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PAPAHOU
RECORDS OF THE AUCKLAND MUSEUM

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10 years of "open by default, closed by exception" at Tāmaki Paenga Hira

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, many museums across the world have shifted their approach to online access, "opening up" their collections by making collection data and imagery available to use via Creative Commons licences, enabling users to access, re-use and remix digital content. Broadly, this was driven by developments in open-source software, and the expanding reach of the internet.

For Aotearoa's GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives and museums), changing expectations from the public, advocacy by groups such as the National Digital Forum and the establishment of the New Zealand Government Open Access and Licensing (NZGOAL) framework, helped usher in these changes (NZ Government 2025). These developments reflected an increasing recognition that collections and the intellectual property held within memory institutions can be better leveraged as instruments of civic value.

Papahou: Records of the Auckland Museum, now in its second year, is the most recent product of Auckland Museum's 10-year open access journey. Strong foundations established over a decade meant that during the 2024 review and refresh of the longstanding Records of the Auckland Museum, the journal could be comfortably made open access and available online. As one of the institution's cornerstone research outputs, Papahou now reflects the breadth and depth of the Museum's collections and research. This editorial providesa brief history of this open access journey.

Open by default

In 2015 Auckland Museum launched the centrepieces of its open access project: a new Collections Online and a refreshed Online Cenotaph (Auckland Museum 2015, 2025a). These two initiatives were balanced with the specific responsibilities that come with caring for taonga, cultural heritage, and knowledge systems with deep ancestral and community connections. While open access has become an aspiration internationally, Aotearoa's context adds an additional, essential layer: cultural permissions processes that honour tikanga (protocols), uphold mana (integrity) and recognise the authority of indigenous communities over taonga (treasures).

The Museum's Digital Channel Strategy (DCS), launched in 2012 and developed with external partner Digital Arts Network, was the strategic foundation for this work and held the ambition to position Auckland Museum as a "Digital Museum" that enabled audiences to engage with the work of the Museum in new and innovative ways (Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira 2012).

Crucially, the DCS sat within the broader framework of the Museum's "Future Museum" strategy, a 20-year plan which prioritised investment in development of digital infrastructure, cataloguing and digitisation to make collections more accessible both inside and beyond the Museum walls (Auckland Museum 2012). This was a period of growth for the Museum with many strategically important projects intersecting: the Collections Readiness Project, a mass digitisation programme, the Pacific Collections Access Project, Te Awe (enhanced cataloguing and storage of taonga Māori collections), the First World War Centenary and the initiation of significant gallery renewal programmes.

Prototype development for the new Collections Online began in 2013. By the time it was publicly launched in July 2015, the platform was host to nearly three quarters of a million records online (726,000) and 330,000 images. In addition to making the Museum's collections available via a single search interface, Collections Online also provided an open API (application programming interface) for programmatic access to collections and

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standardised collection information using linked open data, all firsts for a New Zealand GLAM organisation (Auckland Museum 2015). Alongside this was a refreshed Online Cenotaph. Established in 1996 as a digital roll of honour, Online Cenotaph's redevelopment aligned with the Museum's open access approach and strengthened its capacity to grow as a living digital memorial, rather than a closed institutional record.

Leveraging intellectual property

The increased investment in cataloguing, digitisation and technical infrastructure necessitated a rethink of online access to collection images. To arrive at a new framework, the institution asked itself two questions: Are the constraints placed on reuse of collection imagery and data fit for purpose? And what are the risks associated with lifting those constraints?

Weighing up the Museum's core purpose, the latent value of our collections to our audiences and the administrative burden of handling image requests, the decision was made to shift to an open approach. This included opening collections imagery, making large amounts of digitised content available to download and re-use by licensing them using Creative Commons licences.

This shift was facilitated by a new Copyright Framework (Auckland Museum 2016a). Copyright in the GLAM sector is a key enabler of online access, but in some cases it can also be a roadblock as it regulates legal access online. The Museum saw an opportunity to increase access and use of the collections by streamlining copyright processes, which included a piece of work to reduce 100 different rights statements to just seven.

Te Ao Māori and responsible stewardship

The Museum's Open Access project was underpinned by a framework that tempered openness with cultural responsibility. While the philosophy aimed to be "open by default", it was also "closed by exception", underpinned by the Museum's Copyright Framework and Cultural Permissions Policy (Auckland Museum 2025d). The Māori and Pacific cultural permissions processes, developed in 2014 and 2017 respectively (Auckland Museum 2016b, 2025c), are guided the principles in He Korahi Māori (Māori strategic pathway underpinning the Museum's bicultural aspirations) and Teu Le Vā (Pacific strategic dimension) ensuring that reuse of collections is respectful, culturally appropriate and does not restrict community access.

While these processes could be seen as restrictive, in practice they have increased culturally safe use and sharing of Māori and Pacific taonga, while also providing an institutional safety net for the Museum's collections, staff and the wider public. These collections are viewable online and information about them is accessible, but image files cannot be downloaded, instead requiring permission from Māori curatorial staff, iwi or hapu to reuse them. Through these processes the Museum has established strong relationships with iwi and descendant groups who whakapapa to collections in our care.

In practice this involves strategically realigning power and agency around the care and access to culturally significant collections. Managing western intellectual property alongside the tikanga based cultural permissions processes has showed that these are not opposing forces but can be mutually reinforcing for staff, the public and indigenous communities alike.

