



Benjamin Franklin and Public History: Restoring Benjamin Franklin House

Dr. Márcia Balisciano
Founding Director, Benjamin Franklin House

Introduction

What is the best way to engage the public in the history of a person, location, time? This is a question that was put to the test at Benjamin Franklin House. This paper reviews the process by which a 1730s building, derelict for over 25 years, and never open to the public, became a new kind of museum.

By some quirk of fate, the only surviving home of Benjamin Franklin, one of America's most iconic figures, is not in Boston where he was born; not in Philadelphia, his adopted city, where he created civic institutions that have shaped American life and where he made lasting contributions to science; and not in Paris where he served as the first official representative of a fledgling American government, garnering support which helped decide the course of the American Revolution. It is, in fact, in the heart of London, just steps from Trafalgar Square. Benjamin Franklin called a narrow, brick terrace building at 36 Craven Street home for nearly sixteen years between 1757 and 1775.

By 1980 the Georgian building was empty and derelict. In recognition of the importance of the building and its plight, a trust was formed. It was not, however, until the late 1990s that a robust management structure and substantial fundraising allowed serious consideration of the building's future. The starting point for this exploration was Benjamin Franklin.

In a 1783 letter to Joseph Banks, Franklin noted: "Furnish'd as all Europe now is with Academies of Science, with nice Instruments and the Spirit of Experiment, the Progress of human Knowledge will be rapid, and Discoveries made of which we have at present no Conception. I begin to be almost sorry I was born so soon, since I cannot have the Happiness of knowing what will be known 100 Years hence."¹ Earlier he wrote to Joseph Priestley, friend and fellow scientist: "The rapid Progress true Science now makes, occasions my Regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the Height to which may be carried in a 1000 Years the Power of Man over Matter."² Franklin's passionate curiosity, his commitment to furthering public knowledge, and embrace of technology – to the degree he

¹ B. Franklin to Sir Joseph Banks, July 27, 1783 (Unpublished), The Packard Institute of Humanities: The Papers of Benjamin Franklin [<http://www.franklinpapers.org>].

² B. Franklin to Joseph Priestley, February 8, 1780, The Packard Institute of Humanities: The Papers of Benjamin Franklin [<http://www.franklinpapers.org>]. See also, B. Oberg, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: 1995), Vol. 31, November 1, 1779 - February 29, 1780.

longed to know what would be made, centuries on, of inventions he had pioneered – marked his long life and spurred our quest to make his only surviving residence a tribute to this legacy.

The Context: Living History

The challenge for those who would create or reinvigorate museums is how to set spaces and artefacts in context – moving beyond the glass or red ropes that have traditionally separated viewer from the history of place or piece.

Dennis Severs, an American who moved to London in the late 1960s, bought a home in the Georgian Spitalfields section of London in 1979. There he began a quest “to create a collection of atmospheres: moods that harbour the light and the spirit of various ages.”³ London historian Peter Ackroyd notes his achievement: “The house in Folgate Street is not a museum piece but a living thing; it is a revenant, a retrieval, with its own laws of growth and change.”⁴ In the midst of London’s established museums, large and small, Dennis Severs’ 17 Folgate Street stood out – fire in the kitchen grate on a hot summer night, bird sounds in the dining room, chamber pot in the bedroom – as a fresh approach in the late 1990s as we sought inspiration for bringing history to life at 36 Craven Street.

To gain wide opinion on what constitutes an engaging museum, we consulted with over 70 individuals and organisations ranging from heritage and museum practitioners; local and national government; businesses; tourism boards; neighbours; history, architectural, and US-oriented affinity groups; learned societies; and foundations; as well as parents, students and teachers.

We also interviewed potential designers to help us explore concepts for our primary visitor offering. After careful deliberation we chose Event Communications, a creative group specialising in museum design who, in the late 1990s, were responsible for a temporary theatrical installation at London’s Leighton House – the Victorian showpiece of Pre-Raphaelite painter Frederick Leighton. The well-received performance wound through the building’s rooms presenting a view of Leighton’s life. We liked the idea of an engaging drama that would utilise technology, appeal to all the senses, and give a visitors a sense of the complexity of the man and the times in which he lived.

