

# Social History in Museums

Volume 37



# Social History in Museums

Journal of the Social History Curators Group

Edited by Helen McConnell

Volume 37 (2013)

Published by the Social History Curators Group 2013  
ISSN 1350-9551

© SHCG and contributors

# Contents

Helen McConnell	Editor's foreword	3
<b>Conference</b>		
Jonathan Wallis, Annika Joy, Piotr Bienkowski, Tracy-Ann Smith, Michael Terwey	The SHCG Debate: This Conference believes that visitors are the new curators	4
<b>Community</b>		
Eduardo Gimenez- Cassina	Who is the curator? LGBTQ collecting and identity forming over the rainbow (flag)	10
Alexia Clark & Kate Andrew	Access for the blind and visually impaired	18
<b>Exhibition</b>		
Cressida Finch	Interpreting experiences – the Gun Turret Experience, HMS Belfast	24
Jeff Cowton	Beyond Words: Understanding and sharing the meanings of manuscripts	30
Laura Paterson	A touch of luck?: Developing an interactive touch screen display at the Museum of Edinburgh	35
Gwendolen Whitaker	Kirkgate: The story of a street in a city and a city in a street	39
Steph Gillett	Transforming West Berkshire Museum	45
Stuart Frost	Reinterpreting a Florentine Chapel at the V&A	51
<b>Collecting</b>		
Erin Beeston	Unravelling hidden histories: Researching the Bolton Museum caddow quilt collection	60
Jenny Brown	Collecting practice: An exploration of acquisitions at Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums	70
<b>Exhibition Reviews</b>		
Jack Ord	Many stories, one West End: A suburb in the spotlight at Newcastle's Discovery Museum	78

# Editor's foreword

Conference 2012 focused on interpreting social history collections. We critically examined our practice, heard about innovative work and new ideas, and discussed the difficulties we face. Reproduced here are presentations from Kate Andrew and Alexia Clark on developing interpretation for Blind and Visually Impaired people and from Steph Gillett on the transformation of West Berkshire Museum.

Also included are the arguments put forward in this year's debate, on the motion 'This Conference believes that visitors are the new curators'. Michael Terwey has summarised the subsequent discussion.

Furthering the theme of innovative approaches to interpretation, Cressida Finch shares an insight into the development of an 'experience' and Jeff Cowton offers new ideas on interpreting manuscripts. Gwendolen Whitaker discusses the challenges and opportunities of re-displaying York Castle Museum's famous Victorian street, Laura Paterson discusses the development of interactives, and Stuart Frost shares ideas on the interpretation of religious artefacts.

Focusing on collections, Erin Beeston provides an insight into the history of Bolton's caddow quilts and Jack Ord reviews an exhibition on the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Interesting critiques of current practice are included from Jenny Brown on collecting practice at Aberdeen Museums and from Eduardo Cassina on the representation of LGBTQ people.

**Helen McConnell**

**Editor**

**Helen.McConnell@bristol.gov.uk**

# This Conference believes that visitors are the new curators – SHCG Debate

*Proposing the motion, Jonathan Wallis of Derby Museums and Art Gallery opened the debate.*

*Piotr Bienkowski, of Paul Hamlyn funded “Our Museum” project, spoke first in opposition.*

*Annika Joy, Head of Audience Research and Advocacy at Science Museum, furthered the proposing argument.*

*Tracy-Ann Smith, Co-Chair of Diversity in Heritage Group, added to the case for opposition.*

*Michael Terwey, Chair of SHCG and Head of Collections and Exhibitions at National Media Museum, gives a summary of the discussion which followed the debate.*

## **Proposition – Jonathan Wallis**

Visitors are the new curators!

For years many museums have been able to employ a number of curators, some with specialist knowledge, allowing displays and exhibitions to be developed entirely from the knowledge that the museums hold. In this age of austerity museums have sometimes had to reduce the numbers of specialist staff that they have. We certainly have in Derby. In austere times like this we find ourselves returning to the way that we operated before the growth in our staffing levels in the 1960's. For almost 100 years we had successfully developed exhibitions and built up collections with one or two members of professional staff. In order to interpret and understand those collections, we worked with many local people with more knowledge than us. We developed exhibitions with the support of those who visited us, building community support for what we did in the process. There are specialist communities who visit us: collectors groups, local archaeological and history societies, natural history groups, old comrades associations and many more, who have first hand knowledge and experiences that can help us to develop and relate the stories that are told in our museums.

In the period when we had plenty of staff and were able to generate our own exhibitions without outside help, we had lost touch with our local community. The exhibitions that we presented were from a limited viewpoint and almost two-dimensional. As we return to allowing the visitor some curatorial control again, we are giving back ownership of the collections to their rightful owners. Allowing a multitude of voices to give greater depth and real emotion as well as extra levels of knowledge to what other visitors experience. The museum professional's job has returned to be about guidance and facilitation as well as the academic foundation of our subject. It is the experience and knowledge of our visitors that brings what we do to life, connects it to people and makes our job a whole lot easier.

In these days of widespread technology usage, our visitors expect to be able to see multi layers of interpretation and to participate and share knowledge and opinion in a much easier way. If they cannot be part of their visit as they might our on-line content, we will lose our ability to keep and attract new visitors. Museums need to be seen

more as Wikipedia – something that is more often than not right but where visitors can add more information and influence how it is arranged and experienced by the next visitor. Visitors who become more engaged will become our future supporters. Engaging with visitors in this way will ensure that we include a wider story that strikes a chord with more of our visitors and starts a snowball effect so that eventually we are relevant and engaged with the majority of our communities.

The visitor is not the **only** new curator but another curator standing side by side with us helping us understand the world.

### **Proposition – Annika Joy**

I have a confession: my name is Annika and I am a Visitor Advocate.

My team and I sit around large tables with curators, exhibition officers, learning professionals, conservation managers, designers and support teams to address the barriers visitors face when trying to engage with our vast national science collections.

We base the evidence for our advocacy on intelligence gathered from visitors and non-attenders in a cycle of front-end, formative and summative research.

And what do we find out? That visitors usually need two things: authoritative, factual information & strong narratives they can relate to. So far, so predictable. Keep calm and carry on curating.

Simultaneously, our visitors expect to participate, not just interact. To collaborate, not collude. Rubber stamping is history.

Over the last twenty years the audience research unit at the Science Museum has supported the museum to address fundamental barriers to engagement, as well as the numerous and specific challenges presented by certain aspects of the collection, particularly the communication of complicated science principles and practice in contemporary galleries.

This has helped us to get beyond a passive mode of visitor engagement. Results show that inviting contributions to temporary exhibitions, building dialogue models for events, and enabling projects that engage particular groups under-represented in both audience and collection, can all affect visitor opinion of the museum. They grow to understand that it is not a fortress, that there is a way in, and that they can engage with us in ways more active than simply wandering through a gallery or watching a demonstration.

Local museums will say "yeah, yeah, that's what we do everyday".

Traditionally – and forgive the shorthand – the exhibition process in museums up and down the country basically goes like this:

1. Plan the exhibition (behind closed doors)
2. Do a spot of consultation to endorse your ideas
3. Produce the exhibition (behind closed doors)
4. Build the exhibition (behind closed doors)
5. Done!
6. Open exhibition to the public and hope to goodness they like it
7. Conduct some evaluation

Faced with 2470 square metres and information communication objects that have been collected to tell a history of invention, what's the answer? Our objects don't yell "Hey, I was used by a person just like you, come close and smell your story in my shiny metallic fascia". Rather our collection goes some way to reinforce a historiography that science is done by clever, white, bearded men in mysterious places like laboratories and bears little relation to the wider culture of the day, let alone the present inhabited by our visitors. With a strategic shift to re-establish the role of our historic collections, the vital importance of addressing this major hurdle to engagement with our objects has been catapulted into prominence.

Conversely our more recent collecting of information communication objects tells a story of familiarity, provoking a response that screams "Er, what's this doing in a museum when I just flogged mine down Cash Converters?" How do we make meaning when what resonates is over-familiarity?

And like you, Social History Curators, visitors aren't all cut from the same cloth. They are diverse. They want to take part in programmes that play to their strengths and develop their experience and expertise. They don't all want to be curators.

There is no simple community heritage practice answer to this. A short term project won't sort this out!

To successfully disrupt the process from concept to delivery, the Science Museum is rethinking its entire approach to exhibition development. As part of its commitment, it must be willing to make mistakes and to learn from them. A conscious choice to take imaginative risks. Put simply, why stop at saying visitors are the new curators? Moreover, why make the practical and active engagement of visitors the sole responsibility of learning colleagues?

Our research unit is the mechanism which allows the museum to make mistakes and learn from them, so we have set ourselves an ambitious task: to enable our visitors to curate with us, to interpret with us, to design and to deliver our largest permanent gallery development in over a decade, charting the 250 year history of information communication. Visitor research enables the museum to experiment. The time has come to get more radical.

Ladies and gentleman, Chair, the opposition will tell you that this is all talk, that museum professionals do not sufficiently relinquish power and control to allow this to truly happen. As an empirical researcher I can prove to you on a small scale how our visitors respond to co-produced exhibits and events and as professionals yourselves you can no doubt draw on at least anecdotal reflections about your own work. This has helped me demonstrate the vital importance of this work in a national museum.

As yet, I cannot prove to you that an entirely co-created gallery charting the history of information communication from the cable to the cloud has been a success for the three million visitors, but as a museum we are confident in our risk taking that we're on the right track. And our engagement with visitors is so strong, we know they'll tell us when it's not working and support us to innovate again.

That's what science in a museum is really about. I urge you to be brave innovators by supporting the motion!

## Opposition – Piotr Bienkowski

So visitors are supposedly the new curators? Really? Let's start by looking at what 'old' curators did, or still do, if there are any left, before we judge that visitors have taken over those roles.

'Old' curators:

- Looked after collections.
- Developed collections through acquisition and disposal.
- Documented collections.
- Interpreted collections through exhibitions and events.
- Facilitated use of the collections for educational purposes, e.g. for schools and further/higher education.
- Depending on the size of the organisation, curators may also have done conservation, fundraising, outreach, advocacy.

So I think the 'model' for the old curator is one of expertise and authority: expertise about the collections, and authority to use them and interpret them according to that expertise.

And this is where the idea that visitors are the new curators breaks down – despite years of investment into 'engagement' and 'participation', museums have not managed to give participants any real authority, or to acknowledge that the different expertise they bring is of equivalent importance to traditional curatorial expertise. These are bold claims, but let's look at the evidence:

- Most engagement work in museums and galleries is project-funded and short-term: once a funding stream runs out and a project with one group is finished, the museum moves on to working with another group. There are no long-term relationships, no embedding into local needs.
- A lot of engagement work in museums happens at the periphery of the organisations. The people who carry it out are often project funded – and we all know a lot of them lost their jobs when Renaissance funding ended and was subsequently restructured. In most organisations, engagement is not regarded as core work, and most staff seem to think it is someone else's job to do it, rather than something everyone has a shared responsibility for.
- Most museums use their visitors and communities to 'rubber-stamp' their own existing plans. Bernadette Lynch, in *Whose Cake Is It Anyway?* (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2011), has quoted one community partner describing a museum's consultation practice: the museum director returns from a high-powered meeting in London hearing about the 'next big thing'. He briefs a member of staff on a major new project the museum will now be embarking on. The staff member asks: "Shouldn't we be consulting our community partners?" The Director says: "Good idea! Please organise it." The member of staff tells a community partner about the project. The community partner is just at that moment asking about what's in it for the community, when the Director runs in saying: "Sorry, held up at a meeting. So pleased you are on board for this important initiative." The community member starts to protest: "But I hardly know a thing about it!" when he is interrupted by the Director who says: "Sorry, have to fly – another meeting – you know how it is. Can't tell you how much we appreciate your collaboration." I have seen this happen in many museums, and sadly it is an accurate depiction.

- Participants are usually passive beneficiaries of whatever the museum or gallery is inviting them to – they feel as if they have little voice and no control. They are not empowered in any way, and have no authority. The museum continues to make all the decisions.
- Any input participants bring to an exhibition tends to be ‘quarantined’: we can all recognise this, the ‘community exhibition’ spaces, tucked away in the corner of the museum. What you don’t get is participatory input and interpretation in the mainstream galleries, where traditional curatorial knowledge reigns supreme, describing things that can be measured and quantified – how old is it, who is it by, what’s it made of, why is it important historically. That type of knowledge IS important in museums and galleries, and it would be an abdication of responsibility to exclude it. But it is not MORE important than relational knowledge based on experience, emotion, creativity, memory, connection, and all those senses excluded from scientific knowledge – taste, smell, hearing, touch, or forms of ‘perception’ that cannot be measured – which are often the sorts of interpretation brought in by community groups.

We need both types of knowledge, and the recognition that they are different types of knowledge and expertise but they are equal in importance. And we need more sharing of authority and more long-term relationships. So not only are visitors definitely not the new curators, since museums have not given them that authority or recognised their expertise, actually we don’t want them to be the new curators – what we do need is more equitable partnership and shared decision-making between curators and visitors.

I’d like to sum this up on a topical note. In all the brouhaha over the Jubilee in 2012, sadly we didn’t hear enough about a man who had rather alternative views on the topic: Oliver Cromwell. He had some pretty radical ideas about authority, but most of all he worried about the nature and legitimacy of authority. More than 350 years ago he asked a question that is still relevant to museums today. He said: “I am as much for a government by consent as any man; but where shall we find that consent?” (recorded by Edmund Ludlow in 1656). Museums, and curators, are still in many places an autocratic expert culture, rather in the mould of Charles I. They have not, and should not, completely hand over their responsibility for collections and interpretation to visitors: but they should look to their visitors and communities to find the mutual consent to make decisions and interpretations

## Opposition – Tracy-Ann Smith

Participation can never truly replace curatorial knowledge and expertise, because participation is not supposed to replace curatorial knowledge and expertise.

Replacing curatorial knowledge with visitor knowledge can be as tokenistic as some of the rubber stamping community consultation exercises we have seen over the last decade. By asking visitors to become the new curators the museum denies curators the opportunity to be an important participant in a dialogic process.

Let us look at models of participation. In 1969 we had Arnstein’s ladder of participation, and Wilcox simplified this for us in 1992. Both quite rightly conflate participation with power. Undoubtedly power, authority and knowledge figure large in participation in a heritage context.

In these ladders of participation the lower rungs represent patronising and tokenistic engagement, with the higher rungs showing increasing real participation and collaboration. At the top of Arnstein’s ladder, the ‘holy grail’ of participation is that power is completely divested to the community. I am a fan of Arnstein’s model, despite numerous critiques, and it holds firm in many contexts today. But I have a problem with

delegated power being the highest rung on the ladder, because it is too easy to divest ring-fenced power in a controlled and tokenistic way – it is much harder to share and negotiate knowledge and real power.

One of the hardest things for museums to do is achieve that penultimate rung – the real collaboration where all sides gain and grow – where exciting exchange happens in a culture of mutual respect for different ways of knowing. Using visitors as the sole curatorial voice effectively avoids engaging on an equal footing, learning from each other and crossing social divides.

It is hard for a museum to accept it is not a neutral space. Museums are political and social spaces. So they shouldn't just be talking about the history of their area; they should be working shoulder to shoulder with their community to make it a better place to live now. They should be involved in local campaigns, contributing to sense of place and identity, expression and conservation; using history, art and science to impact people's lives today.

I oppose visitors being the next and sole curators. I want to see museums take up the challenge of creating something they couldn't create alone. No one said participation would be painless – it will involve bruised egos and stepped-on toes, but if we get it right, it could provide a route of survival and evolution for the cultural heritage sectors into the future.

### **Chair – Michael Terwey**

The discussion which followed the debate took a slightly different direction to the main question, of whether "visitors are the new curators", but instead followed the speakers in addressing whether museums are currently sufficiently committed to a more shared approach to knowledge production.

