



THE STORY MUSEUM

**DAVID
CARROLL
& CO**

The Story Museum rebrand
DBA Design Effectiveness Awards entry
July 2025
For Publication

“The new identity brilliantly expresses the spirit of The Story Museum to our many and very different stakeholders.”

Kim Pickin, Founder, The Story Museum

This is a classic story of the underdog battling against the odds of a global pandemic to emerge victorious and emboldened for a bright new future.

Nestled in the heart of Oxford, amongst colleges, world famous attractions and writers, The Story Museum is a wonderful, joyous place that celebrates the power of stories from books to comics, spoken word, poetry and so much more. In 2018 the museum closed for a major redevelopment. The transformed museum reopened in 2020 to house permanent and temporary exhibitions, live events plus a shop and café.

As an educational charity, resources are limited and the small marketing team create the majority of communications materials in-house. But its identity needed to change to reflect the new reality and its transformation. Its brand identity was complicated, difficult to implement and focussed on books and not wider storytelling. And because it was fragmented it didn't build equity in the main brand. At this time, their positioning was **'The most unusual museum'** which reflected the mix of activities they offered and their non-traditional idea of what a museum is. That too needed to change to better tell their story and reach new audiences.

The new brand identity launched in April 2020 and has played a crucial role in The Story Museum's sustained success ever since.

The key success objectives have been exceeded:

INCREASE IN INCOME AND VISITORS

Pre-redevelopment income: **£350,000**

Income target: **£800,000**

Income 2023/24: **£1,072,539**

Income **+206%** from pre-redevelopment figures
+34% above income target

Visitor numbers have exceeded the national average for post-Covid rebound and are over twice the number of visitors pre-Covid and redevelopment.

PUT THE MUSEUM ON THE MAP

Increase in recognition of The Story Museum as a place with **211,000** public visitors, **38,000** people at events, **29,500** school students. This is a step change in the Museum's trajectory to create a unique brand.

EASY TO WORK WITH

Creating brand consistency and recognition plus an average saving of **£72,500** over five years on external designers.

The new branding is also impacting the wider national arts and heritage community with award nominations, frequent peer visits and regular requests for thought leadership. And The Story Museum is the first exemplar in the Art Fund's report 'Why museums should use emotional branding to grow their support', creating lasting impact across the sector.

Before



After



THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

There were three business objectives for our work:

1. Increase income and visitor numbers

Design a brand that keeps the Museum front of mind to attract visitors and grow income

2. Put the Museum on the map

Design a brand that stands out and builds brand recognition for the physical Museum and online

3. Make it easy to work with

Design a brand that's easy to maintain and apply in-house by non-design specialists

BACKGROUND

The Story Museum started as a virtual concept delivering oral storytelling workshops in primary schools to raise literacy and language levels and boost self confidence. Its city-centre site was acquired in 2009 and the Museum team raised the funds to partially open to the public in 2014 in an unrefurbished building, creating temporary immersive exhibitions to test proof of concept. The site consisted of three inter-linked buildings including an old tavern, a defunct telephone exchange and a postal office, all located around a wonderful, enclosed courtyard.

The Story Museum is a **registered charity** with Patrons including Malorie Blackman, Cerrie Burnell, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Sir Nicholas Hytner, Sir Michael Morpurgo, Sir Philip Pullman, Chris Riddell and Dame Marina Warner.

The Story Museum isn't a traditional museum in the sense of formal exhibitions of heritage items. The original meaning of 'museum' is a sacred place for the Muses. The Story Museum offers a series of interactive Galleries featuring a range of story forms and specific stories where visitors are encouraged to 'step into the story' and use all of their senses to explore these story worlds. The result is a Museum that evokes an emotional connection with story, fosters a love of reading for pleasure and kindles the imagination in young and old alike.

In 2018 the Museum closed to the public for a £6 million capital campaign to bring the whole building into use with eight new Galleries, fully accessible for all visitors. **David Carroll & Co** was commissioned to create a new logo and brand guidelines for the Museum ahead of its planned opening on 4 April 2020.

The Story Museum entrance is through the large gates. Protruding signs make the Museum visible from both ends of the narrow street.



CHALLENGES

When it first opened in 2014, the Museum was popular with visitors but suffered from being **'Oxford's best kept secret'**. The location, down a narrow side street in the centre of Oxford, made it hard to draw attention to the building with little casual passing footfall. Anecdotally many visitors came because their children knew about the museum's work through their schools but with limited advertising budgets it was proving hard to reach beyond a hyper local audience.

