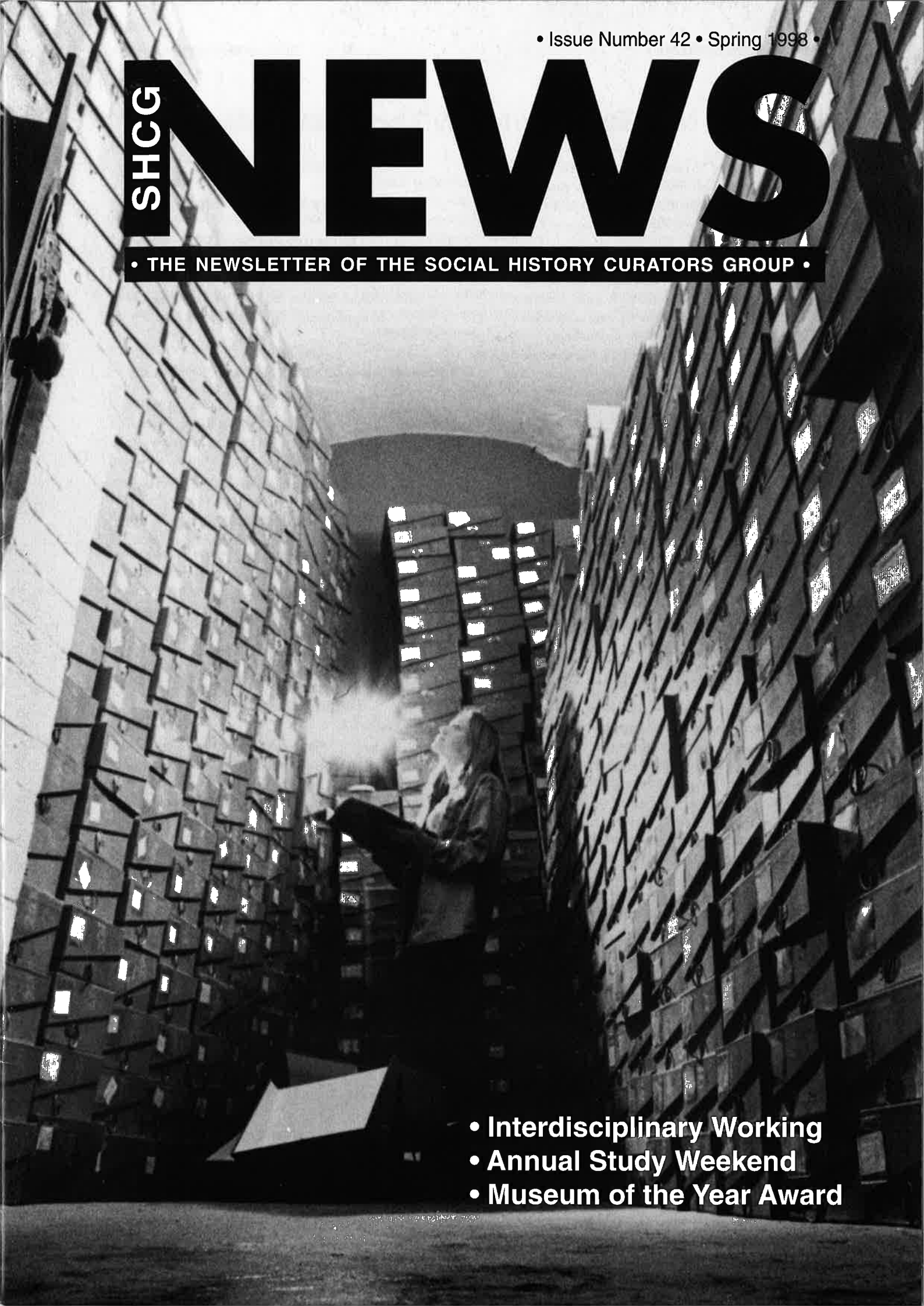


• Issue Number 42 • Spring 1998 •

SHCG

# NEWS

• THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP •

- 
- Interdisciplinary Working
  - Annual Study Weekend
  - Museum of the Year Award

## New Year. New Team.

Welcome to the Spring '98 edition of SHCG NEWS! This is the first NEWS of the year and the first from the new editorial team. We aim to carry on Harriet's good work whilst adding a few new elements to keep you interested. We hope you like what you see.

We want to make sure the NEWS is *the* place to read about current events in social history practice. To make sure that it is always full of up to the minute news you have to let us know what is happening. Please send us information about forthcoming exhibitions or meetings which might interest members and keep us informed of any new developments in your work which you would like us to report.

We would also like to know if there are any new features you would like to see in the NEWS. Perhaps a regular interview slot or more theory and practice features?

Please send all comments, press releases and articles to Nicky Bleasby to make sure that the next edition of the NEWS covers what you want to see.

Nicky Bleasby  
Caroline Macfarlane  
Robert Rose  
Editorial Team

SHCG NEWS will encourage and publish a wide range of views from those connected with history and museums.

The NEWS aims to act as a channel for the exchange of information and opinions about current practice and theory in museums.

The views expressed in the newsletter are wide ranging and do not necessarily express the views of the SHCG committee or SHCG, unless otherwise stated.

Articles for the NEWS should be between 500 to 2000 words. Please submit a typed copy of your article along with a copy on disk, saved as a word file or richtext format, or you can send it as an e-mail. Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

DEADLINE FOR SUMMER '98 ISSUE: 15 June 1998

Send all contributions to:  
Nicky Bleasby,  
Flat 4, 112 Muswell Hill Road,  
London, N10 3JD.

Tel: (0181) 374 4540.  
E-mail: [nicky@knn.globalnet.co.uk](mailto:nicky@knn.globalnet.co.uk)

Nicky is happy to answer all queries and provide a form sheet if required.

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Cover photo: 'Museum Assistant Jane Brum of the Empire and Commonwealth Museum, beginning the cataloguing of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office Archive 1800-1960'.

## The Interpretation and Evaluation Project

**The interpretation and evaluation project was established in 1996 with the broad aim of investigating the most effective methods of interpreting history, through an evaluation of best practice at museums and other related sites and organisations.**

### Progress to date

The initial phase of the project is now complete. Stuart Davies, of the University of Leeds, and Tim Caulton, of the University of Sheffield have written up an overview of curators' attitudes to interpretation and evaluation and have amassed an archive of evaluative techniques used by museums throughout the country. This research was presented at the ASW, but if you were not present and would like to have a précis of the research please get in touch. The analysis is not finished but we intend to use this survey of attitudes of best practice to inform the next stage of the project.

### What is to be done?

The next phase is now a more detailed research project which will look at different techniques of interpretation and assess how effective they are in providing intellectual access to ideas and collections. This will involve a number of action research projects based in a small number of museums.

### How can you help?

We are looking for a number of museums which would like to be involved in this research process. If you use a specific interpretative technique particularly well we want to hear from you.

It might be an unusual use of oral history, an innovative way of incorporating living history, or an elegant use of simple physical interactives. You must be committed to organising a programme of evaluation which will be linked to the research that Stuart and Tim will be doing at specific sites.

### What happens next?

If you want more information about the findings so far, drop me a line. You can get involved in the evaluation projects by committing your organisation to a programme of evaluation which outlines an area of interpretation you think your museum is particularly good at. Watch out for the series of seminars which will present the researchers findings and allow you to comment on them.

The research is due to be completed by Autumn 1998, and a publication will be circulated to all members and member institutions.

### For more details about the projects and offers of help, contact:

Tim Corum,  
Oldham Art Gallery and Museum,  
Greaves Street, Oldham, OL1 1DN.  
Tel: (0161) 911 4657. E-mail:  
cls.museums@oldham.gov.uk

## Annual Study Weekend 1998

### What?

This year's ASW will tackle the issue of partnerships within museums. What can partnerships do for your museum? Are they a good idea? What are the potential pitfalls? Papers will address business partnerships and look at how museums can build up relationships with their local community and friends' groups. As usual, discussion will range from the theory to practical aspects of the subject.

### Who?

Programme co-ordinators have already approached some speakers but they are keen to hear from more people who would like to give papers. If you are

interested in giving a paper or know of someone who might, get in touch with Robert Rose (Tel: (01376) 325266) as soon as possible.

### Where?

The location for the ASW will be Reading, home of Reading Museum Service and the Museum of English Rural Life. It is also close enough to Chiltern Open Air Museum to allow a trip there. Accommodation will be in the University's halls of residence.

### When?

The dates of the ASW are as follows; Thursday 9 July – Sunday 12 July 1998.

## Membership

Members are reminded that from April 1998 there will be a modest increase in charges for SHCG membership. The increases were agreed at the Annual General Meeting, at Wigan Pier, on Friday 14 July 1997 and still compare favourably with the subs of similar organisations. It was felt that the increases were necessary to ensure that the high quality of the group's output can be maintained.

New prices are as follows:

Students	£6.00
Personal	£16.00
Joint	£22.00
Institutional	£38.00
Overseas Personal	£24.00
Overseas Institutional	£42.00

All membership enquiries should be sent to:

Helen Sykes, Museum of Local Life,  
Friar Street, Worcester, WR1 2NA.  
Tel: (01905) 722349

## Appeal From The Journal Editor

It is already time to start thinking about what will go in next year's Journal. If you want to contribute an article, a book review or simply suggest a subject you would like to see covered, contact Nigel Wright. Astley Hall Museum & Art Gallery, Astley Hall, Chorley, Lancashire, PR7 1NR. Tel: (01257) 515555

## Group for Medical History Collections formed

**T**he London Museum of Health and Medicine and the Thackray Medical Museum, Leeds organised a very successful meeting on Thursday 9 October 1997 to discuss the formation of a group interested in Medical History Collections.

The meeting took place at the newly opened Thackray museum. The meeting was attended by over 40 people from a variety of backgrounds – including Curators, Librarians and Archivists. Speakers came from the London Museums of Health and Medicine, The Science Museum and the Science and Industry Collections Group. The meeting overwhelmingly endorsed the need for an annual meeting and some

form of directory or contact list to provide opportunities for people in this field to network. A steering group was set up to organise the first meeting.

