

Staff Profile: Dr Ciaran Toal, Research Officer at Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum



Dr Ciaran Toal talks to NI Museums Council about his role as Research Officer at Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum and highlights

Average day

As Research Officer my job is to provide a historical research service for the Museum, contribute to exhibitions and answer research enquiries from the Council, visitors, or other researchers. I also give talks or lectures on the exhibition programme, Lisburn or the history of the Irish linen industry. I am responsible for a number of the Museum's libraries, include the Reference library and the archive of the Linen Industry Research Association, or LIRA.

Due to staff changes my day-to-day work increasingly revolves around the Museum's exhibition programme. I'm either researching, writing or planning exhibitions or displays, sourcing objects, or working with the Museum's collection. Lately I have been involved in various one-off programmes, for example the Museum's archaeological project at Moira Demesne.

Spotlight on an exciting new project

Currently I am preparing for our upcoming Museum Futures placement, in conjunction with the British Museum. The Museum Futures programme is designed to encourage new entrants into the museum sector. It's aimed at 18-24 year olds who have less than six months experience in a museum, and encourages applications from candidates who do not have degrees. Trainees will

receive a tax-free £13,350 bursary, complete an accredited Level 3 diploma in Cultural Heritage, and the opportunity to attend regular training sessions at other UK museums and the British Museum.

At Lisburn Museum we will be working on a number of digital projects, including cataloguing and digitising the linen damask collection, and a number of other smaller digital projects. The trainee will also be involved in the exhibition programme and get to experience all aspects of a local museum.

Favourite part of the job

The breadth of Museum work means you are always learning something new. One day you could be working with, and learning about, contemporary art, while the next you're researching 17th-century history. I also enjoy meeting visitors and hearing stories about their lives and the objects they've collected.

Main Challenges

I imagine most museum professionals face the same challenges: lack of time and resources to achieve everything they would like to.

Summing up in 3 words the role of a Research Officer

I'm not sure I could sum up my job in three words. I find myself uttering the phrase 'I must find out..' on an almost daily basis. That seems appropriate.

Advice to anyone thinking of becoming a Research Officer

I don't think there's a straightforward path from leaving school to becoming a professional researcher in a museum. In fact, most of my colleagues – and across the sector as a whole – have had really interesting career trajectories. I think this is a good thing. The demands of working in a local authority museum require staff to wear lots of different hats, and a broad skill base is an asset.