# Social History in Museums

Volume 36

# Social History in Museums

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# Contents

# Editor's foreword

It's all change at SHCG's annual conference in 2011 as we responded to the times and cut our cloth to size as well as making improvements, of course. Conference was reduced to two days, cutting the overall cost of conference, and we introduced a more practical element through the workshops. We also added a lively debate reflecting the theme of conference *Who Do We Think We Are: Working with Social History Collections in the 21st Century* asking if Social History Curators should stop trying to be all things to all people. The debate arguments and conclusion have been written up by Steph Mastoris, Nick Poole and Michael Terwey.

Both Brendan Carr and Fiona Ure offer articles relating to community projects in Reading and Leicestershire offering the benefit of their experiences. Dr Robert Knifton reflects on how his research into the use of pop music within a gallery can be used whilst Jenny Broadbent discusses her visits to three new social history displays in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cardiff.

Focussing particularly on collecting; Angela Robinson tells us about her experiences of building a collection from scratch for the new International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. And Lauren Ephithite rounds up the results of her survey into social history collecting practices, which she conducted as part of her MA Museum Studies dissertation. Some all too common and some very interesting results revealed.

*Social History in Museums* is also undergoing a bit of a transformation, building on its redesign four years ago. This year we are offering the Journal in a downloadable format suitable for reading devices, iPads and pcs. If you're reading a hard copy of Journal and you'd prefer to receive the specially formatted digital version, please contact the Editor to register your preference for next year.

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# This conference believes that Social History Curators should stop trying to be all things to all people – SHCG Debate

*This year's conference saw the introduction of a formal debating session which produced some interesting and unexpected expressions. In this article, the essence of the debate is recreated. Steph Mastoris, of Museums Wales proposes the motion on behalf of himself and Lauren Woodard, of the RAF Museum and Nick Poole of Collections Trust presents the opposition on behalf of himself and Nick Merriman of Manchester Museums. Michael Terwey of the National Media Museum chaired the debate at conference and rounds up the article here.*

### Proposition – Steph Mastoris and Lauren Woodard

Lauren and I proposed this motion not out of any sense of intellectual elitism or a desire to exist in some museological ivory tower, but because we care passionately about the special skills and work of history curators and the collections they facilitate for the public. Of course one of the great privileges and joys of being a history curator is that our work is people-focussed and we are, probably more than any other museum professional, "out there" in the community, facilitating all sorts of projects that require a general grasp of lots of things. But we also know that there is a large body of specialist knowledge that we need to posses if we are to do justice to the collections in our care. It is the maintenance of these special skills that we feel is seriously under threat in the current intellectual and economic climate.

I opened the debate by stating that there is a paradox in today's world of museums: in this era of raised professional standards, curators - especially history curators - are expected to be able to turn their hands to every skill required in a modern museum. Despite the huge success of SHCG over nearly 40 years to provide professional self-help, during the same period social history curatorship has steadily disappeared as a distinct discipline and is now on the verge of becoming a form of General Curatorship.

I then provided three observations on this trend.

First, if we become Jacks or Jills of all trades, we will end up masters or mistresses of none. As a result of a combination of poor funding for staffing museums and the broadening expectations of what a curator should do, we end up doing everything. In a quick straw poll of the audience present at the debate most people regularly undertook a good proportion of the following tasks: managing staff, devising exhibitions, designing exhibitions, mounting exhibitions, running education programmes, undertaking outreach programmes, organising events, and writing funding applications. As a result of this general curatorship we often have the bare minimum of time to devote to collections care, and virtually none to research, (unless because of a particularly important enquiry). This lack of time with our collections rapidly leads to a poor grasp of their key strengths and significances, in turn making their future development difficult. Knowing the bare minimum about many of the artefacts within the collection also gives our stakeholders the idea that really anyone can do our job.

Second, much of our professional training is also structured around this generalist approach, concentrating on collections care and interpretation without ensuring that we know enough specialist information about what we have to interpret. This situation is not helped by both the current cultural climate that often sees specialist knowledge as arcane and geekish, and the current economic climate where employers require great flexibility in job roles. These three factors have combined to make specialist curatorial

knowledge a burden rather than an ornament to one's career prospects. As a result there is a growing body of history curators who are happy to have only a general overview of their collections in the mistaken belief that there will always be some expert elsewhere who can help in times of need, or (worse!) that all the information is on the internet. But our users expect us to know about things in detail, or at least of a specific source of expertise to which they can be referred. Specialist knowledge is important. When I asked in my second straw poll of the debate, who would be happy having a tooth filled by someone with just a general understanding of dentistry, no-one put their hand up!

Third, history curators themselves have helped this rise of generalism by not clearly defining the nature and extent of our discipline, especially the core body of knowledge required. To some extent this is because we came very late to the curatorial party, long after the fine and decorative art specialists, the natural historians and archaeologists, and so we are still coming to terms with our subject matter. In part it is also because we look after such wide variety of material that embraces discrete specialist subjects with their own taxonomies, such as costume and textiles, crafts and industries, design technology, architecture, and folklore. In reality, all that we have currently to help define our discipline is the SHIC classification system of 1983, the (now largely forgotten) *Manual of Social History Curatorship* of 1992, and the recent (and excellent) *Object Lessons* teaching pack, along with some articles scattered through our journal and newsletter. The firstBASE database has also been created to provide access to specialist knowledge, but it is significant that very little data has been volunteered by current, practicing history curators.

After making these three observations I concluded by saying that history curatorship is quite easy to do badly but hard to do well, and as social history is the museum discipline that reaches the widest audience so it is too important to be watered down by the onset of general curatorship. Therefore we must stop trying to be all things to all people if we wish to do full justice to our collections, develop our discipline and especially give the best possible practical support to communities we serve.

What I did not have enough time to say was that over the next few years our profession must attempt to define more fully the nature and extent of social history curatorship as a discipline. This must start through our work within our institutions, where there needs to be both time and opportunities to develop specialist knowledge and share it with others.


## Opposition – Nick Poole and Nick Merriman

Nick Merriman and I were pleased to be able to oppose this motion. We believe that it is vital that we do not limit ourselves, or draw arbitrary boundaries around the limitless diversity of social history, in all its aspects.

To explain why this motion must be opposed, we presented three arguments.

Firstly, that social history is a creative process, not a linear one. The skill of the Social History Curator is the skill of the storyteller. It rests in the ability to take the ordinary and the everyday and to draw from them the universal themes which help people to understand themselves and the world around them. Any boundary you create around the role of the social historian will limit the impact of the role.

Secondly, it is only through embracing social history in all its diversity that museums can ensure that they remain relevant to the widest possible cross-section of people.

Thirdly, pragmatism dictates that we can ill-afford to narrow our focus. If you are to be employable, you need to bring to your work a broad portfolio of skills and a clear understanding of how the different elements of the museum work together to deliver inspiring services for the visiting public.

We must acknowledge the rightful place of subject expertise in collections development, interpretation and use. But equally we must bring to this work the broader perspective of the generalist. That is why we must never stop trying to be all things to all people, and why this motion must be opposed.

## Chair – Michael Terwey

"I'm a generalist, but I want to be a specialist". This is the dilemma many Social History Curators find themselves in, and it was a remark which was echoed by many in the audience for the debate. The topic clearly resonated with delegates, and there were a great many thoughtful and personal contributions from the floor.

The attractions of specialism were clear to many. Contributors said that specialism would bring authority, and therefore the respect of (often older) colleagues and the public. What is a curator, if not a specialist and an expert?

Although many aspired to fully know and understand their collections, there was a feeling that this was, in reality, virtually impossible. Time was cited as a particular problem, not only for self-directed research and professional development, but also to do justice to public enquiries and exhibitions.

Perhaps 'specialists' would be more indispensible to their organisations, and less vulnerable to being restructured into redundancy, or consumed by even bigger, amorphous curatorial disciplines such as 'human history', or simply 'history'. And yet this belief coexisted with the anxiety that the stereotypical 'traditional curator' was vulnerable to the whim and prejudices (not without foundation) of museum managers – in particular those who do not, themselves, have a curatorial background.

Some were particularly concerned with the low status of 'generalists' compared with specialist curators at national museums. A number of contributors expressed their disappointment as they struggled to reconcile personal expectations of a curatorial career with the reality that they found themselves experiencing.

Yet not everyone came down on the specialist side of the question. In many ways I felt that, in some respects, our collective head was in 'specialist', while our heart was in 'generalist'. Several speakers argued that specialism and knowledge came through direct contact with communities and engagement with their understanding of their local social history.

Throughout the discussion, I was struck by the great frankness with which some delegates expressed their anxieties about how their career would develop and the great capacity for self-awareness and reflection which characterises the best Social History Curators. Far from indicating a crisis in our profession, I think the exceptionally high quality of discussion and debate is a sign of rude health.

Perhaps the dilemma itself is something which defines us as unique among curators. Mark O'Neill sees Social History Curatorship as a discipline characterised by "empathy and rigour"; empathy for the historical subjects we seek to bring to life and rigour in our approach to researching their lives and worlds. In which case, rather than seeing this issue as a problem to be solved if we could see it as a strength, we might find it easier to achieve what we want in our careers' as Social History Curators.

*The motion was defeated by a large majority. Social History Curators should carry on trying to be all things to all people. The committee would like to thank everyone who contributed to the debate on the day.*

# The Paper Memories project: A coming together of social history, art and reminiscence

*Fiona Ure, Curator of Home and Family Life at Leicestershire Museum Service describes the process of partnership work, an exhibition and a touring display involved in a project exploring the cultural significance of our clothing.*

### The Clothes We Wore

The clothes we wear are very important to us and the clothes we wore in the past can be very special.

Cast your mind back to your childhood. Think of the old photographs you have tucked away in a drawer. You will probably find somewhere in those memories an outfit or garment you treasured.

It may be an outfit you wore to a special occasion, the swimsuit your mother knitted for you that drooped to your knees when it got wet or that 'must have' pair of pyjamas with Thomas the Tank Engine on them.

You may also recall the clothes you knitted or sewed for your children or have family members who worked in Britain's clothing industry.

As part of the Paper Memories project, people across Leicestershire shared their memories of children's clothes; the clothes they wore and the clothes they made.

Those reminiscences were an important part of the Paper Memories project. Some of the paper clothes in the exhibition that were based upon memories were also an important record of Leicestershire's manufacturing past, and the home sewing and knitting skills of our parents and grandparents.

### Summary

The project was a collaboration between a local artist, Leicestershire Museum Service and local stakeholders.

The project used a combination of children's costumes recreated in paper and items from the Leicestershire Museum Service collection to produce a collection of reminiscences from local people, a small touring exhibition and a major temporary exhibition at Snibston Museum. The project covered the period 1940-1970 and children up to age 12.

The exhibitions featured the work of artist Felicity Austin who re-created children's clothes in various types of paper. These garments were based on original garments, family photographs, adverts and the reminiscences of local people.

The time period, 1940-1970, was chosen because Leicestershire was still the home of a number of leading manufacturers of children's wear until the 1970s. It was also a time when many items of clothing were still homemade and showed the creativity, skill and resourcefulness of women who dressed their families on a budget.

Felicity's artistic output was supported by images from the period and objects from the Museum's Home and Family Life Collections to produce a highly admired display.

### Planning and Preparation

The project was undertaken in order to involve local people with museum collections and allow them to inform the content of museum exhibitions.

The project had the following aims and objectives:

- To increase the range and volume of cultural, leisure and recreational activities that older people participate in.

- To empower older people to play an active part in the community.

- To collect and preserve local people's memories of children's clothes, home based clothes making and Leicestershire's textile manufacturing past.

- To produce a small touring exhibition and a major temporary exhibition for Leicestershire museum service. These exhibitions provided a trigger for informal reminiscence including cross generational reminiscence.