The group is not a replacement for, or extension of, the London Museums of Health and Medicine, which will continue to exist. Instead it is an informal group now affiliated with the Science and Industry Curators Group, to help those interested in Medical History Collections to exchange and share ideas and information.

**For further information please contact:**  
Emma Bond, British Red Cross Museum and Archives, Barnett Hill, Wonersh, Guildford, Surrey, GU5 0RF.  
Tel: (01483) 898595

**...Is there something happening in your museum or local area which is newsworthy?**

**...Any exhibitions or seminars you would like to publicise?**

**Let us know the details and watch this space...**

**SHCG NEWS**

## Museum News

**W**akefield Museum has won the lottery! The Heritage Lottery Fund has agreed to support the regeneration of Wakefield Museum to the tune of £1,005,000. This grant was one of only nine successful 'big' heritage bids across the whole country. The Pilgrim Trust has also agreed to pay £17,363 towards the costs of improving the environmental controls in the museum. The museum's staff wish to extend their thanks to all those who have helped achieve these successful bids.

### Christian Heritage

The Manor House Museum, Kettering plays host to an exhibition about Kettering's Christian heritage organised by Churches Together. 2 May – 13 June 1998, Admission Free.

### Ed's note

We would like to feature more social history museum news in future editions of SHCG News.

Send Press Releases to:

Nicky Bleasby, Flat 4, 112 Muswell Hill Road, London, N10 3JD.

## North West Social History Group

**Forthcoming meetings:**

**'Use them but don't lose them' - customer experience versus collection care.**

The Boat Museum,  
Ellesmere Port, 14 July 1998

**'Wedgwood and washboards - never the twain shall meet?'**

- co-operative working across museum disciplines.

The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool,  
10 November 1998

For more information contact:

Emma Chaplin,  
The Boat Museum,  
Ellesmere Port

Tel. (0151) 355 5017. Fax. (0151) 355 4079

Nigel Wright, Astley Hall, Chorley

Tel. (01257) 515555. Fax. (01257) 515556

## Annual Study Weekend Or “Death by Danish Pastry” 12 - 15 July 1997

Liverpool was the venue for this year's Annual Study Weekend (ASW) entitled '*Your Place or Mine? Collecting and Interpreting Identities*'. It proved to be a challenging three days which focused on the role of a museum and the skills of its curator, in representing a sense of identity.

Amanda Gifford and Georgina Colethorpe were attending the ASW for the first time. Here are their perspectives on three very busy days at John Moores University.

A chance encounter with a leaflet in the South Eastern Museums Service's office led me to discover the SHCG – and what an interesting and friendly bunch of professionals you proved to be. Although I arrived knowing no-one, I think I had spoken to everyone by the time I left. I made several useful contacts and did quite a bit of 'business' in the breaks and in the evening socials. As one who is largely self-funding an AMA, I am extremely grateful to the SHCG for my free place – I will start saving for next year immediately.

We were catapulted straight into the weekend's topic on Friday morning by David Fleming's challenging and provocative paper on the role of popular culture in defining regional identity. He posed many questions, whilst modestly refusing to propound many answers, such as are we becoming homogenous and can we retain, celebrate and enhance cultural differences?

Regional identity seems to be a mix of self-perception, 'sense of self', and perception of a region by 'outsiders'. That sense of self is defined by place, street, neighbourhood, city, region, country, in a pattern which may go back to feudal land-owning arrangements and which is modified or reinforced by kinship, race and ethnicity. The way others see us also contributes to our identity. This has to be acknowledged even if it amounts to stereotyping.

In today's world we are under a lot of pressure from the media and advertisers to become homogenous so they can have an easier task of putting the same message across to everyone. In spite of this, however, or perhaps even because of



it, under this pressure we tend to look to regional identities for comfort. Consequently, museums have a crucial role to combat the potential for dislocation and lack of identity.

Of all the papers presented, the high point for me was when Stephen Counce challenged us to confront the established picture of rural life in the 19th and 20th centuries. This worked on several levels, a witty presentation, a lovely piece of in-depth research, and the realisation that any of us who have had to display and interpret rural objects may have fallen into the trap of thinking that the East Anglian model, where so much research has been based, is instantly applicable to all rural situations.

Less applicable to my situation, but totally appealing was Victoria Emmanuel's presentation of Birmingham's Mipuri project. I think we would have all liked to see the rest of the video which raised again the complexity

of the identity question. Interviewees in the video saw themselves as Mipuri, Kashmiri, Pakistani, British or a combination of some or all of these. Victoria's paper reinforced the conclusion that curators must not abuse their power of interpretation. Outreach, community links and asking enough people, and the right people, to interpret themselves is crucial.

For me and my situation, the bias of papers was rather too much towards the large urban areas with multicultural populations. There was not enough about communities with the smaller scale and different problems such as I find here in Kent, e.g. Whitstable, a fishing and holiday town and Herne Bay, a classic holiday town.

The trip to Wigan Pier on the Friday Night was a particularly fun trip which incorporated the AGM - a pleasantly brief affair. I thought it was encouraging that more people wanted to be on the

Committee than there were posts to be filled, necessitating an election. I hope in two or three years time - post NVQ and AMA, that I too will be boldly standing up to do my bit.

It seems churlish to even hint at negatives with the accommodation in university flats at such a reasonable price and so centrally placed. Enough perhaps to say wardrobes usually work better with hangers in them, and that I hadn't thought to bring my own cutlery, teatowel, bathmat etc! Perhaps the food was a bit samey, but there was always enough for us finicky veggies – and if you were peckish there was always the dubious Danish left over from the breakfast pack mysteriously delivered to your kitchen in the early hours...

And what a place Liverpool is! Thank you to the conference organisers for giving us a free afternoon to enjoy the place we were in and to have the chance to be alone and not talk shop for a couple of hours! Without this, I think there might have been an outburst from those of us not within easy reach of Liverpool. I have already planned a return trip and reckon to need at least four days for all the bits I missed or did at a run.

Any downers? Well, a couple of times I found myself on the verge of apologising for coming from the South (mostly as a result of very *joyial* barbed comments). Maybe I should have come out in strength about our pockets of unemployment, the East Kent pit closures, etc., but it seems a shame to be competitive about such sad facts.

And so to sum up what I got from the long weekend. I got a lot of support and maybe gave out a little too? I now have contact with people I expect to ring or visit in the future and people with whom I've said, "see you next year" in the hope that they mean it as much as I do. Suddenly, I feel part of a wider community!

**Manda Gifford**  
Coastal Museums Development Officer  
Canterbury Museums Service.

## Annual Study Weekend Report

As a recent member of the SHCG who, until this year, had never attended an ASW, I was aware through reading the newsletters of how the themes for the weekends are carefully chosen to reflect current concerns and practices and to stimulate debate in pertinent areas. This year's seemed particularly relevant with recent events having placed regions in conflict with National Museums over the disputed possession of objects, while the political process of devolution can only bring the subject to further attention.

The intense emotions that can be aroused over issues associated with the concept of identity was emphasised by Anthony Buckley, of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, who began his paper by drawing our attention to the newspaper headlines for that Sunday concerning the difficulty of reaching a compromise over the imminent Orange Order March at Dumree. It was a compelling juxtaposition of current events with historical discourse. He asked us to address the complexity of Protestant ethnicity and the challenge his museum faces in deciding which tradition to represent in order to fulfil the mandate to present the traditions and way of life of the people of Northern Ireland.

Both Viv Pollock, of the Ulster

Museums, Belfast, and Anthony Buckley illustrated how the very process of uncovering and exhibiting characteristics of identity can, in certain situations, become a cause of conflict. They showed the complexity of confronting such issues where history is itself the subject of dispute. Here was a clear demonstration of how curators would need all their skills to define the museum's role in representing a sense of identity.

Yesterday's identity and today's For the most part, people attending the ASW will not have to deal with such potentially dangerous conflicts. However, as convenor Harry Dunlop, of St Mungo Museum, Glasgow noted, at some point we all have to confront issues of identity and, in the process, can encounter disputes which accompany the subject. What repeatedly stood out was the complexity involved in even defining what constitutes 'identity'. One aspect of identity, the interrelationship of yesterdays identity and today's, where a communal sense of identity appears to consist in part of how people interpret the past as they live in the present, choosing what to remember and what to forget, was also touched on by some speakers.

Mike Boyle, from the City of Liverpool College, considered Scouse Identity. He



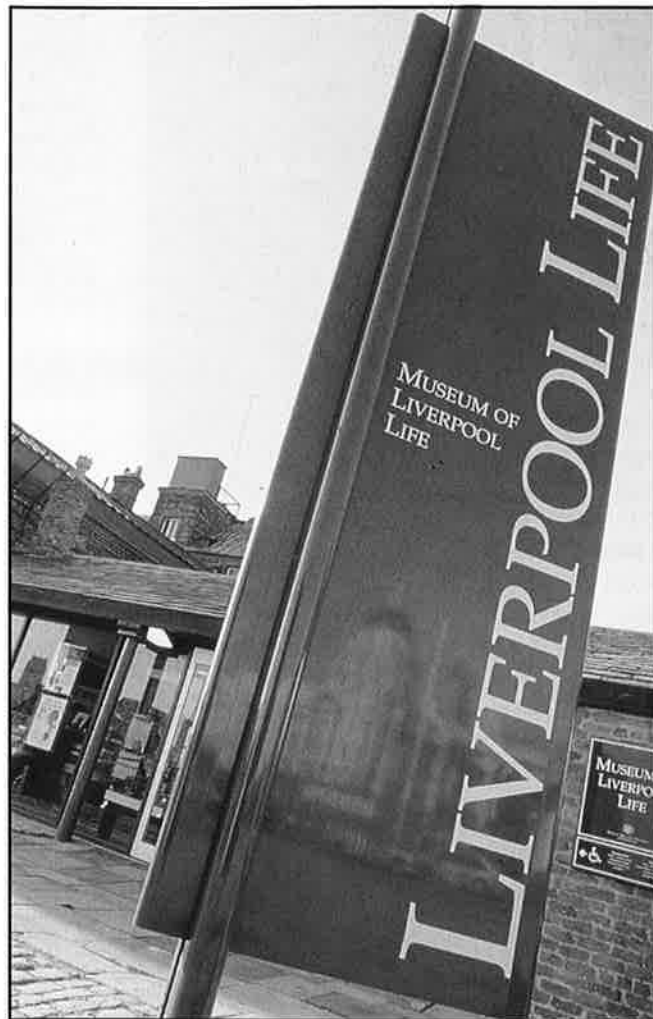
argued that a strong, contemporary impression of identity exists in Liverpool, to the extent that it can be stereotyped by outsiders. It is important to address that stereotype and examine the past history of the city and the former experiences of its people to enable an understanding of modern identities.

