

# Museums – The Impact of Free Admissions

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## Summary

In 1998 the government published 'A New Cultural Framework' which paved the way for a new relationship between government and the cultural world. One of the key decisions was to provide free admission to national museums and galleries in Britain, to give wider access to the country's great collections.

This article looks at how this government policy is working in practice, whether the policy aims have been met and if there has been any other consequences for tourism.

## Introduction

On 24th July 1998, Chris Smith, the Secretary of State at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) issued a document called 'A New Cultural Framework' [\[1\]](#). It made five decisions relating to museums and galleries. These were:

- the establishment of a new national body for museums, libraries and archives
- a challenge fund for designated museums
- free admission to national museums and galleries for children in 1999-2000 as the first stage of a programme for broadening access to national collections
- a code of practice on access to museums and galleries
- a new fund to promote IT in museums.

At the same time, during the Comprehensive Spending Review in 1998, an additional £290 million of funding [\[2\]](#) was allocated to the DCMS over three years, of which a substantial part has been taken up with the free museum entry policy.

It has been more than ten years since the report was released, making it timely to review the impact of providing free admission to national museums and galleries.

## The establishment of free museums

The concept of free national museums is not a new one. Indeed, in 1929, King George V established a Royal Commission under the chairmanship of Viscount D'Abernon to look into the position of Britain's national museums and galleries. Its report, delivered on 20th September 1929, recommended that:

- the introduction of a uniform system of admission fees would be unjustifiable, and
- as soon as possible, steps should be taken to abolish fees in the case of those institutions where they are at present charged.

However, it took three changes of monarch and even more changes of government before this recommendation for universal free entry to Britain's national galleries and museums was eventually implemented.

This was done over a 15-month period with entry charges for children being abolished in April 1999, followed by senior citizens over the age of 60, in April 2000, and universal free entry finally being introduced in December 2001.

Which museums are covered by the free entry policy?

It is interesting to note that whilst there are approximately 6,000 visitor attractions in the UK (including museums, zoos, castles, leisure parks and gardens), around half of all visits are to the 79 national museums that are free of charge, due to grant-in-aid payments. National museums are mostly located in the capital cities of the four UK countries, and there are smaller branches elsewhere.

See [Appendix A](#) for a geographical list of national museums covered by the DCMS free entry policy.

There are also a large number of other museums spread throughout the country, some of which offer free admission. This is not because of grant-in-aid from the DCMS but because they receive financial assistance from bodies such as a local council, university or an endowment fund.