This supposed lack of commitment might manifest itself through a reluctance to offer 'real' opportunities for communities to shape museum exhibitions and projects – fine in the 'community gallery' but what about the permanent displays? Equally museum managers and curators may be reluctant to cede control over their projects and institutions for a number of reasons: fear that the outcome will not be 'accurate'; concern that the museum has a professional responsibility to present visitors with a high quality (well designed, interpreted) product; or a resistance to the implication that curatorial expertise is but one knowledge among many.

At least one contributor raised the issue of how specialist curatorial knowledges can coexist with local, personal knowledges. There may be tension between the two, and the careful and open management of the expectations of participants is a critical element in the planning and development of co-produced museum projects.

Many contributors offered the view that the two sides of the debate were essentially in agreement and tried to draw out the differences. Others gave rich examples from their own work of the challenges and benefits in working directly with audiences to produce exhibitions and other museum projects.

The balance of contributions favoured those opposing the motion, and supported the belief that museums need to do more to engage communities in their work, and that many benefits come from doing so. There were few dissenting voices, and the motion was rejected decisively.

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

# Who is the curator? LGBTQ collecting and identity forming over the rainbow (flag)

*Eduardo Giménez-Cassina is a Postgraduate Researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London, who has worked in architects' firms and museums internationally. Here, he discusses inclusion and the 'accidental curators' of LGBTQ identity.*

We live in an over-musealised world. Yet, this large museum spectrum often fails to accommodate the realities of certain communities, excluding them from being represented in society at large. With the exception of the Schwules Museum in Berlin and the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) museological narratives are virtually non-existent. Authors like Klaus Müller (2001) and Angela Vanegas point to 'institutional homophobia' as one of the reasons for this exclusion (2010: 163), a situation also denounced by Joshua Adair, who discusses how often house museums in the UK or the US would 'avoid the issue of addressing owners' sexuality whenever possible' (2010:266).

This form of bigotry was what led the British Museum in the 1840s and 1850s to have a *Museum Secretum*: an off-bounds dependency where 'obscene materials' were to be kept, objects that often had to do with representations of homosexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome (Frost 2010: 140). In 1994, Gabrielle Bourn's research showed that only eight museums in Britain had represented LGBTQ issues in the last decade (1994:10). In 2000, Angela Vanegas did similar research and recorded 13 exhibitions since 1994, most of them with a broad subject matter that reflected LGBTQ material, or about gay men, often appearing in the context of AIDS (2010: 167). This research was only carried out in a British context, but one is left to wonder about the representation in museums in other countries where LGBTQ visibility is not as large.

The notion of LGBTQ identity in museums raises further questions of what is 'gay'. As Vanegas points out, because LGBTQ individuals are defined by their sexuality, most of the displayed objects exhibited in museums are sex-related (2010), when clearly the queer identity is more than that. The issue of collecting representative elements of the community however, does not seem to be a problem for the two dozen LGBTQ archives that exist worldwide, mostly in the US. Their collecting practices are diverse, from private collections like the Tretter Collection to collective collecting practices such as that of the Gay Archives of Quebec. Most of these sites however, raise questions about access by a wider audience, catering mostly to researchers and people with very specific LGBTQ affinities.

In order to reach out to a larger sector of the population, some of these venues organise temporary exhibitions, such as the Lambda Archive of San Diego, in the City Hall of the Southern Californian city, or the ONE Gallery in the *gaybourhood* of West Hollywood, run by the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive of Los Angeles. However the temporary nature of these events, or the lack of being supported and represented by a larger museological or institutional body, often result in their continued invisibility.

Many of the archives, such as the Gerbert/Hart in Chicago, the Centrum Schwule Geschichte in Cologne, the Transgender Centre in Houston, the Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, or the Stonewall National Museum and Archives in Fort Lauderdale, take the shape of a library, reinforcing the scholarly nature of the project, despite occasional exhibitions of other material. Other archives are housed in the libraries of universities, such as the Hall-Carpenter Centre in the London School of Economics, The Pride Library in the University of Western Ontario, or the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in the library of the University of Minnesota. These collections, embedded in a larger fabric of non-queer narratives, might allow those not familiar with the LGBTQ world to

get acquainted, yet their highly academic profiles in university libraries that have a restricted admission might prevent the access of public at large to these collections. Furthermore, even their placement within the library might be a reason for discrimination or limiting access: the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection at the Minnesota University Library is housed under the 'rare and special books section', a clear sign of how subconsciously there still is a wall reinforcing the idea of 'the other', preventing queer books to be mixed with straight books, queer readers mixed with straight, 'un-special' and 'un-rare', readers.

### The Accidental Curators

As pointed out earlier, the institutional homophobia present in the museum community at large prevents the representation of LGBTQ communities within museum collections. This museological gap, at times filled by temporary exhibitions in permanent museums, is normally fulfilled by different platforms that do the task that the museum has rejected to perform.

As I explored in a previous essay (Giménez-Cassina, 2010), LGBTQ focal points from gay villages or *gaybourhoods*, to community centres or private businesses targeted to a queer audience, could be understood as fulfilling a role of heritage preservation and identity formation similar to that of ecomuseums. It is in these platforms where stories and elements from the community are collected, stored and displayed (Giménez-Cassina, 2010). Furthermore, many of the people involved in these sites, consciously or not, trigger mechanisms that could be understood as 'communities of practice': from gender transitioning talks to the development of musical tastes to drag-king workshops. These are forms of collecting heritage that otherwise would be lost, and are perhaps only preserved because of the communal dynamics triggered by the LGBTQ being together (Giménez-Cassina, 2010). These community-empowering synergies, concentrated in a physical space, is an idea that political advocate for LGBTQs in San Francisco, Harry Britt, defines as '*when gays are disseminated in space, they are not gays due to their invisibility*' (Harry Britt, quoted in Castells 1997: 303). An idea further reinforced by Joan Nestle's account of underground lesbian bars in the 1950s New York:

*Silenced and policed, we congregated in allotted spaces. Borders were marked and real; vice laws, police and organised crime representatives controlled our movements into and out of our 'countries'. But what could not be controlled was what forced the creation of these spaces in the first place – our need to confront a personal destiny, to see our reflections in each other's faces and to break societal ostracism with our bodies. What could not be controlled was our desire (1997).*

Arguably, it was their togetherness, feeling part of a cohesive yet diverse community, which allowed (and still does) and empowered the LGBTQ community to live and to meet, despite the illegal nature of those meetings or the social stigmas projected onto them. The managers for these focal points where the LGBTQ meet, whether physically or virtually, are thus accidental curators. However, these alternative heritage professionals do not necessarily understand their power in crafting a queer identity. Many of these grassroots initiatives work within a capitalist framework, often intended to gain an economic profit, following a specific agenda. However, they are crucial venues for this under-represented community in museums and culture.

One of these platforms is the bookstore Berkana, in Madrid, which served as a catalyst for turning the previously run-down Chueca district into the *gaybourhood* that it has become today (Hernández, 2011). The shop opened in 1993 in neighbouring Malasaña, relocating in 1994 to Chueca. As Mili Hernández, Berkana's founder and a key figure in the LGBTQ community in Madrid, acknowledges, there was a total lack of visibility, an aspect she intended to reverse. The indiscernibility the community was subject to, was not only obvious on the streets – Berkana displayed the first rainbow flag in the city

(Hernández, 2011) – but also in culture: the lack of queer literature and essays in Spanish led Hernández to set up the LGBTQ-specialised publishing house, EGALES. The project is now a literary reference point, a portal to the previously secretive and invisible queer community.

When I asked her whether she was aware of her role of crafting a gay identity by being the manager of that platform, she said:

*I am aware of my role, and at times I have been accused of trying to create 'a segregated gay society' by some members of our own community. This is not true, [...] We sell books so that we can survive, but yes, it is true that in reality we are a meeting space for queer culture (2011).*

Berkana complements the selling of books with several activities, such as book discussions and presentations, art exhibitions and a café space<sup>1</sup>, all performed in a venue with a greater access than a locked door that requires a password. Being certainly aware of her role of crafting a 'gay identity' through her literary and physical platforms, she is also aware of the importance of opening up to society as a whole in order to be destigmatised. She laments the scarce numbers of straight clients she has, providing an understanding of the limitations of her platform: already located in a predominantly gay area, several people – straight and closeted homosexuals – might find it hard to access, a glass wall that leaves people out.

Visibility is central to Mili Hernández's mission, an aspect that translates from the open façade of her shop to the publishing policy of EGALES, where pseudonyms are not allowed (Hernández, 2011). The pioneering presence of Berkana rapidly changed the dynamics in the neighbourhood: from a behind-doors night scene of gay bars and saunas, to the numerous businesses that currently operate during the day, geared towards a queer clientele, a daytime visibility that was previously non-existent. However, this might not work for all people in the LGBTQ collective: due to the private nature of some of these venues, stakeholders often fail to understand and include the whole spectrum of members in the LGBTQ gamut, let alone straight individuals, leaving out, often on racial or socio-economic grounds, unrepresented groups; a situation denounced by American Professor Judith Butler when she rejected the Civil Courage Prize in 2010, awarded to her by the organising committee of the Christopher Street Day (CSD), Berlin's Gay Pride Parade. In her rejection speech she mentions how:

*We all have noticed that gay, bisexual, lesbian, trans and queer people can be instrumentalized by those who want to wage wars, i.e. cultural wars against migrants by means of forced islamophobia and military wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. In these times and by these means, we are recruited for nationalism and militarism. Currently, many European governments claim that our gay, lesbian, queer rights must be protected and we are made to believe that the new hatred of immigrants is necessary to protect us. Therefore we must say no to such a deal. To be able to say no under these circumstances is what I call courage (2010).*

In her speech, she accused the CSD committee of not distancing themselves from racist claims. The controversy started after the 'commercialisation' of the event, when in 1997 the CSD organising committee started charging the numerous groups to parade. Minority groups felt this measure excluded those who could not afford to be represented, thus given a voice. Furthermore, the parade day changed in 2006 because the day conflicted with the Football World Cup (Butler, 2010), a move that several members of the LGBTQ community felt was a sign of how commoditised and de-politicised the initiative had become. A reactionary parade started in 1998, the Transgeniale CSD, taking place in the neighbourhood of Kreuzberg every year normally the same day as the CSD, in which minority and politicised groups and views could be represented.

The political agenda many of these platforms have is also a conflicting issue that needs to be analysed. AIQaws is a Palestinian LGBTQ Collective with presence in Israel and the West Bank. In its origins it worked as part of the Jerusalem Open House (JOH), an apolitical space where LGBTQ Israelis and Palestinians worked together. However, feeling that the political dimension of their identity was too large to deny, in 2007 they decided to secede, in order to run an entity in which politics could be included (Maikey, 2011). Running a political agenda mostly based on the anti-occupation of the West Bank and Israeli Boycott, has prevented AIQaws from collaborating with other Israeli LGBTQ groups: the latter being funded by the government, thus preventing them from taking open anti-zionist stands (Maikey, 2011).

AIQaws runs numerous activities from its offices in Jerusalem, where they also collect narratives from queer Palestinians. However, in recent times there have been discussions about re-orienting the platform, wanting to reach a larger spectrum of people, as they feel there are some who are not being given a voice, such as disabled queers or transsexuals, and feel they would be enriched by including more groups and being a platform about 'sexuality and gender diversity', as Haneen Maikey, one of the founders, attests (2011).

Transgendered individuals are often the least represented group of the LGBTQ in museums, despite on occasions being the most 'visible' queer community: a form of earmarking that excludes and stigmatises this community even more than homosexuals. As Richard Sandell points out:

*Identifying examples of exhibitions with narratives that featured gay or lesbian lives was relatively easy (even if the examples themselves were numerically few) but representations of transgendered people were, not surprisingly, much harder to find. (2007:191)*

Even though academic acceptance for two-spirited individuals might be on the rise, there is still a lot of work to do at street level, as an hijra from India points out: 'They make documentaries about us and say all these interesting things, but when we walk out on the street we still get the calling and the whistles' (Harvey, 2008).

Organisations such as Samabhavana, in Mumbai, have been created with the goal in mind of defending sexual minorities and sex workers, many of them hijras. This incredible task is acted out at different levels: from workshops on AIDS education in rural settings to exhibitions of queer art throughout the state of Maharashtra. Samabhavana is just a platform of a large invisible support network that has been established throughout India by the different LGBTQ collectives. Furthermore, a crucial role that these institutions play is that of portal into the often-victimised and off-the-streets LGBTQ lifestyles in India. Many of these platforms lack a physical venue, being online sites where queer individuals might find support, representation and advice. However, this form of access excludes a large majority of the population, barely able to read and write, let alone have access to a computer.

Hijras have a long history as visible gatekeepers of the LGBTQ community in India. They often live in extremely close-knit communities, centres for hermaphrodites, eunuchs and transsexuals that do not find a space within the established heteronormativity of society at large. Their debated semi-religious origins, as well as generations of stigma, abuse and hatred, have removed them from fully participating in society, relegating them to sexual labour or forms of superstitious begging to survive. They have created not only familial bonds with other fellow transsexuals, but also established 'communities of practice' where they learn from each other 'feminisation' tricks, or engage in religious practices such as the yearly mourning of the death of Hindu god Aravan in South India. These identity-forming rituals remain in the community's private

realm, and are not accessible for members outside the group. It is probably this mist of ignorance and secrecy that provides a fertile soil for damaging rumours and stereotypes to emerge. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit one of these communities in Chidambaram, in the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. I was fascinated by the numerous oral and dance traditions they had. When I asked the matriarch of the community how she recorded them, she described how they were just passed down generation after generation. However, with a high prevailing illiteracy rate, the transfer of such heritage was purely dependant on the collective memory of the group. The strong Tamil identity and Shiva-devotion present in this particular group also excluded other hijras from participating, who might belong to a different state, ethnicity or religious devotion.

## Representing LGBTQ in the museum

Whatever the success these platforms might have at gathering stories, forming heritage and crafting identities, a crucial aspect for their future realisation would be widening access and participations, not unlike museums. Yet, the 'glass walls' surrounding many of these venues, structures built by socially engrained stigma, fear and homophobia, seem to be more opaque than those surrounding museums. Even though there are increased representations of the LGBTQ collective in the mainstream media, public debates of gay issues, a flourishing number of gay parades taking place in diverse cities throughout the globe, all of which increase the LGBTQ community's visibility, the museum world ought to also embrace these groups and incorporate them in their collections and displays. Not doing so would imply risking these communities, and their heritage, to fall into the abyss of social oblivion and exclusion.

The main argument behind the advocacy for 'mainstream' museums housing LGBTQ collections and exhibitions, has to do with the identity-forming potential such actions would have. Sociologist Manuel Castells defines identity in three large groups (Castells 1997: 36):

***Resistance identity:** developed by groups that recognise themselves as defamed or in an inferior position in society.*

***Legitimised identity:** presented by the dominant society to vindicate their control over social actors, often echoed in various nationalist movements.*

***Project identity:** social actors, based on the cultural goods available to them, who redefine their position in society, hoping to change configurations of the society as a whole.*

Despite certain currents promoting isolation, secession and differentiation at all costs, it could be said that the LGBTQ community at large wants to redefine its position in society, be embedded in a broader community beyond sexual orientations and gender identities. The concept probably centres on the thought that, unlike other groups, the LGBTQ community is not entropic, for its members engage and participate with individuals outside the community on a daily basis. Normalising the 'queer' does not necessarily mean a rejection of queer practice but rather people embracing them and accommodating them within the monolithic structures of society. This argument is endorsed by the ubiquitous campaigns supporting marriage and adoption for LGBTQ families, sexual reaffirming surgeries to be included in national healthcare plans, etc., fighting to have the same equal rights as their straight counterparts. Thus, the LGBTQ community should be understood to fall within Castells' definition of project identity. Following this argument, LGBTQ stories should be collected within an agenda-free framework (if such a thing were to exist), and represented in platforms where other communal groups are also represented. Looking for mainstream venues for collection and exhibition rather than LGBTQ centres, might 'engage a broader cross section of society in thinking about the issues raised in the exhibition' (Ted Phillips, quoted in

Sandell 2007:190), a perfect illustration of Castells' definition of project identity. City, national and historical museums provide an ideal space to do this.