From my personal point of view, what I was seeking from the weekend, aside from the stimulating ideas and historical perspectives, was practical guidance on how to begin to address the concept of identity in the process of redisplaying the social history collections at Colchester Museums.

Recent research undertaken in conjunction with the Susie Fisher group, had set out to explore "peoples perceptions of Colchester and its identity and to understand their personal relationship with the town". What became apparent was the lack of a strong concept of identity amongst the people who live in the town in spite of its historical past as Britain's oldest recorded town. This confirmed David Fleming's point that great antiquity does not guarantee a strong sense of identity. One comfort gained from attending the weekend was that this problem of negative or apathetic identification with a place was by no means unique.

With this problem in mind I found that the examples of the skills and processes that can be employed to explore and reveal subjects relating to contemporary identity which were addressed in the four workshops were interesting and notable for the variety of approaches they examined. Led by Nicola Clayton, University of Leicester, Elizabeth Carnegie, St Mungo Museum, Glasgow, Tim Corum, Oldham Museum and Art Gallery and Sandra Marwick, City Art Centre, Edinburgh, aspects of subcultures, text, the strategic

importance of contemporary collecting and the practicalities of representing disparate communities in one project were demonstrated through case studies. In each case the need for political and cultural sensitivity in relation to the individuals and groups a museum is seeking to record, collect from or represent was again emphasised, together with the need to understand the political implications of addressing aspects of identity. The issue of whether to actively collect or record material was looked at



in particular by Nicola Clayton. She drew attention to the importance of subcultures, many of which define their identities through material objects such as dress, accessories and publications which, in turn, come to influence mainstream life.

Of further interest from my perspective, coming from a town whose history is closely linked with the history of a

garrison, was the member's paper by Simon Jones of the Museum of Liverpool Life. This not only examined the importance of a regimental museum in creating a sense of identity and esprit de corps for regiments, but the problems for a curator in combining this original role for such collections, with the needs of the general public who are often ambivalent towards the subject.

The last session of the ASW was a session where we could all discuss some of the issues which had been raised over the preceding days and consider their application to our various situations.

One criticism I have of an otherwise fascinating, well organised weekend was that the general discussion was restricted to this last session which left a lot of issues to be addressed in a very short time. An opportunity at the end of each day would have enabled greater exploration of points raised, particularly in relation to the variety of museums represented at the ASW.

Challenging and enjoyable  
Aside from this minor gripe it was a challenging, highly enjoyable weekend, and the socialising is as legendary as it is rumoured! This year there was the opportunity to experience a Northern Soul Nite at first hand, not to mention the constant supply of Danish Pastries! As one of the recipients of a free place, I am very grateful to the SHCG for giving me the opportunity to attend the

whole weekend and can highly recommend the experience to people who have not yet attended.

**Georgina Colethorpe**  
Assistant Curator, Social History,  
Colchester Museums.

## Award Winners

The joint winners of this year's Museum of the Year Award for Best Museum of Industrial or Social History were Saffron Walden Museum and The Royal Engineers Museum. Both were praised for the way in which they had introduced a strong element of human history to galleries not specifically about social history. Christine Allison, Curator of Saffron Walden Museum, explains what it means to have won the award whilst John Rhodes, Curator of the Royal Engineers Museum, describes the work done to transform the museum's galleries with the aid of some unusual partnerships...

### Saffron Walden Museum

"...and I am pleased to be able to tell you that Saffron Walden Museum is Joint Winner of the Best Museum of Industrial or Social History". What an exciting moment - to be a winner in the Museum of the Year Awards - and how nerve-racking it was, ensuring that word did not leak out before 10th November, as we were so delighted with the news!

A potted history about the museum will help to set the scene. The collections and the building are owned by Saffron Walden Museum Society but they are leased to Uttlesford District Council who are responsible for the day to day management of the museum. The museum opened in 1835, in a purpose-built building, which is set in the grounds of the ruined Walden Castle. Like many societies at this time the main interests of the group were archaeology, ethnography and natural history, and they collected artefacts not only from the local area but from around the world. Visitors are often surprised at the "wealth" of the collections (in a historical sense) - how did such a small rural town become the repository of such amazing objects? Explorers, missionaries, settlers, colonial officers and travellers associated with the district, and local dignitaries too, donated objects to the growing museum's collections, most of which we still enjoy today.

There have been some disposals - the 'large mammal' collection was dispersed in the 1960s, only Wallace the Lion remains. Wallace was the first lion born in captivity and formed a part of Wombwell's travelling menagerie. It was agreed that on his death his body would be rushed (which it was, by stagecoach from Dudley, in 1838) to the museum for taxidermy. The famous Victorian



'Wallace'

monologue about 'Albert, Wallace and the horse's head handle' was based on our Wallace. The large mammal collection was housed in the Great Hall of the museum.

It had been appreciated for some time that better use could be made of the space in the Great Hall for interpreting the collections. A fundraising project was launched in the mid-1980s by the museum staff and the Saffron Walden Museum Society to totally redisplay this area of the museum. The sum of £300,000 was raised from donations, grants, events and so on. The Ages of



'Children using the quern in the Ages of Man Gallery'.

Man gallery (archaeology) was opened in 1988, followed by The Earth Beneath Your Feet (geology). The final phase was the Natural History gallery and Discovery Centre, opened in May 1996, and this formed the entry into the Museum of the Year competition. Why then were we joint winners of the Industrial or Social History Award? We were told that it was to mark the work of the whole museum, where human (social) history plays a large part in all the displays.

Credit is due to Len Pole (Curator until 1996) and Maureen Evans (Visitor Services Officer) who were responsible for launching - and maintaining the momentum - in this project, especially with regard to the essential fundraising. Nick Gordon, the Natural Sciences Officer, master-minded the superb Natural History gallery and Discovery Centre. (A full account of Nick's preparation of this gallery can be read in *Museum Practice*, 5, "Interpretation" p.57-61) The Great Hall project, however, would have been untenable without the enthusiastic support of all staff members over the ten year period.

The museum also had the whole-hearted support of the Museum Society with the Great Hall Appeal. On 10th November, as Curator, I had the most enjoyable experience of being invited to collect the Award - without having done the hard work (cheeky really).

Once the entry form was submitted, we were aware that if we had made any progress in the selection procedure that we were going to receive 'visitations'.



Two of the three judges visits were unannounced; we collected one judge from the station so that gave us some warning. The museum has always prided itself on ensuring that exhibition light-bulbs are changed as soon as they expire, that the toilets are clean, that our visitors are made to feel welcome, and so on, but being in the running for Museum of the Year certainly kept us on our toes!

I am all in favour of the Museum of the Year and the Gulbenkian Awards as they provide an opportunity for the smaller museums to be recognised for both the quality and the imaginative nature of their work. Saffron Walden Museum has won three major awards in the last five years; Gulbenkian award for the Best Museum Publication (Local History gallery) in 1992; runner up in the Gulbenkian award for Best Provision for

Visitors with Disabilities in 1996; and finally to be joint winner of this National Heritage award in 1997. In his address at the Award ceremony, the Right Honourable Chris Smith said that that he had requested the Museum of the Year Awards and the Gulbenkian Awards host a joint ceremony. In his opinion, this Awards ceremony should have the kudos and publicity of the Booker Prize and emphasised his view that the museum world did not blow its own trumpet nearly enough. It is true that we do not always seem to capitalise on such events as much as we could.

The main effect of the award has been to heighten the awareness of local councillors and the local community to the work at Saffron Walden Museum. Press coverage has been good - although 10th November release date coincided with an unsavoury incident in the town

which stole the front page headline! Some things just can't be 'managed'. Without wishing to tarnish the golden glow of success - there is no room for complacency. Winning an award does not safeguard the future of a museum - the current situation at Aylesbury Museum, with its wonderful, award-winning Roald Dahl gallery, is a case in point.

On that salutary note, I would like to congratulate The Royal Engineers Museum at Gillingham on their success and to wish them (as we wish ourselves) a fruitful year of being able to put Joint Winner of the Industrial or Social History Award, Museum of the Year Award 1997 - nor forgetting 'Sponsored by Unilever' - on all publicity!

Christine Allison  
Curator

## The Royal Engineers Museum

**The Royal Engineers museum today is funded by the Ministry of Defence, though its collections are owned by the Institution of Royal Engineers (a private charity incorporated by royal Charter in 1923).**

The Museum's origin lies in a collection of instructional models used in the School of Military Engineering at Chatham from the early 19th century. In about 1875, the newly-established Institution combined these with members' memorabilia and trophies into a private Museum collection. In 1912 it formally opened the Museum to the public in Brompton Barracks, where it remained until 1986. In that year the Museum moved to its present Chatham site, the old Electrical School of the School of Military Engineering, with its own public entrance and car park. It was formally opened in 1987 by HM The Queen as Colonel in Chief of the Royal Engineers.

Here, while remaining alert to the training needs of the Corps and the specialist interests of its historians, the Museum has consciously sought to widen its appeal by tailoring its displays for a

more general public. This has been facilitated by the history of the Corps of Royal Engineers itself and its past responsibility for all major technical developments in the British army, with the exception of gunnery. In addition Royal Engineer architects and civil engineers were responsible for many public works in Britain and throughout an expanding empire. Its surveyors, who carried out the pioneer work of the Ordnance Survey, were also responsible for many major overseas area and boundary surveys. These, mainly Victorian developments, were illustrated in the first phase of the new Museum's development after 1986.