We chose Screenhouse Productions for the Student Science Centre. We liked that their experience was in science-related television and online rather than science centre design. Among potential partners, Screenhouse offered a fresh approach to integrating hands-on demonstrations with video and games. Franklin translated inquisitiveness and discovery into practical ways of improving life and society. In essence Franklin said, 'I want to know; I can know.' We desired a Student Science Centre that would allow students to re-create diverse and important experiments from Franklin's sojourn in London, that would support the British National Curriculum, while encouraging thought and questioning rather than ready answers.

Plans were circumscribed by the Grade I (England’s highest heritage rating) nature of the building. This meant all designs had to be approved by the two statutory bodies with an interest in the building, the local council, the City of Westminster, and English Heritage.

History of Benjamin Franklin House

³ D. Severs, *18 Folgate Street* (London, 2001), p. 7.

⁴ Peter Ackroyd Introduction in Severs, *18 Folgate Street*, p. ix.

Benjamin Franklin House is the result of a gentrification project undertaken by the Craven family who had been supporters of the Charles I and his son during the time of the English Civil War. Much of their land had been appropriated by the administration of Oliver Cromwell, but after the Restoration they regained previous holdings. Originally called Spur Alley, Craven Street, circa 1700, was the site of a number of ramshackle dwellings housing craftsman. The area – situated well between London’s political heart, the City of Westminster, and its commercial centre, the City of London – was prime for redevelopment. The construction of new townhouses the Craven’s surmised might be lucrative; they would retain ownership of the land while ceding long-term leases on the new properties. According to Nancy Locke Doonan, who undertook research on Benjamin Franklin House in the first days of the trust, such renovation was happening across London: “The signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 brought peace with France and is said to have been responsible for the initial phase of London’s building activity in [the 18th] century. Wealthy nobleman...developed the lands which surrounded their townhouses. This resulted in the formation of new and fashionable residential areas such as Mayfair and Marylebone. Such activity encouraged...land speculators to act; Hanover and Grosvenor Squares, laid out in 1717-1719 and 1720 respectively, replaced open spaces.”⁵

About 1730, William Craven commissioned joiner Henry Flitcroft to develop Craven Street in the townhouse style cropping up elsewhere in London for its “verticality and compactness. External limitations such as overcrowding, shortage of space, and the narrowness of streets required such emphases....”⁶

The resulting structure is indeed narrow with five floors linked by a single, original staircase with turned balustrades, three to a tread, and cut strings with curved brackets. The main rooms have fielded panels in two heights, divided by a chair rail and surmounted with a fine moulded cornice and drip. The exceptional brick facade has gauged dressing to the window openings on the top three storeys and a face of cemented false joints to represent masonry on the lower two storeys. Exterior iron railings and balconies are of the period, as is most of the interior. The House was constructed of brick with heavy timber beams within each floor running from front to back of the building (west - east), with timber joists running between the beams and party walls (north - south).

Benjamin Franklin and 36 Craven Street

Leaving behind wife Deborah, who feared an ocean crossing, and fourteen year-old daughter Sally, Franklin departed Philadelphia on 4 April 1757. It was not, however, his first visit to the motherland. In 1724, as a young man of eighteen, Franklin traveled to London to expand his printing skills and remained for nearly two years. In his amazing lifetime (1706-1790), Franklin ventured across the Atlantic eight times.

Accompanied by son William and two black servants, Peter and King, Franklin’s second sojourn in London began on 26 July 1757. King soon departed for points north, but Peter remained a loyal friend. (In 1789, Franklin assumed his last public role as President of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, some eighty years before the ratification of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution banning slavery.) As Agent of the Province of Pennsylvania at the Court of His Most Serene Majesty, Franklin’s mission was to convince the Penn family, Pennsylvania’s proprietary owners, to pay tax in order to alleviate the expense of the French and Indian War, or persuade George III to bring the colony under

⁵ N. Locke Doonan, “Benjamin Franklin’s London Milieu,” 1983, Unpublished, p. 60.

⁶ Doonan, “Benjamin Franklin’s London Milieu,” p. 61.

Royal dominion, with concomitant financial support. He also served as Postmaster-General of North America.

Due to his success as a printer and his pioneering work in electricity, Franklin was nearly as well-known in England as he was in America. He was elected to the Royal Society in 1756 (three years prior he had been given the Society's Copley Medal for his enrichment of science); earlier he had become a member of the Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufacture, and Commerce. (The Franklin – and Benjamin Franklin House – link remains strong with today's Royal Society of Arts: they annually award the Benjamin Franklin Medal to an American or British citizen who, like Franklin, advanced Anglo-American relations.) Although given honorary Masters degrees from Harvard (1753), Yale (1753), and William and Mary (1756), Britain's St. Andrews (1759) and Oxford (1762) bestowed on Franklin the title of Doctor.