Oxford Museum of Modern Art is on the same street as The Story Museum. The Ashmolean Museum, The Bodleian Libraries, Pitt Rivers Museum and other world renowned visitor attractions are all close by in Oxford with all of them competing for tourist and local visitor footfall.

AND THEN COVID HIT

With the museum scheduled to reopen in April 2020, everything was in place to make a magnificent splash with the new branding: website, social media, signage, exhibition graphics and aprons for staff uniforms. Branded teddy bears and bookmarks were in the gift shop and the season guides were out in the wild. With a week to go before the grand reopening the country went in to lockdown. The Story Museum had to close its vast entrance gates and ticket sales inevitably plummeted. It had two more false reopenings but the new branding remained a constant reminder that the Museum existed and would eventually reopen. When The Story Museum **fully reopened in May 2021**, the new branding had been in place for over 18 months.



The post-rebrand season guide from 2020 and the new format guide for April-July 2025



DESIGN INSIGHTS AND SOLUTION

We began our work in 2018 and through a series of interviews, workshops, working sessions and walks through the building site, we explored a huge range of ideas for the identity. The idea of 'Story' has many different start and end points and it meant different things to different members of the team. We explored portals, fairy tales, skies, dragons, magic and so much more.

The building itself was the answer for the identity: the warren-like corridors and rooms with each revealing something new and special. Whilst our brief was for the identity, our design work directly led to changing their positioning to **'A surprise around every corner.'** The bold and surprising logo focuses on 'STORY' to echo the building's corridors. The split 'O' directly inspired the idea of 'A surprise around every corner'. It's dramatic, engaging and timeless. It works beautifully on everything from their website to ticketing, newsletters, as well as their vast entrance gates (see page 3). The word 'MUSEUM' becomes secondary in the design as this museum is definitely not a traditional 'staring at objects in cabinets' type of place. With the emphasis on STORY we also make a bigger impact on social media. Our design solution allows The Story Museum to shout about itself when it needs to and also allows the exhibitions and events to shine when they're in the spotlight.



"Everyone is very happy and very grateful for the amazing job you've done."

Sophie Hiscock, Director of Communications and Impact

Through careful crafting of all the design elements we created a range of tools for their new brand identity, including:

- A **bold and distinctive visual system** with flexible elements including the graphic edge, colour and scale
- Selected free **Google fonts** (important for team and volunteers not to incur extra cost)
- **Brand guidelines** showing all the basic elements and how they can be used
- **Wayfinding system and signage** to create a cohesive experience across the museum strengthening its sense of place and packaging the experience
- Designed the first **'Season Guide'** in 2020 which became the template for all future guides up to 2025
- Designed the new **shorter format** in 2025 to reduce cost and create even greater impact. This is the new template for future guides.
- Reduced their **brand architecture** to the main brand and 'The Story Museum Café'
- Briefed the website agency **EyeKiller** on the new brand identity and reviewed their work
- Briefed the marketing team on **implementation strategy** and how to use the brand to gain **maximum impact**



"The visual style is powerful and contemporary – not at all soft or childlike."

Art Fund Report

Results

OBJECTIVE 1

INCREASE INCOME AND VISITOR NUMBERS

Design a brand that keeps the Museum front of mind to attract visitors and grow income

Following the redevelopment and with a more distinctive and recognisable brand in place the Museum has seen the following impact.

Increase in earned income

PRE-REOPENING TARGET:

Earned income only (not including fundraising) over £800,000 in our first full year

2017/2018 = **£350,000**

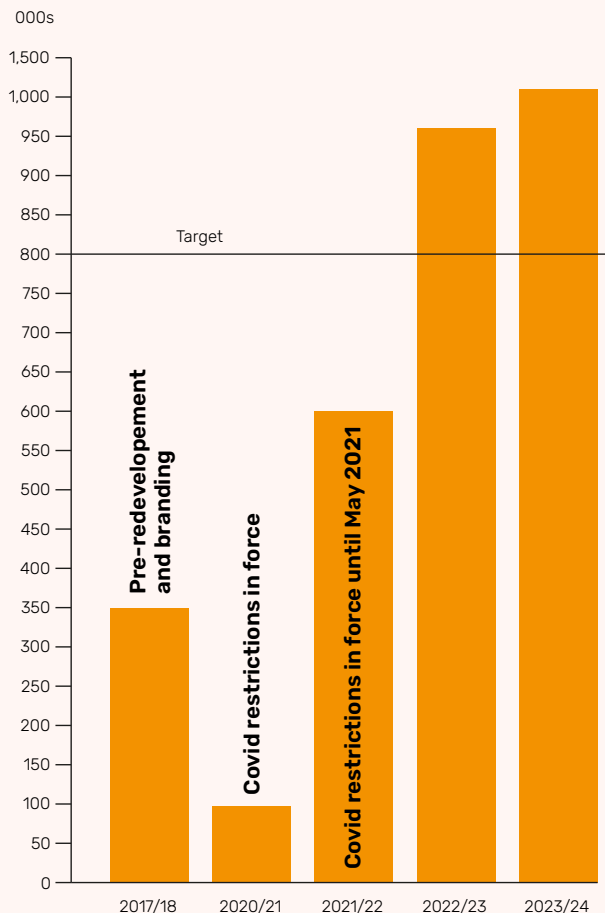
2018/2020 = **closed for redevelopment**

