

# Museum's monster makeover

Tristram Besterman faced an uphill struggle to reconnect Manchester Museum with the people it was supposed to serve. **Jane Hughes** reports

WHEN Tristram Besterman became director of the Manchester Museum a decade ago, he knew he had a challenge on his hands.

The way he managed it was a lesson on how to steer staff through sometimes upsetting changes and emerge with a cutting-edge, award-winning museum specialising in one of the sexiest of all areas — dinosaurs.

The museum, owned by the University of Manchester, is one of the largest regional institutions of its kind, with international collections, particularly in Egyptology and natural history, and about six million exhibits.

But when Besterman arrived in 1994, all was not well. There was no marketing budget, the education programme was struggling for survival and the buildings, he recalls, looked shabby and down at heel.

What's more, the institution was operating at the margins of good practice, with questions raised over the standards of academic research and an ad-hoc approach to managing individual collections.

In short, said Besterman, the museum was a public institution that had begun to lose touch with the people it was supposed to serve.

"It had become introverted and disconnected and was not delivering as well as it could to the university or the public," he said.

"One thing that really worried me was that many of the 13 keepers of the collections ran their departments almost as mini-museums, and weren't that interested in the other things going on around them."

Besterman's task was to turn the museum into a vibrant, innovative institution to act as a bridge between the university and wider society.

One of his first initiatives was an ambitious £20m capital project of high-quality, contemporary new building. Kick-started with a £12m Heritage lottery grant, this involved the creation of a new entrance hall, two new galleries, classrooms, lecture halls, a café and a refurbishment programme linking five buildings.

Besterman's aim was to put the museum on the map as a 21st-century institution, and he seems to have succeeded. Construction was completed last year and the buildings, designed by Ian Simpson Architects, recently made the short list for two Royal Institute of British Architecture awards.

But that was the straightforward part. As a member of the Museum Professionals Group, Besterman had worked hard to persuade museums across the country to adopt a professional way of working. But when he arrived at Manchester he found that some staff were not co-operating fully.

"The professional approach to museum management hadn't really taken root in the more rarefied world of higher education," said Besterman, who had previously worked for local authority-run museums, including the Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery where he was city curator.

So at first he concentrated on making the museum more outward looking and professional. As staff retired, Besterman began to re-direct the budget to obviously under-resourced areas.

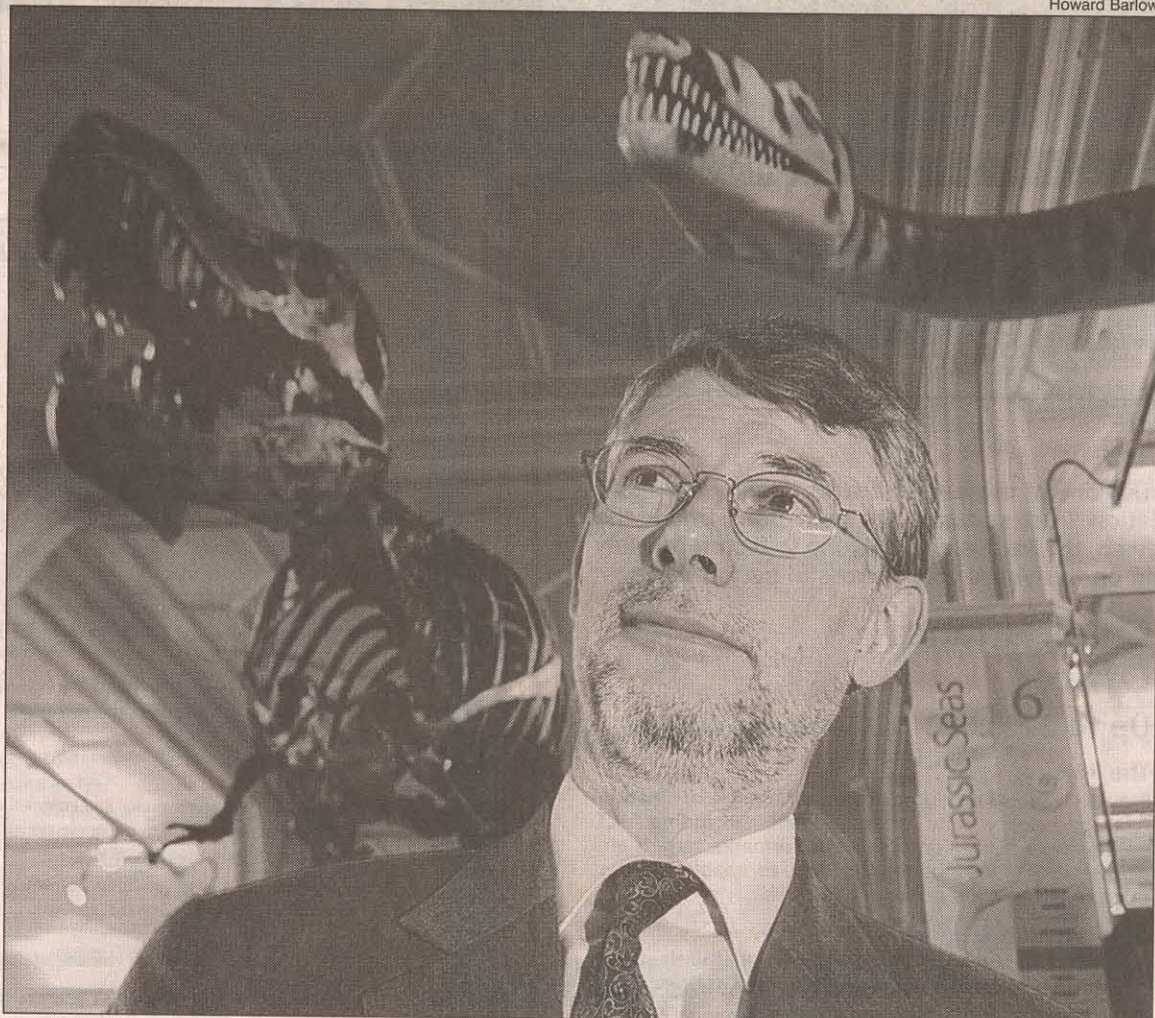
A marketing professional was asked to join, followed by a registrar who was charged with co-ordinating and documenting collections to make them more accessible.

