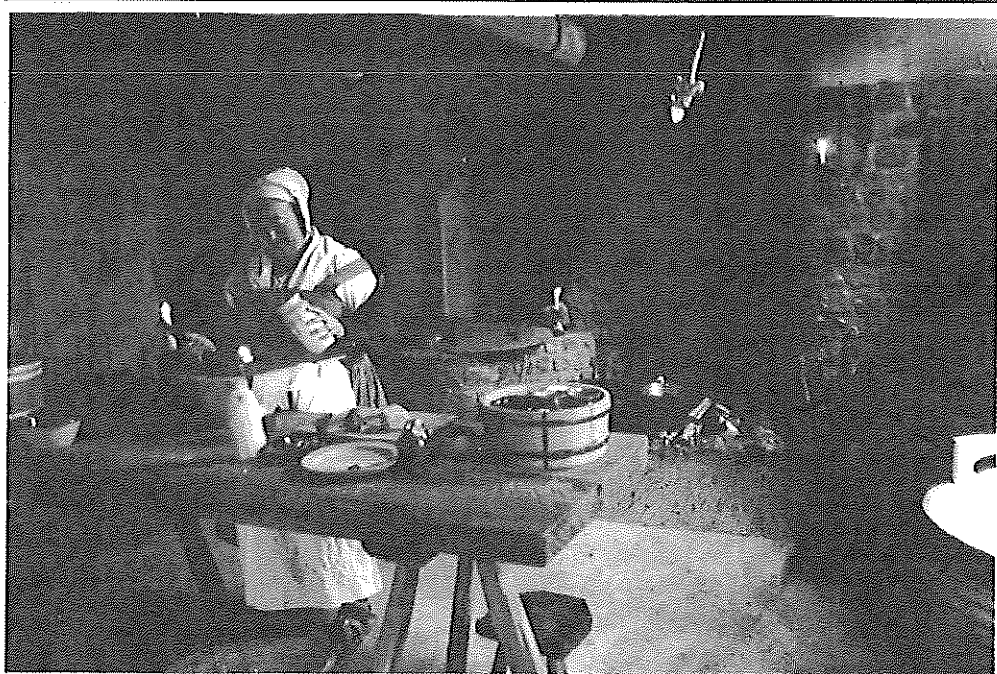


SOCIAL HISTORY IN MUSEUMS

Volume 30



**JOURNAL OF THE
SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP**

Social History in Museums

Journal of the Social History Curators Group

Edited by Rebecca Fardell

Volume 30 (2005)

Published by the Social History Curators Group 2006
ISSN 1350-9551

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Front Cover Illustration:

*A costumed interpreter at work in the Winkhurst Tudor at the
Weald and Downland Open Air Museum*

Photograph: Weald and Downland Open Air Museum

The Social History Curators Group

The Social History Curators Group (SHCG) aims to draw together all members of the museum profession to promote social history in museums and improve the quality of curatorship.

It aims to:

- Work with those who are continually developing standards, to improve the quality of collections care, research, presentation and interpretation.
- Stimulate and act as a forum for debate on issues affecting the museum profession.
- Act as a network for sharing and developing skills.
- Advocate the study and practise of social history in museums.

SHCG is a point of contact for other organisations, as well as its own members. It represents the interests and concerns of members liaising with Regional Agencies, Federations, the Museums Association and MLA.

The Group organises seminars throughout the year on a wide variety of topics which are a useful resource for member's Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The annual conference provides a forum for a fuller analysis of major subjects such as interpretation, evaluation and community outreach. A *News* is issued several times a year and includes reviews of meetings and exhibitions, opinions on current issues and items of news. There is also a SHCG website and the Group is responsible for the first BASE database.

Social History in Museums is produced annually and is issued to all members. Back issues are available via the Editor. Articles, reviews and books for review should be sent to the Editor who can be contacted via the website. SHCG does not accept responsibility for the opinions expressed by the contributors.

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Editorial

All the articles in this volume are based on papers given at the 2005 Social History Curators Group Conference which was held in Wales. The Conference was called 'The Real Thing...? Practical approaches to interpretation'.

Michael Houlihan's paper raises a number of questions as he considers the challenges currently facing social history in museums, particularly the threat to objectivity and the dangers of a micro-history approach. The issues he raises about museums and identities are further explored in Rhiannon Mason's article about how Welsh identities are represented within National Museums and Galleries of Wales. Anna Smith looks at how a museum of Cardiff might tell the story of the city's people and at some of the ways that the Cardiff Museum Project is establishing relationships with local people.

Graeme Meggeson's and Fiona Orsini's articles describe two practical responses to partnership working with collections, an approach favoured by the Museum Association in *Collections for the Future*. The Regional Resource Centre is a collaboration between Tyne and Wear Museums and Beamish that aims to improve care of, and access to the collections of both institutions. The Exploring 20th Century London project currently has five partners and seeks to create an online learning database about London in the last century.

The following five articles all look at ways of using 'the real thing': Julian Bell and Hannah Miller explain how interpretation and collections care have developed at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum and how these two elements have become inter-reliant. Ruth Shuttleworth demonstrates the impact of the Inspiring Learning for All framework on the recent redisplay of the Power Hall at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. Emma Lee describes how Reading Museum Service's loan boxes were created and updated and Fiona Ure outlines a partnership project based around a series of object led reminiscence sessions. Zelda Baveystock and Caroline Whitehead discuss how objects were dramatised for the Working Lives gallery at Discovery Museum.

In her paper 'Reality Check: Can Museums ever "tell it like it is"?' Vicki Wood considers the role of modern technology and whether there is still a place for real objects in today's museums. She considers many of the issues raised by the other articles in this volume and the importance of recognising the impact of all we do on our visitors.

'The Real Thing' suggests that there are two kinds of artefacts, two kinds of experience, the genuine and the somehow fake. Social history curators have tended to maintain the supremacy of 'the real thing', by which we usually mean an historic artefact or record. The projects discussed in this volume show that perhaps things are less clear cut: the tools now available to us for interpreting our collections mean that we may need to broaden our definitions if we are to tell real stories about our communities and their identities.

Rebecca Fardell

Social History: Closed for Reconstruction

Welcome to Social History Curators Group Conference at National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) on 30 June 2005

Michael Houlihan

The title of these introductory comments was inspired by a gallery sign in the National Museum, Tirana, Albania; however, my themes reflect the sort of discussion that I would hope to have with our social historians and archaeologists as we consider the future and direction of social history at St Fagans, the Museum of Welsh Life.

I would like to suggest that the presentation of social history in our museums is peering into something of an intellectual abyss. Museums and especially national museums make much of their objectivity, but the concept is actually a chimera. A range of subjective forces have, in the past, and are, today, shaping our intellectual direction for us. Such influences include the role, particularly in its devolved form, of government; the growth of the plural society; and issues of cultural identity. However, I would, briefly, like to look at two particular areas. First, the dangers to objectivity, which are implicit in the social history museum's role as a repository of memory; and secondly, the disengagement and decontextualisation of social history – namely, that blinker-tendency of public programmes in museums towards micro-history and, in particular, the jettisoning of global context in favour of overly narrow, local experience.

Social History is an approach to the past that carefully examines the conditions and contributions of groups of ordinary people. It concerns itself with how people live their lives and evaluate them, from family to economy to emotions and the senses. This is an important and difficult responsibility.

In 1999, Northern Ireland's then new Minister for Culture, Arts and Libraries, Michael McGimpsey, commenting upon his new role, observed that now, thanks to the ceasefire, the boys were out of the ditches, but culture had become the new battlefield. This was no throw away line. The fact that the Ulster Unionist Party had selected the Culture portfolio over Education and Health, and then installed a political heavyweight to drive the agenda, was indicative of the Party's sensitivity to the power and possibilities of a Culture Ministry in reinforcing the Protestant and Unionist identity; that web of kinship, common origins, collective myths and shared memories that are the defining characteristic of most cultures, societies and families. In other words, the emotional core of contemporary social history

We, and the public, know that museums serve as places to imagine, as places to discover, as places to remember. Collections are at the heart of all those experiences. Museums are places loaded with consignments of memories; places where objects are reunited with stories of the past, ostensibly with the curatorial intention of telling "objective" history. Yet, they are frequently used by the public as a vehicle for promoting community memory; but only, of course, where those communities are represented. One of the more enduring and highly developed skills of museums has been their ability to collect and develop knowledge; and to configure and reconfigure that knowledge.

Let me quickly and quirkily illustrate the link between memory and museum. Commonality of heritage is asserted through many varied events, objects and activities. Perhaps, one of the most dramatic contributors to sustained common cause is the way in which societies remember wars and commemorate the fallen. Certainly remembrance days, the creation of memorials and the wearing of poppies all tend to fabricate a common narrative of the past. But, that narrative may not be objective; the problem with memory is that not only does it play tricks, it can also be selective because it is part of the same spectrum that includes amnesia. For example, take the

Second World War. Nationally, we commemorate the anniversaries of iconic battles and events such as Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and D-Day adding our own layers of memory to old and, arguably, shutting out context to a point where history becomes distorted. The true context is that, in 1944, the real war of mass destruction was in the East where 315 German Divisions faced the Soviet Army, whilst a mere 11 German divisions were deployed to meet the Allied breakout from Normandy in July, more than a month after D-Day. This is a little known statistic supported by the staggering and probably unknown numbers of Russian dead suffered during the Second World War; possibly 20,000,000. Memory and context; I would argue that museums are frequently complicit in reinforcing the community memory, at the cost of balance and sometimes objectivity.

However, we have to work with the fact that museums are often perceived as appropriate places of commemoration in this weave of remembrance, narrative and memory. For example, the entrance hall, at the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff was designed with a memorial purpose and to display the Book of Remembrance for those who died in the Great War. Further afield and more recently, when visitors to the Vietnam Wall in Washington began leaving personal mementos of the dead, such as letters, photos, items of uniform etc, it was decided that these should be placed, uncaptioned, in the Museum of American History, just along the Mall. Still in America, the scenes and tokens of loss and mourning in New York following September 11th created instant, poignant and personal memorials, street side museums to the missing and dead. The arguments over the building which will replace the Twin Towers reflect many similar earlier debates, at other times and in other places, over the shape and form of monuments to the fallen. Interestingly, dust from Ground Zero was displayed, in both a memorial and artistic context, here at the National Museum by the artist, Zsu Bing, who won the Artes Mundi contemporary art prize. Again, serious proposals have been brought forward in Northern Ireland by Sinn Féin for the conversion of the former Maze prison into a museum of the Troubles. However, this would clearly serve only to iterate one narrative, given the power of the place and its associations. The other view, put forward by some politicians and the Northern Ireland prison service, is to pull it down.

Clearly, for museums as well as society, reconciling memory with multiple identities is a difficult challenge, not only in the divided political landscape of Northern Ireland but also in the multi-cultural environment of, say, south Wales. Don't forget that twenty years ago, this Museum rather gave up the challenge, when it handed over its ethnography collection to the Horniman Museum in south London and as a result, today, singularly fails to reflect the multiple histories and cultures which are modern Wales. I, therefore, pose the question, if St Fagans is the Museum of Welsh Life should it also seek to represent Somali, Italian and Asian heritage and culture as it exists in Wales? Or should it remain an icon and expression of a principally Welsh speaking, white, rural based culture? St Fagans stands at an important crossroads.

Neurologists tell us how people who suffer severe memory loss often have to reinvent their memories and the identity of those around them. To some extent this can apply to communities and, therefore, the repositories of their memories, such as museums. Frequently, the invention of memory can be linked to a political agenda. I would argue that social history museums should be alert to the risk of becoming complicit in the promotion of invented tradition and culture and the portrayal of "merry" history.

It is also arguable that the shifting directions in social history studies over the past twenty years, the so-called "cultural turn" with its focus on values systems, linguistic usage and anthropology has taken us away from some of the fixed, given and stable concepts underpinning social science into an arena where society, nation, gender, politics and identities have been re-drawn as zones of contest and difference. For

example, fifteen or twenty years ago the Inner London Education Authority talked about "celebrating diversity"; today, the concept of the plural society recognises that the root of the word "diversity" lies in "division" and that where identity is contested such as in South Africa and Northern Ireland, the concept of learning to recognise and live with difference is a more realistic strategy.

This is the cultural battlefield; I would ask if social history museums are equipped for the fight?

So, what about my second area, the tendency of social history museums towards micro-history?

I would argue that social history has been notoriously place specific, with social historians often taking a regional or at most a national approach. (In fact the intellectual origins of St Fagans lie in the academic area of geography rather than social science). Now some social historians would argue that only a commitment to micro-history can capture the complexity of the social experience. Certainly, the "cultural turn" has tended towards an even tighter geographical focus. Social history in museums has become small history, almost completely untied from global context. By contrast, natural historians in addressing regional environmental issues, a field which in fact borders on social history, invariably place their presentations in a global context.

By and large, museums don't seem to do big history. Individual memory and community experience are highlighted, whilst the global pattern, from which these may emanate, is ignored. Even the museums that like to tell us that they are "universal" do not seem to get to grips with it. They are generally good on civilisations and the periodicisation of history; less good on changes in social or gender structures, the nature of childhood, agriculture etc.

Let's just take one of the most important, contentious and ongoing phenomena in human history; the migration of people. For those seeking to shore up purist ideas of cultural and national identity, migration is probably best ignored as it can be disruptive to the gentle rhythms of closed and introspective cultural elites, quaint traditions and the concepts of national uniqueness, which all seem to underpin such ideas. Yet, how can museums not take into account the continuing splintering and re-shaping of societies world wide and in the modern, post-colonial era, the break up of nation states into smaller entities and the growing diversification of national societies as a result of the largest migration of people in Europe and the Middle East witnessed since the Second World War? So, here, in Wales, we should, perhaps, be paying attention to those aspects of the social and political history of Somalia, Italy, Bengal, Ireland and, dare I say England, which have brought their peoples to south Wales.

Another theme – nationalism; and I know that Rhiannon is going to talk about this very shortly.

On a bad day, I sometimes feel that nationalism, in its blinder manifestations, is like some frozen piece of the nineteenth century that has broken off and somehow collided with the twenty-first. But, there is a lot of it about and it uses up a lot of energy; Wales, Ireland, Spain, the Balkans, the Middle East, the World. However, I suppose, I should be grateful that I have not had to live under a regime of cultural, social and political occupation, which frequently gives rise to and embeds such movements. Yet, without doubt, it is an international phenomenon, but how do we, as museums, deal with it? Well principally, by battening down the intellectual hatches; emphasising regional history, focussing on narrow and local cultural experiences and, sometimes, casually dismissing international context, global politics and example as irrelevant. National museums can already be criticised for their rhetoric of the universal museum, which declares that they present the world to everyone, yet do so in ways that are, inevitably, only partial and that deny representation to certain groups. One of the earliest aspirations of the National Museum of Wales was to "Show Wales

to the World, and the World to Wales"; we still strive to do that. But, there is a risk for all of the Home Nations that, under pressure of politicians and micro-historians, we could end up presenting our own world to ourselves.

In conclusion, then, my questions are:

- Can we take the rich menu of contemporary social issues and develop an appropriate world/social history perspective on them?
- What is the relationship between major changes in world history and significant social developments at local level, whether for the masses of ordinary people or for the wider range of human activities that social historians explore?
- Can our social history museums sustain such an approach?

Museums and Identities: What can the National Museums and Galleries of Wales tell us about Welsh identities?

Rhiannon Mason

A week ago, the body governing our national museums admitted it wants to drop "Welsh" from the titles of its individual institutions. Soon, for example, the Museum of Welsh Life will become the National History Museum ... Persuading incomers and tourists of the value of the Welsh culture and its traditions is - along with reminding the rest of us of their richness - the fundamental task of our museums. That task will not be fulfilled by dropping the terms which signify that culture and history and by smoothing over the things which separate us from the rest of Britain. Mario Basini, "A Museum by any other name?" *Western Mail*. October 22, 2005.

As Cardiff prepares to host the second *Artes Mundi* exhibition, Michael Tooby (Director, National Museum and Gallery Cardiff) looks at its importance to Wales. 'What do I mean by the character of the impact and benefit to Wales? I think it is in being able to say that contemporary Wales, in being international in outlook but unique and distinctive in approach, is prepared to establish its own routes of communication with the international communities to which it relates. *Artes Mundi* does not apologise in being specific to Wales. It therefore reinforces projects like that of the National Museum to reorient its programming and collecting - of major figures and movements in history as well as in the contemporary - to be of Wales but not narrowly and exclusively Welsh in some artificially defined way.' Karen Price, "Showing the world what we're made of", *Western Mail*. November 18, 2005.

This article is based upon a paper presented to the Annual Conference of Social History Curators Group (summer 2005) which focused on one aspect of a book I am currently writing about the National Museums and Galleries of Wales. The first National Museum of Wales was granted its charter in 1907 and opened in 1927 in the centre of what is now Wales' capital city: Cardiff. This first site is today known as the National Museum and Gallery, Cardiff; one of eight branches of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) network. The sites are concentrated in the south of Wales with some branches in the west and north of Wales, and include Big Pit: National Mining Museum, the National Woollen Museum, the Welsh Slate Museum, the Roman Legionary Museum, the National Waterfront Museum, the National Collections Centre, and the Museum of Welsh Life.

Nations have been described by Benedict Anderson (1991) as "Imagined Communities" and national museums are charged with the task of translating these imaginative constructions into a visible and tangible form. They are therefore key spaces within which to examine and debate the construction and representation of national identities and national cultures. Indeed, one aspect of NMGW's mission statement as featured on its current website is: "To promote a wide understanding and knowledge of Wales' heritage, culture and role in world development and history".

The aim of my book is to examine the ways in which NMGW as a cluster of institutions constructs ideas and representations of Welsh identities and national cultures. In particular, I want to explore if, and how, Welsh identities might be represented or staged differently within various disciplines and sites. My initial supposition was that, as they bore the name the National Museums and Galleries of Wales, these organizations should be able to tell us something about what it means, and has meant, to be Welsh as distinct from Scottish, English, or British.¹ However, my

research has raised many other questions for me about national museums, national histories, and national identities which can be grouped into two sets of problems.

The first set revolves around the nature, roles and rationales of national museums. What makes them different from other museums? What do we expect from them? Are they all the same? What are their purposes, remits, and definitions? Are they still relevant to contemporary, globalised, and multicultural societies? Tension between people's different responses to these questions recurs frequently in public debates within Wales, as demonstrated by the two recent quotations from Welsh newspapers which preface this article.

The second set of questions relates to some of the difficulties produced by attempts to map contemporary representational demands and expectations onto museum collections, buildings and displays inherited from different contexts. What I mean here is that we might look to a museum to tell us about Welsh identities today, but its collections will have originated as a series of responses to the contingency and accident of different demands, chance donations, or specific financial situations. Collections accrue and accrete opportunistically, strategies morph over time and the museums are shaped as much by chance and fortuity as by strategy and design. In the case of NMGW, for example, its formative early period was interrupted by the two World Wars so that while its charter was granted in 1907 and its foundation stone lain in 1912, it was not officially opened until 1927. The much under-rated role of chance and happen-stance involved in the development of any museum means that there can never be a neat and straightforward line leading us from a given identity to its equivalent museum representation, nor vice versa. On the face of it this seems to be a fairly obvious point to make. However, because of the public importance accorded to those institutions which represent national histories, and because of the way that current funding and policy arrangements require museums to be accountable to their audiences, it seems to me that contemporary museums in the UK are expected to make more of an effort than ever before to be explicitly representative of, and answerable to, their present constituents.

This is a difficult challenge given that national museums both give a 'public face' to assumptions which may otherwise go uncodified or unspoken, and face the challenge of 'reflecting back' their visitors' assumptions to them critically but without criticism. In many cases this prompts museums to promise that they will contribute to 'building' or 'restoring' local identities in the here and now. In itself this is not a negative thing; there are many positive examples of museums involving themselves in cultural diversity and social inclusion work. However, we need to examine where such expectations might come into conflict with both the legacies of early collecting policies and assumptions and the results of contingency and chance. In my opinion, NMGW provides a particularly useful case study with which to explore such issues and ask the following questions: firstly, what is a national museum and in what ways is NMGW 'national'? Secondly, what can NMGW tell us about 'national identities' within Wales? And thirdly, what might the sites not tell us, why, and what do these silences tell us about the relationships between national museums, national histories, and national identities?

What is a National Museum?

On close inspection it becomes clear that while many institutions carry the same 'national' title they can be established according to quite different historical, political, and museological understandings of what constitutes a "national museum". From my research it seems there are at least five responses to this question, all of which are represented within NMGW:

1. The museum as 'patrimony': an instrument of civic pride

In the first sense, national museums can be understood to be 'for the nation' in terms of being perceived as a valuable asset for the national public to see and visit but not necessarily needing to hold collections which are representative or 'reflective of' the nation. This sense of the term often coincides with the desire to use other cultural institutions like museums, libraries, and other civic buildings to make a statement about the standing of a particular nation. In this respect, museums function as a kind of 'calling-card' – a means of announcing the 'arrival' of a nation at a certain level of cultural or educational sophistication – although this can equally be applied to city or regional museums wishing to stake a place for their locale in the national consciousness. This first usage clearly informs the creation of the earliest national museum in Cardiff, the first deliberately National Museum of Wales.² This grand, neo-classical building was one of a number of civic buildings constructed in the Cathays Park area of Cardiff in the early part of the twentieth century.³

2. The museum as 'nation-in-miniature': a holistic, typological, and celebratory attempt at 'reflecting' the nation back to itself

The first understanding of what constitutes a national museum contrasts with a second approach which assumes that museums should be explicitly representative of the nation in an ethnographic style; in this case they collect or represent that which is considered to be typically national whether it be Swedish, German, or Welsh. This approach is inevitably fraught with difficulties because it always involves selectiveness over which elements of the nation are deemed appropriate and to be celebrated and legitimised. Such selectiveness is frequently contested particularly in terms of what is perceived to have been left out of the picture. We can see this particularly at the Museum of Welsh Life at St. Fagans which was repeatedly criticised in the 1980s and 1990s for having too much of a rural, folk bias and took on-board industrial heritage partly in response to this criticism (Mason, 2005).

3. The museum as 'exemplar': ethnographic case studies

A third definition concerns those museums deemed to be representative of a specific national element. This can be seen in those branches of NMGW which each represent the specific story of a particular industrial process or material such as Slate, Mining, Wool, or Industrial and Maritime History and their associated cultural histories. Museums devoted to specific industries or disciplines are very common. However, what is different about NMGW is that each one is perceived and presented as a component within a greater, national story which stretches across all the sites. This offers some positive opportunities in that the network will be greater than the sum of its parts but understandably creates some difficulties in terms of whether visitors will pick up and link together the other threads of the national story or instead compartmentalize them according to their visiting habits.