This first phase however, was merely part of an ambitious plan to develop the Museum and the associated Corps Library into an internationally-recognised centre for the study of the application of science and technology for military use and the Royal Engineers' contribution to it. To raise capital for this long-term project the Royal Engineers Museum Foundation was set up in 1989 to approach for financial support private business and, particularly, the construction industry, where many former Royal Engineers are to be found.

As part of its first initiative an outside designer was commissioned to utilise the old turbine-house of the former Electrical School for displaying large equipment from both World Wars. These formed the centrepieces for displays illustrating trench and dug-out construction, tunnelling, poison gas, anti-aircraft defence, bomb disposal, bridging, mine warfare and the Mulberry Harbour project. All were put together by the Museum's own team of Sapper tradesmen under his general direction. In this respect the Museum has been particularly fortunate until the end of 1996, in having at its disposal a Project Team of about ten craftsmen under a Clerk of Works or a qualified Engineer Officer, and in being able to draw upon the resources of the Royal School of Military Engineering for all basic construction work.

The next stage was to increase the exhibition area by upwards of a third by roofing over an open central courtyard. This included a glass barrel-roof, and was completed in 1991 at a cost of £250,000 plus several gifts in kind. However, the new enclosed exhibition area necessitated a new fire-safety system for the whole Museum, which was installed by Messrs

Drake & Skull for another £60,000 between 1991 and 1992.

This new covered courtyard was to provide the setting for the Story of the Royal Engineers since 1945, built around some of the Museum's growing collection of vehicles and large equipment. This latest phase of development began in 1994 with a modest budget of £150,000, chiefly for materials and professional advice, on the assumption that much of the work would be done by the Museum's soldier Project Team. This was to be supplemented by some help from the wider Corps of Royal Engineers and trainees from Career Ahead, a local agency at that time providing work-experience for the unemployed. As the courtyard displays neared completion selected inmates from Rochester Prison, nearing end of sentence, were also brought in to help.

The overall courtyard design concept came from Derek Simpson of Roundel Exhibition, Management Co-ordination and Design. This was Roundel's first venture with Museum design but it caught the imagination of the selection committee by Derek's proposal to make maximum use of the height of the courtyard and his bold application of exhibition design techniques to an open space of exhibition-hall proportions and ambience. The centrepiece of his scheme was a high-level walkway designed to give an elevated view of the exhibits, and allowing scope for the development of



'The courtyard showing the walkway under construction'

future displays at a higher level. Work on the displays began early in 1996

and was built around tableaux designed to show large items of Royal Engineer specialist equipment in appropriated contexts from the campaigns and projects of the post 1945 period. To this date, two major tableaux have been completed within the existing budget. The most spectacular represents a 1960s jungle scene in Borneo with Gurkha Engineers de-rigging a bulldozer air-dropped by parachute. This includes a jungle stream, artificial vegetation, sound effects and specially moulded figures of Gurkhas at work.

The second represents an urban scene in Northern Ireland in the 1970s with an armoured bulldozer removing a street barricade and soldiers dressed in anti-riot equipment of that period. These were designed and built by Three Dimensional Displays of Hampton Wick and apart from the walkway, were the only features of the courtyard development not undertaken by the Museum Project Team or curatorial staff.

Other, more embryonic, tableaux were constructed around a Harrier jet fighter emerging from a hide, an armoured Combat Engineer Tractor as used in the Falklands conflict, a Gainsborough Medium Wheeled Tractor from the Malayan Emergency and a Ferret Scout Car from the Gulf War. These still need to be further enhanced when funds allow.

The courtyard was formally opened on 3rd October 1996 by the Rt. Hon Lord Kingsdown KG PC, Lord Lieutenant of Kent. By then expenditure had risen to

£180,000, £30,000 more than the original estimate, but still an amazingly modest sum for the scale and quality of the new exhibition. Much still remains to be done (a new gallery illustrating Royal Engineers Port & Railway Operating between 1940 and 1964 is due to open in April 1998), though the opening of the courtyard, together with the increasing overseas calls on Royal Engineers skills against a background of Defence economies, has led to the



'Gulf War tableau'

disbanding of the soldier Project Team. In the future we will have to manage as other museums do!

**John Rhodes**  
Curator

**Credits**

*Design:*  
Roundel Exhibition,  
Management Co-ordination and Design

*Walkway design:*  
MC Squared Ltd

*Walkway fabrication:*  
Helm Exhibitions

*Tableaux design & build:*  
Three Dimensional Displays

*Carpet layers:*  
TECO

*Lighting & effects:*  
Thorn Lighting

*Fire safety system:*  
Drake & Skull

If you would like further information about any of these firms please contact John Rhodes at the Royal Engineers Museum. Tel: (01634) 406397

## Starting From Scratch

**I**n 1994 the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum Trust began the restoration of Brunel's "Old Station", a Grade 1 listed building at Bristol Temple Meads. Project Director, Dr Gareth Griffiths outlines how the project has grown and developed since then...

**T**he mission of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum Trust is summarised as being to "provide a national forum for preserving, exploring and studying Britain's cultural heritage associated with the former Empire and today's Commonwealth, so that we can better understand and treasure the past and enrich the future.

The Museum will show both how the British Empire evolved into independent nations of the Commonwealth, and also its global impact through interchanges of peoples, language, institutions, trade and cultures".

Receiving no local or central government funding the Trust was presented with the challenging task of not only, raising millions to support the restoration capital project, but also regular revenue and capital funding to support the establishment of the museum project office and the necessary infra structure for the new museum.

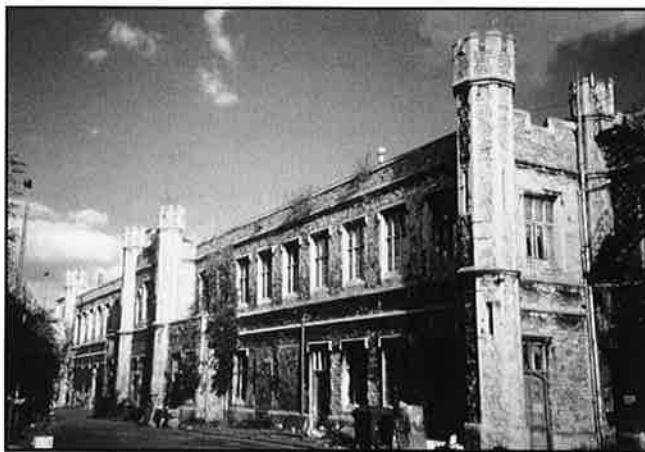
From its inception, Sir Arthur Drew the first chairman of the museum trust reached an agreement with national museums who held significant reserve collections relevant to the themes of the proposed museum, that these would be drawn upon.

Another important key principal which was agreed in the early stages of the project was that every attempt needed to be made to ensure that as many different voices as possible were heard:

a commitment that the underlying approach would be that of a "shared history" - a Commonwealth History. 1998 began with another phase of restoration being commissioned by the Trust which will complete the restoration of over an acre of historic railway buildings.

In addition, within the restored parts of the building a library, oral history archive, collections management areas and temporary exhibition galleries have been established. Over £4.4 million has been raised in support of the project since 1994. At the outset, the Trust was determined to put in place a powerful computer system which would serve all the projects needs. With the support

over a three year period, a large computer system has been developed which has supported the creation of substantial databases as the collections have developed. In 1994 the Museum Trust owned one item ( an enormous oil painting belonging to the Curzon



'Brunel's Passenger Shed before restoration'

family). Today, over 30,500 items are listed on the holdings database. From the start of the project, whilst the restoration work took place, there was a sense of urgency to record the generation who lived through the colonial period and witnessed the growth of the independence movements and the creation of independent nations within the Commonwealth. Funding was raised to establish a major recording project, administered from Bristol and covering the UK and overseas. Today this project which continues to grow, has twenty interviewers who record throughout the UK and is collaborating with three overseas recording projects. Around a third of the interviews are with interviewees who were born outside Britain. All the interviews are easily accessible on the database in summary form where searches by subject, country



'Restoration in progress, Passenger Shed roof bay being replaced, 1997'

of a commitment of substantial sponsorship from Cable and Wireless

etc. can be carried out. There is the intention to transcribe in full all interviews, although the five transcribers who are working with the project struggle to keep pace with the hundreds of hours of recordings carried out each year. All interviewers are sent on an introductory course to oral history and a "refresher day" takes place annually when there is an opportunity for the entire team to be brought together at least once a year.

The commitment to large capital works has limited the ability of the project to employ a large permanent team. However, through a commitment to training and the use of outside professionals for training and advice on

site, a large, active volunteer work force supports the project who are organised by teams. Working with three local training organisations who specialise in IT training the museum currently benefits from the support of over a hundred active volunteers or work experience attachments. In addition, as the project grew so the demand for a Friends organisation developed. Founded in 1996 the Friends of the Museum is a self administered organisation with a mailing list of over two thousand, which produces a newsletter three times a year as well as raising funds in support of the project.

1998 promises to be an important year for the project. The Trust submitted,

towards the end of 1997, an application for a grant in support of the museum's development, to the Heritage Lottery Fund. A large building development has recently started, which surrounds the museum's site, and when completed will significantly enhance the opportunities for the project's development. The year will also see the publication of the holdings catalogue for the oral history archive which is already available on the internet, as well as an education pack on the history of slavery.

For further details contact:  
The Project Office, British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Clock Tower Yard, Temple Meads, Bristol BS1 6QH.  
Tel: (0117) 9254980.

## Interdisciplinary Working SHCG at the MA Conference

**A**t the Museums Association Conference in 1997, SHCG presented a session entitled 'Social History. An Interdisciplinary Discipline' under one of the two main conference themes, 'New Working Order'. It was hoped that this strand of the conference might produce a new, more people-focused, definition of museums to replace the existing one used by the Museums Association. While this new definition did not emerge, a lively debate took place about the ways in which museums can and should work in the future.

The two papers presented in the SHCG session offered different interpretations of interdisciplinary working. Maggie Appleton of Stevenage Museum looked at interdisciplinary working in small museums, drawing on the input of all members of museum staff, while Lucy Harland of Birmingham Museum discussed an interdisciplinary approach between curatorial disciplines.

