

HCAP dinner, 23 May 2019

Your Royal Highness, Distinguished Guests, Masters, Master and friends

Thank you for your kind introduction.

How is a museum – albeit one of the UK's national museums and the RAF's museum to boot – really relevant for the gathering of forward thinking, technologically advanced company of air pilots gathered here this evening?

Academics and museum professionals have debated the role of museums since they were first founded over 300 years ago, and that conversation has broadened and deepened as the years have passed. Is a museum a temple for academics, a club for enthusiasts, a visitor attraction or a community space? The answer is that, depending on their collections and governance, most museums support some or all these to a greater or lesser degree, and none are mutually exclusive. For me though, museums are places of inspiration, places where our curiosity is inspired and where we can learn and have the space to question and challenge. Museums can be a powerful force for good; one of the few organisations that still hold the public trust in these times of fake news – and they have the power to change lives.

The RAF Museum has recently launched our new strategic plan that sets our ambition for the next ten years. Our vision over this next chapter of our own history is to inspire everyone with the RAF story, the people who shape it and its place in our lives.

We welcomed just short of 1m people to our two museums last year as we marked the Centenary of the RAF (up 39% on the previous year), but we see our transformed site in London not as the pinnacle of our efforts, but as a baseline, setting firm foundations for our future.

We have set out our stall with clarity and ambition. We want to engage more people – to double our visitor figures from 17/18, and to engage a broader range of people in the museum. And we plan to use all our resources to engage people with the RAF's story, and to light the touch-paper of wonder for them in science and technology – whatever their motivation and pathways to visiting our Museum.

- 70% of our visitors are people who walk through our doors for a good day out – most don't have a connection with the RAF or have a specialist interest in its history, or of aircraft. Rather than wringing our hands because they don't understand us – or appreciate us as deeply as (we feel) they ought to, we see that as a massive opportunity to connect the general public into our vision and story through interaction and discussion. Through engaging in our museum, from our pre school little swifts activity sessions to hands on, immersive interactivity for everyone who enters our space.

- 70,000 children come in organised school groups – not to mention the 000s of YP who visit with their Cadet groups, scouts etc.
 - Major science days – full day science events with multiple schools and activity points
 - School sessions including coding clubs which we launched in September and hit our target for the year in the first three months
 - Fly to the Line is now international – 230 schools / 10,000 children
 - Deep dive programmes too. Our Summer Time Advanced Aerospace Residentials (STAAR) courses teach 14 year olds advanced aerospace concepts and designs, multi aerospace capabilities, teamwork, comms and critical thinking. Run in partnership with our fabulous next door neighbours at RAF Cosford, Tablet Academy and inspired and funded by NG, at the beginning of their session last year, 67% said might be interested in career, at end of session it was 85%.
- We plan work across all our YP platforms in the next ten years – work experience, youth forums and apprenticeships – to extend this love of learning while developing a major intergenerational programme to foster learning and understanding between the large nos of retired aerospace workers in the W Mids.

The physical space of a museum and its collection can be a powerful stimulus for engagement, but museums are also going further to collect and share the stories of those who cannot visit in person. Thus, as part of the RAF Museum's transformation to mark the RAF's Centenary, RAF Stories was developed, an online collector of memories where anyone, anywhere, can upload their own stories and hear those of others. At RAFstories.com you can listen to those stories and upload their own. Today's stories are every bit as important as yesterdays. We marked 100 years of the RAF last year; in another 100 years those who gather, use and are inspired by our museums – no doubt in ways we can only begin to wonder about – must not find a gap in the record.

This very day, two of our team is at RAF Akrotiri to witness and record the first op deployment of the F35. These men and women who are out there right now protecting our skies are the legacy of those whom we laud for their bravery and sacrifice across the RAF and the years of flight, and what better inspiration for our visitors. I hope that in 5, 10, 20 years' time, some of those gathered for this event may themselves have been inspired by our Museum.

So the answer is that museums are connected to and relevant for all of us; we do reflect on the past, but for most of us the point of that reflection is to inform the present and help us ponder on future opportunities and solutions.

Thank you colleagues and it is now my privilege to propose a toast to

'THE HONOURABLE COMPANY OF AIR PILOTS, MAY IT FLOURISH ROOT AND BRANCH FOREVER'