

Memorable experiences: Heather Mayfield, 30 July 2012

I unpacked some of the contents of Marie Curie's lab and I can remember David Wright walking past and he said, 'What's that?' I said, 'That's from Marie Curie's lab, I don't really know what they are.' He said, 'I'll just run a Geiger counter over them.' Of course they were all completely radioactive; we didn't think about it. And then it was very cold and we all used to have our own heaters, and I put my heater on this crate that had been on the floor for ages and ages and it started getting really smelly. We thought we'd better open this crate, and it was a skeleton that hadn't been properly cured. And then when we looked at it we thought, it doesn't look that old. Eventually the coroner's office came and that was another thing that got taken away because it wasn't over 100 years old. So when I look back it was a slightly odd thing – it was odd in a good way.

There's a sort of reality about my career, which is in the first 20 years I had two directors and in the last 10 I've had 11. So it's been a turmoil. Dame Margaret was an inspirational woman, but I was a 22-year-old curator and at the time didn't realise it. Way down the food chain in a very hierarchical organisation, I might meet Dame Margaret in the loo and that would be about it. She had an enormous capacity for making things happen which, because she was the first director that I knew, I just thought was normal. But I look back now and I see it was quite extraordinary. If you think that under her we created the Railway Museum, the Media Museum, we took on the Wellcome collections and built the Wellcome galleries, we acquired Wroughton. All of those things happened under her.

Dame Margaret was about expansion outside London and Neil Cossons was about sorting out London, and it was clear within a few weeks of him being here that the majority of his time was going to be spent making the Science Museum a great museum.

I suppose the biggest challenges have always been persuading people to want to be part of major change. When I was a more junior curator change sort of happens above you, and you think: well, you know, that's all going on. But now it's like persuading people that if we do things differently we can do more, and it will be more interesting and we'll be able to reach more people. So it's those kind of things now. And to be quite honest, when I first worked here I don't think we thought about visitors at all. We thought a lot about ourselves and the things that we could do and the things that would further our careers – and now it's about what can we do for visitors, what would visitors enjoy, what would really work for them? So it's a really different feeling.

An Oral History of the Science Museum Group, 1973-2000