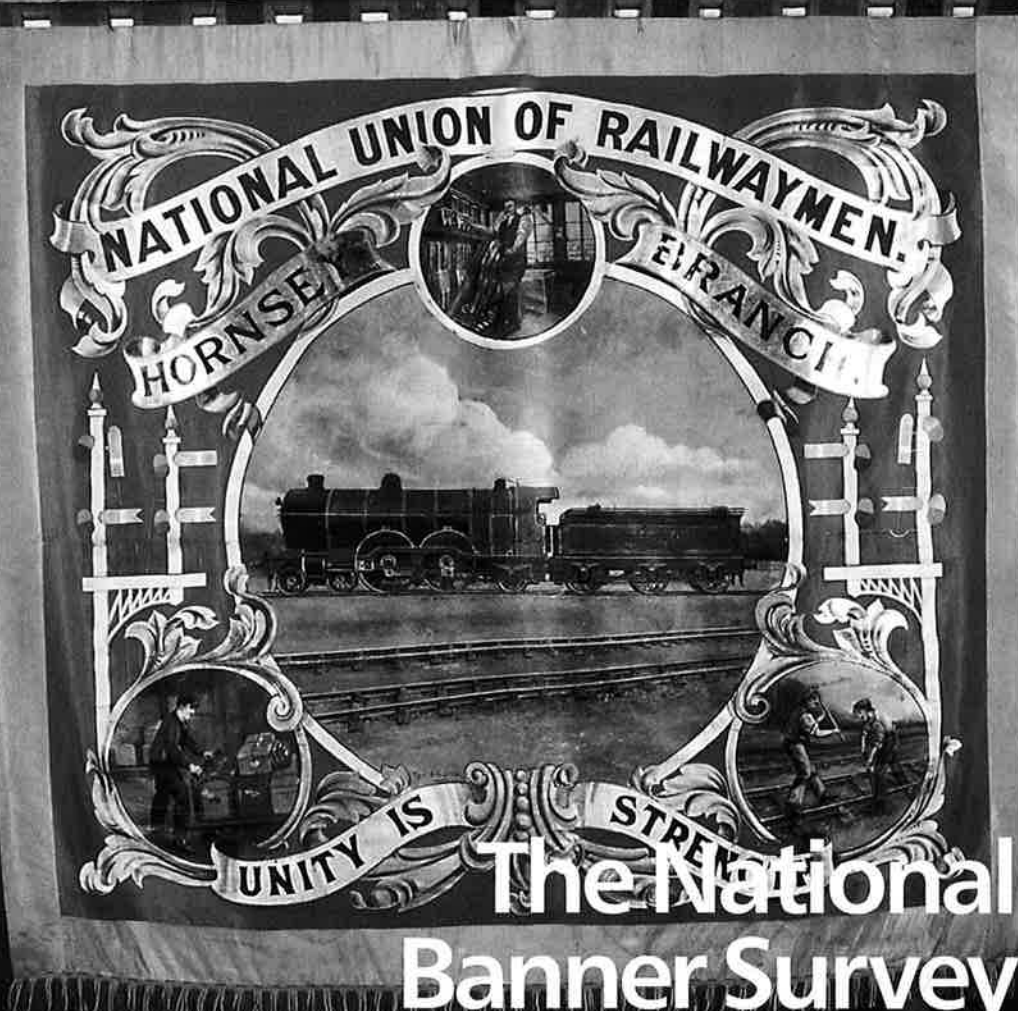


SPRING 1999

ISSUE 44



The National
Banner Survey
Community
Curators
Working with
Focus Groups

SHCGNEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

A New Perspective...

Although we undoubtedly have our audiences' needs at heart when planning new exhibitions, activities or buildings, it is easy to make the mistake of assuming we know what the audience wants.

Understanding the role of museums from the local community's perspective is vital if a museum wants to ensure that it provides a valuable service within that community and delivers what the visitor wants.

In this issue of SHCG News, two different experiences of using focus groups in, Great Yarmouth and Walsall, demonstrate the role that such groups can and should play in directing museum provision. At the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry, staff have gone a step further by directly involving a local community group with the development of an exhibition.

The results of these projects have been to open the eyes of both the museum staff and the public. However, work like this is only the first step towards encouraging greater understanding, the true test is whether or not that communication process is maintained.

NICKY BLEASBY - EDITOR

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 PC word file or rictext format, or you can send it as an e-mail.

Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

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

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

Cover Photo:
Banner of the Hornsey Branch of the National Union of Railwaymen, part of the collection at the National Museum of Labour History.

Issue Designed by Paul Cook
Tel: 01784 252698

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Culture Secretary attends Museum Box Launch

Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was recently guest of honour at the launch of the North and East London Museums Group's Museum Boxes produced by the education sub-committee. The event was held at Islington Museum on 12th November 1998.



Chris Smith MP and Sonia Rasbery, project chair, pictured with local children modelling the specially made Victorian costumes

The two museum boxes 'Victorian Costume' and 'Taking Tea' comprise objects donated by members of the group together with resource packs for use by museum staff and suggested handling activities. They are contained in robust, easily transportable trunks with foam cut outs to store and support the objects correctly. Funding for the project was generously provided by London Borough Grants.

The 'Victorian Costume' box contains objects relating to the textile industry in the second half of the 19th Century. The main feature of this box is four child size replica costumes made by expert historic costume maker, Jo Barney.

All four costumes are based on designs from about 1850 and represent different levels of society with upper middle class lady and gentleman's outfits, a parlour maid and groom.

The 'Taking Tea' resource box contains objects connected to the tea trade and the preparation and serving of tea. Samples of tea from around the world are also included and form an important multi-sensory element to the box.