One of these examples is the Amsterdam Museum<sup>2</sup>, as it has successfully integrated LGBTQ narratives in its permanent exhibition, a situation that mirrors the reality in a country where despite isolated incidents, the LGBTQ communities have been largely assimilated within the structures of society. By including these queer accounts, the museum is not only acknowledging the importance of this minority in the city, but also recognising it as an intrinsic part of Amsterdam. The Brighton Museum is another example where LGBTQ groups have been integrated in the permanent collection (Sandell, 2007:8), yet again reflecting the large queer community that lives in the Southern English city.

These situations unfortunately remain the exception and not the rule. In Berlin, the German Historical Museum has dedicated several rooms to Nazism, or migration, yet there is a fissure in the narrative: the untold stories of the gay members of society. Should this void be compensated by the Schwules museum? This raises issues of access, representation and also semiotics: the idea of the otherness, just like in the library of the University of Minnesota, the queer biographies are placed again in their own 'rare and special' section.

The Stadtmuseum, Berlin's city museum, also ignores this part of its history. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the German capital was a centre in the documentation of gays and lesbians in numerous fields (Müller 2001), as has been masterfully recorded by authors like Christopher Isherwood in his autobiographical *Goodbye to Berlin*, or painters such as Otto Dix and his infamous *Portrait of Sylvia von Harden*. However, accounts of the Jewish community are reflected, leading us to understand that Libeskind's iconographic Jewish Museum is not compensating a narrative gap, but rather complementing a story.

This situation is replicated at the Copenhagen Museum, which after organising the temporary exhibition 'As I am', a historical reflection on LGBTQs in the city (which coincided with the Gay Olympic Games in the summer 2009 that the city was hosting), failed to incorporate any of the objects and accounts on display into its permanent collection. This situation, again, leaves the LGBTQ community as a 'temporary' community, perpetually relegated to time-based exhibitions and never contextualised and integrated in broader narratives.

Nonetheless, even in the Amsterdam Museum there is room for improvement: trans stories are not reflected, nor are the chronicles of migrant queers that also form part of the city. Whereas it is justifiable that not every biography might be reflected in a city museum, there continue to be significant LGBTQ minorities unrepresented. The 'institutional homophobia' that Vanegas and Müller denounce is, like any form of bigotry, unjustified, even more so because it may not reflect the wishes and values of society at large, let alone LGBTQ individuals. In 1999, the Museum of London organised a temporary exhibition that directly dealt with LGBTQ issues, *Pride and Prejudice*, the first of its size and impact. In it, interactive displays allowed the audience to give feedback. 95% of visitors believed that the museum was right in staging the exhibition and 87% believed that lesbian and gay history should be integrated into the museum's permanent collection (Burdon, 2000). Whereas it is possible that a large number of the visitors identified as LGBTQ, these data provide an indication of how, in many societies, there is a general acknowledgement of the need to integrate LGBTQ collectives, and their heritage, in society at large. This desire is also echoed in the data collected by Müller whilst researching LGBTQ representation with queer youth. The study revealed that 73% of those responding to the survey believed that 'museums are important institutions for educating GLBT youth' (2001:39), highlighting the need and the interest in this community to be represented in these institutions.

The representation and collection of LGBTQ heritage in museums is a long road that has many unanswered questions, some of them regarding the very nature of this fluid and diverse group. Should the LGBTQ community be limited to sexual orientation or should it be discussed in terms of the more inclusive 'queer community', accepting those individuals that do not necessarily conform with LGBTQ sexual/gender realities but do so in terms of a cultural or academic spheres, allowing them to fully participate and engage in these collective collecting practices? Furthermore, should we not just remove tags and avoid misleading names and limiting definitions? Perhaps we should just advocate for queer identities, a term that encompasses a lot more than just sexual orientations or gender identifications, overtaking the racism, islamophobia and transphobia that Butler denounced in her speech. How can it be possible to expect acceptance of queer realities when some of the most respected institutions in society, museums, do not represent them? Enmeshing LGBTQ heritage in museums, perhaps through participatory collecting schemes, would give a voice to this community.

One small step for a museum, one giant leap for humanity.

### ***Bibliography:***

Adair, J.G. 2010. 'House Museums or Walk-in Closets? The (Non) Representation of Gay Men in the Museums They Called Home'. In *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. Edited by A.K. Levin. Oxon: Routledge.

Bourn, G. 1994. *Invisibility: A Study Of The Representation of Lesbian and Gay History and Culture in Social History Museums*, unpublished MA dissertation, Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester.

Butler, J. 2010. *I must distance myself from this complicity with racism*. Translated Speech [original in German]. Electronic resource. Available at: The European Graduate School Site <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/articles/i-must-distance-myself/> (Last accessed: 24th October 2011)

Burdon, N. 2000. 'Exhibiting homosexuality.' In *Social History Curator's Group News* 46. Pp.13-15.

Castells, M. 1997. *La Era de la Información vol.2- El Poder de la Identidad*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.

Frost, S. 2010. The Warren Cup: Secret Museums, Sexuality and Society. In *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. Edited by A.K. Levin. Oxon: Routledge.

Giménez-Cassina, E. 2010. 'Who Am I? An Identity Crisis. Identity in the New Museologies and the Role of the Museum Professional'. In *Cadernos de Sociomuseologia* v.37. pp. 25-43

Harvey, N. 2008. 'India's Transgendered- The Hijras'. In *The New Statesman*. Electronic resource. Available at: The New Statesman Site: <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2008/05/hijras-indian-changing-rights> (Last accessed: 24th October 2011)

Hernández, M. 2011. *Berkana*. Interview with the author on 14th October 2011.

Maikey, H. 2011. *Palestinian Queer Politics*. Lecture 18th October 2011. Goldsmiths, University of London.

Müller, K. 2001. 'Invisible Visitors: Museums and the Gay and Lesbian Community', in *Museum News*. Electronic resource. Available online at: [http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN\\_SO01\\_InvisibleVisitors.cfm](http://www.aam-us.org/pubs/mn/MN_SO01_InvisibleVisitors.cfm) (Last accessed: 14th October 2011)

Nestle, J. 1997. 'Restriction and Reclamation: Lesbian Bars and Beaches of the 1950s'. In G. Ingram, A-M. Bouthilette and Y. Retter (eds.) *Queers in Space: Communities/ Public Spaces/ Sites of Resistance*. Seattle: Bay Press

Sandell, R. 2007. *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. Oxon: Routledge.

Vanegas, A. 2010. 'Representing Lesbians and Gay Men in British Social History Museums' in A.K. Levin (ed.) *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*. Oxon: Routledge.

**References:**

- 1 Unfortunately, due to the economic recession that started in 2008, Berkana transferred to a smaller space in the autumn of 2011 where there is no specific allotment for the café.
- 2 Formerly known as the Amsterdam Historical Museum.

# Access for the blind and visually impaired

*Alexia Clark and Kate Andrew, formerly of Herefordshire Museum Service, gave Conference a fascinating account of providing interpretation and access for visually impaired visitors. Here, they give Journal readers the benefit of their extensive experience.*

## Background

Herefordshire Heritage Services has been providing access to the blind and visually impaired for many years, and in fact won prizes for the level of access and interpretation provided as far back as 1998 when they were awarded a Gulbenkian award. In the early 2000s links were forged with the Royal National College of the Blind (RNC) which is based in Hereford and since then the service has made use of this audience of willing testers for the resources. Over more recent years Hereford Museums have hosted work placements from the RNC and in 2009 they also hosted a visually impaired Positive Action Trainee funded via Renaissance who in addition to work experience in front of house and administrative duties, advised on a variety of improvements which could be made to the resources provided and helped to test and trial these.

According to the service's visitor survey statistics 40% of the visitors to Hereford Museum and Art Gallery who declare a disability describe it as a visual impairment. The service is now able to provide access to that audience through T3, Tactile Images, Braille, Audio Guides, staff trained in interpretation and guiding and two 'app's. Each of these resources will be discussed in more detail below.

## Initial considerations

Before spending any time or money on creating resources for the blind and visually impaired it is important to really consider the potential audience, and the realistic usage of the resources. How many blind people are there in the area? – local councils should be able to give an idea of this, are there local support groups through which services could be advertised or through which a group of testers or focus group could be formed? In Herefordshire there are macular degeneration support groups, a vision links group, the RNC and more besides, but this may not be the case in other parts of the UK.

Around 360,000 people in the UK are registered as blind or partially sighted, with an almost 50/50 split between the 2 designations. Of those designated as blind, only 10% have no vision at all, meaning that 90% are able to see something – whether that be light, some colours, or even some shapes.

Because of the huge variation in what people can see, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to providing access for the visually impaired, although some resources will help more people than others. This variation is why testing is so essential throughout the process. Herefordshire's staff are still learning every time they have a visitor who is visually impaired, and it is necessary to evolve resources to meet the needs of particular groups of visitors.

The key learning point at Hereford has been that the resources work best when combined together to create a multi-sensory experience – a tactile image really comes alive when there is audio alongside to describe what the user is feeling.

One of the best resources in Hereford are the staff, most of whom have been trained in providing access to the blind and visually impaired. Staff are able to guide visitors around the physical spaces, to give audio interpretations of paintings, photographs and other items and to apply these skills when writing exhibition text or planning exhibition spaces in order to create an accessible resource. Staff are also able to produce tactile images, T3 sheets, Braille and audio guides in-house. The equipment used to do this

varies in cost, but is almost always cheaper in the long run than commissioning resources from elsewhere, and having the skills in house means that the team can create accessibility tools for temporary exhibitions as well as permanent displays.

Good practice in terms of labelling displays can benefit all users – printing on a yellow background is useful to those losing their sight to macular degeneration, but can also aid a dyslexic user. Printing all information at a reasonable font size is useful to older visitors just as much as those registered with a visual impairment.

Herefordshire Heritage Service have created the following protocols, procedures and resources for use in house, most are straightforward to use and low cost.

### **Large print**

It is extremely easy and cheap to produce a large print guide – simply by taking the existing museum text and increasing it to at least 20pt. Printing on a yellow background can be useful to some visually impaired users, printing on cream paper is good practice for all users. Otherwise a small investment in a set of coloured plastic overlays is useful – the overlays can then be laid over a white text sheet to correct the colour of the background. These can have benefits beyond the visually impaired, and can help users with dyslexia, tracking problems or other conditions, users will be able to select the most effective colour combination for their needs.

The exhibitions policy at Hereford means that all labels are printed at least 20pt and visitors have commented that they like visiting Hereford Museum's exhibitions as they don't have to be putting their glasses on and off every couple of minutes to read the labels or lean in very close to read the labels.

### **Braille**

Braille is usually what comes to mind when considering transcribing a document for the blind, but in fact these days as few as 2% of blind people in the UK can read Braille. Most people who can use Braille have been visually impaired from an early age, few who have lost their sight later in life go on to learn it.

This decline in Braille usage is largely due to the great reductions in the cost of personal computers, and the associated text speaking software used by the blind – such programs as JAWS. That having been said Herefordshire Heritage Services do get more commissions to produce Braille than anything else.

Braille comes in two forms – grade one and grade two. Grade one Braille is a simplified form most often used by beginners, and grade two is used by more advanced users – it uses a series of contractions so that not every letter is reproduced in its Braille equivalent on the page.

Even using this system of contractions, a Braille document is much, much longer than a written text piece. As a rule of thumb one page of text print will equate to about 4 pages of embossed Braille.

When taking commissions for Braille it is necessary to establish the end use – a recent request to translate an entire school prospectus would have come to around 150 pages of Braille with a cost for the school of over £1000 – when the school consulted with the blind parent over what information they actually required the job was reduced down to approximately 5 pages with a cost of less than £50.

Although equipment costs are covered later, Braille is one of the cheaper things to produce once the initial outlay of buying the embosser and associated software has been covered. There is also the chance to take commissions which can be used to offset the costs.

## Tactile Images

Tactile images are raised representations of floorplans, artefacts in the collections, photographs, paintings etc. The equipment needed to produce tactile images is expensive up front but the equipment is quick and easy to use, and like Braille, there is potential to take commissions from other museums as Herefordshire have done for Clun, Ludlow and the National Carriage Collection at Arlington in Devon.



Tactile images being used by a blind visitor

One of the hardest things to do when making tactile images is to forget everything you have learned about art – especially three dimensional representation on a two dimensional plane. To a blind person the basic features of a face – eyes, mouth and nose will make much more sense if represented straight on, and if not complicated by detail such as wrinkles, eyebrows, facial hair etc. The result is the kind of outline image of a person that would be seen on a toilet door or similar. However, whilst this is the best way to create a tactile for someone completely blind, some partially sighted users will appreciate additional detail and texture which enables them to combine touch and sight to get a more rounded experience. In order to strike a balance we have come to the conclusion that a tactile image is not much use on its own – it needs to be accompanied either by a sighted person who can interpret the image, or some audio description, or in fact with a Braille and large print description.

Recently Hereford Museums have been thinking about developing a series of conventions for Tactile images in a similar vein to those used in archaeological drawing. Initially this was discussed as a way of making images user friendly – ie a dotted surface would indicate that the item being represented was made of metal, and when the idea was discussed with some blind testers they felt it would be a useful step to take.

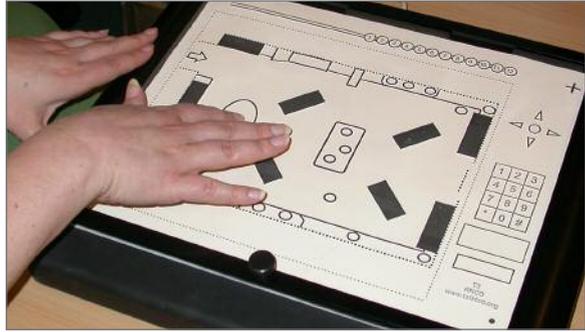
This is still work in progress with issues over representation of mixed media objects etc, a pilot is being developed for the in-house plan.

### Talking Tactile Tablet (T3)

The T3 is when tactile images really come alive – standing for Talking Tactile Tablet, the T3 system comprises a touch screen pad on which an overlay imprinted with a tactile image is placed. This pad is connected to a standard PC or laptop via a USB connection. Through pressing a unique pattern of three buttons at the top of the sheet and buttons at two diagonally opposing corners, the learner locates the sheet in the correct position, calibrates the sheet and activates the information files in the connected PC or laptop. The user launches the system by pressing anywhere on the ‘screen’ and then explores the overlay sheet through touch. As the user explores the raised contours of the overlay they are able to identify symbols, icons or tactile regions which when pressed trigger pre-programmed audio information. Each symbol may contain up to ten levels of information, namely each press reveals a new, related level of information.

The T3 is expensive, as is the training to be able to use it, but as with everything else the system is quick and easy to use and the initial outlay does allow the creation of access for temporary exhibitions in house. The T3 is also hugely popular with children and so can assist with their learning too, although they need some monitoring as the touch screen and connections are quite sensitive.

The other consideration with T3 is the space needed to use it – the T3, its laptop, and speakers take up quite a lot of room, and can be vulnerable to being interfered with or even stolen. Hereford have a cleverly designed cupboard that the speakers and laptop live in, with only the tablet itself being on display.



The T3 in use

## Audio

Audio is a great way to make information accessible to all sorts of people – it is not only appreciated by blind visitors, but also by foreign visitors who often understand more spoken English than they do written text.