4. The museum as 'treasure house': importance, funding, and status

A fourth definition concerns those museums which are given national status, and crucially national funding, because they contain artefacts considered to be of outstanding national importance and to necessitate special recognition. Despite their national status, such museums are not usually required to be explicitly representative of a particular ethnicity. Instead, it is sufficient that they hold in trust a class of treasured objects which supposedly constitute that society's 'most valuable heritage'. (It goes without saying that the definition of 'outstanding value' is neither a neutral nor an apolitical act.) For example, the V&A and the British Museum are both national museums but do not attract the same representational expectations as the Museum of

Welsh Life or the Welsh Slate Museum. This treasured heritage may or may not originate from within that national group but these museums are rarely restricted to this kind of directly representative material and frequently contain more from 'other' cultures. A clear example of the difference between this kind of national museum and those which precede it can be seen in the Royal Museum of Scotland as opposed to the more recent Museum of Scotland (Mason, 2004). Both are part of the National Museums of Scotland network and are housed in physically adjoining buildings. However, the Royal Museum holds material from all over the world and is charged with "presenting the World to Scotland" whereas the Museum of Scotland is concerned with Scottish material and intended to present "Scotland to the World". NMGW has a similar bifocal commitment to look simultaneously inwards and outwards but, unlike the National Museums of Scotland, does not explicitly split those responsibilities between different sites.

5. The museum as 'intellectual adventure': inheritor of early collecting

The fifth and final version that I have identified is the inheritor of museums established in the early days of collecting often by societies of antiquaries or learned societies. Such collections were often established under the aegis of the nation but were not expected to be explicitly representative of the nation – at least not initially. In some cases, there has been an effort to make such museums and collections more nationally representative as they expand, and as greater awareness develops about the value of a clearly-defined collecting policy and rationale. This process can be seen, for example, in nineteenth century changes to the collecting policies of the Royal Museum of Scotland which attempted to increase the ethnic Scottishness of its collection of antiquities (Mason, 2004). The closest example of this in NMGW is the Roman Legionary Museum in Carleon which is currently classed as one of the national museums but is the descendent of a museum built in 1850 to house a collection of Roman finds and subsequently passed to the National Museum of Wales in 1930.

While it is helpful to delineate between these differing conceptualizations of what constitutes a national museum in order to understand why people expect certain – often contradictory – things from national museums, in practice these definitions overlap and can co-exist within the same museum. This is only to be expected as all museums represent the cumulative effects of previous assumptions and approaches. Some definitions will also be more obviously relevant for some disciplines than others; it is perhaps more obvious to expect art or history to be explicitly relevant to discussions of national distinctiveness rather than geology which may be more global in its focus and perhaps less concerned with political and cultural borders.⁴ It may also be the case that certain groups will mobilise specific conceptualisations as opposed to others. For example, those with political or economic interests in promoting a national agenda may well expect that the museums should highlight national representativeness while museum professionals might place as much value on the outstanding national value aspect of those same collections.

Across the diverse NMGW sites all these different versions co-exist; each museum contributes something different to a collective understanding of Wales' histories, identities, and cultures. The range of inflections of 'the national story' is why it has proven less than straightforward to answer the latter part of my enquiry: what can NMGW tell us about national identities within Wales; what don't the sites tell us and why; and what does this tell us about the relationship between museums, histories, and identities?

To answer this second set of questions, the first thing to acknowledge is that the different branches of NMGW clearly do tell us a great deal about Wales, its

cultures, its histories, and its identities but they do this in different ways: both directly and indirectly.

Direct Representation

If we deal with the direct approach first, we can say that many of the museums were formed with the aim of formalising representations of national life based around both the professional and industrial capabilities, and natural resources and industries of Wales; in the case of NMGW these comprise wool, coal, maritime, industrial history, slate, and rural life. Other explicit representations of Welsh history, culture, and environment can also be found in specific galleries such as the Evolution of Wales gallery in Cathays Park site, the Archaeology section, the Art in Wales gallery, and particularly in the Museum of Welsh Life which contains the primary archive of Welsh oral testament and tradition and many of the iconic objects of Wales and Welsh identity. National costume, for example, is discussed at this site as are traditional Love spoons and the Eisteddfod cup.

At the same time as they directly represent recognisable aspects of a broader national story, NMGW sites also interweave regional and local variations into the over-arching national metanarrative. In practice, a site's interpretive text will frequently slip and slide between the regional and national eliding, occluding, and conflating the differences between them. Big Pit: the National Mining Museum, for example, presents a very different face of Wales to that of the Museum of Welsh Life by embodying the South Wales coal mining industry and invoking notions of community, working-class culture, camaraderie, and a specific geographical location: the South Wales Valleys.⁵ The Slate Museum in the North of Wales offers a further competing version of Wales' industrial heritage by referring in its advertising to Slate as the most "Welsh of Welsh Industries". If considered collectively and cumulatively, the sites therefore highlight multiple facets of Wales, its identities, and cultures. In the process they deconstruct – intentionally or not – the notion of a single, homogenous national identity.

Indirect Representation

Despite blurring boundaries between the regional, national, and local, these sites provide a fairly direct and recognizable match between contemporary ideas about national culture in Wales and what visitors will see – and expect to see – in the collections. By contrast, other aspects of NMGW present a more indirect answer to the question what can the national museums tell us about Wales. What are we to make of the collection of Indian, Kalighat Icons rediscovered some years ago in the basement of the Cathays Park branch; the collection of Japanese ceramics in Cathays Park; or the fact that the Welsh Slate Museum built in 1870 in the shadow of Snowdonia is reputedly modeled on a mid-nineteenth Century Indian Hillfort? This apparent lack of fit between collections and contemporary expectations of national culture is perhaps most visible – and certainly frequently remarked upon – in the case of the collection of French Impressionist Art for which the Cathays Park branch is renown.

The art collection was bequeathed by the daughters (Gwendoline and Margaret Davies) of a self-made Welsh industrialist. However, both its pre-eminence within NMGW's art collection, and more generally the display of the relationship between the national and the international elements of the art collection have been sources of both academic and public debate in recent years. Critics such as Peter Lord (1992) have claimed that insufficient attention has been given to the collection and the balance of display of Welsh visual culture within the national museums. Lord argued that the visual culture of Wales has been not only subsumed within, but made subservient to, a European aesthetic canon. According to this argument, the museum's collections have been judged as providing insufficient emphasis on, and identification with, a

notion of national culture. These issues and others were explored in a public consultation initiated in 2001 by NMGW on the future display of its art collections, and continue to be discussed in relation to proposals for a new National Gallery for Wales.⁶ Interestingly, one of the findings of the consultation process was that there was considerable support for a new, national gallery but that the art of Wales should continue to be shown in an international context (Tooby, 2003: 6).

Determining 'relevance': what counts as 'national culture'?

The debate outlined above is beyond the scope of this article but is of interest because the tensions here seem to me to stem from the very conceptual differences over definitions of national museums discussed earlier. Such examples clearly demonstrate conflicting opinions about whether the remit of a national museum is to collect the 'best examples' of culture as understood and available to it at any particular time, or whether national cultures – and therefore national museums – are expected to be representative of, and mark out some form of national – and often – ethnic distinctiveness (this definition itself is not fixed and changes over time). While this kind of criterion makes perfect sense in terms of justifying public funding and fulfilling a local, regional, or national agenda, the tendency to apply a narrow, definition of national culture not just to art but to museums generally – particularly when applied retrospectively – privileges the conditions of production and underplays the importance of the multiple histories and stages of ownership, usage, and collecting.

The other major difficulty with such attempts to retrospectively fit collections collected in other times and under other collecting rationales into more contemporary national parameters is that trade, consumerism, patronage, and the collecting of heritage or art objects precisely traverses national borders. Thus a number of the objects will have arrived in NMGW because of their provenance: they were owned, purchased, or donated, by someone resident in, or connected to, Wales. This same state of affairs is similarly evident in most Western, European museums with historical collections which do not directly represent their contemporary identities or indigenous cultures.⁷ In one sense it is arguably not the nature of the objects themselves which provides the connection to contemporary societies, but the contexts of their acquisition, ownership and usage; that is to say, the reasons which have brought those objects to their current resting place.

While this argument might be acceptable in the case of Wales, this issue of the representational, legal and ethical fit between collections and societies is considerably more problematic in those museums holding collections arising from acts of imperial conquest or aggression. Here the same argument about acknowledging the importance of ownership and acquisition is often mobilized to counter claims for repatriation. However, the provenance and acquisition of such objects is now considered by many – both in and outside of the museum profession – to be outweighed by a higher ethical claim.

Faced with growing pressure to repatriate the cultural property collected, owned and used in colonial contexts to those who originally created, produced or used such material culture, a number of the world's major museums have recently made the case that they are "Universal Museums" with a special quality and remit which transcends locality and claims of local ownership. The difficulty with the idea of the universal museum, as many of those in favour of repatriation are quick to point out, is that just as the balance of power between the coloniser and the colonised was distinctly asymmetrical so too was the transfer of cultural property; the flow of cultural property was almost always towards the dominant nations and away from the colonised peoples (O'Neil 2004). There is no single answer to these museum dilemmas. It is the responsibility of each museum to consider each case on its merits, to consult with all

relevant parties and to consider the ethical standards of the national and international bodies.

To return to the case of NMGW, I would argue that all of the collections at NMGW contribute to an account of Welsh culture in its broadest sense, but in some cases this relationship will operate in a more indirect fashion than in others. While the museum at Cathays Park contains collections of French impressionist art and Japanese ceramics, these artefacts are arguably equally relevant to the story of Wales because the museum is indicative of a specific civic pride supported by the increasing wealth enjoyed by a patron class, and a wider nation-building agenda in Wales at the start of the twentieth century. Similarly, one can argue that the very presence of the European art collection tells us of the enormous wealth generated by Wales's industrial past and the efforts of its labouring classes.

In this respect the history of the European art collections held in Cathays Park provides the counter-story to the history of coal-mining, trade unionism, and the Valleys' mining communities represented at Big Pit. (Unfortunately, although this is recognized in NMGW's industrial strategy such links have been rarely made as explicit on the ground.) The question, "what can NMGW tell us about Welsh identities" therefore actually needs to be inverted. What the museums tell us about identities, cultures, and histories within Wales depends on how we imagine national cultures should be defined and represented, how we expect museums to relate to contemporary identities, and whether we (as visitors) are prepared – and encouraged – to make lateral connections across disciplines, sites, and contexts.

What is the role of a national museum?

So far this article has considered both direct and indirect responses to my question what does NMGW tell us about Welsh identities; why in some cases it is easier to point to an explicit answer than in others; how this relates to fundamental museological questions about the relations between cultural property and society; and how museums operate as complex, transactional spaces. It is worth adding that there is a second reason why it has proven difficult to answer my initial question which is because – as yet – NMGW has rarely explicitly addressed the issue of Welsh identities. When I began my investigation I expected somewhere to find some kind of explicit commentary on national identities within Wales; as mentioned previously, it is indeed possible to find individual components and elements. However, nowhere did I find the question of identities addressed head-on in permanent displays. It could be argued that this kind of work is not what museums should be doing and that this would be a distraction from the core activities of museums or could be too didactic. Certainly some critics of the move towards a more people-centred museum take precisely this line (Braeburne, 2000; Appleton, 2001). However, museums from around the UK and further a-field are increasingly putting statements about identity and culture at the heart of their mission statements which suggests a desire to take-on such issues. A cursory glance at the local and national Welsh news media also indicates that there is serious public interest around issues of national identities and museums within Wales.

Let me stress that I am not suggesting the national museums should be conscripted into providing a single, essentialising, or homogenising account of what it means to belong to a certain national identity; this would be counter to all the recent theorising about identities which argues that identities are not given, fixed, or unchangeable but complex, context-dependent, multiple, and negotiated. To the contrary, NMGW could facilitate a discussion about identities within Wales not by providing a checklist of Welshness, but by encouraging visitors to reflect upon and question their assumptions about national identities in the plural: theirs and other people's.

'Leading' public debate

Indeed, NMGW has already begun such work through the temporary exhibit format. One example organised for the millennium was the exhibition: *What Make Wales?* The advertising material for this exhibition read: "From King Coal to Coi Cymru, from Roman remains to twenty-first century animation, we look at every possible take on Wales, past, present and future." In doing so it asked provocative questions like: "Did the Celts ever exist? Does 90% of Birmingham's population come from Wales? Are Welsh cakes really Welsh?" Most importantly the exhibition asked visitors what they understood about the idea of Wales. Similarly, a 50 year celebration of the Museum of Welsh Life, St. Fagans, held in 1998 offered a useful contextualization of Welsh identities, but again was only temporary. Looking to the future another temporary exhibition is planned for November 2005 entitled "A Vision of Wales", which will explore the theme of identity by asking students aged 16-26 to present their ideas about identity and Wales using paintings, sculpture, film and props (South Wales Echo, 2005).

The permanent exhibitions also now look set to change. An article in the *Museum Journal* in April 2005, outlined a new vision for NMGW with an overall name change for the whole organization to *Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales*; the reconfiguration of the Cathays Park branch into a National Museum of Art on the first floor and a National Museum of Natural History on the ground floor; the move of the Cathays Park branch's archaeology collection to the Museum of Welsh Life; the renaming of the Museum of Welsh Life, St. Fagans to St Fagans, National History Museum; and the reorganization of that museum's collections along the "themes of origins, belonging, the future, and creativity" (Heal, 2005, 11).

Whatever the specific outcome of these proposals, hopefully the overall effect will be to provide visitors – both local and tourist – with a better understanding of the complexity of national identities and national cultures in Wales; with the opportunity to reflect upon and question their own sense of identity; and to recognize the extent to which any national identity is always inevitably linked with, and dependent upon, a wider, global and constantly shifting network of relationships. Indeed, as this article has demonstrated, NMGW is ideally placed to denaturalize what often passes as a ahistorical, intrinsic, and natural: that is to say, national identity. If explained and contextualized, the various permutations and incarnations which NMGW's own identity has undergone could make clear how conceptions of national identity are always-on-the move, contested, contestable, and political. The challenge for national museums is to animate and lead public debate about how 'national culture' is envisaged, defined, and what it can be said to be for.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by support from the University of Newcastle's Arts and Humanities Research Fund (AHRF) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council* (AHRC) Research Leave Scheme. Many thanks also to Alistair Robinson for his comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors remain my responsibility.

As this material was originally written for a conference, it does not provide full referencing for all sources. For full details I would refer the reader to my forthcoming book about the National Museums and Galleries of Wales to be published with the University of Wales Press in 2006.

(* The AHRC funds postgraduate training and research in the arts and humanities from archaeology and English literature to design and dance. The quality and range of research supported not only provides social and cultural benefits but also contributes to the economic success of the UK. For further information on the AHRC

please see www.ahrc.ac.uk)

Notes

1. Cardiff was not designated the capital of Wales until 1955. This was one of the main reasons repeatedly given by Parliament for not agreeing to calls by Welsh MPs for a National Museum of Wales between the 1890s and 1907.
2. The distribution of NMGW sites around Wales can be found at <http://www.nmgw.ac.uk/visiting/> [4 July 04]. Since this paper was presented the names of the various sites have been changed to: National Museum Cardiff, St. Fagans National History Museum, Big Pit National Coal Museum, National Roman Legion Museum, National Slate Museum, National Wool Museum, National Waterfront Museum (November 05).
3. It should be noted that there is no National Museum of England; English national identity tends to be dealt with regionally rather than nationally, presumably because of the historic role of the British Museum and the traditional elision of Britishness and Englishness.

I say 'deliberately national' because the Roman Legionary Museum which is today a branch of NMGW actually dates from 1850 but only passed over to the national museum in 1930.

It should be noted that while the first National Museum in Cathays Park (Cardiff) was clearly part of a wider nationalist movement in Wales, it was equally important in terms of efforts to gain recognition for Cardiff as a metropolitan, capital city for Wales. At the same time it is crucial to recognise that the museum and a number of its early supporters sought to balance greater recognition for Wales as a nation with reiteration of Wales' commitment to, and place within, the British Empire. Loyalty to the Empire and British Monarchy is clearly stressed in the Museum's architecture and in the organisation of its opening ceremony.

4. This is not to say that art history or contemporary art are not interested in internationalism, quite the reverse as demonstrated by the Artes Mundi prize, but are more likely – it seems – to be called upon to delineate national distinctiveness than geology. Although some aspects of geology and natural sciences may equally illustrate local distinctiveness they also reflect global histories which precede nationalism and cut across national borders and territories.
5. See Bella Dicks (2000) for an extremely useful discussion of the construction of the notion of community in the South Wales Valleys.
6. Detailed information on the results of the consultation and the proposal for a National Gallery can be found at:
<http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/art/consultation/>
7. In explicit recognition of this gap between historical collections and contemporary concerns, the Museum of World Cultures in Sweden, for example, has decided to use its collections selectively to support changing, thematic exhibitions focusing on world culture. To find out more about this go to:
http://www.sweden.se/templates/cs/Article____11017.aspx

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The Cardiff Museum Project: developing a museum of, and for, Cardiff

Anna Smith

I am going to tell you about the historical background to both Cardiff, and the Museum Project, as well as some of the specific challenges facing the Project and the Council. Finally, I'll tell you about some current projects and future plans. At this point in time, Cardiff Council has not fully committed to creating a museum, and funding is not in place.

2005 is Cardiff's centenary year, as it has been a city for 100 years and a capital for 50. The city has seen a lot of upheaval in the last few years. Built on the back of the export of coal through its docks and the production of steel, it has seen its fortunes fluctuate. Redevelopment has seen the face of the city change beyond recognition, firstly in the city centre during the 1960s and '70s and more recently when the docks became the Bay in the 1980s and '90s. One of the outcomes of this regeneration has been the Council working towards putting Cardiff on the tourist trail, and encouraging major projects like the Millennium Stadium and St David's 2 shopping development.

Through all this, however, comes a very strong sense of civic pride and love of the city by its residents. It is both the good times, and bad, that need a way of being recorded and shared.

Cardiff does not have a museum of its own. This historical anomaly, in terms of many other municipalities, is mostly to do with the National Museums and Galleries of Wales. The Cardiff Free Museum and Art Gallery was on the upper floor of the first library from 1874, and then in what is now the old Central Library from 1882, the building in which I am currently based. In the early twentieth century, to attract the newly founded National Museum to Cardiff, the Corporation offered a free site in Cathays Park, as well as its collection. The foundation stone was laid in 1912 and the collection handed over. Today, you can still see objects on display with Cardiff Museum on the label. However, the National Museum can rest easy that I am not going to ask for my stuff back as the eclectic collection was made up of art, geology and natural history, which are not collecting areas we are currently considering!

Cardiff is well served for museums with the National Museum sites at Cathays Park and St Fagans, two military museums at the Castle, both currently awaiting a new building there, and Butetown History and Arts Centre in what was the docks. However, none of these sites have a remit for Cardiff as a whole. You can visit the Cardiff pre-fab at the Museum of Welsh Life, and listen to the memories of Butetown residents at the Arts Centre, but nowhere can you begin to see the history of the city as a whole. Therefore, there is an identifiable gap.

There has been a push for a city museum for Cardiff for about 20 years or so, and it has got close before, yet fallen at the last post. A 1994 Heritage Working Party, established by the Council, recommended the establishment of a museum. More Working Parties followed, but with no result. In 2001 Cardiff Council received £2m from the Welsh Tourist Board, of which just over £100,000 was set aside for the Museum Project. A feasibility study was completed in September 2003, part funded by the predecessors to CyMAL, Museums, Archives and Libraries Wales, called Council for Museums in Wales (CMW).

This feasibility study recommended the employment of a project officer. It also found overall support for the project and market projections estimated 130,000 visitors a year with free entry to a fully developed museum, although the reality may be different. A city centre site was found to be essential, and site options were a new

build, using part of the new central library, or the Old Library building. Capital costs would be in the region of £5m for an existing site and £14m for a new build. Finally, a phased development was recommended.

So, here I am, in post since March 2004, charged with pushing forward Cardiff's ambition to have a museum of itself. The challenges are numerous, and there are a couple that I want to focus on particularly here. Firstly, Cardiff's unusual position of wanting to develop a museum from nothing, and secondly why that is a challenge for the Council to confront and explore.

Cardiff Council does not currently have a collection. In this its ambitions differ from other current city museum projects, such as Bristol or Liverpool. Unlike them, Cardiff would be starting from scratch, so it is not a case of reorganising and reinterpreting from the basis of an established museum collection. I do believe, however, that Cardiff can turn this to their advantage if they are willing to be bold.

The challenge for the Council in the twenty-first century is committing themselves to the creation of the kind of institution that other cities were creating in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the age of 'e-government'. It is not difficult to see why this might be off-putting, committing themselves in perpetuity to the care of a collection and all the expense that it entails. Rather an albatross for a modern organisation to burden themselves with. As the Group for Large Local Authority Museums, a category that Cardiff could potentially fall into, has demonstrated through their benchmarking work: 'local authority museums are providing a service – and this costs money. Admission charges and commercial activities will never provide the core revenue funding for such museum services – they will only supplement it'.

So, why should Cardiff join the ranks of local authorities who squeeze their museums' revenue budgets year on year, while all the time expecting more performance? Perhaps they should create a low maintenance, static, and object-free 'heritage centre' to satisfy local and tourist visitors' desire to know more about the origins of the city?

I don't believe that Cardiff should settle for this kind of compromise. I think that instead it needs to examine the motivation behind the enthusiasm for a museum for Cardiff. Secondly it should embrace the opportunities it has due to not having a collection. Here's an opportunity to 'get it right', and having personally come from a museum with seventy years of documentation backlog, that holds a very strong appeal! Finally, as it is not currently hindered with the costs associated with caring for an established collection, Cardiff can be innovative about its approaches to collecting for the future, and the content of the museum. This is something that I am trying to achieve through my 'virtual' collecting, or collecting without 'owning'. More of which later.

From talking to people in Cardiff, and gauging their responses to exhibitions, over the last fifteen months, I can say that there is a real demand for preserving the material culture of Cardiff and its people. The force of change in Cardiff has led to ways of life ending and tools becoming obsolete. Although much of Cardiff has become a homogenised shopping centre, its arcades excluded, and its Bay home to restaurant chains, it has a strong identity which its residents seem to want to see preserved and recorded. Civic pride, in Cardiff's case, seems to lead to a desire to preserve its histories with credibility in a museum. To fulfil its inspiration, learning and enjoyment roles, the stimulating mix of sound, film, photographs, text and objects needs to be achieved. A museum would help to solidify a sense of place amongst all the change.

Further, although the Council does not own a museum collection, there is Cardiff material in the city. It is just that it has not been drawn together before in one place, to tell the Cardiff story. Photographs, archival records, oral histories and objects are available from institutions such as the National Museum, Glamorgan Record Office as well as the Central Library's photographic collection. Private individuals, too, hold

some significant collections or individual items. We currently have on loan an original Lonsdale belt, won by Cardiff boxer Jack Petersen in 1932, lent by the family who were keen to see the belt on public display.

Currently the Museum Project is not collecting objects. My motivation behind this is an ethical stance against building up a collection that the Council has not committed to caring for or holding in trust. I do not want the longer-term ambition for a museum of Cardiff to have a reputation for collecting and then returning objects if the ambition is not fulfilled this time. For the meantime we are borrowing objects for exhibitions.

Within this context of wishing to propel forward the creation of a museum for Cardiff and maintain the Project's momentum, against a backdrop of no formal commitment to a museum, there are a few strands of work which I am currently using to look to the future.

As part of the centenary celebrations I was asked to put on a series of exhibitions at the Old Library funded by Millennium Commission money given to Cardiff for its 2005 celebrations. The Old Library, home of the first Cardiff Museum, is a serious contender for a museum site. Centrally located in the shopping centre with excellent footfall as the area is pedestrianised, it is a building held in much affection by residents and seems the natural home for a museum since the failed Centre for Visual Arts moved out and the Tourist Information Centre moved in. Our first exhibition, Moving Stories opened in December 2004 and over its six month run was very positively received by both the public and local press. It attracted nearly 17,000 visits. Building on the success of that exhibition, we have just opened the second centenary exhibition called Cardiff's Century. Both exhibitions play strongly on the telling of Cardiff people's stories.



