THERE MUST BE LITTLE IN THE WAY OF HOPES and despair, ambition and fear, ingenuity and effort that hasn’t been expressed within the walls of Mont Orgueil Castle over eight centuries of occupation.

So, for the team involved in planning and commissioning the Castle’s exhibition scheme, the big challenge was how to suggest aspects of the different military, social, political, and natural histories in an imaginative and emotionally engaging way without concealing or competing with such an architecturally important and archaeologically sensitive historic site.

The answer lay in the use of an approach pioneered by the Jersey Heritage Trust at the nationally recognised Maritime Museum in 1997. Here, the Trust brought together an eclectic and talented mix of designers, artists and craftspeople to consider and interpret Jersey’s maritime history. The innovative interpretation scheme worked well - and won the 1997 Museum of the Year award.

But while the challenges of presenting big histories in small spaces were the same in both locations, there was one crucial difference – the architecture. The Maritime Museum is set in warehouses on the New North Quay – ideal gallery spaces that allow a vibrant mix of exhibits and information in many different styles and materials to work with each other to create a dramatic overall effect. But at Mont Orgueil, overly dramatic exhibits could compete with, and potentially damage, the character.

Another element the team had to bear in mind in planning the exhibition scheme was that the quality of the exhibits at Mont Orgueil could have a major impact on visitors’ understanding by providing strong visualisations and by representing aspects of history for which there are few original artefacts to exhibit. In years past, one solution was to use waxwork tableaux representing historic scenes from various periods. These were confined to the Keep, where they had a strong, but in some ways adverse, impact. Theatrical lighting meant windows were blacked out, and wall-to-ceiling wood and Perspex barriers broke up the rooms and obscured the fabric of the building itself.

So the new scheme was planned around a number of ideas. We would try to use the whole castle, exterior as well as interior spaces. We would avoid adapting the rooms themselves in order to house exhibits. We would aim to cover a wide range of subjects, telling the stories of the castle from many different viewpoints. And we would encourage the involvement of a variety of artists, craftspeople and technicians working in different media.

We drew up an extensive list of potential relevant subject areas, and, separately, assembled a range of visual ideas, often based in medieval images. Lead artist Gordon Young helped us match subjects and ideas to artists who were invited to develop proposals. In some cases these proposals went nowhere and were not pursued, but in most cases wonderful, creative exhibits emerged that give life and presence to subjects and ideas for which we have only fragmentary historical remains.

Of the many exhibits in the castle developed in this way, the following six help illustrate the approach we took.

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The Illusion of Witchcraft by Mike Woods

Between 1562 and 1660 there were at least 65 witch trials in Jersey – resulting in at least 33 deaths and eight banishments. This is an incredible insight into the religious fundamentalism that gripped the Island at that time. People were incarcerated in the castle, and many killed, for crimes that were imagined by a paranoid community. Mike Woods’s exhibit represents the power of that fantasy, and draws on period images of witches and demons.

The Island was in the grip of what G R Balleine in his History of Jersey described as ‘the stern militant uncompromising Protestantism of France where all who belonged to the “New Religion” thought of themselves as soldiers engaged in a life and death struggle with the Devil’.

During this period new laws were passed to safeguard the Sabbath. Dancing, playing skittles and gossiping could result in a prison sentence; missing church, swearing and drunkenness could result in fines, while the telling of licentious stories or the singing of lascivious songs meant a fine for everyone present. In 1591 the Royal Court banned diviners from seeking counsel or advice from witches ‘under pain of one month’s imprisonment in the castle on bread and water’.

In the grip of religious paranoia, elaborate fantasies of diabolic behaviour were imagined. As Lieutenant Bailiff Philippe Le Geyt later reflected: ‘How many innocent people have perished in the flames on the asserted testimony of supernatural circumstances? I cannot say there are no witches; but since the difficulty of convicting them has been recognised in the Island they all seem to have disappeared as though the evidence of time gone by had been but an illusion.’
Brian Fell’s Tree of Succession shows the interlinked fortunes of the French and English crowns from 1154 to 1485. The royal houses of France and England were closely linked by marriage throughout the Middle Ages, but these complex relationships provoked significant Anglo-French rivalries and led to the Hundred Years War in which the castle played a part.

