



About the Museum

A visual guide for families with children on the autistic spectrum



Museum of
Natural
History

The Museum of Natural History is proud of its family friendly status but recognises that visiting with children on the autistic spectrum can be challenging.

This guide is designed to help you feel more confident before your visit by providing a visual introduction to the museum and by highlighting some of its more sensory aspects.

The pictures in the guide will help give you a sense of the different spaces and displays in the museum, as well as the general feel. We have focused on objects and areas that are unlikely to change, but be aware that things do move around from time to time so may not look exactly the same as they do in the pictures or from one visit to the next.

Essential information

- The museum is **FREE** to visit.
- Feel free to stay for five minutes or five hours, and do come back again.
- The Museum does not have a designated quiet space, but staff at the Welcome Desk will be happy to direct you to a quieter area if one is available. If a quiet space will help make your visit successful from the start, please ring in advance to discuss possible options.
- Do bring and use any support aides that will help your child to feel more comfortable in the building.
- Museums are traditionally seen as places where people should be quiet, but we're not worried about a bit of noise, so you don't need to be either.
- Bring the whole family; there are always trails available to keep siblings occupied, and children can collect a museum sticker from the Welcome Desk.
- **HAVE FUN!**

For further information or advice regarding visiting, please contact the Family Education Officer: **Telephone** 01865 282537 **Email** education@oum.ox.ac.uk

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

General Information

Opening Times

- The museum is open seven days a week, 10am–5pm. Please check the website www.oumnh.ox.ac.uk or ring 01865 272950 for information about closures at Christmas.

Busier and Quieter Times

- The museum tends to be busier at weekends and during the holidays. At these times, we recommend visiting when the museum opens at 10 am.
- During term time, we recommend visiting 2.30–5pm on weekdays.
- Sunday mornings tend to be a bit quieter throughout the year.

Quiet Spaces

- There aren't any particular areas that are quieter than others in the Museum. However, if you require a quiet space please ask a member of staff who will find a quiet room where possible.

Events

- Events for adults and families happen throughout the year.
- The museum can get very noisy and crowded on event days.
- The Museum hosts early openings for visitors on the autistic spectrum. Please check the website for more details. Booking is required.
- Please check the website www.oumnh.ox.ac.uk or ring 01865 272950 for information about days when events are taking place.

Arriving at the Museum

Parking

- There is no public parking at the museum.
- There is disabled parking at the museum. These spaces can be located on the left hand side of the Museum next to the lawn.
- There is pay-and-display parking (2–3 hours) nearby on Parks Road, Museum Road, and Keble Road.
- There are multiple bicycle racks on the left hand side of the Museum and some to the right by the accessible entrance.

Walking

- The museum is a 5–10 minute walk from bus stops on St Giles and in the city centre.
- Although there is a shop and café at the museum, the nearest shop, café, or cash machine away from the museum are all a few minutes' walk.

Traffic

- The museum is set back from a relatively busy road.
- There is parking for university staff on the left hand side of the museum; please be aware of cars pulling in and out.

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

In the Museum

The Building

- The Museum of Natural History is a Grade 1 listed Victorian building.
- The main part of the museum is effectively one large room with a gallery upstairs.
- Most of the building is stone, iron, and glass, with wooden doors and metal grates throughout, and some carpeted floors.
- Light and temperature levels can vary greatly, both in different spaces and at different times of the day and year. Portable fans may be used to help circulate the air when it is hot.

The Displays

- Wood-and-glass and metal-and-glass cases are arranged in rows, with viewing at different heights.
- There are large, freestanding models – particularly of dinosaurs – as well as objects on open display and tables and plinths with touchable objects.
- Many cases are brightly-lit and/or contain brightly-coloured displays, which may appear visually ‘busy’; other cases are much plainer. The amount of text in displays also varies.

Facilities

- There are toilets, including two disabled toilets, and baby changing facilities located on both the left and right hand side of the Museum, including some located by the accessible entrance.
- There is no cloakroom.

- Photography, with or without flash, and filming using tablets, cameras, or phones are allowed for personal use only.
- You are welcome to draw in the museum, but please help us to protect the stone floor by only using pencils. Foldable stools are available to use. Please ask Museum staff to direct you to these.