The boxes represent a substantial resource that will be used by all thirteen subscribing members of the group for hands on education sessions with Key Stage 1 and 2 children.

For information about the North and East London Museums Group and other London networks contact:

Helen O'Hara,
London Museums Network
Development Officer.
Tel: 01234 306277
email: ohara@kbnet.co.uk

For information about the NELMG Museum Boxes project contact:

Sonia Rasbery,
Museum of Domestic Design and
Architecture, Middlesex University.
Tel: 0181 362 5441
Fax: 0181 362 6639

FORTHCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Tudor Times

Stevenage Museum, 13 February - 28 August 1999

Throughout the spring and summer, Stevenage Museum will be hosting exciting Tudor activities as part of their Tudor Times exhibition. Visitors will be able to try on Tudor clothes, construct their own timber joints, see the spine-chilling scold's bridle or restrain their less well behaved friends in the stocks.

The exhibition explores the Tudor family, how Tudor people spent their time, what they wore, how they built their homes and what they believed.

For more information contact: Sally Ackroyd or Julia Mackie, Tel: 01438 218881

ASW 1999

Negotiating the Past - Can History Heal?

Thursday 17 June - Sunday 20 June 1999
National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, Belfast and Cultra

This year the Annual Study Weekend moves to Northern Ireland. Its topic is one of great interest to those living in the province, but the problems it addresses are found all over the world.

It is mooted that, in situations of conflict, private grief and public anger can be assuaged by exploring the past. Most obviously in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, but also in exhibitions concerned with the Holocaust and similar topics, there is an idea that to expose the past is to transcend its ravages. Clearly this idea concerns social history curators in museums, but it has more general relevance.

The Annual Study Weekend will ask whether, and to what extent, it is beneficial or harmful to collect and document artefacts, oral history and archives relating to personally and politically fraught pasts. It will also raise the issue of whether it is useful to represent these matters to the public and if so, how this can best be achieved.

Although the conference has a theme relevant to Northern Ireland, it is intended that this will be a conference with an international dimension. It is hoped that there will be speakers from South Africa, Germany and America.

There will be four main themes:

- Collecting contemporary history
- Curators and their communities

- Pointing the finger, Accepting the blame, Forgiveness
- Commemoration: public events and private grief

The conference will be based in the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, two of the three museums of the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (NMGNI). There will also be a visit to the award winning Castle Museum in Derry, and receptions at Belfast City Hall and Stormont Castle, home of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Members of SHCG will be notified of details in due course. Anyone else interested can get details from the organisers.



Harbour Museum, Derry



The Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, Cultra Manor, Holywood, Co. Down

ORGANISERS:

Dr Vivienne Pollock,
Ulster Museum, Stranmillis Road,
Belfast, BT9 5AB, Northern Ireland.
Tel: 01232 383016
Fax: 01232 383013

Dr Anthony Buckley,
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum,
Cultra, Co. Down, BT18 0EU,
Northern Ireland.
Tel: 01232 428428
Fax: 01232 428728

Southend celebrates the Millennium with new Discovery Centre

A Discovery Centre in Southend's Central Museum will help the past to come alive thanks to an award of £30,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Centre will be one of many projects around the country established to celebrate the Millennium as part of the Millennium Festival.

The project, which will re-vamp one wing of the museum, will enable visitors to feel, examine and explore a large selection of fascinating items from the museum's collection - chosen not just by the museum's curators, but also by the Southend public in a series of community events designed to open up the archives for all.

The Discovery Centre will also look forward into the 21st Century, and back to the 19th Century, as a collection of historic photographs of Southend and local wildlife will be available on computer for the first time.

Andrew Lewis, Assistant Director of Leisure Services at Southend on Sea Borough Council, who heads up the Essex town's cultural services, says: "This project really is hands on history in action. It is the first time that the community have been involved in the museum in this way, and I know the Discovery Centre will be an exciting project for those involved."

Some of the key features of the Discovery Centre will be computer access to several thousand historic photographs of Southend and a special collection of objects from the museum collections that can be handled by visitors. Specially themed topic tables will explore certain topics in an exciting 'hands on' way, using a minimum of labelling. Examples might be a beachcombing table with seashore objects to be sorted or the town's coat of arms explained using three dimensional materials.

London Schools gain new access to The Victorians

The Central London Museums and Galleries Group and the Corporation of London have launched a resource pack, **The Victorians** that will give all primary school children in London the opportunity to use resources from London's museums to find out more about life in the Capital 150 years ago.

The 1,100 page pack provides teachers with information sheets, activity sheets and primary source material from the archive collections of the museums involved in the project. It is designed to be used in the classroom and on-site to support the teaching of the Victorians at Key Stage 2 and is being distributed free to all primary schools in Greater London.

The resource pack is the result of one of the largest collaborative projects to have been developed between schools and museums and has been launched at a time when a number of government initiatives are stressing the importance of collaboration and partnership and emphasising the need for museums to look at new ways of promoting access to their collections. It represents the culmination of five years work by the South Eastern Museums Education Unit, the 16 museums in the Central London Museums and Galleries Group and the City of London School. It has been funded by the Corporation of London, the museums themselves, the Headley Trust, the London Boroughs Grants Committee, the Museums & Galleries Commission and the South Eastern Museums Service.

For further information on

The Victorians contact:

Sue Wilkinson, Director, SEMEU.

Tel: 0171 717 1245 Fax: 0171 717 1256

Or

Helen O'Hara, London Museums Network Development Office.