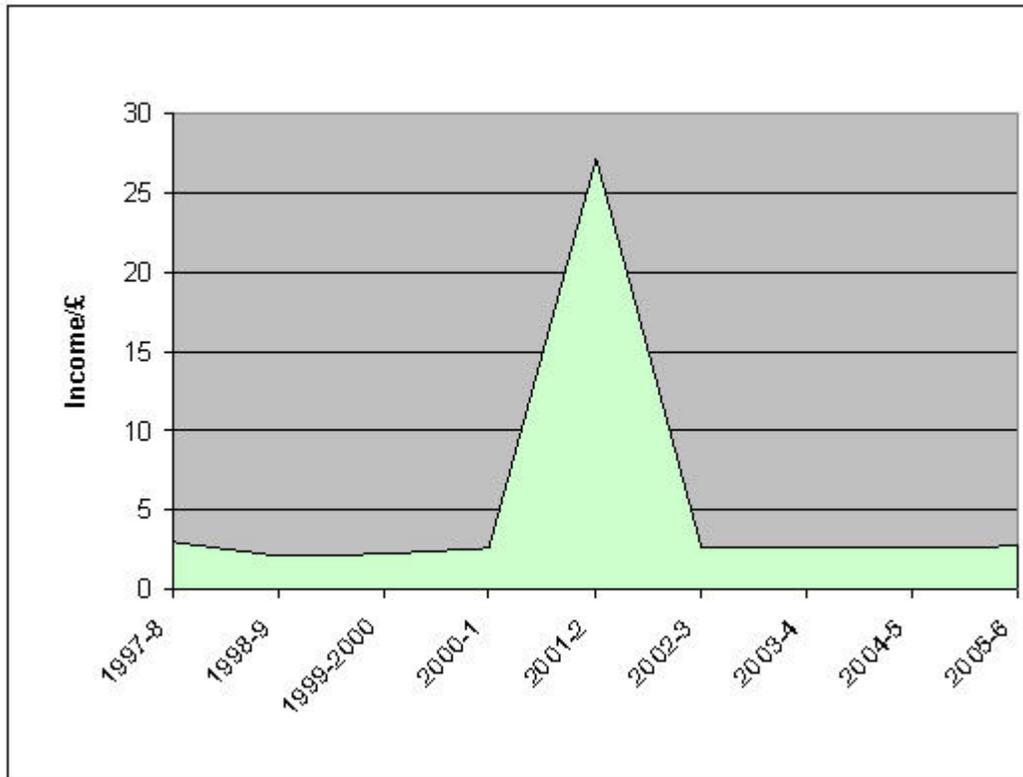
### Impact on trading income

Despite hopes that trading income would increase significantly as a result of free entrance, Figure 1 illustrates that, after an extraordinary initial burst of cash being spent by visitors in the national museums gift shops and coffee shops, income per person has not increased since free admission was introduced.

By December 2002 the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee was noting [\[3\]](#) that:

'Unfortunately revenue from on-site sales and hospitality has not kept pace with the rise in throughput. Whilst the total revenue from the institutions' shops and cafés has gone up, the almost universal experience is that the spend per head has gone down.'

Figure 1: Trading income generated per visitor



Source: Travers, T. Museums and Galleries in Britain. December 2006. Report for the National Museums Directors' Conference and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

It should be noted that although the DCMS is providing grant-in-aid to national museums and galleries, so that no admission fee is charged at the point of entry, this does not preclude these institutions from charging for admission to temporary exhibitions, facilities such as car parking and cloak-rooms and generating additional income from trading activities such as gift shops and cafés.

### Impact on visitor numbers

There is no comprehensive consolidated data on visitor numbers and expenditure for national museums so, for this article, data has been cited from various sources. Note that total visitor numbers differ between these sources, resulting from differing methodologies Figure 2 shows visitor numbers to major national museums in 2008.

Figure 2: Visitors to national museums 2008

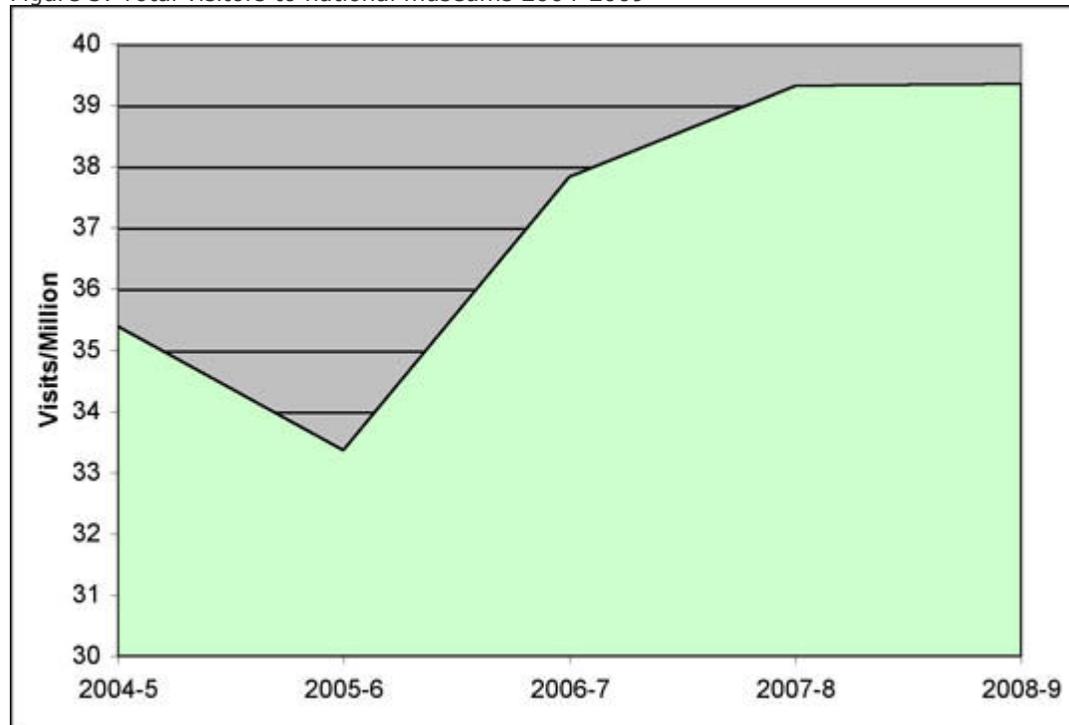
Attraction	2008
British Museum	5930000
Tate Modern	4862581
National Gallery	4207677
Natural History Museum	3260731
Science Museum	2705677
Victoria & Albert Museum	2420815
National Portrait Gallery	1843266
Tate Britain	1618309