- To display what were essentially paper sculptures produced by a local artist.

- To collect information about children's clothes, home clothes making and local textile industries.

## Involvement and Partnership

- The main partnership in the project was between the artist, Felicity Austin and Leicestershire Museum service.

- The key stakeholders were the members of the four community groups that provided the memories the exhibition reflected.

- Further stakeholders emerged as the exhibition attracted visitors to Snibston Discovery Museum and the community spaces where the 'Moving Objects' touring display was exhibited.

- Visitors were encouraged to add their own reminiscences to the exhibition by filling in postcards. These cards also gave people the chance to draw their own favourite or special outfit and were displayed as a 'washing line' of memories along with individually drawn outfits based on recollections. One of these collected memories included a hand drawn blue dress which was 'the dress I wore when jumping off the chapel wall and tore it, mother was not pleased, about 1954'.

- A visitor book also allowed people to record not only their responses to the exhibition but further reminiscences triggered by the display.

## Results and Benefits

- The range and volume of cultural, leisure and recreational activities that older people participate in was increased in a meaningful way.

- Older people were empowered, through reminiscence, to play an active part in the community. Local people's memories of children's clothes, home based clothes making and Leicestershire's textile manufacturing past were collected and preserved.

- A small touring exhibition going to the major library sites was produced incorporating memories and photographs from project participants. This greatly increased the audience for the exhibition and allowed it to reach people who wouldn't go to a museum.

- Artist Felicity Austin's art found a suitable and appreciative audience.

- A major exhibition at Snibston, which engaged a wide range of stakeholders, was produced. This exhibition had an interactive element, in the form of a drawing station, which allowed further memories to be collected from the visiting public.

- Four events aimed at children took place at Snibston museum. These were designed to engage young people in a range of projects such as designing and making your own clothes and hats and paper doll making and also to demonstrate the artistic possibilities of paper and card and encourage creative development.

- A series of recorded recollections (38) and copies of 34 local photographs were added to the Museum service's pool of knowledge.

## The Reminiscence Sessions

Four older community groups were engaged with. This included two women's groups, a group of disabled people and their carers and a health support group.

The groups were each visited twice, once to explain about the project and get peoples reminiscence 'juices' going with examples of Felicity's art and museum objects, the second to record reminiscences and collect photographs for use in the exhibition.

The museum service commissioned a handling collection of paper clothes from Felicity specifically for the reminiscence sessions. This included a knitted swimsuit (of course), a pair of grey flannel shorts, a babies outfit and a pair of Kay's sandals.

The handling collection was designed to include iconic clothing items which most people would instantly recognise and have an emotional response to.

The reminiscences collected were very specific and based around memories of home dressmaking and knitting, clothes worn for specific occasions, special, favourite or indeed loathed outfits, (we all had one!), clothing rationing during World War Two and 'make do and mend', the 1953 Coronation celebrations and working in the clothing industry,

Informal feedback from the reminiscence clients was captured on tape and included the following:

> 'I haven't had so much fun for a long time. I've really enjoyed talking about the old days', E. Bateman, 25/03/09

> 'You forget how clever you were. You could make something out of nothing and never think about it'. O. Cope, 25/03/09

> 'I'm looking forward to seeing the exhibition, knowing I had a hand in it'. P. Clements, 28/07/09

## The Exhibition

Felicity sourced paper and card of every kind to represent the patterns, material types and textures of the many different garments she made for the display.

Visitors were constantly amazed at the ingenuity involved in reproducing fabrics in paper. Textured wallpaper was made into knitwear (the knitted swimming suit always produced cries of recognition and reminiscences among visitors of a certain age!) and corrugated cardboard made the soles of the Kay's 'Start-rite' sandals I remember from my own childhood.

The display was arranged thematically with sections including nightwear, (stripped, flannelette pyjamas!) baby wear, party wear, beach and holiday wear, school wear, the make do and mend era of the 1940s (including patched and darned clothes) and the fancy dress costumes of the 1953 Coronation celebrations.

Garments based on the clothing industry of Leicestershire were also much in evidence. Cherub baby vests made in Leicester and Liberty bodices made by Symington at Market Harborough triggered streams of reminiscence from older visitors who delighted in

passing on their memories to younger family members. (I had a reminiscence moment myself with the Liberty bodice!)

The themes were supported by complimentary items from the museum collections including things like toys, school room items and nursery furniture. Large graphics showing children in appropriate settings acted as a backdrop. The reminiscence element was displayed on labels with clothes based on memories and in a large 'book' on a stand in the exhibition space.

Informal feedback from exhibition visitors includes the following;

> *'Imaginative and creative', 'We heard lots of admiring comments and reminiscences as we eavesdropped our way round'. S*onya and Tony Greatorex, 25/11/10

> *'The scale of the display was quite exceptionally stunning. It brought back many memories and times I had forgotten about.'* Liz Odon, 02/12/10

## Innovation

This was the first time a combination of art, reminiscence and museum objects and expertise had been used in Leicestershire to develop an exhibition. It was also the first time that such collaborative and creative reminiscence has resulted in a major exhibition. Using reminiscence in this way is also a new development across the museum sector

## Sustainability

- The reminiscences and copies of the personal photographs which acted as memory triggers will become part of the museum services holdings and be preserved for future use.

- The service now has a handling collection of children's clothes made in paper which can be used in future projects and other more informal reminiscence sessions.

- The project acted as a pilot study for future projects, most immediately the 'Eating In' project. This involved working with a group of people with learning difficulties and a group of older ladies in 2011. The resulting reminiscences will inform a major touring exhibition, on the theme of food and cooking in the home, for Leicestershire Museum Service in 2012.

## Making Connections – the main features of the project

- The project combined skills-reminiscence, curatorial and exhibition development to produce a series of connected end products.

- The museum service developed an artistic partnership with a local artist and contributed to encouraging creativity in local children through the workshop sessions.

- Community expertise and knowledge was collected to add to curatorial knowledge but also inform and engage with the wider society of Leicestershire.

- Social history was used as a tool to directly improve the lives of local people, those who took part in the project, those who visited the exhibition, those who engaged with the exhibition through the touring display and those who took part in the workshops associated with the exhibition.

- The project used collections in an innovative way, as memory triggers rather than historical objects.

- Objects were used to produce a new type of social history, one based on memory rather than historical fact and what people living through history found important rather than historians.

The exhibition at
Snibston Museum



An example of the sort of reminiscence and photograph collected as part of the project.

Fiona aged two in 1960.

- Wearing a smocked dress made by her mother on a hand turned Singer sewing machine. The dress fabric was from mum's maternity smock.

- Fiona says, 'my mum made all me and my sister's clothes. In fact she bought fabric for two and wool for three as my brother had all his knits in the same wool as well!'

The well loved and much admired knitted swimsuit made from textured wall paper!

# Social History as community engagement
# – A personal reflection

*Brendan Carr of Reading Museum offers an amusing yet insightful reflection on establishing community engagement projects and ensuring that everyone gets the most out of them.*

My appointment in April 2010 to the newly created role of Community Engagement Curator for Reading Museum was the beginning of a curatorial adventure and with the benefit of one year's hindsight, I offer some approaches to community engagement practice which I have found worthwhile and also warn of potential pitfalls. It is an entirely personal refection based upon my own experience and opinions but I hope that some of what I will say is recognisable and may aid debate.

My first recommendation is simply to read as much as you can about community engagement in museums. This has helped me to appreciate that there are motivations for engaging un-established audiences that extend beyond the concern for institutional self-preservation. Whilst the western world remains in a state of economic meltdown there is little we can predict about the future, but it is fair to suggest that museums funded from the public purse need to comply with EU social inclusion directives. Those that do not embrace the agenda are more likely to lose political favour than those which demonstrate a social return on investment by inspiring and being inspired by the community.

I knew this from the outset because my role arose from a personnel restructure at Reading Museum. It was prompted by a severe funding cutback, coupled with a need for the museum to align itself more closely with the local authority's new vision statement, which explicitly places community needs at its heart. Curatorship is much more than just a job and I need a more satisfying raison d'être than merely ticking the correct boxes. Through reading the proceedings from the Group for Education in Museum 2009 conference, I found a more important moral imperative to get me out of my bed in the morning: I work to engage communities with my museum because it is "the right thing to do"[1].

This year's SHCG conference asked us to consider who we think we are. I am a bit of an exhibitionist really; having an audience for what I can do motivates me. From a young age, fronting a pop band or as centre half on the football pitch, I was always looking to do something out of the ordinary and be involved in entertaining people. Three university degrees certify that I am some sort of artist and artists want their work to be seen. So I suggest that museum workers should never be shy about driving through publicity campaigns to promote their work in mixed medium; with communities for the canvas and artefacts for paint. I am a community engagement curator and so at the expense of becoming the resident media tart I need my name well known amongst the local community. Developing partnership relationships with journalists wishing to fill space with the type of human interest stories we encounter everyday is a straightforward means of engaging with community members who consume local media and will visit museums when they hear all about us. Shrinking violets who hide the museum's light under a bushel can gather dust in an ivory tower, for me it is a far better bet to act as an advocate for my collection by being loud and proud about it.

Gaynor Kavanagh's attempts to define curatorial identity some time ago proved difficult: While we may share interests, educational attainment and often come from similarly aligned socio-economic backgrounds, we all have unique character and individual experience to offer in service to our communities[2]. Given this diversity, I would hold

that having a sense of being motivated for the right reasons, and a grasp of the set of values that underpin these, is an essential; common to anyone hoping to operate purposefully in the realm of museum community engagement.

Maybe my upbringing (the middle child of five in an Irish, Roman Catholic household amongst West Reading's ethnically diverse community) means I regard all people as being my equal and I do not discriminate. Perhaps my background has also engendered my strong convictions about the impact that equality of opportunity and social justice have on human potential. This is something that informed my activity as a trade union official before I resumed my museum career last year. These values are underpinning my motivation and I have related a lot to what authors such as Nick Merriman and Graham Black have written about museum outreach and the moral imperative to address the barriers to acquiring even basic levels of enlightenment that large numbers in society face due to poverty, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, disability and other forces including racial discrimination, homophobia[3] and old age[4].

This brings me to another of my recommendations for approaching museum community engagement – to develop networks strategically. As Trade Union Secretary at Reading Borough Council my understanding of local government structure was enhanced and I came into my new role with a not unsubstantial network amongst the wider organisation. There must be less drastic ways of developing relations of trust with colleagues than accepting a nomination to do battle with senior management, but it is always worth remembering that you can forge alliances with other professionals who have direct and permanent contact in the communities that your museum needs to engage with. Other departments can unlock the gateways to people. Rather than parachuting into Reading's estates saying 'Hi, I'm from the museum, let's do an exhibition about inner-city decay!", I have found a better approach is to engage with council officers and also third sector organisations and convince them of the purpose material culture can have as an additional resource for reaching out to those members of our society who are isolated or at risk of exclusion: I am not a social worker or care assistant but I do have a set of atypical museum skills to offer for promoting creativity in communities to break down negative stereotyping.

I am convinced that the 'My Generation' project we devised with Age Concern and Reading Borough Council's Thriving Neighbourhoods team secured funding in the last round of the government's 'Generations Together' scheme because partnership arrangements between museum curators and other caring professions are more persuasive to funding bodies than stand alone initiatives. There is good reason for this being the case, not least the insight of community needs that partners bring to mitigate the risk of initiatives becoming what the Paul Hamlyn Foundation have recently described as 'empowerment lite'[5].