Illustration 1: The Peterson family with their father's Lonsdale belt at the Cardiff's Century exhibition.



Illustration 2: Hands on activities at the Cardiff's Century exhibition.

The future advantage of this exhibition programme is that it puts a public face on the Project, as well as resulting in short-term profile raising. We are also taking the opportunity to find out more about our visitors and their thoughts about the current exhibition and future content for a museum of Cardiff. For the second exhibition we have also added an education pack, to target a valuable visitor group that we did not have the time to cater for in the first exhibition.

The second strand follows on from the first, in that it has been incorporated into the current exhibition. The Museum Project has been working in association with BBC Wales and their Capture Wales team, the first time that the team has worked with a museum organisation. The Capture Wales team run digital and radio story workshops. People from all walks of life come together to tell their story, with the help of computers, scanners, digital cameras and editing software. Using photographs from their family albums, favourite possessions, even long lost treasures from their loft, they learn to craft their scripts, record their voices, lay down music and edit still images and video. For the Cardiff's Century exhibition, and for any future use that we may have, we drew up an agreement which allowed me to request that they target people who had stories to tell about Cardiff, loosely fitting in with the exhibition's themes. These workshops resulted in ten digital and ten radio stories which are available to hear and



Illustration 3: Radio Stories in the Cardiff's Century exhibition.

watch in the gallery.

They help to further emphasise the Project's commitment to telling Cardiff people's stories in a future museum, as well as adding a new dimension to the current exhibition.

Finally, a third strand of work for looking to the future of the Project is the development of community archives. Community archives, in this case using Comma software, are computer archives of scanned photographs, ephemera and stories, both written and oral. There is even the function to add film footage. Again, this is another partnership project, this time with the Glamorgan Record Office and funded by Inspiring Learning grants from CyMAL. The project's title is One City, Many Voices, and is comprised of two elements. Firstly, there was the creation of a 'city' archive, One City, which resulted in a database of over one hundred images from existing archives within Cardiff Council and Glamorgan Record Office. The images were selected to reflect the 'event' theme of Cardiff 2005. The database currently sits within the exhibition gallery, but can also be shown on a laptop computer. Its primary function is to demonstrate the strengths of the software that it uses, to show how it can be used to create individual community archives. It has been shown to various community groups in order to generate interest in the next phase: Many Voices. It is hoped that in phase two, which commences in August 2005, we will be successfully piloting the software within community groups, with the support of an officer. One of the motivations for the Museum Project's involvement in the community archives project, is that I feel, while not being able to build a tangible collection that will be able to tell the stories of Cardiff people, we can begin to collect intangibly, or virtually. This is the category into which the digital and radio stories fall too. If the Museum Project can encourage and nurture grass-roots recording of communities' histories, then there may well be a fantastic resource to return to in the future for museum content. I am hoping that, if the community archive ethos of community self-selection is followed, then we really could have an idea of what the various communities, of both interest and geography, consider important enough to record and preserve, thus pointing the way forward for a city museum.

In addition, what all three of these strands allow us to do is establish relationships, involvement and interaction.

Key to the development of the Project is the establishment of relationships with other attractions as well, a process that is already in motion. Not only will this enable us to work with other collections and expertise, but it will mean that duplication is prevented. It is important to provide something for Cardiff that is relevant to the community, yet fresh in approach. The plan is to 'dovetail' with other museums and attractions, to provide the best and most comprehensive experience for everybody, yet to acknowledge where other sites can "do it better". For example, Cardiff Castle has Roman and Norman ruins on site, therefore it will be in a better position in its new interpretation centre to cover those periods of Cardiff's history. Butetown History and Arts Centre has great collections of photographs and oral histories, and is well placed within its community to collect and share these collections. It will also be important to liaise with the Valleys and to recognise the entwined relationship Cardiff has with them.

So, to the future. I personally advocate the progressive growth model followed by a local science centre, Techniquet, which started life in an empty gas show room, a model also recommended in the feasibility study. This would allow the Museum to establish strong roots and to consolidate its position as a hub of Cardiff's history. It would allow for the development of a decent collection and facilities. In addition it would allow for the targeted collection of those stories and memories that are going to breathe life into the Museum's presentation. It will also allow for a groundswell of support, which is already there, to develop and carry weight with the powers that be.

2005 is a crucial year for the Project. Four years' worth of funding has been received by CyMAL and CMW for the feasibility study and my post. This commitment to pump-priming will come to an end in March 2006. The Council will need to face up to some of the challenges identified here, and I hope, embrace the idea of what a twenty-first century museum still has to offer to both its residents and the tourist market in Cardiff. It is worth noting that I sit within the Marketing and Tourism department, and the focus on tourism is significant to the persuasive element of our cause. However, I am in no doubt that we have to offer ownership of the Museum and its content first and foremost to Cardiffians, and the tourists will follow. With changes to the National Lottery and the possible effect of the Olympic bid, the pressures on external funding will become greater for projects like ours, but ultimately it will be the Council's commitment to revenue funding that will ensure the successful outcome of their ambition.

I believe that Cardiff can support a Museum of itself at this stage in its history. It is a forward looking city with big ambitions, 'Europe's youngest capital', yet its residents want to consolidate and record their past experiences, to create a sense of place, that, to some extent has been lost through its regeneration. If Cardiff is brave enough it can create something really successful out of nothing.

The views expressed in this paper are the author's alone.

Notes

1. Enriching Lives, Creating modern and sustainable museum services for the 21st century. GLLAM, March 2004.

Relocation and Rationalisation: The Merging of a Designated Collection at the Regional Resource Centre

Graeme Meggeson

In recent years there has been a growing concern within the museum industry regarding the value placed upon collections. Many commentators have argued that since the 1980s museums have been forced to become financially viable as a result of Conservative governmental policy. This prompted museums to rethink their priorities and led to an increase in projects focusing on education and access. While such areas are indeed highly important in modern museum management, statistical information highlighting problems such as documentation backlogs could be said to lend credence to popular concerns for museum collections. For example, in October 2003 South East Museum Libraries and Archives Council's Standards and Stewardship Team commissioned a research project to look at the scale of the region's documentation records. Their findings included a statement suggesting that 'significant cataloguing backlogs are associated with too many important collections'. Furthermore a report published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 1999 claimed that in the West Midlands alone, out of 160 museums surveyed, 85 of them, or 65%, had 'substantial documentation backlogs'.

As a result of such findings museum bodies and government departments have been developing policies aimed at rectifying this situation. Documents such as *Collections for the Future*, a Museums Association project aimed at directing museums towards placing their objects in a more prominent role, have gone a long way towards reshaping many museums' attitudes towards their collections. One of the key elements of this document was a suggestion that museums should, if possible, implement projects to share collections or rather, that 'museums should find ways to collaborate more closely' in order to make better and more substantial use of their objects.

The Regional Resource Centre: Prioritising and Using Collections

The Regional Resource Centre (RRC) project is a collaborative effort between Tyne and Wear Museums and Beamish, The North of England Open Air Museum, which has been partly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It will provide a highly sophisticated and accessible facility for both institutions, as well as many other regional museums, to store objects and provide access to their collections. Indeed one of the key statements within the provisional application for this project identified the importance of providing support for 'smaller heritage organisations by providing safe storage'. The RRC hopes to follow in the footsteps of a previous regional sharing initiative, the Regional Museum Store, and expects to take the idea of regional sharing of collections even further, providing greater access to objects that otherwise would have remained largely unused and unseen.

Collections for the Future highlights many facts about the state of collections and collecting in modern museums. However, it could be suggested that one of the most troubling areas of the paper was the Museums Association's inference that,

'Too many collections are unused or are effectively unusable at the present time; not displayed, researched or documented in accessible ways'.

Initiatives such as the RRC project, as well as other major schemes, for example the establishment of The Great North Museum in Newcastle, have at their core the fun-

damental desire to improve access and research into their collections.

The overall aim of the Regional Resource Centre is to develop an existing relationship between Tyne and Wear Museums and Beamish in order to allow the sharing of designated collections under one roof. While there are many reasons behind the project, such as improving access to collections and in some cases, providing better storage to alleviate conservation concerns, the idea underpinning the whole project is to create a varied collection of objects that is both regionally important and widely accessible. While the vast majority of the objects to be housed within the RRC will indeed belong to either Tyne and Wear Museums or Beamish, many other local museums will be able to retain objects within the store. A variety of methods can be used here; interested museums can apply for storage space to house their collections with priority being given to those needing relocating for conservation reasons. For example the RRC has agreed to house the lifeboat from the Grace Darling Lifeboat Museum while the building is closed for refurbishment, thus offering the opportunity for continued display of a regionally important object, albeit in a restricted sense. In addition to the main storage areas, local museums can also apply for use of the project's innovative 'Heritage Cubes', which are large glass cases housed within the store. The 'Heritage Cubes' are designed specifically with smaller museums in mind and although they are somewhat limited in terms of space, they offer an excellent opportunity for small local institutions to contribute to a nationally recognised regional sharing scheme. This has proved to be highly popular among small local interest groups within the area and several cubes have already been allocated to a number of local groups including regional police and gardening societies.

Rationalisation at The Discovery Museum

While the necessity for improved storage and regional merging of collections is an aim shared by both partners, rationalisation is a further objective, relevant to The Discovery Museum specifically. Again this is linked to the Collections for the Future report, which suggests that 'collaboration will bring much greater focus to collecting' and that 'some objects might have a better and more productive life outside the museum world'. Therefore the project aims to provide a detailed rationalisation system whereby certain areas of the collection are categorised as possible targets for disposal. At this point however it should be made clear that the policies regarding rationalisation within the institutions involved, remain independent and are in many ways quite distinct. Beamish is different to other museums in the area, in that as a living history museum it requires a much larger collection of duplicate or similar objects and as a result cannot implement large scale rationalisation within its own collection. However, while the acquisition policies of both institutions remain independent, it is likely that there will be a small degree of similarity in areas common to both museums such as domestic technology and in particular typewriters and sewing machines. As a result the rationalisation system at The Discovery Museum in particular, uses the collection policies of both Tyne and Wear Museums and Beamish to avoid unnecessary duplication within both their own collection and the RRC as a whole. The main rationale behind this aspect of the project is to improve the regional relevance of the collections based at the RRC by removing items that hold no significance to this region. By doing so both partners hope to increase the accessibility of the collection and thus improve its relevance to local history groups and museums as well as the local community. Such a system is not without precedent in this kind of project. Throughout the development of the Regional Museum Store at Beamish a number of ship engines were rationalised due to a lack of regional relevance, thus making room for more regionally important collections to be opened to the public. A similar outcome is sought within this project where the capacity for wide scale rationalisation will make

valuable space available so many other museums can benefit.

Supporting Access Through Collections

Although this project has at its heart the fundamental desire to improve the conditions in which the North Eastern museum collections are kept, it also recognises the contemporary necessity for accessibility and the museum's role as an educational institution. For this reason a formal access team will be established at the Regional Resource Centre to deliver programmes to the public. Not only will this access team provide advisory sessions, educational activities and guided tours within the stores themselves, they will also spearhead the additional creation of a Collections Room within the store itself. The aim of this room is to encourage local groups to visit the store to examine and research the collections. This will be supported by the development of an extensive online database for many of the objects housed within the store. The Collections Room will be open to both institutions and groups who have their own objects housed within the store, as well as to the public, thus creating an ideal opportunity for those people interested in local history to begin or continue research projects as well as providing a safe and secure area for educational activities.

Throughout the course of the project the team at The Discovery Museum have been involved in a number of projects that will benefit both the RRC and The Discovery Museum itself. A large-scale scheme of documentation and digitisation has been the main body of work undertaken throughout the move. Not only will this improve the standard of recorded information and thus greatly enhance the potential for object based research at the store itself, it will also augment the quality of the in-house documentation at the Museum. Furthermore approximately two hundred objects have been selected for inclusion on a specialised website and will appear online as digital images alongside object specific captions written by the team. This endeavour is focused upon improving both documentation and expanding access to include national and international targets.

As the RRC has developed, the positive outcomes bear testament to the fact that all institutions involved have fulfilled the primary aims laid out at the inception of the project. The North East Region now has a state of the art storage facility which not only provides optimum environmental conditions for the objects it houses, but also maintains positive regional development, keeping the collections relevant to North Eastern heritage. The whole project has served to benefit several aspects of museum management; documentation backlogs have been reduced, objects have received the appropriate conservation and public access to local history has been heightened. Visitors now have the advantage of seeing objects that have previously been hidden and unused. The North Eastern model of prioritising collections therefore, is working proof that far from being separate and detached, access can be used to support and enhance museum collections rather than replace them as priority projects.

Acknowledgments

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Exploring 20th Century London project – A personal view

Fiona Orsini

This article explains the background, contents and progress so far of the Exploring 20th Century London project. At the time of writing, the project is in its pilot phase and still has a further six months of this initial phase before being launched. As one of the project assistants, my aim is to give an overview of what the project is about and what the project aims to achieve. I shall also use examples and give my personal perspective on what has been learnt so far and the issues and questions that the project has raised.

Background

Exploring 20th Century London project is a partnership project, funded by The London Hub and the Designation Challenge Fund (DCF) which is administered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). The project's aim is to create an online learning resource which uses museum collections to allow the public to find out about twentieth century London. The website is made up of collection records which have shared themes and standards but which come from a number of museums' databases. Fundamental to the project is that the resource is collections-focused and object-focused, using museum items as a starting point to explore and learn more about London during the twentieth century. It also allows us to make connections between collections to gain a broader understanding of the human stories behind the objects.

Exploring 20th Century London is a partnership project to encourage collaboration between London museums, an area that both the MLA and The Hub are eager to foster. The two primary partner museums are The Museum of London (MoL) and London's Transport Museum (LTM). Together, they are contributing a total of 9,000 collection records. There are also three other additional partners who are joining the project at this pilot phase; the Geffrye Museum, the Jewish Museum and Croydon Museum. Together, they are adding a further 3,000 records. If the pilot is successful Exploring 20th Century London will not only be developed further with additional partner museums but will also act as a role model for future collaborative Hub projects within the London region.

The key aims of the project are as follows:

- To increase public awareness of twentieth century London
 - To extend the knowledge of twentieth century collections
 - Development of information systems
 - Provide a best practice model for collaboration between designated collections and Hubs
 - Further the strategic aims of the partners and the Hub
- (MoL, 2004)

Timetable and Structure

Exploring 20th Century London was planned in 2003 and submitted for DCF funding in December of that year. Work began in earnest in April 2004 with the further development of the concept and consultations with the primary partner museums. During October 2004, evaluation was carried out with the target audiences to test the aims and in January 2005, nine project assistants were recruited to work across the

two museum sites. Currently, the assistants are due to finish in January. The first phase of the website is due to be completed by March 2006.

Five of the nine project assistants are located at the Museum of London and four are based at London's Transport Museum. All are working directly with specific collections: for example, I am based at London's Transport Museum and working with the Museum's 3D collection. However, the project is led and managed by the Information Resources Section at the Museum of London and all the project assistants are employed by this museum. The project involves other museum staff at both sites: including curatorial, collections care, IT and access & learning staff. Furthermore, at least one member of core staff from each of the additional partner museums is dedicated to the project.

Aims and Evaluation

- At the beginning of the project five main user groups were identified, here listed in order of priority: adult learners, adult learners non-specialist, students in higher and further education, school pupils Key Stage 2/3 and museum professionals. A number of learning outcomes were also identified:
- A greater awareness of how London has developed in the twentieth century in terms of its cultural diversity
- A greater awareness of how technology has changed London and Londoners' lives in the twentieth century
- An increased understanding of how people's lives changed during the twentieth century
- An increased curiosity about London's twentieth century history and a desire to find out more
- A greater awareness of the rich and diverse nature of the museums' twentieth century collections
(MoL, 2004)

These aims and outcomes were tested through focus groups evaluation with three distinct audiences: families (adults and children aged 7-14 years), adults with specialist interests and adults with general interests. Points explored included: general use of the web, the 'look and feel' of websites, possible additional features, the contents of the 'Exploring' website, images and information and searching methods. A mock up of text and image was also presented. (Boyd & James, 2004)

Partly as a result of issues thrown up by the evaluation it was decided to create a dedicated children's site which will target the requirements of Key Stage 2/3 age groups. It was also decided to hold a more specialist focus group to 'test the appropriateness of the project's approach with regards to representing cultural diversity on the Exploring 20th Century London website' (Khanna, 2005). This group raised a number of important issues:

- How to present what exists in the collection in a way that will appeal and add to the experience of ethnic minority communities.
- The importance of generating specific themes for certain issues that are relevant to ethnic minorities and to the growth of London in the twentieth century, namely immigration.
- How to keep generating interest in the site from diverse audiences.
(Khanna, 2005)

As one member of this group remarked, 'what would be nice is if we made those connections that are often not in mainstream collections. The material is in the collections but often the connections are not made' (Khanna, 2005). All the points raised in the evaluations have been recognised as important in further informing the website contents and ongoing research. Further evaluation will be taking place at a

later stage in the project.

The Partners

The Museum of London is the world's largest urban history museum, holding some 1.1 millions objects. (MoL, 2004) Its collection of twentieth century material makes up the largest proportion of the collections. Amongst the many items, there is a large collection of the London-made Whitefriars Glass along with arguably one of the most important collections of Suffragette Movement material. Items relating to the White City Exhibitions, the 1948 Olympic Games, the London Blitz, The Festival of Britain and the Silver Jubilee along with others also exists. In photography, the entire photographic archive of Henry Grant is held, documenting social and educational issues in London and in costume, a large selection of fashionable dress is held with examples of designs from Norman Hartnell, Mary Quant, Biba and Vivienne Westward, but to name a few.

London's Transport Museum (LTM) preserves and displays important collections reflecting all aspects of the history of public transport in London (LTM, 2005). Some of the London Transport Museum's key items include Harry Beck's famous Underground map, the original artwork for The Tate by Tube poster, the B-type bus being the world's first mass-produced motorbus, a locomotive that operated on the Central & South London Railway, the first electric underground railway as well as various material showing the development of London Transport's famous roundel logo. The photographic collection reflects London's public transport history from the 1860s to the present day and the film and video archive has examples of staff training and public relations footage.

Benefits to the museums

There are many potential benefits for all the museums participating in the project. It will bring new research and further interpretative material to the collections. It will help with collection management and inform conservation needs. It will create new or enhanced content for future museum projects such as exhibitions and publications. It will also create contextual links relating items within and across separate collections. Records on the museums' collection management systems will be enhanced, providing accurate and up to date information about the items such as dates, maker's details, dimensions and materials. Through new photography or scanning, digital images will be created which can also be used for future projects. Finally, inclusion on the website will raise the profile of the museums' collections, highlighting any previously 'undiscovered' items.

Material Selected

Photograph: LTM



Illustration 1:
Albert R. Luxton

One of the criteria used to select items for the website has been the focus on human interest and the personal stories that can be drawn out of objects. These may derive from the donor, how the object was donated, who made or used it. It has thus been important to provide rich contextual information about the selected items in order to gain the best understanding of them. For example, Illustration 1 shows a photograph of Mr Albert R. Luxton, a bus driver in 1912. Illustrations 2 and 3 show two postcards which complete his story: one of a bus crash on Highgate Hill and the other of a large funeral procession. Mr Luxton was driving his B-type bus down Highgate Hill when his brakes failed. He realised that he could not stop and the bus was out of control and so the only way he was going to save his passengers was to deliberately crash into a lamp post. He was

Photograph: LTM

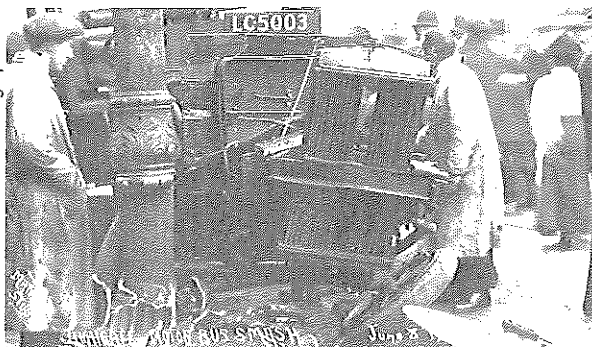


Illustration 2: bus crash on Highgate Hill

Illustration 3: Mr Luxton's funeral procession



Illustration 4: carriage door lock .

Photograph: LTM



killed but he saved his passengers onboard from what could have been a far worse accident. Inevitably he was hailed as a hero and his funeral procession became a huge event and was attended by hundreds, if not thousands.

Illustration 4 shows an example of an item selected for its eloquence about broader social contexts. Here we have a brass carriage door lock that was fitted to the

Metropolitan railway trains during the 1920s. It is inscribed with the words 'Live in Metro-Land'. The Metropolitan Railway Company instigated the development of the new housing in northwest London during the 1920s and 30s and invented the word 'Metro-land', referring to the area affected. This beautiful detailing on the carriage door handle is a subtle reminder to commuters that Metro-land is a good place to live and an example of how connected the development of the new suburbs was to the railways.

Website Structure

The physical appearance of the website is yet to be designed but a draft has been developed of the basic structure and the terms of navigation (see Illustration 5). The Homepage will include a general explanation of the project, who the contributing partners are and how the website works. There are four main search methods or points of entry. The timeline will show the twentieth century broken down into decades. Linked to this there will be short texts on the different decades, highlighting key events. The map of London will show the 32 London boroughs. These will be linked to short potted histories of the boroughs. The third method is a series of broad themes that have derived from the need for the site to provide a basic historical framework about London in the twentieth century. The records will be linked to the themes but the search can be narrowed down further by a choice of shorter but more specific information texts on subjects, events, people and organisations. Lastly, there

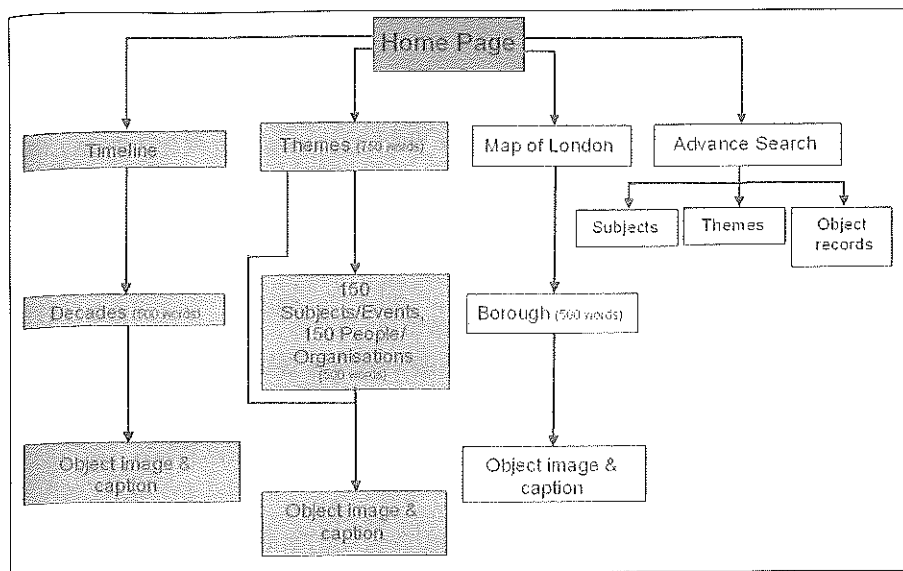


Illustration 5: Structure of the Explore 20th Century London

is the advance search or free text search which will allow the users to find out more by typing in key words or phrases. As the website progresses and additional partner museums contribute items, there will be the opportunity for further theme or information texts to be added.