Source: VisitEngland. 2008. Survey of Visits to Visitor Attractions.

These figures broadly compare with published DCMS data from 2004 (see Figure 3). DCMS statistics from 2004-

2009 suggest that visits have increased since the free national museum policy was introduced. This is further endorsed in VisitEngland's annual [Visitor Attractions Survey](#) which shows an increase of 6% between 2007 and 2008 on visits to free museums and art galleries.

Figure 3: Total visitors to national museums 2004-2009



Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

[www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Visitor\\_Figures\\_Website\\_spreadsheet.pdf](http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/publications/Visitor_Figures_Website_spreadsheet.pdf)

However, it is worth noting that little work has been undertaken to determine how long visitors stay in a free museum compared to when an admission charge was levied. The 'visit' statistics are just that – the numbers passing through a turnstile – whether they stay for three hours to soak up the entire collection, or for 15 minutes to use the coffee shop or toilets. They, therefore, provide little indication of the increase in 'benefit' provided to the public by making access free.

## Impact on tourism

### Inbound tourism

One of the benefits that government claims has resulted from free museums is that it helps boost tourism to the UK. With inbound tourism contributing £19 billion to the UK economy (it is the UK's third largest export earner), this benefit is worthy of examination.

Certainly, the annual Nations Brands Index survey conducted by GfK for VisitBritain suggests that cost is a major barrier to people wishing to visit the UK. The 2007 Survey [4] showed that, with a score of 5.19 out of 7, overseas visitors were very much in agreement with the proposition that Britain is expensive.

In addition, data from the museums show that overseas visitors constitute 27% of the overall total visitor numbers to national museums indicating that these museums are 'must see' attractions for visitors to the UK.

However, the fact that the UK is seen as expensive and visitors flock to the museums does not necessarily mean that tourism levels to the UK are influenced by museum admission charges. These findings need to be viewed

alongside information on total visitor spend.

The British Tourism Framework Review [5] indicates the average amount spent on a visit to the UK by the top spending seven overseas nations (USA, Germany, Italy, Spain, Turkey, China and France). The expenditure per person, per trip, from these countries averages over £1,000, with American visitors spending nearly £1,700.

With the cost of a museum visit at around £10-£15 it seems unlikely that free national museums is a key factor in the decision-making process of these visitors. Even if a visitor went to four museums per visit, their notional saving is only just over 5% of total expenditure while in the UK, and even less when the cost of flights is taken into account.

