

Britain's Little-Known Gems

As a researcher on BBC's quirky general knowledge quiz, *QI*, Molly Oldfield has visited museums all over the UK. These are some of her favourite finds

Some people search for years to find their dream job, others just fall right into it. Ten years ago, Molly was about to finish university: "I didn't really know what I wanted to do — just something interesting..." As luck would have it, TV comedy producer John Lloyd was putting together his idea for a quiz show with a difference, in which contestants would be rewarded if their answers were Quite Interesting — hence, *QI*.

Hired by John, Molly and two other researchers read books, went to lectures and museums and collected facts. Molly's still doing the same job (as well as writing books).

"I'm finding out new things every day," she says. "I've always asked questions. In fact, when I told my grandparents about my job, they said, 'That's perfect — you've been asking 'Why?' since you could first talk!' My job also means that I'm never stuck for something to say at dinner parties. Someone will mention armadillos, and I usually have a fact or two to throw into the conversation, because I know that the nine-banded armadillo always gives birth to identical quadruplets, and that the smallest of the species is the pink fairy armadillo, which is less than five inches long."

Charlie Brown, The Space Ship

Science Museum, London (0870 870 4868; www.sciencemuseum.org.uk)

"Charlie Brown" was the nickname for the Apollo 10 command module. It's a weird brown tea-ish colour and looks more like a prop for an early episode of *Doctor Who* than a craft that safely took three humans into space, travelling 500,000 miles at a speed faster than any other man-made object (24,791 mph).



The Prime Minister's 'Siren Suit'

The Cabinet War Rooms, Imperial War Museum, London (020 7930 6961; www.iwm.org.uk)

This is a brilliant museum where you can listen to Churchill's famous speeches, look at his paintings, read letters to his wife — and see his red velvet onesie. They're popular now, but Churchill was way ahead of the trend. He got his made at Turnbull & Asser, and wore them through the long nights when he worked through air raids — which is why he called it his "Siren Suit".



The Walrus

Horniman Museum, London (020 8699 1872; www.horniman.ac.uk)

The taxidermists in Victorian England who stuffed this walrus had never seen one alive. As a result, they overstuffed it, so it looks absurd. Today, it's a popular exhibit — it even has its own Twitter following!

Pony Boots

Garden Museum, London (020 7401 8865; www.gardenmuseum.org.uk)

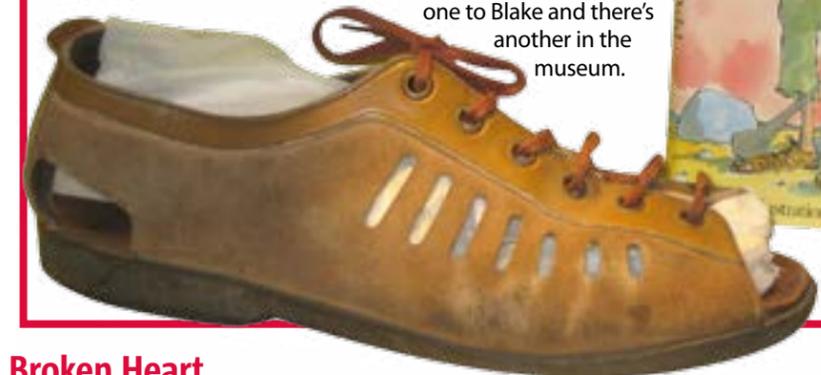
With their metal-clad hooves, horses pulling the new-fangled mowers of the 1800s were at risk of ruining the lawns they helped cut. The answer? Leather pony boots, as made by Green's, whose patrons included Queen Victoria and the Tsar of Russia. Then came the motor mower and by 1930s, pony boots were history.



The BFG's Shoe

The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre, Great Missenden, Bucks (01494 892192; www.roalddahlmuseum.org)

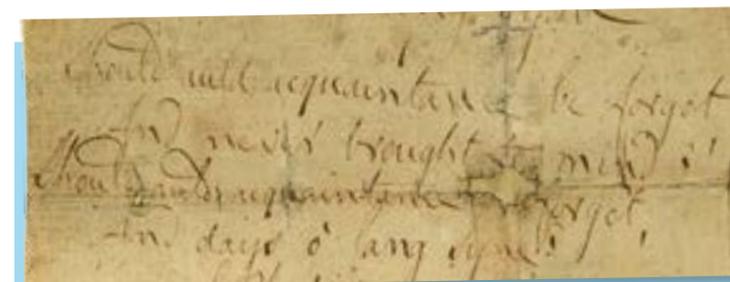
Dahl first described his big, friendly giant as wearing black trousers, "tucked into the tops of black leather boots". But when the illustrator Quentin Blake drew the boots, they made the BFG look a bit scary. Dahl realised that a pair of his own Norwegian, lace-up sandals would suit the giant better — "ridiculous sandals that for some reason had holes cut along each side, with a large hole at the end where his toes stuck out". He sent one to Blake and there's another in the museum.



A Broken Heart

The Foundling Museum, London (020 7841 3600; www.foundlingmuseum.org.uk)

When the Foundling Hospital opened in London on 25th March 1741, all lamps and candles were blown out, so mothers unable to care for their babies could deposit their tiny bundles unseen. The women were asked to leave a token linking them to their babies, in case they could claim them later. Often, mothers would simply cut a piece of fabric from their dresses. In 1767, a baby named Charles was left by his mother, Sarah, along with a patchwork needle case, above which she stitched a heart and their initials, C and S. She cut the heart in two, taking one half away with her. Eight years later, she returned, matched her half to the one that's now held in the archives, and reclaimed her son.



Auld Lang Syne by Robert Burns

The Mitchell Library, Glasgow (0141 287 2999; www.glasgowlife.org.uk/libraries/the-mitchell-library)

Auld Lang Syne is sung all over the world on New Year's Eve, using the words on a piece of paper that's two centuries old and lives in a combination-lock briefcase in a secret location within the Mitchell Library. Penned by Scottish poet Robert Burns, it's one of five handwritten versions of the song known to exist. Yellowed and fragile, the paper has to be kept out of the light to preserve it.

The Exhibits You May Never See...

"A few years ago, the fish curators from the Natural History Museum asked to come to a live recording of *QI*," says Molly. "Of course we said yes, but asked to see their place of work, too. We saw creatures collected by Darwin — stored in glass jars — a giant squid, and sharks that inspired Speedo swimwear designed for the Olympics. For the first time, I realised that most museums have far more hidden away than they have on display. They're full of stuff that's conserved for the future, ready for researchers to delve into.

"Some are just too precious or fragile to exhibit; there may not be space for enormous objects, and the microscopic ones are impossible to display effectively. So they stay behind closed doors."

● *The Secret Museum*, by Molly Oldfield (HarperCollins, £25), is out now.

The Blue Whale

Natural History Museum, London (020 7942 5000; www.nhm.ac.uk)

This is the first museum exhibit I remember seeing. I looked up at it, amazed that such a thing swam in the ocean and lived on our planet. Since then, I've found out that the blue whale in the Natural History Museum is a

life-size model, but there's a real blue whale skeleton in the National Museum of Scotland's archives in Edinburgh. It used to be on display, but during a recent redesign, they moved it onto a long, long shelf in the archives. I never expected to find such a magnificent animal in storage. Even a baby blue whale weighs up to 3 tons, the same as an elephant.