Perhaps Franklin chose the House for its nearness to the seats of British power; it was additionally close to the Penns' palatial home at Spring Gardens. And it had an upright mistress, widow Margaret Stevenson, her charming daughter Polly (Mary), and maid Janey who hailed from Pennsylvania to recommend it. Franklin found a surrogate family that did not look all that different from the one he had left behind. Biographer Carl Van Doren said he was less a lodger than the head of a household living in serene comfort and affection.

While politics were Franklin's primary focus in London, he did not forgo his encyclopaedic interests, including health (inoculation, air baths, cures for the common cold), music (the glass armonica, an instrument for which Mozart and Beethoven composed) and letters (articles, epitaphs, treatises, and voluminous personal correspondence), while forging a hearty social life and friendships with leading British figures like James Boswell and Adam Smith. He enjoyed evenings at London's coffeehouses and traveled when he could. Among his first excursions was to the home of the English Franklins: Ecton in Northampton. Franklin instructed Peter to scour the gravestones overgrown with moss to reveal the names of his ancestors while son William copied the inscriptions.

In London, Franklin continued his innovative work in science. On the banks of the Thames at the bottom of his street he demonstrated his kite and key experiment proving lightning to be an electrical phenomenon (and St. Paul's Cathedral was the first building in Britain to have a Franklin lightning rod) – a hallmark of the Age of Enlightenment he helped shape. At Craven Street, Franklin worked with chemist Joseph Priestley on oxygen experiments, tested the smoothing properties of oil on water, and the effect of canal depths on ships.

During conservation we discovered the remnants of a Franklin stove he installed in his laboratory at Craven Street. As he wrote in 1758 to James Bowdoin:

I have executed here an easy simple contrivance, that I have long since had in speculation, for keeping rooms warmer in cold weather than they generally are, and with less fire. It is this. The opening of the chimney is contracted, by brick-work faced with marble slabs, to about two feet between the jambs, and the breast brought down to within about three feet of the hearth. An iron frame is placed just under the breast, and extending quite to the back of the chimney, so that a plate of the same metal may slide horizontally backwards and forwards in the grooves on each side of the frame. This plate is just so large as to fill the whole space, and shut the chimney entirely when thrust quite in, which is convenient when there is no fire; drawing it out, so as to leave a space

between its farther edge and the back, of about two inches; this space is sufficient for the smoke to pass; and so large a part of the funnel being stopt by the rest of the plate, the passage of warm air out of the room, up the chimney, is obstructed and retarded, and by that means much cold air is prevented from coming in through crevices, to supply its place. This effect is made manifest three ways. First, when the fire burns briskly in cold weather, the howling or whistling noise made by the wind, as it enters the room through the crevices, when the chimney is open as usual, ceases as soon as the plate is slid in to its proper distance. Secondly, opening the door of the room about half an inch, and holding your hand against the opening, near the top of the door, you feel the cold air coming in against your hand, but weakly, if the plate be in. Let another person suddenly draw it out, so as to let the air of the room go up the chimney, with its usual freedom where chimneys are open, and you immediately feel the cold air rushing in strongly. Thirdly, if something be set against the door, just sufficient, when the plate is in, to keep the door nearly shut, by resisting the pressure of the air that would force it open: Then, when the plate is drawn out, the door will be forced open by the increased pressure of the outward cold air endeavouring to get in to supply the place of the warm air, that now passes out of the room to go up the chimney. In our common open chimneys, half the fuel is wasted, and its effect lost, the air it has warmed being immediately drawn off. Several of my acquaintance having seen this simple machine in my room, have imitated it at their own houses, and it seems likely to become pretty common.⁷

Franklin returned to Philadelphia in 1762, but his presence in London was soon deemed essential in order to further colonial views before a distracted King and an increasingly antagonistic Parliament (by 1764 he had become the agent for Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Georgia, as well as Pennsylvania). He successfully fought against the punitive Stamp Act, but despite his continued negotiations and pleas, a final break proved inevitable. As Franklin historian Joan Reid notes: "Franklin, a key conciliating force, and truly loyal member of the British Common Wealth, as he called it, came to be seen by those in power as a persistent irritant and danger. As he appeals for common sense and concessions came to naught, Franklin began to despair of the inflexibility and ignorance of the people with whom he had to deal. 'In England I am thought of as too American, whilst in America I am considered too British,' he complained of the fruitless negotiations with which he was entangled."⁸

