ROOK NOW

rofessor Christopher Brown CBE, director of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum – which he first visited as a teenager – was our first castaway when this long-running series began.

But as he is retring from his post this month we thought it would be the perfect moment to revisit the life and times of the man who has overseen a wonderful transformation of the University of Oxford's museum of art and archaeology.

Since its opening in 1683 the Ashmolean has been one of those rare places where Town and Gown meet.

Visitors to the museum before Professor Brown arrived on the scene in 1998 would have had a very different and less welcoming experience than they do today.

It is not just the new building which Professor Brown has overseen, but also the revitalising of the education department, the links with schools and the rearrangement of collections on the theme of *Crossing Cultures Crossing Time.* And under his stewardship, annual visitor numbers have risen from 200,000 to close to one million.

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Sylvia Vetta talks to the retiring director of Oxford's Asmolean Museum, Professor Christopher Brown

Traveller in time

BOOK NOW

In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

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Professor Christopher Brown with his desert island choice – a Rembrandt sketch of the artist's father

> Photograph: Marc West

A PRIMARY AND A MAN AUTO

GERRITI

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Professor Brown's family had a background in the mining industry.

"My father's father was a miner – and my father, Arthur, left school aged 14. He had a flair for technical drawing and, instead of going down the mine, became a trainee draughtsman in an asbestos factory – an environment which gave him an opportunity, but would eventually cost him his life. He died of mesothelioma in 1991," Professor Brown said.

"Shortly before the war he joined the Auxiliary Air Force and, at weekends, learned to fly. He was one of the first to be called up in 1939. He flew Spitfires and was fortunate to survive the Battle of Britain. Like many ex-RAF pilots after he was de-mobbed he started a career in commercial aviation.

"He began working for Gibraltar Airways and flew de Havilland Rapides, biplanes with a handful of passengers, between Gibraltar and Tangier.

"My parents spent six months of the year in the Rock Hotel in Gibraltar and six months in Tangier, where I was born in 1948."

"A few years ago, my mother, Marjorie (who is 95 and lives in Bloxham) and I took a trip to Tangier we found the nursing home where I was born. When I was being a difficult teenager, my father would jokingly threaten to alert the Moroccan Embassy to have me conscripted into their military service."

Late in 1948, the family returned to the UK and his father went to work for British European Airways.

Professor Brown recalled: "My father flew for BEA out of Heathrow so we settled at Ickenham near Uxbridge. I began at the local primary school, but my secondary education was as a day boy at Merchant Taylors' in Northwood, Middlesex.

"We had an enthusiastic art teacher who encouraged us to visit the Goya exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1964. I became obsessed by Goya as a printmaker and that prompted my first ever art lecture – to my fellow sixth-formers.

"To this day. I have a profound love of the work of Goya. I remember only one art book at home, on The Group of Seven. My father acquired it in Canada where he was sent after the Battle of Britain to train fighter pilots. On a recent trip to Canada, I saw some of their work and the memories came flooding back."

In the early 20th century The Group of

Seven tried to create a truly Canadian artistic tradition.

Professor Brown said that one great advantage in having a pilot as a father was that the family travelled a great deal.

"We often went to Greece and Crete," he said. "At the age of 16, having visited Knossos and pursuing an interest in Minoan archaeology, a schoolfriend and I got on our bikes and cycled up the A40 to Oxford from the family home at Ikenham, near Uxbridge. We stayed at the youth hostel which, as I remember, was then in Headington, in order to visit the Ashmolean for the first time."

"Art history would probably have been my first choice for university. However, I was persuaded by my teachers to apply for either archaeology at Cambridge or history at Oxford.

"At school I had been treasurer of the archaeological society – which had produced well- known archaeologists like Martin Biddle. In the event I applied to St Catherine's at Oxford and was accepted to read history."

While a student at Oxford, Professor Brown met his future wife Sally, the daughter of a don at Brasenose. She is two years younger than *Continued on page* 13

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him and read English at Somerville.

Profesor Brown said: "Sally got a first and I got a second, a fact that has frequently been brought up in the course of our married life!"

They married in 1975 and, shortly afterwards, Mrs Brown became a curator of literary manuscripts at the British Library. She looked after manuscripts from Keats to Pinter until her retirement in 2008.

Professor Brown had completed a postgraduate Diploma in the History of Art at Oxford.

"My tutor was a remarkable man – a great Belgian scholar, Bob Delaisse, who was a Fellow of All Souls," he said. "I was enormously impressed by his knowledge and his enthusiasm and took the course he offered on early Netherlandish painting. If anyone has to take the blame for my career as an art historian, then that person is Bob Delaisse.

"I had just registered for a DPhil with Bob when the previous curator of Dutch and Flemish painting left the National Gallery. I applied for the job and, despite my modest knowledge of the subject, I was appointed.

"In those days there was a very different attitude. People were often hired on their promise rather than their achievement. I stayed for 27 years.

"While I was working at the National Gallery I was given some time off to do a PhD at the Courtauld Institute on the subject of Carel Fabritius, Rembrandt's greatest pupil," Professor Brown explained.

"My distinguished supervisor was Michael Kitson. The artist he loved above all others was Claude. I was delighted when he made a heroic effort to come to the Ashmolean in 1998 to see an exhibition of drawings by the artist. By then he was seriously ill and he died soon after, but he was proud that a student of his was director here."

"At that time I also became very interested in the social history of art, the way that art works in society and the functions it serves. The modern art market was born in the 17th-century Dutch Republic. There were exhibitions and dealers and auctions, all the features of the modern art market."