## One Big Happy Family An Interdisciplinary Approach to Communicating in Museums

**S**ocial historians are the misfits of the museum world, defined by a way of thinking rather than a set of objects. A latecomer into the strictly defined environment of curatorial disciplines, social history sits uneasily within the traditional organisational structures of many of our museums; Social Historians have a people-centred approach where others are object-centred; we are not closely allied to the academic study of our subject unlike our colleagues in the fields of art or archaeology and we are not always at ease working in an environment which is defined in relation to material culture.

Interdisciplinary working lies at the heart of creating an effective environment for social history interpretation. This paper looks at some of the arguments in favour of interdisciplinary working and at some of the fundamental changes in working practice that adopting such an approach might entail.

### Interdisciplinary Working

Interdisciplinary working goes beyond the boundaries that we have constructed in museums for organising and dealing with our collections and encourages a holistic approach to the museum, visitors, the collections and the staff

working with them. Ideally, it starts from the visitor's point of view, thinking about what we are communicating, why we do it and for whom. We need to be fulfilling our obligations to make things accessible, educational, enjoyable and interesting and we need to be using any tools available to us to do it.

Learning methods studied in a museum environment show that visitors understand exhibitions through their own experience and previous knowledge. They relate to what they see on a highly personal level, not just through the constructs that we create. In a recent

exhibition at Birmingham Museum, 30 members of the public were invited to make their personal selection of 'Favourite Things' from any part of the museum's collections. The exhibition was a success in reflecting just how personally visitors respond to objects. Each label (some of the best and most interesting the museum has ever had) was written by a selector to explain their personal relationship with the object chosen:-

*"All people who leave their native lands can identify with this picture; leaving behind friends and family and facing an uncertain future in another country. I could put myself in the child's position (revealed only by its tiny hand) having come here from Pakistan with my parents. The hands providing comfort make it all the more poignant."*

The Last of England by Ford Maddox Brown

*"What would suffragettes and feminists say about this? I chose this item simply because it amused me to think that swains would make these boards for their sweethearts a gift of love - love conditional on their laundry being done? At least they're LOVINGLY carved I suppose"*

Carved Mangling Board

*"This is a lovely example of a simple plain piece of furniture. It looks just right. The colour is so rich and warm that the chair just demands to be sat on. But to a Terry Pratchett (fantasy fiction author) fan the real joy of this chair is that it is made of sapient pearwood. On cold winter nights it grows little feet and walks across the room to be that little bit nearer the warmth of the fire."*

Pearwood Armchair

Naturally, visitors respond to the collections beyond the boundaries of curatorial discipline. They like pictures because they could never paint them, they are drawn to tallow candle moulds because they weep to think that life was once so hard and they feel an affinity with ancient Egyptian sandals because they bought a very similar pair on their travels. If we only think within subject disciplines then we are denying the infinite possibilities that our collections present to us for communicating with people and the infinite ways by which

our visitors approach our collections. The more you think about it, the more absurd it becomes.

### Keeping objects warm

The justification for an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to interpretation is perhaps best expressed through an idea which exists within Maori culture. For many museums in New Zealand there is increasing collaboration and consultation with Maori people to develop culturally sensitive care and interpretation of material culture. One of the concepts that is particularly important in this process is the Maori idea of keeping objects 'warm'. The warmth is generated and maintained through continued connection with the object's history and its social, cultural and spiritual context. It is this warmth that we must try to maintain. How many flat irons make a personal connection with visitors if they have no context? How often do we collect a mundane object which has strong personal meaning for the owner but which becomes decontextualised and 'cold' when it enters the museum? Recording and preserving the story of the user or owner of that flat iron keeps it warm, creating a human connection which is the starting point for communication with our visitors.

But where else does this warmth exist in our museums? The material value placed on oil paintings or fine china, or the historical complexity of archaeological remains, somehow prevents us from keeping these objects warm, from keeping them connected with their personal and human past. It is this warmth that an interdisciplinary approach can engender across the working practices of a museum.

### Social History: an interdisciplinary discipline

Social History is by definition an interdisciplinary subject, encompassing all areas of human activity. It is accepted that we need to use a whole range of material culture and associated information with which to communicate and interpret the past, present and future. The story that we are trying to tell is the focus of our activity and we should use whatever means at our disposal to tell it. As social historians,

where human experience and emotion are at the core of what we try to do, working with rigidly defined subdivisions of material culture can only obstruct our ability to tell a story.

There has been, and still is, some debate about these issues and about the role of material culture in social history interpretation. Without wishing to reopen this debate, the fact that it actually happens and continues to concern some people, emphasises the unusual position of social history curators and collections within museums. The question is no longer - Do we need to focus on material culture so that we continue to fit into traditional museum organisational structures? - but - how can we change the organisational structures to enhance and expand what we are trying to do? It is not a case of whether we work with the objects but how we organise ourselves most effectively to use those objects to communicate.

### The Barriers to Interdisciplinary Working

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach across a whole museum service raises questions about the roles of curatorial staff within museums and the erosion of barriers between the 'public' and 'private' worlds of the museum. We need to look at the physical and intellectual barriers which constrain our thinking, to reconsider our priorities and to focus on the importance of effective communication with the people who use our services.

There are several factors which inhibit our ability to work in an interdisciplinary way. Some of these factors present practical difficulties while others are perhaps more personal or intellectual barriers to working more collaboratively. What we need to ask is, are any of them justifiable reasons why we should not become more holistic in our approach to our collections and their interpretation?

### Relative value placed on collections

As social historians, we have all heard the comments about mangles and dolly tubs, and recognise that traditionally there has been an underlying hierarchy of value

## • Theory and Practice •

among the collections contained within our multi-disciplinary museums. There is a fear that interpretation somehow debases some areas of material culture - a fear which we may more readily associate with the world of art or decorative art but from which social history is not exempt. In addition, there can be a concern that the juxtaposition of objects from different areas of a museum's collections upsets the status quo, devalues the objects on display and somehow decontextualises them. Yet in Birmingham's Favourite Things exhibition, part of the pleasure came from each selector's grouping of objects - an oil painting next to a motorbike, a juke box next to Egyptian potsherds. This is how we perceive the material world around us on a daily basis and yet why should this perception be unacceptable in the museum environment?

### **Collections care vs. collections interpretation**

There are few museums in which the staff structure does not directly reflect the physical organisation of material culture. But is this a model which still works for us and creates the optimum environment for effective communication, as well as collection care? We may look to work in project teams across discipline boundaries but why not look at a more fundamental change in the way that we organise ourselves and our collections. Should we not be looking to models where the staff structure balances more effectively the needs of the public with the physical organisation of collections?

We are responsible for the physical maintenance of our collections and related information yet the management of collections can make us into gatekeepers, guarding 'our' objects. Beyond the creation of centralised stores with equal access to all areas of the collection for all staff, one obvious way to address this issue is to separate collections care from collections interpretation.

Is it true that we have to care for the collections in order to interpret them effectively? Working with collections creates greater knowledge of the resources that we have available to us but so does working with colleagues, visitors and the

community. We do not have to be responsible for the day to day organisation and administration of the collections to appreciate them, work with them or use them effectively. Neither is this division of responsibility a luxury only available to those people working in larger museums, many smaller museums in New Zealand have both curatorial and registrar staff who divide the work of interpretation and collections care.

### **Role of the Curator**

Every curator will tell you that they have too much to do and that there are too many conflicting demands between the key areas of their job. Many of us enter the profession attracted by the prospect of variety but find it hard to balance our work to cover all 5 areas of museum work (i.e. to collect, document, preserve, exhibit and interpret). We should be addressing these varied tasks and asking whether they are best met by one person or whether they should be divided up between a number of staff to create more effective working practises.

For many of us, the role of curator is changing already. The shifting balance of power between the museum as the repository of expertise and the public as the passive recipients of knowledge has altered how we perceive ourselves and our role. We are becoming more adept at communication, better at creating dialogues with local communities and more interested in challenging existing perceptions of what a museum is for. But these new skills can sit uncomfortably with the traditional tasks of curatorship and notions of academic subject expertise.

There has been little strategic analysis of where the future of the curatorial role lies. As the role of 'curator' has traditionally been defined by the care of objects, the separation of collections care from interpretation can seem threatening. But we can still be curators without having to directly care for collections. We need to look at the best place for collections care and whether the traditional role of a curator still serves us in the context of modern museums and their aims.

### **The Way Forward**

Interdisciplinary work is a fundamental part of the future of museums but we can improve the way in which we organise ourselves to facilitate a truly holistic approach to communication. Addressing the implicit hierarchy of values between collections, thinking about the way in which divide the work of collections interpretation and care, and analysing the role of the curator, can only help us to develop a more holistic approach to what we do. More than the keys to a store, we need open-mindedness, a willingness to listen to our visitors and non-visitors, a fluidity in our approach to our collections and subject specialism, and a willingness to experiment.

**Lucy Harland**  
Birmingham Museums

# Interdisciplinary Working in Smaller Museums

## The multi disciplinary worker

**The question of an interdisciplinary approach is very different for smaller museums than for large ones.**

The difficulties many staff in large museums would highlight are concerned with colleagues across different subject specialisms being willing - and able - to work together and share their resources, principally their collections. In most small (often community) museums with just one or two curatorial staff this situation simply does not apply. By definition, curators in small museums with responsibility for a diverse collection have to be multi disciplinary workers, whatever their training. The alternative is to ignore half the material resources at their disposal.

The interdisciplinary approach in small museums is less about working across subject specialism boundaries and more concerned with the relationships between a small team with different job functions and the team's proactive approach to working with external resources.

This paper looks at how this team interdisciplinary approach can be a positive use of resources to cope with the changing political and leisure climate, whilst also being an effective internal teamworking tool and bridge with the community.

## The interdisciplinary approach - a necessity not a choice.

Museums are not operating in isolation; external factors daily impinge and make demands on the services and how they're delivered. Museums have to cope with the realities of:

- Dealing with a large number of publics - meaning that the majority of museums don't have the luxury to dictate what visitors will see. We cannot choose our

audience by making our interpretative decisions from the starting point of our own interests; they are shaped by the local population and local needs.

- Limited staff and few curatorial specialisms.
- Increasing desire to achieve accountability - museums and their purseholders (councillors/ trustees) have to be sensitive to local taxpayers and visitor demand - or lack of it.
- Limited finances and static or decreasing budgets.
- Increased competition from the leisure and tourism sector.
- Increased customer expectations.