Franklin's last days in London were thus marked by political strife, precipitated by the so-called Hutchinson Affair. Franklin leaked letters to Sam Adams and others agitating in Boston which showed the intention of American-born Massachusetts Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, to call in British troops should denizens prove unruly. The fiasco led to a duel in Hyde Park between two disgruntled players in the drama – and Franklin's call-down in 1774 before the House of Commons. According to Joan Reid:

Throughout 1774 Franklin remained at Craven Street with his head below the parapet. His letters still emerged but his personal attendance at meetings, committees and dinners dwindled. Behind the scenes, several serious attempts to broker a deal ensued. The Earl of Chatham,

⁷ B. Franklin, *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (London, 1769), pp. 369-74.

⁸ J. Reid, "Significance of Benjamin Franklin in London," *RSA Journal* (April 2006), p. 56.

the elder William Pitt, who had always advocated a conciliatory approach to the Colonies, came to negotiate with Franklin. There were also several meetings with Admiral Howe organised by his widowed sister who played chess with Franklin and desperate discussions with pacifist Quaker leaders David Barclay and John Fothergill. None of these efforts gained ground and when Franklin learned of the death of his wife Deborah, he knew he finally had to leave, which he did clandestinely in March 1775, with his grandson William Temple Franklin [illegitimate son of his illegitimate son William]. He spent his final day at Craven Street with friend and chemist Joseph Priestley scanning the American newspapers for any snippet to relive the gloom. Within months, Franklin, having signed the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, was sailing back to Europe, this time, on his way to France to broker the alliance that eventually saved the young United States from ignominious defeat.

Franklin's contribution in London was significant in many ways. Politically, he survived many years of near impossible controversy, demonstrating tireless skills of patience, perseverance, and compromise. By his pen, his chief weapon, he explained his current and future vision for the Colonies, and their ongoing relationship with the mother country.⁹

After his first nearly ten years at Craven Street Franklin wrote presciently:

I have lived so great a part of my life in Britain, and formed so many friendships in it, that I love it and sincerely wish it to prosperity.... As to America, the advantages of such a union to her are not so apparent. She may suffer at present under the arbitrary power of this country; she may suffer awhile in a separation from it; but these are temporary evils she will outgrow. ...America, an immense territory favored by nature with all advantages of climate, soil, great navigable rivers, and lakes, etc., must become a great country, populous and mighty; and will, in a less time than is generally conceived, be able to shake off shackles that may be imposed on her and perhaps place them on the imposers. In the meantime, every act of oppression will sour their tempers, lesson greatly – if not annihilate – the profits of your commerce with them, and hasten their final revolt; for the seeds of liberty are universally found there, and nothing can eradicate them. And yet there remains among that people so much respect, veneration, and affection for Britain that, if cultivated prudently, with kind usage and tenderness for their privileges, they might be easily governed still for ages, without force or any considerable expense. But I do not see here a sufficient quantity of wisdom that is necessary to produce such a conduct, and I lament the want of it.¹⁰

London life had not been all clouded skies. He wrote his charming spoof, *The Craven Street Gazette* in 1770 when he left in the company of Polly and her new husband William Hewson, during a visit by Margaret to visit relatives in Rochester in the company of his niece Sarah, then living at No. 36.

⁹ Reid, "Significance of Benjamin Franklin in London," p. 57.

¹⁰ Quoted in C. Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1991), p. 363.

Saturday, Sept. 22.

This Morning Queen Margaret, accompanied by her first Maid of Honour, Miss Franklin, set out for Rochester. Immediately on their Departure, the whole Street was in Tears——from a heavy Shower of Rain.

It is whispered that the new Family Administration which took place on her Majesty's Departure, promises, like all other new Administrations, to govern much better than the old one.

We hear that the great Person (so called from his enormous Size) of a certain Family in a certain Street, is grievously affected at the late Changes, and could hardly be comforted this Morning, tho' the new Ministry promised him a roasted Shoulder of Mutton, and Potatoes, for his Dinner.