Audio is relatively cheap to record and the equipment is also relatively inexpensive, the issue comes with having staff that are able to edit the tracks adequately – in Hereford a number of staff are also musicians and they have sound recording experience which they are willing to use to help out. However, some of the software on the market today is fairly easy to use, and can be mastered by most competent computer users.

Hereford records audio on portable recordable mini-discs which is a somewhat outdated technology and newer digital recording devices.

Once recorded and edited, the tracks are burned onto CDs and used with a number of portable CD players which were bought by the Friends of the Museum. However, the portable CD players are now at a point where they are coming to the end of their useful life and it is necessary to think about replacements – portable CD players are now redundant technology and as MP3 players take their place, and so those still on the market are expensive, however MP3 players are just too small and easily stolen. At present the audio offer is all on the museum app whilst another solution is investigated.

Audio can be as simple as a description of an object, or as complex as a step by step guide around a gallery – allowing for full independent access. Hereford have experimented with both, and also with guides which give walking instructions on how to get to the museums from the Royal National College, or the railway station, posting them out to prospective visitors.

The decision on what level of information to give comes down to researching the visitors that are likely to come. Even with the RNC in Hereford the museum very rarely gets unaccompanied blind or visually impaired visitors. Because of this, the amount of work that goes in to pacing out a step by step guide around the gallery is way out of proportion to the amount of usage such a guide would get. Thus the museum has settled for simpler audio descriptions just of 'star objects' and staff trained in guiding who could assist a blind visitor if necessary.

## Staff training

The staff training element of access is more valuable than any of the technologies discussed so far. As a service Herefordshire Heritage were lucky enough to receive extensive training on working with the blind and visually impaired in 2010 as part of the RNIB Culture Link project. This training included the basics of helping someone who is visually impaired to navigate their way around a space, and went on to look at the complexities of audio description and interpretation.

One key element to remember when audio describing is to find out about the condition of the person using the service. If they have lost their sight then they will retain a visual memory and so it is perfectly appropriate to use colours, and to describe the scene exactly as it appears it in order to build a picture for them. For someone who has been entirely blind since birth, it is much trickier – shapes are useful, but colours are not...again, this is a learning curve and something which only improves through practice. Audio description training is also extremely useful in audio guide script writing.

## **Apps**

The first app Hereford commissioned was funded by the Culture Link project and originally designed to accompany a summer exhibition of sculpture. However, due to a delay in the funding release the exhibition the project coincided with was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition of the Hereford Photography Festival.

Interpreting two dimensional photographs for visually impaired visitors was considered such a challenge that many thought it would be impossible, but in fact it simply tested the staff's creativity. The resultant app featured pictures and audio descriptions of six images from the exhibition, and was available on both android and iPhones. It received a mixed reaction, some of the users really liking it and getting on well with the touch screen technology, and others finding it near impossible to use without assistance from a sighted user to select the relevant tracks and get them playing.

In 2011 a second app was commissioned from partners Field of Vision. This app is focused on the permanent displays and is not so directly targeted at blind and visually impaired users, but instead seeks to give a good level of information in a range of formats – there is written text, audio clips and clear photographs. As far as VIP users are concerned it is not going to give them completely independent access, but it will give them information about specific items from the collections and eras and themes from Herefordshire's local history. It is now available by searching Hereford Museum on either the play store or the app store from iTunes.

## **Other approaches**

There are other approaches to access for the blind and visually impaired. M-Shed in Bristol is using the pen-friend to give access to its permanent exhibitions. This is a pen shaped digital device which comes with a series of stickers. When the pen comes into contact with the stickers an audio clip can be recorded and played back. The original use of the device which was developed by RNIB was to allow people to tell the difference for example between a can of dog food and a can of peach slices - so averting a breakfast disaster... It has been neatly adapted by MShed who have pre-recorded snippets of information about their displays. The stickers are all placed on a bright orange background allowing partially sighted users to find them, and they are also in round Perspex holders always situated to the top right of an interpretation panel – this consistency should allow a blind user to find them too.

The Tate Modern offer an irregular program of touch days where specific items are available for handling tours with specially trained staff – the downside of this is that it proscribes what the visitor can experience, and doesn't allow for a spontaneous visit, although the positive side is that a VIP visitor can guarantee that on those days there will be someone there who can interpret collections.

Hereford have been asked recently about handling tours of the collections, and this is something they are currently discussing with the local Vision Links group – the handling collections at Hereford Museum have also been used with Macular Degeneration groups to some success.

## Costs and suppliers

Index Braille Embosser – direct from Index Braille:  
<http://www.indexbraille.co.uk/basic.html>

### Braille Papers:

<http://www.sightandsound.co.uk/>

Zychem Fuser and Papers – Direct from Zychem  
<http://www.zychem-ltd.co.uk/Products/>

or <http://www.sightandsound.co.uk/> for the papers

### UController:

Produced by Behringer – available widely on the internet  
Microphone, CD players, Digital Recorders available widely from electrical retailers

### T3 Machine and Training:

Available from Royal National College of the Blind, <http://www.rncb.ac.uk/>

### Guiding and Interpretation Training:

Available from RNIB, <http://www.rnib.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

• Index Braille embosser	Starter pack £1625 including embosser and 1000 sheets of paper
• Braille paper	Replacement paper £15
• WinBraille programme	£400
• Zychem fuser	Starter pack £625 includes fuser, A3 paper and A4 paper
• Swell paper (A3 and A3 sizes)	Replacement paper - £75 for 100 sheets A3 or 200 sheets A4
• Audio recording equipment	U controller £35 Minidisc recorder £70 and discs £7 Microphone £35 or more
• App development	Expensive, but excellent design and complete editorial control using Field of Vision. Cheaper versions available but untried
• T3	The device including software and on-going support costs in the region of £900.
• T3 Authoring training	Costs £400 for a 'reasonable' number of people
• Guiding and Audio Interpretation training	Costs around £700 for a half-day training for up-to 16 people

## Conclusions

Providing access for VIPs doesn't have to be expensive, but it can be time consuming.

Technology moves on and some things that are useful become redundant eg. the T3 and portable CD players. Investing in people and transferable skills is more valuable than technology.

## Contact details

Alexia Clark – [alexiamarnie@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:alexiamarnie@hotmail.co.uk)

Kate Andrew – [geologicalkandrew@btinternet.com](mailto:geologicalkandrew@btinternet.com)

# Interpreting experiences – the Gun Turret Experience, HMS Belfast

*Cressida Finch, formerly Exhibitions Manager at Imperial War Museums (London Branches), gives us an insight into her experience of creating an "experience" for visitors on HMS Belfast, moored in central London. She is now Interpretation Manager at English Heritage.*

*'It made me feel like I was actually there, fighting.'* (Learning Family, UK)

The Gun Turret Experience, which opened in July 2011, is a permanent installation on the historic ship HMS *Belfast*. It aims to give visitors a taste of the 'experience' of being part of HMS *Belfast's* gun crew, and taking part in one of her key Second World War engagements, the Battle of the North Cape on Boxing Day, 1943, which resulted in the sinking of the German battle cruiser *Scharnhorst*, with the loss of all but 36 of her 1,963 crew. The Experience attempts to recreate some of the physical and emotional sensations of war at sea, to offer visitors a new way to understand the experiences of her sailors. It is in the form of a five minute immersive show inside *Belfast's* original 'Y' Gun turret, with IWM film and images projected onto the turret's walls and ceiling (using three projectors), and dynamic physical effects including the central gun rising for firing and the floor shaking as it 'shoots', plus smoke, smells and lighting. It features a voiceover narrated by a character based on a member of the gun crew, and draws on eyewitness accounts and new interviews with veterans. This article will discuss the issues and opportunities around developing an 'experience', especially one based on sensitive historic events, within the context of an historic site, and how far it meets its aims for its target audience. I will argue that 'experiences', while possibly raising eyebrows as a term, if carefully judged and pitched, can indeed be a useful interpretive tool to explore complex events or moments.

The concept of 'experiences' can often sound tacky or closer to a fairground ride than something suitable for a museum or heritage site. During an early project meeting for the Gun Turret Experience we debated the very use of the word 'experience',



HMS Belfast moored in the Pool of London. Copyright IWM.

as possibly giving out the wrong message about our intentions, yet the name stuck as the most appropriate description of what we were creating. Indeed, experiences at their heart are a form of interpretation which can appeal to different learning styles and be memorable and extremely effective in getting across key messages around unique events or life time experiences, which are often difficult to describe using more traditional means. Especially effective, very simple and durable experiences which arguably achieve their interpretive goals include the Natural History Museum's Kobe Supermarket earthquake machine (with its vibrating floor) and the Museum of London's Fire of London experience (until the refit of the Medieval Galleries, this was a very simple audio loop with a model which gradually lights up with the 'fire').

### **Interpretation on board HMS *Belfast***

A light cruiser originally launched in 1938 and moored in the Pool of London near London Bridge since 1971, the historic ship HMS *Belfast* is now part of Imperial War Museums (IWM). Visits, which can last from 90 minutes to four hours, follow an extensive route around the ship, much of which is restored and open. The ship and her history are interpreted through a palate of different interpretive techniques, centred on the dressed historic compartments using props, aromas, sound effects, and mannequin figures. Free audioguides (with four languages and a family option), are supplemented with graphics panels, films focusing on technical aspects, two exhibition galleries displaying objects relating to the ship and her crew, alongside a small but growing volunteer interactor scheme, and occasional event based reenactment. As part of improvements to the interpretation in 2010-11 I led projects to reinterpret two key areas of the ship: the Operations Room, which now includes simulated radar, soundscape and an interactive plotting table game based on the real-life naval operation 'Pony Express' from 1961, and the Gun Turret Experience.

The reinterpretation of these two areas is part of a gradual upgrade of HMS *Belfast's* interpretive interventions and presentation style, as funds allow, based on a new Interpretation Plan, key messages and audience segmentation. The key message is to:

*tell the story of life on board and explore how war affects and impacts on the morale, resilience and determination of a ship's community. We take visitors on a journey through the ship's nine decks and show them what life was like for the 950 strong crew, through the real life stories of the people who served in her.*

This move towards interpreting the ship through the lives of individual sailors who served in her helps to deepen visitors' understanding of the human impact of war, as family links to, and memories of, the Second World War stretch further distant.

The creation of more immersive and interactive areas is also part of the move towards increasing interpretation (and associated marketing) for one of the key audience segments for the ship, 'Family Focused Kids First', who are defined as 'looking for a more fun and social trip for kids and the whole family, learning and information is a second benefit. It is a mix of both UK and overseas visitors, with a focus primarily on families with children aged 8-11'. This is the target audience for the Gun Turret Experience. Appealing to this segment meant that the Experience needed to have an element of enjoyment or excitement, with elements of 'peril', while treading a very careful line of historical sensitivity.

Of course the family audience is not the only audience for the ship and many visitors (including many families) are interested in the technical side. As the Experience required making the turret dark this reduced visibility of the original fittings, making it harder to see and understand the technical aspects of the gun mechanism. The Gun Turret Experience was made possible by the fact that another of *Belfast's* four gun turrets is also open to the public with more traditional interpretation, including brighter lighting and a more traditional film explaining the gun mechanism.

## What type of Experience – and what is an Experience anyway?

During the development process I researched other 'experiences', both in museum and heritage settings and in commercial exhibitions. There is no hard and fast definition of an 'experience' but they usually engage multiple senses, often involving the physical with an element of movement, and their subject matter is usually a very unusual event or time and place which is difficult to understand using more traditional means of interpretation. Several visited involve some element of 3D film which is then supplemented with movement and another additional element to make it more 'real' (and often then termed '4D') – additions of bubbles at the London Eye Experience and water at the Science Museum's Legend of Apollo 4D film, which also includes moving seats. Others include walking through a scenic representation, such as two at IWM London. These are both longstanding exhibits which have proved very popular: The Blitz Experience includes sitting in an air raid shelter with the sensation of bombs falling around you (this includes a moving floor) and then walking into a devastated street scene. And The Trench Experience, which involves walking through a 'trench', with smells, lighting effects and voiceovers of mannequins narrating genuine letters from the archives.

Experiences can be relatively brief and simple (such as the Natural History Museum's Kobe Supermarket earthquake machine), or complex, such as the Doctor Who Experience at Olympia, which is a 20 minute experience with multiple sets including film (with 'Doctor Who' directly addressing the audience and appealing for their help in driving his TARDIS, shaking floor and 'laser' shooting Daleks), or the Trafalgar Experience in the Royal Naval Museum's Victory Gallery which again has multiple sets with a particularly effective scene set inside the Victory and including moving cannon.

For the Gun Turret Experience the use of the actual gun turret – a small space within the historic ship – determined the format to an extent, as it has no room for seats, and a standing experience for up to twenty visitors at a time became the most practical option. The budget precluded 3D film (the practicalities of issuing and collecting 3D glasses was also a concern). Retaining the integrity of the historic space and not damaging the fabric in any way was also extremely important. The use of movement was agreed early on in developing the brief, as the shudder of backblast would be key to the experience of being in the Turret. To achieve this, we needed a moving floor. The relatively low ceiling height was a factor in deciding how to create this. Adding hydraulics would have lifted the floor too high for comfortable head clearance, and so the designer came up with the ingenious solution of using speakers mounted to a false floor, which floats on rubber spacers, causing no damage to the original floor. When the speakers are activated it produces a definite shudder. A relatively brief experience was also appropriate (the experience length is five minutes), to avoid causing too much of a bottle neck and also as befitting an experience which is part of a much longer visit. The turret is monitored, but mostly unstaffed directly, except during very busy periods, so a count-down clock outside the turret indicates the start of the show.

### Risks: appropriateness and tone

A major issue in creating experiences is that of appropriateness and tone. The very title 'experience' can raise hackles, as mentioned, and just like the majority of museum and heritage experiences mentioned above (experiencing the Great Fire, an earthquake or First World War trench), the genuine experience of being in a Second World War Gun Turret was clearly not a matter for entertainment or a 'fun day out'. Genuinely being in the turret under operational conditions was cramped, with extreme conditions of hot and cold, loud noises which could result in life-long deafness, risk of injury from the machinery, and, above all, risk of loss of life as the enemies' gun turrets returned fire. At the Battle of the North Cape the guns and torpedoes of the Allied ships also resulted in very heavy loss of life for the enemy. Self-evidently museum and heritage professionals do not wish to endanger our visitors, even if we could recreate the genuine experience

(making HMS *Belfast* pitch and roll in the Thames would be definitely a step too far, and live ammunition a step further!). Any experience is therefore a much toned down simulacrum of a genuine experience, and visitors, apart from the very young, implicitly understand that, just as they understand watching a horror film, it is not real. The physical experiences of being in a gun turret are hinted at through movement, smoke and loud noises, which all serve to intensify what is most important, the emotional experience. The experience aims to give a sense, without becoming terrifying, of the grim reality of serving in a gun crew – a real risk of being killed, and the certainty that success will result in deaths among the enemy.