Such external pressures on museums, in terms of the pull between the need to be visitor focused yet having fewer resources available to fulfil this, requires museums to maximise their resources to the full. Typically, staff costs make up 50% of a museum's revenue budget, so making the most of these resources through a team focused interdisciplinary approach is rising to that challenge.

## Interdisciplinary approach - sound sense

As well as making the most of resources, the interdisciplinary approach is the means by which a museum can utilise its full team to provide a visitor led service. The result of this should be more visitors through the door leading to increased income and in turn a better profile within the authority/ organisation.

The interdisciplinary approach

- Makes the best use of resources.
- Creates a team-oriented approach.
- Brings in external influences - community representatives and specialists to broaden the museum's perspective.
- During the initial planning of a new environmental exhibition at Stevenage Museum, the team approach highlighted that the Museum Technician was a keen nature photographer. The Technician subsequently undertook most of the photography for the

## Team interdisciplinary approach

So that is the theory, but this team-focused approach is more a pragmatic response to the external climate - it is about delivering a service. The team interdisciplinary approach can only work if the whole staff feel committed to and a part of the aims and philosophy of the organisation. They should have input from policy making to the forward planning process to exhibition planning. It is not the approach to take if the Curator(s) feel the Museum has an innate right to be there. It is the approach to take if the Curator and team are committed to a museum that is a vibrant community resource.

Nor is it a formula that can be brought out to plan one exhibition or pull together one token policy document. This approach is one that must interlock with a clear mission statement, aims and targets in an organisation that has the flexibility to allow each individual's opinion and decisions to be taken onboard. Assuming this structure is in place, and using exhibitions as an example, figure 1 is a model of how the interdisciplinary approach can be drawn on to plan museum projects making the most of internal resources.

## Benefit to the service

(See Fig. 1, Page 16)

This is a democratic team model; meaning that the whole team is involved from outset and skills sharing is the focus. The skills sharing element is lost from a top down managerial style as the rest of the staff are brought in at the end of a project when it is too late to take their views on board. In this model, skills and ideas sharing is not related to the member of staff's job function. Specific examples include:

- During the initial planning of a new environmental exhibition at Stevenage Museum, the team approach highlighted that the Museum Technician was a keen nature photographer. The Technician subsequently undertook most of the photography for the

exhibition saving the museum several hundred pounds.

- In the same way, one of the Museum's administrative staff is a talented 'resource investigator' and her proactive work in seeking out resources and targeting new avenues for museum publicity has had a measurable effect on the performance of museum events. 88% in the last year were fully booked and many were re-run to accommodate demand.
- One of the Museum Assistants is a keen amateur dramatist and began taking on drama workshops for schools (first with training from the Education Officer and she is now undertaking an education NVQ). The same member of staff also suggested holding children's birthday parties which she went on to develop and run (a fun addition to the service but one which also contributes to the Museum's aim to make collections more accessible as they include a 'behind the scenes tour'). This member of staff's work has led to a small restructure to take on board these creative ideas whilst ensuring that security and housekeeping standards are not sidelined.

Such input improves the quality of the Service and the commitment and motivation of the team. Without involving all staff in the creative and planning functions of the Museum, many of these new initiatives would not be generated.

**Benefit to the public**

Being involved from the beginning of a project improves its content and also allows each team member to do their own job better as they have better understanding of the wider issues. David Anderson has argued convincingly that educational staff should be involved in the projects from their outset. I would certainly agree and, if the Museum is to achieve a truly visitor focused approach, would relate that assertion to the whole team, particularly the front-line staff. In this way we can ensure front-line staff who are knowledgeable about and

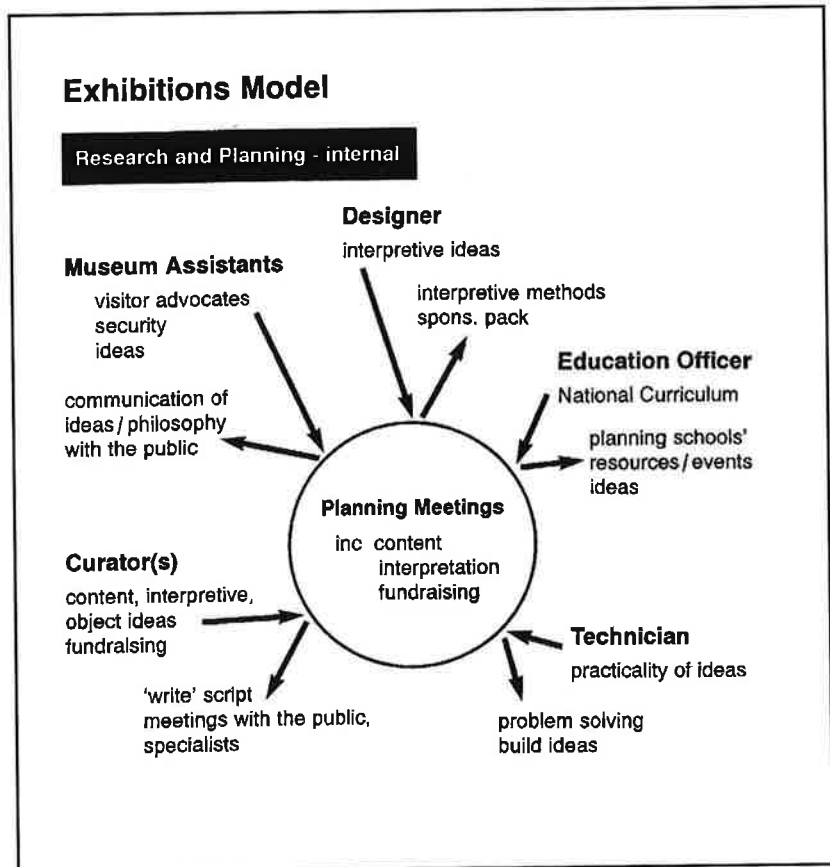


Fig 1.

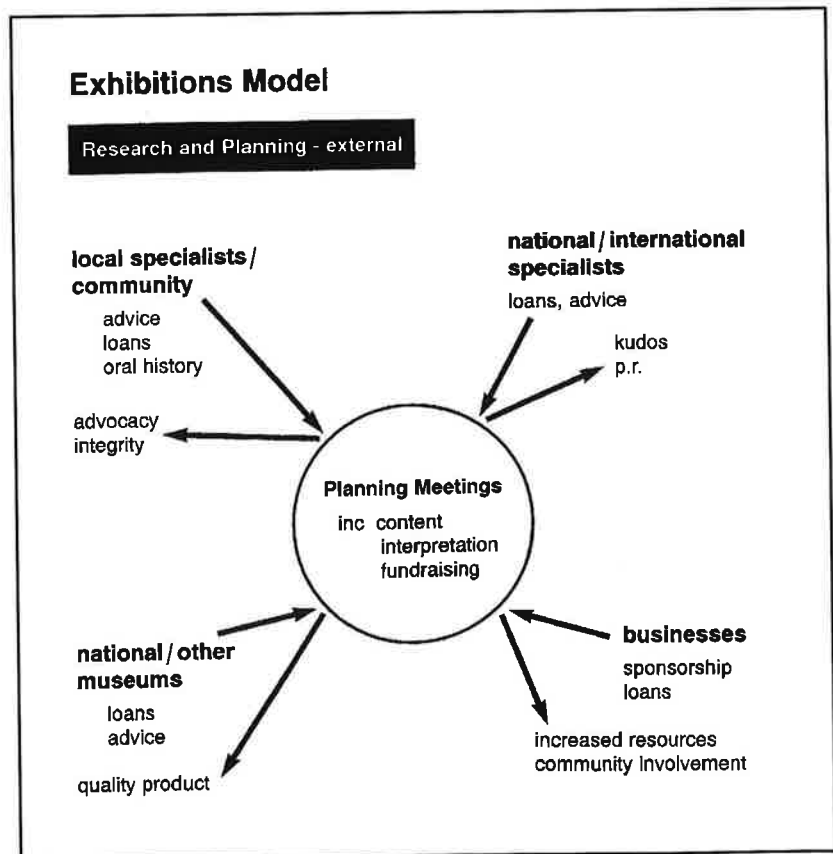


Fig 2.



committed to the project, a benefit and attitude which filters through to the visitor.

This approach also ensures committed and enthusiastic front-line staff who don't glower at - or completely ignore - visitors. This can be the greatest advantage of all. A focus group of non-visitors recently showed me that the public still do expect 'a grumpy man (yes, man) in a uniform in the corner' and are shocked and delighted when that's not the case. But if it is the case, it doesn't matter what beautiful, clever or even fun exhibitions are on display, the public will receive a negative impression of the organisation. With many visitors, we only get one chance to turn them into a regular attender - the challenge is not to throw away that opportunity.

### Community involvement - additional resources meets best practice

(See Fig 2, page 16)

Bringing the internal team onboard is the first step, but external resources should also be harnessed by the museum team identifying skills gaps and bringing in specialists locally, nationally or from even further afield. Bringing in local people to give the local perspective has been practised by social history curators for decades. Extending these links further will mean that the museum team can make that step to address specialist interests in the community which extend out of their curatorial or academic training - which at Stevenage Museum has included exhibitions as diverse as space, the environment and classic motorbikes.

These external links also have a crucial advocacy role for museums. The recent government commitment to 'best value', stressing the importance of community consultation for local authorities, offers an opportunity for the community work, which many museums are excelling at, to be recognised within the wider authority.

The external model also includes other resources. For local authority curators, colleagues in other departments can provide support and advice on a whole range of issues (and we should be able to reciprocate). We should also be sharing

ideas and resources with colleagues in other museums and tapping into national organisations for their knowledge and skill. A small museum team, however talented, has limited time and limited skills. This approach can extend both of them dramatically.

### The disadvantages?

*"This interdisciplinary approach is time consuming - surely it's quicker and easier just to get on with it"*

Harnessing these resources does need an investment in time - and in staff training. It also assumes a staff that has a level of commitment at the outset that demands careful recruitment procedures and good person specifications. Ultimately, however, the approach is resource-efficient, harnessing additional ideas and support for Service.