Tel/Fax: 01234 306277

Email: ohara@kbnet.co.uk

FORTHCOMING EXHIBITIONS



'Holy Joe' (far left) who used to tour the town singing hymns, with staff of Bond the Saddlers outside their Wimborne premises in 1903

Open All Hours
The Priest's House Museum,
Wimborne Minster
1 April - 20 June 1999

A nostalgic trip through the history of Wimborne's local shops giving a fascinating insight into the world of shopping over the last 150 years.

For more information contact: Sue Tapliss, Tel: 01202 882533

Using Focus Groups: The Great Yarmouth Experience

Focus Group work is usually applied to selling consumer goods or political parties and its findings are frequently ridiculed in the media. It is not necessarily the best way of finding out what people think they want, nor is it guaranteed to give the purchaser of the focus group survey answers they want to hear.

Nevertheless, the heritage partners in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, are confident that focus group work has benefited them in a variety of ways. Sheila Watson, Area Museums Officer for Great Yarmouth Museums explains how.

Background: The formation of the partnership

In 1995 The Norfolk Museums Service (a joint County and District museums service), the National Trust and English Heritage came together to try and improve the services they offered to their visitors and to support the work of the Great Yarmouth Borough Council in an area of special economic and social need, the South Denes area of the town, in which all their museums and sites were situated. Before they began work they decided to use focus group work to decide what they could achieve in such a depressed place.

In 1995 the situation appeared desperate to those who cared about the town's heritage. With a few notable exceptions the indications were that the majority of local people cared little for their history. Despite a successful active out of season schools programme, visitor figures to the Museums Service sites were so low that they only opened for four months in the summer season to attract what numbers they could from the seaside holidaymakers. English Heritage sites opened longer (March to October) but on some days had no visitors at all. Worse, its properties were under siege - local children used their windows as target practice and taunted the custodians. Faced with at best indifference and at worst hostility none of the partners knew how to reach new audiences, nor did they have the capital to improve their sites.

Salvation came in the form of the Borough's Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund bid. The Norfolk Museums Service, the National Trust

(who owned one of the museum sites) and English Heritage promised to create a themed interactive heritage attraction from all their sites on the Quayside, in return for a seven year grant from this Fund. This would provide the Borough with a new tourist attraction, help kick-start the local economy and, at the same time, improve residents' sense of self esteem.

The decision to use focus groups

The partners and the Borough were keen to win over local support for their work but assumed that history, heritage and conservation of the built environment would be of little importance to people facing a daily struggle with poverty. Nevertheless they were determined to involve local people in all their plans. At the same time they had to ensure that the final product would attract holidaymakers and not deter the heritage minded who formed most of the current visitors. Faced with such a seemingly impossible task they turned to a consultant, Susie Fisher, for help.

Susie had already worked for other museums and, after much research, her name came up several times as someone who could deliver what the heritage sector wanted, using focus group work. Officers from all three heritage organisations invited her to Yarmouth to see if they felt she was right for them. She listened carefully to what they had to say. They were all concerned with their image and brand names. Should they promote what they were good at doing in traditional ways, tested and proved in other locations, or should they 'do different' as they say in Norfolk?

If so, how should they be different? How were they going to work together to produce a similar presentation from their different styles? Local people, they assured Susie, were not interested in what they offered. Should they ignore this or try to find a way of involving them in their heritage? How could they attract the seaside holidaymaker who was not interested in heritage? Wouldn't everything done to attract that audience alienate the traditional museum visitor? Could they, in fact, do what they had promised to do, create this new themed heritage attraction?

As project leader, I was part of that officer group and heard Susie's response. She offered us no easy solutions. She warned us that we might not like her results. She told us we ignored our location, Yarmouth, at our peril. She advised us to work with peoples' perceptions of the place, and not try to pretend we were somewhere else. She pointed out that we might not find a way of pleasing all our target groups and what would we do then? However, we liked her for her honesty and we gave her the job. It was the best thing we could have done.

Susie made us work. She forced us to think very hard about everything we wanted to do, from our target audiences to our display themes. We had to make up the stimulus boards for her to use with the groups we wanted her to consult; locals, seaside tourists, and heritage minded visitors. Different organisations had to stop thinking about their individual aims and objectives, their idiosyncratic ways of working, their perceptions of their roles, and instead, work together on trying to create a

variety of options for the focus groups to consider. These options included not just display themes but styles of presentation and the roles our sites were to play in the future. Were they to be research resources, places of entertainment and fun, creative areas for audience participation? Could we create something which would not compromise the integrity of our sites and collections? Above all, what did people think of Great Yarmouth and how was that perception to be fitted into the partners' plans? By the time we had finished the boards and Susie returned to run the focus groups, we were convinced we knew what the responses would be. We could not have been more wrong.

Findings of the focus group work

I observed some of Susie's work with local people. These were people who lived on the council estates, none of whom had ever visited any of the sites, and who were paid to come and talk for one and a half hours responding to the stimulus boards we had made.

I was astonished by their responses. They cared desperately about the history and built environment of the town and they felt angry at the way the town's history and heritage had been lost under its present seaside image. They had a clear perception of the way a historic landscape, conserved and interpreted, could improve the environment and raise their pride and self esteem. They were not indifferent and hostile. They were enthusiastic supporters of the preservation of the past. We had failed them.

"Susie made us work. She forced us to think very hard about everything we wanted to do, from our target audiences to our display themes."

"They wanted the real thing, in an entertaining way, with much emphasis on family activities and not too much hard academic work."

Our presentation styles, marketing and our superior attitude to the local presence had alienated them. They could not understand why we had separated the maritime history of the town, housed in a museum on the seafront, from the local history displays in the Tollhouse on the Quayside. They brought in their own agendas, arguing for the preservation of more of the town's historic past than we were offering. In particular they wanted the last herring curing works to be rescued and turned into a celebration of a thousand years of the fishing industry whose death they mourned.