Eating and Drinking

- The café is upstairs and serves light refreshments. It can be particularly crowded at weekends and during the holidays. Please note that it closes at 4.30pm.
- There is also an outdoor café in a horsebox that serves light refreshments. It is open everyday, 9am-5pm.
- You are welcome to have a picnic on the lawn but this area can be noisy and crowded.
- Bottled water, but no other food or drink, can be consumed within the main part of the museum. This is because food attracts pests, who will then eat the Museum specimens e.g. the taxidermy.

Recording your Visit

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

Family Activities

- You can pick up a family trail at the Welcome Desk as you enter. There are also pencils for you to use, but please remember to return the pencils before you leave.

Help us take care of the museum

Although we encourage families to engage with the objects on display, there are certain guidelines that are always good to remember:

- please walk when you are inside the museum: we want both our visitors and our collections to be safe, and running increases the chances of knocks and falls;
- rough handling and oily or sticky fingers can damage our objects: look for signs saying 'Please Touch' or 'Please Don't Touch', and if in doubt, don't touch;
- sometimes you may want to get a better view of something, but please do not lean, sit or climb on the stonework or cases.



The Museum

The Museum of Natural History is a large Victorian building with other buildings on either side. There is a tower in the middle of the roof. In the late spring and summer, you can see and hear swifts (birds) flying in and out of the tower. In front of the museum, there is a paved and gravelled drive, a lawn with a fenced-in sequoia tree, and some smaller gardens along the front of the building and in square planters to one side. Visitors, including large groups, often gather by the Main Entrance, so it can become crowded.



When You Leave the Museum

When you leave the museum, you will have the paved and gravelled drive and the lawn in front of you. At the far end of the lawn is a wall, and beyond that is the road.

You are welcome to sit on the lawn, you are also welcome to have a picnic on the lawn too.

On the lawn you will find casts of dinosaur footprints.

Accessing the Museum



There are two main ways to enter the Museum from the main road. If you walk down the path on the right hand side of the building you can go through the Accessible Entrance if you go straight ahead. Or if you turn left you can enter via the Main Entrance doors.



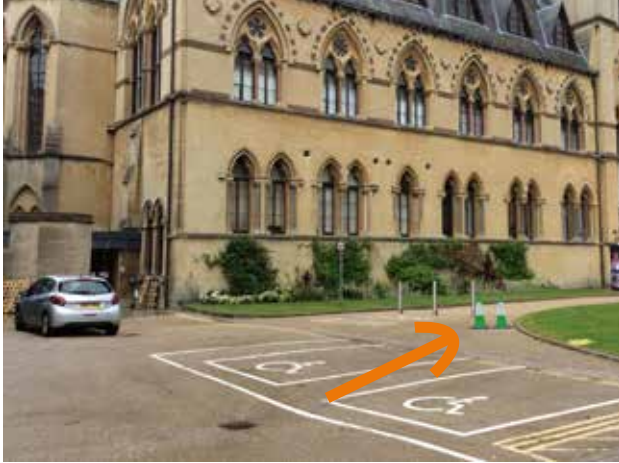
Straight on to the Accessible Entrance.



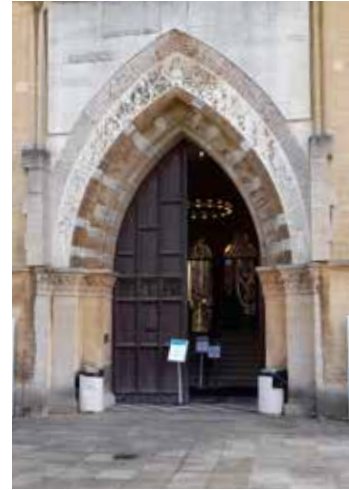
If you walk down the path on the left hand side of the building you will find two entrances; the side doors and the main entrance. The side doors tend to be closed most of the time, but you can ring the bell. Or if you turn right, you can enter via the Main Entrance doors.



The Museum has no general parking for visitors. There are 2 disabled parking bays located at the left hand side entrance which are offered on a first- come first-served basis.



From the parking spaces, you can follow a pavement path that will lead you to the Museum's Main Entrance.



View of Museum's Main Entrance doors. Inside the Main Entrance are a short flight of stone steps leading up into the Museum. If you need the Accessible Entrance, turn right past the Main Entrance.