It is said, that the same great Person intended to pay his Respects to another great Personage this Day, at St. James's, it being Coronation-Day; hoping thereby a little to amuse his Grief; but was prevented by an Accident, Queen Margaret, or her Maid of Honour having carried off the Key of the Drawers, so that the Lady of the Bedchamber could not come at a laced Shirt for his Highness. Great Clamours were made on this Occasion against her Majesty.

Other Accounts say, that the Shirts were afterwards found, tho' too late, in another Place. And some suspect, that the Wanting a Shirt from those Drawers was only a ministerial Pretence to excuse Picking the Locks, that the new Administration might have every thing at Command.

Sunday, Sept. 23.

It is now found by sad Experience, that good Resolutions are easier made than executed. Notwithstanding yesterday's solemn Order of Council, no body went to Church to day. It seems the great Person's broad-built-bulk lay so long abed, that Breakfast was not over 'till it was too late to dress. At least this is the Excuse.

Franklin set the pace and tenor of life at Craven Street and engaged in interesting practice as he detailed in a 1768 letter to Barbeu Dubourg, who translated his works into French: in his bedroom he sat “without any clothes whatever, half an hour or an hour according to season either reading or writing.... And if I return to bed afterwards before I dress myself, as sometimes happens, I make a supplement to my night’s rest of one or two hours of the most pleasing sleep that can be imagined.”¹¹

Life at Craven Street was busy and full for all. Polly’s husband, William – whom Franklin helped get elected to the Royal Society – established a thriving anatomy school, remnants were found during structural repair in the basement in 1998. More than 1200 pieces of human and animal bone were recovered from a one metre pit in the House’s basement. The bones, now being catalogued at London’s Institute of Archaeology, are revealing insight into early surgical practice.

As demand for space increased, Franklin and Margaret Stevenson moved across the street, though there is some indication Franklin continued to use his parlour for his “literary” endeavours. As Polly wrote to him during a visit to Birmingham:

I had the pleasure of receiving your Letter I am bound to answer it. My Mother I must tell you went off last friday week, took our little Boy with her and left Mr. Hewson the care of her House. The first thing he did was pulling down a part of it in order to turn it to his own purpose, and advantage we hope. This Demolition cannot affect you, who ar present are not even a Lodger, your litterary apartment remains untouch’d, the Door is lock’d, and the Key in this House. I was commission’d to open any Letter from you, that your orders might be executed, by which means I had the pleasure last saturday of hearing you were well and happy in these middle Regions.¹²

1774, Franklin’s year of challenge, was likewise a time of great sadness for other Craven Street residents. During a dissection William Hewson cut himself, developed septicaemia, and was dead within days leaving Polly to care pregnant with a daughter and two young sons. It is likely that at this point Margaret and Franklin returned to No. 36 to help Polly cope.¹³

¹¹ Quoted in Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1991), p. 405. Franklin seemed to delight in his role as a second father to Polly and her receptiveness and innate curiosity pleased him. He wrote among his most detailed letters on science to her and shared news of his travels. No detail escaped his attention – including the practice of fashionable Parisians – as he wrote Polly during a trip to France in 1767, “As to rouge, they don’t pretend to imitate nature in laying it on. There is a gradual diminution of the colour, from the full bloom in the middle of the cheek to the faint tint near the sides, nor does it show differently in different faces. I have not had the honour of being at any lady’s toilet to see how it is laid on, but I fancy I can tell you how it is or may be done. Cut a hole of three inches diameter in a piece of paper; place in on the side of your face in such a manner as that the top of the hole may be just under your eye; then with a brush dipped in the colour, paint face and paper together; so when the paper is taken off there will remain a round patch of red exactly the form of the hole. This is the mode, from the actresses on the stage upwards through all ranks of ladies to the princesses of the blood; but it stops there, the queen not using it, having in the serenity, complacence, and benignity that shine so eminently in – or rather through – her countenance, sufficient beauty, though now an old woman, to do extremely well without it. You see I speak of the queen as if I had seen her, and so I have... (p. 368).”

¹² B. Franklin to Mary Hewson, July 6 1782, The Packard Institute of Humanities: The Papers of Benjamin Franklin [<http://www.franklinpapers.org>].

¹³ Given the close relationship between Franklin and Polly it is not surprising that she and her children visited him in Passy while representing American interests before the French court. After the war she moves her family to Philadelphia and joins Franklin’s daughter Sally at his deathbed in 1790.