Issues that have arisen

Copyright

The most problematic issue so far in the project has been the establishment and clearance of copyright, particularly for photographs. No funding has been allocated for copyright clearance, a fact which, in hindsight, was a naïve decision. The time implications were also underestimated. The process of tracing who the rights' holder is, sending out letters to explain the project and request their permission, followed by drawing up license agreements is all very time consuming and often complicated and confusing. Where copyright has been traced, rights' holders will be credited on the website, next to the image. In some instances, the rights' holder has agreed to the image being used on condition that their email address or website is listed so a link can be made. However, some copyright holders have not been traced. Here, the key point is to demonstrate due diligence in trying to trace copyright holders. It is also important to keep good documentation, in case of future challenges.

Cross-site Management

The second big issue has been the logistics of managing such a large and complex project across two different museum sites. Between the two museums there were fundamental differences in staff terms and conditions, collection organisation, curatorial procedures, collection management systems and IT systems. On top of this, there is also the management of the nine project assistants who are spread across the two sites. Clear and consistent communication is vital for the whole management process to work to avoid any misunderstandings or inefficient use of time.

Involvement of additional partners

As well as coordinating the two primary partner museums, the project team also has to consider the requirements of the additional partners; the Geffrye Museum, the Jewish Museum and Croydon Museum. All three have their own individual demands that they bring to the project and often have more pressing considerations that take priority and therefore hampers the partnership building process. Other limitations exist: for example, at Croydon Museum, much of the collection is not actually owned by the museum so copyright clearance becomes a more important issue. The Geffrye Museum, is in the process of replacing its collections' management system and this has brought further complications in the organisation and delivery of data. No extra funding is available to help with these site specific problems, and this may inhibit the ability of future partners to join the website, particularly for smaller museums who may not have the funds or resources to allow them to commit to such a project.

Needs of stakeholders and funders

One factor dictating the progress of the project is the demands of funders and stakeholders, in this case the DCF fund and the London Hub, which is of course funded by Renaissance in the Regions. Exploring 20th Century London has been nominated by the MLA as its flagship project for the Hub and therefore certain expectations are required of the project. The emphasis of the Hub has been on museums but MLA are now keen to involve archives and libraries. This will have to be considered as the website grows and additional partners come onboard. Furthermore, the MLA have requested that the website is linked to the People's Network Service, a national initiative to provide the internet within libraries to allow the public access to a wide range of educational resources and databases. This has had huge and unforeseen technical implications for the project.

Levels of Research

In the project planning stage, it was thought that enhancing the existing records would enable the project assistants to carry out thorough historical research about the items and their contexts. However, this underestimated the sheer amount of work involved in just getting some of the records up to the required standards. Many of the records only have the most basic of information so much of the project assistants' time has been spent on gathering inventory-level data.

So what have we learnt so far?

Shared skills and knowledge between sites

Despite the various problems, the partnership has yielded benefits. Through the collaboration of Museum of London (MoL) and London's Transport Museum (LTM), skills and experience have been shared, providing a broader knowledge base for the greater benefit of the project. For example, LTM have fed into the project their experience of developing and implementing their own information management system and MoL have contributed their expertise in oral history and the skills of their professional museum photographer. This has enabled LTM to create high quality digital images.

One of the most difficult aspects of working in partnership is that all the parties involved are working within their own collection management systems and when it comes to the process of transferring the data onto the website, nothing is consistent or compatible. However, through the completion of a Documentation Manual, attempts have been made to map the various fields over the two museum systems to enable the extraction of data to the website. There is also a shared Digitisation Policy that has been put together between the museums so all the new imaging that is carried out follows the same procedures and standards. As part of the digitizing process, images,

film and sound files are being created and delivered in non-proprietary formats where possible, which will enable long-term preservation.

Approaches to interpretation

The project has not only brought about a sharing of curatorial skills and experience but also different ways in which we view objects and approaches to how London's history is understood. This has been most prevalent in the decisions made over the themes and subject texts. It is interesting and useful to see how different museums approach the interpretation of their collections. By seeing objects in new contexts across both sites, interpretative approaches can be viewed in a new way. Examining and cross-referring over both collections yields the most interesting facts and stories, all of which help explore the breadth and depth of London's twentieth century history and its people.

It has become clear that since the launch of Exploring 20th Century London back in April 2004, some aspects of the project have changed according to the original plans and no doubt further changes will probably be made before the end of this initial pilot phase. Only time will tell. However, these changes are all part of the learning process and should be expected, particularly when working in partnership with different institutions. Exploring 20th Century London is an ambitious and complex project and there are inevitably going to be difficulties and issues. However, it hopes to be a working model for future partnership initiatives and is addressing the need to provide greater context and meaning to museum collections and well as better access for all.

If you would like to find out more about the project, you can visit the project's working website at www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk

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Telling The Story: On-site Care and Use of Collections

Julian Bell and Hannah Miller

Museum Overview

The Weald & Downland Open Air Museum set up in 1967 by Roy Armstrong, is the leading museum of historic timber framed buildings in the country, covering 50 acres of the South Downs in West Sussex.

It is a totally independent museum, receiving no regular external funds apart from special projects for which we apply to appropriate funding bodies.

It has re-erected 45 historic buildings on site, ranging in date from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries; all buildings have been rescued from destruction within its collecting area – not simply acquired to fill a gap in our collection. They include a farmhouse, market hall, school, medieval shop; carpenters, plumbers and brickmakers workshops; barns, granaries and tread wheel; working Tudor kitchen and a working water mill.

Some of the building interiors are furnished, while other remain bare in order to highlight their timber frame construction. The Museum has another fifteen dismantled buildings in store which have not as yet been erected.

In 2002 the new, award-winning Gridshell building was completed; this provides an extremely versatile conservation and workshop space above a purpose-built basement store which houses the bulk of the artefact collections. The artefact collections currently consists of around 11,000 items and are comprised of building



Illustration 1: Museum Overview

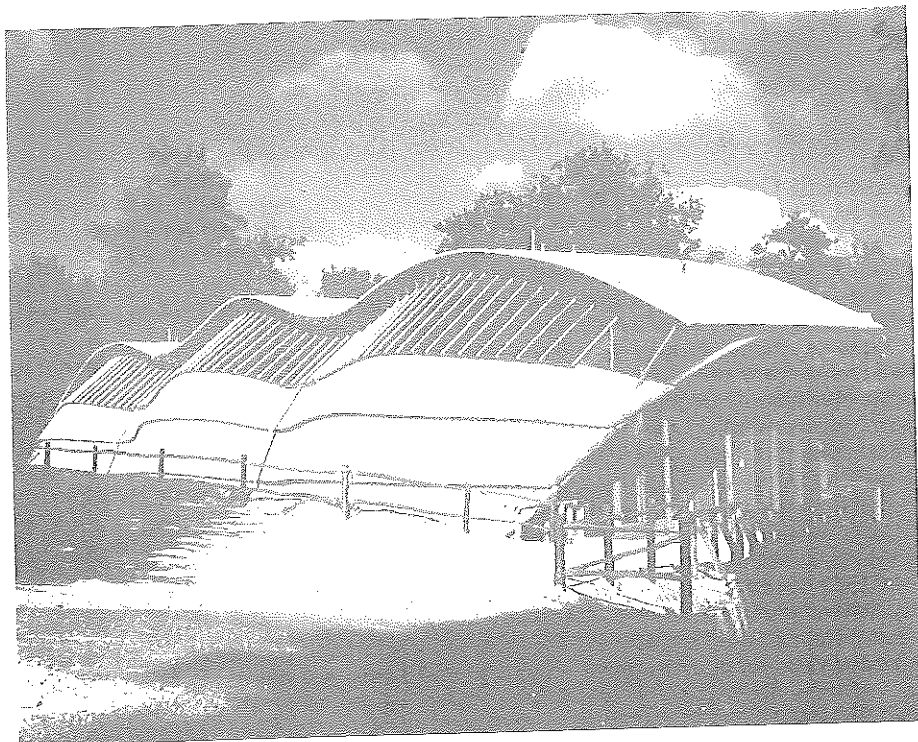


Illustration 2: Gridshell

parts and trades, agriculture, rural trades and crafts. Both the Buildings and Artefact collections have been Designated by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

To compliment a number of the buildings, the Museum has created seven historic, period gardens, growing produce appropriate to the time period which is then used in a variety of ways across the site.

The Museum is an important centre for rare and traditional breeds of farm livestock which include working horses and cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry. Traditional farming methods and equipment are employed wherever possible and the output from these activities are again used across the museum or sold to provide additional revenue.

There are regular demonstrations of traditional rural skills such as timber work, blacksmithing, leadwork, charcoal burning, and hurdle making; these activities are carried out either by the Museum's own, skilled staff or by external craftspeople who provide their services often free of charge.

The Museum holds many special events throughout the year such as a Rare Breeds Show, Heavy Horse Event, Food Fair, Sustainability Event and The Wood Show. It also acts as a venue for many smaller activities such as open-air plays and concerts, and meetings and parties of external organisations.

There is a huge programme of educational courses covering a wide variety of subject matter the pinnacle of which is the MSc in Timber Building Conservation which is run in conjunction with Bournemouth University.

As an example, throughout 2005, there are over 100 other courses being held covering building conservation, the use of traditional materials, traditional rural trades and crafts.

Interpretation

'The purpose of the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum is to stimulate public interest in and promote the preservation of buildings of architectural or historical interest and to stimulate public interest in ancient crafts, trades and manufactures'
Dr Roy Armstrong 1968

This statement holds true today and was included as the statement of purpose in the Museum's Forward Plan published in 2003. However our outlook has expanded since 1968 and interpretation has increasingly focused on the lives of the people who lived and worked in the buildings. Frequently asked questions from our visitors are 'who lived here?' and 'what did they do?'. To help us answer these questions we are about to start a two-year project with PhD History students from Reading University focusing on building a picture of the type of people who lived in our buildings.

Until 2005 there was no interpretation department at the Museum. That is not to say that there had been no interpretation at the Museum for the previous 35 years - far from it. But creating a department formalised a process that had been happening all over the Museum, to varying degrees, for years. From the time our first building from Winkhurst was erected on site to our schools' workshops, interpretation has been a continually evolving process at the Museum.

Authenticity is the key to everything we strive to do at the Museum - the process is as important as the result. We are not trying to create an illusion of the rural idyll but interpret the processes, crafts and daily lives of the people who lived and worked in the Weald & Downland region - warts and all.

Person-to-person interpretation is key to our interpretation policy on site - whether stewarding the buildings, running schools workshops or leading guided walks.

Replica period clothing is currently worn for specific activities and events by staff and volunteers doing third person rather than first person interpretation. With 45 exhibit buildings across our site spanning seven centuries we have not developed a policy of period clothing being worn by everyone working on site. There are a number of reasons for this including cost and logistics but principally because we did not want to create a jumbled 're-enactment playground' feel to the Museum site.



Illustration 3: Winkhurst

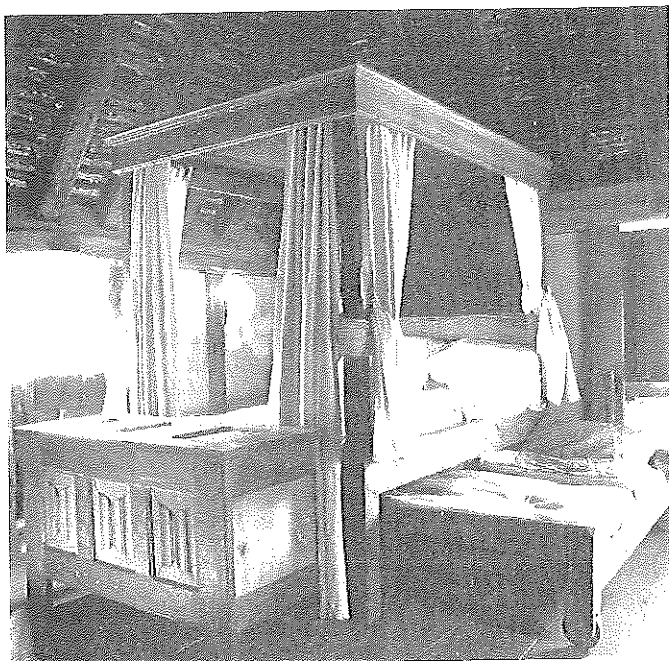


Illustration 4: Bayleaf

Our Wealden timber frame Hall-house Bayleaf was a groundbreaking project back in 1989. It was interpreted and furnished to a particular period - 1540. It proved to be a huge success with visitors and the process of furnishing and interpretation was a richly rewarding one for all the staff and volunteers involved. Six more buildings have been furnished and interpreted since then - more are planned. In conjunction with the buildings we have created period gardens that add to the interpretation and understanding of the lives of the buildings and people living in them at a particular time.

In 2005 the line separating collections' care and interpretation becomes increasingly blurred. A conventional out-of-hours approach to tasks and maintenance has disappeared. Our approach is as authentic as resources allow 24 hours a day and not merely during open hours. The processes we undertake as part of collections' care and interpretation using modern and period techniques are often extremely interesting for visitors to see and talk about. Whether we are demonstrating contemporary museum conservation techniques or period housekeeping within a domestic building every process can be shared with the visitors. Enabling the public to build up a true picture of what the Weald & Downland Museum is all about and also the processes involved in running a museum of this nature in an open-air setting.

Interpretation Team

Who Are They?

The Museum has a staff of 25 employees and 350 volunteers. This covers everyone from cleaners to the Museum Director. Each in their own way is an interpreter for the Museum simply by working here and dealing with the general public.

The interpretation team created in 2005 consists of the Head of Interpretation plus one full-time and one part-time domestic interpreter. We also have a part-time Woods

& Crafts interpreter. Working alongside the team we have a number of regular volunteers without whom we would not be able to run many of the projects and activities.

Volunteers obviously bring their own valuable experience to the Museum. Part of the challenge for the Museum is to make sure they are working on appropriate projects to make maximum use of their skills and interests and consequently that they are enjoying working here as a volunteer.

What Do They Do?

Demonstrate

This is a key part of interpretation at the Museum. There is no better way to understand a process than by seeing it demonstrated in front of you and ideally being able to have a go yourself. The Museum aims to achieve this with a team of staff and volunteers working across the site for example in our working Tudor Kitchen, our forge, working in the fields planting and harvesting the crops. Additionally we have a large number of independent demonstrators who visit the Museum to demonstrate throughout the year.

Provoke

The role of good Interpretation should be to provoke an emotional response from the visitor this in turn will ideally lead to an intellectual desire to discover more and as a Museum we aim to provide them with the resources and information to be able to do this. Our schools workshops for example encourage children to think and explore the many different aspects of the Museum. Many of the events we hold have a specific theme and explore the different layers within that theme. For example in May 2005 we held our first Olah Roma! Gypsy festival event which we interpreted as a celebration of traditional Gypsy and Traveller culture in the region. Gypsy and Traveller culture is a contentious with strong opinions and ideas on all sides. At the Museum we felt it was a traditional lifestyle, as much a part of the region's heritage as living in houses, which we would like to be interpreting.



Illustration 10: Forge

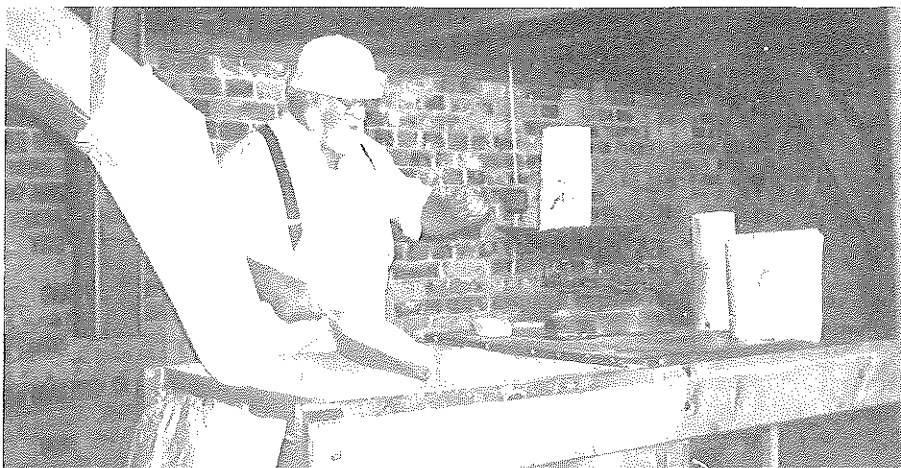


Illustration 6: Mill

Reveal

There are many layers of interpretation at the site. For example our period gardens are a rich resource on many levels. Aesthetically they add a whole new dimension to the exhibit buildings and are as valuable in interpreting the historical period of the building as the furnishings and replica items. Look deeper and other layers of information and experience reveal themselves. By examining the use of plants and herbs we can learn so much about their importance to the people living in the buildings not only as food and medicine but symbolically or religiously.

Communicate

What we are all about. Talking, sharing memories & information, music & stories, oral history and traditions.

Relate

All part of communicating. Helping to make the links with visitors, relating information and experience to the person standing in front of them. Assessing the needs of each visitor or group and being able to adapt the information or activity accordingly.

Listening and sharing

An important part of the whole experience for many visitors is being able to share their own experience, stories and information with people working at the Museum. Interpreters can learn a huge amount by fully engaging and listening to the visitors – the idea that they should simply pass on information parrot-fashion has never a practice of the Museum.

Where Do They Work?

- Working buildings and workshops: The Watermill, The Forge and barns.
- Domestic buildings: The Tudor kitchen, Victorian Whittaker's cottages.
- Offices & Shop: the important first point of contact for most visitors.
- Period Gardens: The Toll cottage, Walderton, Whittaker's cottages, Poplar cottage.
- Bayleaf Farmstead and Pendean Farmstead.
- Woodlands & Landscape.
- Stables & fields.



Illustration 7: Carpenter's Workshop

Care of Collections

The First 25 Years

The approaches to the treatment of the building and artefact collections were slightly different, however their way their practical care was administered ended up being quite similar.

As the buildings are on permanent display, and continue to be the main focus of the Museum, their care and upkeep was also on permanent display and so any deterioration would be instantly noticeable. However the Museum's philosophy regarding the buildings is such that we want them to look as authentic as possible, and so during their original lives, a certain level of wear and tear would be expected. This has led to many repairs and general care of the buildings occurring on quite a responsive basis, with the decision to repair taken at the director's discretion. This approach continues and runs alongside the long-term programme of regular repair and replacement of such vulnerable material as wattle and daub, floors, cladding and roofing.

The Museum's main artefact storage facility which was acquired by the Museum in 1980, was opened to the public on occasions, however being located off-site meant the collections were never fully in the public eye. The conditions in which items were stored at the off-site store was initially quite high, however as the collections grew, strain rapidly led to a downturn in conditions and accessibility.

Considering the limited resources available, care of the collections was also initially of a quite high standard with items usually receiving treatment at the point of acquisition, however as the strain upon the storage facilities began, so the care of the collections became much more difficult.

As the off-site storage conditions became more difficult, the greatest opportunity for items to receive care and maintenance was when artefacts were taken from store to be displayed on site (in set dressing, trade workshops or specific displays); items were often conserved before they were put out on show, however further, regular cleaning and treatment of items on display was rarely able to take place and tended to be quite irregular. The curator had responsibility for the task, although the limited resources and other duties demanding attention dictated that it was very difficult to implement any regular programme of care and maintenance.

As the artefacts on permanent display were largely restricted to very static usage -



Illustration 8: Swath Turner

traditional displays and set dressing - visitors could generally only get so close to the items and relatively few were physically used. A separate, smaller collection of items was, and still is, retained for use or demonstration purposes and these items would necessarily receive more regular care.

As the artefact collections further grew their storage conditions became relatively poorer and regular care and attention for the collections, extremely difficult. As storage conditions continued to become more difficult, in 1995 an idea was formulated for a new, on-site facility.

The Museum worked steadily towards the development of a new building and the stored collections made ready for their move; this proved very successful despite the extremely difficult conditions in which the work was completed. With the advent of the Designation Challenge Fund this idea became a reality in 2002

Gridshell and On

With the opening of the new Gridshell building, and the preparatory work carried out to the collections beforehand, the stored artefacts have been given a new lease of life; they are now well stored, well organised and regularly accessible to both staff and public alike.

As such, these stored collections and those displayed across the main site are able to be used much more; we also now tend to use them in a more active way and not limit them to largely static displays. Such uses include:

- education and schools
 - a number of loan boxes have been set up
 - quizzes and games for visiting groups
 - tours and demonstrations
- quizzes, special events, demonstrations etc
 - aimed at the visiting public rather than pre-booked groups
 - usually held in conjunction with other special events on site

- human interpretation of buildings
 - we are committed to providing a human presence in as many of our historic buildings as possible and for those stewards to be able to handle and use items on display, and for the public to do so too stables and agriculture
 - horse-drawn equipment used by the museums team of heavy horses

As a result, the artefacts involved require a much more planned, regular programme of care.

As collections' care and interpretation at the Museum are now largely linked together, we have taken the opportunity to make the care of the collections as open and accessible to the public as possible as it is an important form of interpretation in itself. The way in which we now approach the care of our artefact collections varies somewhat depending upon their size and potential use; this can most easily be demonstrated by separating them into larger and smaller items.

Smaller Artefact Items

In those buildings which are regularly manned, the care of the interior and artefacts displayed are, where possible and appropriate carried out using materials and methods applicable to that time period, in order to form part of the interpretive activities of the building. Cleaning of the range in Whittaker's Cottage for example forms part of our Victorian Cleaning Session for school groups.

Many items however require a more sensitive approach, using modern techniques and materials; to this end, a specific conservation cleaning team has been set up to tackle those interiors and artefact displays not covered by the building stewards. The team is comprised largely of volunteers and is supervised and trained by the curatorial and interpretation departments; dedicated cleaning kits are available to the team members and a log book records what has been achieved and which areas require attention next. Although in existence for only a short period of time, the team is proving to be successful and certainly provides a platform for future artefact cleaning programmes.

Any items which are seen to be in need of further conservation are brought to the attention of the curatorial team who then treat the items as necessary.

Larger Artefact Items

With the appointment of a new stables' manager at the beginning of the year, horse-powered agricultural activity on site has increased immensely and likewise the numbers of horse-drawn collections items in use. Whilst undoubtedly excellent for the image of the Museum, interpretation and keeping alive endangered skills, using such a range of historic equipment brings to the fore the debate about actively using collection items for such benefits versus the wear and tear they suffer.

Having experienced both collections which remain untouched in store, and items which are used on a regular basis, my own personal opinion is that those which are used, do suffer some wear, however the benefits of regular care and maintenance which they receive in order to keep them in a sound working state, far outweigh the infrequent wear and damage.

Our own set of circumstances and limited resources dictate that our larger collection items cannot all receive regular care and maintenance, which over the years has left many in poor condition; items which we do use are carefully checked beforehand to determine their condition, operated only by suitable staff and given regular, agreed care and maintenance.

The Museum's larger items require somewhat different methods of care and conservation than the smaller artefacts, whether actually used or not. The treatment of

the more complex pieces tend to be individual projects in themselves and although part of the team's planned care programme, are dependent for work upon the available resources of the Museum.

