HOW CAN A NEW MUSEUM TELL THE STORY OF LONDON?



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

London’s new museum has opened inside the huge Victorian buildings of Smithfield Market. The market was used for selling meat for about 800 years, and Charles Dickens once described it as a place of “filth and fat and blood”. Instead of demolishing the buildings, designers have turned them into galleries showing London’s history. The displays stretch from prehistoric stone axes and Roman Londinium to medieval objects, Tudor jewellery, women’s suffrage and modern music. One unusual exhibit is a piece of the famous Whitechapel fatberg, a giant mass of fat and rubbish removed from a sewer. The building itself is part of the story. Visitors can see old market spaces, underground rooms and a Victorian temperance café, where people once gathered to drink non-alcoholic refreshments. The museum nearly became an office development, but conservation campaigners argued that the historic buildings should be saved and reused.

WHY IS THIS INTERESTING?

This story shows that history is not only found in ancient objects. It can also survive in buildings, streets, shops and even sewers. The museum brings together Roman Britain, medieval London, industrial growth, changing attitudes to alcohol and modern popular culture. It also raises an important question: should old buildings be demolished for new development, or can they be given a new life?

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

“Should historic buildings be saved even when cities need new offices?”

Source: The Guardian

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2026/nov/24/fatberg-museum-of-london-astonishing-smithfields-architecture