Bringing the Project to Fruition

Craven Street's townhouses are built on in-filled soil, which does not provide a fully stable foundation. Benjamin Franklin House also suffered from a change to the original mansard roof in 1780 and the addition of the back 'closet' story, over the ensuing 270 years the additional weight, shifting subsoil conditions, and damage to the fabric of the building (for example, removal of two support pillars in Franklin's parlour during the Victorian era) caused delamination of the front brick facade, critical sagging of the spine wall, and overall structural decay.

When the Craven family fell on lean times at the turn of the 20th century, they decided to sell the freehold for No. 36 to what became British Rail. They recognised the historic and architectural value of Benjamin Franklin House but did not invest funding to prevent the building from becoming derelict.

In 1998, our first step then was to ensure exterior stabilisation of the building to avoid the collapse of the structural. With planning approval from the relevant statutory bodies and primary funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), English Heritage, the Getty Foundation, and the William Hewlett Trust, among others – support beams were reinforced, brickwork was tuck-pointed, repairs were made to the roof, and ties were instated to steady floors at a cost of nearly £1 million.

Throughout the project we adhered to the following conservation principles:

- 1) Minimise the extent of repair work
- 2) Retain original material wherever possible
- 3) Use traditional methods and materials wherever possible
- 4) Provide long-term rather than ad hoc repairs which need early renewal

While this work completed by 2000 secured the structure of the building, the interior was still derelict.

Between 2000 and the start of 2004, all design work was completed for the Historical Experience, Student Science Centre, and Scholarship Centre and two floors of interior conservation. Piecemeal conservation is more expensive than undertaking all works simultaneously with accordant economies of scale, but we believed it was important to demonstrate tangible progress. Of the approximately £3.3 million total project cost (including exterior stabilisation), by the close of 2003 there was still £1.5 million to raise; and with a goal to open on the tercentenary of Franklin's birth in January 2006, timescales were tight. We were extremely fortunate a new bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund proved successful (the process took a year – six months to prepare the submission and six months for the HLF to review all documentation and conduct site visits). The nearly £1 million grant served as a catalyst to raising the required balance.¹⁴

With funding in hand, we tendered for final conservation and all multimedia and electrical services. During the year, ceilings, panelling, fireplaces, and flooring were brought back to their original lustre by primary contractor Wallis under the watchful eye of a project management team that included a member of the Board who is a conservation specialist. And with help from multimedia advisors, Can Factory, we selected Sysco to install the technology (including sound, lighting, switches, video, PC networking) needed for all uses of

¹⁴ We received contributions from numerous sources including £150,000 from a single US donor as well as a low, fixed interest loan from the Architectural Heritage Fund.

the House. Heating, cooling, cabling and multimedia requirements were sensitively integrated into the 18th century fabric of the building.

Where we go from Here

On a remarkable day, Benjamin Franklin's 300th birthday, Benjamin Franklin House opened to the public for the first time. In a fitting tribute to Anglo-American Franklin, who planted seeds of a 'special relationship between Britain and America during his long years of negotiation between Crown and Colonies – with his long cultivation of friendships across the Atlantic – British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw and the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, Robert Tuttle, cut a ribbon across the threshold of 36 Craven Street on 17 January 2006 to welcome the public to Franklin's last remaining home.

The House's offerings make best use of the building's limited space uncovering the rich yet not widely known story of Franklin's London years. The Historical Experience employs live interpretation and leading edge sound, lighting and visual projection to tell Franklin's rich London story in his own words. The historic spaces serve as stage for this 'museum as theatre' which removes the traditional distance between visitor and the past and illuminates a unique moment in AngloAmerican history: food, health, botany, and daily living in the basement kitchen; public and personal relationships, musical inventions and political tension on the ground floor; scientific work, political triumphs and woes, and a hurried return to America in the face of the looming War of Independence on the first floor. Emmy-award winning actor Peter Coyote is the voice of Benjamin Franklin and Academy Award-nominated actress Imelda Staunton is Margaret Stevenson, Franklin's landlady during his 16 years at Craven Street. The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) provided consultation on the script.