We are also now just over one year into a Department of Children and Families funded project to improve conditions, document and conserve items at our off-site store for larger artefacts; this is a project which will address those problems associated with many years of poor storage and care, and provide a sound footing for future programmes of maintenance.

The Future

There has been a great deal of progress made in interpretation and collections care at the Museum over recent years. Together with key staff appointments in 2005 and ongoing projects, huge opportunities exist for further expanding the interpretive use of the Museum's collections and at the same time improving the standards of care to levels not previously experienced.

With interpretation and care of the collections becoming so inter-reliant, the development of one impacts upon the other; therefore with greater use of the artefact collections comes the necessity to maintain those items in good order. Similarly, expanding our programme of care and taking on new conservation projects makes it our duty to explain and make such work accessible to our visitors. As one now has a much more direct impact on the other, we cannot make changes in isolation; we may have the resources to expand our interpretive activities, however we must take account of the additional resources required to care and maintain the additional collection items used.

Interpretation and care of the Museum collections have a huge potential for expansion and improvement over the coming years. There is no shortage of creative ideas and projects and we are fortunate to have a group of dedicated staff and volunteers to help make these ideas become workable schemes. However there are always risks when implementing a successful programme of work; resources can become stretched, processes can become overcomplicated and individuals can lose their focus and motivation. This is very real risk in our case where material resources are limited and there is a very heavy reliance upon volunteer labour for the success of both interpretation and care of collections. As activities, ideas, collections care and maintenance increases our only restrictions are human resources and money.

Revamping the Power Hall – Interpretation and Presentation of Engines at The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester

Ruth Shuttleworth

The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester's (MSIM) Power Hall tells the story of power, from muscle, water and steam power to the internal combustion engine. With the assistance of a grant from the Wolfson Foundation the museum is currently revamping the Gallery. The work splits broadly into three areas: building work; access; and interpretation and display. This paper will focus on the interpretation of the exhibits with reference to the other two areas of work. It will include a discussion of the Museum's use of the 'Inspiring Learning For All' framework and evaluation so far.

The Museum of Science and Industry – An Introduction

The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester occupies the site of the first purpose-built passenger railway station in the world, the terminus for the Liverpool to Manchester Railway. The railway was launched in September 1830 and became a great success, soon carrying around a thousand passengers a day. In 1975 the station was closed by British Rail after 145 years of operation. It was bought by Greater Manchester Council in 1978 for a token cost of £1 and reopened to the public in 1983 as the Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry.

Today the site covers seven and a half acres and is comprised of five major buildings with galleries in each; the Main Building, Power Hall, Station Master's Building, 1830 Warehouse and the Air and Space gallery. Both the Station Master's Building and the 1830 Warehouse are Grade I listed, with the Power Hall and Main Building being Grade II listed.

The exhibitions tell the story of the history, science and industry of Manchester – the world's first industrial city. They include Manchester Science, the Museum's most recently opened gallery, and Xperiment. The Main Building also contains the Collections Centre, developed to give greater access to the collections, where visitors can see around a third of the Museum's reserve objects and use the Museum's Archive and accompanying Study Area.

The Power Hall – An overview

The Power Hall is one of the Museum's most popular galleries. The exhibits aim to tell the story of power from muscle, water and steam to the internal combustion engine. A major part of its appeal to visitors is the demonstration of many of the engines on a daily basis, steam being provided by a modern boiler in the Main Building. The story begins with a display of an eighteenth century horse gin which was used to lift coal in a colliery near Wakefield – this is the main exhibit in the Gallery's muscle power section. The start of steam power is marked with a replica of a 1712 Thomas Newcomen steam engine, with the steam story continuing through displays including horizontal textile mill engines and smaller engines, which were used in workhouses and factories.

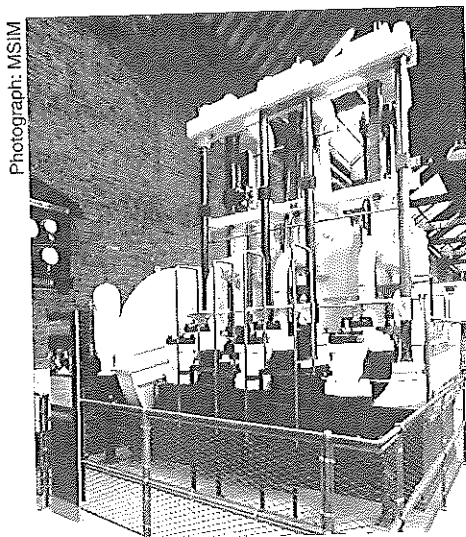
The internal combustion display begins with a replica of the Otto Four Stroke Gas Engine, the only such working replica in the world, built by Museum staff in 1982. Otto's engine was the forerunner to the modern car engine. The display also includes engines running on diesel, oil and hot air, many of which are also demonstrated.

Hydraulic power was a major power source in Manchester and other major cities. The system operated from the 1890s in Manchester, eventually ceasing operation in the 1970s. The hydraulic system was used for a wide variety of tasks, such as raising the curtain at the opera house and powering the town hall clock.

The Power Hall also holds the Museum's rail collection. Key exhibits include a Beyer Garratt articulated South African locomotive which dominates the one side of the Gallery.

The History of the Power Hall Building

The current building was built in 1855 as a transit shed, replacing the original 1830 structure. It was used for the transfer of perishable goods from rail wagons to horse drawn carts.



Photograph: MSIM

The Power Hall was the first major gallery to open to the public in September 1983. The most recent addition to the gallery has been a Galloways Pumping Engine which was installed in 2002 (Illustration 1). This used to work along side five other engines in one of Manchester's hydraulic pumping stations which is now Manchester's People's History Museum.

The Power Hall Team

The Power Hall is the main responsibility of three key departments:

- Collections
- Public Programmes
- Technical Services

Collections are responsible for the wellbeing and interpretation of the objects within the Hall. If there are concerns over the condition of a particular working

Illustration 1: Hydraulic Pumping Engine.

engine, it is the responsibility of the key Curator and the Collections Care Officer to ensure its operation does not continue until any problem is rectified. Public Programmes members are present in the Hall every day operating the various engines and running a series of events which take place next to key exhibits. Technical Services maintain the engines, ensuring their safe operation, both for the engines themselves and staff and visitors. Some overlap does exist between the responsibilities of the different departments, however, the departments are in constant communication to ensure the smooth running of the gallery.

The Power Hall Experience

A visitor to the Gallery can learn about the exhibits in various ways:

- Text panels
- Presenters on gallery
- Various events

The Power Hall text panels offer two levels of information. The top of the panel contains any technical data available about the engine, such as the stroke of the piston, horsepower and rpm. Beneath this is more general text which gives a context for the engine or exhibit, explaining its use and background. This text is not normally

more than some 70 words long.

In offering both sets of information it is hoped that the panels cater for both those with prior knowledge and those who are completely unfamiliar with the subject and wish to find out more.

Presenters are on gallery start up and operate the working engines and also circulate around the Power Hall to be on hand for any visitor queries. They present various events in the Hall based on several exhibits. Some of these events are costumed interpretation, such as an event which takes place next to the 1830 Beam Engine, in which a member of the team takes on the role of James Watt. 'Watt' explains his significant improvements to the Newcomen steam engine, his own improved engines being much more successful (Illustration 2).



Photograph: MSIM

Illustration 2: One of the costumed events performed by Public Programmes.

Policies and Procedures

The running of historic engines requires strict procedures and there a several key documents and procedures which have to be followed. All of the Museum's working objects are covered by the Operation of Objects Policy. The key points are that an object will not be operated if it is the only such item in a British Museum collection or if it is the oldest or best preserved of its kind in a British Museum, and that the operation of an object must demonstrably add to the viewer's understanding of the object.

Every engine within the Power Hall has an engine manual detailing such things as the starting up and stopping procedures, and oiling routines. These manuals are used to train new staff on the Presenters' team, and are due to be updated. The updated manuals will take into account new risk assessments recently carried out on every exhibit in

the Power Hall. Health and safety is a main issue within the Gallery and staff have been trained to carry out risk assessments. Working engines provide their own set of problems as health and safety requirements were much more lenient during their working lives compared with what is acceptable today, i.e workers climbing on engines to top up oil, move flywheels into position etc.

The 'Revamp' Project

The revamping of the Power Hall has been made possible through a grant of £148,000 from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)/Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund. £100,000 has also been allocated from the Museum's reserves. The Wolfson Fund provide money primarily for structural improvements, but additional funding has allowed interpretation to be addressed as well. Furthermore, improvements to the physical structure of the building will add to the interpretation of the exhibits, as will be explained in more detail later.

The Development of the Brief

Previous applications had been made for the redevelopment of the Power Hall, as

such earlier brief documents had been produced, meaning the development of the brief has been an ongoing process. With funding secured, two meeting groups were arranged. The Core Group involves those immediately involved with the Project, including representatives from Collections, Education and Learning, Design, Technical Services and Public Programmes. This group normally has monthly meetings. The Cluster Group involves representatives from other departments and meets on a less frequent basis, allowing other departments to be updated on developments and to feedback their comments.

The brief has also been informed by evaluation and the use of the 'Inspiring Learning for All' framework. The Core Group met to discuss generic learning outcomes (GLOs) for the Hall - what they considered were the key issues for the Gallery. The Power Hall project was the first gallery project to use the framework within the Museum. A set of GLOs was compiled, but it was agreed that these could not be finalised until visitor evaluation had been carried out to gauge the public's opinion. A sample of the GLOs follows:

Knowledge and Understanding: 'How an engine works' - to be addressed through graphics, the range of engines in the gallery and presentations.

Skills: 'Intellectual, social and communication skills' - to be addressed through gallery design and a multi-layered approach.

Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity: 'Enjoy a memorable experience' - to be addressed through display and operation of authentic exhibits in a multi-sensory environment.

Attitudes and Values: 'Appreciation of the industrial heritage of the Manchester region' - to be addressed through a display of engine makers' plates.

Activity, Behaviour & Progression: 'Encouraged to find out more about the topic and the rest of the Museum' - to be addressed through highlighting links to other galleries and the Collection Centre.

Many of the methods detailed to address the learning outcomes were already in place, but there was still room for improvement and some gaps were clearly identified, which will be discussed later.

Evaluation

The evaluation consisted of several different elements:

- General visitor exit survey
- Junior Board consultation
- Formal Education Advisory Group (FEAG) consultation
- Informal discussion with specialist groups

The visitor exit survey was compiled with direct reference to the Project's GLOs to enable a clearer analysis of results. The survey was piloted internally with new members of staff at the Museum to check for clarity and usability. Once assessed it was used with 50 visitors to the Gallery.

The Junior Board consultation involved consultation with five children on the Board. They were asked to walk around the Gallery and identify their likes and dislikes in the Power Hall, and were given a camera to record their decisions.

The FEAG members consisted of two primary teachers, two secondary teachers and two Local Education Authority Advisors. They were asked to do a similar exercise to that of the Junior Board after a short live interpretation presentation by a presenter as James Watt.

The informal discussions involved a presentation to the Museum Friends and volunteers, many of whom come from an engineering background. General comments were also sought from Rolls-Royce Heritage Trust members.

Evaluation Findings

A general summary of the evaluation is as follows:

Strengths

- Most people had a very positive experience
- Popularity of working engines
- Popularity of steam and smell
- Visitors mostly agreed with proposed GLOs

Weaknesses

- Need for clearer route through Gallery
- More hands-on activities
- Need to provide more information on exhibits – provide context
- Make it clearer where can find out more

The evaluation was extremely useful as it allowed us to confirm that the majority of our GLOs were on track and ensure that the brief reflected the main issues within the Power Hall.

Aims of the redevelopment work

The work as detailed in the brief consists of three main areas of work:

- Renovate/improve the building and space housing the collections/exhibits
- Improve displays and interpretation of the exhibits
- Improve access and facilities

Building Work

The building work involves several main tasks:

- Roof and gable repairs
- Floor resurfacing
- New track and ambient lighting
- Management of the environment

Over the years several of the skylights in the Gallery had become cracked, presenting a health and safety concern as well as issues over the care of the exhibits. Flooring within engine compounds was also showing its age and has already been replaced as part of the project. Lighting is another issue in desperate need of attention. Dark winter afternoons are a particular problem, as staff do not have enough light to safely operate the engines.

The management of the environment has been a major concern for some time. A decision was made as part of the Project to remove the vehicle and bike collection from the Power Hall into alternative accommodation. These objects are particularly vulnerable to the frequent changes in temperature in the Hall due to the use of steam. To deal with the worst of the problems of heat and humidity a new air handling system is being installed. This should greatly improve both the conditions for the remaining exhibits and the environment for staff and visitors. Action has been taken however to ensure that the system does not remove all of the steam from the Gallery, the steam and smell being so important for the multi-sensory gallery experience.

Display and Interpretation

The Project involves some new elements of display and interpretation, the main areas being:

- Creation of new entrance introduction/orientation displays
- Display of engine maker's plates

Photograph: MSIM

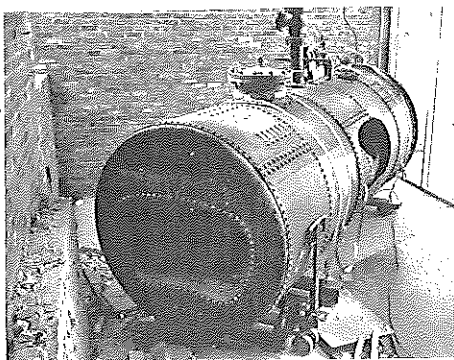


Illustration 3: The relocation of the Lancashire Boiler.

- Display linking engines with machines and finished products
- Display on local locomotives manufacture
- Provision of trails for visitor
- Provision of information sheets on gallery

Both visitor and staff evaluation highlighted the need for a clear introduction area in the Power Hall. The original layout offered two routes into the top of the Hall and visitors were drawn by the sight of engines working straight into steam power, thereby missing out the start of the story – Muscle Power. This has been addressed in two ways. Firstly

the entrance area has been reconfigured so that all visitors entering at this point go straight into Muscle Power. This involved moving the Hall's seven ton Lancashire Boiler to enable steps to be placed immediately next to the ramp which leads into Muscle Power (Illustration 3). Secondly a whole new introduction area will be created addressing key themes for the rest of the Gallery. These themes are:

Energy and Power

- Fuel
- Horsepower
- How engines work
- The Industrial Revolution

The themes will be explained in basic terms as the aim is to give a simple explanation to provide a context for the rest of the exhibits. The workings of a steam engine will be demonstrated through a brass cross-sectioned beam engine model (Illustration 4), which can be operated by visitors. Horsepower, a key concept through the Hall, will be explained with the use of an interactive.

Photograph: MSIM

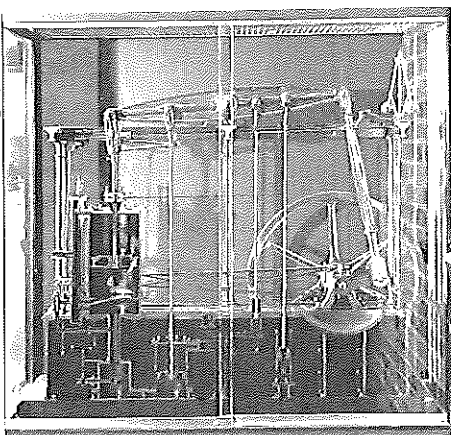


Illustration 4: Brass cross-sectioned beam engine model.

A timeline was discussed for the area, however after reconsideration it was felt that this might not be the best approach to setting engines in a timescale, as visitors would only see this information in this space. Instead, it was felt that different trails around the Gallery would be more beneficial, with visitors being able to follow symbols next to relevant exhibits. A new floor plan will also be provided, the Gallery not having one at present, which will include images of the exhibits on display.

In order to better illustrate the importance of the Manchester area, engine maker's plates will be redisplayed on a map graphic, showing the companies' locations and nature of their busi-

Photograph: MSIM

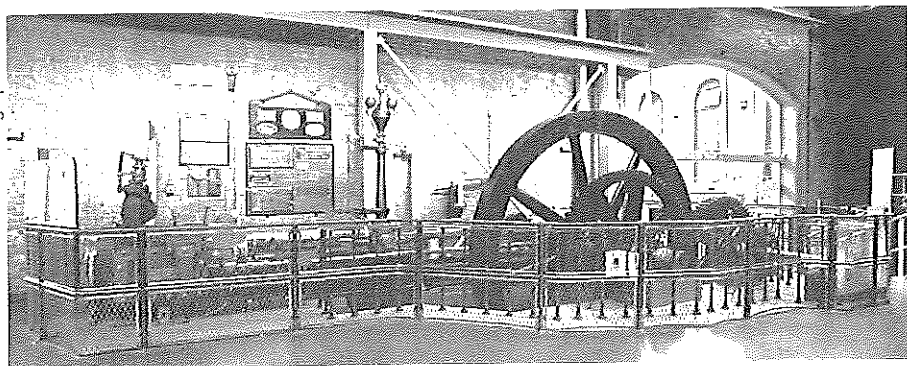


Illustration 5: The Durn Mill Engine.

ness. This spotlight on local industrial production will be continued with a new display on the local Beyer, Peacock firm who were well known for the locomotive manufacture. The Museum holds the Beyer, Peacock company archive and this fact will be advertised through both the use of images and plans from the Collection, and links in the text to the Archives in the Collections Centre for further information.

A key point raised through evaluation was the difficulty in imagining the engines in their original setting and confusion over their role in the manufacturing process. This will be addressed through a display next to the Hall's earliest textile mill engine (Illustration 5). The engine was used at Durn Mill in Littleborough by A & W Law who manufactured tartan cloth. Textile sample books from the mill will be reproduced on panels and film footage of a textile mill engine in action has been sourced to illustrate how the engines powered the looms in such industries. Visitors will also be encouraged to visit the Textiles Gallery to see such machinery being demonstrated.

Various audio visuals are proposed to go into the Gallery depending on final costings. The costumed interpretation of James Watt and his beam engine will be filmed and played on a large screen next to the beam itself, thereby allowing more visitors to experience the show. It is also planned to show footage of workers inside the Beyer Peacock factory producing locomotives as part of the Beyer Peacock display.

Finally information which is currently located in the Collections Centre concerning the engines will be made available on gallery in laminated information folders. These information sheets are A4 sized and offer more details on the exhibits. Other folders will also be produced holding large text versions of the panel text to increase access.

Access and Facilities

Access through the Power Hall will be improved through the extension of smooth pathways. Viewing of the rail collection will be enhanced with the installation of a new platform between the two rows of trains and carriages. Tired and damaged engine bases will be replaced to bring all exhibits up to the same standard.

Conclusion

The Power Hall is one of the Museum of Science & Industry's most popular galleries and it is hoped that the Project currently underway will enhance its appeal and enrich the visitors' experience as well as improving the conditions and interpretation of its well loved exhibits.

It's an Open and Shut Case:

A brief history of Reading Museum's loan service

Emma Lee

Loan services are currently enjoying a renaissance in this country, but the are by no means a new venture. The first loan services for schools were set up by Liverpool and Sheffield in the late 1800s. In Reading, the establishment of a loan service for schools in 1911 followed the founding of the Museum of Reading in 1879. Initially small, delivered on an informal basis, the loan service gradually developed and by 1964 was much larger and in its own premises. 1970 saw another site move and further expansion of the service to around 2000 collections of artefacts and framed pictures, covering all aspects of the school curriculum. The achievement of all this is made even more remarkable due to the lack of money available for packaging and interpretation at this time. In the early 1990s the service, like many others faced budget cuts and disbandment. Thanks to the then director, who recognised the huge importance and potential of loan services, Reading's survived. Key factors of location, object status, investment and team dynamics were vital to survival.

In line with the refurbishment of the Museum, the loan service was relocated there in 1996. A gallery called the Box Room was specially created to house the loan boxes. Divided into two, one side contains roller racking clearly visible from the public side which contains a wide range of objects suitable for handling and a macroscope for closer viewing. In this way the service became much better integrated into the Museum, turning it into an explicit rather than a discreet feature.

The decision to give objects in the loan service the same status as all other objects in the collection was made to preserve them from disposal. All disposals and transfer of objects have to be approved by the management team and subsequently, Reading Borough Council cabinet.

For many years there had been a lack of financial investment in packaging and interpretation, which was in stark contrast to the level of personal investment made by staff. Collections had been stored in old style suitcases for years, with good quality wooden boxes being gradually introduced while the service employed a qualified carpenter. In 1995, aluminium-faced transport cases began to be used as a preferred option for high standard packaging. Objects were prioritised according to their need to be repackaged, generally those which were archaeological.

The nature of the working relationships across the whole museum team, particularly between education and curatorial staff was and remains a huge factor in the success of the service. Such relationships forge strong understanding of the whole gamut of issues related to loaning museum objects to schools; from collection care to the suitability of objects as learning resources.

Over the past few years the loan boxes have been rationalised. Some have been removed because they were unsuitable. For example, poor copies of documents already held at the local record office and inadequate reproductions of well known paintings. In addition, there were many large scale models which posed health and safety issues for the carrier in terms of weight and size. Consequently, the service now comprises 1,536 high quality collections.

In 2002, the Museum started using a courier company to deliver and collect loan boxes from schools. This released key staff from the duty, enabling them to focus on the development of the service. The arrangement has worked well over the past three

years with the allocation of a specific driver, who over time has developed knowledge of the whole operation; from routes and routines, to the type of objects being loaned.

Most recently the Museum has successfully obtained Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF) to build on the work of previous years. Currently the loans team comprises of three staff who run all aspects of the service: Learning and Loans Officer, Collections Care Supervisor and Collections Care Officer. The £1 Million funding will enable the Museum to employ six new members of staff to carry out the essential tasks of repackaging, reinterpreting, documenting and marketing the service over the next four years.

Key factors in selecting material suitable for loan

Objects can be sourced from a number of areas:

- Existing loan collections due for repackaging sometimes contain too many objects. In most cases, teachers would prefer a minimum of 15 objects. Usually a collection with too many items can be repackaged into two collections
- Museum objects in store may be considered appropriate for loan
- New acquisitions, following the Museum's acquisition policy
- Objects from partner museums

Objects are assessed according to the following:

Health and Safety

Consideration must be given to any potential risk the object might pose to individuals handling it. If the risk cannot be removed through treatment of the object, or enclosing it within Perspex, it is deemed unsuitable for loan.

Weight

The Health and Safety Executive consider twenty-five kilograms to be a maximum weight for one person to lift. However, a limit of twelve to thirteen kilograms is considered to be a more appropriate figure for most people.

Size

Objects cannot exceed the largest box size of 450mm x 450mm x 300mm.

Object Care

Similarly, consideration must be given to the potential risk handling and exposure to environmental change might have on the object. If the risk cannot be removed, it is deemed unsuitable for handling. Loan boxes are also accompanied with notes on how to care for museum objects.

Uniqueness and importance

Objects are not suitable for use if they are rare, of high historical importance or high monetary value.

Collection Care

The Museum uses freelance conservators where required – usually for complex or specialist jobs. Over the past ten to fifteen years, Collections Care staff have developed their expertise through a combination of accrued experience and a wide variety of training courses in first line conservation. They carry out repairs of items in the loan service and in the galleries. The number of repairs required on objects that are loaned out over the course of a year are minimal. Staff monitor objects on a regular basis, make judgements about their continued suitability and withdraw them where necessary. The service operates on a half-termly basis, allowing six borrowing

periods of approximately four weeks, depending upon school term dates. Therefore, it is possible for object condition to be checked up to six times a year.