The focus group participants were not interested in the objects the museums considered to be important, for example, our ceramics collections, but they were enthusiastic about the idea of finding out about peoples' lives in the past.

They drew a clear distinction between us and the seaside attractions, recognising that we had the real thing and reassuringly, they wanted exactly that. They wanted it displayed in an accessible way. 'Real people', 'ordinary people', 'what they ate and drank', 'where they slept' - these were their concerns.

Traditional display cases were disliked but they wanted 'their' objects to be protected, especially from the tourists, and voted for objects in context beyond the reach of damaging fingers but with replicas for them to touch and try out. They wanted human interpreters on hand to interact with them and explain the displays, they wanted family educational experiences which were entertaining and informative. Above all, they wanted something in which they

could take a pride and to which they could bring their children and their friends from outside the town. They compared their history and heritage with that of Norwich and they wanted to know why they could not have the same types of heritage attractions.

Much to our astonishment the findings from these local groups were similar to the responses not only of the seaside visitors but also of the heritage minded. We discovered Susie had been right. Yarmouth's image as a place of entertainment and fun affected the way everyone wanted the past interpreted. They wanted the real thing, in an entertaining way, with much emphasis on family activities and not too much hard academic work. Yet they all wanted Yarmouth's history to be accessible and said they would come if we made it so.

The tourists, many of whom came back year after year, held Yarmouth in great affection tinged with sadness for its tarnished image. They surprised us with their enthusiasm for its history and wanted the town to market this. The heritage minded cared deeply for the town's great past but they too wanted it celebrated in a way which was in keeping with its image of entertainment and fun. One local historian pointed out that he went to London to do research but he would like somewhere in Yarmouth he could take his grandchildren, to kindle in them, the enthusiasm he felt for the history of the town.

When it came to the display themes there was once again a surprising unanimity. The heritage partners had selected three main options. The first was the

"focus group work taught the partners never to assume they know what people want and always to consult the public."

interpretation of the sites using the stories of the people who had lived in them in the past with a few local and national heroes thrown in such as Nelson and Dickens. The second was the maritime theme. The third was the story of rich and poor through time. The partners all bet on the first but it was the last choice which proved the winner with all the groups, with the maritime theme incorporated into all aspects of the story.

Benefits of focus group work

While it should be stressed that focus group work does not by itself solve problems, and the partners have had to work extremely hard to apply its findings to achieving outputs, they have found the focus group's work beneficial in a variety of ways. They took on board the findings, have adopted the display theme of rich and poor through time and modified their display styles to create a family orientated entertainment based soundly on the real thing.

The Elizabethan House was redisplayed along these lines in 1998 and has proved enormously popular with paying visitors whose numbers have been way up on the previous year. It received a Commendation in the Interpret Britain Awards, 1998. People from the Borough have been recruited to work on all aspects of the House - they helped clean items for redisplay and have been trained as in house guides and interpreters.

The partners have had special activity days out of season to attract locals into the museums and have modified publicity and marketing to make them more attractive for families and local people.

Other benefits were unexpected. As a result of the reaction of the Borough Officers and Members to the extent of local support for the project, conservation of the built environment and support for heritage attractions and collections have been placed in the Borough's Regeneration Vision for the year 2020. The Borough has committed an annual revenue grant to the partners to help the development of all the projects and museums and their activities are now seen as an essential part of all the work being done to support and improve the lot of the people who live on the South Denes.

Focus group work has strengthened the partnership because it helped the partners realise that their users do not understand the differences between their organisations nor do they care. Consequently the partners are now planning to implement a new management agreement for all their sites pooling all their finances and their staff. Above all, however, focus group work taught the partners never to assume they know what people want and always to consult the public. This active consultation has now been incorporated into everything they plan to do for the future.

Sheila Waston

Area Museums Officer,
Great Yarmouth Museums.

The National Banner Survey

The National Banner Survey runs from March 1998 to May 1999. It is administered by Nicholas Mansfield, Director, Ruth Stevens and Sarah Gore, Survey Curators, Karen Thompson, Conservator/Photographer and Ian Murray, Administrative Assistant and is based at the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester.

The aim of the project is to ascertain the number of banners held in public collections, their condition and quality of storage. In order to do this we have contacted over 660 museums in Great Britain, asking them to complete a questionnaire form for each of the banners held in their collections. The questionnaire is designed to be 'user friendly' and to glean detailed information about the historical background of the banner, its appearance and construction, methods of storage, condition and levels of conservation. All of the returned questionnaire forms are to be entered onto the National Banner Survey database, which also includes photographic images of many of the banners.

This database will become a valuable resource for researchers, museum professionals and the general public. It already has over 1500 banners recorded on it and has a sophisticated search engine which enables banners to be located by maker, carrying organisation, condition, and so on. We hope to make it publicly accessible via CD-ROM and display versions at our public building the Pump House: People's History Museum, although the survey team is happy to deal with enquiries in the meantime. The survey represents an impressive accumulation of knowledge about banners, banner making and the culture of banner carrying. It provides an overview of survival of banners in Great Britain and can help curators place their banners within this context, indicating the rarity or significance of their banner collections. It also gives a wider view of the state of textile storage in museums throughout the nation.