In response to the global recession, VisitBritain is running a 'Value' campaign to persuade more overseas visitors from its major markets such as USA, Canada and Europe to visit the UK, based on the good exchange rate. In the USA, for example, it is branded as 'Get more Britain for your Buck' and has a dedicated website [6]. On the 'Best of British' page are 25 suggestions of things to do or visit. While free national museums are mentioned, they feature at the bottom of the list and the emphasis is on the quality and quantity of the museums rather than free admission:

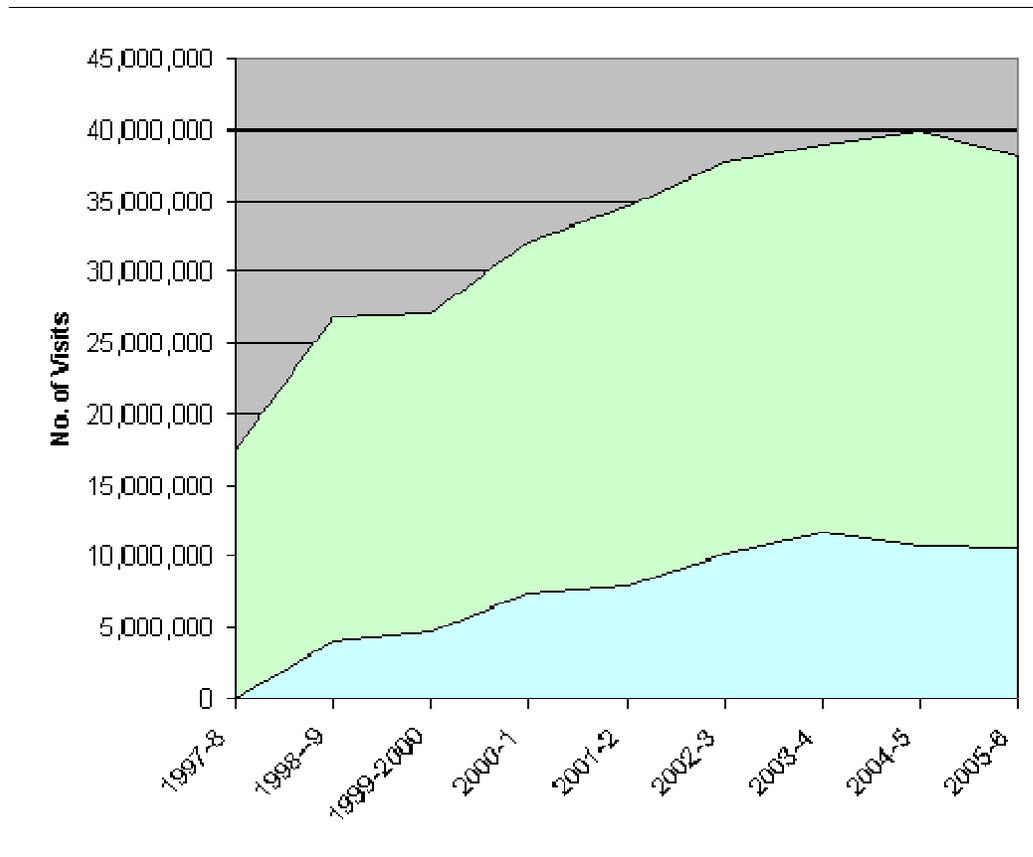
'London boasts more national museums in one city than any other capital in the world. Best of all, entrance is free!'

As Britain is one of the few countries in Europe (with Eire and Denmark) to provide universal free museum entry it would appear that, if this was a strong selling point, VisitBritain would promote it heavily to distinguish the UK from its competitors. It is therefore likely that most overseas visitors will assume that museums make admission charges.

#### Domestic tourism

Unlike overseas visitors, the level of awareness of the free entry policy remains high domestically. As Figure 4 shows [7] domestic tourists to the national museums still constitute the vast majority of visitors and visits continue to rise year-on-year (save for 2005-2006). This indicates that the free admission is being successful in generating large numbers of additional visitors.

Figure 4: UK and overseas visitors to national museums



Source: Travers, T. Museums and Galleries in Britain. December 2006. National Museums Directors' Conference and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

However, there has been considerable criticism, that increased visitor numbers to national museums has been at the expense of paid visits to other attractions and, as a result, domestic tourism as a whole has not benefited from free admissions.