Eleanor of Aquitaine is at the base of the tree. She was one of the crucial links between the two dynasties. She first married King Louis VII of France and then King Henry II of England, first of the Plantagenets. It was their son, King John, who ordered the construction of Mont Orgueil following the crisis of 1204 and the loss of mainland Normandy. By building and maintaining Mont Orgueil Castle, the kings of England announced to the world that they had political ambitions in this part of north-west Europe.

The Tree is made of cold forged steel, but so fine is the detail that the metal seems almost to have been made of plastic. These medieval royal faces are situated in the Medieval Hall, the part of the early castle building with the highest status.

The Tree is complemented by a sculpture called the Wheel of Fortune, also by Brian. The wheel was a common medieval image and revealed that even kings and emperors cannot escape the vicissitudes of fate. An illuminated illustration of the Wheel formed part of an ancient manuscript found in Jersey called the Romance of the Rose, which dates back to around 1230 but which was stolen from St Helier’s public library in 1955. The manuscript was photographed in the 1920s but only in black and white. It was described as being ‘most delicately drawn and blazing with scarlets, pinks, blues, greens and yellows, besides much gold-leaf in the backgrounds and borders’.

This illusion is represented by Mike Woods in an elaborate piece of interactive blacksmithery. As the handles are turned the figures become animated to the sound of grinding cogs and gears.

‘I used techniques that would have been familiar to metalworkers in the 16th century, although I also used modern fabrication methods and 21st-century tools,’ Mike explained.

‘Before starting the project I delved into various books on medieval witchcraft and was inspired by Bosch and Breughel, as well as other lesser-known artists. I incorporated some references to this in the sculpture. Similarly, there are some references to witchcraft, both local and generic. A Jerseyman, Jean Morant, sacrificed a finger to his satanic master. I have shown this, along with other witchcraft references, such as a bottle of urine for protection from spells, a dead man’s hand for making spells and witches’ familiars such as frogs, cats and bats.’
The Wound Man
The Wound Man reveals another, less romantic side of medieval warfare – the damage medieval warfare wreaked on the human body. Doctors of the period, and certainly the barber-surgeons at the castle, would have been familiar with the figure from their medical texts, which show the Wound Man calmly absorbing the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The exhibit is a reminder of the grim realities of conflict at this time, and it would be hard to find a better illustration of the phrase ‘long-suffering’ than the Wound Man.

There are few records that give details of medieval combat in Jersey, but a poetic description of a battle in St Aubin’s Bay in 1406 survives to give us a hint of the violence this sculpture represents.

‘Dropping their spears, they grasped swords and axes, and joined in a fierce rough and tumble. Then you could see helm severed from breastplate, and arm-plates and grieves hacked off. Some grappled with daggers drawn and blood flowed in torrents.’ (G Diaz de Gomez, El Vittorial, on the battle in St Aubin’s Bay, 1406.)

The carving, formed from huge section of oak tree trunk roughed out with a chain saw, is closely based on an illustration of 1420 in a manuscript in the Wellcome Institute collection. The texts describing the wounds around the sculpture have been translated from Latin. Creating such a large-scale carving was in itself a challenge for Owen, but there were further difficulties in siting the finished work in the confined space of the Elizabeth Gate.

‘The Wound Man involved a return to wood sculpture for me,’ Owen explained.

‘To cope with such a large-scale project, I enlisted the assistance of chain saw artist Andrew Frost, who blocked out the figure from the assembled oak trunks following a life-size polystyrene model I had made. The figure on its base stands at over 5 metres high and is braced by a galvanised steel armature. The armature

Fabulous Beasts by David Kemp
Medieval minds believed there was a land beyond their immediate space and time that was inhabited by strange and wonderful beasts. Many of these fabulous beasts were thought to have amazing and awesome powers and their images were adopted into medieval heraldry. Heraldic images of dragons, a unicorn and a green man and woman appear in carvings in the castle. And images of fabulous beasts appear elsewhere in the Island; there is a dragon window in St Martin’s Church and a dragon wall painting in St Clement’s Church, while a Griffin supports a Le Marchand seal of 1453.