Investment makers measure returns and so it is reasonable that the Trustees of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation deliberated upon whether to distribute further funds to institutions invited to become recipients of the available funds under their "Engagement at the Heart of Museums and Galleries" scheme. Without wishing to single this body out; (they just happen to have very recently produced an assessment of current community engagement practise in museums which is likely to become influential)[6], I must put forward the notion that outcomes from museum community engagement should be considered under the same terms of reference as any other museum practice. We know that small acorns planted during primary school visits improve life chances but we do not expect the oak trees to flourish instantly and suspend all education work when, regrettably, some perish. In my work I have to accept there will be blind alleys. For instance there is much to do in presenting positive images of young people in museums but I know they may spend the entire time

texting and will sometimes walk out to go to the chip shop. I have therefore to take heart when they are friendly and welcoming to me during a visit to school later on – it shows that they know I am investing time in them and I think they respect that and with perseverance, their views are now informing aspects of the museum's contemporary collecting work under the 'Long and Winding Road' element of the 'My Generation' project. I think it would be pointless and "empowerment lite" for me to confine community engagement activity to well heeled local history societies just because object handling sessions at the youth club do not always seem to generate the same level of engagement.

Just like other museum fundamentals, I see 'community engagement' as a lifetime's work: Documentation systems do not achieve SPECTRUM standards when only the catalogue of the latest acquisition is complete, the standards are achieved through a process of accumulation. Therefore I would argue that funding agencies and government will be acting unreasonably towards museums if they are impatient about seeing the social return on investment that enhanced and directed access to material culture will bring with time and with reflective practice[7].



Figure 1: © Reading Museum/Reading Borough Council. All Rights Reserved

Despite the discipline being age old; (as exemplified in Figure 1, 'Blind Visitors to the Museum,1930), the codification of our natural instincts towards outreach, under the catch-all phrase 'Community Engagement' could introduce a sense of urgency and level of expectation that is misplaced and compounds the danger that responsibility for providing equality of access to cultural heritage is placed in a silo; when it should be amongst the principle motivations for anyone involved in museums. Working in a museum puts you in touch with your own mortality and looking through museum archives makes you appreciate that it takes a considerable amount of time for the best of curatorial intervention towards material culture to reap rewards. If there is no undue pressure for instant transformation, the things we do naturally (because of who we are and because it is the right thing to do) can, when planned and directed, contribute to

multi agency attempts to bolster failing economies, re-generate neighbourhoods and ease any national identity crisis; but we are museum workers not miracle workers.



Figure 2: © Reading Museum/Reading Borough Council. All Rights Reserved. The same Hippo skull which appears in Figure 1 pictured in 2010

This year's 'My Generation' project at Reading Museum drew in other third sector partners, namely: We-Are-What-We-Do, the people who own and operate Historypin.com, and Readipop; a local charity which provides musical activities across age groups. The popularity of Historypin in the Southcote Estate and the positive outcomes of 'Get Grandad to DJ' in Whitley have subsequently attracted further and more substantial investment from the HLF and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. This is enabling the museum to work with these organisations for a more prolonged period of time and increases our chance of effecting outcomes, such as improving the employment prospects of young people and raising self esteem amongst elderly residents. It is leading to genuine empowerment because it is grounded on reliable intelligence about the communities of Reading; the work is underpinned with a set of shared values between the organisations involved and, importantly, benefits from sufficient funding.

'Handle with Care', a display of objects and stories produced by young people living in foster care in Reading, was seen by over 2000 people during its six week run at Reading Museum. Visitor figures alone are not the only measure of the return on investment in museums and besides being community meeting places, they can also provide opportunities for expression about important social issues.

The 'Handle with Care' exhibition was arranged with the charity Company Paradiso and received a Heritage Lottery Grant through the Young Roots funding stream.

Cllr John Ennis, lead councillor for children's services in Reading said:

*'I was truly moved by this exhibition and how, against all odds, these children can reflect upon their situation and have been willing to share their feelings with visitors to our museum. As a Council and as a society, we share a huge responsibility for ensuring that young people are provided with an equality of opportunity in life.'*

Of course such partnership relationships will never be entirely hassle free. I have found that at the expense of the work I need to be doing in the museum's store rooms, much of my time is spent project managing and keeping certain people on task. I would therefore recommend that you do not underestimate how much energy it takes to develop, deliver and evaluate community engagement initiatives. In managing your agenda I would suggest that you seek to find and maintain a balance between this and

your responsibilities towards the care of your collections; so that the treasures you seek to engage people with are preserved, adequately documented and accessible. It is my view that you cannot have one without the other. I would suggest that as Social History Curators, concerned with the people's history, we have affinity for the living history and oral traditions of our communities. If my record keeping is anything to go by then; in the context of common or garden local authority museums, social history attracts the highest volume of public enquiries and, as such, its curators are well placed to take leadership roles in the realm of community engagement.

We have all inherited artefacts that we are unable to contextualise within current exhibition policy because they were acquired through autonomous decision making in the 1970s by individuals with no apparent concept of the future. This is why, these days, we devise acquisitions policies and make decisions by committee. I would argue that in precisely the same way, we should have plans and a structure towards opening and extending our relationship with our communities, so that we do not make and then have to break promises. I would suggest that a bespoke policy towards community engagement is as fundamental to any credible museum as an education or documentation policy and I recommend that you write and adopt one.

Just as we acquire and reject donations on the basis of objectives embodied in our acquisitions policy so our community engagement practice should be purposeful and directed if it is to have a worthwhile bearing on the future and we should exercise the same curatorial disciplines towards choice. To avoid any sense of the museum becoming embarked upon a merry go round of empowerment lite community engagement schemes; I have to consider whether activities and undertakings by the museum have potential for feeding into an overarching objective, that of developing a rich collection of engaged communities to focus the museum upon what matters most to the town's residents and visitors.

In applying curatorial choice based on a policy, I feel that the 'Pinning Reading's History' project with Historypin has in recent months greatly extended the museum's capacity for engaging with the town's communities[8]. The most vital component of the partnership is the legacy it has the potential to deliver; in terms of establishing new community relationships so that advantage can be made subsequently. This will be of huge benefit to the museum as we seek to encourage future community led projects, in particular next year's 'Our Sporting Life' exhibition, 'Royal Reading' display and the Abbey Quarter project, which will include a reconfiguration of the current social history gallery, so that it wholly reflects Reading's unique character and remarkable history.

I am convinced, because I have seen it work in Southcote area of Reading, that Historypin can achieve its laudable aims for using the world's vast bank of photographic heritage in a very immediate and striking way, empowering communities to give their own version of events. It is also entirely appropriate that Reading Museum should be pioneering Historypin since it was from his establishment on Baker Street that William Fox Talbot began to mass produce photography from his callotype innovation.

It remains to be seen if the Historypin website will become a household name, but in the meantime, the permanent nature of Reading museum's relationship with the resource, means that we can be hopeful of avoiding short-termism because the activity and engagement that the resource generates can give the museum a 'foot in the door' with a wide range of Reading communities, across the town's neighbourhoods, particularly if used in conjunction with our reminiscence services and in supporting the school curriculum.

Another advantage of reading about community engagement in museums is the facility it has for availing you with other people's good ideas, which can inspire your own practice. In pursuing my own recommendation, to write a community engagement policy, I shamelessly cribbed from Manchester University Museum's Community Engagement Policy because it very neatly provides some very strong definitions of 'community' which I have found useful in the formulation of my campaigns[9]. As the Community Engagement Curator for Reading Museum I must oversee all community engagement activity by the museum and so, having written the museum's policy statement (achieving staff "buy-in" through the museum's Collections and Learning workgroup) I can wave it at colleagues to encourage them to undertake individual projects which dove-tail into the community engagement strategy, with its particular emphasis on the agreed priorities towards engaging 'Communities of People'; incorporating groups defined by shared needs such as age, ethnicity and socio-economic background[10]. One of my first steps was to 'map' the museum's existing community engagement activity. It soon became clear that just as some museums at are more advanced stage in terms of collection documentation, Reading Museum has been active in the realm of access and outreach and I have not been faced with any need to convince colleagues to become more outward looking. The advantage of an agreed policy towards community engagement is that colleagues understand how their endeavours are part of a 'bigger picture'.

In my experience, community curatorship has involved using my own free time to have tea with charming old ladies in youth centres. I have also enjoyed sweet bread with members of the Caribbean community and I have drunk pints of lager with Mods in Caversham. It is a consuming role which I am passionate about, but my final piece of advice to you, based on my experience so far, is quite simple: avoid having too many good ideas of your own. Why not let the community come to you with their ideas? The exhibition 'Reading Steady Go: Life through the Eyes of a 1960s Mod' came about this way when the museum was approached by members of the Mod community about us 'doing' an exhibition similar to "Rip it Up", a 2006 show which looked at the punk era in Reading.

I'd like to blow my own modern jazz trumpet here and say that 'Reading Steady Go' is an exhibition which has truly engaged, charmed and educated because it was developed with Mod-like attention to detail. In working with the Mod community, cutting corners by using a costume with a marginally short hemline would have been unacceptable and the exhibition could have been disowned by some key community leaders or 'Ace Faces'. Had we used too much of the poetic license permitted to museum curators then the exhibition would have been panned across social media platforms, at the rallies and in the meeting places. The chances of persuading Liam Gallagher's fashion label, Pretty Green, to sponsor the show, I think, would have been remote. So there is pressure and aggravation attached to working with 'Communities of Interest' but we saw the benefits in terms of how it would engage with wider 'Communities of People', entering into the early years of retirement. There were egos to massage and expectations to exceed but, as it was, by being accurate and authentic (doing no more than a museum exhibition should) we were able to use the story of the Mods in Reading as a platform for making statements about the social historical background attached to the explosion of youth culture in the early 1960s. It is a rich stream which people aged over 60 have particularly related to - post war urban planning, for instance. We were also able to put up posters featuring black music legends as well as Reading based local acts, as evidence of the influence that our Caribbean community's cultural contribution has had upon the town since the late 1950s (when Huntley & Palmers and the town's other major employers identified the various townships of Barbados as the place to target their post austerity recruitment campaigns).

I rarely instigate email correspondence because doing so generates more email and by avoiding having too many good ideas of your own, your chances of not encountering stressful bottle necks of activity will improve. If I did not have the idea of launching the 'Reading Steady Go' exhibition with a Saturday afternoon parade of 1960s scooters then I would have not have had to jeopardise my own work-life balance writing risk assessments, recruiting event stewards, finding high visibility jackets, liaising with bus companies and emergency services etc. Had we not invited Cilla Black to open the exhibition then there would have been no need to write all those press releases and what on earth was I thinking of taking responsibility for organising live bands and DJs for the Super Sixties Saturday Fun Day?! We have to be pragmatic, and the fact is that fewer staff in our museums means our production values have to be compromised unless we are prepared to sometimes do everything, including setting out the chairs and projector screen. There have been mornings when I have had so much work to do that I do not know where to start. I just don't dare imagine what it would be like if I was actually proactive more regularly. Volunteers have become an increasingly important component of the armoury I use to prevent a complete failure to achieve anything! Developing voluntary opportunities for members of the local community is itself a key component of the community engagement strategy. A colleague in the museum's Collection and Learning workgroup has been co-ordinating this to great advantage. Besides outcomes such as making progress with collection research and documentation, having a group of empowered, well trained and engaged volunteers is in itself a means of providing community access. A commitment towards developing well led and empowering experiences for volunteers is also another means through which museums can demonstrate social return on investment. For example, as many employees of museum will know for themselves, voluntary work enhances employment prospects.

The truth is that whilst I have accepted quite a lot of motivating managerial praise for my work so far in generating new relationships and engaging with communities, I have not actually had to do much more than wait for the phone to ring. I have simply responded enthusiastically when it does, with using my imagination to maximise the outcomes of any community contact the objective. Just as I will not move any museum object without good reason and when I do, I will measure, photograph, condition check and repackage, so; when it comes to community engagement, it has really been a case of, to use a football player's terminology, *letting the ball do the work* – Rather than running around breathlessly trying to think of good ideas to represent Reading's Irish community I feel its better to pass a sense of ownership over to the communities of Reading by building an institutional reputation for being genuinely open for business and receptive to the good will, creativity and many good ideas that are out there. We just need to be willing, ready and able to help translate this back into something inspiring and meaningful to the audience/communities of people.