The Student Science Centre features hands-on experimentation with scientific discoveries from Franklin's London years, juxtaposing past and present knowledge, and inspiring young people – particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds to think and test in the mode of Franklin. Franklin translated curiosity and discovery into practical ways of improving life and society. In essence Franklin said, 'I want to know; I can know.' The Student Science Centre allows students to re-create diverse and important experiments from Franklin's sojourn in London. The activities in the Student Science Centre are designed to support elements of the National Curriculum. The emphasis in the Medical History Room is on the medical research work of William Hewson at Craven Street.¹⁵ In the Discovery Room, children are challenged to identify various objects related to Craven Street science to explain their function, to test their guesses and to suggest how they are used or work. The Demonstration Room features task-led, hands-on experiments that supplement the other learning activities and refer to Franklin's scientific activities at the House. Children will carry out experiments with the House's Education Officer encompassing Franklin's work on canal depths, electricity and lightning rod design, and the Franklin developed instrument, the glass armonica. Dramatic, interest-catching audio-visual segments support the presentations, extending the lesson and enabling children to explore 'what if' questions such as 'what happens if lightning strikes a building with no lightning conductor?'

The Scholarship Centre is the intellectual hub at the top of the building. It features a full set of the Papers of Benjamin Franklin, prepared by Yale University purchased with support from the US Embassy London with access to the prototype online Papers catalogued by Yale and the Packard Institute for the Humanities. We aim to have a scholar in residence

¹⁵ For instance, a circulation game requires students to follow the route of blood through arteries and veins with butterflies that flutter in the stomach and red lights that flash in the brain of the glass body's silhouette when all is connected correctly.

by the new academic year in October 2006 focusing on one of the myriad subjects of interest to Franklin, while annual Symposia will use Franklin as a point of departure for contemporary discussions of issues related to his key contributions in science, the arts, diplomacy and letters.

By reaching out to underserved communities we are further using the House and the character of Franklin to further history and education. Our work with inner city young people show they are familiar with American products or brands but many do not realise the US and the UK were once joined. They are unfamiliar with the circumstances that led to the War of Independence between Britain and America. The House and Franklin played an important role in these events will be a catalyst to help local youth understand more about this pivotal historical period.¹⁶

The homeless or those at risk of homelessness who frequent the St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Social Care Unit are our neighbours and we are developing a regular lecture programme, and also making plans for free, evening tours on a regular basis. A visit to the House will no doubt be an enriching experience that gives these individuals a sense of how London has developed between Franklin's day and their own. Given that Franklin was a prolific writer and that during his time at Craven Street he devised an alternative alphabet and wrote what is considered one of the best autobiographies of all time, we hope to develop an active writing programme and feature Social Care Unit client's work in the House.

Benjamin Franklin House has significance: locally and will add to London's rich heritage attractions; regionally (Franklin's family was from Ecton, near Northampton, providing tourism links with that region and other areas critical to Franklin – in fact, in honour of the Franklin tercentenary, we are developing a Franklin Trail throughout the UK with our colleagues at the US Tercentenary Commission signed into law by President George Bush); and internationally (the House served as first de facto American embassy and is a lasting symbol of the ties that bind Britain and the United States).

London's influential Time Out magazine remarked in a four-star review of the Benjamin Franklin House Historical Experience: "A Grade-I listed building, beautifully restored.... It's a short, intense experience.... You'll come away with a strong sense of the man and the times in which he lived."

¹⁶ 2006 student outreach includes:

1. School visits to the House – schools schedule free of charge half-day trips to the House for a viewing of our 'museum as theatre' Historical Experience, along with hands-on experiments centred on Benjamin Franklin's London science.
2. Ben's Travelling Suitcase – our Education Officer travels to schools to provide hands-on workshops using a valise full of Franklin-related science objects.
3. The Science Day – three respected professionals (a historian, a scientist, and a museum curator) present interactive sessions to students demonstrating Franklin's innovative discoveries.
4. In-School Science Fairs – participating schools hold in-school science fairs with children addressing such questions as 'how do you get more heat from less fuel', a question that led Benjamin Franklin to install a 'Franklin Stove' in his laboratory at Craven Street.
5. Annual Benjamin Franklin Science Fair – Winning projects from in-school science fairs are on display at an important London Science Venue like the Royal College of Physicians. Winners in all categories are judged by experts.

The primary focus now is ensuring Benjamin Franklin House is widely experienced by the public. In their interest we have tried to engagingly capture the London life of one of history's great figures in a manner that would have appealed to the man himself. For Franklin is a character whose pragmatism, inventiveness, and sense of civic responsibility has much to teach us still.