*"This approach leads to populist displays and a 'dumbing down' of the service and its output"*

Only if the presentation is patronising. An interdisciplinary, marketing oriented approach is aiming to understand the needs of the public and to fulfil them in a purposeful stimulating way.

There are further inherent difficulties too in trying to involve all parties internal and external. With regards to exhibitions, the curator or interpreter has to make an end 'editorial' decision - if every idea and object is included the whole project becomes messy and unfocused (as well as being physically too large). This goes back to having a clear brief and agreed aims and objectives, This will not stop the problems entirely, but gives the team a clear steer to keep revisiting so that the direction is not lost.

### In conclusion...

The interdisciplinary approach can harness

- more ideas
- skills sharing advantages
- diverse perspectives
- community involvement
- specialist support
- team commitment and well briefed staff

- well informed visitors and a welcoming environment
- a better end product with both community and purchaser support

The interdisciplinary approach that can best work for smaller museums is about team building and bringing in all identifiable resources - mainly the people that typically make up half the budget as well as those outside the organisation. This paper has taken a smaller museum's perspective but there are clear applications too for larger institutions. It is an approach which is appropriate for the challenges museums face but arguably more importantly, its end product is a public service which more closely relates to visitor interests and demands.

Maggie Appleton  
Stevenage Museum

## Oral History and the New Millennium

**D**espite being in existence for over twenty years Oral History within museums seems to have stagnated but the prospect of a New Millennium could give it new impetus.

Clare Lyall outlines ways in which museums can overcome ever present restraints of time, staff and money to establish a legacy of Oral History archives for the generations born in the next millennium.

**I**nitial research for a Museum Studies dissertation has revealed that whilst many curators value Oral History material they feel they never have the chance to do it, or only carry it out at its most primitive level. Whilst curators continue not to look beyond the constraints of insufficient staffing, no time, inadequate funding and poor or non-existent equipment, Oral History material will remain firmly beyond their grasp. In order to reveal how curators can effectively devise Oral History projects it is worth examining how organisations outside the museum field, but with similar constraints, are in the process of constructing Oral History projects for the New Millennium.

### World War II project

The first involves Worcestershire County Record Office. The project started by interviewing four ex-servicemen about their experiences of World War II. It has now escalated into hundreds of civilian as well as ex-servicemen's war time recollections and even incorporates the memories of German prisoners-of-war who had stayed on in the country after the end of the conflict. The project is to be a permanent memorial to those

involved in World War II and a gift to those generations born in the New Millennium.

### Reciprocal arrangement

How did the Record Office overcome poor resources and staffing levels? They marketed the project effectively through the production of a simple flyer. People volunteered to help from clubs and societies and from their own Friends' organisation. They also established a reciprocal arrangement with the Museum of Local Life. If the museum interviewed people or were aware of people who might be able to contribute to one or both projects they agreed to share the data.

### Open University

Although the Open University's 'Histories for the Millennium' is not an actual Oral History project, the leaflet they have produced provides an excellent framework for one. The leaflet is aimed at local communities producing histories for the new century. It gives five areas to focus on:

- 1953.
- The 1930s.
- 1851.

- A special event in your community.
- Some feature of the changing landscape.

### Guidance

There is also guidance on how to start a project, getting and giving help, how to present the material and a directory of nationally based organisations which offer assistance. The key to this material is the emphasis placed on groups working in unison.

### Keys to success

In conclusion, Oral History projects should not be deemed beyond the grasp of any curator. The key to its success is to network with other organisations, volunteers and Friends within the community and to use the momentum gained by the prospect of a new century to forge harmonious links which will stretch beyond the New Millennium.

### Acknowledgements

*Maggie Toehill,  
Worcestershire County Records Office  
'Histories for the Millennium',  
The Open University*

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## Success with access?

### A visit to museums in Australia and New Zealand

**E**leanor Moore visited museums in Australia and New Zealand last year to look at how they put their access policies into action ...

**I**n September 1997 I went on a study tour of museums and galleries in Australia and New Zealand. This visit was partly financed by an MGC International Travel Grant, with a contribution from Walsall Museum and Art Gallery's training budget.

I choose to look at the practical ways in which these museums and galleries have involved and represented communities, and particularly culturally diverse communities, in their displays and activities. It was clear from discussions with other museum workers that museums in these two countries are often active participants in debates about community identities - the ways they have been shaped in the past and can be shaped in the future and the role of museums within that process.

However, just as in the UK, there are other pressing priorities for these museums. Is the need to chase the tourist dollar affecting the extent of museum's involvement in these debates?

### Cultural Capital?

My visit began in Melbourne, which is vying more vigorously than ever with Sydney for the unofficial title of cultural capital of the Pacific rim. The city has plenty in the pipeline which could help it win. The National Gallery of Victoria has

plans to expand to a new, high profile site which will enable its twentieth century collections to be seen at last. The Museum of Victoria is vacating the highly traditional building it shared with the State Library and moving to the beautiful setting of Carlton Gardens, the home of the city's 1880 Royal Exhibition, supplemented by a new wing. And work has already begun at the old Customs House, home to the new Museum of Immigration which will open in autumn 1998, to coincide with the ICOM Conference, on Museums and Cultural Diversity, to be held in Melbourne.



Work begins on the new wing alongside the 1880 Royal Exhibition building - the new home of the Museum of Victoria at Carlton Gardens, Melbourne.

I visited Moya McFadzean, Senior Curator of Migration and Settlement at the Museum of Victoria, who is currently researcher for the new Museum of Immigration. Her post title is the result of a recent restructuring and reflects the Museum's aim to interpret and develop its collections in terms of the ways people actually live their lives; moving and settling, forming communities and working. Posts are no longer closely tied to curating specific collections.

### Cultural Access

She explained how the Museum's new activities are underpinned by a long term commitment to cultural access in its displays and collections by all of Victoria's diverse communities. The Museum has developed relationships with Melbourne's Italian, Jewish and Chinese communities through temporary exhibitions, partnership agreements and formal consultations. The new Museum of Immigration will tell the stories of these communities alongside many others in culturally pluralistic displays which use personal stories as their main

vehicle. The visitor will come across these stories, told in many different media, by a variety of real and fictional narrator-characters to offset the sense of one authoritative history, as they travel from the present back to the past in Victoria's migration history. These personal stories will emphasize the similarities as well as the differences between experiences of settling in Australia from different places and at different times.

### Community Access

As well as permanent displays, the Museum will incorporate a 'Community Access' space in which individual communities can present exhibitions of their migration histories, working with a museum officer who will facilitate this and co-ordinate the space.

'Access' spaces can be found in many of the larger museums and galleries in Australian cities, for example, at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Australia

Museum. The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney was the first museum to develop this concept and continues to put on regular 'Community Focus' exhibitions. I spoke to Jana Vytrlik, Head of Visitor Services, previously the Museum's first Education Officer with responsibility for multi-cultural programs.

Every project is different, she explained, but where the Museum has not collaborated with a particular community before, initial contact with people who might be interested in taking part in a project is often made through appeals on community language radio programs.

### Links

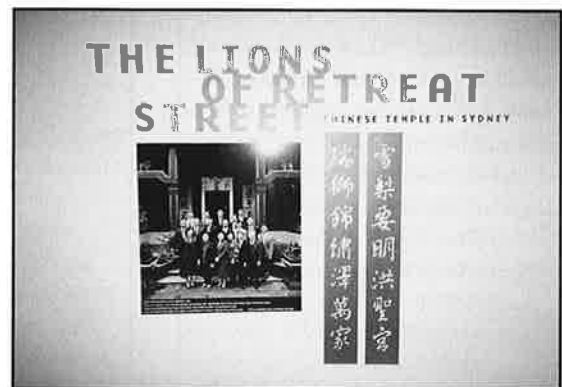
Where possible, links are made with the Museum's permanent collections. For 'The Lions Of Retreat Street', an exhibition developed in collaboration with the members of the Yiu Ming

Chinese Temple in inner Sydney, the main thrust of the exhibition is the group's representation of the history of the temple, recorded with the help of the Museum's Social History team. However, it is supplemented with relevant objects from the rich Asian decorative arts collections. The exhibition is visually stunning and beautifully displayed, and does not skirt round difficult issues. The era of the 'White Australia' policies was evoked through personal papers, photographs and objects from member's of the Temple's families. As a welcoming gesture to the wider Chinese Community, aspects of the exhibition text are translated.

### Evaluation

Visitor research and exhibition evaluation, conducted or commissioned by the Museum's in-house Evaluation Department, has increased the sophistication with which the Museum can present its messages both in Community Focus exhibitions and in other areas of its work. Marketing of all activities includes advertisements in the media of non-English speaking communities. This is partly prompted by a government directive, demonstrating the current political weight behind embracing cultural diversity, and partly

because the Powerhouse's 1996 detailed visitor and non-visitor study suggests that it is effective in attracting new visitors.



The Lions of Retreat Street, a 'Community Focus' exhibition at the Powerhouse, Sydney.

### Bi-culturalism

My tour culminated in Wellington, talking to the History co-ordinators for Te Papa Tongerewa, the new Museum of New Zealand, which opens in February 1998. The new Museum is determined

not merely to pay lip service to the principle of bi-culturalism, but to embrace it, and also to go beyond it, to make the Museum a place in which people of all cultural backgrounds (not only Maori and Pakeha/European) can feel a sense of ownership. The fact that New Zealand's history collections are largely European and weighted towards the nineteenth century pioneer experience has not made this aim an easy one to fulfil.

**Debate**

Nevertheless, the Museum has managed to use these unpromising collections to encourage debate around the issue of portraying national identity. In one of the planned social history exhibitions, aspects of five national exhibitions staged by New Zealand between 1851 and 1992, will be faithfully recreated. Visitors will be encouraged to deconstruct these

exhibitions, and in doing so, explore the fact that presenting identity is not, and has never been, a neutral act - that what is excluded tells as much as what is



Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand, Wellington.

included about the attitudes of New Zealanders at different times.