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# Popular music beyond text: An academic perspective on popular music in the museum

*Dr Robert Knifton reports on research conducted by Dr Marion Leonard and himself on the pleasures and pains of collecting and using popular music in exhibition display at the Institute of Popular Music, based within the University of Liverpool*

Since June 2010, the major research project Collecting and Curating Popular Music Histories, conducted at the University of Liverpool by Dr Marion Leonard and Dr Robert Knifton, and funded through the AHRC's Beyond Text scheme, has involved contact with 200 museums and archives. Data collected has included information from over 80 museums, including 48 completed surveys giving detailed information on institutional collections and exhibitions; and in-depth interviews with 61 respondents such as museum curators, educators, oral historians, private collectors, archivists, conservators and collection managers. We contacted institutions across the UK and our results reflect a broad range of museums but with the heaviest weighting of responses from the North West and the South East. One result of this research has been to highlight how popular music can link with a broad range of museum tasks and topics. In this article, we will focus on a few specific emerging topics, each of which develop a different, interlinked aspect of museum practice.

From an external perspective, popular music has been under-represented within museum culture. However there are a number of recent developments which have considerably increased its visibility within the sector, most particularly its growth as a subject utilised by social history curators. What is clear from the activity in this area – whether it is the Kylie exhibition at the V&A or Home of Metal at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery – the traditional boundaries between high and popular culture are in the 21st century becoming ever more permeable and indistinct; there is a widespread recognition in the sector that what is most significant is the connections and stories that a display can evoke for visitors, balancing emotional and intellectual responses.

When one curator remarked, 'Napalm Death fanzines are as important as a Rosetti painting', it is a sentiment that is perhaps becoming more orthodox and less shocking than it would have been 10 or 15 years ago. Popular music reflects wider trends within our museums, where policy and social trends are coalescing to create demand for new approaches to such subjects – how they are collected, valued, represented, and the audiences they address.

Whilst temporary engagement with popular music through exhibitions has grown immeasurably in recent years, the permanent shape of popular music in UK museums is only beginning to be shaped, with less than half of museums contacted featuring any popular music items in permanent displays. There is an opportunity for the curatorial profession to consider how this material can best be collected, interpreted and used to carve out a place for popular music histories within museums.

## Collecting

Contemporary collecting issues are not solely the preserve of just music, however many considerations seem to be heightened when dealing with music materials. Questions arise such as what should be collected? And, whose experiences will the museum represent? When a museum brings in objects from individual's personal musical lives they collect social experiences, spatial expressions of identity, and mediated memories. One curator commented, 'ephemeral objects like ticket stubs ... show what being a fan's all about, collecting memories...'

We can consider music's ephemerality in a number of ways:

- The intangible nature of music itself.

- The fleeting production, realisation and experience of live performance.

- The tangible material culture which has not been designed to last and is often treated as throwaway – concert posters, tickets, handbills, stage banners, set lists, tour itineraries.

The service of this material is time sensitive – a flyer makes us aware an event is to happen, a ticket permits access. The quality of the paper and laser printing all conspire to lead us to think about these items as temporal. It is only over time as interested parties struggle to find this material and it increases in financial value that its cultural worth is also reconsidered. It is important that contemporary collecting policies take account of the fast moving and vulnerable nature of this material so that it is not lost to time and so that future budgets do not have to strain to buy these items at auction.

Buying star objects at auction is beyond the means of most museums, where private collectors can easily outbid institutions, and have greater flexibility. Our interviewees described the difficulties of reconciling museum funding structures with making an auction house bid. Museums often worked with private collectors to assemble temporary displays. Transferring loans to donations though was very rare.

The research has often revealed some of the different and perhaps conflicting pressures that curators are under. On the one hand there is the need to provide visitors with 'star' items: to present material from the most commercially successful practitioners within the transnational recording industry. Even museums with a particular geographic focus have sought to do this, putting successful local acts on display as a way to celebrate their achievement, and by association the significance of their home city. Indeed in some museums this aim has begun to inform collecting policies: 'part of the project we felt would be to help to grow the collection more strategically so we could pick the most significant bands, the most significant venues in the region and try and do some targeted collecting'.

But this also begs the question about how significance or importance is understood. Perhaps this is something we can think about further: to what extent should a museum seek to echo or reflect the star system within the commercial recording industry? Of course, these performers should be recognised and represented, but we raise this as an issue to think about the range of ways in which music is practiced and experienced. Should we also think about the amateur, DIY cultures, the fan, and indeed the experience of 'failure' which is actually the dominant experience of signed artists? How are museums to engage with music releases which are digital, and music cultures which are virtual? This connects with wider debates within museums which have turned their focus towards recording people's stories and reflecting the experience of everyday life. So the tension here is between the celebrated and the overlooked, dominant narratives and hidden histories, and how these should be told.

## Curating Sound

Practical problems featured strongly within the research, such as the effective use of sound within exhibition spaces. One history curator commented, 'we wanted to try and get a lot of sound in there so people could hear the change as well but it was really difficult to do...It's led to the suggestion that our design team needs to look at how we use sound, to find a better way.' This approach of developing several soundscapes within a single exhibition can lead to cacophonies if not carefully managed. The

approach outlined here is interestingly contrasted with that of an art curator, who said to us, 'I think of it as being a problem, something to be contained within the artwork. If a work has a sound component, I just think about how to isolate that sound so it just relates to that one work.' At its best, sound within museum spaces takes on a meta-textual element, interleaving sympathetically with the space and content of the museum. In discussion with one curator she expressed this well, saying: 'the sorts of relationships are very multi-layered: there was a relationship between the artist and the visitor; there was a relationship between the artist and the sound and architecture of the galleries.' In this manner, sound becomes part of an expanded toolkit that curators now operate with. The same curator remarked, 'the mechanisms by which you disseminate content and engage the visitor have really changed dramatically'. Sound, touch screens, other interactives, film, video, web, and commissioning processes are all a part of this widened curatorial platform.

## Histories and Narratives

Central to many debates around curatorial choices are what stories to highlight. This is inherent with popular music as a subject. One curator summed it up by saying, 'In the museum world, the story is king.' Many music items are highly rich in stories and associations, yet often they are hidden, personal and implicit. In an interview, a curator with a history museum captured this fascination with the personal connections to history and memory, highlighting: 'For me it's the personal story behind the objects that's the most important. So from something fans have collected you want to know why, when they became a fan, what was it about the certain group that they really liked, what did it mean to them, to their lives personally, when they collected the items'. It is the task of the curator to successfully evoke those narratives from objects that may not necessarily be highly visual, and are often flat. Common approaches we found were to emphasise the three-dimensional objects available, utilise interactive technologies, and to create more immersive environments that could attempt to evoke the emotional kinaesthetic experience of being in a gig venue, for example.

Whose histories should museums represent through popular music? One aspect that has emerged in our research is the usefulness of popular music for empowering disenfranchised groups within local communities, and popular music objects can allow the museum to include such groups. One of the museum professionals we met talked for instance about a group with mental health issues who visited their music exhibition: 'The personal stories that came out of it, there were people who were petrified of coming out the front door, let alone coming into a museum but they ended up saying, 'I'm going to go and get my 7" out' because they remembered it , it triggered memory and these are people who are majorly vulnerable... you hope they did go home and get that record out and start talking to their neighbours about it. That's the power of a music exhibition on a visitor. It's really rewarding when you see that.'

Music exists on the cusp between material and immaterial heritage, encompassing elements of both in their cultural composition. These objects do not generally narrate their own stories, but need to be interpreted in order to bring them to the fore. Further, multiple narratives may be held within such objects in different stages of their object biographies.

With popular music, history moves quickly. One of our interviewees remarked to us, 'heritage starts now, it started five minutes ago because that's the best time to look at your heritage. You can look at it through rose-tinted spectacles if you want, but the thing is the sooner you start, and the sooner you collect, that's the way to go forward. History starts now.'

## Engagement and Learning

One finding from the project was the great degree of popular music used in engaging with hard to reach audiences, and especially young people. Music as a common element experienced by all members of society was particularly useful in helping audiences to overcome any 'threshold fear' which may have kept them from entering into and participating in the life of the museum. An education manager who had put on music events in their museum commented, 'What we aim to do then is to not just open up the foyer and dance there to the DJ you'd normally go somewhere else to see, but getting people interested in what is this organisation I'm dancing within? What's through that door, and what's up those stairs? Actively getting people to engage with everything else that's going on because if they're walking through there they're likely to come back again whether we have a music event on or not, or they're certainly likely to remember their experience as a good one.'

Music can have an immediacy that is useful, as one of interviewees explained: 'young people want to do something and they don't always want to use text panels... we've actually brought in more basic kit for people to engage quicker'. Projects highlighted in case studies today often involved some form of audience development. Some exhibitions have developed such community groups, with music acting as a bridge to wider discussions about place and belonging. Such developments can be reciprocal; in both these examples, community involvement helped to shape the exhibition, and we can see the benefits of joined-up approaches across community, learning, and curatorial departments. One curator commented on this, suggesting: 'over the years of the community team and the learning team, working with all their audiences, they'd start feeding into the exhibitions and advising us in the curatorial/creative team on some of those subject matters, and what should be included in the exhibitions and what they'd like to see'. Their ideal position they claimed was to have opened-ended exhibition processes, with the community fully involved and the museum acting as editor. The universality and flexibility of popular music as an exhibition subject permitted this crowd-sourced model to develop.

## Conservation and Storage

Because of the contemporary nature of the subject, many current issues in conservation studies are relevant to the care of popular music. The object biography of a popular music item may be very unclear: 'By the time the museum gets them you don't necessarily know what kind of history they've had, you can only guess based on what stage of degradation they're at...' Ephemeral printing techniques utilised for flyers, tickets and posters decay far quicker than earlier examples, meaning an item from the 1980s may be more at risk than 1700s printing.

Plastic storage and decay is a further area where much current work is being directed: records, tapes and discs, as well as the equipment used to play them are built from different plastics. A conservator explained to us, 'Generally speaking, with plastics it's the plastic itself that is destroying itself.' Nevertheless, it's imperative not to over-conserve popular music, since some of the history of these objects is in its decay. For instance, a curator involved in the Kylie exhibition told us, 'Kylie was quite keen for the wear and tear on her costumes to be shown – make-up stains and so on. I think this was done in the exhibition, she wanted to show behind the scenes, the reality of it'

Finally, the move to digital cultures of music online poses issues to archivists, where questions of the legitimacy of making archival copies of music on formats that are subject to decay remain – leading us on to our final area of investigation, copyright.

## Copyright

The problem of copyright was one that we perennially returned to in discussions with museum professionals. Materials under copyright protection took a number of different forms and related to different museum activities, from playing sound in exhibition spaces to digitising photographs and objects in collections. In general, the commercial exploitability of such material made negotiating affordable levels of licensing fees for museums more difficult. As one of our interviewees commented, 'It's a problem that is growing in that copyright is getting tighter and tighter in terms of what you can do, what you can't do, so you do need a budget for that. That's where smaller museums fall foul, in that they just don't have the budget to be able to take that on. A lot of people in the museum have great knowledge of copyright now as a consequence of working on various exhibitions, and understand how to go about acquiring it.'

Approaches such as developing partner relationships with copyright holders have worked very well for larger institutions, but for smaller museums wanting to work with popular music the issue remains, and the costs demanded can be prohibitive, perhaps even discouraging work in the area.