"We needed to know what we had so that people could use it," he explained. "We're still finding the most wonderful things, such as a finch collected by Darwin in the Galapagos Islands. That's like having the crown jewels and not knowing about it."

He also brought in an external consultant to do an assessment. The subsequent report — looking at how staff attitudes connected with the museum's strategies and aims — showed broad support but also identified lack of motivation among keepers.

Besterman held discussions to get the keepers on board, but in the end decided he needed external help. With financial backing from the university he hired consultant Robin Jordan.

The first thing Jordan did was take



Boning up: Manchester Museum director Tristram Besterman with the new tyrannosaurus rex model

all 65 staff, plus university professors in related subjects and local community representatives, on an away day. He asked the group to decide what the museum should look like in five years' time and gave them the task of getting onto the cover of a Sunday Times special colour supplement featuring the 10 best regional museums.

"They came up with all the key criteria that anyone would want," said Besterman, "most important, the need to make the museum a world-renowned institution with excellent public access."

Staff signed up to the document they had helped create and Jordan used it to stock-take against performance. His eventual recommendation was to abolish the post of museum keeper and replace it with professionally trained curators, together with museum academics jointly appointed with university departments.

Negotiation and consultation took a further eight months before the univer-

sity gave final approval. Besterman then met each keeper to review his or her options: professional development into a curator role, a joint academic appointment shared between the museum and the university (if they could demonstrate their calibre), redeployment within the university or early retirement. There was a commitment that nobody would be made redundant. So far, four of the 13 keepers have been retained as curators.

Meanwhile, Besterman built up the museum's education service following its near-collapse due to the withdrawal of local-authority funding. Seeing the transfer of spending power to schools as a "wonderful opportunity", he sent out his education manager to talk to schools and develop a service that they would want to use.

The charges levied on schools pay for a team of 12 teachers and the museum is considered a highly effective portal between the community and the university.

"Children get to handle real objects before visiting the galleries and, for some, it's the first time anyone in their family has had such an experience," said Besterman. "It's incredibly rewarding when they then drag their parents in at the weekend."

Today, the Manchester Museum is at the forefront of applied dinosaur research. Visitor numbers are up by 30,000 and the education and outreach programme is at full capacity.

Last week the museum unveiled its latest exhibit — a tyrannosaurus rex skeleton, cast from an original in the United States. But its ambitions continue to grow: discussion is now under way about the possibility of embarking on a £5.5m fundraising initiative to buy a real tyrannosaurus skeleton.

Having accomplished what he set out to achieve in Manchester, the last thing Besterman intends to do is sit back and relax. Next autumn he plans to move on and he is already looking for new challenges, both in Britain and abroad.

## Which of the best

MANAGEMENT education is big business. There are nearly 100 university-based business schools in Britain, all eager to attract MBA students paying high fees. There are also lots of short courses, seminars, conferences, breakfast meetings and the like, all catering for the lucrative management-training sector.

More and more senior public-sector workers, in local councils, the NHS and the civil service, are opting for management training in the belief that it will advance their careers. Some are sponsored by their employers, others take out loans to cover the cost of courses.

How can individuals and organisations ensure they get value for money? People tend to use three criteria: reputation, personal recommendation and price. But these are often not enough.

People and institutions can have reputations they do not deserve. It takes a long time to build up a good reputation but less time to lose it. This benefits older, better-established institutions which may be resting on their laurels or using clever marketing.

Personal recommendations can be useful as long as you realise that different people have different motives, needs, experiences and preferred ways of learning. Some like the formal "theory and evidence" approach, others prefer "learning by doing" or shadowing a mentor.

And never forget the power of "buyers' nostalgia" — to justify the vast amounts of time and money, employees often feel obliged to paint a rosy picture of their courses.

Price is usually determined by the market rate, not the value of the course. Factors such as the cost of buildings, staff and so on have little relationship to course content.

So if these criteria are insufficient, what should you look for? There are at