There was a lot to admire about the approaches taken by these museums to presenting the histories of the culturally diverse communities they serve. I was

impressed with staff structures which recognise that Social History exhibitions benefit from building long term relationships with communities and from serious evaluation. Even so, within these organisations, the work I've discussed was not often seen as the most crucial for audience development in numerical terms. Creative fund-raising and adaptability as circumstances change will continue to be as important as idealism to ensure it is not marginalised, and remains central to the philosophies of these museums.

*Eleanor has collected publications and resources related to this study tour from museums in Australia and New Zealand. She can be contacted at Walsall Museum and Art Gallery.*

## The Seminar Section

### Coming Soon...

#### Carry on Collecting!

A Contemporary Collecting Seminar

Venue: Museum of London  
Date: Monday 27 April 1998,  
10:00am - 4:30pm.

This seminar will look at current issues in contemporary collecting and some recent case studies at Birmingham Museums, Croydon Clocktower and the Museum of London. The event will cover multi-disciplinary and social history approaches to modern collecting.

Contact:

Stephen Lowy,  
Snibston Discovery Park,  
Ashby Road,  
Coalville,  
Leicestershire, LE67 3LN.

Tel: (01530) 813301.  
E-mail: snibston@leics.gov.uk

#### Wood Seminar

A seminar on the basics of wood identification. For all those who wouldn't know lignum vitae if it fell off a tree and hit them!

Contact:

Catherine Nisbet,  
Manor House Museum,  
Sheep Street,  
Kettering,  
Northants, NN16 0AN.

Tel: (01536) 534381

#### Cancellation...

##### Medical Seminar

Due to the amount of medical seminars taking place over the next few months, it has been decided to cancel SHCG's contribution. If you are still interested in attending a seminar, the following are taking place.

##### History of Medicine

18 May 1998,  
Thackeray Medical Museum

Contact:  
Marilyn Moreland.  
Tel: (0113) 233 3220

#### Call for help...

In order to keep seminars at affordable prices it is important for us to find both venues and speakers for which we do not pay, or pay only negligible amounts. If you can be of any help please contact either Stephen or Catherine.

## Review...Seminar on Death: 'The Final Curtain'

**I**t was a small band who gathered at Bury St. Edmunds Art Gallery to enjoy a friendly and informative day. Ruth Richardson, author of 'Death, Dissection and the Destitute', gave not only the keynote address but managed to cover identification of objects and also a blueprint for the types of material culture which could be included in any exhibition on the subject. Feverish note taking ensued!

Maggie Blake, Curator of Moyses Hall's exhibition on Death gave a case study on the work carried out there. Her talk

highlighted the fact that endeavouring to put on an exhibition of this type in a small community can be challenging, providing in itself, a rite of passage for all the individuals involved. She is the only curator I know who has had her exhibition reviewed in an undertaking magazine.

Steph Mastoris from Snibston Discovery Park spoke on the ephemera of death and highlighted the need for collections to be developed in this area.

Lunch was actually taken in the Death Exhibition at Moyses Hall. Maggie Blake and her staff produced more food that

I've ever seen before at a seminar. The benefit of taking lunch together was that all were able to raise points with the speakers and, like many a late night session at ASWs, many stories were shared!

During the afternoon session Kate Innes of Avoncroft Museum of Buildings challenged us with the idea that museums are inherently places of the dead and also discussed the ways in which items and displays are located within our buildings to lessen their impact or soften their message.

## English Mourning Jewellery - A Potted History

**R**uth Richardson, who gave the keynote address at the Seminar on Death, explains why she finds mourning jewellery so fascinating.

**A**s a schoolgirl in the late 1960s, I had a Saturday job on a stall in London's Portobello Road Market. I can remember the beautiful examples of heavy black and gold brooches, mourning rings, and hair jewellery, and the cheaper varieties in pinchbeck, bogwood, and early bakelite which were pinned like massed medals on little velvet cushions. There were a lot of them about, because people of the Victorian generation were dying off and these things found their way in large numbers to my employer's stall. I don't think any were purchased in the entire time I worked there, which was over a year. Most jewellery buyers considered them morbid, and shrank from touching them or shuddered if they did so by accident. They thought the intricate woven human hair utterly vile. At that time there were no dealers who had any interest in them either.

I, on the other hand, was consumed by curiosity about them: whose hair was in them? who had done that exquisite hair-weaving, and how? who did they commemorate? and who had worn these

things? I loved reading the little engraved details of donors, recipients, and dates, and began to develop a scholarly interest in mourning and its manifestations which, as you see, endures. I longed to be able to afford them - they were so cheap by modern standards - and no-one wanted them. Sadly, I only earned a pound for a full day's work, so it was out of the question that I should ever be able to purchase one! Now these things are collectors' pieces, dealers exchange them at very high prices, and they remain out of my grasp. If only I could go back that stall now!

### Memories of the Dead

Nobody knows if the jet jewellery found in ancient British barrows was thought of by those who wore it as mourning jewellery. We can only classify it as funerary jewellery, or as grave-goods. Mourning jewellery was designed to be worn by survivors, and probably had multiple meanings: evoking memories of the dead, signifying the constancy, fidelity and status of the wearer, perhaps to prompt prayers for the dead, or to prepare the wearer for their own future demise.

### Museum Collections

The mourning jewellery which survives in museum collections is generally of

very fine quality and known provenance, designed to commemorate affluent members of society - aristocracy, gentry and the higher reaches of the commercial classes. Early examples tend to be rings: they are frequently engraved with the names and death dates of those commemorated, occasionally with the name of recipients. Very little seems to be known about whether people of lower social status wore mourning jewellery, and if so, what it was like.\*

The earliest recorded English mourning ring dates from the 15th century (Bury 1982). Such early rings often feature the insignia of Death - a skull, a skull and crossbones, or even a skeleton (so beautifully carved that they seem miniature realities) and often an inscription such as *Memento Mori*, or *Remember Death*. They were customarily distributed to the most important mourners of both sexes by special stipulations left in the will of the deceased.

### Calligraphy

In the eighteenth century mourning rings underwent an interesting process of change. The tiny ivory skulls skeletons and 'memento mori' inscriptions - which had been in vogue since the 15th century - seem to have disappeared between

about 1720-1740. They were not replaced by a new visual vocabulary immediately. Instead there followed an intermediate phase in which mourning jewellery featured elegant monograms and inscriptions - mainly in black enamel upon gold, or formed in gold wire protected by crystal. There appears to have been a genuine appreciation in the mid-18th century of the possibility of beauty in the typography or calligraphy of alphabetical letters and an increasing weight laid upon significant words or letters - particularly upon initial letters signifying names. Typographic letters were used in symbolic ways, such as intertwining to signify loving relationships.

### Classical Imagery

Then the neo-classical imagery of pedestalled urns, sarcophagi, willows, and melancholy figures seems to have come into vogue in jewellery form the 1770s on. Crystal was increasingly being used to protect delicate paintings on ivory, or samples of human hair, forming elements of pictures or presented decoratively in twirls, plaits or other shapes. The skull - which probably more than any other emblem represents human bodily decay - was thus replaced by other imagery, and by the least corruptible part of body, the hair.

It may be that there was gender divide in modes of mourning insignia developing from at least the mid-eighteenth century, because between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth century, for women, brooches or pendants tended to be the more usual vehicle for mourning pictures and inscriptions. Victorian mourning rings tend to be rather heavy in character, and severely simple - gold with black enamel inlaid in bands, or with black enamel filling engraved inscriptions on the ring's outer or inner surface - perhaps signifying that rings were more likely to be worn by men.

Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher, who left his body for dissection (very avant garde mode of disposal in 1832) was nevertheless a conventional man of this time in having already prepared mourning rings for his (mostly male) friends. They were gold, with a miniature of Bentham in silhouette on the bezel

(Richardson & Hurwitz 1987; Atkinson 1987). Details of the donors' gift and the date of his death were engraved after the event on the interior surface of the ring. Surviving examples of Bentham's ring are so well preserved that it seems unlikely that they were ever worn, being kept instead in a drawer as a memento of the great man. This may well have been a widespread practice among those who received mourning rings from other donors, and may explain why, despite their age, so many of these rings appear quite perfect. They are literally unworn.

The Victorians continued to make hair jewellery, including little plaited or woven panels in gold or jet brooches, or inside gold or jet lockets. Jet really came into its own with the advent of heavy crape, and the peak of Victorian mourning etiquette, where acceptable female jewellery was defined as jet and pearls, but not cut stones, or anything else which reflected light.

### Whitby

The peak and fall of Victorian jet can be witnessed in the numbers of carvers employed in the town of Whitby, where a natural jet of good carving quality was to be found. There were only twenty five workers in 1832. By 1872 there were 1400. Cheaper imitations of jet (in early forms of bakelite, for example) made jewellery of convincingly similar appearance available down the social scale, and jet swiftly lost its fashionable cachet. The industry collapsed. In 1884 less than 100 workers were left (Morley 1971). Nowadays, Whitby shopkeepers import old jet jewellery to sell to visitors to the town from dealers all over the country.

Although mourning jewellery was probably still being made and worn in the early years of the twentieth century, and can certainly be seen being worn on early photographs, the taste for it had already declined before the Great War.

### Dr Ruth Richardson

Wellcome Research Fellow in the History of Medicine,  
Department of Anatomy,  
University College, London.

### References

*\*It seems to me likely that it was worn, and probably made of cheap materials, such as black stained wood. Such items would probably be rare in museum collections, because both less memorable and more perishable. Surviving wooden finger rings or beads might be worth examining however, for signs of faded black stain.*

1. Atkinson, Catherine (1987) 'The Jeremy Bentham Silhouette Rings', *Bentham Newsletter*, 11, 1987; 48-50. One of these rings is on display with Bentham's curious 'Auro-Icon' or corpse/statue in the cloisters of University College, Gower Street, London.
2. Bury, Shirley (1982) 'Summary Catalogue of the Jewellery Collection', Victoria and Albert Museum
3. Morley, John (1971) 'Death, Heaven and the Victorians', *Studio Vista*, 66.
4. Richardson, Ruth & Hurwitz, Brian (1987) 'Jeremy Bentham's Self-Image: An Exemplary Bequest for Dissection', *British Medical Journal*, July 1987; 195-8

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