Online partnerships and new audiences

Over the past 10 years the Museum has continued to describe, digitise and release more of its content on Collections Online, significantly growing its national and international online audience. By mid-2016, a year after its launch, Collections Online had reached over 100,000 page views a month, which eventually settled into its current range of 3070,000 views per month. Online Cenotaph has an even larger audience, with 150–200,000 views a month, peaking at nearly 500,000 in April each year, due to Anzac Day commemorations. Combined, both platforms reached 620,00 users in the last financial year made up of local, national and international online audiences. The amount of information available continues to steadily grow and at the time of writing this editorial there are over 1 million collection records available online, 1.1 million images and of those 526,000 are openly licenced, while Online Cenotaph has grown to feature over 265,000 service people.

This vast pool of open access content has enabled the Museum to share its collections and research across a wide range of websites and platforms. In line with the Digital Content Strategy's aim of going where audiences are and the ethos "Create once, publish everywhere" influenced by the US National Public Radio, the institution embarked on a series of digital partnerships. The first of these involved the upload of Natural Science data to the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) in 2016, followed by a collaboration with Google Arts & Culture. These initiatives contributed to increased search and website traffic, as users followed links back to the Museum's website.

Today Auckland Museum uploads and shares content with over 20 different websites, reaching different audiences who use the collections for different purposes. This includes biodiversity researchers using data portals (GBIF, Atlas of Living Australia), students and teachers searching content aggregators (Digital NZ, Digital Pasifik), the general public browsing image sharing

website (Flickr, Pinterest), hobbyists and artists seeking 3D models (Sketchfab), genealogists (A Street Near You) and a global audience of readers and volunteers of various Wikimedia projects, including Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons and Wikidata (Auckland Museum 2025b).

These Wikimedia platforms have been a particular focus in recent years and have contributed to a significant growth of the Museum's online audience, with 89 million views of collection imagery and data recorded on external websites in the 2024–2025 financial year. When viewed alongside the 619,000 views of Collections Online during the same period (a 14,000% incincrease), it's clear to see the Museum's investment in the open access project is showing tangible benefits.

This approach has also significantly increased the scale of public participation with Online Cenotaph. Since 2015, tens of thousands of contributors have added data, images, documents and notes to Online Cenotaph, alongside more than a million digital poppies placed in acts of remembrance. Such engagements are essential to Online Cenotaph's mission as a collaborative platform, driven by whānau and community participation, and made possible by the Museum's open access ethos.

The future of "open by default, closed by exception"

In the coming decade, museums will be defined less by the openness of their digital collections than by the care and collaboration that underpins that access. As the sector continues to face technological, ethical, legal and cultural challenges, it is crucial to maintain balance, ensuring that quality and depth of engagement are valued alongside the quantity of digital content made available.

As we witness the rise of Artificial Intelligence and online misinformation, GLAM institutions are in a unique position to be sources of trusted, validated information. Indeed, Seb Chan, the Director of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, recently referred to GLAM institutions as "evidence institutions" (Chan 2025). We are already seeing this in practice with our open access collections, along with our open access collections and Wiki programme of work included in large language model training datasets. Crucially, this material provides accurate and factual content, helping to ground the outputs of generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT (Deckelmann 2023; Wikipedia contributors 2025).

Auckland Museum will continue to balance the impact of big and open data with our bicultural aspirations. As we move towards 2040, the bicentenary of the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, museums must continue to proactively respond to concerns about indigenous data sovereignty and ethical ownership of mātauranga (knowledge), information and collections. Already museums are working intentionally to restore the agency and authority for communities to determine the direction of care and access to their taonga tuku iho (ancestral treasures).

The Wai 262 claim is a landmark Waitangi Tribunal claim that examines Māori rights and interests in taonga species, mātauranga Māori and cultural knowledge, and how these should be recognised and protected within New Zealand's legal, policy and institutional frameworks. Wai262 strengthens the expectation that collection management, digitisation, imaging and open access decisions will be undertaken in genuine partnership with iwi and hapū, with tikanga embedded as core practice. Wai262 presents both opportunity and implications for museums in Aotearoa because it reframes how taonga, mātauranga Māori and associated knowledge are governed, accessed and used.

The past decade of Auckland Museum's open access programme has also strengthened internal discipline. The act of making material publicly available necessitates a higher standard of metadata completeness, image quality, rights clarity and documentation.

We also continue to invest in the technology that enables this work. Looking ahead to 2026, Auckland Museum will undertake the first phase of a large redevelopment of our technical infrastructure which powers our Collections Online and Online Cenotaph platforms with a longer purview to redevelop the user interface and make it fit for purpose for another 10 years of online access.

Conclusion

Over the past five years Auckland Museum has faced unprecedented closures, the first for five months during the long COVID lockdowns of 2020–2022. While many other museums scrambled to pivot to online access, years of groundwork meant that Auckland Museum was able to promote and foreground the online collection and partnerships that had been developed in prior years and public engagement could continue, albeit at a distance.

This preparedness was the result of decisions made nearly a decade earlier. In the early 2010s, leadership at Auckland Museum made the bold decision to invest in an open access programme and the 2015 Future Museum strategy confirmed this path. A decade later, we see the results of this, with the depth and scale of access to collections exceeding initial expectations. Now guided by the The Path to 2029, the Museum will continue to provide access to collections data, information and imagery in a respectful and culturally appropriate way. Acting as kaitiaki, the Museum has demonstrated that open access reframes — rather than diminishes — institutional responsibility, supports collective access and participation while maintaining integrity, tikanga and long-term stewardship.

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