## Conclusion

Questions such as accessibility, representation and diversity, cultural value, collecting for the future, and digital museums can all be addressed through examining the positioning of popular music within current museum discourses. Perhaps in the past popular music has been developed by museums in a manner that is separate from their core operations, but from the evidence we've collected for the project this is gradually shifting. The view in the past might have devalued popular music and denied its place within traditional museum hierarchies. As one of our interviewees observed, 'popular culture doesn't seem to have had any value, or it was not as valuable as other things.'

There has perhaps been a tendency within many popular music exhibitions to be rather celebratory, since these shows have often been the first opportunities for a museum to engage with the music and associated material culture related to a particular performer or the music of a particular place. As these engagements with popular music become more commonplace so then the space also opens up to explore more dimensions of music and its place in our social and cultural lives. It is now 30 years since the International Association for the Study of Popular Music was formed. Since then there has been considerable scholarship on a whole host of topics including the relationship between music and place, the role that music plays in identity formation, the relationship between music and politics as well as the ways in which people use music for pleasure and escape. Scholars have also contributed to critical re-evaluations of histories of music and questioned the ways in which the popular music canon has been formed. We highlight these areas of work because they can inform the ways in which the curation of popular music is developed and can add to the range of narratives which are told.

We seem to have moved beyond the debate of whether popular music ought to be a topic dealt with by our museums. We can now initiate discussions on how we might further successfully integrate popular music, and indeed other popular culture subjects, in our museum culture in ways which reflect their significant, complex and multifaceted place in our social lives.

# People and places: Developments in Social History 1989-2011

*Jennifer Broadbent is Collections Officer at the Museum of Wigan Life, Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust. As part of her AMA she received a Trevor Walden Trust Bursary to conduct some research into new and refurbished social history displays in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cardiff.*

A comparison of the displays at the Edinburgh's People's Story, Glasgow's People's Palace and the Cardiff Story, highlights how the boundaries of social history curatorship have been redefined over the course of the last thirty years. The discipline has changed from being largely confined to the experiences of working class people, to being about all people and their relationships with places.

The first section of this article, 'Beyond the working classes,' looks at how social history displays have developed from being primarily about the working classes, to being about local people of all classes and their bond, connection and pride in their local area.

The second section 'From the beginning', examines how earlier social history displays took their starting point as roughly the beginning of the industrial revolution, whereas displays developed more recently have gone back to the first evidence of human activity in the locality. Social history displays have expanded their remit to creating a sense of place and covering all human experiences, not just those experiences from the industrial revolution onwards.

The final section explores changing approaches to the topic of working life. In the People's Story displays, worker experiences dominate the narrative, at the People's Palace, opened 10 years later, there is more focus on the impact work and industry has had on the city. The most recently developed display, the Cardiff Story, looks beyond working experiences and city development and explores how both the people and the city have developed a new identity in the face of industrial decline.

## Beyond the working classes

In the past thirty years social history displays have expanded their remit from being primarily about the working classes, to being about the experiences of all local people and their local area.

The People's Story Museum 'tells the story of the work, life and leisure of ordinary people in Edinburgh from the late 1700s to the present day.'[1] Opened in 1989 the museum mirrors the trend in academic social history of uncovering the hidden histories of the working classes or 'ordinary people'. The experiences of Edinburgh's middle and upper class residents are not covered and the story of Edinburgh's development is a background story. In part, some of the stories of Edinburgh's upper and middle class residents are told separately at the nearby Museum of Edinburgh. This separation however does not enable a clear picture of the city's development to be seen or acknowledge the agency of working class people in shaping their city.

The current displays at the People's Palace Museum date to 1998 and tell 'the story of the people of Glasgow from 1750 to the present.'[2] People are still the main focus of the exhibition but the individual identity of Glasgow as a city, and pride in the development of the city, are also key themes. Here the 'people' means all Glaswegians, not just working-class Glaswegians. Working class experiences are admittedly the

focus especially in sections including 'The Bevvy', 'Dancing at the Barrowland' 'The Steamie', 'The Buttercup Dairy', 'Doon the Watter' and 'Single End'. However the experiences of wealthy Glaswegians are explored in the 'Capitalist Visions' section and the effects of capitalist wealth on the face of the city is evidenced.

At the Cardiff Story Museum, opened in April 2011, the exhibition focuses clearly on both the people AND the city. The museum's website states 'discover the history of Cardiff through the eyes of those who created the city – its people'.[3] Here the agency of local people in shaping their city is clearly acknowledged. The 'history of a house' interactive, in particular, shows how people of all classes have used and fashioned their city. The interactive explores the changing occupants of a house on Cathedral Road from the 1890s to the present. In the 1890s, during the heyday of the docks, large houses were built and occupied by wealthy industrialists. As the docks declined in the 1930s, middle class families occupied the houses which were split into smaller flats. In the 1970s the houses were further split into bedsit properties for single people. Today the house contains apartments occupied by professional couples. In this interactive and throughout the displays, city stories and people's stories are intertwined and a strong sense of place manifests itself. Class is not the most important distinction; shared experiences of place are stronger.

## From the beginning

The time span covered in the different museums indicates a widening of focus for the discipline of social history curatorship. The approach selected, be it chronological, thematic or a combination of the two, also has an effect on the emphasis and overall message of the displays.

At the People's Story and People's Palace, the displays begin in the late 1700s and the 1750s respectively and continue to the present (1989 and 1998 respectively). The start dates of the displays are significant as they roughly coincide with the beginning of the industrial revolution, and development of working class consciousness.[4] As a result the displays do not place the cities in the context of their origin or development pre-industrial revolution.

The People's Story splits its displays into these two time periods then thematically within these periods. The first section 'Living in the 18th Century' is split into the following themes; Trade Incorporations, Friendly and Fraternal Societies, Earning a Living, Housing, Crime and Punishment and Political Life. The second section '19th and 20th Century' firstly examines working life through various industries and occupations. It then continues with themes of Housing, Health and Hygiene, Friendly Societies, Leisure, and Religion and Culture. This approach allows the viewer to gain a sense of change and development in life during the period but not before. This is the people's journey, not the journey of the people and their city.

The People's Palace displays are organised thematically. They begin by examining speech and dialect, in 'The Patter' and drinking culture, in 'The Bevvy'. Other themes include 'Dancing at the Barrowland', 'Crime and Punishment', 'Doon the Watter', 'The Steamie' and 'Single End'. This approach produces a nostalgic experience as opposed to a clear journey through time. However within individual sections you discover how life changed for local people and within the 'Made in Glasgow' section the rise and decline of industry in Glasgow is addressed.

The Cardiff Story approach is both chronological and thematic. At the front of the gallery the 'Changing Cardiff' section sets the scene chronologically. 'Changing Cardiff' is made up of five large towers which use timelines and AV presentations to cover the

The 19th and 20th Century working life displays at the People's Story

following time periods: 1) Before 1794 A Port of some Importance! 2) 1794-1850 Full Steam Ahead! 3) 1851-1913 Cardiff's Made It! 4) 1914-1955 A Capital Idea and 5) 1956-1999 From Coal to Cool. Key moments in Cardiff's history are highlighted in these time lines including when the Glamorganshire Canal opened (1794) and when Cardiff became a capital city (1955). Setting the scene in this way gives context to the people's stories told in the thematic parts of the gallery under the broad headings of Early Cardiff, Housing, Working Lives, Transport and Modern Cardiff.

At first glance the Cardiff Story displays may appear to begin at roughly the same period as the People's Palace and People's Story displays, as the first tower is entitled 'before 1794'. However 'before 1794' actually means 2300BC, the date when there is first evidence of human activity in today's city centre. In setting the scene chronologically and then exploring the key topics (Early Cardiff, Housing, Working Lives, Transport and Modern Cardiff) thematically, you get a powerful sense of the journey of Cardiff and its people. It is clear that Cardiff has been shaped by its people and the people have been shaped by their city. Social history today encompasses all human experiences not just those from the industrial revolution onwards.

'Changing Cardiff' at the Cardiff Story © Redman Design

## Working lives

Stories of working life are told with a different focus in each of the three museums. At the People's Story experiences of work predominate over narratives of Edinburgh's development. At the People's Palace Glasgow's industrial development takes centre stage with worker's experiences less central to the narrative. At the Cardiff Story the displays go beyond worker's experiences and city development and explore how both people and city have developed new identity in light of the coal industry's demise.

In the People's Story each industry is dealt with in turn, industries covered include Sea Trades, Industrial Workers, Food and Drink, Printing Trades, Service Industries, Retailing and Traditional Industries. Within each section there is a background history of the industry and an overview of changes to have taken place, including details of Pay and Conditions, Health and Safety, Union Activity, Camaraderie and Work-related Social Activities. There is a wealth of information about local people and specific industries but it is harder to join this up and create overarching conclusions about the city. At the time the displays were developed the discipline of social history was about working class people and not necessarily their cities.

At the People's Palace 'Made in Glasgow' tackles the rise and fall of local industry head on, posing the question 'What happened to Glasgow's Industry?'. The central section of the exhibition showcases a vast array of products made in Glasgow under the following themes, Engineering and Machinery, Household and Luxury Goods, Clothes and Shoes, and Chemicals. The accompanying text focuses on the development, production methods and changing fortunes of these key industries. Worker's experiences are covered separately under the headings 'Rewards of Labour', 'Get a Trade Son', 'Unity is Strength', 'All in a Day's Work' and 'Danger – Work can Damage your Health'. In separating products and industries from worker experiences you get a greater sense of how individual industries shaped Glasgow. However you gain less of an understanding of the unique character of worker's experiences in one industry as opposed to another industry. Social history curatorship began to be as much about places as people.

The 'Made in Glasgow' display at the People's Palace

At the Cardiff Story the displays again cover both worker experiences and city development, but look beyond this too. The 'Down the Docks' section focuses on life on the docks as well as their opening, heyday and decline. 'Fight for your Fights' addresses a multiplicity of campaigns for workers rights, and 'Every object tells a story' focuses on worker experiences, with particular focus on dying or extinct trades, such as that of Fishmonger T Letton. But what makes the Cardiff Story's approach different to other two museums, is that it looks beyond worker experiences and industrial development, to explore the connections between the identity of people and place. The 'Views from The Valleys' section in particular addresses what Cardiff means to people from The Valleys and questions whether Cardiff has left The Valleys behind. This approach demonstrates how social history curatorship has evolved over the past 30 years to address more complex questions of identity and place.

Conclusion

Social History Curatorship has undergone a transformation over the course of the last thirty years, as illustrated by the changing approaches of the People's Story, People's Palace and Cardiff Story Museums. Social history displays previously focused on 'ordinary' people or the 'working classes'. Today, as exemplified in the Cardiff Story Museum, the focus has generally widened to include all people, usually within a defined geographical area, for example a city. Social history displays now often cover a wider time period and address all human experiences, not just those from the industrial revolution onwards, and also to tackle complex questions of identity and place.

The approach of the Cardiff Story Museum is echoed in other recently opened Social History museums. Bristol's M Shed's displays cover 'prehistoric times to the present day' and are 'dedicated to telling the amazing history of the city, through the objects and stories of the people who have made the city what it is today.'[5] The Museum of Liverpool is 'the place to discover the amazing story of Liverpool and its people, from the ice age to the present day'[6] and to explore 'how the port, its people, their creative and sporting history have shaped the city.[7] Looking further afield the National Trust's 'Go Local' initiative underlines the current importance of place and localism in wider heritage strategy and interpretation.[8] Social History Curatorship in 2012 reflects the current trend of localism in the wider heritage sector and is firmly about people AND their places.

*I am grateful to the Trevor Walden Trust for funding my visits to the three museums and supporting my professional development – Jenny Broadbent*

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1   Taken from sign outside the People's Story Museum

2   Taken from introductory panel at the People's Palace Museum

3   Cardiff Story Museum website, **www.cardiffstory.com** as of 08/01/2012

4   In the preface to E P Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class (1963), he claims that 'in the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.'