The project addresses a need for increased investment into the conservation, storage and display of historical banners. The demise of many banner carrying organisations and the high costs and levels of expertise involved in the care of banners, means that even those held by museums can be in an extremely vulnerable state (too often we come across banners which have been severely damaged by inappropriate storage, mould and insect damage). The survey will give the most accurate picture so far of the state of Britain's banners and by raising the profile of their plight, will hopefully encourage greater financial assistance towards their care, thereby benefiting many other banner holding organisations.

The National Banner Survey also provides a valuable insight into the quality of documentation in British museums. We are extremely grateful to the museums who have been so generous with their time and in providing us with details about their collections. However, the poor state of many museums' cataloguing can mean that there is very little information for museum professionals to work from. This is exacerbated by the fact that the size and fragility of banners makes them difficult objects to handle and that the examination of banners is a time consuming business. However, I am pleased to say that as a direct result of the survey many museums have taken the time to examine, document and photograph their banners. We have received numerous letters from museums saying that the survey has rekindled their interest in banners and that the project

has led many museums to reassess and upgrade their storage facilities.

Another important aspect of the project is the programme of site visits to other museums, which provide us with the opportunity to meet fellow museum professionals and to examine and photograph their banner collections. These visits are both interesting and enlightening. We can see at first hand the storage problems faced by financially stretched museums and it is always exciting to see banners in the flesh. In October we visited museums in Scotland with outstanding banner collections. This trip was extremely valuable as it gave us an insight into Scotland's unique banner tradition and allowed us to gain an over-view of banner care in Scottish museums which we were encouraged by. Our trip started in Biggar and ended in Edinburgh, via museums in Cupar, Perth, Elgin and Stirling. At Biggar Museum we viewed the Biggar Whipman Society banner; one of the many fascinating and attractive banners discovered through the survey. It was made in 1807 by James Howe, who was an accomplished Scottish animal painter specialising in horses. On its blue silk ground is painted a lively scene of the Biggar Whipmen on horseback, riding in procession over a bridge spanning the Biggar Burn.

There are hundreds of exceptional banners throughout Great Britain, made for organisations as diverse as the Labour Party and the Mothers' Union. Banners can make a stunning visual impact due to their size, use of vivid colours and craft techniques such as applique and embroidery. The iconography and



Educational visit to the Pump House: People's History Museum

variety of artistic styles employed by banner artists makes banners extremely interesting objects from an art historical point of view. They can also give insights into the history and beliefs of particular organisations and provide a link to aspects of local and social history. As I have found with my own research into Manchester banner maker Henry Whaite which started with a nineteenth century railway union banner and has led me through fascinating aspects of the Whaite family history, the fairs and pleasure grounds of Victorian Manchester, the Durham Miners' Galas and the Royal Cambrian Academy.

The end of the National Banner Survey will be marked by two exhibitions at the Pump House: People's History Museum and an academic conference in conjunction with the Social History Curators Group in 1999 - 2000. However, we hope that this will be just the start of an era of investment and interest in banner conservation and display.

Ruth Stevens - Survey Curator

The National Banner Survey is located at the National Museum of Labour History, 103 Princess Street, Manchester M1 6DD. Please telephone the survey office on 0161 228 7212 for further information.



Survey Curators examine 'Incorporated Trades of Elgin Hammermen Flag' at Elgin Museum, Scotland

Community Curators: 'Dolls and Toys' at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry

The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum has recently hosted a successful exhibition that was the result of an innovative collaboration between the museum's staff and a local special interest community group.

Robin Johnson, Interpretation & Outreach Officer at the Museum explains how the project came about while Diana Powell, Secretary of the Heart of England Doll & Toy Club, gives the Community Group's perspective.

The Museum's Experience

This article outlines how a potentially small community display was transformed into a major three month exhibition with related activities and events due to the influence and sheer hard work of members of a local community group. It should perhaps be subtitled, 'How to put on an exhibition of social history when your Exhibitions Officer and Keeper of Social History leave!'

The exhibition *Dolls and Toys* took place at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, between January and March 1998. It was one of the most successful exhibitions held at the museum for many years, both in terms of visitor numbers and satisfaction. It has left behind a legacy that influences all our planning for exhibitions in the present and into the future. The ideas for the exhibition came about after a talk given to the members of the Heart of England Doll & Toy Club, by the then Keeper of Social History, Liz Read, who put forward a small exhibition proposal to our exhibitions officer. Some members of the group had also expressed an interest in volunteering for the museum, particularly in cataloguing the toy collection. Seeing this as an opportunity to utilize specialist skill, Liz agreed.

The then Exhibition Officer, Karen Belshaw, agreed to a small community gallery display. Unbeknown to the Doll & Toy Club, Karen had already been approached by the British Doll Association for an exhibition but had failed to come to an agreement, so an exhibition of dolls at least, was very much on the agenda.

As the weeks went on, still twelve months away from exhibition time, discussions were held with the Doll and Toy Club about the possibility of making the exhibition bigger, more wide ranging and displayed in a "proper" gallery. As it was the 30th anniversary of the club, this was acknowledged as a good idea to combine the best of the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum's collections with the best of the personal collections of members of the club. Therefore, a large gallery space was assigned.

By this time we were thinking 'People's Show' and consequently held two 'open days' for members of the public to bring in dolls and toys for possible exhibition - these were spectacularly badly attended, so it was decided to make the exhibition 'in-house' with objects from the club and the museum. The 'people's' element was to be a small showcase of favourite childhood toys with a supporting contemporary photograph - which proved to be rather embarrassing for those of us who contributed!

As the time went by it became apparent that there were two club members who had the time and commitment to work with us closely. This was fortunate because we lost both members of staff who had initiated the project, so the involvement of these members became absolutely vital. Without doubt, the hard work of these club members kept the project alive. They spent many hours in the museum selecting and researching the objects for exhibition. Effectively, we asked them to use their knowledge as specialists, to choose toys and dolls that were the most interesting or significant and had a story to go with them.

