

# RUSSELL COTES ART GALLERY AND MUSEUM MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



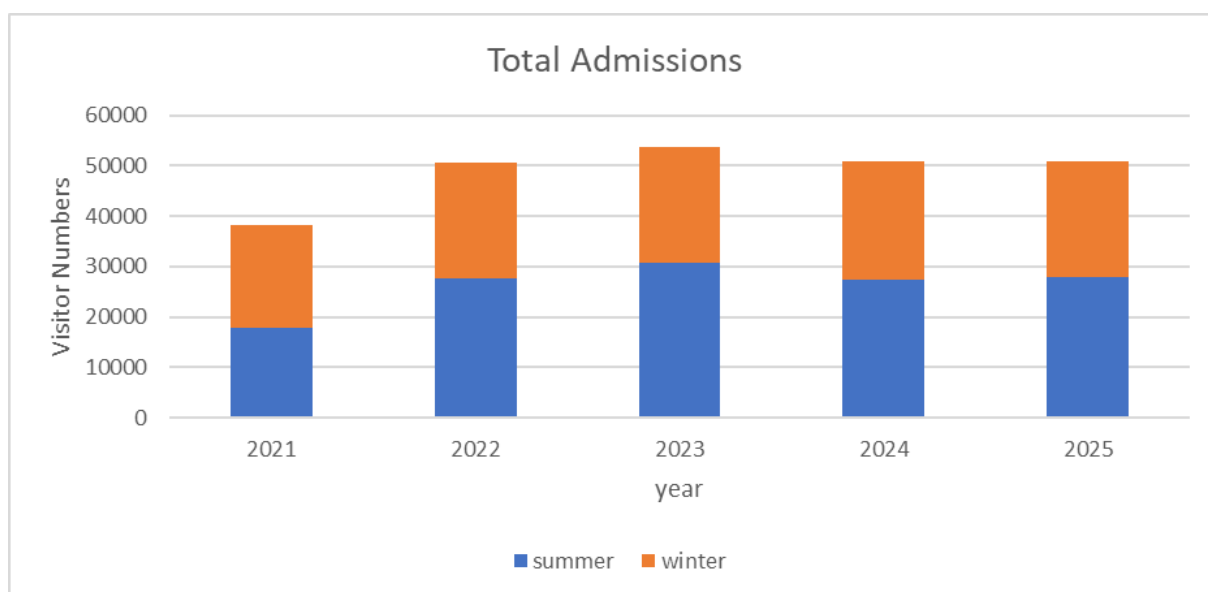
Report subject	<b>Russell-Cotes Art Gallery &amp; Museum Update Report 1 October 2025-31 March 2026</b>
Meeting date	1 June 2026
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>This period has seen a maintenance of visitor numbers and visitor income with diverse and engaging public programming across a number of areas.</p> <p>From October to March, 'Artist as Witness: Impact of War' with its associated legacy catalogue was a thought-provoking and moving exhibition on the impact of war from the First World War to Ukraine. It was accompanied by associated exhibitions about Indian soldiers recuperating in Bournemouth in the First World War and a photographic exhibition documenting the experience of Ukrainian refugees.</p> <p>Subsequently, the opening of the 'Flower Fairies' exhibition in March 2026 has brought significantly increased visitor numbers.</p> <p>The café and the shop have performed particularly well.</p>
Recommendations	<p><b>It is RECOMMENDED that:</b></p> <p><b>The Management Committee accepts the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum Update Report for the period 1 October 2025 – 31 March 2026.</b></p>
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

## Background

### Visitor Figures

1. Visitor figures (22,944) to the site for this period were comparable with previous years. Total annual visitor figures were 50,971 for 2025/26 compared to 50,393 in 2024/5. However, visitors to the museum itself were 44,436, a marginal reduction of 750 on 2024. In the context of a challenging year (cost of living, Iran war etc), this consistency in visitor numbers is very encouraging.