To consider whether there is any justification to this criticism visitor figures from the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions were examined to illustrate differences in growth between paid and unpaid attractions. The results for 2008 [8] are mixed. Of those attractions in ALVA membership with paid admission, 12 showed an increase in visitor numbers on 2007, whilst 20 attractions showed a decrease (with one attraction having stable admission numbers).

Overall, admissions to paid-for attractions is down slightly by 1.96% in 2008 compared to 2007, while the Museums Association reports that for 2008, the number of people visiting museums increased slightly. While this would tend to suggest that free entry museums had an unfair advantage over paid-for attractions, this has to be put in context of the current recession and the natural reaction of people to reduce expenditure. Therefore, there is no clear evidence that the free admission policy is significantly increasing domestic tourism, nor any evidence to suggest that there is unfair competition with paid attractions.

### Impact on museums

While the impact of the free admission policy on both inbound and domestic tourism seems negligible, it is worth considering whether there has been any impact on the museums themselves. They remain important tourism assets regardless of whether visitors need to pay for admission or not.

The impact of the free entry policy has been scrutinised twice by Parliament. The Culture Media and Sport Committee in its December 2002 report [\[9\]](#) said that:

'It is too early to draw firm conclusions about the actual impact of free admission, either for the institutions directly affected or for the wider sector as a whole.'

It noted that:

'The success of the free admission initiative seems to have been a double-edged sword in terms of the financial impact upon the newly free institutions.'

Returning to this in 2007, the same Committee had this to say:

'Many independent museums are wholly reliant on self-generated income and fundraising', [and agreeing with Professor Travers] 'it was important to state that museums and galleries also exist for rather different purposes that running catering and other trading facilities.'

It concluded by recommending that:

'...research should be undertaken to determine exactly what effect the free entry policy has had on the sector as a whole and that a way should be found to support museums which suffer.'

In response to the criticisms in this report, the DCMS said [\[10\]](#) that:

'We have not seen any compelling evidence that providing free admission to these institutions has unfairly skewed visitor numbers to other museums...We do not propose, therefore, to conduct the research that the Committee recommends. We have no intention of abolishing the policy which we view as extremely successful.'

## Criticisms of the policy

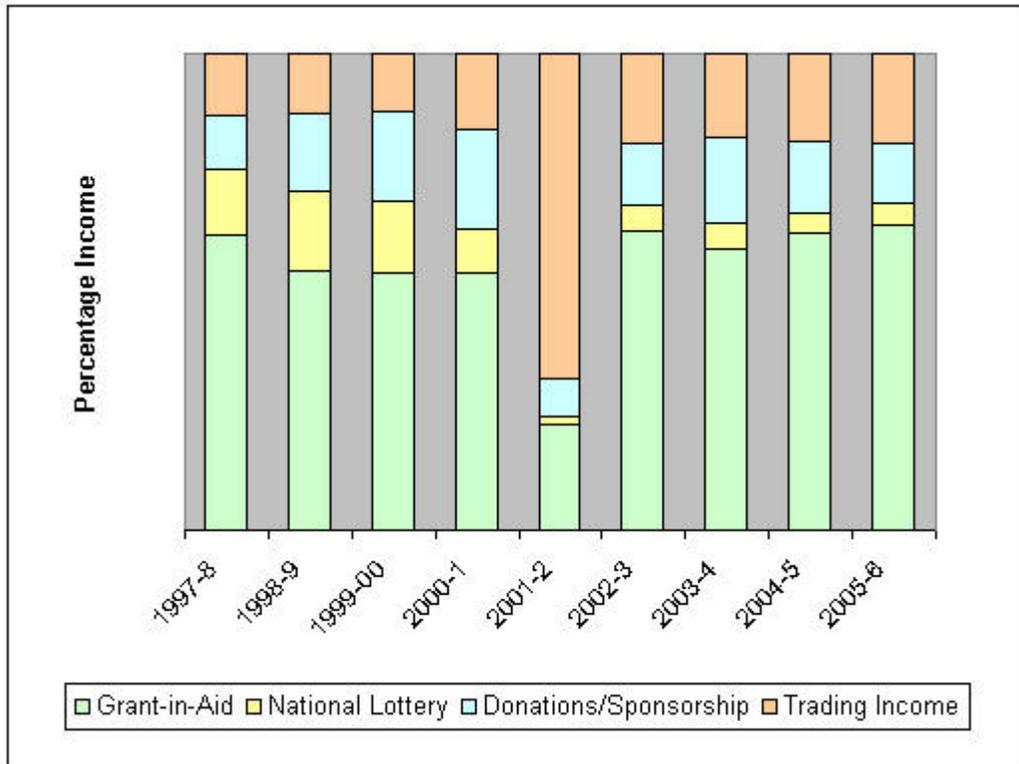
However, not everyone shares the DCMS view that the policy has been an unequivocal success and two criticisms have been raised. In addition to the charge of unfair competition with paid attractions, further criticism includes reduced capital investment to maintain buildings and a potential reduction in the quality of visits.