There is also a small horsebox outside the Main Entrance which is a small café. It sells hot and cold drinks, cakes and pastries. There may be a queue of people waiting.

There are outdoor tables and chairs on the lawn to the left of the horsebox café. Sometimes the tables and chairs are on the paving directly in front of the Main Entrance.



Side Doors

There are external doors located at the front of the museum on the opposite side of the Accessible Entrance. These doors are located by a smaller set of toilets. On the inside there is a large button to the left of the glass sliding doors; pushing it will open the doors. Once through the doors, you must re-enter via the Main or Accessible Entrance.



The Accessible Entrance

If you are looking at the front of the building, the Accessible Entrance is through a side door on the right. You can access this by going to the Main Entrance then immediately turning right down a walkway that follows the building site hoarding, which leads you to a stone archway. The Accessible Entrance is a wooden door to the left inside the archway. To open the door press the silver button located on the wall to the left hand side of the door. Follow the signage in to the Museum and around the corner to the lift. You may want to ring 01865 272950 before setting out to confirm that the lift is working.



The Porch

This space is between the Main entrance and the main museum. It is dimly lit and can be draughty. If lots of people are trying to come in or out at once, it can be noisy and crowded. Sometimes the doors at the top of the stairs are open; sometimes they are closed. If you have to open them, be aware that they can feel heavy or stiff.



When You Enter the Museum

In front of you, you will see some columns and a whale jawbone, and, beyond them, the main part of the museum. There will be a member of staff from the Visitor Experience team standing behind a wooden trolley to welcome you and tell you about what you might see during your visit. They will be wearing either a blue fleece or a blue T-shirt.

The main part of the Museum is known as the Court. It is a large open space separated into narrower aisles by rows of cases. Above the Court is a high glass roof. Sometimes there are multi-coloured lights shining up the columns. The outer aisles, including the one you will be standing in as you enter, form a square around the Court. The outer aisles are darker and feel more enclosed than the aisles in the Court. The flooring is made from stone, the textures and colours vary throughout.

The Museum is naturally lit and has low level light fittings throughout.



The Welcome Desk

If you have any questions or problems, please ask the person at the Welcome Desk. Different people work at the Welcome Desk on different days and throughout the day, and sometimes there doesn't seem to be anyone there at all, but don't worry: someone will be there soon!



Donation Point

As you enter the Museum, there is a screen on a wooden trolley. This is for anyone who would like to donate money to the Museum to do so by debit or credit card. The screen has no other functions. Donation boxes which accept coins or notes can be located close by.



Family Trails

Family trails are available at the Welcome Desk. You can pick any of these up and use the trail to find objects in the Museum. There are also pencils available. There is a range of topics for a range of ages. There is a sign next to each trail with guidance on age and which floors of the museum are covered in each trail.



Drawers

At the front of the museum there are a set of drawers that you can pull out. Inside are natural history specimens. Some of these are covered with a plastic casing but others are open and you are welcome to touch the specimens inside. The specimens are the real thing so they are body parts or animals that were once alive but are no longer. There are a range of textures in the drawers.



Specimens in the Museum

Most of the objects in the museum are not models; they are the real thing! Like in any other natural history museum, there are lots of skeletons and skins that have come from dead animals. There are also lots of minerals and fossils. Some specimens are on open display. Others are in wood and glass cases.



Models in the Museum

Some of the objects in the museum are models. They help us to see things that we might not otherwise see because they are too small or rare or fragile.



Chairs

There are chairs between the cases in various parts of the museum. Feel free to sit down if you need a rest. If you move chairs together, please return them to their original positions.



The Pitt Rivers Museum

At the back of the Museum of Natural History you will see a large doorway which is the entrance to the Pitt Rivers Museum. This is a separate museum which has objects made and used by people from around the world. The collection is spread across three floors. There is very little natural light and it is darker than the Museum of Natural History, but still light enough to see well. The cases are closer together and full of objects and this might feel overwhelming. On Mondays the Pitt Rivers Museum opens at 12pm in the afternoon. On Tuesday to Sunday, it opens at 10am in the morning and closes at the same time as the Museum of Natural History at 5pm. Outside of these times, the doors are kept shut.