Recently the Textile Conservation Centre in Southampton advised a change the way that original costume is packaged. Plastic bags which are thought to transfer dust onto garments are being replaced with unbleached cotton bags made in a range of four sizes.

Packaging techniques and materials

In 1999, Reading Museum Service (RMS) made a successful bid to the (then) Department for Education and Employment for funding to evaluate how effectively the loans' service supports the process of learning from objects. One of the main objectives was to inform the development of twelve pilot loan boxes and displays in consultation with 24 schools. Data was collected through a combination of interviews with teachers and students, and observation of the use of loan boxes in the classroom.

The findings of the project led to the redesign of the loan boxes; the key features of which were to have fewer objects, more accessible accompanying notes and improved branding. The Museum committed to this new standard by setting up a rolling programme of repackaging existing collections.

New loan boxes have recently been created using objects from partner museums: Royal Borough Collection, Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre and Slough Museum. This increases opportunities for access to the partner museums' collections, and increases the number of popular boxes available for loan. All of the new boxes have been made to the new standard, with dual branding of both museums.

New metal cases

Four standard sizes of heavy-duty aluminium-clad cases with reinforced stacking corners are used. Standardised sizes enable easier storage and transportation. Aluminium branding plates, silk-screened with the Museum logo are riveted to the exterior of the lid. The cases are lined with LD45 black plastazote, which is bought in three standard thicknesses of 7, 14 and 28mm. Plastazote is a stable foam blown with an inert gas, therefore posing no risk of chemical reaction with the objects. The density of the material allows for cushioning against any sudden movement or impact, yet is dense enough to maintain its own shape under the weight of the objects contained within it.

Internal branding panels, painted in terracotta (one of the Museum's corporate colours) are silk-screened with the Museum logo and held in place with four leather straps and toggles. The purpose of the panel is to retain an A4 sized integrated display system, which can be set up by the user in a few minutes. This consists of three Perspex note holders and four hand-tightened hinges.

We provide information on the following:

- Object specific notes
- Care of museum collections
- Suggestions for using the display system

Perspex sandwiches

Perspex sandwiches were developed about ten years ago to protect small or vulnerable objects from handling, while allowing access to them in loan boxes. Objects are contained in plastazote and sandwiched between two Perspex blanks, which have been drilled and tapped. The whole sandwich is then held together with brass countersunk screws, which have been cut to the appropriate length.

Certain items, particularly jewellery, require a slightly different approach. These items are sewn onto a thin piece of Perspex (cut to the same size as the blanks)

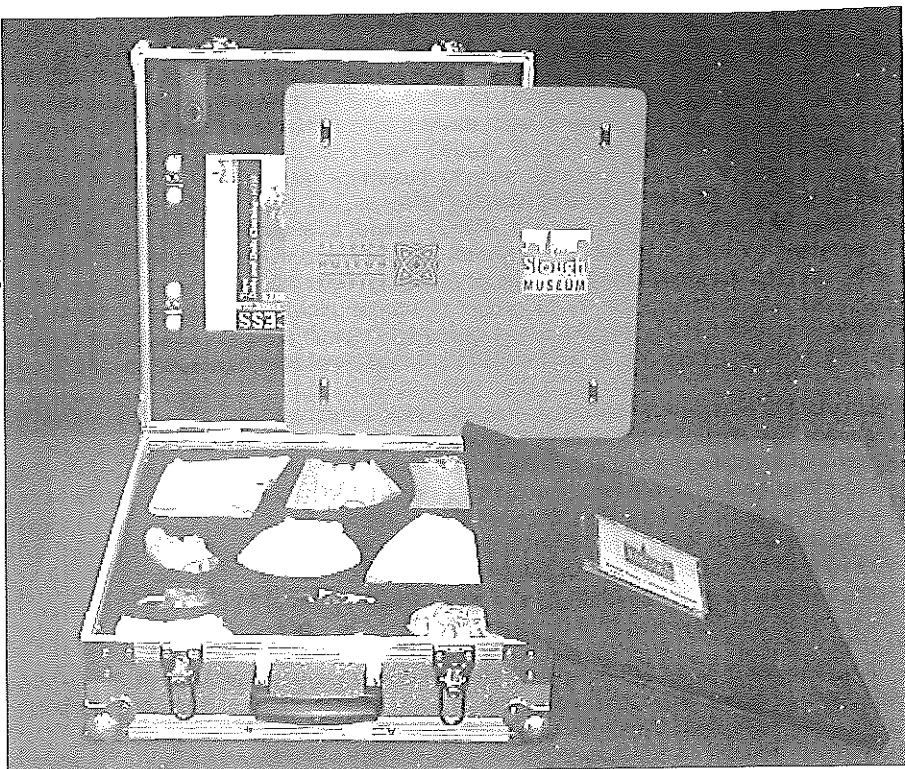


Illustration 1: One of the new loan boxes.

through small holes made in the Perspex with a hand drill. The Perspex and the object are then sandwiched between plastazote and the blanks. For the past three years, sandwich blanks have been manufactured by a local supplier, in five standard sizes. This method of production is more cost effective than in-house manufacture.

Retro-fitting older metal cases

Metal cases produced before 2001 require retro-fitting with branding plates and panels, as described earlier – this brings them into line with the new standard.

Wooden boxes

Wooden boxes were the next development after the original suitcases. These boxes were made to measure in house between 1970 and 1995 and are still in very good condition, providing a high standard of protection for the objects. To bring these boxes into line with the new standard, they require re-painting and re-branding (with self adhesive foil labels, rather than riveted on panels) and some repairs where necessary. In addition, any foams or packing materials are replaced with black plastazote. 75 boxes were updated in this way in Summer 2002.

Interpretive notes – what teachers want

The Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) research project described earlier

revealed further areas of improvement. Firstly, many teachers thought that it was unclear that the boxes came from the Museum due to a lack of obvious branding and corporate colour. Secondly, it was clear that having too many objects in a box was a disadvantage. Some of the boxes had up to thirty items which posed quite a challenge to pack away ready for collection. Thirdly, the quality of the accompanying interpretive information was generally considered to be poor. Most of the notes had been produced on a typewriter fifteen or more years ago and were written in an overly academic style. In some cases they had little object specific information but far too much background information. In addition the physical appearance of the notes was quite often dated and tatty. As a result, the notes were not easy for museum staff to change and were time consuming and uninviting for teachers and children to read.

The DfES project set the standard for future loan box development. Clear external and internal branding was added. The suggested optimum number of objects per box became ten – fifteen. In reality this has been subject to variation when repackaging existing collections, as each collection has to be assessed individually.

The new interpretive notes focussed on object specific information written in a conversational style that could be absorbed quickly by teachers, and also read by children with a reading age of ten. The layout and design of the notes produced during the project were created by an external designer, which brought a fresh and professional looking appearance. However, this was fairly costly especially if replacements were required. New notes produced as part of the HLF project will be researched, written and produced in-house, using a template created by the Museum's Exhibition Designer.

Documentation

In 1998 the Museum received funding to finance the development of a new collection management and booking system for the loan service, which would allow teachers to book loan boxes online. This was purpose built by ADLIB Information Systems, based on existing systems and procedures. The system was launched successfully in 2000, and online bookings now number a third of all bookings. The website displays images of one to three objects and a full list of contents. Developments over recent years have provided the opportunity to enter more information in the non-public side of the program about specific objects, including records of repair and conservation reports.

Working with partners

Over the past three years, RMS has successfully worked with local museums to increase access to their collections. So far three museums have selected objects from their collections to be put into loan boxes:

- The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Museum Collection
- The Berkshire Medical Heritage Centre
- Slough Museum

The loans team played a large part in the development of these partnerships. Members of the team visited partner museums and advised on the suitability of objects and popular themes they might connect to. Advice was also given on the level and amount of information required for interpretive notes. The partnerships have provided a great opportunity for RMS staff to develop close connections to other museums, and share expertise with each other. The Museum will be working with a further eighteen partner museums to create 100 new loan boxes on popular themes, during the course of the HLF project *Outside the Box*.

Suppliers and Costs

Contract out manufacture if more cost effective and design a small number of standard sizes

5 Star Cases	make boxes to our specification, 4 standard sizes £60 - £80 per box depending on quantity ordered
Kewell Converters	local supplier of LD45 Plastazote foam, three standard thicknesses of 7, 14 and 28mm £20 - £40 per 3x5 ft. sheet approximately £10 per box
Elgee Plastics	local supplier of Perspex and cutting, they make perspex sandwich blanks to our specification, 5 standard sizes, drilled, tapped and countersunk. We use long length 3mm diameter brass screws which we cut to size depending on the depth of the sandwich £3 - £8 per pair
Daniel Gray	local cabinet makers, they make wooden specimen boxes for displaying insects to our specification in two standard sizes, in mahogany £50 each. Also make internal branding panels in two standard sizes to fit the boxes, silk-screened with 1-2 logos £50 each
Higgins Engineering	Local engineering company, make blank metal external branding plates for the boxes £2 each
PME	Local machine engineering company, screen-print above plates with museum logo £1 per plate
Letraset	Suppliers of Letraset used to mark collection www.letraset.com numbers onto boxes (need to use matt fixing spray) £12.75 per sheet

Tools

Drill jigs for fitting internal and external branding plates to lids of boxes
 Rivet gun
 'Sabatier' kitchen knife
 Heavy weight steel 1 metre straight edge
 1 metre rule
 Right angle set square
 Chalk for marking
 Metal wad punchers
 Evo-stick PVA wood adhesive
 Weights or sand boxes
 Scalpel or craft knife
 Junior hacksaw
 Metal file
 Chisel
 Small desk mounted vice
 Perspex cutter
 Acrylic sheet heat bender
 Needle and cotton
 Ink, paraloid in acetone, brush & brush wash (acetone) for object marking
 HMG glue for repairs

'The Stuff of Memory': Object-Led Reminiscence

Fiona Ure

Introduction

The Gloucester House Project was a partnership project between Leicestershire Environment and Heritage Services and Age Concern, Melton Mowbray. The project was based around a series of object led reminiscence sessions with a group of older people with learning disabilities. It was designed to produce memory books and tapes, which would act as memory reservoirs for the future whilst giving the group members intimate access to museum objects.

The project also acted as a pilot scheme for Age Concern with a view to expanding the concept to other, similar groups in Leicestershire though not necessarily in conjunction with Leicestershire Environment and Heritage Services.

Project Aims

The project aims to run a series of reminiscence sessions using objects as memory triggers in order to produce a series of memory books, one for each participant, and a group book. It is hoped these books will then become reminiscence objects in their own right, an aid to future interactions with and within the group and a record of the life experiences of a group of people with learning impairment living in Leicestershire.

The project was also designed to provide intellectual and physical access to museum objects for a group of people who might find such access difficult in a traditional museum setting.

The Clients

The clients met as a group at a day centre run by Age Concern in Melton Mowbray. Several group members also attended a local college together in order to take 'life lessons' in cooking, housework etc.

The group consisted of people with learning difficulties aged between 50 and 74. Both sexes were represented. At least two group members were hearing impaired and a number had speech impairments of one kind or another. A wide range of intellectual capacities was also represented.

Most of the group had spent time living in an institutional setting, had not had access to paid employment and were not local to Melton Mowbray. Many were from a rural/village background.

The number of clients present at the sessions unfortunately varied considerably from visit to visit. Clients went on holiday, had doctors appointments or other places to go to and two of the original clients left the group whilst another two joined it during the project. This meant that continuity was very difficult to achieve and also that at any given time there was someone new to the project to get to know and assess as far as his or her ability to take part was concerned.

The Project

The project itself consisted of six, one hour, monthly sessions. These were held at the Age Concern day centre to provide a familiar back ground to the project, avoid the need (and expense) of hiring a mini bus and allow the clients to have their lunch as usual! The clients sat around tables in the centre day room where they usually went for their time at Gloucester House. Unfortunately the phone line to the Day Centre Organiser was in the same room and this occasionally led to disruption. Furthermore

the centre also acted as a venue for other groups and their comings and goings sometimes caused problems.

The sessions were organised thematically and supported by objects from Leicester Heritage Service's handling collection plus a few robust objects from the Service's main collection. Themes included Christmas (and favourite toys), holidays, cooking and food, parties and birthdays. 'where I live' and finally, shopping.

Photographs were taken of the objects used, to act as memory prompts for creative activities and as the basis for future discussions and informal reminiscence. The sessions were taped to provide a record of everyone's individual contributions.

The reminiscence sessions were supported by the Day Care Organiser and a second carer who put aside a day a month in which the memory books were put together. The memory books were made up of photographs of the objects used in the sessions and individual creative work based on the sessions' themes.

The Day Care Organiser also reinforced and supported the sessions with group creative activities. These included making a collage on the subject of favourite foods following the session on food and celebration cards following the session on birthdays and parties.

The Sessions

It became obvious very quickly that the success or not of the project would be heavily reliant on the assistance and support of the Day Centre Organiser. I had no prior experience of communicating with people with learning difficulties and certainly at first needed a lot of help re-phrasing questions designed to draw out memories into simple prompts.

For instance the question 'where do you stay?' caused utter bafflement and no little confusion but 'where do you live?' elicited the looked for response.

Furthermore many of the clients had speech impediments and the Day Care Organiser had a much better ear for what was being said than I did. One of the group members used a talking keyboard that he typed into to communicate but this meant his answers were very short.

One client sat in at every session but was unable to contribute at all verbally to the sessions though she seemed to be interested in looking at the objects.

Another client was profoundly deaf but could read questions if they were written down for her. A carer took on the role of her 'secretary' otherwise I would have had to get up and walk round to her every time it was her turn to hold the object and speak. (The 'only the person holding the object could speak rule' had to be pretty rigorously enforced to give every one a chance to have their say and to give better clarity on the tape for future use.)

Another problem that proved to be more difficult to work around was the fact that the clients had very little idea of the passage of time. Determining when a particular event had occurred in their lifetime threw up a lot of complex issues. Only two of the clients could reliably distinguish between things that had happened when they were 'little' girls and things that had happened more recently. The expression 'when you were young' or 'younger' was meaningless to all the clients. Even probing whether mum and dad were there was far from fool proof as the clients still did things like going on holiday or for a day out with their families. The deep personal knowledge that the carers had of the clients' individual circumstances was invaluable here.

Furthermore all the clients found it difficult to distinguish between something which was 'old' and something which was not. They would sometimes describe a rather battered old thing like a wooden spoon as 'not very nice' or something similar but didn't seem to understand that this was because something was old.

However there were certainly some objects which had more resonance with the group than others. An old bisque doll stirred childhood memories for the ladies in the

group and two of these ladies were able to confidently distinguish between this doll and their own though not on the basis of the age of the object.

The subject of holidays also stirred memories from childhood for most of the group though distinguishing between more recent excursions and what had happened in the past as far as detail went was difficult.

An old plastic bucket and spade caused a great deal of fun as clients demonstrated how to use it to make sandcastles and an old pair of swimming trunks nearly caused a riot. A small confusion over what they were led to one of the gentlemen staring to unbutton his trousers to show he already had a pair on and they were 'nicer' too boot! Then he remembered the bucket and spade and realised the 'pants' were swimming trunks. His rueful comment 'silly me' added greatly to the general hilarity which resulted from this subject and the happy memories it invoked.

The End Product

- Individual Folders containing photographs of the objects used in the sessions, individual artwork, photographs of the joint displays and individual quotes from the session tapes on the different subjects. There will also be a series of simple questions and answers based on the photographs of the objects such as did you have one of these? What colour was it? etc.
- A group folder containing every one's photograph and photographs of the objects
- A display board showing the larger art work pieces put together as a group product under the project headline.
- A series of tapes of the session which can be listened to again and form the focus for future discussion.
- The Age Concern Website. It is anticipated that an entry describing and evaluating the project will appear on the above website. All necessary consents and permissions will be obtained by Age Concern.

It is anticipated that both folders and tapes will be re-used firstly to prevent the group from forgetting what they have already done and secondly to act as a starting point for future creative expression and socialisation. This is in addition to acting as a record of the group and their individual memories for future reference.

Evaluation

As the project was a pilot scheme it was evaluated as intensely as possible but because of the clients' intellectual capacities and literacy skills their input had to be less formal than would otherwise have been ideal.

After consultation with the Day Care Organiser a series of simple questions were put together which we hoped the participants would be able to understand and answer without a great deal of prompting from us. Even so the questions had to be rephrased to suit individual clients needs whilst retaining a certain amount of standardisation in order to make the answers cohesive and meaningful.

Due to the wide ranging abilities of the clients some participants were able to answer more complex questions than others and this, inevitably, led to the evaluation being weighted against the clients with fewer vocal skills and lower levels of understanding.

The two carers who had been involved with the sessions also underwent a more formal evaluation process. They answered a series of questions designed to record their opinion of the value of the project for the group, individual participants, and themselves.

Clients' Evaluation

Whilst every group member gave individual answers certain common themes emerged

from the client evaluation.

- Everyone agreed they had enjoyed the sessions.
- Everyone enjoyed the creative activities associated with the project.
- Clients who were able to give a more in-depth answer to the question on what they had particularly enjoyed listed talking, listening and handling the different objects.
- Two clients particularly mentioned liking the idea of being taped.
- All the clients who answered the more in-depth questions were able to give a favourite object and subject. A 1920s bisque doll was the favourite object with the ladies and 'Holidays' was the favourite subject.
- Only one client could think of something they hadn't enjoyed and that was a 'bad' memory concerning a fall.

Carers' Evaluation

There were two carers involved directly with the project. Both gave generally positive answers in the evaluation. Some of their comments included the following.

- Both carers recognised a high 'fun' factor for the clients.
- Both carers noted an improvement in the vocal abilities of the clients.
- Both carers noted that the project provided intellectual stimulation for the clients. It made them think about things in a more in-depth and ultimately productive way than most of the other activities they could offer at the Day Centre.
- Both carers recognised that some of the clients had been able to get more out of the project than others and listed lower mental capacity, different levels of understanding and fewer vocal skills as the main reasons for this disparity. Both commented that the make up of the group had not been ideal for this particular sort of project, that it had probably been too large and that some of the group would have got more out of one-to-one sessions.
- The Day Care Organiser particularly noted improved social skills with in the group especially in things like listening to others and taking turns to do things and speak. Another carer who takes the group for their 'life lessons' at a different venue had also noted this improvement.
- The Day Care Organiser also noted that it had taken up more of her time than expected to make up folders and get project work finished. She explained that the clients had to be left to do things at their own pace and that for some, this pace was very slow.
- A final general comment concerned the venue. It was felt that there had been too many distractions from outside and that incoming telephone calls had been a particular problem.

My Evaluation

This was a very challenging undertaking. I must confess I had no idea how testing it would be when I started on it. I had a lot of experience in reminiscence with older people including some who were mentally frail but working with this particular group involved a whole new level of communication problems.

With out the dedication and knowledge of the carers I doubt we would have got past session one. However with their help I feel we made a success of the project.

The benefits to the clients taking part were obvious even to me. People became more confident talking about themselves. They became better at sitting quietly waiting for their turn. Improvements in vocal ability for at least one of the clients can be easily traced listening to the tapes. Pride in the artistic and creative expression evoked by the project was also obvious in a group of people who, I think, rarely get a feeling of achievement. Above all I only have to listen to the recordings to hear how much fun we all had!

Whether this sort of scheme is valid for museum rather than caring staff is a

knotty question to which I have no immediate answer. Certainly the clients would have enjoyed the same benefits using non-museum material. There was very little recognition that the objects were 'old' though sometimes that they were 'different' in some way. On the other hand museum staff involved in outreach and particularly reminiscence work hold a great reservoir of knowledge and experience which can be drawn on for this sort of venture.

Age concern approached me in the first place, as they didn't know of anyone else who could facilitate the project they had in mind (and still don't!). Museum professionals committed to bringing museums out into the community are an obvious first stop for carers looking to do something more challenging with their clients. It is a challenge I personally think it is worth rising to, if only for the immense job satisfaction, but not one to be tackled lightly!

Notes

The Gloucester House Project ran from January to June 2005.



Truth, fudge or fiction? Dramatising objects in Discovery Museum

Zelda Baveystock and Caroline Whitehead

Last year the pages of the *Museums Journal* ran a mini-debate about the role of narrative in interpreting collections in museums. Implicit in this debate was a sense that some museums have somehow gone 'too far' in their drive to present coherency out of objects normally collected in another time and for another reason. Maurice Davies, for example, criticised those spending Lottery pounds on "graphic panels that weave over-ambitious narratives around their collection"¹, while Nichola Johnson complained that "Too often, in the drive towards the 'edutaining' narratives that we believe meet public need and institutional responsibility, we are using objects as secondary illustration rather than primary evidence."²

Neither critic goes so far as to suggest that we should ditch the story and go back to the halcyon days of 'letting the object speak for itself'. The implication is that somehow the story should remain, but with the object at its heart – or as Davies puts it, interpretation should "enhance the objects without overwhelming them; interpretation that brings visitors closer to the objects." He goes on to say that over-simplification is another cardinal sin, but that interpretation needs "to aim for the essence of things, the key points."³

Stitch these together, then, and we have a recommendation that good interpretation takes the object as primary evidence, shows its essence but somehow doesn't overwhelm. I'd like to think that the subject of this paper, the Working Lives gallery at Discovery Museum in Newcastle upon Tyne, does all of these things. Certainly, the judges of the Awards for Excellence 2005 felt it did, as it won an award for the Best Use of Technology, with its audio-visual interpretation commended for keeping it simple. However I am still troubled by the idea of finding and illustrating "the essence of things". This paper sets out to illustrate the complexity of the ways in which we chose to interpret the gallery's objects – and it was, of course, ultimately our choice – to tell the stories that we wanted to tell. The essence of things was entirely subjective, but interestingly altered according to our temporal closeness to the object in hand – in other words, the older the object, the less certain the essence became.

But before I go into that any further, I shall first outline the background to the gallery and its context within the Museum.

Discovery Museum is one of eleven venues run by Tyne and Wear Museums. It is the largest museum in Newcastle, and covers a range of topics from local and regional history to science, fashion and military history. Over the last five years it has undergone a radical £13m development programme, which has seen its spaces and facilities vastly improved, and eight new permanent galleries enlivening the presentation of its objects. On the ground floor sits Newcastle Story, a classic social history trawl through the many ages of Newcastle from Roman times to the late twentieth century. The first floor broadens the story out, with four Tyne Galleries, each of which tells an aspect of the history of the river corridor, but from a different perspective, or with a different emphasis. Working Lives is one of these four galleries, and hopefully its particular emphasis should be self-evident. The Tyne Galleries opened in February 2004, and took just under two years to complete from submission of the Stage 2 bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. Overall, the Tyne Galleries cost just under £3m, including some fairly extensive architectural and structural works. Working Lives had one of the smallest budgets, costing £368,500. More than two thirds of this (or £148,500 to be precise) went on the audio visual and oral

history interpretation.

The space itself is also one of the smallest galleries in the building. As Discovery was originally partly a Victorian warehouse, many of the galleries have low ceilings, interspersed with regular iron columns. Many of our displays seek to disguise these columns, which affects the design process. So the physical space lent itself to something personal and intimate, which was very much what we wanted to achieve with the subject matter also. Although Discovery has a strong family-based audience, we felt that this display offered opportunities for engaging older audiences. We wanted a gallery that was conducive to reminiscence without recouring to nostalgia, something that showed the best of times in work and the worst, the personal and not the corporate.