2020/2021 = **£97,743** (Covid restrictions)

2021/2022 = **£599,937** (Covid restrictions)

2022/2023 = **£958,464**

2023/2024 = **£1,072,539**

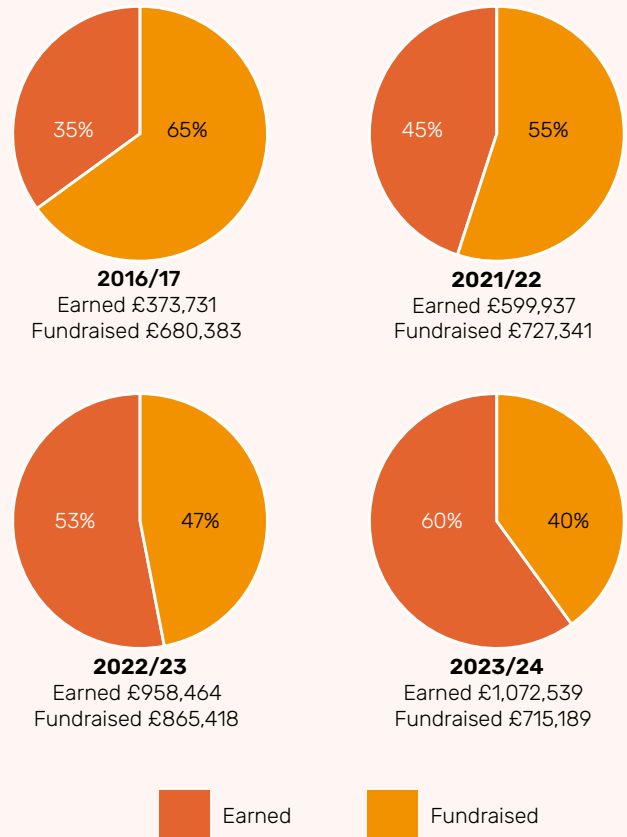


Increase in balance of overall income

PRE-REOPENING TARGET:

Balance of earned / fundraised income shifting from 40%/60% to 60%/40%

The brand's clear positioning and identity has helped create the desired uplift in the Museum's earned income.



+79%

increase in **gross income** from 2022 – 2024 (**£599,937** to **£1,072,539**). The brand helps make the café an attractive destination and they sell branded products in the shop – pocket money items like rubbers and pencils are some of the strongest performing stock lines in the shop.

+241%

increase in **average ticket income** **£401,217** (2014/15 – 2017/18), compared to **£1,368,542** (2021/22 – 2023/24)

+65%

increase in **ticket income** **£327,491** (2021/22) compared to **£541,610** (2023/24)

Results

Increase in visitors to the Museum

PRE-REOPENING TARGET:
Tripling visitor numbers to over 100,000 per annum over 5 year period

