before the year end.

Programming

19. See attached appendix about exhibitions and programming.
20. The main exhibition this summer 'May Morris: Art and Advocacy' has been very popular. We had hoped that it would bring in a slightly new audience of those interested in textiles, embroidery and interior design and it clearly delivered. The exhibition has coincided with a renewed interest in William Morris and has been very positively reviewed by visitors.
21. The exhibition of shortlisted entries to the 'Ruth Borchard Self-Portrait Prize' was a tremendous success because of the high quality and variety of the work, curated in a variety of museum spaces to generate dialogue, contrast and comparison with the historic paintings and décor. It brought the museum to the attention of a new audience of practising artists, nationally and internationally and would be worth following up with a similar intervention in due course.
22. 'Artist as Witness: the impact of war' will run from 25 October to 8 March 2026. Dr Gill Clarke has curated this exhibition, focussing on the significant Russell-Cotes war art collection with loans from national and regional museums and private collectors. The museum has produced an exhibition catalogue to accompany the show with publishers Sansoms & Company which will be available at the museum and through bookshops and usual channels. Sales will benefit the museum and provide an important legacy as we strive to increase publications about the collection.
23. The exhibition 'Waves of Change: Jewish Life in Bournemouth 1880 – 2020' has been postponed till October 2026.

Education / Engagement

24. School and university student sessions continued, on and off site, self and museum led. The museum had a stand at Bournemouth University Freshers Fair and at the community zone of the Arts by the Sea Festival.
25. Craft sessions for children were held at Easter and summer half term. In the summer holidays object handling sessions and family tours were added to

encourage more family visits to the museum. However, figures look roughly comparable between the years.

26. We have relaunched our tactile tours for visually impaired visitors with some success. They are offered free as private tours and on a monthly basis. Over this period 16 people have participated.
27. In 2024, the Russell-Cotes received £5,000 from the Valentine Trust. We worked with arts and wellbeing organisation, CoCreate, to deliver a series of workshops for our volunteers, to help develop a sense of inclusion and care, and to build their skills and confidence to create more activities for the benefit of our visitors. As a consequence they have delivered drop in sketching sessions, spotlight talks, object handling sessions and slow art sessions.
28. Thanks to the Valentine Trust, we have also distributed 285 free admission vouchers to local community organisations including NHS staff and volunteers, refugee charities, carers, people living with mental health issues and ME and feedback has been very positive.

Events

29. We are looking more closely at finding opportunities to generate additional income through partnered events and experiential tourism packages, and have been setting up partnerships with the Dorset Wine Festival, Bournemouth Writing Festival and Purbeck Film Festival, as well as developing high-ticket price prestige curator-led experiences. However, council restrictions mean that using necessary platforms such as TXGB is not feasible at present, which makes it difficult to reach the desired world-wide audience.

Marketing and publicity

30. We benefitted from good press coverage celebrating the completion of the Conservatory as well as the May Morris exhibition. The Conservatory featured in local press as well as Museums + Heritage Advisor, and the May Morris exhibition benefitted also from local press as well as reviews in the Embroidery Magazine, Pre-Raphaelite Society Review, a feature in Evolver and we published a piece about the show in The William Morris Society Magazine.
31. The Russell-Cotes featured in the media for its decision to postpone the 'Waves of Change' exhibition.

Café

32. The Café has had a good summer, with increased sales from more home-baking and new product lines and taking advantage of the good weather on the terrace, though the lack of the Air Festival meant it was not possible to offer the associated afternoon teas.

Shop

33. The shop is on track at the moment, having had good sales so far this summer when the majority of sales occur. May Morris exhibition was particularly strong for sales of textiles such as scarves, teatowels. Embroidery kits did well. Some of the new suppliers will be useful going forward.

Staff and Volunteers

- 34. Stuart Bartholomew's chairmanship of the Management Committee was renewed at meeting of Cabinet on 7 October.
- 35. Five casual museum assistants and two catering assistants have become permanent staff due to their long service and regular work pattern. This has been well-received by staff. It is anticipated to have some impact on costs with more staff taking up pensions and new additional payments required for evening and bank holiday working resulting from the Pay and Reward scheme.

Fundraising and Partnerships

- 36. BCP Council agreed to sign the contract for partnership on the Art Fund supported 'Going Places' project with Watts Gallery and The Bowes Museum. The Russell-Cotes will receive c£100,000 directly but the first instalment will be paid in 2026.
- 39 We tried to apply for an ACE Small Project Grant for an engagement project to accompany the 'Artist as Witness' exhibition working in partnership with DEED, Dorset Ukrainian Association and Vita Nova. But unfortunately it coincided with the collapse of the ACE grant portal Grantium and by the time the new application arrangements were in place, it was too late for this project. However, we will still try to schedule some joint low-cost activities, such as a Ukrainian evening during the run of the show.
- 40. £3,000 was received from a legacy from Mrs Margaret Arnold and we will receive a little more in a final settlement.
- 37. The following grant applications have been made
 - a. Art Fund for £30,000 for the Irving Room redisplay
 - b. Valentine Trust for £9,000 for Pavilion
 - c. Rok-Box for a new crate for 'Venus Verticordia'

Options Appraisal

- 38. n/a

Summary of financial implications

- 39. n/a

Summary of legal implications

- 40. n/a

Summary of human resources implications

- 41. n/a

Summary of sustainability impact

- 42. n/a

Summary of public health implications

43. n/a

Summary of equality implications

44. n/a

Summary of risk assessment

45. n/a

Background papers

none

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Exhibitions and Programming .