But what about work on Tyneside? How could we possibly seek to encompass the entire history of such a vast topic in such a small space? Tyneside is best known for its highly successful industrial past, coupled with bleak periods of mass unemployment in the 1930s and 1970s. Due to the Museum's origins as a museum of science and engineering, the collections are heavily weighted towards the masculine industrial story, and indeed much of the rest of the Museum spins narratives of invention and innovation, celebrating Tyneside's now-faded glory as a powerhouse of Empire. Locally, among certain sections of the audience, there is still a palpable sense of loss over the demise of both coal mining and the great manufacturing industries (principally shipbuilding, engineering of all varieties, and armaments). We did not want to belittle this sense of loss, but equally we did not want it to take over completely. It was important for us to show the breadth and variety of work and to place the changes in Tyneside into a wider context of national changes to the way we work. We also wanted to show the less recognised histories of women and children at work, who scarcely got a mention in our displays of old.

So the route into this was to create something that was more experiential than didactic. At the entrance to the gallery, three vertical plasma screens show images of three key shifts in working patterns, from agriculture, to industry, to office. The industry screen uses original archive footage, while the office screen was

Photograph: TWM

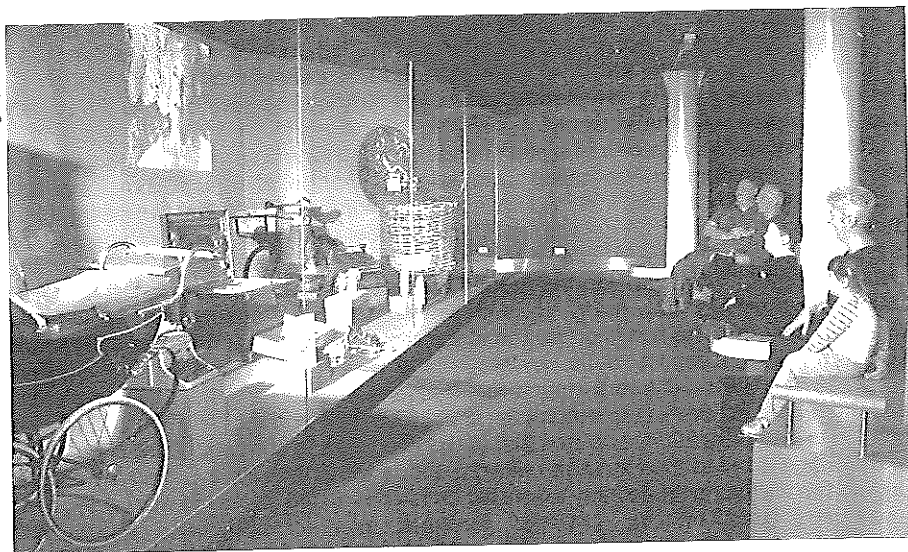


Illustration 1: A view of the Object Theatre.

commissioned by us and filmed in a local call centre. The agriculture screen was, of course, complete dramatic fiction, as the heyday of farming on Tyneside way precedes the advent of film. Bucolic scenes of haymaking were actually shot on the Isle of Man, intercut with grimmer seasonal footage from film archives. These film sequences are complemented with five slightly more detailed object cases, which focus on a griculture, coal-mining, manufacturing industry, domestic service and the office. Right at the start, then, we are communicating how the essence of work has changed over the last three centuries.

The gallery then moves round to a sweep of thematic cases, encompassing learning the job, health, safety and welfare, social life, and, importantly for Tyneside, not working (whether through unemployment, redundancy or retirement). In all of these, objects are interpreted wherever possible with quotes from oral history interviews. At the end of the sweep is an oral history bench, with extracts from interviews and also poems and songs, giving some space to sit and listen or reflect.

But the true heart of the gallery is what we called the Object Theatre, a semi-enclosed space with seating which presents the stories behind seventeen objects in a son-et-lumière style.

Each object is lit in turn in a random sequence, and accompanied by a short film of one to two minutes duration projected onto a double screen behind the objects. These are varied in pace, length and style, and also varied across a 200 year time span, and across the experiences of men, women and children. They almost perfectly fit Maurice Davies' recommendation that "museums' stories should flow from individual objects rather than dominate the entire display" taking the viewer from "the particular to the general"⁴. Although in a very literal sense they do not bring the public closer to the object (as there is a massive glass case in the way), they hopefully do communicate some of the typical experiences and emotions connected with work. It is fair to say that the audio-visual interpretation is absolutely critical to this - put the same objects in the space without our chosen stories and you would probably think you had entered either some high art installation or, more likely, a junk shop.

So how did we choose these objects, and what stories did we decide to tell? Firstly, we wanted to pick up on themes we had introduced in the displays - for example health and safety issues, working away from home, how women's lives have been differently affected in different periods by being either married to the job, or having to juggle part-time work with childrearing, and so on. To a greater part we fleshed out the messages we wanted to communicate and then found the objects in the collections that most eloquently matched. Added on top of this was the way in which we thought the story should be told. Wherever possible, we wanted to use real people's voices, and preferably the real people connected with the object. However, the very nature of museum donation means that these people are more often than not dead, so for some objects we were reliant on the memories of relatives. For objects beyond living memory, we knew we were going to have to take a more fictionalised dramatic approach.

Once the objects and themes and ideas had been selected, we ended up with a short outline brief for each object. Detailed object research was then conducted by the gallery's curator, Caroline Whitehead, along with Michael Terwey, to fine tune the brief, check or amend its accuracy, and supplement it with primary sources. Each object therefore ended up with a small folder of information on it, which was submitted to the production company, Centre Screen. Contemporary accounts, diaries and memoirs were the principal sources for eight of the final films, four were oral history interviews with actual owners or users of the objects, and three were interviews with relatives. The final two were complete fiction produced by a scriptwriter to our brief. Once scripts had been finalised and approved, the films went into production. This could probably be the subject of a seminar in its own right, but suffice to say

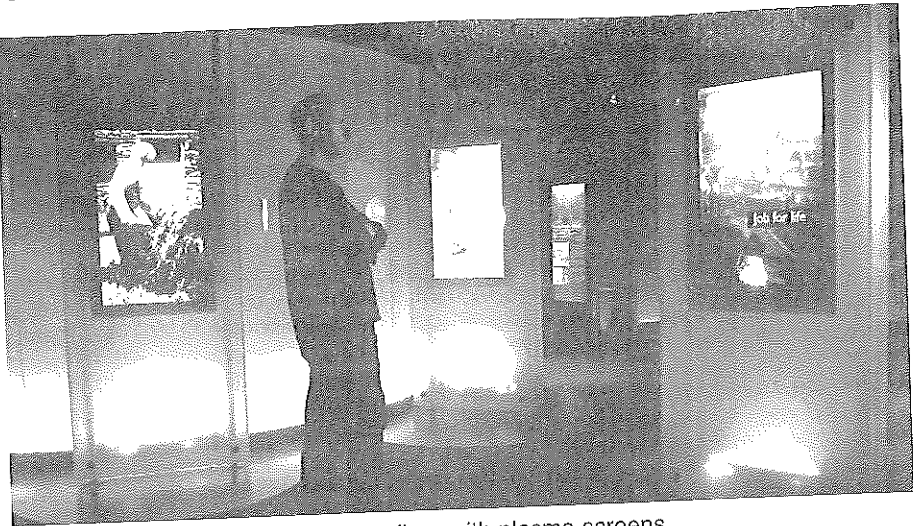


Illustration 2: The entrance to the gallery with plasma screens.

it was a complex mix of juggling budget and available resources (be that staff, actors, props and costumes, or locations), which further effected the final results. So, for example, the exorbitant costs of location filming meant that we had to forgo local options in favour of the Black Country Living Museum, which was cheaper for a period feel, while the equally exorbitant costs of archive film footage meant that in some cases we had far less of this than we would have liked. Museum staff are also extras in some of the films, going to show that no matter how large the budget, you can always do with more when it comes to producing audio-visuals!

Overall all, though, we felt we achieved our aim of a rich and varied programme which would both entertain and inform the visitor. We never anticipated that people would sit down and watch the full seventeen films, which run to just over 40 minutes. Discovery has a high proportion of repeat visitors, and we hoped that this would enable them to catch something different in this permanent gallery each time they came. However, recent evaluation of the gallery carried out by students from the Museum Studies MA course at the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies at the University of Newcastle revealed that of the sample interviewed, a quarter watched two to three films, 28% saw three to five films, and 22% five or more – which is far higher than I would have anticipated.

To give a sense of how different the approaches to interpreting the objects were, I am now going to outline three examples of objects and the style and content of their accompanying films.

The first is a group of cut glass sample bottles containing lead carbonate. Leadworks were one of several significant chemical industries on Tyneside in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We wished to showcase it to counteract the dominant view that women played no part at all in industry in the region, as it was one of the relatively few industries that had a predominantly female workforce. The sample bottle, of course, tells none of this story – it looks attractive but vaguely innocuous – and I am fairly sure it was not collected with that story in mind either. And it certainly was not donated by one of the leadwork companies to tell the specific story we chose, which was of a teenage girl dying of lead poisoning.

The film takes the style of a dramatic costume drama, intercutting scenes of the girl

Photograph TWM

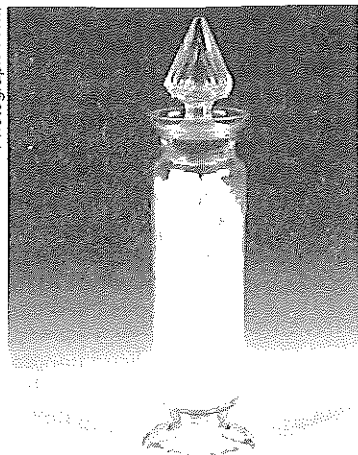


Illustration 3: Bottle containing lead carbonate from the Cookson Lead and Antimony Company Ltd
TWCMS:2001.5075.

Photograph: TWM

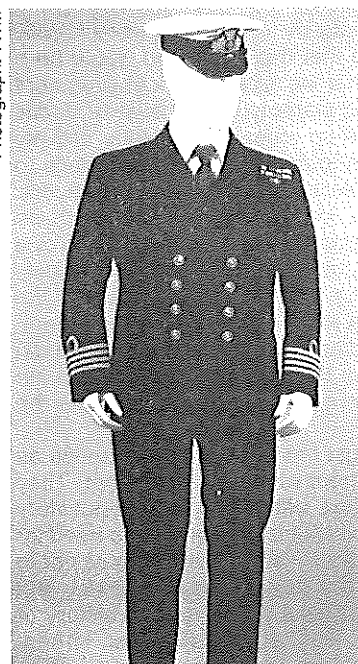


Illustration 4: Captain Dryden's uniform TWCMS:2000.5303.

on her deathbed with her mother and the doctor, with shots of a journalist writing an exposé on the horrors of the industry. Now although our film uses pathos to the max, and goes for the jugular in terms of drama, I do not believe it is a wholly inaccurate representation of this industry. There are numerous newspaper articles, factory inspector reports and parliamentary debates which chronicle the working conditions; resulting illnesses and deaths were running so high in the late 1800s that local poor law guardians were complaining of the cost of caring for these women in an attempt to get the works' owners to contribute. We took verbatim chunks of some of these reports for the script of this film, although archaic language and the need to keep it comprehensible meant that florid Victorian penmanship was generally cut short. Without doubt, however, this film is a work of fiction, and a fiction that suits our contemporary mores.

The second object is possibly the fudge, although a fudge I believe made for all the right reasons. It is a uniform from the 1960s, which was the last uniform worn by a Captain Henry Dryden of North Shields. He retired in the late 1960s from working all his life for the Union-Castle line of merchant navy ships. This uniform was donated by his widow and daughter in 2000. Captain Dryden had wanted to be buried in his uniform, but for some reason the undertaker's refused and said they should donate it to a museum.

We decided to put this item into the Object Theatre, as Captain Dryden obviously felt strongly about his life at sea. He was also emblematic of the many Tynesiders who principally work away from home, particularly those connected with maritime trades. But although we could find contacts with other merchant navy men active in the 1960s, we knew very little about the working life of this particular man. What 'truth' or essence should we have chosen to tell, therefore? A fictionalised account from multiple sources as we did with the older unprovenanced objects, or a secondhand account from his own life? Even more problematic was the fact that his widow herself knew only sketchy details, as like many people, Captain Dryden chose not to discuss his working life during his periods of on shore leave – which in itself says interesting things about our relations with work and home life, and our attitudes to work. And just to cap it all off, although his widow wanted to see his uniform on display, she did not want to feature in any film herself, nor did she want her voice from an

oral history interview to be used directly.

So, in the end, we chose to focus on a highly dramatic episode in Captain Dryden's life, as his ship had been the first to enter Valetta harbour during the Malta convoy in 1942, for which he had received a Distinguished Service Cross. The object, a 1960s uniform, is thus scarcely interpreted at all, but the owner's life is. Mrs Dryden's oral history interview was used as a basis for a script which was read by an actress over close-up footage of the uniform and archive newsreels of the Malta convoy. The soundtrack is therefore her words about her husband, but it is not her voice, although the actress was good enough to listen to the original interview first to try to get a sense of both her accent and her intonation. It is difficult to assess whether this raises ethical issues or not. Strictly speaking in oral history terms it does - but compromises have to be made and the main point is that we gave a voice to Captain Dryden's dedication to his job.

The last example is a method we used for the three objects that had living people directly connected to them. Without doubt, these people believe their stories to be 'the truth', and I do not think you could argue that we have not got to the 'essence' of these particular objects. As part of the research for *Working Lives*, we checked our outline and detailed briefs with various focus groups. As one of our aims was to show the breadth of experience on Tyneside, we consulted with community groups to ensure that we would be telling their stories. We had particularly identified the need to show the contribution of various ethnic groups in the West End of Newcastle, where Discovery Museum is actually sited. Newcastle has one of the lowest percentages of ethnic minorities in England. The largest ethnic group is of Asian descent (4.4%), 1% of the local population is of mixed race, 0.4% Black, 0.7% Chinese, and 0.5% is defined as 'Other'.⁵

Although we decided to include a story representative of the most statistically numerous ethnic minority group, we were concerned that this small nod would be perceived to be tokenistic. We were also concerned that the typical work environment - the restaurant trade - would be seen as simplistic stereotyping. However, focus group sessions with a local multicultural women's group revealed that they actively wanted the contribution of the Bangladeshi population to the city's restaurant trade to be recognised, as well as a story about a female pieceworker sewing from home. Importantly, however, the people themselves gave an angle to their stories which we probably would not have scripted if left to our own devices. The resulting film is of a 'head and shoulders' interview with JoJo Ali, a restaurant manager, filmed in his own restaurant and intercut with sequences of food being prepared and cooked in the kitchens, and tables being set. The spotlight object is a karai dish from the restaurant, and a menu. JoJo's story is partially one of discrimination: he came to England to train as an accountant, but could not find work after more than 60 job applications. He therefore fell into the restaurant trade initially as a means of staying alive, and was the first member of his family to work in one.

I think these oral history focussed films are amongst the best of the sequence as they truly reflect working lives with an honesty and humour which is hard to beat. They offered an opportunity to film the object in its true context, with a fully fleshed out story scarcely directed by curatorial choice. This raises important issues about the need for completeness in documentation when acquiring an object - always so much easier to do when the donor is both alive and still connected to the story behind the object. But I don't think this should belittle or undermine the other films where no oral history or film footage exists. I judge some films to be less successful than others predominantly because of the high production values we are accustomed to when watching period recreations - and these production values are always going to be beyond the reach of museum budgets.

As ever, then, the art of interpretation is thus not just about seeking to reveal

'essence', but also about revealing as much of the story as is practical and possible. It is about choosing the message and adapting the medium to suit. It is also about accommodating the desires of sections of the audience who might read the story entirely differently. Compromise, or fudge, is inevitable – but are we really any worse off for that?

Notes

1. Maurice Davies, 'Story makers', *Museums Journal*, March 2005, pp20-23
2. Nichola Johnson, 'Wanted: new breed of curators', *Museums Journal*, June 2005, pp16-17
3. Davies, *ibid*, p23
4. *ibid*
5. Office of National Statistics, 2001 Census

REALITY CHECK – CAN MUSEUMS EVER “TELL IT LIKE IT IS”?

Vicki Wood

Introduction

Rounding off the Social History Curators Group (SHCG) Conference and drawing the themes of the conference together, these thoughts were first presented at Big Pit National Coal Museum, in July 2005. This prize-winning museum¹, with its underground tours, newly refurbished galleries and charismatic former miners, provided a thought-provoking backdrop to the theme of this paper – Can museums ever “tell it like it is”? Big Pit has been described as ‘an exceptional emotional and intellectual experience’ which ‘tells the individual stories of its communities better than any museum’². However, with its slag heaps now grassed over with time, can Big Pit really convey to the visitor the full experience of life and work in a Welsh mining community? Can any museum capture the essence of another’s life experience and deliver it, in a nutshell, to the casual visitor?

Clearly it cannot and, as Michael Houlihan, Director of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales³ reminded us in the opening paper of this conference, the very act of bringing an object into a museum and out of its original context strips it of its authenticity and much of its meaning. Despite this inevitable problem, we have a duty to take our role as interpreters very seriously, striving to convey the truth as accurately and sincerely as possible, revealing hidden histories and challenging myths⁴.

As social history curators in the twenty-first century we have a whole array of recording and collecting techniques, interpretation styles and communication methods with which to attempt the task. Mindful that people learn best when they learn at an emotional level, this paper highlights a number of these contrasting methods and styles, many of which were discussed at the Conference itself. It also looks at the pros and cons of displaying real museum objects and discusses a number of collections management issues. Reference is made to the history of social history curatorship, the development of curatorial practice, as well as current museological ideas.

While this paper boasts no firm conclusions, its serves as a reminder that our role is only part of a two-way process, which also involves the visitor. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so empathy is in the mind of the visitor. What helps one person imagine another person’s life, or appreciate the context of an object or identify with a remote culture, is not the same as that which will help another. This means not only that different interpretation styles are valid, but also that we have to trust the visitor to make sense of their museum experience and give them permission to accept or dismiss what is presented to them. Finally, it is also worth remembering that a museum visit is most commonly seen as a leisure activity, where the quality of the café and the baby change unit is just as important as the intellectual rigour of the displays. While this does not let us off the hook or give us a ‘get out’ clause, it should serve to keep us grounded.

Living history

In 1987, Robert Hewison published *The Heritage Industry – Britain in a Climate of Decline*⁵ in which he contested that “instead of manufacturing goods, we are manufacturing heritage”. He was referring to the boom in heritage centres and social history museums in the 1970s and 80s – especially ‘living history’ museums, such as Beamish⁶ and Blists Hill⁷ – which coincided with Britain’s decline as an industrial

power. The charge was that, unable to face an uncertain economic future, we were creating "a past that never was", looking back with rose-tinted spectacles and creating twee theme-park museums that belied the true harshness of ordinary people's lives in the past. With healthy, well-fed, costumed interpreters showing visitors round reconstructed towns made clean, safe and accessible, curators could not – or would not – tell it like it was.

While this may be true, thousands of people have gained a 'serious insight'⁸ into life in the past through this approach, which had its English origins in the Kirkgate recreation of a Victorian street, opened in 1938 at the Castle Museum, York⁹. In most cases an imperfect representation of the past is better than no representation at all and the majority of visitors are capable of making the conceptual leap from what they see in front of them now and what they can imagine to have been true in the past. For example, at St Fagans¹⁰ there is a row of tiny ironworkers' cottages (Ryd-y-car) each furnished from a different period in history from the early nineteenth century to the 1980s. On entering one of the earliest – dark, cramped and appallingly basic – and being told by the guide that it once housed a family of fourteen, most people can appreciate for themselves the harshness of real life there, without need of further interpretation.

Tableaux and special effects

Confronting painful realities directly is nevertheless a necessary and important part of museum interpretation and – since visitors cannot be exposed to physical danger or discomfort – museums and heritage centres have increasingly found ways to simulate the grittier aspects of life. Often this has been done by means of audio-visual presentations (where actors portray historical characters) or by good quality mannequins and replica objects in specially designed tableaux, rich in colour and texture, some with clever special effects. In 1984, the Jorvik Viking Centre¹¹ opened to international acclaim, incorporating a static recreation of Viking York, through which visitors were taken, riding a fairground style car. The whole gamut of Dark Age village life was portrayed, including 'authentic' sounds and even smells! Criticised by a few as gimmicky, the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. A visitor in 1987 noted: 'This was a revelation. I had always thought of Vikings as a homogenous mass of male fighters – two dimensional in the pages of a history book – never as real people, let alone women and children! I now have a much more rounded picture of the Viking era, and history generally'¹².

Synthetic smells have also been particularly useful for war museums, where the portrayal of realistic battle experiences is obviously fraught with difficulties. The Smells of the Trenches exhibit at the Imperial War Museum North, with its imitation odours of cordite, mustard gas and trench foot, has caused several visitors to feel genuinely nauseous. More ambitiously, the Imperial War Museum launched The Trench experience in 2002, a walk-through re-creation of a front line trench on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, brought to life with special lighting, sound and smell effects. Visitors are confronted with the simulated horrors of trench warfare plus original mementoes and stories of individual fallen troops¹³. While this 'shocking' style of museum experience may be appropriate for the subject matter, it undoubtedly has a profound impact on visitors, necessitating sensitive signage and warnings.

Interactive exhibits, virtual reality and on-line access

While The Trench exhibit is perhaps an extreme example, the emphasis on participation as a means of learning has now become an established method in museums. From the early 1990s, no new exhibition aimed at a general audience has been complete without a hands-on element – clothes to try on, flaps to open or wheels to turn. The 'Victorian School' and 'Wash Day' sessions have become museum

classics for Key Stage 2!

Now in the twenty-first century, the technology of the digital age has increased the range and scope of museum interactives beyond anything previously possible. In addition to all the above, the touch screen is now seen as an essential part of a museum gallery, however small¹⁴, allowing access to numerous images and pieces of information not feasibly shown on graphic panels. The new National Waterfront Museum in Swansea¹⁵ – visited on the Conference four months before it opened – incorporates very few graphic panels but more than 100 audio visual exhibits, including 36 state of the art interactive displays using the latest computer technology. Among the innovative exhibits are projections which respond to gestures, and tabletops with touch sensors where visitors can interact with the displays. In common with many recent flagship museum projects, the Waterfront looks and feels very modern, very expensively designed in shining steel and glass¹⁶. As the administrators of the National Museum Wales are only too ready to point out, the contrast with Big Pit and St Fagans could not be greater.

With the new sensory exhibits – as well as hundreds of objects, including a brick press, a replica of the first ever steam locomotive and a monoplane – the Waterfront invites the visitor to '...be plunged in to poverty, wallow in wealth, dabble in danger or even risk your health! Experience noise, grime, high finance, upheaval, consumerism and opportunity.' 'It's no "soap". It's what really happened' claims the website.

But will the new venture inspire a deep emotional response in its visitors? Will the new technology deliver the innovative learning experience promised or will it only bamboozle people, shutting down their emotional responses? Will the experience prove too clinical or even gimmicky, alienating an older audience while provoking the kids to run riot? As the Waterfront's new team readily admits, no one yet knows, and that is what makes the project exciting¹⁷.