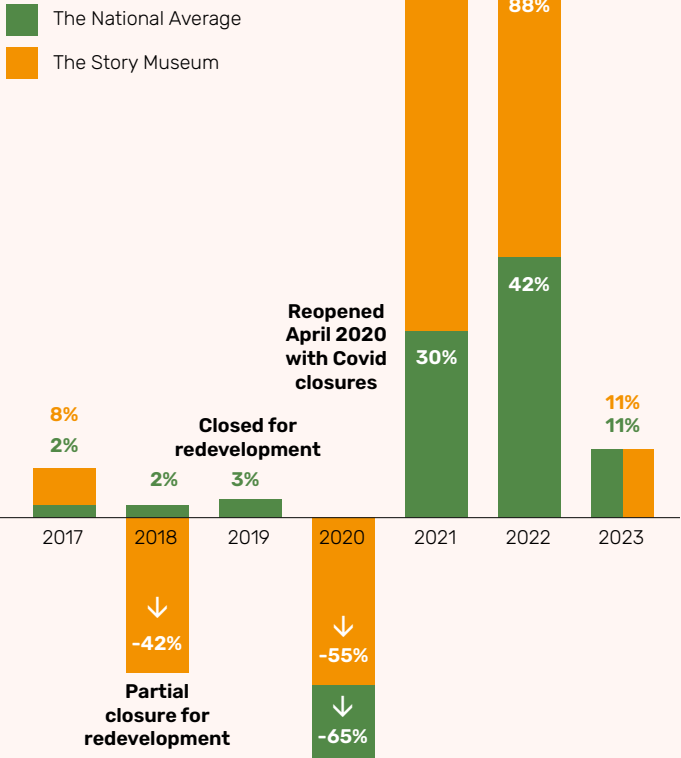
- 2017/2018 = 21,000
- 2018/2020 = Closed for redevelopment
- 2020/2021 = 5,266 (Covid restrictions)
- 2021/2022 = 67,000 (Covid restrictions)
- 2022/2023 = 81,408
- 2023/2024 = 90,000

The Story Museum has bucked the national trend for increase in visitor numbers where most attractions are still feeling the impact of Covid.

“Attractions in England reported a 1.4% increase in the volume of total visits from 2023 to 2024, however this is still 27% below 2019 levels.”

Visit England, June 2025

Annual % change in visitors
Sources: Visit England and The Story Museum



+329%

improved footfall
2017/18 vs 2023/24
(21,000 to 90,000)

21,000

average annual
visitor numbers
pre-rebranding /
redevelopment
2015 – 2017

+34%

visitor numbers have
consistently grown
year on year after Covid
2021–2024 (67,000 to
90,000)

51,000

average annual
visitor numbers
post-rebranding /
redevelopment
2022 – 2024

+33%

growth in school visits
on site from 2021
(post-Covid reopening)
to 2024 (5,604 to 7,471)



OBJECTIVE 2

PUT THE MUSEUM ON THE MAP

Design a brand that stands out and helps build brand recognition for the physical Museum

The bold, simple and consistent brand identity has given the Museum confidence and built brand recognition for the physical Museum and online.

Growth in reach

43%

increase in **annual distribution** of post-rebrand season guides from **42,000** to **60,000** across same distribution networks, with the full run being distributed. The pre-rebrand guides had a print-run of **16,000** with **3,000** copies not picked-up and were trashed. The new guide design puts The Story Museum logo as a masthead for maximum stand out in leaflet racks (see page 4).

"We're distributing 20,000 season guides three times a year and the brand is working brilliantly in leaflet racks and the website. The distribution networks ask us for more when they run out."

Sophie Hiscock, Director of Communications and Impact

92%

growth in **newsletter sign ups** since introduction of the brand, with **14% increase** in opening rates (2019/20 **8,116** to 2024/25 **15,559**)

124%

increase in **website visits**, with **increase of 3 minutes average visit duration** (2019/20 **110,579** to 2024/25 **247,990**)

553%

growth in **Instagram** followers creates a ripple effect of interest in the Museum (2019/20 **1,898** to 2024/25 **12,390**)

65%

growth in **Facebook** followers creates a loyal bond with audiences and keeps the Museum front of mind (2019/20 **7,766** to 2024/25 **12,792**)

71%

of visitors would **recommend** the Museum to a friend, December 2024

"From a visitor's point of view, the new brand identity creates a cohesive experience from initial interaction with our guide, posters or online to booking and the visit around the museum."

Anna Senior, Communications Manager (Marketing)

OBJECTIVE 3

MAKE IT EASY TO WORK WITH

Design a brand that's easy to maintain and apply in-house by non-design specialists

Increase in savings

£71,250

average annual **estimated savings** in external design fees per year over five years

A low estimate based on **£250 day rate**

3 season guides x 3 days design = £2,250

6 days design for posters & banners = £1,500

2 days design for flyers = £500

5 days design for adverts, recruitment packs = £1250

Total £5,500 per year

Over 5 years = £27,500

A higher estimate based on **£500 day rate** and more days

3 season guides x 7 days design = £10,500

10 days design for posters & banners = £5,000

5 days design for flyers = £2,500

10 days design for adverts, recruitment packs = £5,000

Total £23,000 per year

Over 5 years = £115,000

Results

Print savings

Post-rebrand season guide (2020–2025)

24pp guide 20,000 copies = £3,959

3 times a year (total 60,000 copies) = £11,877

Over 5 years = £59,385

New format season guide (2025 onwards)

8pp guide 20,000 copies = £2,121

3 times a year (total 60,000 copies) = £6,363

Over 5 years (projected) = £31,815

Saving £1,838 per issue

Saving £5,514 per year

Over 5 years (projected) £27,570

Saving 46%

3/3

of the **core marketing people** say the new brand has made their job easier to produce communications materials, saving time and money and is more consistent.