To do this, the experience needed to be sensitively managed, not shying away from the loss of life or the danger involved, without being mawkish, triumphalist or even worse 'cheesy'. These risks were countered through use of historical evidence, thorough consultation with a wide range of stakeholders on the script before production, and very careful monitoring of effects such as the type of music and the tone of voices used in the voice over. The experience is of urgency and loud noises, and is deliberately (and sign- posted as) unsuitable for very small children (it is recommend for over sevens only). The shaking floor and sudden rush of smoke do create an element of entertainment, but it is within the context of an explained historical moment, and the overall tone is sombre. Both sides of the conflict are featured, with images of sailors on board the *Scharnhorst*, and of shivering survivors in the sea and blindfolded after their capture featured in the film and image footage to emphasise the reality of the sinking. The script concludes with a moving toast genuinely given on *Belfast* after she returned to harbour:

*To the Scharnhorst although misled, our enemies put up a gallant fight and went down with their guns firing, as we know we would have done had the fate of the battle been otherwise.*

The issue of the multiple experiences of the members of the gun crew was also considered. No experience in life is the same for any individual. Members of a gun crew, as the different archival sources suggested, would all have slightly different experiences. Anyone who has researched warfare will know that while many die or are marked and scarred by war, others have different experiences, with boredom and inaction often being a dominant feature. Being in HMS *Belfast*'s gun turrets in the Korean War was very different to being in them during the Second World War, with just one element being different extremes of temperature, changing the turrets from freezing icebox to searing metal hothouse. We initially considered having several different narrators, perhaps set in different conflicts, and even having a 'boring' chapter – the life of a gun crew in peacetime. However during development this was refined to a simpler narrative structure based around the Battle of the North Cape, *Belfast*'s key action in the Second World War, to aid engagement and for clarity, especially as the majority of the ship is interpreted as it was during the Second World War.

### **Authenticity and historical accuracy**

IWM adheres to strict principles of historical accuracy and rigour and the experience was no exception. We worked closely with the design company to develop the script and check its accuracy. As much as possible of the script was drawn from historical sources in the archives, including for example a letter written by a young sailor, M D Withers, sent to his mother shortly after the Battle of the North Cape, where he describes his feelings straight after the attack. The gun drill itself was recreated from interviews with veterans, drill books and additional invaluable help from the ship's current Chief Yeoman who himself worked in a Royal Navy gun turret during the 1970s.

As the key interpretive aim was empathy with the sailors, it was decided to make the voice over from one point of view. An older voice introduces the story, and then his



Projections inside the Gun Turret Experience. Copyright IWM.

reminiscences take us back to his time as a young sailor in the gun crew, as part of a dramatization of the gun drill and the heat of battle. The older voice then tells of the aftermath. This approach allows background information and the result of the battle to be given. Ideally one archival source would have been used as a narrative, but no suitable material could be found, so in the end the story presented was woven together from a range of sources into one character. It was a concern that the visitor would feel tricked or confused, and so it was made clear with a line in the voice over and in signage that this was the method used, and a multiplicity of different faces is shown within the film to emphasize the point.

### Evaluation of the Experience

A visitor survey, conducted by two MA Museum Studies students (Wiestke Helwig and Corie Edwards of Leicester University) was carried out shortly after the Gun Turret Experience opened. This consisted of 30 interviews with visitors, mostly recruited as they visited but including some longer pre-arranged visits followed by detailed interviews, and five with Yeoman Front of House staff. This research covered all aspects of the ship but with a particular emphasis on the then newly opened Gun Turret Experience. Participants were divided according to the IWM's audience segments, which showed that it had been successful in attracting many different segments as well as the family audiences.

Those interviewed were overwhelmingly positive. Comments suggested that it meets its aim of creating empathy with the sailors, 'or me [motivation to visit was] a glimpse of how it was on such a boat. So, I really liked the experience of the Turret and some explanation about what life was like in such a Turret. You can see how life was and that they were cramped with 27 people in the Turret. I think it was well done' (Sightseers, The Netherlands). 'It made me feel like I was actually there, fighting' Learning family, UK Boy, 11 years old). 'I liked it a lot because it was well explained with the video' (Teaching family, Austria). Satisfyingly, the veterans who tested the experience were also happy with it and said that it gave a real sense of what it was like being in the turret.

The survey also suggests that it meets its aims of engaging the emotions and works on different senses: 'I actually had a woman get really emotional, she was crying. She was crying, saying it was really well done' (Yeoman). 'Excellent. It sort of attacks you from

all your different senses' (Self Developers, UK). 'That was really good....It was emotional and helpful. You didn't know how interactive the ship was going to be until you got into that room' (Self developers, UK).

Additionally it meets the aim of providing a 'wow'/highlight moment at the start of the visit – good news for the Marketing team! 'It is something you would tell your friends as a highlight of your trip' (Self Developers, UK). 'For me, what we've seen so far, it would be the highlight. It's enhanced the experience thus far' (Expert, Australia).

Two issues which were mentioned however were whether the sound levels were too loud for smaller children. Signage recommends the Experience for those aged seven and up, however some interviewed had found it on the loud side. As discussed the experience is designed to introduce an aspect of 'peril' as is made clear on the signage but the sound level issue should be monitored and, if a persistent problem, stricter age guidance could be put in place. 'It was only a bit too loud for him [child]' (Learning Family, Austria). [Did you find it too loud?] 'No, not at all. To be honest it is probably better when it is loud. Gives it more of a feeling doesn't it. You need it to be more realistic' (Self developer, UK). Foreign language speakers (in this case French) also noted that they would prefer a French version of the experience (although they did note that despite not understanding the whole voiceover the physical effects gave them a general impression of the gun and they still rated it as 'excellent'. Foreign language versions would be difficult to manage operationally (although this is the solution used at the Trafalgar Experience), but translation transcripts which could be read in advance, as it is dark during the Experience, could easily solve this issue going forwards.

## Conclusions

Like any project, improvements can be made to the Gun Turret Experience, but on the whole the feedback from visitors, staff and veterans has been positive. It benefits from having had clear aims and target audience, and, personally, I would recommend that other sites keep the idea of the 'experience' in mind when creating new interpretation. When interpreting a complex human event such as a battle, especially in the format of an experience, which can easily be seen as a 'ride', careful judgment must be made as to tone and appropriateness, but when done well it can create an effect which meets your interpretive aims. I was especially pleased that the veterans felt we had created something authentic. The last word must be given however to one of the visitors surveyed who pointed out that the whole ship is already a hands-on, interactive and immersive experience: at the end of the day, elements such as the Gun Turret are just an addition:

*'I think the ship is a real hands-on experience. You are actually in it'* (Expert, UK).

*The views above belong to Cressida Finch rather than the official line of the IWM.*

# Beyond Words: Understanding and sharing the meanings of manuscripts

*Jeff Cowton is Curator of the Wordsworth Trust. Here he shares experience from their recent project investigating the effective interpretation of manuscripts.*

Interpreting manuscripts successfully in an exhibition can be difficult. Those of well-known authors, works or moments in history will resonate with visitors already familiar with their significance. For some people, being in the presence of a draft of a favourite poem can be a dream fulfilled, and the end of a journey. For others, the wonder of such a manuscript will be lost. Manuscripts in our collection at the Wordsworth Trust, for example, are not brightly coloured, and cases filled with several similar-looking pages of handwriting do not have the visual power of other types of artefacts. They can even appear quite daunting to the uninitiated.

When we view a manuscript in an exhibition, how often do we read but fail to look? And by failing to look, how much do we miss? If we replaced the manuscript with a transcription of its words, what visual clues to its creation and history would be denied to the visitor? Occasionally, the words on a manuscript can be less important than its history; a closed exhibit to be looked at but not read. Most often, however, it is a combination of the text and the artefact that creates a powerful and engaging exhibit: the representation of words, images and ideas in a form that itself has history and meaning.

How do we stimulate a visitor's interest in manuscripts without adding more words to an exhibition that already requires the act of reading – more words added to words? How do we create a learning experience that makes the most of the visitor being in the presence of the manuscript, and one that goes beyond regarding the manuscript only as a two-dimensional holder of text? How do we encourage visitors to notice clues in the physicality of the object; to look closely at handwriting styles (different pens and hands, or the same hand instructed from different states of the same mind?); to notice the way the page is laid out; to investigate how the text changes over time through the visible evidence of drafts, revisions and additions; to get a sense of the manuscript's creation and history over several generations; to imagine what this physical object, perhaps with words of comfort or love, meant emotionally to its creator and subsequent owners?

In essence, how do we enable a visitor to see what at first glance looks like an old piece of paper in a typical museum display, as a thing with a prior life, which witnessed the lives of people every bit as real as ourselves, and which describes feelings and thoughts that are as common to us now as they were to the authors from the past. The text and the artefact: a powerful combination with great learning potential.

We began our investigations into these questions some years ago, with support from the Designation Development Fund, part of the Renaissance programme previously administered by the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council and now managed by Arts Council England.

A first round of funding enabled us to carry out an extensive programme of research into the learning potential of manuscript collections and to commission Piotr Bienkowski to produce the report 'Putting Manuscripts at the Heart of the Experience' completed in 2011. Further funding received in 2012 enabled us to implement many of the recommendations in the report. Firstly, to identify the meanings that can be found in manuscripts, we held a conference of academics, learning specialists and artists in Grasmere in April 2012. The conference (one of several that we have held as part of

this project) provided evidence to suggest that there were seven main areas of meaning, and many different methods of interpreting these meanings.

### The seven meanings of manuscripts

In 1979, Philip Larkin summarised the primary meanings held by literary manuscripts:

*All literary manuscripts have two kinds of value: what might be called the magical value and the meaningful value. The magical value is the older and more universal: this is the paper that he wrote on, these are words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination. The meaningful value is of much more recent origin, and is the degree to which the manuscript helps to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer's life and work.*

The conference examined a variety of types of document, and established seven distinct 'meanings'. We might ask ourselves, 'beyond the actual facts contained within the text itself, what wouldn't we know if we didn't have the manuscripts'? These 'meanings' are an articulation of the knowledge and understanding that can be gained from an examination of the physical qualities of the manuscript that a transcript of the text alone could not convey.

1. **Magical qualities – a moment in history.** A manuscript, like any artefact from the past, can take us to a moment in history. We as people can never go back in time to 1800, but by being with Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journal we are in the presence of something which has witnessed that time. It is a tangible link with the past.
2. **The creative process of the writer – the mind of a man in motion.** Regardless of the appearance of the words, manuscripts provide evidence towards the thought processes of their creators. One word replaces another, and paragraphs are added or removed.
3. **The state of mind of the writer.** The appearance of the manuscript and words provides evidence of the state of mind of the creator during the creative process. The pen strokes 'mimic the texture of thought'. The style of writing, emphasis of deletions, positioning and layout of words or paragraphs can all help us understand better the creator's intellectual and emotional state.
4. **Evolving relationships – the purpose and audience of the written piece.** All manuscript texts have a specific purpose and audience, even if this is just the creator themselves. This may change over time. This affects the handwriting and layout, and may provide evidence of the state of relationships between those involved.
5. **Manuscripts as social objects.** Manuscripts can contain texts with several creators and purposes, written at different times and in different places. Entries can be by one or more creators working together, and be sequential or layered on top of existing entries, perhaps over hundreds of years.
6. **The emotional values of the manuscript.** Manuscripts are not emotionally neutral. The creator invests emotionally and intellectually, the result perhaps being of financial, as well as artistic and emotional value. The subsequent holder of a manuscript will place a different set of values on it.
7. **The historical contexts in which the manuscript was created and used.** Manuscripts give evidence of life at the time and the general circumstances under which they were written. For example, they provide evidence of communication systems, cost and use of materials, and the social setting.

The focus of the second part of the project was to develop a range of interpretative techniques to engage people directly with the manuscripts and to draw attention to their physical qualities, better communicating the 'meanings' developed at the conference. Our research led to commissions of new artworks and new displays, and activities involving people of different age groups and backgrounds, both at the Wordsworth Trust and in community settings across Cumbria.

Several new displays were incorporated into the Wordsworth Museum as gallery interventions, and their effectiveness evaluated during the summer of 2012 (though these were experiments added to the existing layout of the gallery of 30 years standing, making the testing conditions less than ideal). It was hoped that these changes would also provide an opportunity for visitors to develop stronger emotional connections with the manuscripts, which might provide them with a deeper and more connected experience as well as encourage their receptiveness to learning. By encouraging social and emotional responses we also hoped to emphasise the social context in which the manuscripts were being produced and to emphasise the emotional 'meanings' of some of the manuscripts themselves

The prototype exhibits fell into one of five categories of interpretive techniques. The principal focus of the evaluation was to examine how effective the interpretative techniques were at engaging the visitor with manuscripts directly and the subsequent results of this engagement. The questions we hoped to answer by evaluating these interpretive techniques were:

- Which interpretative tools help engage the visitor in a direct physical examination of the manuscript?
- Which interpretative tools can help the visitor understand that a close physical examination of manuscripts can lead to a greater understanding of them? In particular which tools are effective in helping the visitor understand the seven 'meanings' of manuscripts?
- Which tools were effective in enhancing the visitor's experience, in particular:
  - Which exhibits did the visitors enjoy?
  - Which exhibits have led to social interaction amongst visitors?
  - Which exhibits led to emotional outcomes for visitors?
- Which interpretative tools are effective at helping the visitor understand the significance of the manuscript and appreciate its beauty?

The following interpretative techniques were employed:

- The use of visual art and visual representation.
- Redisplay and repositioning of manuscripts.
- The use of digital technology.
- The use of sound and film, integrating the voice of experts and enthusiasts.
- The use of hands on activities including high quality facsimiles.

The evaluation of these interpretive tools led us to a number of key learnings and recommendations to improve interpretation in future exhibits and gallery designs:

- The manuscript's physicality and associated 'meaning' should tell a story, and be part of an overarching theme or message which the visitor can relate to.

- The 'meaning' and associated evidence from the manuscripts needs to be a central part of an exhibit, with the various interpretative elements in an exhibition reinforcing this message.
- Selecting the right manuscripts is key to conveying simple messages relating to the seven 'meanings'. Manuscripts which have strong physical attributes should be used to tell a story through their physicality.
- Some of the art installed into the gallery was successful in highlighting the physical qualities of the manuscript, which in turn gave visitors an understanding of what these physical properties meant. However, this form of interpretation in particular should show a clear link between the art work and the manuscript itself, with the manuscript positioned centrally in the exhibit.
- We concluded that a small number of manuscripts should be selected, based on the criteria of conveying an overarching message/theme and sub-themes.
- The interpretative techniques motivated some visitors to examine the physicality of the manuscript and look for evidence such as handwriting and marks on the page, but few visitors were then able to translate this into an understanding of the 'meanings'. It was found that the use of films of experts was the most effective tool in helping the visitor understand these meanings. As we develop future manuscript exhibitions, the passion of the curatorial staff, experts and ordinary people should be used in sound-recordings and film to inspire and enthuse visitors, and support them in developing their own skills and understanding.
- It was the human story behind the seven 'meanings' that generated the most enthusiasm from visitors. We noted particular interest in evidence relating to the creative process of the writer and their emotional state of mind. Focus group participants said that they were most interested in the 'human' emotional aspects of Wordsworth, the man and his life (personal and professional). Therefore to enhance the visitor experience, we could focus on the human story of the 'meaning', using a manuscript that both illuminates the meaning and triggers further questions in the visitor's mind. For example, manuscripts of Wordsworth's poetry written in the hand of his sister Dorothy are evidence of the fact that Wordsworth suffered physical discomfort when he wrote and so used Dorothy as his amanuensis, showing the close relationship between the siblings. Visitors could either be encouraged to look for the evidence of the relationship in the manuscript, or find the evidence and then consider what it means.
- Visitors found the hands-on and interactive exhibits most enjoyable, and these exhibits were also the most successful at eliciting a range of learning outcomes. Interactive opportunities should appeal to different learning styles and tastes, but clear and direct reference should be made between these activities and the associated manuscript.
- Short written or audio transcripts combined with visual interpretation were more effective than lengthy extracts, with visitors preferring reading highlighted or enlarged extracts. Visitors generally did not engage with full or large written transcripts, or found them too difficult to navigate, therefore presenting a distraction from the manuscript itself. These hands-on exhibits helped to encourage social interaction between visitors, which in turn made the museum a more interactive and lively space, and encouraged shared learning experiences.