Toilets

The male, female, and unisex accessible toilets are all downstairs. They can be located on both front corners of the building. They can be accessed by lift, or by the stairs located at the end of the Museum's shop. The toilets near the Accessible Entrance/Museum Shop are in a larger space and have more toilets. There are baby changing facilities in these toilets.

Please note that there are automated hand driers in the toilets which make a loud noise when you put your hands underneath. There are side doors leading out of the museum near all of the toilets. The lift is located by the larger set of toilets.



The toilets near the side doors are in a much smaller space and a separate accessible toilet can be found next to them which also has baby changing facilities.



The Shop

The Museum Shop is immediately on the right if you come through the Main Entrance. It has a range of products from postcards and pocket-money souvenirs to more expensive gifts and books. Because of its location and layout, the shop can become crowded when there are lots of people or large groups in the museum.



Stairs

There are two main sets of stairs: one in each of the front corners of the building. The stairs are stone and curve around. When you come through the main entrance, the stairs on the right are initially a bit darker and you have to walk past or through the shop to get to them. The stairs on the left are lighter but can be busy in the mornings during university term time, when students use them to access the lecture theatre upstairs. Both sets of stairs have large windows halfway up. The stairs down to the lower ground lead to the toilets.



The Lift

The lift calls at three floors: the lower ground floor by the Accessible Entrance, the ground floor, and the first floor. When you leave the lift at the ground floor, you will be in the front corner of the museum, near the shop. When you leave it at the first floor, you will be in a small room with a television screen and an enclosed bee hive.



Stair Lift

There is also a stair lift available on the left hand side of the Museum near the toilets. Please ask a member of staff to assist you with this lift.



The Upper Galleries

Like the outer aisles downstairs, the gallery aisles upstairs are darker and feel more enclosed than the aisles in the Court. From the galleries, you can look out and up and see many architectural details. You can also look down and see the Court below.



The Café

The Museum Café is upstairs and can be reached via both staircases and the lift. There are lots of tables and chairs, and some highchairs. It is difficult to predict how full the café will be, but it is likely to be busier in the holidays and on Saturdays. The refrigerated shelves make a constant buzzing sound. There may be strong smells of food and drink from the café.



The Exhibition Space

On the Upper Gallery there is also an exhibition space. The current exhibition is called ***Breaking Ground*** and tells the story of 19th century paleontology with a particular focus on William and Mary Buckland. The exhibition also includes important fossils from *Megalosaurus*, the first ever dinosaur to be named scientifically, as well as many other interesting specimens, letters and drawings from that time.



Live Specimens

Upstairs, there are four cases that usually have live animals from the Entomology department in them. The animals you might see include cockroaches and stick insects. We ask visitors not to tap on the glass as tapping can disturb the animals.



Touchable Objects

Visitors are invited to touch various objects in the museum. Most are located in the Court. Please look for the 'Please Touch' signs. There are also drawers that can be pulled out near the family activities trolley. The touchable objects inside the drawers comprise a wide range of textures. There are some specimens that cannot be touched; there may be a barrier around them or a sign stating this. Not all displays will have a sign or barrier so if in doubt do not touch.



Screens

There is a television screen to the right of the Welcome Desk. It usually shows short films, but in the summer it has a live cam on swifts nesting in the Museum tower. There is also a touchable interactive screen in the museum downstairs featuring information about the 'Megalosaurus' dinosaur. There is also a screen upstairs in the entomology aisle showing large images of insects. These screens do not make any noise. Sometimes the touchable screen can be a bit temperamental, so do report to the Welcome Desk if you notice that it has stopped working.





Redisplay

The Museum is currently undergoing a redisplay project. A lot of our fossil specimens from the South Court (to the right hand side of the Museum) have been taken off display, but there are still plenty of fossils to see. The old cases and specimens have all been removed and replaced with new metal and glass cases to match the other display cases in the Court. There is currently a display of art works showing enlarged photographs of insects by photographer Levon Biss.

Written by Caroline Cheeseman and Susan Griffiths, Joint Museums Community Engagement Service & Carly Smith-Huggins, Public Engagement

Photography by Pete Ryan, Scott Billings & Carly Smith-Huggins

Design by Oxford University Design Studio

Many thanks to Rae Sellen for instigating the resource and to the museum for its support.

Last updated May 2025

www.museums.ox.ac.uk

Oxford University
Museum of
Natural
History



Supported by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**