We then worked with them to choose certain themes for the display cases and text panels, e.g. World War Two, Local Connections, Toys for Adults. At this point the secretary of the club, Diana Powell, began writing the text. We were very clear that all text would be under our final control. We were extremely lucky though that she had an excellent style and understood perfectly the requirements of length of text and the need for simple clarity, not pedantic details. All the same, it was a vast undertaking to edit the text to please a general audience and the specialists we knew the exhibition would attract - hence a decision was made to go for minimal object labels with accompanying, more detailed, themed handout sheets for visitors who wanted more information.

We felt it was an excellent opportunity to target Key Stage 1 children, as I knew that 'old' toys was a topic that teachers were frequently asking us about. I therefore wrote activity sheets with this in mind adhering to some of the key aspects of the KS1 History curriculum - compare and contrast. The resulting interest from primary schools was massive, with a school visiting every day, sometimes two a day.

What were the benefits of working with a community group? The access to a massive collection was a major influence in persuading us to go ahead with the exhibition. The research capabilities of the members were outstanding, their commitment, enthusiasm, ideas and non 'museum' attitude was refreshing - they were also very willing to give talks to a guaranteed audience! The museum has also now realised the huge potential of



A young visitor playing with the dress-up dolls

the toy and doll collection held in the stores - without this injection of knowledge and enthusiasm, it is true to say that this potential would have stayed hidden for a while longer. We have established and kept a very useful community link which is still active to this day.

Were there any drawbacks? Not really. Some club members wanted more details from the exhibition, but we had expected this. There was perhaps a slight lack of understanding of museum audiences from some members. There were definitely some unrealisable expectations of museum budgets and staff time which were quickly dispelled! But generally the advantages massively outweighed these small, easily solved problems. We found that this experiment in working so closely with a community group a most enlightening exercise. Their enthusiasm for the subject was simply extraordinary, this transmitted itself to all the staff involved. I would say that this is the major advantage to working with specialist groups. Of course for every genuinely interesting and interested community group there is another with an agenda of their own. But, if the sheer exuberance of a community group exhibition can be harnessed then there are many short and long term benefits to any local museum.

Robin Johnson

Interpretation & Outreach Officer,
Herbert Art Gallery & Museum.

Community Curators: A Community Group's Perspective...

I thought I was being foolishly optimistic in asking Liz Read, to speak about and maybe show some slides of the Museum's toy collection, at the heart of England Doll and Toy Club's 30th Birthday National Convention in May 1997. Her willingness not only to speak (free of charge and on a Saturday morning) and to share the presentation with our knowledgeable chairwoman was amazing. Her unstuffy and friendly attitude encouraged me to wonder whether the gems of the Museum's collection could be shared more widely, supported by loans from the collections of Doll Club members and from the general public. In no time at all it seemed, the idea had taken off and, after media publicity, we collectors joined the keepers in the Museum foyer to receive items from local people, record their stories and take photos of the treasured toys they offered.

Liz unexpectedly moved on to pastures new half-way through the planning stage, but other equally enthusiastic, approachable people quickly stepped into the breach. When the museum assistants started to greet us by name as we walked in the door, we really did begin to feel welcomed and trusted where it really counted!

We have been deeply impressed by the keepers' open minded attitudes and their genuine concern to reach out to local people of all ages, as well as by their professionalism. They in their turn have been more than generous in acknowledging and valuing our particular areas of expertise. If there has been one key factor which has underpinned the success of our

continuing relationship, it is this sense of equality and mutual respect in our joint endeavours.

While our exhibition shows how a group of local enthusiasts can bring invaluable specialist knowledge to add to the repertoire of the museum's professional staff, it seems to me that they can also have an important role in raising awareness in the wider community about their local museum's needs as well as its strengths. I was taken aback by the stark reality of the resource constraints on the Museum, which were significant. Even fundamental improvements to the management of the collections, such as up-dating the information technology or systematically photographing items, seem to depend heavily on special one-off applications for external funding. I hope we may have a future role in helping the museum to develop local political and financial support for such initiatives.

However, as an experienced community worker I also know that working with volunteers is neither a cheap nor an easy option. We collectors certainly took our role very seriously, working hard to meet deadlines, keep appointments and generally be reliable colleagues, but the keepers also had to make a huge effort to find the time, patience and sheer good humour needed for the whole process to work out as amicably and successfully as it did. We really enjoyed it - what more can we say?

Diana Powell

**Secretary, Heart of England
Doll & Toy Club**



Oswald the lucky rabbit: he survived the Blitz in Coventry although he had his arm blown off when his owner's car exploded - the owner was not inside!

What do Walsall People Want?

Walsall's new lottery funded Art Gallery presents many opportunities for the local community. However, the re-development has created a challenging future for the museum. Carl Franklin, Community History Officer at Walsall Library and Museum discusses the issues and examines what the future holds for the museum.

Walsall's new Art Gallery is a 21 million pound new-build gallery designed by young British architects Caruso St. John that will enshrine our core vision of EXCELLENCE matched by ACCESS. It will fuse distinctive local, national and international agendas and is already being hailed as one of the most important new public buildings of the decade. Funded by the Arts Lottery, ERDF, City Challenge and Walsall NBC, it is located in the heart of the town at the top of Walsall's main shopping street on a new Gallery Square, currently being designed by artists Richard Wentworth and Catherine Yass.