David Kemp works in an ‘assemblage’ process, collecting and recycling all sorts of discarded items. When things have been thrown away their functions are similarly discarded, and David combines them in new contexts, discovering new identities for them, an approach that is particularly relevant here.

David said: ‘Throughout history, societies have collected relics from the past and presented them to illustrate contemporary beliefs. History is constantly being rewritten and “explanations” are constantly being revised. The medieval world was deeply superstitious, very little had been “proven” in scientific terms. Dragons, griffins, fairies and goblins were as ‘real’ to them as God or hell-fire. Medieval minds were open to belief, anything was possible.

‘In the 19th century, the age of Enlightenment examined medieval beliefs in the light of scientific enquiry, and many myths were dismissed as mere superstition. Rational explanations were constructed for the endurance of fragments from the past. Myths, however, endure, occupying spaces in the human mind beyond the rational. Archetypes persist, here “there still be monsters”, representing things that we do not quite believe, but still do not yet know. Objects may be revealed to be “fakes”, but science has not yet provided all the “real” answers.’

The components of these displays hint at the character and function of the creatures. The Dragon has been reconstructed from fragments of carved wood, wrought iron, carthorse harnesses and musical instruments, evocative of some sort of medieval mechanical dragon that might have been used in theatrical processions. The Griffin is made from bamboo and papier mâché, lightweight materials suitable for exhibiting it swooping from aloft.
 includes a jib hoist, which lifted the heavy oak elements into position in the confines of the Elizabeth Gate. Essentially a two-dimensional image, I have striven to preserve the naïveté of draughtsmanship often found in the barber-surgeon’s notebooks.’

**King Death by Steve Gumbley**

Death was never very far from the minds of Jersey people – including castle dwellers – in medieval times. Hostile invasions and terrible diseases were a constant threat and Steve Gumbley reflects this in the shadow sculpture. The figure illustrates the sense of mortality experienced in a society where fighting and disease meant that life for most was brutal and short.

Two vicious assaults in the 14th century left Islanders feeling particularly vulnerable. In 1336 David Bruce and other Scots attacked Jersey and Guernsey ‘inhumanely committing murder, arson and other atrocities’. Then in 1372 Ifan of Wales attacked Guernsey and there was great slaughter: ‘The French burnt and wasted the whole Island and put men and women to ransom. Then they entered Jersey and burnt and wasted there also.’

The remnants of the *Trois Vifs and Trois Morts* wall painting in St Clement’s Church are a vivid reminder of the medieval preoccupation with death. This painting depicts a story, which tells of a meeting between three young kings and three corpses who warned them: ‘As you are, we once were; as we are so shall you be.’

When activated, Steve’s *Danse Macabre* sculpture slowly rotates to specially commissioned music, casting dancing shadows of skeletal archers on the walls of the tower. Explaining his inspiration for the exhibit, Steve pointed to both the strong sense of mortality experienced by our predecessors, and the original use of the Bell Tower Chamber.

‘People of the 14th and 15th centuries witnessed death more than we do today; it was an ever-present threat, a shadow over life from birth to old age. This was reflected in the popular stories of that time, with vivid images of dancing skeletons and decaying corpses providing strong reminders of mortality,’ he said.

‘The starting points of this exhibit are these grisly warnings and the fact that the Bell Tower Chamber was used by archers, or crossbowmen, who defended the castle through the arrow-slit windows. If you look at the sculpture from above, it shows the castle dominated by the King of Death and surrounded by deathly figures, all casting shadows over Mont Orgueil and on to the chamber walls. Revolving slowly, like a prayer wheel, this is a mechanical meditation on darkness and light, death and life.’