5   M Shed website, **http://mshed.org/about-us/** as of 08/01/2012

6   'Guide to your visit', Museum of Liverpool, p3

7   Museum of Liverpool website, **www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/mol/about/** as of 08/01/2012

8   National Trust website, **www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-strategy-next-decade-17-march.pdf** as of 08/01/2012

# A different perspective: Developing collections at the International Slavery Museum

*Angela Robinson of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool presents her reflections on how the curatorial team have been developing the museum collections, the development of a Collections Plan and the process the museum has been through to build its collection since 2007.*

## Background information

The International Slavery Museum (ISM) opened on the 23rd August 2007. The 23rd August is the UNESCO Slavery Remembrance Day, dedicated to the memory of the successful uprising of enslaved Africans on the island of Saint Domingue (modern Haiti) in 1791. 2007 was the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. The museum is located on the third floor of the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

ISM is the successor to the original Transatlantic Slavery Gallery – Against Human Dignity, which opened in the basement of the Merseyside Maritime Museum in 1994. The gallery was very successful and laid the foundation for the museum.

ISM is made up of four galleries: Life in West Africa, Enslavement and the Middle Passage, Legacies and the Campaign Zone. The life in West Africa gallery aims to highlight the diversity and sophistication of West African society prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The gallery uses traditional forms of museum interpretation, such as objects and text as well as more modern forms of technology in the use of audio visual and touch screen computers. The middle gallery – Enslavement and the Middle Passage, focuses on transatlantic slavery and the processes of enslavement. The use of primary sources is integral to the telling of this history and has been heavily used in this gallery. The legacy gallery explores the legacies of transatlantic slavery. Community consultation highlighted the need for the museum to balance the negative legacies of transatlantic slavery such as racism, against a backdrop of resistance and African and Black achievement. This gallery aims to fulfil this need. The final gallery, the Campaign Zone, opened in September 2010. The gallery is an exhibition space, dedicated to campaigning against contemporary forms of slavery. At present we have an Environmental Justice Foundation exhibition on display in the campaign zone. The exhibition highlights the use of child labour in the cotton industry, in particular, in the harvesting of cotton in Uzbekistan. Children are forced to leave the classroom and spend over three months of the year harvesting the cotton.[1] Considerable profit is made by the Uzbekistan government through the sale of cotton; however, the money is not invested back into the Uzbekistan cotton industry or to those working within this industry.

## Why a Collections Plan

The museum opened with the appearance of a fully formed museum but without a collection. The question of which collection the objects acquired during the museum development, should become part of was raised prior to the museum opening. The established transatlantic slavery collection had been developed over a number of years by the Maritime History department at the Merseyside Maritime Museum. However, key objects which were collected during 2007 could not be incorporated into this collection as they were predominately objects which reflected the legacies of transatlantic slavery. An example of the type of object the museum acquired is an original 1920s Klu Klux Klan outfit which is on display in the racism and discrimination section of the legacy gallery. It therefore became necessary to explore the idea of

developing a new collection for the International Slavery Museum. To develop this new collection a collections plan was devised.

## The Collections Plan

The plan began as rather a large document which encompassed all the ideas for collections. The main influences on the plan were:

- The community consultation, carried out during museum development.

- The themes of the Legacy Gallery.

- And the type of offers we initially received.

It was concluded that the museum should have a slavery collection with the intention, long term, of transferring objects from the collection held in the Maritime History department, of the museum service. The existing collection had focused on the maritime links to transatlantic slavery; the new collection would have a broader remit and propose to explore forms of slavery in a contemporary context.

The development of a collection which reflected some of the key themes of the legacy gallery was proposed. To collect objects which reflected the racism and discrimination section of the museum would be a completely new approach for the museum. Objects of this nature had not been collected in significant numbers in the UK before. The proposal was also influenced by the acquisition of the previously mentioned Klu Klux Klan outfit. Within the existing collections a small number of ephemera, which showed racists imagery, had been collected, the majority of these had been placed on display in the racism and discrimination section of the museum. The displaying of these objects saw the museum receive numerous offers from the public to donate items which fitted this definition.

A further legacy of transatlantic slavery and a key theme of the legacy gallery is the Black Diaspora. A collection which explores the positive contribution of people of the Black Diaspora was proposed. It was felt that a collection was essential to demonstrate the breadth of the legacies of transatlantic slavery. A separate Diaspora collection was proposed which focuses on the individual story. The collection would be a social history collection which would seek to collect oral histories as well as objects wherever possible.

From these initial proposals it was concluded that we were in need of a document to guide our collecting and help us make considered long term decisions that fitted with the aims of the museum. We established three main collections – Slavery, Legacy and Diaspora. Within the main collections are smaller collection strands, these are more flexible and are regularly reviewed. The plan is first and foremost a working document that enables the museum to collect in a strategic manner. It is an essential tool and a guide.

## The Collections:

The initial proposals for the collection plan lead to the development of the following collections:

### Slavery Collection

The Slavery collection is divided into transatlantic and contemporary forms of slavery. At the core of the museum is transatlantic slavery, a key aim of the museum, long term, is to explore all forms of slavery. The development of a contemporary slavery collection is the next logical step as these are forms of slavery which exist today.

The transatlantic slavery collection will be developed, over a number of years, by means of different collecting strategies. A recent strategy the museum has adopted has been to contact institutions which have objects on long term loan, to ISM, and ask them if they would consider donating the object. This has a 50 per cent success rate so far.

Examples of the type of objects we have collected are two small black and white photographic cards called *Carte de Visite* photographs, a form of calling card. The cards are from 1863 and show an image of a girl called Rebecca Huger. Rebecca was part of a group of eight emancipated slaves from New Orleans sent to the Northern States of the US, as part of a publicity tour.[2] The purpose of the tour was to raise money to educate former slaves in Louisiana. The tour also highlighted and challenged the social and legal existence of the 'one drop rule'. This classified persons with any degree of African ancestry as Black. Rebecca Huger was eleven years old; to all appearance she was white.

Developing a contemporary slavery collection is a priority for the museum as this will contribute to the eradication of contemporary forms of slavery through campaigning and education. To develop the collection we are establishing partnerships with Non-Governmental Organisation's (NGO's) active in the anti-slavery movement, such as Anti-slavery International and Stop the Traffik. We aim to build a collection which challenges slavery through the individual narratives of people who have been enslaved. Working in partnership with Anti-Slavery International this approach has over the last two years enabled the museum to collect a small number of personal items and oral histories from individuals how have been enslaved. The items collected represent domestic and descent forms of slavery.

An example of a contemporary slavery object we have collected for this collection is an ankle bracelet previously worn by a lady called Mariama. The bracelet is horseshoe shaped, possibly made from brass and weighs over 2 kilos. Mariama was subject to a form of descent based slavery.[3] Descent based slavery occurs in some countries where people are either born or are from a group that society views as suited for being used as slave labour. People from this group are not allowed to own land or inherit property and denied education,

a status which is carried from one generation to the next. Mariama is from Niger, West Africa; she was helped to gain her freedom with support from Anti-Slavery International. Slavery is illegal in Niger. Mariama's bracelet and another bracelet donated by Anti-Slavery International are on display in the museum.

## Legacy Collection

The legacy collection explores racism and discrimination and global inequalities.

The racism and discrimination strand has developed considerably since the museum opened. We regularly receive offers from all over the country, from people who have in their possession items depicting a racial stereotype. Racism and discrimination are issues which arguably define transatlantic slavery, therefore it was felt we should have a collection which reflects this history as a means to educate and tackle the use of negative imagery.



A Robertson's golliwog apron forms part of our racism and discrimination collection. The apron is believed to be from the late 1970s. On the back of the apron the straps have been repaired, suggesting the object had been regularly used by its original owner. In the early 1980s images of the golliwog began to be seen as racist. Following protests from ant-racism campaigners in 1988 Robertson's removed the image from television adverts.[4] The image was the mascot for Robertson's Jam for 91 years, it was discontinued in 2001. Robertson's said its decision to abandon the mascot was due to children no longer recognising the character and not due to societal pressure. It was created by Florence Kate Upton in her 1895 children's book, The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwog.

The global inequalities collection is a small strand, the curatorial team felt that this was a subject which the museum should seek to represent within its collection. The museum seeks to collect objects from those countries which have links to transatlantic slavery. Countries which have been underdeveloped and continue to be unable to gain equal status due to the world policies put into effect by General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, The World Bank, and the International Monetary Foundation.

One of our key objects for this collection is a piece of metal art depicting The Beatles – Yellow Submarine. The piece was produced by a group which promotes employment in Haiti. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere though it was the world's first black-led republic and the first independent Caribbean state. It has endured decades of poverty, environmental degradation, violence, instability, dictatorship and western intervention.[5]

## Diaspora Collection

The final collection focuses on the Black Diaspora on a local, national and international level. The two strands for this collection are Black Liverpool Social History and the Black Diaspora.

A key part of the museums legacy gallery is a section which explores the family histories of three local people from the Black community. The section, through text and photographs tells the family history from slavery through to the present day. It was felt that the museum should have a Black Liverpool Social History collection which focuses

on collecting these histories. We aim to base this collection around oral histories, recording people's experience of living in Liverpool and their family history.

One of our latest acquisitions is an anti apartheid banner made by the L8 Against Apartheid Group. The banner is made of yellow and green pieces of material sewn together with 'Liverpool Eight Against Apartheid' painted on the front. The L8 against Apartheid group were a local group active from the mid eighties until the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. The group felt that the Black residents of Liverpool 8, also known as Toxteth, should show solidarity with the Black population of South Africa. The group's activities included boycotting products made in South Africa and picketing establishments supporting the regime such as Barclays Bank and Shell. The banner was regularly used in local marches through the city

A principal aim of the museum is to demonstrate the contribution people of the Black Diaspora have made to the development of society today, particularly in the West. The Black Diaspora collection is preliminarily based on Black presence in the UK though we do have objects which represent the Diaspora. To date this collection has been established mainly through the purchase of items.

An example of an object in our collection, which represents the Black Diaspora, is a Barack Obama campaign poster designed by Shepard Fairey. The poster was used during Obama's presidential campaign. The version in our collection states the date of Obama's presidential inauguration in 2009 with the slogan 'Be The Change' printed along the top. The style is described as Andy Warhol meets Socialist Realism and is printed in red, blue and black.[6]



## Conclusion

Since the museum opened in 2007 the curatorial team has been striving to develop collections which represent the breadth of the legacies of transatlantic slavery and enable the museum to educate and campaign against the contemporary forms of slavery. The development of the collections plan has provided the team with clear definitions and solid foundations with which to build the collections. It has enabled the team to make considered decisions, taking into account the sensitive issues some of the collections explore, and develop strategies for the collections.

The development of the collections has required a variety of approaches; the curatorial team has learnt to be flexible and proactive in the process of developing the collections. In particular the contemporary slavery collection has led the museum to develop close links to NGO's, which has enabled the museum to develop a small collection which reflects contemporary forms of slavery. This has led the development of exhibitions which support various NGO campaigns.

Over the last four years with the guidance from the collections plan the museum has begun to develop its collections. The collection has now reached a size where it requires its own storage. As the curatorial team has become more adept at using the strategies devised and grown more confident with our approach, the growth of our diverse collection has accelerated.

With our collections becoming established the museum has begun to develop plans for the next phase of the museum. We aim to teach the history of transatlantic slavery, its legacies and contemporary forms of slavery through our collections. With this in mind it is proposed that within the next building phase of the museum a collections centre should be developed which would enable the collection, where possible, to be on accessible display. The collection centre will be housed in the refurbished Dock Traffic Office, a building adjacent to the current display galleries. The building would become an education and research centre for the study of slavery. The collection centre, together with the DTO, will engage with large parts of the local and international community to educate and campaign against all forms of slavery.