### Maintenance of the resource

As overall visitor numbers have risen almost three-fold since free entry was introduced, this has increased wear and tear on the buildings. While grant-in-aid from DCMS has met the loss caused by removing admission charges, it does not provide the additional capital investment required to maintain these assets.

The perception that the funding of museums is now taken care of by the government has also hampered other forms of income. Figure 5 illustrates this, showing how the four principal sources of museum funding have fluctuated over a nine-year period. (Note the extraordinary trading income from visitor spending in museum shops in 2001-2 when free admission was first introduced.) A reduction in donations and national lottery funding cannot be good for museums or tourism in the longer term.

Figure 5: Museum income



Source: Travers, T. Museums and Galleries in Britain. December 2006. Report prepared for the National Museums Directors' Conference and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

### Quality of visit and increased engagement

One of the policy aims was to encourage more people to visit. As mentioned above, although there is much data collected on museums, this does not measure how long visitors stay in a free museum, what they do when they are there, or whether they have any engagement with the artifacts exhibited. Where attractions charge, they have an incentive to please their customers or meet their perceived needs. This can diminish where there is no admission charge.

And, as most free national museums are located in the capital cities, the engagement they can have with people living at a distance is limited.

### Cultural tax

With just over one-quarter of visits to national museums being made by overseas visitors, some criticise that it is unfair that the taxpayer should subsidise these visitors, particularly as many expect to pay an admission charge. It could be said that there is currently a cultural charge on all UK taxpayers.

### Conclusion

Entry numbers to free national museums continue to rise indicating that one of the stated aims, to make national museums more accessible, has no doubt been achieved. However, there is nothing to suggest that the policy has had any material impact on either inbound or domestic tourism. The cost of visiting museums is too insignificant in overall expenditure terms to be any real incentive for overseas visitors, and there is evidence to suggest that the increase in domestic visits is more to do with locals using the museums as meeting places than the generation of new visitors.

There is also little evidence to support the notion that free national museums have had an adverse affect on

attractions that charge admission. Although entry figures for paid-for attractions is down by just under 2% in 2008 compared with 2007, this is against the backdrop of the worst recession in three generations. Admission numbers seen in this context are holding up very well. Indeed about one-third of charging attractions showed an increase in visitor numbers in 2008 compared to 2007.

More worryingly, from a tourism perspective, is that the level of grant-in-aid has not risen since the free entry policy was introduced in 1999, so effectively, revenue to museums has been falling over the last ten years. With increased visitor numbers, the national museums will have more wear and tear. Income from trading activities is broadly stable – but both national lottery funding and donations have been squeezed, with the former especially so.