Despite the trialling of a number of different interpretative techniques, visitors still found the manuscripts quite challenging. For some visitors they presented such a barrier visually that further engagement was not possible. Our research recognises that, whilst setting high expectations of the visitor is positive practice, setting outcomes that are too numerous, complex or intellectual can mean that the simple messages of an exhibit are missed or lost amidst the attempt to present too much. Therefore a hierarchical layered approach to interpretation is required for all new exhibits. One key

message per exhibit relating to the manuscript's physicality should be articulated clearly at the highest level, with the opportunity to find out further information by reading, listening or viewing.

The project as a whole, along with Piotr Bienkowski's initial report, has transformed our ideas for interpreting manuscripts. We now have a checklist of meanings against which we can establish the learning potential of proposed manuscript exhibits, and a second checklist of tried and tested methods with which to interpret them.

For the full report, please email [j.cowton@wordsworth.org.uk](mailto:j.cowton@wordsworth.org.uk).

*As well as the support of Arts Council England, we would like to acknowledge the major contributions of Nick Winterbotham, Jane Davies and Jael Edwards in making the conference and evaluation of new ideas a success.*

# A touch of luck?: Developing an interactive touch screen display at the Museum of Edinburgh

*Laura Paterson was the Collections Trainee at Edinburgh Museums and Galleries during 2011-2012. Here she reflects on the development of their first interactive display. Laura is currently undertaking a PhD in History at the University of Strathclyde.*

In this article I will aim to discuss the development of a touch screen interactive display now included at the Museum of Edinburgh from the initial discussions that led to the decision to include a touch screen, to the final instalment and running of this display. I hope that by writing about the process we took in introducing our very first interactive display it will encourage other museum professionals to think about the benefits of employing this technology in their own interpretation.

The first phase of a large scale redevelopment programme took place at the Museum of Edinburgh from 2011-2012. The finished redevelopment incorporates a new audio-visual show sponsored by Registers of Scotland, a revamped vestibule and shop area, new access to the museum through an entrance courtyard and three new temporary and permanent exhibition galleries.

At the heart of this redevelopment was making the Museum of Edinburgh's collections more accessible and increasing the number of visitors to the museum. This was of particular importance to the curatorial team based at the Museum of Edinburgh. The redevelopment was a real opportunity to show off some of the hidden treasures within the museum's collection and to do so in a way that really changed the way in which the objects had previously been interpreted.

This was no more obvious than in the case of the National Covenant. The Museum of Edinburgh's copy of the National Covenant, a seventeenth century manuscript signed by the people of Scotland in defence of their religious and political beliefs, represents individuals from all walks of life who lived and worked in Edinburgh.



Touch screen display after installation.

Prior to the redevelopment of the Museum of Edinburgh the National Covenant displays and interpretation had not been updated for many years. Trying to tell the story of the National Covenant and the Covenanting Movement through interpretation panels had previously led to severe oversimplification of the subject and a misunderstanding of the origins of the manuscript itself.

When I joined the City of Edinburgh museum service in October 2011 as a Museums Galleries Scotland Intern I could not have imagined having the opportunity to work so closely with this wonderful object. However, with my background in Early Modern Scottish History and special interest in the National Covenant I was fortunate enough to be trusted with the project of redisplaying and reinterpreting one of the museum's most iconic objects.

By first using survey material gathered in the lead up to the redevelopment of the museum and gathering survey material of my own, I was able to establish the areas of the existing displays that required improvement. By using this material and talking with our front of house visitor assistants I was able to identify the areas of interest shared by previous visitors. After analysing the material gathered in surveys I also felt that visitors were failing to connect with the individual's who signed the National Covenant.

In many ways identifying the stories and facts that needed to be communicated was the easy part. The problem of how to deliver this material without visually overloading the visitors with interpretation panels and text was the most challenging part of this project.

My first port of call was to explore the rest of the museum's collections to discover if there were any other seventeenth century objects related to the National Covenant that would allow me to give a fuller account of the Covenanting Movement with more visual stimulus. I discovered a helmet likely to have been worn in the Covenanting Wars, a sword reputedly owned and used by Oliver Cromwell, and a copy of the Martyrs' Stone commemorating the Covenanters who died in the defence of their beliefs. By bringing these wonderful objects together in one gallery for the first time I was able to highlight the important events throughout the Covenanting Movement.

While the discovery of these objects was wonderful and would already have allowed the story to be told in a far more wide ranging way than previously accomplished it still did not in itself hold the key to telling the individual stories of the signatories of the National Covenant. With over 4000 signatures on the Museum of Edinburgh's copy of the National Covenant, and for many visitors the near impossibility of reading seventeenth century Scottish handwriting, it was a challenge to encourage visitors to inspect the signatures and make a connection with the people who had once walked through the same Edinburgh streets as them.

With the realisation that it would be impossible to give any of these Covenanters their own story within the Covenanting Movement it was agreed that I should look into the possibility of including an interactive touch screen in the redisplayed gallery. This was a daunting challenge as the City of Edinburgh museum service had never used digital interactive technology in any of its displays before.

My first point of call was to contact the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) and arrange a meeting with the Interactive Displays Manager to discuss their technology and try to get an idea of the cost involved in developing, installing and maintaining a display. Although most of the interactive displays at NMS were a lot more advanced than what we expected to be using at the Museum of Edinburgh we were faced by many of the same problems and challenges on a much smaller scale, and without the dedicated technical support available to the NMS displays.

Following this meeting I also met with the Digital and New Media Curator at Glasgow Museums, who had been leading the development of the interactive displays at Glasgow's new Riverside Museum. I was very much inspired by my visit to the Riverside Museum as it was very obvious how much thought and planning had gone into developing the systems they use. It was this meeting that really made me question our motivation for including a touch screen display in this gallery and what benefits it would bring that could not be achieved in any other way.

With the advice of two industry experts I set about writing a software brief for the digital interactive display. Our goal was to make a very complex subject available to our visitors in the most accessible way possible. To do this we wanted to break the subject down into small chunks of information and make it available in a way that the visitor could choose themselves.

With a brief including our motivation, information about our target audience, the key messages to be delivered in the touch screen interpretation and timescale I was ready to contact some suppliers. For us it was extremely important to find a supplier who could not only work within our set parameters, but could also bring their creative knowledge and experience to the project. This was particularly important while delivering this project as much of the work that produced the final product was developed out with our direct control.

While we had ultimate control of the content that is used within the touch screen interpretation it was a process of negotiation to decide how this would be available to the end user. In many ways digital interactives are more visual than interpretation panels and might require more images. In hindsight I would have allocated more time to sourcing images as so many are subject to reproduction rights, the sourcing of which can add time and money to a project.

With regards to the actual content included in the touch screen display, it was written with the same consideration that traditional interpretation panels are given. However, it was a much more time consuming process as there is far more content included on the touch screen than would ever be considered for an interpretation panel. For us it was very important to have this content finalised before passing it on to the software design company as it would have caused great confusion to change the digital versions with updated text.

For us there were two main options for touch screen software. The first would have been to purchase software that allowed us to add our own content and images into pre-set fields, which would be updated and changed by us whenever we liked. The second was to have software developed and designed from scratch.

We were fortunate enough to work with a wonderful design company called Lateral Line in Glasgow. For us it was important to be located fairly close to the design company we selected as it meant that we could get a feel for the development of the software throughout the project and make changes on an ongoing basis.

We also found it extremely beneficial to the end product to take advice from the designer we worked with. It was really important to work with a company who had experience in similar software design projects and was well placed to help us decide how best to deliver the information we had defined. For us it was a question of developing software that was accessible and simple for all to use, but still allowed us to include all of the necessary information.

Another important consideration for us was how this digital interactive would be maintained and changed in the future. Currently there are no IT specialist technicians within the City of Edinburgh museum service, which meant that it was essential for us to have a system that needed very little input from us to keep it running. For this reason we opted for a stand alone Mac Computer that only runs the software program in question. The computer is set to turn on and automatically run the program in the morning and likewise power off at night. This is great as it does not present any extra work load for any member of staff. As for any updates in the future these would need to be carried out by our design company as we opted for the fully designed option.

Overall this was a fantastic project to work on and I believe that the new digital display alongside more traditional interpretation panels and object labels has really enhanced visitor experience in the National Covenant Gallery. Visitors now have control of the information available to them, and the vastly increased dwell time in gallery suggests that they are taking full advantage of the new interpretation.

I am very grateful for the help and guidance that many individuals gave freely throughout the project. The museum sector is very fortunate to have a huge number

of people who are very passionate about their jobs and very willing and able to help their colleagues and peers. Asking for help and advice throughout the project was absolutely key to the success of our final product.

One piece of advice I would give to others embarking on a project similar to ours is: be brave. Don't think that you have to work with a company that only develops museum based interactives. Yes, companies that mainly work with museums might have some idea of the industry, but on the other hand a company that works out with the sector might help you to question the status quo and come up with a better solution to what you are trying to achieve.

# Kirkgate: The story of a street in a city and a city in a street

Gwendolen Whitaker, former *Curator of History at York Museums Trust*, discusses the objectives, methods and considerations of re-displaying and extending the iconic street display at York Castle Museum. Gwendolen is now *Freelance Curatorial Consultant at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*.

The beating exhibition heart of York Castle Museum is the recreated street Kirkgate.

Named after its founder Dr Kirk it was the first museum display of its kind, a touchstone of social history collections and a memory maker and shaper for generations of visitors.



© York Museums Trust, (York Castle Museum)

When the street first opened in 1938 it offered gentle time travel and immersion into a world past. It was an exciting new concept and thousands queued to wander down the cobbled street and peer into period shop windows. An international nation of window shoppers visually consumed the displays with nostalgic delight. The treasures that Dr Kirk had rescued, bought and chased had found a new home.

In June 2012 York Museums Trust launched a new look and larger Victorian street. The project involved carefully blending the cherished old with the new to provide multi-layered stories for a new generation of visitors.

Key to the project was to re-model displays to reflect the Victorian city of York, heighten the sense of 'real' within display methods and by so doing bring Kirk's vision and the city's history more closely together.

Development offered an opportunity to celebrate the joy of high density, object rich display and embrace the spirit of 'collecting' & 'shopping'.

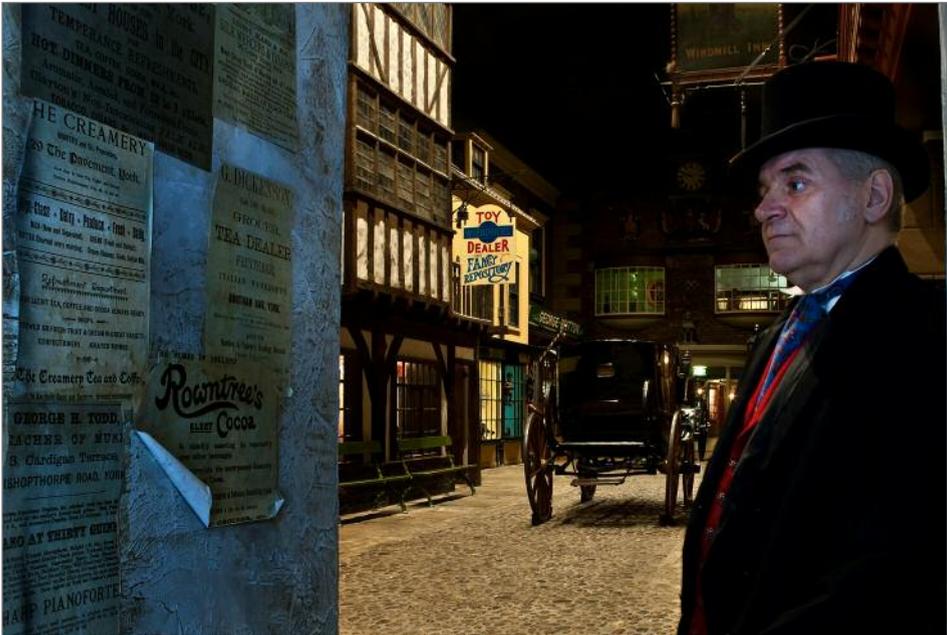
## What is Kirkgate?

Kirkgate was conceived as a recreation of 19<sup>th</sup> century life, and was predominately pre-industrial. It was built by a generation of late Victorians who, post 1914 and on the brink of the Second World War, were living through a period of turbulent social change and uncertainty. The Kirkgate they built was a monument to a disappeared 'golden' age and period of seeming social stability. (As the museum street was being built the City of York was heavily involved in demolition and clearance of some of its ancient historical streets).

There is no doubt that once open, the street captured visitors' imaginations and 'nostalgic' sentiments. Not only was this demonstrated by the snaking queues but also by the offers of donations. This desire by visitors to contribute and to merge their

personal past with the community and ‘stability’ of the past represented by Kirkgate, is, I speculate, largely responsible for the growth of the collection post Kirk and the continued offers of donation from across the world today.

Despite visitor perception, the street has changed greatly over time, and has not remained set in aspic. Displays have been added and taken away; new technologies and techniques have been used to connect with a changing audience. As an innovative collector who had a huge passion for living life to the full, and was fascinated by technology, this is something of which I think Kirk would have approved.



© York Museums Trust, (York Castle Museum)

### From street to district

Years and layers of change as well as fears of change had made Kirkgate disjointed as an exhibition display. This was most obviously represented by the surviving names above the shops. These were a jumble of businesses from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century York or names of former civic officials and past members of staff.

Today's visitors see a cityscape of York where all premises are set from 1870 –1901. Using this mid-point in Queen Victoria's reign to be a starting point of Kirkgate gave the opportunity to reference both backwards to the original setting (and so continue to display many of the exhibits chosen by Kirk and familiar to the street) and look forwards to the birth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the most important sources used to help shape the new district of Kirkgate was the report *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*. This was compiled by young chocolate entrepreneur B Seebom Rowntree in the 1890s and published in 1901. Rowntree conducted a door to door investigation to examine the living conditions of the poorest sector of society and analyse the causes and consequences of poverty. His findings were shocking and ignited a national debate about the development of welfare support. Indeed, Rowntree's findings highlighted that the conditions in many York slums were worse than those in the depths of London; a chocolate box city it was not. The report,

although a statistical study is written in powerful and emotive prose and paints a detailed picture of the city and its inhabitants.

### **Getting straight to business**

Which businesses were chosen to be on the street was determined by a number of factors.

The scope of the History collection and a drive to display objects which had largely remained in store or were under-represented in other displays were important deciding factors. Indeed today's Kirkgate displays more objects from the collection than ever before. (To create the new spaces on the street four collection stores were re-located off site.)

The scope of the collections shaped a walk in Chemist which now houses period fixtures and the compact medical collection. A walk-in Drapers shop to display the range and quality of the Costume and Textile collection was also an easy decision. A collection of taxidermy pieces bought from local taxidermist Edward Allen by the Yorkshire Philosophical Society (and now part of the Science collection) was another shaping resource.

Key objects gave the small research team a lead to investigate the businesses they belonged to. This included a ceramic preserve jar from grocer George Britton, shop signs and pawnbrokers' tickets from Henry Hardcastle, a photograph of Thomas Ambler outside his family grocery business, a bonnet from the millinery Plummer sisters.

In some instances working with living relatives brought offers of donations and loans. The undertaker's J Rymer displays a bench from the original workshop, tools and the hat worn by James Rymer the undertaker. They also made a coffin for the display.

Not all businesses were new to the street, but many were updated to fit the time frame. The Quaker booksellers Alexander's became Sessions, a firm which recently closed in York, but is still well-known in local memory. The Sessions family had originally assisted staff at the museum in the display of the original shop, and the updated name is also a tribute to their support and historical relationship with the street.

The layout of the street was planned to be sympathetic to the shape of Victorian York. Busy main street shops were placed together and those with workshops such as the Undertakers and Tallow factory accessed through back alleys. Businesses which served customers from different levels of society were strategically placed in Kirkgate to do the same thing. For example, the Chemist Saville's which in Victorian York attracted customers from the city centre, as well as offering an out of hours back door service to the nearby slum, was positioned with dual entrance in Kirkgate.