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# Collecting practice in Social History museums

*Have you ever wondered what the social history collecting practice is in other museums? Lauren Ephithite at Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service, as part of her recent Museum Studies dissertation conducted a survey of collecting practices in Social History museums. Many of our members participated in the survey, and here, Lauren disseminates some of her findings.*

This article is a condensed form of my Master of Arts Museum Studies Dissertation, researching collecting practice in Social History museums. It featured a survey designed to discover if collections and collecting remain an important part of Social History museums.

It can be argued that 'the first function of museums to appear historically was that of collection, and collection remains the predominant reason for many a museum's existence.' (Alexander, 1996, p. 119) This shows that a collection is crucial to a museum and in theory should remain a priority throughout its existence. However, is this true in practice? Do museums continue to collect and add to the existing collection to ensure that it remains significant and relevant?

Changing priorities for museums and staff mean that many have to 'weigh the finer points of collection management against over-riding demands to service and extend the visitor experience.'(Brigden, 1992, p. 547) This visitor experience may include exhibitions, events and activities. It can be seen that other aspects of work have gained priority, such as generating income, saving money and marketing, particularly in the current economic climate. This may affect staff priorities and time but may also impact on collecting habits as 'a significant number of museums in the real world may well be dealing in balance-sheet collecting policies, rather than ones developed from social and professional considerations.'(Kavanagh, 1990, p. 96) All of these pressures and demands may mean that collecting has slipped down the priority list for museums. As Social History has developed, many museums now have 'Community History' departments. This clearly highlights the shift to people-centred rather than object-focused history; does this mean that collections are no longer as important in museums?

The following survey results will show whether these changes have been to the detriment of collecting and assess whether it is still an important activity in Social History museums.

## Survey

A survey of nine questions was emailed to 180 museums which hold social history collections, and was also distributed via the Social History Curators Group, please see Figure 1. These museums were found using the Museum Association members guide and the internet. Museums were approached when they had Social History collections and an email address to send the survey to. A wide range of museums were approached: geographically from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and of varying size and governance including: Independent, Local Authority, National Trust and University museums. The survey questions have been designed to find out about the history of the museum's collection, current collecting practices and to gauge current priorities in museums.

98 surveys were completed and returned which is a completion rate of 54.4%. These surveys have been analysed and put into the following graphs.

## Collecting in Social History Museums

Name:
Job Title:
Organisation and method of governance:

1. When was the museum started?

2. How was the bulk of the collection collected?

3. What are the main objects in your collection?

4. How do you collect objects now?

5. Do you contemporary collect eg collecting that reflects now?

   Yes ☐    No ☐

   If yes, what have you collected? -

6. What are the main barriers to collecting that you face?

7. Do you view collecting as an important part of your job and the museum?

   Yes ☐    No ☐

8. What other tasks do you have that may have more priority than collecting?

9. What was the last object that the museum collected?

Thank you very much for completing the survey. Please return to ***

## Collecting Practice

Question 2 asked how the bulk of the collection was collected. This was designed to gain insight into how collections have been formed in the past. 76% of museum collections have been formed by donations. This shows that museums have always been reliant on donations to form their collections. This is different to what was expected, as collections were often formed in response to changing society and redundant material. It is surprising that active collecting does not feature as a way of initially collecting material (15%). However, it is inevitable that these responses may not have been entirely accurate as the majority of those filling out the survey were not present when the collection was being formed.

Question 4 asked museums how they collect objects now. This question was designed to look at museum current collecting practices. Unsurprisingly, the main way that objects are collected is by donation with 91% of respondents giving this as an answer. This shows that museums are largely reactive to offers of objects rather than actively seeking objects. Active collecting or fieldwork was an answer given by 14% of respondents which is very similar to the way that the collections were originally formed.

The survey results show that collecting has also become a largely passive activity, relying on donations to add to its collection. Although Kavanagh argues that 'passive collecting is still valid and will remain so as long as our judgement of the material offered is sound. Indeed, it is the quality of our judgement which is a deciding factor in the future of collecting.' (Kavanagh, 1993, p. 63) This is a fair view and of course a curator has the deciding judgement of what enters the museum collection. However, by not actively seeking out material, the opportunity for thorough research and context is lost. It also means that the objects offered to the museum are affected by the donor's view of the museum. Passive collecting has a direct impact on the quality and content of a museum collection. What does this reliance on collecting of redundant material and passive collecting mean for museum practice and collections? It clearly shows that the quality of museum collections are at risk due to lack of active research in issues of importance to the local area.

34% of respondents said that they made purchases to add to the museum's collection. This is promising and suggests that collecting practices are good and healthy. However, most answers were accompanied with the fact that they were occasional purchases funded by Friends, grants or specifically fundraised for. Although museums may have the restriction of limited funds it shows that it is possible for them to purchase special items for the collection.

Two areas which could be expanded are bequests (7%) and Community Projects (4%) However, with bequests it may be difficult to source high quality material in Social History unlike other disciplines such as art. Community projects are now becoming much more widespread in museums; however they could be used more fully as a way of collecting objects for the museum. This could boost contemporary collecting, context and stories associated with an object and oral histories. One survey participant summed this up by saying 'establishing relationships of trust with the community which can lead to the museum being considered as a repository makes community engagement initiatives of paramount importance.'(Anonymous, 2011) Embedding a museum in a community and completing community projects can be an important way of collecting objects for the future.

Question 5 asked museums if they collected contemporary objects. 70% of respondents said that they did which is an encouraging statistic and suggests that modern life features in museum collections. Contemporary collecting in museums is a greatly debated topic and it is recognised that the collecting of current, modern objects is important. When asked what contemporary objects they had collected many of the answers were clothing and electrical goods. Photographs and oral history were also popular answers, which will have a big impact on the future of museums and displays. There may be a dependence on these sources rather than objects when interpreting this era in the future. This will have an impact on galleries and exhibitions and may lead to greater use of online exhibitions and resources.

Some of the 30% of participants who do not contemporary collect gave reasons for this. Many respondents said that they wanted to collect modern objects but gave reasons such as lack of time and knowing what to collect. Another reason for not contemporary collecting may be time for research and to hone skills needed. A new type of curator has been foreseen; 'connoisseurship of the present and future: a connoisseurship of anticipation.'(Mayo, 1981, 13) For a Social History museum it is advised that current trends or themes in existing collections are extended to contemporary material so that 'direct parallels or modern versions of items already well represented in the museum' are collected. (Crook, 1993, p. 271) This, while good advice, needs time dedicated to it so that curators can be clear what they are collecting. Reasons that prevent collecting in general are explored in the next graph.

Question 6 asked participants to state what the main barriers were to collecting. Unsurprisingly staff time, lack of money and lack of storage were the main barriers to collecting. Staff time has obviously had a big impact on how objects are collected as this prevents active collecting, fieldwork and research. This graph also suggests that the reliance on donations as a collecting method may be due to lack of funds as 59% of respondents cited finance as the main barrier to collecting.

Some of these answers highlighted issues and problems with relying on donations as a collecting method. 2% of participants said that people's view of the museum and collections affected what objects they were offered. This included offering different objects than the museum collects but also the public's view that museums are only interested in 'old' objects. One survey participant said that 'visitors do not always think that we would be interested in items that are not old.' (Anonymous, 2011) Indeed, my

What are the main barriers to collecting that you face?
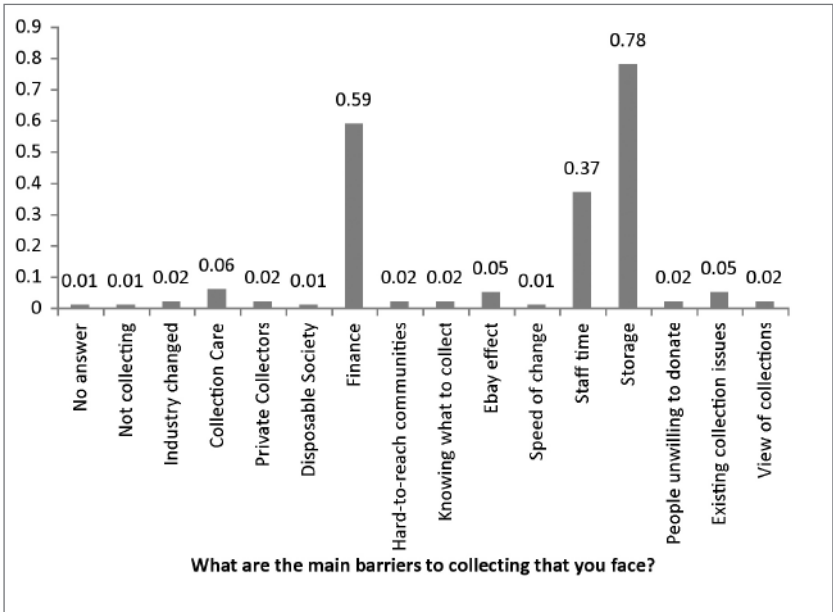
own experience in visitor services has shown that visitors are always surprised when objects that they can remember being in use are in a museum. Is this view something that needs to be addressed by individual museums or the museum sector as a whole to ensure that the modern era is collected? Should museums be relying on donations as a method of collecting?



What other tasks do you have that may have more priority than Collecting?
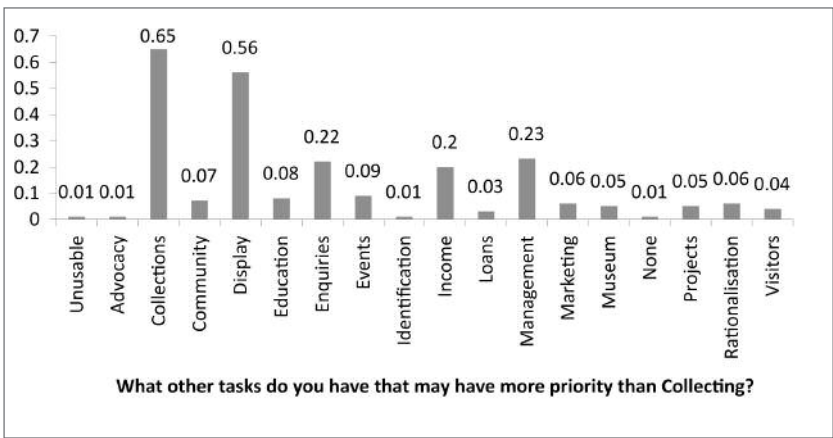
Question 8 asked what other tasks participants have that may take time away from collecting. This was to look at how much of a priority collecting is in museums now and what other tasks staff undertake which they view as more important than collecting. This is an important consideration as a museum's collection is usually its main reason for forming and therefore its reason for continuing to exist.

What this graph very clearly shows is that there is a considerable problem of existing collection management problems affecting collecting as 65% of participants reported

this as a high priority task. As well as taking time away from collecting new objects it impacts on collecting in another way. If it is not known what is in a collection, collecting of new acquisitions is difficult. The risk of collecting duplicates and objects not complementing each other is high when existing collections management is not complete.

This graph suggests that public-facing activities such as museum displays, community work, education, events and enquiries have become increasingly more important and take up a considerable amount of staff time. This makes sense as museums have become more community focused and outward looking in recent decades. Indeed one participant stated that it was the 'public facing activities which justify our existence.' (Anonymous, 2011) This shows how important these activities are and that it is important for museums to prove their worth and value whereas collecting does not do this. However, one participant pointed out that 'the collection is the priority of the museum. Without care and development of collections it is difficult to produce exhibitions and events.' (Anonymous, 2011)

20% of participants said that they now have tasks such as financial management and income generation. This could be due to the current economic climate and financial situation faced by everyone, not just museums. This shows that economic survival is currently a greater concern than collecting, which is sensible, particularly in light of the current, unstable economic climate. This graph also shows that many of the participants have other management tasks including personnel management, volunteer coordination and visitor services.