At some point soon, national museums will need capital expenditure and it is not clear where this will come from. The DCMS has firmly rejected the recommendations of the Culture Select Committee in their 'Caring for our Collections' report [11] Visitors are unlikely to want to visit museums that have become tatty. Museums that rely on grant-in-aid have less incentive to raise money by trading activities.

By the time national museums need money for capital expenditure, and to care and maintain their collections, they will be less experienced in generating money through commercial activities. Attractions that charge admissions have a continuing necessity to be financial astute and a far greater incentive to satisfy customer needs.

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## About the author

David Bowden MTS is a dual-qualified English and American lawyer and director of D Bowden Consulting Limited [www.lobbyandlaw.com](http://www.lobbyandlaw.com). David is a member of the Tourism Society and also acts as a consultant to VisitBritain. If you need advice or assistance in relation to museums or related tourism issues, he can be contacted on (01462) 431444. He has previously written for Tourism Insights on domain names, data management, unfair commercial

practices, coastal access and casinos.

## Appendix A - National museums offering free admission ENGLAND

### **London (25)**

- British Museum
- Churchill Museum & Cabinet War Rooms
- Geffrye Museum
- HMS Belfast
- Horniman Museum, Forest Hill
- Imperial War Museum Museum in Docklands
- Museum of London
- National Army Museum, Chelsea
- National Gallery
- Natural History Museum
- National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
- National Museum of Childhood, Bethnal Green
- National Portrait Gallery Royal Observatory, Greenwich
- Queens House, Greenwich
- RAF Museum, Hendon
- Royal Armouries, Tower of London
- Science Museum
- Sir John Soanes Museum
- Tate Britain
- Tate Modern
- Theatre Museum, Covent Garden
- Victoria & Albert Museum
- Wallace Collection

### **West Midlands (1)**

- National Cold War Museum, RAF Cosford, Shropshire

### **East Midlands (0)**

### **East of England (1)**

- Natural History Museums Zoological Museum, Tring, Hertfordshire

### **South East (2)**

- Fort Nelson, Royal Armouries, Portsmouth
- National Museum of the Royal Navy, Southsea

### **North West (13)**

- Imperial War Museum North, Manchester
- International Slavery Museum, Liverpool
- Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool
- Liverpool Museum
- Merseyside Maritime Museum

- Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester
- National Conservation Centre, Liverpool
- National Football Museum, Preston
- Peoples History Museum, Manchester
- Sudley House, Liverpool
- Tate Liverpool
- Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
- World Museum, Liverpool

#### **North East (13)**

- Arbeia Roman Fort & Museum, South Shields
- Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne
- Great North Museum Hancock, Newcastle upon Tyne
- Hatton Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne
- Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne
- Monkwearmouth Station Museum, Sunderland
- National Museum of Science and Industry, Shildon
- Segedunum Roman Fort, Baths & Museum, Wallsend
- Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead South
- Shields Museum & Art Gallery
- Stephenson Railway Museum, North Shields
- Sunderland Museum & Winter Garden
- Washington 'F' Pit, Washington

#### **Yorkshire (4)**

- National Coal Mining Museum for England, Wakefield
- National Media Museum, Bradford
- National Railway Museum, York
- Royal Armouries, Leeds

#### **South West (1)**

- Science Museum, Swindon

#### **SCOTLAND (6)**

- Museum of Costume, New Abbey, Dumfries
- Museum of Flight, East Lothian
- Museum of Rural Life, East Kilbride
- National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh
- National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh
- National War Museum, Edinburgh

#### **WALES (8)**

- Big Pit: National Coal Museum, Blaenafon
- Museum of Welsh Life
- National History Museum. St Fagans
- National Museum, Cardiff
- National Roman Legion Museum, Caerleon

- National Slate Museum, Llyn Padarn, Llanberis
- National Waterfront Museum, Swansea
- National Wool Museum, Cambrian Mill

#### NORTHERN IRELAND (4)

- Armagh County Museum
- Ulster American Folk Park, Omagh, Tyrone
- Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, Holywood, Down
- Ulster Museum, Belfast