## Financial Performance

2. Overall, net income from visitors increased marginally by 4% (£20,000) in the Financial Year 2025/26. Admissions income remained lower than anticipated but excellent performance from the café particularly and the shop more than compensated.
3. Friends membership income remained broadly comparable to the previous year, despite a reduction in total members following the removal of Annual Passes to streamline memberships.

## **Building**

4. 37 building faults were raised in this period with five repairs outstanding: including the garden gate, gallery roof water ingress and metals alert cameras on the Gallery roof, which will probably be picked up through MEND 4 (see separate report).
5. We are investigating water ingress into Picture Store 2 in the Modern Wing during rainy weather which is causing mould. The paintings were decanted during January closure, and the walls sealed but this has not solved the issue and major repairs are under consideration. The external wall in the Welcome desk/Shop area is also very damp, often saturated, and investigations are continuing but it is thought that this has been an issue since 2008.
6. The black mould on the north wall of the café store in the historic house was cut out and removed and the area tanked leaving an observation hatch. This wall is observed to be very wet with no obvious cause other than that it is subterranean. We are looking at managing the water out of the building using existing drainage channels.
7. In February the garden shed was broken into but nothing was taken and we have had one incident in the garden resulting in a broken window.

## **Garden**

8. A strong team of volunteers are now working well with gardening and maintenance and have supported the Flower Fairies exhibition with appropriate planting.
9. In preparation for externalisation, the Russell-Cotes has taken over lawn mowing and waste removal from the Council and intend to manage this through volunteers and contractors more economically. Volunteers will mow the lawn and have set up a compost heap whilst more significant arisings from hedge trimming etc will be removed by a contractor.
10. The re-creation of one of the Children's Pavilion in the garden, part funded by the Bournemouth Civic Society has proved challenging. Additional funds have been raised to enable the museum to proceed with the tender process and carry out associated landscaping work. However the appointed company has been slow at providing a design for submission for planning consent. The design is anticipated at the time of writing.

## **Collections and Conservation**

11. The Russell-Cotes made a Stage 1 Application for Designation for the Founding Art Collection to the Arts Council. 'The Designation Scheme recognises and celebrates collections of national and international importance based on their quality and significance.' Designation would give the museum access to funding and recognition which could be beneficial. The Russell-Cotes applied unsuccessfully nearly 30 years ago. We will hear in the summer if we are invited to submit a Stage 2 application.
12. In October 2025 a desk from Sir Merton Russell-Cotes' study received emergency conservation following water ingress. The conservation treatment allowed for a full

examination and identification of the piece revealing that it was actually an architect's table (aka *table a la tronchin*) dated to 1780-1800, and it is likely that Sir Merton would have used it to work with large plans, maps or prints rather than as a writing surface.

13. The Russell-Cotes won a competition for a ROXBOX packing crate which unlike the usual forms of museum packing crates, are environmentally friendly and sustainable. Additionally, because they are made from lightweight materials, they are safer to move around historic interiors and are much easier to lift. We used it for the first time for a loan to Nottingham Castle Museum and Gallery and intend to buy more for the Going Places inter-museum lending and exhibition project thus reducing the carbon footprint of this three-exhibition venture.
14. During the January 2026 annual closure period the museum's wooden floors were polished but attention was mainly given to the active mould discovered in Picture Store 2 (see above). With the help of two placement students from West Dean College, the store was decanted and the active and in-active mould was removed from artworks. We took advantage of the opportunity to take reference photographs and dimensions for the collections management database, deep clean the racking and tidy up more generally.

### **Interpretation and Display**

15. During the January 2026 annual closure period the Conservatory was redisplayed with busts from the Sculpture Terrace which not only brought out items not seen by the public for 25 years but also pre-emptively cleared the Sculpture Terrace in advance of MEND 4 works. In support of this, funding of £3,000 was secured via the South West Museum Development's 'On Display!' grant to refurbish some of the period plinths in use in the Sculpture Terrace. The challenge of moving the heavy yet delicate busts into the Conservatory, which is down some steep steps was managed internally without recourse to expensive external contractors. This was a definite skill building experience for all concerned.
16. New interpretation panels outlining the family and museum history have been installed in the Learning Gallery to give a better introduction for visitors.