94%

of **wider staff and volunteer teams** (20+ people) say they're able to follow the brand guidelines easily in their work. No-one at The Story Museum is a graphic designer.

Brand architecture

Establishing a simplified brand and brand architecture (only the Café has its own logo) builds long-term value through ease of application and consistency.

"The new identity has given us confidence to be bold in our communications."

David Gibb, Communications Manager (Press & PR)

"The Learning Team are going great guns on branded resources, the fundraising team have produced a stakeholder newsletter and I'm creating a 16-page 'History of the Story Museum'."

Sophie Hiscock, Director of Communications and Impact

"A surprise around every corner' reminds us to create the best experience for our visitors, whatever their age, whether that's online or in real life."

Anna Senior, Communications Manager (Marketing)

"Because the brand has been designed to last, it's still looking fresh and is building a very strong brand for us. We love it and don't plan to change it any time soon – saving us more money!"

Sophie Hiscock, Director of Communications and Impact

The logo for The Story Museum Café is displayed on a teal background. The word "THE" is in a small, white, sans-serif font, positioned vertically to the left of "STORY". "STORY" is in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font. To the right of "STORY", the word "MUSEUM" is written vertically in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. To the right of "MUSEUM", the word "CAFÉ" is written vertically in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font.

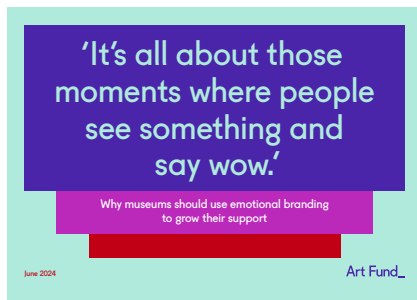
THE WIDER IMPACT

The new brand identity has exceeded expectations against the original business objectives. The combined effect of the new brand identity, excellent media coverage and an air of confidence has had a profound effect on other areas of the business too.

“Our brand identity is as bold and fresh as ever enabling us to successfully raise our profile across multiple audiences including businesses, charities and community groups.”

Niamh Walshe, Head of Development

**Art Fund
June 2024**
Why museums should use emotional branding to grow their support



Increase in stakeholder perceptions

The Story Museum has gained higher visibility in the sector plus an increase in high-calibre job and volunteer interest.

“The combination of a clear proposition and a confident visual identity has helped to increase brand awareness of the Museum. This led to greater recognition from the national arts and heritage sector as demonstrated in the award nominations, frequent peer visits, regular requests for thought leadership from our team and increased interest in jobs and volunteering at the Museum.”

Caroline Jones, CEO

There's also been a surprising wider impact with The Story Museum brand case study used as the first exemplar in the Art Fund's report 'Why museums should use emotional branding to grow their support.'

1.

Museums should make more use of emotion to grow support – to give people an emotional reason to visit, use, give to and speak up for them.

Case study: The Story Museum, Oxford

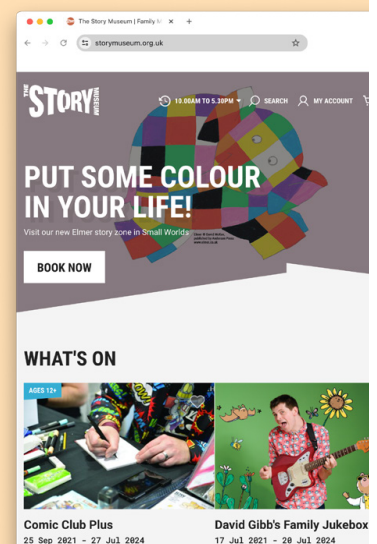
The Story Museum, which first opened as a public venue in 2014, is an extraordinary mix of museum, art gallery and immersive theatre, designed to help both children and adults find an emotional connection with stories. Emotion has therefore always been its secret sauce. The museum's core belief is that stories provide an emotional engagement that enriches lives. Children can 'push through the fur coats into Narnia'; adults can rediscover what it feels like to be a child.