A huge body of research was generated as part of the development process. This could not have been done without the helping hand of ancestry.co.uk, the support of existing York businesses, city archives, living relatives and the York Family History Society. Research was channelled into interpretive tools such as a free newspaper, *The Kirkgate Traders' Review*, based on a similar advertising publication in the City archives. The paper provides visitors with a potted history of selected businesses, and is scattered with adverts and photographs of the original shops, shopkeepers and workers.

To emphasise the reality of these trader's stories and their place in the city, a walking tour app is now available. The tour guides users through York centre using archive 'then and now' photographs. It provides a visual insight into the city's Victorian past, a story often underrepresented when discussing the history of York. Taking Kirkgate out into the 'real' streets has intellectually expanded its footprint.

## Their story – our story

It was important to populate Kirkgate with stories of life experiences visitors could relate to and promote in the visitors themselves a spirit of inquiry into their own family's Victorian roots.

As part of the development phase a poll was carried out to identify the types of personalities visitors were most curious about, and from this and collection research, the seven Kirkgate characters were born. These are a schoolchild, a policeman, a shopkeeper, a doctor, a worker, a servant and an apprentice.

Amongst the seven is Mabel Smorfit, a Victorian child who attended one of York's first Board Schools and whose exercise books, school samplers and phonograph photo album are in the collection, (in fact most of the contents of Mabel's home were donated by her family when she died in the 1970s). Another Kirkgater is George Alp, teenage dad and recruit to York's growing police force. His service book noted the highs and lows of his career including episodes of drunken lateness.

The exploration of characters led to interesting and exciting insights into the collection. A photograph, annotated on the back revealed Isaac Dickinson, who worked in the bakery department at Terry's factory. Isaac would have worked alongside the team when Terry's gifted a huge elaborate Christening cake to the future Edward VIII. The moulds to this cake are held in the collection. Isaac also signed a petition for shorter working hours and this is held at the Borthwick Institute at the University of York.



© York Museums Trust, (York Castle Museum)

Links and connections between these characters and the shops on the street were also found. Mabel we discovered lived a few doors down from Isaac's boss and a street away from George Alp who also lived on the same street as James Kidd's bookmaking shop, James being the father of another Kirkgater, servant Elizabeth Kidd!

Although this does seem surprisingly coincidental and cosy, not all stories were as local. Patterns of regional, national and international migration were all evident in character research and demonstrative of an emerging global economy.

The stories of the Kirkgaters were made accessible using a number of interpretive vehicles. A magic lantern (AV) display in the new Cocoa Temperance Room plays a short story sequence of each of their lives. The lantern slides showcase a mixture of Victorian slide manufacturing techniques including Illustration, posed photographic stills (of actors on Kirkgate) and animated moving pictures. Visitors also had the chance to explore characters' lives by flicking through scrapbooks generated from reproduction original material.

Their footsteps on the street are light and it was a conscious display decision to let their stories blend into the background, to be discovered and investigated if visitors choose to do so. They are however tour guides if you wish them to be. Positioned throughout the street are seven hampers loaded with reproduction school slates.

On these slates are printed rebus puzzles (Victorian picture puzzles where words and letters are replaced with an image) which take visitors on a story trail around Kirkgate to spot displayed objects. Interestingly this has proved to be a hit not only with families but couples working together to explore the displays and discuss the material life journeys of the characters.

The introduction of characters to the street is a non-intrusive but crucial addition which elevates the intellectual framework of the displays. The shops are no longer simply showcases for objects, but objects are now showcases for stories about the people who made, sold and bought them.

### **The art of display**

Re-working Kirkgate involved reflecting as closely as possible the street furnishings, signage, lighting and decoration of shops from the period. Nearly all the shops on the street have been re-displayed or enriched with this aim in mind. Items from the collection were used where possible on open display. This included using barrels, crates and baskets (which otherwise may have been disposed of), pairs of boots to string up over the boot makers, umbrella and hat stands, mirrors and pictures. My favourite display tool is an original wax child's mannequin. A rare survivor of retail history it has real hair, glass eyes and stands proudly inside the Draper's window showing off a Barran's sailor suit. When original material did not exist, items such as replica food or lighting were commissioned. Internal shop signs were printed on Victorian presses in Bradford.

It was important that every shop looked individual. They needed to embody a trade, a shopkeeper's personality as well as being sensitive to the display needs of the collection being 'sold' to visitors.

Paint colours, finishes and techniques, wallpaper, fabrics and lighting were chosen with care and discussion. A research document produced for the project by an expert in period display was consulted at every stage so ensuring a high level of quality. Skilled craftsmen were sourced to carry out work. For example the prominent high-street Drapers shop had its frontage carefully (and expensively!) French polished and the upmarket grocer's was given a new traditionally constructed green striped awning.

To extenuate the sense of authenticity guest curators were invited to display shops. This proved to be a rich and invigorating strategy and helped to provide further layers of character to the shops and interiors. Visitors also provided curatorial tips! Since at no time did Kirkgate close to the public during installation the small display team were often given helpful advice such as 'that needs to go a little to the right'. That the face of the new street grew and changed slowly during the project helped to reassure and explain changes to visitors and staff.

The Victorians were not shy of boldly advertising their consumer passions. Authentic display tricks of the trade were used to entice the visitor's eye – leading them from shop to shop. The past was not sepia but an extravaganza and parade of colour (especially in a period which was widely experimenting with new synthetic dyes) and the street needed to capture this visual excitement.

In contrast to the magpie shops was the creation of new 'slum' areas which showed the York Rowntee's report highlighted. These new - old spaces required perhaps more care and sensitivity to blend them into the established areas of the streets. Here skilful scenic painting, choices of textures and materials, levels and sources of lighting, fly posting all helped to set a tone distinct from the main shopping areas. The fly posters were reproductions from originals in the collection or from period trade directories. They represented many of the shops and businesses on the street, again underlining authenticity.

The street had already been installed with an AV light and sound show in 2006, with some elements considered more successful than others. The scope of this project sought to re-programme and re-distribute this resource into the new areas and introduce a surround sound filling the huge high spaces but not overpowering the experience. Streams of dialogue were replaced by a sequence of layered street and day to night sounds. These have been programmed to be heard at different levels so providing a more subtle depth of sound. For example, the clatter of a cab wheel sounds lower than a bird's song and a church bell. Light levels have been increased by the use of a new high spec LED light, (at the time of installation the only other user was the band Coldplay!).

The introduction of smell diffusers, carefully controlled, provide an evocative and immediate sensory journey into the period. Aromas include a 'stable' smell in the Horse Repository and a cocoa-coffee smell in the Cocoa Room; the past didn't always smell unpleasant! These smells blended with natural ones such as carbolic soap and tea in the Grocer and clove oil and liquorice root in the Chemist.

### **Life of a street**

The aim of the 2012 project was to bring the street closer to its city, to acknowledge and celebrate the lives of its citizens, and to redisplay more of the collection which belongs to them.

A more long term goal was to provide a chronological and interpretive display framework which would let Kirkgate grow and evolve more comprehensively in the future.

Cities change, and streets ebb and flow with the stories of the lives of the people who walk them. A museum display which reflects the many shades of life and challenges us to explore our relationship with consumption and material culture must do the same.

Victorian Kirkgate is ready for the 21st century visitor, long may it keep changing.

### ***References:***

Rowntree, B. S., (1901) *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, London: Macmillan

# Transforming West Berkshire Museum

*Steph Gillett, Museum Manager, shares an insight into the innovative re-development of West Berkshire Museum.*

The need to deal with deterioration of the fabric of the historic buildings that house West Berkshire Museum in Newbury provided an opportunity for us to effectively start with a clean sheet. In doing so we are following many changes since the Museum first opened.



Architects' model of redeveloped Museum as seen from the north, with from left to right the Corn Stores, new link building and entrance, and the Cloth Hall.

## A Century of changes

The Museum opened in 1904 in the Cloth Hall (built 1626 and now Grade I listed) following its refurbishment in 1901/02 to commemorate Queen Victoria. The collection on opening included material from the Newbury Literary & Scientific Institution which had opened a museum in 1843; Newbury was one of the first towns to house a local museum open to the public.

One of the first honorary curators was Harold J E Peake (1867-1946) a well-known anthropologist and pre-historian and co-author of the 'Corridors of Time' series. He was curator from 1908 and is remembered for his 'Prospector Theory' of the diffusionism school within anthropology. Consequently early acquisitions include world archaeology and ethnographic items. The displays were ordered on the Haslemere system during Peake's time and occupied around 140 square metres of gallery space on two floors.

Peake's successor in 1946 was Harold H Coghlan (1896-1981) a noted metallurgist. His legacy is a mixed one; amongst the archaeology collection are Bronze Age implements with sections sawn out for testing and re-filled with solder. He disposed of the catalogue of the Literary & Scientific Institution because he could no longer link objects with their catalogue entries. Apparently during Peake's time a team of helpers had washed off the original accession numbers, thus losing the link between object and catalogue. Coghlan is also reputed to have disposed of material not in keeping with his collecting policy by dumping it in the nearby canal; hopefully this is apocryphal!

The Museum was enlarged in 1934 by the building of an extension to the east between the Cloth Hall and adjacent Corn Stores. This increased gallery space by around 80 square metres and provided improved office accommodation for the curator and his deputy. (The extension building also housed a weights & measures office and public lavatory – perhaps a precursor for the sort of local government re-organisation some museum services have suffered in recent years.)

The first professional curator was Tony Higgott, appointed in 1978 he was in post until 1998. During his time collection care and management began to meet the standards expected under Registration. There was also considerable collecting of material, especially social history items, during this period.

In 1981 the Museum expanded yet again into the Corn Stores (built 1723, Listed Grade II\*) providing new offices and new public entrance point and increasing gallery space by around 150 square metres (subsequently reduced by half due to sub-letting space). New displays featured the English Civil War, Kennet & Avon Canal, costume, and items concerned with trade, industry, agricultural and rural crafts. Some of these galleries have proved to be the least flexible or accessible within the Museum with glass panels that require a small army to remove and spaces that can only accommodate a specific object. They also demonstrate some of the less desirable contributions of museum designers during the 1980s and since, including the painting of Civil War items to match each other, holes bored in objects to bolt them down, and evidence of handles of implements being cut to fit the display spaces!

### **A relevant collection?**

The collections cover natural sciences, geology, archaeology (including Egyptology), social and industrial history, textiles and costume (including jewellery), fine and decorative art, and local history resources (including photographs, maps, archives and ephemera). It has in the past been claimed to comprise around 100,000 objects or groups, but current audits suggest it is more likely to be between 25,000 to 30,000 objects/groups. The Museum is the repository for archaeological archives for West Berkshire and this material of course comprises many thousands of individual items. By quirks of past curatorial decision there are substantial collections of costume and cameras, as well as many photographs of local scenes and people. Many of these collections have a social history context though much of the material has little if anything to do with West Berkshire.

Since local government re-organisation in 1998 the Museum has been part of West Berkshire Council and the current policy strictly limits collecting to material from or with strong local links to within its boundaries. In fact the Museum has had a wider than Newbury remit since 1974 with the creation of Newbury District Council.

In preparation for re-opening a thorough review of the collection is being undertaken by the Museum's 50 volunteers under staff guidance. We expect subsequent rationalisation to lead to disposal of items without a West Berkshire connection, but some earlier material that reflects the Museum's history will be retained.

The initial task is to eliminate from further discussion those items that will clearly be retained (ie have strong local provenance or significance) and those that will be recommended for disposal (eg items with no known provenance and items with no West Berkshire connection). We will then have about a year to review the rest of the collection before determining what will go into the initial displays, what into store and any further rationalisation opportunities.

### **Heritage Lottery Fund**

The impetus for redevelopment came in the late 1990s with recognition that the historic buildings were deteriorating; surveys identified around £500,000 of required renovations. Although the Council allocated funding towards these repairs it was recognised that using this as match-funding for a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) would allow other concerns to be addressed as part of a comprehensive refurbishment. Issues included outdated displays and interpretation, access problems, poor street presence of the entrance, and inadequate visitor facilities.

During 2006 a series of meetings and consultations with internal and external stakeholders identified a range of options for addressing these problems. At this time the preferred option was for refurbishment of the existing buildings and construction of an adjacent resource centre and collection store. The Council secured a Project Planning Grant (PPG) from the HLF in 2008 on the basis of this option and conservation management (for buildings and collections), access and audience development plans were prepared. These in turn informed a subsequent Round One HLF bid in June 2009. Proposals had by then been revised to concentrate redevelopment within the existing footprint and exclude the resource centre/store extension. This first Round One bid was unsuccessful, but following further work on activity planning a second bid received support from the HLF in June 2010 and allowed the engagement of architects (BFAW of Manchester) and exhibition designers (HKD of Margate) who completed design work to RIBA Stage D in time for a second round application to the HLF in March 2012.

Applications for Planning and Listed Building Consent were approved in May 2012 and the HLF awarded a Round Two grant of £1.2 million towards the £2.25 million total project costs in June 2012. Further funding from the Greenham Common Trust and the Headley Trust leave the Council with just under £100,000 to raise from other sources, with support from the recently formed Friends group. On-site construction work is expected to begin in April 2013, with a target re-opening date of June 2014.

## Outcomes

The physical aspects of the redevelopment can be seen broadly in three elements: restoration of the historic buildings; replacement of the 1934 extension with a new entrance and link building; and a complete re-shaping and re-fit of all the internal spaces.

As well as plans prepared with the PPG, proposals have been informed by a learning strategy and plan prepared by consultants and an interpretation strategy undertaken in-house. The underlying driver for these strategies is a theme from the audience development plan to create a Sense of Place, exploring what West Berkshire has been, is now, and might become in the future.

Our interpretation strategy also aims to:

- Provide opportunities for and encourage dialogue with users and visitors about West Berkshire's heritage.
- Facilitate and prompt users and visitors to ask themselves questions about West Berkshire's heritage, eg:
  - Why did *this* happen *here* in West Berkshire?
  - Why did *this* happen *then* in West Berkshire?
  - What does this *mean* for *me* now?
- Interpret West Berkshire's heritage in ways that have meaning for the widest possible audiences.

As well as helping to create a Sense of Place, we identified the other key outcomes for the project as:

- More opportunities for learning, community involvement and participation.
- Increased number and range of objects on display.
- More flexible display infrastructure.
- Adaptable spaces for learning and other activities.
- Improved visitor orientation and circulation.
- Enhanced user facilities and resources.

The redevelopment will also deal with access problems, fire safety issues (that on their own would have cost £600,000 plus to resolve), and provide energy efficient services. The new link building with its fully glazed north façade will provide obvious public entrances from either side and will be a significant investment in the local streetscape. It will house a new staircase and lift to the split level first floors of the Cloth Hall and Corn Stores and for the first time toilets for visitor use.

The new Welcome area will provide a combined reception, shop and refreshment point and provide visitors with a range of orientation resources including a tactile model of the Museum's interior spaces.

Most importantly the redevelopment brings all of the buildings into museum use; parts of the Corn Stores have been sub-let for other purposes since the 1981 extension. This allows us to increase the total display area by about a third to over 400 square metres; we also intend to greatly increase the density of object display, with some areas approaching 'open storage'.

The buildings presented BFAW and HKD with a number of challenges, not least their long narrow configuration that requires the non-public office and furniture store to be located at the east end of the Corn Stores. But they also helped to determine visitor flow along the ground floor of the Corn Stores and back along the upper floor via a second stair and platform lift. Our discussions with both architects and exhibition designers were at time highly animated! A tool in these deliberations was a 'Day in the Life of the Museum' narrative<sup>1</sup>, which helped us to explain how we envisaged the Museum working.

A further challenge for HKD was that we did not want them to undertake exhibition design work in the usual way, but to help us create a range of very flexible display spaces and interpretation tools. We did not want fixed display themes for any area, whether by chronology, locality or collection type. The turning point in these discussions was when we were able to describe how the Museum's volunteers were working through the collections and the hands-on engagement they had with objects.