Its mission states that; 'The New Gallery for Walsall exists to provide all the people of Walsall with a cultural and educational service of the very highest quality, and to act as a focus for civic pride and community identity'. Its artistic programming, the presentation and development of its collections and its access and interpretation strategies propose a model of how art galleries can contribute meaningfully to twenty-first century life and culture. As an art gallery of outstanding excellence it seeks to disseminate its work as widely as possible, thus, drawing national and international attention to Walsall and its achievements.

However, I find it hard to believe that the Art Gallery can successfully achieve its mission to act as a 'focus for civic pride and community identity' when there is no place in it for Walsall Museum. In fact the museum is in danger of being squeezed out of existence thanks entirely to the Arts Lottery's blinkered conditions

for funding. The decision not to house the Museum was a significant one and has certainly split the staff. It has been particularly hard to accept knowing that Walsall's successful exhibition programme has come about from joint social history and contemporary art projects. I see this as a serious flaw in the Art Gallery's plan, if we have learnt only one thing over the last ten years it is that contemporary art projects genuinely linked to local communities work and can generate huge new audiences.

Over the last five years priority has been given at Walsall to pursuing longer term strategies of interpretation, events and education. The aim is to engage people, especially young people, with museum collections and the historic and contemporary visual arts in richer, more imaginative, more rewarding and often more informal ways. As a result, Walsall now attracts a much higher proportion of visitors who would normally be defined as non-traditional attenders of arts venues.

Mixing art and history

Mixing contemporary and historic art works with social history objects reflects the way in which artists and historians have been working for decades. Historians are commissioning art works as an alternative means of exploring subjects which they are attempting to analyse through looking at evidence. Many contemporary artists are exploring the past from a personal and imaginative perspective (as opposed to an analytical perspective) to provide alternative histories through art work. The great Louise Bourgeois described her work as not being about art but about life. The

breakdown of subject boundaries and the importance of the personal story, the single, subjective perspective is having an effect on the way art and history are practised. Social history can provide many ways of accessing the physical, mental and psychological process of creating and viewing artworks. Similarly, the creation of a work of art and what it can represent can provide equally important insights into societies' histories.

I was stunned by a recent article about the work of sculptor John Buckley and his current exhibition called 'The Landmines Exhibition'. Buckley got involved in the Cambodia Trust, which makes artificial limbs for mine victims. He visited Cambodia and found that he couldn't draw, he couldn't sculpt, he couldn't translate the message from brain to hand. The horror was so literal there was nothing left to interpret as an artist. When he left Cambodia, he brought with him from a hospital some of the artificial limbs. Six years later he felt sufficiently distanced to make sense of them as art. The most haunting image is of a child's dusty, eroded sandal clamped into steel limbs, an egg serving as a head. By the side of the single sandal is a child's footprint where once there had been a leg. Buckley used to feel that art couldn't change the world - he doesn't think that anymore. I have never doubted its power and believe more strongly than ever that social historians and artists are working in the same field.

Museums and galleries at their best, are not just sites for spectatorship, for being 'lifted to a higher level'. They continue to be inspiring temples of beauty for some, but they can also offer a warm invitation

for creativity in a context that links contemporary life in all its disarray. Walsall's philosophy is based on the premise that audiences are much more sophisticated, demanding and critical than they are assumed, or more importantly, allowed to be. Contrary to the often broadcast prejudices of burnt-out critics, sensationalist tabloid journalists and jaded politicians of all parties, people are interested in, and supportive of museums and galleries and of challenging, contemporary art in particular. The aim should be to create a museum and art gallery that is a stimulating, provocative, yet non-threatening space, in which visitors are encouraged to feel a sense of ownership, involvement and participation and where there is an ethos of informality and unembarrassed interactivity. Recent exhibitions, which truly unite social history and contemporary art, have pushed the boundaries back and have opened up a critical debate on the nature of collecting and the purpose of museums and galleries, enabling essential and long-term public dialogue about curatorial objectives and the mystique of professional practices.

The future of the museum

The Museum and the Art Gallery in Walsall developed in tandem and have had close links since emerging out of the Public Library Service at the end of the last century. Both have enjoyed prominence at different periods in their history but the 1990s have seen the Art Gallery receive Arts Council Funding to enable it to expand its staff, exhibitions and education programme. Funding from the Foundation for Sports and Arts

enabled the Garman Ryan Gallery to be dramatically improved in 1991, presenting a perfect opportunity for Arts Lottery, ERDF and City Challenge funding in 1996. Even the acquisition, in 1992, of a nationally significant collection of working-class women's clothing from the 1920s to the 1950s could not alter the path that the Museum & Art Gallery was being taken along. Refurbishment of the History Gallery in 1993 and NEG funded improvements have only served to maintain a presence.

So where are we now? Some would say in the enviable position of having everything to play for. However, I was mildly amused by a statement in a report on the vision, aims and objectives for Walsall's Public Art Strategy, commissioned in 1997. It stated that, 'the new art gallery is one of the most exciting and innovative arts projects in the UK. It will move well away from the allegedly 'elitist' approach of traditional institutions, and will offer an original mix of educational and community-orientated activities designed to involve local people in the gallery's work and programmes'. It went on to say, 'precisely how the existing museums will be managed following the opening of the new art gallery is still under debate'. I honestly believe that senior management do not know what the future holds for the Museum, how much space will be allocated in the new art gallery for the results of 'community involvement' or whether funding will be found for a truly integrated library and museum.

But in spite of this, the future could be bright. The Museum has experienced over four years of uncertainty about its

future and yet has still devised the extraordinarily complex community project 'Music Makers' and had a major input in the recent 'Me & You' exhibition. In addition, a recent consultation exercise to determine a way forward for the Museum has revealed some interesting facts.