The Story Museum expresses this emotional ethos through all its communication, particularly in its tone of voice. Its visual style is powerful and contemporary – not at all soft or childlike.

Branding partner: [David Carroll & Co](#)

The museum's logo is based on the visitor's emotional experience, suggesting there's a surprise round every corner, and the split in the O at the centre represents the opening of the museum's front gates. This exemplifies the Story Museum's approach to emotional communication: 'start with how visitors experience you, not what you want to say'. And success comes from constant experimentation: 'We see what really engages people, and learn from that'. Through the power of emotion, the museum's support has grown, with visitor numbers up 126% from 2017/18 to 2023/24.

Interestingly, the museum was founded by a former brand consultant, Kim Pickin, so ethos has always been the central driver.



Other influencing factors

GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND COST-OF-LIVING

Covid-19 was devastating for The Story Museum. Their resilience shone through and when they fully reopened their visitor numbers and income spiked at an all-time high as people rushed to experience life again. After this, the cost-of-living crisis and rising energy, supplier and staff costs have all affected The Story Museum. Despite all this, the new branding has kept The Story Museum front of mind and the figures we've shown demonstrate a steady increase in all their success metrics.

PR

The Story Museum receives excellent support from local and national TV and media, which continue to play an important part in their success.

"Visiting the museum is a highly interactive experience: visitors can brush past fur coats in a wardrobe to emerge in Narnia, cut open a portal to Pullman's Oxford using the Subtle Knife, play Poohsticks on a bridge over a hi-tech river, peer down an earth-filled rabbit hole in Wonderland, sit on the Snowman's sofa and explore Horrid Henry's bedroom. It also offers inviting spaces for live storytelling sessions by specially trained guides."

The Guardian, 15 March 2020

"How Oxford's new Story Museum transformed into a world-class wonderland – The venue has opened its doors after an overhaul. From King Arthur to Alice, it's full of surprises."

The Times, 31 October 2020

AWARDS

The Story Museum has been successful in many awards which has enhanced its reputation. Shortlisted for Museum of the Year 2022, Kids in Museums 2022, Museums & Heritage Awards 2022 & 2024, Best Family Museum in Muddy Stiletto Awards 2022, 2023, 2024, Winner 2025.

Increase in media coverage/profile

23%

increase in press coverage

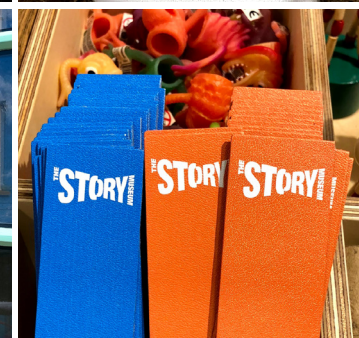
The brand is intrinsically linked to the Museum's seriously playful personality and key message of **'A surprise around every corner'** which is a strong message for media. The brand also focuses the Museum's photography to show the **reaction to the spaces** rather than just the spaces – images show interaction between families, show surprise and delight. The media coverage is all about reflecting the emotion that the spaces evoke and that the brand encapsulates.

Highlights of broadcast coverage include BBC Breakfast (October 2020), 500 words launch, BBC Teach Live (September 2023), BBC Oxford regional TV (July 2021 & October 2024). Highlights of print coverage include *The Guardian* (twice), *The Times*, *Oxford Mail*, *Metro*.



“We’re definitely not Oxford’s best kept secret anymore!”

Sophie Hiscock, Director of Communications and Impact



Data sources

The Story Museum impact data
The Story Museum audited accounts
The Charity Commission
Art Fund: Why museums should use emotional branding to grow their support, June 2024

Visit England: Visitor Attraction Trends in England 2024, 18 June 2025
Agorapulse (scheduling/listening tool)
Google Analytics
Meta Insights

Credits

The Story Museum team

Sophie Hiscock, Director of Communications and Impact
Kim Pickin, Founder
Tish Francis, Founder
Caroline Jones, CEO
Anna Senior, Communications Manager (Marketing)
David Gibb, Communications Manager (Press & PR)
Niamh Walshe, Head of Development

David Carroll & Co team

David Carroll, Creative Director
Dave Brown, Design
Jeremy Tankard, Logo crafting
Darren Clarke, Signage consultant
Damian Taylor, Signage consultant

Launch

The new brand identity launched in April 2020

Design fees

[Redacted confidential data] not including production