### **Programming**

'Artist as Witness: The Impact of War' (25 October 2025 - 8 March 2026)

17. Featuring over 70 artworks, by renowned and lesser-known artists from national, regional, private and the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum's own war art collection, the exhibition highlighted artists' diverse responses to scenes of conflict. Highlights included 'Spring in the Trenches' by Paul Nash (Imperial War Museum), a searing comment on the suffering witnessed by Nash both as a soldier and then an official war artist. In addition Osmund Caine's spectacular Spider Hutments (Government Art Collection) was on public display for the first time in over twenty years.

The exhibition was very well received and had 13,994 visitors. It was accompanied by a catalogue published by Sansoms which is still available in the shop and online.

18. Visitor comments included:

*'Moving exhibition. Particularly impressed by how many women artists are included'*

*'Really phenomenal exhibition. Interesting pieces showing the resentment/differing perspectives of male/female experience.'*

*'I am lucky enough that I have seen many RC exhibitions, none have moved me the extent of your 'Artist as Witness.'*

### **'Flower Fairies: Enchantment by the Sea' 28 March - 4 October 2026**

19. Initial reactions from visitors have been extremely positive, particularly noting the connection to local vistas as well as the nostalgic and beautiful flower fairy images. It has already delivered some of the best visitor figures for Easter and May Bank holidays since 2022.

### **Print Room**

20. The Print Room has focussed on recent donations to the Museum's collections including works by Lucy Kemp-Welch and Leslie Moffat Ward.

### **Café Gallery**

21. The Café Gallery was used for an exhibition about the experience of Indian soldiers in Bournemouth in the First World War: 'Recovering by the Sea', and later for an exhibition 'Occupied Unoccupied' of photographs by Ukrainian artist Iryna Sozanska.

### **Education/ Engagement**

22. Five school sessions and fourteen university trips took place during this period. However, the museum has decided to focus its formal learning offer on self-led sessions for schools and universities in the future as demand for taught sessions is very limited.
23. In the spring AUB animation students held an exhibition to showcase their work on a James Bond theme in the Café gallery. AUB Fine Art students participated in an art installation project in the museum whilst textile students from Bournemouth and Poole College showcased their response to the May Morris exhibition.
24. The Museum attended BU and AUB Freshers Fairs, the Arts By the Sea Community Zone and involved local community groups including Dorset Blind Association, The Chatterboxes (for young people with disabilities), Brownies and Russell-Cotes Friends and volunteers in the making of poppies which created a stunning display in Gallery II at the entrance of the 'Artist as Witness' exhibition

### **Going Places**

25. The Founding the Future Network (Russell-Cotes, Watts Gallery and The Bowes Museum) began preparations for the first touring exhibition. Funded by Art Fund, the network will co-curate two touring exhibitions working with young people (18 – 25 years). The network agreed that the first exhibition, on display at the Russell-Cotes in October 2027, will be themed around 19th Century environmental awareness and early activism. A researcher was appointed to identify exhibition themes, relevant collection objects from all three venues, and suggestions for loans from other galleries and contemporary artists. Using this research the network went on to collectively select the core object list, collection pieces that will travel to each of the

three venues. A co-ordinator will support the touring show's logistics and funds are available to support conservation and interpretation across the venues. Finally, Russell-Cotes staff participated in various training sessions including carbon tracking and recording, digital tools for community engagement, reducing the environmental impact of touring collections, and audio descriptive training.