All of these other tasks and considerations are important and probably should have greater priority as they are more time conditional, however it suggests that staff are being spread thinner across many tasks. This does not allow staff to research or gain an expertise in the museum's collection and collecting remit. A collection is no longer the focus of a museum; there are many priorities for staff, as one participant said 'collecting is only part of the job and needs to be managed within the workload.' (Anonymous, 2011)

Some tasks on the graph which have relatively low percentages should perhaps be given greater priority. These are advocacy (1%) and rationalisation (6%). Despite a recent campaign by the Museum Association advocacy was only mentioned by 1 participant ('Advocacy' *Museums Practice* Issue 49, March 2010). Advocacy means promoting the benefits of a museum to politicians, potential funders and the general public. Slightly different to marketing (which still only had 6% answers) it focuses on continuing to emphasise an institutions worth which is crucial in the current economic climate. Advocacy could be a beneficial way of raising the importance of a collection. As Figure 2 showed the main barrier to collecting was issues of storage. In light of this, should rationalisation be more of a priority in museums? Rationalisation would boost and improve management of existing collections and create greater storage space. Although a difficult process rationalisation could improve collections and allow for better present and future collecting practice.

Lastly, participants were asked whether they viewed collecting as an important part of their job and the museum. Positively, 94% answered yes, showing that, in theory, collecting remains a vital part of the museum sector. One participant said that they viewed collecting as 'essential' another that 'collecting keeps the museum alive.' (Anonymous, 2011) Although collecting is viewed as important we can see from the other graphs that this is not always reflected in working practice.

Overall, the findings of this survey have been positive and show that collecting remains important in Social History museums. Donations remain the main method of collecting but this survey has found that it is possible to raise funds to purchase special items. 70% of respondents said that they did contemporary collect, however it is clear that more guidance and time is needed to allow this to become standard museum practice. Staff no longer have the time to fully research the current collection and future acquisitions. There is a reliance on donations to continue collecting which means that the collection is dependent on the donor's view of the museum. Clearly there are a large number of barriers which prevent museum staff from collecting. The survey has shown that these barriers include: staff time, lack of money, lack of storage and existing collections management problems. This survey has shown that museum staff are often responsible for wide ranging tasks that have more priority than collecting, including public facing activities and economic survival. Although collecting is still viewed as important in Social History museums it is apparent that this is not always reflected in working practice as it is such a passive activity.

It is recommended that more staff and time is dedicated to collections. Rationalisation and improved collections management would allow future collecting to be thorough, more simple and straightforward. It would also make museum activities such as events and exhibitions easier to produce and manage. Although this would be expensive, which is not ideal in the current climate, it would be a good investment in a museum's foundation to ensure a healthy and relevant future.

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# National Museum of Scotland and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

Regardless of the institution in which we find ourselves, despite great disparities of wealth, and the diversity of subjects, there are common threads which loosely bind museum people together into a single profession. The development of and care for collections are rightly cited as one such strand, and the processes of creating exhibitions, galleries and spaces in which the public can experience these collections should also be considered of equal importance. As museum professionals we are often guilty of accentuating the differences between us on these issues: the challenge of curators working across disciplines can be overstated, and the museum officer with a meagre exhibition budget could be forgiven for struggling to aspire to the quality of display that national museums with millions to play with can expect as a given.

Yet the very fundamentals of interpreting and displaying collections cost nothing to think through and get right. Edinburgh has recently seen the reopening of two of her venerable national institutions, the National Museum of Scotland and the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, after significant architectural projects and the creation of new galleries for their outstanding collections. And while they have spent between them £65m, the successes of one and the failure of the other as museum experiences relate to the fundamentals of museum interpretation, planning and execution.

Quietly dropping the "Royal" from the former Royal Museum of Scotland, the Chambers Street museum has undergone a forty-seven million pound transformation and is now linked properly with its Chambers Street neighbour, as a single national museum of Scotland. Sixteen new galleries and an architectural facelift have seen a ground level entrance into the basement of the museum, through which the visitor now approaches past a new shop, cloakroom, bistro / cafe, toilets etc before ascending past a wall mounted cascade of iconic and diverse objects into the main atrium of the museum. This three storey "Great Gallery", previously a chaos of cafe tables, clutter, and a large automata "Millennium Clock", is now a more peaceful architectural space, populated by a mere handful of large, yet seemingly random, objects (a lighthouse optic; a communal feasting trough from the South Pacific). Adjacent are a series of similarly open three storey voids, around which galleries are clustered on walkways and balconies. Visitors susceptible to vertigo are advised to go carefully.

The sixteen new galleries have been grouped together with care, and there are links vertically through the spaces as well as horizontally. This works most notably in the natural history suite of galleries which surround an impressive arrangement of scale models of sea creatures suspended in mid air.

Generally the galleries follow traditional collecting and academic disciplines: natural history is adjacent to geology, astronomy and anthropology, which in turn leads to decorative arts, technology and communications. However, while traditional in this sense, the extraordinary achievement of the museum is to maintain an exceptionally high standard of interpretation throughout. Text is short and very well written, and thoughtful graphic design makes use of colour and layout to aid visitor understanding. Interactive exhibits and screens with film and other media are well integrated into the whole. Remarkably, this never seems to become formulaic, but rather a very welcome consistency of approach which helps visitors to make sense of quite diverse subjects and topics. The only drawback is that the older galleries, which have not been redisplayed as part of the project, do feel more dated in comparison.

Meanwhile, over on the more genteel side of the city, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery has reopened after its own redevelopment. Clocking-in at a mere £17.6m the gallery, which first opened to the public in 1889, has also undergone a significant architectural renovation internally. A spacious new cafe and shop occupy half of the gallery's ground floor, while the other half is set aside for contemporary displays. Above, a series of displays run over two levels. The project has also seen the opening up to visitors of the library and has resulted in a 60% increase in the gallery's public space. This includes a new gallery dedicated to photography.

While the gallery undoubtedly boasts some extraordinary material in its collection, the new exhibitions suffer from poor quality interpretation and planning. While the National Museum galleries are consistently arranged by subject, at the National Portrait Gallery they are arranged in some cases by time period, in others by artist, or body of work, or classification of material (such as photography) or any number of other rationales. For the visitor it is hard to grasp any narrative for the whole gallery, not least as so much material on display is not actually portraiture. This in itself is only a problem if the gallery was serious about presenting another story: if not a gallery of portraits, then a gallery of what?

This intellectual muddle is illustrated by a series of galleries on the second floor. I walked through a section celebrating Scots scientists, into a display of Hello!-style, family portraits of prominent Scottish Asians posing in their living rooms, into an exhibition of landscape paintings from the first world war of naval installations, some of which were of emplacements on the English channel coast, and all of which are on loan from the Imperial War Museum. Interpretation is primarily by wall-text, often full of jargon and convoluted sentences, and topping off at around three hundred words per panel. In comparison, there was more nuance and complexity expressed simply in thirty word labels at the National Museum than these three hundred word exercises in curatorial obfuscation. It's hard to not draw the conclusion that thirty years of museum interpretation practice has somehow escaped the attention of the gallery's curatorial staff.

In the press materials for the reopening, John Leighton, Director-General of the National Galleries of Scotland hails the gallery as a "forum where issues of history and identity come to life through art" and where visitors can see a "portrait of a nation". Certainly, a visitor well versed in Scottish history and culture can find their own meanings as they explore the galleries: I was struck by the juxtaposition of two busts on a staircase; one of the contemporary poet Jackie Kay, of African descent, lesbian, brought up in a white, Communist family in Glasgow with John Buchan, arch-imperialist and conservative author of *The Thirty-nine Steps* – I would give my right arm to eavesdrop on their conversation. But, sadly, no such interpretation was offered.

The quality of the collections and the richness of the subject are undeniable. But it seems to me that the gallery fails to say anything meaningful or challenging about Scottish identity in the 21st century. Less than three years before a likely referendum on the union, and the gallery says little or nothing on the relationship of Scotland to England. As a post-industrial society struggling with entrenched unemployment and poverty, facing the realisation that long-term prosperity cannot be built on the chimera of financial services and a banking sector now synonymous with greed and arrogance, the gallery does not speak to these issues. But, then, perhaps doing so would risk alienating the well-heeled and well-spoken who apparently constitute the core audience for the gallery. If the gallery really wanted to be anything more than cultural wallpaper for the comfortable Edinburgh middle-classes, they need to find the courage to challenge both the expectations of regular visitors and the traditional, and frankly antiquated, interpretive approach.

The National Portrait Gallery would not have needed to spend a single extra penny to get this right: a little time spent interpretation planning and an afternoon reading museum practice literature would have made an enormous difference. These opportunities come along rarely for any museum, and it is a great shame that only one of these two great institutions have grasped the nettle, or thistle, on this occasion.

*Michael Terwey is Chair of SHCG*

# The Clink Prison Museum, Southwark, London

The Clink Prison Museum is nearing the end of refurbishment work which commenced in January 2011 and will continue through until early 2012. The museum has remained open throughout this period (with renovation work taking place overnight), and as such the updated displays have been unveiled at intervals over the past year. Prior to the project completion, I was able to preview the final stages of redevelopment.

The Clink Prison Museum is not – as I had assumed – a scare attraction. It explores the history of one of the earliest prisons in England; provides an overview of crime and punishment from the Middle Ages through to the Georgian era; and encourages visitors to consider parallels with contemporary societies.

The museum has been restructured to take a chronological journey through the prison's history (1144 -1780). The stories of both infamous and forgotten past inhabitants – such as the religious heretic Bishop Hooper and Ellen Butler, who was incarcerated for refusing to be a prostitute – are used to consider broader historical episodes and societal themes. The displays depicting imprisoned heretics reference the English Reformation, and the Civil War is considered through representations of Royalist prisoners of war. Prisoner mistreatment is illustrated by instruments of torture, such as a selection of iron manacles. The museum has been able to showcase a number of new artefacts which were acquired through its relationship with the *Mudlarks Association*, who found the objects on the banks of the Thames.

The museum has always sought to communicate the experiences of offenders who were often forgotten by their contemporaries. As part of the redevelopment, the museum will further engage visitors with these personal accounts by utilising interactive aids, such as filmed acting sequences. Films about the Gordon Riots and victims of torture are currently in development.

On a practical note, the refurbishment has improved visitor accessibility. Interpretation panels have been re-designed to be more engaging and digestible for a range of reading ages. A superior lighting track and modernised display cases have been installed, and the gallery spaces have been restructured to incorporate a new gift shop. A new guide book provides additional detail about the Clink, the Southwark area, and the context of periods of high imprisonment.

As part of the redevelopment, museum staff have consulted academic research to uncover new information about the prison. This has revealed that the Clink was one of the few prisons in England to have an *Oubiliette* – a small underground pit accessible only from above, where prisoners were often left to die - and as such, a new display features a replica.

The new museum will ask visitors to consider the contemporary prison experience; the final display will reference campaigns by organisations such as Amnesty International, which highlights that the mistreatment inflicted on Clink Prison's detainees continues to exist in modern society.

The Clink Prison Museum has been challenged to deliver a significant redevelopment (the first in its 30 year history) with a diminutive budget and whilst remaining open to the public throughout. It is testament to the hard work of the museum staff that the project is nearing completion, and is achieving its objective of bringing the fascinating and challenging stories of prisoners to life.

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# Notes for contributors

Social History in Museums is published annually, and the editor welcomes proposals for articles from museum professionals, researchers, academics and students. Please send an abstract of no more that 200 words to michelle.day@nationalmediamuseum.org.uk. Articles should be between 2,000, and 4,000 words long.