If the jury is still out regarding the hi-tech approach at Swansea, we can only guess at the possibilities for museums of the future. Taking these ideas to their extreme, a gallery could offer visitors a complete 'virtual reality' experience of life in another time (hooking them up with the required electronic suit). While this total simulation experience will probably remain impractical for a gallery situation, the use of screens to show reconstructed buildings and objects whose physical remains are too few to be easily recognizable, clearly is not. Archaeological and heritage sites benefit from such interpretation, and damaged or fragmented museum objects – too fragile for regular viewing or manual handling – if represented digitally can be viewed from angles and aspects not possible in real life¹⁸. Though very few websites actually offer this facility now, interaction with a digitised images at home via the Internet may become commonplace in the future. But before the necessary resources are put into such expensive work, we need to be clear about how and why people use on-line object databases. Thus it is vital that pioneering digitisation projects such 'Exploring 20th Century London' are properly evaluated when complete¹⁹.

If much work still needs to be done in this area, the usefulness of the Internet for attracting visitors to the physical museum has largely been proved. As recently as the late 1990s, many curators were quite sceptical – if not concerned – about the impact of 'virtual reality' on museums, fearing a reduction in visitor numbers or the misuse of their images. In fact the opposite has been true, with museums increasing footfall with the production of good on-line brochures to whet the appetite. It doesn't matter how many images one sees of the Mona Lisa, standing in front of the 'real thing' at the Louvre is still a unique experience.

Real objects

Because of this human need to interact with real objects, the core function of museums will remain, whatever the interpretation methods available to us. A real

object, with its unique texture and smell, provides a powerful and tangible link to another time or place, as proven by the success of reminiscence sessions for stimulating memories and discussion, often with very positive outcomes for the participants²⁰. Our earliest ancestors understood the power of objects as symbols and sacred artefacts, and even as today's consumers we cannot help but be fascinated by things, as witnessed by the popular obsession with collectables and antiques! In putting together its loan box scheme, Reading Museum took the bold decision to go further than most services in providing only real objects for public use²¹; this despite the inevitable tension between the needs of the collection and the needs of people for access, which leads many conservators to advocate the use of replicas.

But is there ever a situation where replicas can be more realistic than originals? Does 'real' mean the genuine article, such as a seventeenth century silk shoe, now frayed and faded with time? Or is a reproduction – brightly coloured and wearable – more 'real' because it looks as it did when worn in the seventeenth century? This question is highly relevant to the design of museum room sets and the furnishing of historic buildings. The Ryd-y-car cottage mentioned earlier contains only genuine objects of the period still surviving, mostly wooden and metal, deteriorated with age. Does this give the visitor a realistic impression of life here in the early nineteenth century? Though no one could dispute the discomfort of living in this house, life would have been more bearable with the colour and texture of textiles, food and fire that were undoubtedly present, even if only in short measure. Thus there is an argument for adding reproductions of these and other comforts to increase the realism of the interior. The problem then is that visitors must distinguish between real objects and reproductions in juxtaposition.

Open-air and 'working' museums are faced with the dilemma of mixing the old and new on a regular basis, often at a very practical level: parts wear out and need replacing. Can a historic engine, machine or building be classed as a real museum object if a proportion of its parts are modern replacements? Though the buildings at St Fagans, such as the corn mill shown to SHCG delegates, need periodic repair, the new components are not seen to detract from the original, so long as correct materials and authentic methods are used and processes are recorded properly. Deciding what constitutes the original may be a matter for real debate, however. Even before a building comes to the museum, it will have been modified many times during its working life. Does an early twentieth century addition to an eighteenth century structure detract from its authenticity or is it a valid part of the building's evolution? Where should the line be drawn, if it is drawn at all?

Looking further at the issue of working exhibits, what are the implications for their care and management? Is it right that museum objects should be exposed to the wear and tear of usage, as well as the weather? Paradoxically, working exhibits often corrode and deteriorate less fast than their static counterparts, as the former are regularly inspected and maintained to high standards. Recognising this, staff at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum keep a significant number of machines and vehicles in use and now view collections care as an integral aspect of interpretation at the site, with work in progress accessible to the public²². The winding wheel at Big Pit, without which the underground tours would not be possible, is inspected and maintained to the standards of a working mine, despite not, as yet, being an accessioned object²³.

These various examples highlight the difficulties and contradictions faced by curators of complex social history museums working to modern collections management standards²⁴. Should an object as important as Blaenafon's pit-head gear remain unaccessioned? Does it lose any of its significance as a real 'museum object' by remaining outside the Accessions Register? As standards for documentation and collections care become ever more rigorous, it is important that the

position for working collections is clarified and workable.

'Collections activists'

Such documentation issues were of no concern to the pioneering curators of the nineteenth century, even though machines featured heavily in the 1851 Great Exhibition²⁵. Instead the primary emphasis for Victorian curators was to show objects as sources of inspiration and celebration, giving an insight into different worlds, past civilisations and showing the state of the art manufacturing processes of the day. In understanding the positive potential of exhibitions for educating and entertaining the public, the nineteenth century curators were perhaps the first 'collections activists', a phrase recently coined in the 2005 report *Collections for the Future*²⁶. The great Victorian museums had a new emphasis on realism – in terms of scientific and historical integrity – and were keen to set themselves apart from the peddlers of curios and relics of the past, who had cared little for the 'real thing'.

Despite a new scholarly approach, Victorian activists fell far short of modern ethical standards in terms of acquisition and collections management. Objects were collected haphazardly, often with their owners under duress, and little thought was given to the real needs of objects or the people who created them; Victorian interpretation was usually limited to one narrative, written from the point of view of the curatorial establishment. The challenge for our generation is to build on the successes of the past while seeking a new approach to activism that is both systematic and sensitive.

The Conference heard about the new systematic approach to collections management offered by the joint Resource Centre for Beamish and Tyne and Wear Museums, providing shared storage facilities accessible to the public²⁷. Such regional ventures allow the possibility of rationalising collections to reduce duplication, saving precious resources, and concentrating information and expertise in one place to enhance levels of scholarship. This should allow museum staff to increase their knowledge as connoisseurs of the 'real thing', developing confidence in identification and interpretation. Unlike their Victorian counterparts, modern curators have little time to research, so any initiatives which pool and disseminate information are invaluable, not least SHCG's own on-line Firstbase facility.

Alongside more systematic approaches to collections management, we also need to develop greater sensitivity and openness in dealing with object histories. Museums with ethnographic collections are increasingly open about the circumstances of acquisition, even if these are disturbing, and some are involved in the process of object repatriation. Many are revising their object records on receipt of more accurate information about the use and significance of objects, given directly from descendants, or other cultural members.

While the problem is less acute for most social history collections, and the practice of recording object histories is well established, we still need to be open to the possibility of new interpretations: part of activism is having an open dialogue with the public. Sometimes in order to provoke this we can take risks, extrapolating our knowledge, making educated guesses and looking for new links. This approach has been taken to great effect in the Working Lives gallery at Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne²⁸. Here, individual objects are 'showcased' with lighting effects and audio-visual projections, telling direct and tangential stories connected with each, using song, scripted drama and video oral history. Poignant and absorbing, these stories engage the visitor and offer levels of interpretation rarely seen in conventional exhibits. Though not explicitly asked to do so, the visitor may feel moved to offer his or her own view or experience of the same or similar objects, which could then help curators interpret the objects with even greater accuracy and relevance in the future.

'People' approaches

Such two-way communication requires not only that visitors feel confident enough to enter into dialogue but also that museums have a means of receiving and processing the information accurately and sympathetically. For many museums, the 'people' approach is the mainstay not only of their welcome and orientation strategy (vital in all museums, regardless of style and content) but of their overall interpretation method, often achieved through a large team of volunteers. Third person interpreters²⁹ can enter in to general conversation with visitors, engaging them and responding to questions. Their presence is particularly important at open-air museums where other interpretation methods, such as graphic panels or audio guides, are often kept to a minimum.

Do these interpreters, well-trained and knowledgeable, enhance the realism of the experience for visitors? Should they be costumed, and if so, to what level of accuracy? For third person interpreters the costume is only optional and depends on the need, or otherwise, to be 'in keeping' with their surroundings. At sites like Blists Hill, which is a coherent recreation of a Victorian town, costumes are more appropriate than at St Fagans, say, where each building is of a different date. As well as performing tasks and demonstrating historic techniques, such as smithing and printing, the interpreters can help visitors understand what they see and put it in historical context, explaining modifications for health and safety purposes and distinguishing between real objects and reproductions, or more broadly, between fact and fiction. Perhaps their most important role, however, is to act as a sounding board for visitors, whose reactions and feelings often need expression, as they assimilate new ideas and information.

This discursive role is beyond the scope of first person interpreters³⁰ (often actors or professional re-enactors) who must stay in character at all times, not responding to 'modern' discussions. While this approach offers visitors valuable insights into past lives, it can be disconcerting and wearisome for those not willing, or able, to enter into the pretence. First person interpretation designed specifically for children works extremely well, however, as the very young easily accept the idea. At the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, the working steam engines in the Power Hall are interpreted for school children by 'Forgetful Fireman Fred' and 'Engineer Eric' whose jokey banter engages children and reinforces key engineering concepts, not easily conveyed by traditional educational methods³¹.

Humour can also be a serious means of engaging adults, as witnessed by the charisma of the staff at Big Pit, all former miners. As noted in the first paragraph of this paper, the museum is judged to have succeeded in bringing a difficult subject to life in a meaningful and authentic way. In part this is also due to the first person interpretation of an actor featured on an audio visual presentation, scripted by a real miner. He discusses the positives about the life in a mining community, revealing the support structure and optimism that got people through what must have been a tough existence. Common sense tells us that past generations must have had 'coping strategies' and compensations now lost to us in the modern western world³² or they simply would not have survived.

If, as previously discussed, museums have struggled to highlight the privations of life in the past, almost all have failed to explain how this was bearable for our ancestors.

What works best?

The intellectual integrity of all these interpretation methods will continue to be debated, but their effect on individual visitors is perhaps what ultimately counts. Clearly this depends not only on personal background and existing knowledge but also on age group, temperament and expectations for the visit. In a recent survey carried out for a

museum in the north west of England, older people said they preferred interpretation by a 'human being' while non-users wanted film and photography as a priority. Not surprisingly, what works for one does not necessarily work for another: it is 'horses for courses'.

If museums have struggled in the past to evaluate the effect of their work objectively, the Inspiring Learning for All (ILFA) framework³³ now provides a structure for assessing the impact on visitors. The comparative merits of different interpretative approaches should now be easier to analyse, as the scheme divides the effect on the visitors in to five categories, or Generic Learning Outcomes:

- knowledge and understanding,
- skills
- attitudes and values
- enjoyment, inspiration and creativity
- activity, behaviour and progression.

The Conference heard how the 2005 refurbishment of the Power Hall at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, was informed by front-end evaluation using the ILFA framework³⁴.

Real communities

Thus for the majority of museum services – particularly those funded by public money – the needs of real people in the modern world are of primary concern. Appraisal schemes such as Best Value have led local authority museums to study the impact of their work not only on visitors but also on the local community, in order to demonstrate a positive effect on local quality of life, and hence value for money for the council tax payer. With carefully worded questions, it seems surveys of non-users, as well as users, reveal a strong attachment to museums. The majority of people who never visit their local museum still believe it should be supported and funded in order to give a sense of pride and place to the town³⁵. Regardless of its collections or interpretation scheme, simply having a museum is what counts for many sections of society, perhaps as a reassurance or a grounding, like a local church or landmark. Certainly museums are used as a 'neutral' meeting place for community activities and projects, especially where sensitivity is required: in 2005 St Fagans played host to a reunion of over 50 evacuees and their families on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II.

That museums are needed in this way is indeed heartening, but though the majority may see their museum as a natural repository for the collective memory, a minority may feel excluded or even outraged by the claim. As Michael Houlihan pointed out, museums can be anything but neutral, complicit in reinforcing a false community memory and reiterating one narrative at the expense of objectivity³⁶. Can this charge be laid at St Fagans, previously called the 'Welsh Folk Museum' but now titled St Fagans National History Museum³⁷? In creating a charming open-air site, with a bias towards rural life in West Wales, has the museum thus far been guilty of maintaining a traditional stereotype of Welsh life that never existed? Now with a specific remit to diversify, can St Fagans accurately reflect the breadth of life in Wales, past and present? The challenge will be great indeed for, as Rhiannon Mason made clear in her paper, there is no such thing as one, authentic, community identity, but a myriad of different human experiences³⁸.

Despite the ethical and intellectual need for museums to challenge misleading stereotypes, from a marketing point of view this often makes little sense. A museum's core market – the people who contribute most to its footfall and revenue – may have little interest in reality. Could the success of St Fagans as a traditional Sunday afternoon 'escape' for local Welsh city dwellers be challenged if it seeks to reflect

urban life as well? The issue is particularly complex for museums, like St Fagans, in tourist areas and capital cities, where many visitors come from further afield. Should such a museum be outward-looking, interpreting the local area for holiday makers or, on the other hand, be more inward-looking, focusing on the needs of local residents? Which more accurately reflects the reality of the local area and can a museum incorporate both perspectives? A city currently struggling with these issues is Cardiff, which – though hosting the headquarters of National Museum Wales – has no community museum of its own³⁹.

Intellectual integrity vs. pragmatism

This paper set out with the recognition that there is no answer to the problem of realism in museums. Achieving true realism is not logically possible: no amount of contemporary collecting, oral history recording or computer wizardry will solve the problem. Society cannot be replicated in a museum – we cannot “tell it like it is”. That said, the capacity of social history museums to inform, to move and to challenge visitors (and remote users) with images, objects and narratives is proven beyond doubt.

Proven too is the tension between the need for intellectual integrity and authenticity on the one hand, and pragmatism and practicality on the other. Whatever the ethical merit of challenging myths and telling the real story, visitors need to be kept safe, collections managed, stakeholders satisfied and books balanced.

Perhaps reconciling these two realities successfully is the greatest challenge for the modern social history curator, who needs to be multi-skilled as never before.

As the Gulbenkian Prize judges have suggested, Big Pit has come close to achieving the balance between success in the ‘real world’ and ‘realism’ in its interpretation. Rather than being complicit in perpetuating myths, many argue that the mining museum has made serious attempts to show there are two sides to every story: pit life was harsh but survivable; domestic life was more dangerous than work underground; and Welsh miners have been both heroes and villains in the eyes of twentieth society, depending on the political circumstances.

But perhaps the overriding reason we cannot truly represent reality is because every person’s reality is different. Not just historians and NMW curators debate the causes of the 1984 Miners’ Strike – so does every person who lived through it! The impossibility of replicating reality is thus not just that we are often dealing with remote figures in the past. Museums cannot interpret the life of a living person with true authenticity. The only person who “can tell it like it is” is the one person who has experience of it.

Conclusion

If reconciling intellectual integrity with pragmatism is the art of good curatorship, so too is the recognition that museums are essentially for the people who use them. The impact of our work on the hearts and minds of visitors is ultimately the test of our work, not philosophical arguments about the nature of ‘reality’. As stated on its website, Blists Hill Victorian Town offers visitors a ‘serious insight’ in to life in the past, despite the opportunities for spending money on sentimental souvenirs and having tea in nostalgic surroundings. If every visitor comes away with at least one new realisation, insight, or question, the museum has done its job. Likewise, if the new National Waterfront Museum can set visitors pondering the contrast between its shiny, hi-tech, presentation and the heat and dust of Wales’ industrial heritage, it should be judged a success.

Despite the ultimate futility of seeking to replicate reality in a philosophical sense, in practice the interpretive methods discussed in this paper have had a huge impact on people’s ability to empathise with others’ lives. Beginning with York Castle Museum

nearly seventy years ago, museums in Britain have offered visitors intellectual access to 'everyday' situations beyond their own experience, providing increasing levels of learning, enjoyment and inspiration. This has been achieved by pushing boundaries, exploring technical possibilities and experimenting with new approaches, whilst recognising the need for health and safety, quality standards and economic sustainability.

The technical advancements that await us in the twenty-first century are as yet unimaginable and herald exciting new possibilities for museum interpretation. As curators we need to be ready to embrace these changes, actively consulting with people, in the gallery, on the web or in the street, to determine the efficacy of new methods. But while looking to the future, we would also do well to look back at our Victorian forebears and remember the value of scholarship and connoisseurship, since interpretation is only ever as good as the information that underpins it. Interpretive fashions may come and go, but museums will remain as treasure-houses of real objects, be they silk shoes, Viking cooking pots or Welsh pit wheels.

Bringing all these considerations together we can conclude that, though a museum might never convey the full experience of life in a particular community, the objects it keeps and the passion it engenders in its staff and visitors, is real indeed.

Notes

1. Winner of the Gulbenkian Prize for Museum of the Year 2005
2. Richard Sykes, Chairman of the Gulbenkian Prize judges
3. Now known as National Museum Wales (NMW) [see this volume for Michael Houlihan's paper – Ed]
4. Much has been written in recent years about the challenges faced by museums dealing with issues of personal tragedy, violence and conflict, and collective trauma such as genocide and apartheid, where representing the truth is vitally important to living communities. Without wishing to diminish the importance of this topic, this paper concentrates on less controversial subjects and looks at mainstream styles and methods of interpretation only.
5. ISBN 0413161102
6. Beamish, the North of England Open Air Museum, founded in 1970, is (according to its website) a 'living, working experience of life as it was in the Great North in the early 1800s and 1900s'.
7. Blists Hill Victorian Town, part of Ironbridge Gorge Museums, Shropshire
8. Blists Hill Victorian Town website
9. The Castle Museum, York, with its recreation of a Victorian street and various period room sets, was the brainchild of Yorkshire GP Dr John Kirk, who spent the early years of the twentieth century collecting everyday objects no longer wanted by his patients, thus creating a pioneering social history collection. The 'Kirkgate' exhibit is still a popular attraction and the Museum continues to be a major centre for social and domestic history.
10. Founded as the Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans in 1948, based on the Scandinavian model pioneered at Skansen, Sweden (1891). Now known as the St Fagans National History Museum, part of the National Museum Wales. Visited by SHCG members on the Conference 2005.
11. The Jorvik Viking Centre is run by the York Archaeological Trust, whose major excavation of Coppergate, York (1976 – 81) revealed the remains of a Viking settlement. The recreated village is just one part of the centre, which also incorporates many other interpretation styles, as well as displays of artefacts.
12. University of Leicester, Museums Studies course, 1987-8, study trip
13. An accompanying documentary *The Trench* was aired on BBC2, featuring 24 volunteers from Hull, living in a trench in northern France, endeavouring to repeat

the experience of the 10th Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment: one of a number of historical 'reality TV' shows broadcast in recent years produced in conjunction with museums or experimental archaeologists.

14. Vince Taylor and John Burton, Bedworth Parsonage Project: Touch Screen Heritage on a shoestring SHCG Conference 2005. [see articles in SHCG News issue 57 – Ed]
15. Part of National Museum Wales, with a remit to explore the industrial heritage of Wales
16. The £30.8m building consists of a new structure clad in glass and slate, designed by Wilkinson Eyre Architects, linked via a glazed central walkway to the original Grade II listed warehouse, former home of Swansea's Industrial and Maritime Museum.
17. Team members, including Director Steph Mastoris, addressed delegates at the SHCG Conference 2005 and led a series of guided tours.
18. On television, such advanced computer graphic techniques have already formed the basis of several primetime documentaries in recent years, and are an essential part of programmes such as Time Team (Channel 4).
19. Fiona Orsini, Museum of London: 'Exploring 20th Century London' project – an on-line learning database comprising 12,000 digitised records. SHCG Conference 2005. [see article in this volume – Ed]
20. Fiona Ure, Leicestershire Environment & Heritage Services: The Stuff of Memory: object-led reminiscence sessions SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
21. Emma Lee, Reading Museums Service: It's an open and shut case: the Reading Museums Service loans boxes SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
22. Julian Bell and Hannah Miller, Weald and Downland Open Air Museum: Telling the Story: on-site care and use of collections SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
23. The winding wheel has historically been classified as part of the industrial site, not the formal museum collection.
24. These include Accreditation, the successor to Registration, administered by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council; Spectrum, the documentation standard produced by MDA (Museums Documentation Association); and Benchmarks in Collections Care, MLA's standard for the physical care of collections.
25. The Great Exhibition was intended as a celebration of the British Empire and advances in technology
26. Museums Association: *Collections for the Future* report 2005
27. Graeme Meggeson, Tyne and Wear Museums: Relocation and Rationalisation: the merging of a designated collection at the Regional Resource centre SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
28. Zelda Baveystock, Tyne and Wear Museums: Truth, fudge or fiction? Dramatising museum objects in Discovery Museum SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume by Zelda Baveystock and Caroline Whitehead – Ed]
29. Third person interpreters describe people in the past using phrases beginning "He/she/ they..."
30. First person interpreters impersonate characters from the past using phrases beginning "I..."
31. Ruth Shuttleworth, Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester: Revamping the Power Hall – interpretation and presentation of engines SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
32. Studies of mental health in the modern western world suggest rates of mental illness are increasing.

33. www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk Museums Libraries and Archives Council
34. Ruth Shuttleworth, Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester: Revamping the Power Hall – interpretation and presentation of engines SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
35. The South East Museum Library and Archive Council maintains that 80% of people want a museum in their town, even if they do not visit it.
36. Michael Houlihan, addressing the Conference, June 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
37. Founded in 1948, St Fagans followed the Scandinavian model of preserving vernacular architecture and artefacts, and recording folk culture and traditions rapidly being lost with increasing modernisation.
38. Rhiannon Mason, International Centre for Culture and Heritage Studies, University of Newcastle: Museums and Identities: What can the National Museums and Galleries of Wales tell us about Welsh identities? SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]
39. Anna Smith, Cardiff Council: SHCG Conference 2005 [see article in this volume – Ed]

Notes for Contributors

The Editor will be pleased to consider articles for inclusion in Social History in Museums. The article should be supplied on disk along with a printed copy. Articles should be in the region of 2,000 - 3,000 words, but longer articles will always be considered.

References (Footnotes)

Contributors may use either of the standard conventions:

(a) In text citation of sources

Give author's surname, date of publication and page references (if any) in parentheses in the body of the text, e.g. (Dyer, 1994, 179). Where a second or subsequent work by a particular author in the same year is cited, references should be distinguished by letters (a, b, c, etc) placed after the date. A complete list of references cited, arranged alphabetically by the author's surname, should be typed at the end of the article in the form:

Dyer, C. 1994, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London)

Give place of publication, not the publisher. Titles of books and journals should be in the form of the examples in these notes.

(b) Citation in footnotes

References should be given in notes, numbered consecutively through the typescript with raised numbers. Type the notes on separate pages at the end of the article. Full publication details should be given at first mention, a short form thereafter:

Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its aftermath in late-medieval England* (London), p. 18.

T H Ashton and R H Hilton (eds), *The English Rising of 1381*, pp. 9 - 24.

SAC Penn, 'Female wage-earners in late fourteenth-century England', *Agricultural History Review*, 35 (1987), pp. 1 - 14.

Short forms:

Platt, *King Death*, p. 102.

Ashton and Hilton (eds) *English Rising*, p. 25.

Penn, 'Female wage-earners', p. 12.

Quotations

Quotations should be in single inverted commas, with double used only for quotations within quotations. Quotations of more than five lines should be set off from the text and indented.

Tables and illustrations

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