Professor Brown's time at the National Gallery was an excellent preparation for what was to come at the Ashmolean.

"In 1971 the National Gallery was opening up to a broader public. The art historian Sir Michael Levey became director in 1974. I admired him very much indeed. He created an ambitious education department and mounted the first substantial exhibitions," Professor Brown said.

"His aim was to open up the museum in the way we now expect of museums. That is where and how I learned to do it – annual visitor numbers at the National Gallery have grown since the early 1970s from half-a-million to six million today.

"I was also involved in the two large building projects: the first being the Sainsbury wing. A competition was held in 1981 to choose the architect to build it.

When Sir Michael Levey left the post as director in 1986, art historian and editor of the *Burlington Magazine* Neil MacGregor took on the role.

Professor Brown said: "We worked closely

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oxfordtimes.co.uk Castaway

At the selection interview for the directorship of the Ashmolean, Professor Brown made it clear that if he were appointed he intended to open up the museum to the community at large. "I told the panel that if that was not what they wanted they should not appoint me"

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and successfully together. We are different personalities but we shared the same vision and ideas about what a museum could and should do. During those 27 years I was very happy and never applied for another job. I left a lot of my heart in Trafalgar Square when I moved to the Ashmolean in 1998."

At the selection interview for the directorship of the Ashmolean, Professor Brown made it clear that if he were appointed he intended to open up the museum to the community at large.

"I told the panel that if that was not what they wanted they should not appoint me. I believed this new public face would involve a new building. The then vice-chancellor Colin Lucas made it absolutely clear that he shared this vision."

The Ashmolean's collections are comparable to the very best in Europe but when Professor Brown took over in 1998 much was poorly housed and displayed. New temporary exhibition galleries were needed too.

"Howard Colvin's 'Unbuilt Oxford' is a catalogue of unfulfilled dreams. The idea of the new Ashmolean could have been just another dream," said Christopher.

"While in London, we lived in Dulwich. I had worked with Lord Sainsbury at the Dulwich Picture Gallery as well as at the National Gallery. Lord Sainsbury was among my very first visitors in Oxford and I asked him if he would help me to transform the museum.

"I was also very fortunate that Sir Ewen Fergusson, the former Ambassador to Paris, whom I had got to know as a trustee of the National Gallery, gave a generous gift – enough to allow me to commission a masterplan for the future of the building.

"I admired what architect Rick Mather had achieved at Dulwich and so, in 1999, I asked him to produce the masterplan. It was brilliant and made clear how the museum needed to develop," Professor Brown said.

"We then organised a formal architectural competition and, although many architects from around the world applied, Rick was appointed.

Professor Brown then needed to raise the

money - £70m - for the two stages of the project. "John Sainsbury, through the Linbury Trust, committed to make a large donation at an early stage and, together with university support, that helped us win a Heritage Lottery grant of £15m," Professor Brown explained.

"That moment in 2004 was wonderful. It was the moment when the dream became reality. We knew then that it was going to happen."

Leading the rebuilding project was an enormous undertaking, but ensuring the support of the staff and changing the culture within the museum was also difficult.

Professor Brown said: "There have been museums where an incoming director with new ideas came up against an entrenched and resistant curatorial culture. And that can be very painful. I did not want that to happen here. What I felt I needed to do was to take time to consult everyone.

"It was a long process in which



everyone's view was sought and taken into account. Many, many meetings took place and colleagues came to accept the need for change."

Professor Brown could teach many businesses a lesson in successful people management.

Then there was the reorganisation of the museum's collections.

Professor Brown said: "Departmental display must inevitably stress cultural difference – here is European art and here, in another part of the building, Asian art. It puts cultures in hermetically sealed boxes.

"The idea of Crossing Cultures Crossing Time is to emphasise cultural exchange. That is how civilisations really work."

Displaying paintings, as at the National Gallery, is relatively easy compared to the problems of displaying the kind of archaeological material held by the Ashmolean.

"I had no clear idea of how to do it," Professor Brown said. "The idea of the new display strategy really did grow out of the discussions inside the museum and within the wider university which began in 2000 and lasted until 2007."

Lovers of the Ashmolean have reason to be grateful for his patience and vision.

When I first interviewed him in 2007, Professor Brown focused on the 'Treasures' Gallery for his island objects.

At that time the demolition of the old galleries was underway and he wanted to keep the rest of the museum as inviting as possible in the circumstances. His choice then was the Alfred Jewel.

Now he is about to embark on four years as a research professor in preparation for a major exhibition in 2018, provisionally entitled *Rembrandt's Leiden* in collaboration with the Lakenhal Museum in Leiden.

Leiden, Rembrandt's birthplace and scene of his early triumphs, is twinned with Oxford.

Professor Brown said: "In addition I will work on Anthony van Dyck's stay in Italy and on the social history of Dutch art.

"The early years of the Dutch Republic is the perfect time and place to examine the social function of art.

"So while I have the Alfred Jewel to remind me of Oxfordshire, this time I would like to take with me Rembrandt's deeply moving drawing of his father (*pictured left*).

"It was made shortly before his father's death in 1630 and is inscribed prominently by Rembrandt with his father's name.

"Drawn in red and black chalks with a brown wash, it is testimony of great love and compassion."

In July this year Professor Brown joined Nelson Mandela and fellow castaways Roger Bannister and Colin Dexter when he was awarded the freedom of the City of Oxford. A fitting commemoration of his achievement in transforming the Ashmolean.