### **Venue Hire**

26. Venue Hire was modest in the second half of the year, with an income of £390, but saw an increase in enquiries, some of which have made bookings for 2026/27, suggesting a positive change in the landscape of our local business communities. We had our first Conservatory booking for a private birthday party Afternoon Tea.
27. We also hosted two events where the space was offered for free, one for the South West Museums Fed, which provided a positive networking opportunity with our professional peers across the sector, and one for a showcase event for the Citizens' Panel project run by Jessica Toale MP, which raised our profile with people of influence within the constituency. Both of these events generated additional catering income.

### **Events**

28. The usual programme of tours, talks and evening events continued. To develop a stronger presence with more affluent audiences we also partnered with the Purbeck Film Festival for a special event screening and reception in October, and with The Dorset Wine Festival to host a special Art of Wine evening in November. Both were well-attended and generated a modest profit.

### **Shop**

29. Shop performance was comparable with the equivalent period the previous year, with a turnover of £52,878 net (equivalent £53,237 in 2024/5) despite the 'Artist as Witness' exhibition not being so easily merchandised as the Purbeck exhibition the previous year. The 'Artist as Witness' catalogue was the main seller and Christmas stock did well too. 'Flower Fairies' merchandise was introduced in mid March and was immediately a strong seller, auguring well for summer 2026.

### **Café**

30. The Café continued to have a good year with turnover up overall by 10% (£19,000), however costs also increased particularly staffing. A new staffing model has been developed to reduce staffing at the end of the day designed to deliver a profit. A number of catering staff have left which has enabled this change to be managed naturally and its impact on profitability will be monitored.

### **Marketing and Publicity**

31. 'Artist as Witness: The Impact of War' secured local press coverage, though national and regional coverage was not achieved despite support from an external PR advisor. In November, a large-scale installation of approximately 3,000 handmade paper poppies was displayed at the Russell-Cotes and received coverage on local platforms including the *Bournemouth Echo* and *BBC News*.
32. *Artist as Witness* was complemented in the Café Gallery by 'Recovering by the Sea: The Indian Army in Bournemouth, 1914–1915' and 'Occupied / Unoccupied' by

Ukrainian photographer Iryna Sozanska. All three exhibitions attracted local press and radio coverage and received highly positive visitor feedback.

33. 'Flower Fairies™: Enchantment by the Sea' opened on 28 March 2026, generating significant advance interest. An additional £5,000 marketing allocation supported a sustained Newsquest campaign, lamppost banners in Bournemouth town centre, and late-summer train station and billboard advertising with JCDecaux. Collaboration with the official Flower Fairies Instagram account proved highly effective, with announcement and behind-the-scenes posts achieving 38,000–42,700 views and over 4,000 interactions each – substantially higher than typical Russell-Cotes engagement levels.

### **Fundraising and partnerships**

34. The Russell-Cotes has been awarded
- £23,000 by Weston Loan with Art Fund to support the tempera exhibition in 2027 and particularly a tour to Royal Holloway University London
  - £2000 by the Finnis Scott Foundation for Tempera exhibition
  - £5,000 from CIL for the Pavilion
  - £5,000 from the Valentine Trust for the Pavilion
  - £3,600 legacy from Mrs Margaret Arnold. Allocated to the pavilion
35. During 2024-25, we partnered with England's Coast, along with other BCP attractions following the end of BCP support for Tourism Marketing. This partnership has now come to an end, and the Destination Management Board has taken over Bournemouth and Poole Tourism; we look forward to working more closely with them.

### **Staff and Volunteers**

36. A number of catering assistants have left but new staff have been successfully recruited. Volunteers continued to contribute significantly to activities at the museum.

### **Options Appraisal**

37. n/a

### **Summary of financial implications**

38. n/a

### **Summary of legal implications**

39. n/a

### **Summary of human resources implications**

40. n/a

**Summary of sustainability impact**

41. n/a

**Summary of public health implications**

42. n/a

**Summary of equality implications**

43. n/a

**Summary of risk assessment**

44. n/a

**Background papers**

none

**Appendices**

There are no appendices to this report.