At the end of 1997 we set up a series of focus groups giving people the opportunity to say what they wanted from the museum & library services. A strong theme that emerged from the process was that people feel disempowered in the context of local service provision, and in particular believe that the needs of local communities have not been effectively served in the past. This is a powerful backdrop to the development of appropriate services. It raises issues of both community consultation and future strategies for communication.

The key findings of the focus groups are complex but the level of consensus on key issues was unusual and striking. These can be summarised as:

- 'We do not trust the council'
- 'We value the library highly'
- 'The new art gallery is not for us'
- 'Walsall is not meaningful it's just a geographic boundary'

These are strong and vital messages, which impact on the corporate identity and public relations of the borough as well as cultural services.

To look more specifically at the cultural services addressed within this project,



Combining art and history: Mr Jack Allen of Walsall Wood, by Ming de Nasty at Poseurs for the Talking Pigeons exhibition

the following opportunities may be identified:

- Local history is valued, and integrated access to museum and local history centre services is seen as logical
- Library services need to address the opportunities afforded by technology (and to offer less cramped public services)
- The history of people has the potential to imbue a sense of place in the communities of Walsall

I will end with a note of caution highlighted by the focus groups. They viewed the borough as being guilty of having developed 'flagship sites' without an eye to the local public. It is clear, therefore, that new initiatives need to keep in touch with the opinions of the local communities. It is important that enthusiasm, vision and innovation do not serve to alienate the local population. Does it really matter what the building looks like? It is significant, physical access for all is vital, but surely the most important thing is what goes on display and what subjects and themes are being explored. Let's not lose sight of why we're here in the first place.

Carl Franklin

Community History Officer,
Walsall Library and Museum.

REVIEW...

The Care of Collections Containing Drugs and Chemicals

This seminar took place at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and was a joint venture between the South Eastern Museums Service and the Group for Medical Collections in Museums.

The day was clearly focused on the practicalities of dealing with sometimes unpredictable substances. Caroline Reed and Peter Homan of the Pharmaceutical Society outlined the principles of handling and collecting Drugs and Chemicals. Over and above general handling, Dr Mike Pascoe underlined our responsibilities in Health and Safety terms not only to fellow workers and visitors but to curatorial staff in the future. The idea that all drugs become less dangerous over time is erroneous.

Sue Minter of the Chelsea Physic Garden outlined the particular problems of showing your 'exhibits' i.e. plant life with medicinal quantities where they may be touched by members of your audience. They are actually making their collections work for them financially through entering their seed for screening programmes by Pharmaceutical Companies searching for new drugs.

After lunch we split into groups to see the displays of Pharmaceutical Material around the building. We were able to watch a demonstration of pill-rolling and also to view storage areas to see the ways in which this material can be stored safely.

There were two speakers in the afternoon, the first Dr. Gordon Applebee

COMING SOON...

Banners Unfurled

The SHCG and National Museum of Labour History one day banner conference.

This event is planned for the 3rd April 2000 at the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester. It will contain everything you need to know about banners and probably much more!

The seminar will cover:

- The National Banner Survey report
- Practical housekeeping tips
- Banners in relation to social history
- The regional and international dimension

Whether you just have one banner in your collection and don't know what to do with it, or if you want to find more about the history of the social and political movements that used banners, this is the seminar for you.

For more information watch this space but remember to keep Monday 3rd April 2000 clear!

Contact: Stephen Lowy, Tel: 0121 454 2374
Email: snlowy@globalnet.co.uk

covered the legal aspects of holding collections of drugs. The last speaker was Emily Johnson who had carried out a project for The Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester to store their dyestuffs collection more safely.

The day was full of useful information, however, some of the more complicated information especially legal requirements would have benefited from a handout. This would have allowed delegates to concentrate on the speaker instead of scribbling furiously. As it was, the day was very much an introduction to the subject for me and underlined just how much you need to know to make valid decisions.

Catherine Nisbett

Manor House Museum, Kettering.

COMING SOON THIS AUTUMN

The Wood Seminar

Virtually every museum collection contains wooden objects. This seminar will help you maintain the care of your collection and help you avoid being lumbered with the perils of pests, pollution or people that effect wood.

For further details contact:
Catherine Nisbett,
Tel: 01536 534381

COMMITTEE

CHAIR & JOURNAL EDITOR:

NIGEL WRIGHT
Astley Hall Museum & Art Gallery
Astley Hall, Chorley
Lancashire, PR7 1NP
Tel: (01257) 515555

SECRETARY:

LUCY ALLCHURCH
Jersey Museums Service
The Weighbridge, St. Helier,
Jersey, C.I. JE2 3NF
Tel: (01534) 633323

TREASURER:

ROBERT ROSE
Braintree District Museum
The Town Hall Centre
Market Square
Braintree Essex, CM7 6YG
Tel: (01376) 325266

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:

VICTORIA EMMANUEL
Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery
Chamberlain Square
Birmingham B3 3DH
Tel: (0121) 303 1672

ORDINARY COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

NICKY BLEASBY Tel: (01483) 725517
The Galleries, Woking

TONY BUCKLEY Tel: (01232) 428428
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

STEPHEN LOWY Tel: 0121 454 2374

ANDREW MACKAY Tel: (01362) 860563
Norfolk Museums

ELEANOR MOORE Tel: (01922) 654324
Walsall Museum & Art Gallery

CATHERINE NISBET Tel: (01536) 534381
Manor House Museum, Kettering

HELEN SYKES Tel: (0121) 303 2875
Discovery Centre, Birmingham

VICKY WOOD Tel: (01494) 421898
Wycombe Museum