### Everyone a curator

From this volunteer involvement came the notion of visitors as curators, being able to explore material in a variety of ways according to their interests and prior knowledge. This approach is underpinned by our interpretation strategy which recognises that objects can have multiple stories and have different meanings for different people. Our interpretative approach has also been inspired by the work of John Falk<sup>2</sup> and others that show people to have different interpretative needs according to the motivation for their visiting on a given occasion. These motivations have been characterised as:

- **Explorer** – Motivated by personal curiosity with a generic interest in the content of the museum; they expect to find something that will grab their attention and fuel their learning.
- **Facilitator** – Motivated by the needs of other people; their visit is focused on primarily enabling the experience and learning of others in their accompanying social, family or learning group.
- **Experience Seeker** – Motivated to visit because they perceive the museum as an important destination; their satisfaction primarily derives from the mere fact of having been there.
- **Professional/Hobbyist** – Motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective; they feel a close tie between the museum content and their professions or hobbies.
- **Recharger** – Motivated by seeking to have a contemplative or restorative experience; they see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world.



Story Store 1 showing the initial orientation gallery with a volunteer and action trolley. The displays in this room will introduce the visitor to the interpretation methodology used in the Museum.

variety of display cases and other resources, including a room with provision for audiovisual presentation, another for the display of high-value objects, and several rooms for high-density display behind glazed walls. The first Story Store will provide 'tools' for helping visitors understand how the displays work and guide them towards the style of interpretation that best addresses their needs. By providing colour-coded labels and text panels written for different motivations we hope that visitors will naturally follow a personally rewarding interpretative route without us being didactic.

As the themes will be changing over time and we intend to change around 25% of objects on display during each year it is important that interpretation can be easily updated. The proposals include templates for label and panels that incorporate QR codes with links to further interpretation. Those without Smartphones will be able to borrow a suitable device during their visit. The use of QR codes will allow access to collection data and bespoke content without the need for expensive and intrusive touch screens in the galleries. We also hope that this technology will encourage the dialogue between visitors, objects and the Museum, with audiences responding and contributing content.

### Space for discovery & learning

The first floor of the new link building will house Discovery, an area which as well as housing the Museum's library, reference materials and computer access to collection databases, will provide space for other ways of exploring content and themes, e.g. object handling, story-telling, make-and-take craft sessions. Positioning Discovery at the end of the normal visitor route may encourage further exploration of themes experienced during their visit. Modelling of visitor flows suggest that most will spend between one and one-and-a-half hours in the Story Stores.

The only part of the Museum with a permanent display theme is Our Story on the first floor of the Cloth Hall. This will explore the development of the buildings and their significance in the context of Newbury and its social and industrial history, and will re-use some of the original display cases to tell the story of the Museum itself. Here again though it will be possible to change the objects used to tell these stories and there will be a number of simple interactives as aids, eg three-dimensional models of the Cloth Hall and Corn Stores.

All the display spaces will have provision for learning or activity nodes using simple hands-on activities; action trolleys that can be used throughout the Museum will be equipped with resources for examining and exploring the collections. It is intended that volunteers will select a range of materials including handling objects suitable for helping to interpret themes in a particular part of the Museum; they will be trained to facilitate activities that encourage a three-way dialogue between visitors, the collections and the Museum.

The redevelopment will provide a series of ten display spaces throughout the Corn Stores, which we are referring to as Story Stores to reflect both the historic use of the building and stored-up stories that objects can hold. These Story Stores will be provided with a



Story Store 4 showing one of the glazed wall display spaces. The deep space behind will allow for maximum flexibility and density of objects. The ground floor Story Stores can be seen from outside through the bay windows.

Between now and re-opening we will test our ideas for display, storytelling and creating a Sense of Place with objects from the collections in temporary exhibitions at venues across West Berkshire. We will be working with groups of all types across the District to plan and prepare museum activities and displays and will continue to provide learning and outreach activities using our collections to maintain a public presence during closure.

### Conclusions

Have we got it right? We think so, and so do the Heritage Lottery Fund and other funders and supporters! But the real test won't be in 2014 when we re-open, but perhaps in 2025 when our successors are faced with the continuing opportunities (or challenges) of community engagement and a very flexible museum environment. We will at least have left a Museum that can accommodate a variety of different display approaches and we have no doubt anticipated some of the debate about permanent museum galleries that the Museums Association has initiated.

#### *Further Information*

*Steph Gillett, Museum Manager*

*Email: [sgillett@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:sgillett@westberks.gov.uk)*

*Telephone: 01635 519231*

*Websites: [www.westberks.gov.uk/museum](http://www.westberks.gov.uk/museum)  
<http://westberks.ssl.co.uk/home>*

#### *References:*

- 1 Copies of 'Days in the Life of West Berkshire Museum' are available on request from [sgillett@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:sgillett@westberks.gov.uk)
- 2 See for example 'Situated Identities and the Museum Visitor Experience' John H. Falk, Sea Grant Free-Choice Learning Professor, Oregon State University at <http://www.visitors.org.uk/files/Audience%20Segmentation%20-%20J%20Falk.pdf> (Accessed 23.10.2012)

# Reinterpreting a Florentine Chapel at the V&A

*Stuart Frost, who led on interpretation for the V&A's Medieval & Renaissance galleries, shares an insight into the development process behind the re-display of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Florentine chapel. Stuart is currently Head of Interpretation at the British Museum.*

## Introduction

On 11 November 1860 the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) acquired the late 15<sup>th</sup> century high altar chapel<sup>1</sup> and altarpiece<sup>2</sup> from the former convent church of Santa Chiara, Florence. Santa Chiara was a single-aisled church belonging to an order of nuns known as the Poor Clares. The convent was suppressed in 1808, the church sub-divided and finally deconsecrated in 1842. Although the Chapel was used for the celebration of Mass, and was therefore the most sacred part of the church, it was acquired by the Museum because it was regarded as a remarkable example of Florentine Renaissance architecture. The Chapel has been on permanent public display in South Kensington ever since, its scale ensuring that it has been a dominant presence in all subsequent displays.

The question of whether to present the Chapel as a complete coherent architectural space has been an important debate since it arrived in London. The *pietra serena* (grey sandstone) framework was acquired but not the masonry that formed the walls or the altar-step, altar-block or the tiled floor. Each presentation of the Chapel has also had to decide the extent to which its original function should be acknowledged as well as how far the Chapel should be reconstructed with modern materials. When first installed in the North Court, for example, the altarpiece was not displayed within the Chapel, consciously or unconsciously secularising, decontextualising and aestheticising the display. The Chapel was installed in the east end of Room 50 around 1908, with the altarpiece within, where both have remained ever since. Photographs of the Chapel display show that over time the Museum made increasing use of modern materials to complete the architecture, eventually merging the Chapel entirely with the Aston Webb architecture, making it difficult to distinguish between original artefact and modern museum (Figures 1 & 2).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: The Santa Chiara Chapel as displayed around 1920. Photograph courtesy of the V&A.

The Chapel's scale and location ensured that it was one of the most imposing and significant objects in the V&A's Medieval & Renaissance Europe 300-1600 galleries, which opened in December 2009. This article describes the decisions, processes and influences that informed the redisplay and reinterpretation of the Chapel as part of that project, illustrating the ways in which curatorial research, visitor studies and design decisions informed the current display (Figure 3). The Medieval & Renaissance Galleries 300-1600 project represented a complete redisplay, rethinking



Figure 2: The Santa Chiara Chapel as displayed around 1950. Photograph courtesy of the V&A.

and reinterpretation of the Museum's collections. Each of the ten galleries has a stand-alone narrative, but an overlapping chronological arrangement and thematic structure offers continuity between the rooms.<sup>4</sup>

### 'European Sculpture' to 'The Renaissance City 1350-1600'

The Santa Chiara Chapel is currently displayed in Room 50 The Renaissance City 1350-1600. The previous objects displayed in this vast hall-like space were loosely themed on European architecture and sculpture but almost all of these objects were removed and relocated elsewhere in the Museum, a vast undertaking. Moving the Santa Chiara Chapel from the semi-circular apse-like end of this gallery was never considered, and its presence (along with a vast choir screen for the cathedral of St John in s'-

Hertogenbosch) informed the decision to sub-divide Room 50 into two themed displays.<sup>5</sup> The Renaissance City: Cityscape and Villa (Room 50a) incorporates sculptures and architectural elements that virtually all came from exterior contexts; The Renaissance City: Inside the Church (Room 50b) houses large scale objects from church interiors, stained glass, painted altarpieces, other sculptures and the Chapel itself. Both the scale of the Chapel and its location at the east-end made it one of the dominant objects in Inside the Church and inevitably it dictated the selection of objects displayed around it. The Chapel is part of a subject display titled The Chancel 1450-1600 (Figure 3). All of the objects displayed here relate to the celebration of Mass or are from the eastern end of a church. Additionally, these objects were almost entirely selected from Florentine, Tuscan or Italian contexts so that they would harmonise visually and intellectually with the Chapel and its Renaissance style. This approach was a new departure, and arguably the first time in the history of the Chapel at the V&A that it was part of a larger framework designed to meaningfully explore the division, use and furnishing of church space. The Chapel was no longer presented in isolation solely as a fine exemplar of Florentine architecture to inspire modern artists and designers.

### Evaluation and audience research

Visitor studies and evaluation played an important role in shaping thinking about the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries as a whole, including Inside the Church and the Santa Chiara Chapel display. Quantitative evaluation of the previous displays of medieval and Renaissance art confirmed the need for redisplay and the desire for greater contextualisation of the objects and displays.<sup>6</sup> It was partly for this reason that the objects were grouped into tightly focused subject displays with coherent narratives and strong themes. Qualitative focus groups were particularly informative in establishing visitors' levels of knowledge about the medieval and Renaissance periods and their perceptions and misconceptions. Visitor reactions to the organised church and Christianity were particularly influential.<sup>7</sup>

The focus group work indicated that the church in medieval and Renaissance Europe was a subject that had limited initial appeal for contemporary audiences. Furthermore, the central tenets of Christian belief and ritual, important to a display on the Renaissance church, were unfamiliar and initially uninteresting. A series of structured consultation sessions with visitors from varied faith backgrounds were undertaken later to explore some of these issues in more detail.<sup>8</sup> The project team were keen to consult with visitors from different faith backgrounds to assess their reactions to medieval and Renaissance displays and their level of interest in visiting. The strengths of the V&A's collections as a whole, and the representation of faiths within the medieval and Renaissance collections, informed the decision to focus consultations on visitors from Muslim, Jewish and Christian faith backgrounds.

With the exception of visitors from a Roman Catholic background, the consultation groups confirmed that most visitors, as might be expected, were unfamiliar with Christian subject matter, beliefs or liturgy. Most participants responded to religious objects purely on a visual or aesthetic level, their attention attracted by the exquisite materials, sophisticated techniques or the high level of craftsmanship rather than the subject matter. A minority of comments indicated that some participants, those from other faith backgrounds, would actively avoid overtly church-like exhibition spaces or displays with a devotional atmosphere. There was clearly a need to maintain a fine design balance between suggesting the original devotional context for visitors in *Inside the Church*, and not making the displays too church-like.

It was evident that the visual appeal of objects and displays would be crucial in attracting visitors' attention, but holding that initial interest and deepening engagement would require a carefully considered interpretive framework. A range of interpretive and design approaches were developed as a means of directing visitors' attention to key objects and their relationship with Christian belief. One of the particular challenges in *Inside the Church* (Room 50b) was to set isolated and incomplete objects into a meaningful context. The objects all belonged to the church, but the church itself was missing. The Chapel seemed to be a particularly good focal point for introducing visitors to the layout and function of a church, providing a gateway into the large themes of the *Inside the Church* displays, and the Chancel subject. It seemed to be a good choice for additional interpretive treatment, and its sheer size suggested that it was likely to have good attracting power.

### **Redisplaying the Chapel: The Chancel 1450-1600**

A number of significant changes were made to the environment in Room 50 to help communicate the themes of the display. The levels of daylight in Room 50 were gradually reduced, reflecting the transition from the exterior context of the *Cityscape* and *Villa* (50a) to the interior focus of *Inside the Church* (50b). Whilst the reduction in light levels was partly atmospheric it also facilitated the display of light-sensitive material in the second part of the gallery, including the V&A's remarkable collection of polychromed wooden altarpieces and other sculptures. The church context was evoked by displaying objects in a way that suggested their original function or location. For example, altarpieces are displayed at an appropriate height; panels of stained glass from the Mariawald cloister are arranged to reflect their original arrangement as windows<sup>9</sup> rather than as individual panels, and full-scale terracotta models for a pulpit are supported on a pulpit-like structure.<sup>10</sup>

The Santa Chiara Chapel offered a unique opportunity to provide an architectural space in which visitors could immerse themselves. A central ambition of the redisplay was to allow visitors to enter the Chapel, requiring the removal and relocation of a colourful tiled pavement from the Lombardini Chapel installed in the floor in front of the altarpiece.<sup>11</sup> Replacing this pavement with modern terracotta tiles laid in a herringbone pattern was more accurate whilst also allowing visitors to enter the Chapel. No other

changes were made to the Chapel's interior as the curatorial intention was simply to allow visitors into the space. The function of the Chapel was to be explained through the associated interpretation, and not by recreating a period Renaissance chapel with a reconstructed altar, either completely or partly furnished as it would have been for Mass.

The grey *pietra serena* surrounds of the doorways to the left and right of the Chapel are part of the original architecture. As part of the redisplay the doors that had been present within these frames were removed and the storage space behind them reclaimed for displays (see Figure 3). The interior spaces (Rooms 50 c & d) were adapted to display metalwork and vestments used during Mass and were intended to be loosely evocative of a church treasury or sacristy. Opening up these doorways and stores meant that the Chapel was displayed in a manner more evocative of its original appearance, whilst providing space for complementary subject displays enhancing visitors' understanding of Christian liturgy in this period.



Figure 3: View towards The Chancel 1450-1600 subject display and the Santa Chiara Chapel, July 2012. The two figures on the left are using the touch-screen interactive and the touch-screen audio-point in the bench is just visible.

### Digital interactive: Explore the church of Santa Chiara

A digital reconstruction of the entire church of Santa Chiara was developed to help visitors understand the Chapel by adding some of its missing elements and reuniting it virtually with the rest of the building. In the wider context of Inside the Church (Room 50b), and the galleries as a whole, the digital reconstruction was intended to provide an introduction to the layout, division and use of space within a church.

At the scoping stage of the project a number of agencies were contacted to establish the probable range of costs in developing a digital model. These ranged considerably and were beyond the project budget. At Peter Kelleher's (V&A Photography Department) suggestion the project team contacted Dr Martin White, Reader in

Computer Science, at the University of Sussex.<sup>12</sup> The team at the University of Sussex suggested that students studying for an MSc in Multimedia Applications and Virtual Environments build a virtual wireframe model of the church as part of their course requirements. This initial developmental model demonstrated the value and viability of producing the final rendered interactive in conjunction with the University. The not-for-profit process, made possible by the collaboration, gave more time than a purely commercial arrangement and greater flexibility to develop, test and refine the model.

Existing visitor research suggested that without a seat, visitors were unlikely to spend more than a few minutes engaging with a free-standing touch-screen animation. Therefore allowing the user to go where they wanted for as long as they wanted was not an option. Instead visitors were offered a virtual walk-through tour of the church following a pre-defined route, by creating a short digital 'movie.' The final sequence follows the path of a person walking through the church, with the perspective always from eye-level as though the visitor were in the building. This was intended to connect the visitor with the church on a more personal or human level. Having determined the virtual visit path, the team then refined the final script and subtitles.

A number of objects known to have been in the Church of Santa Chiara have survived. The sixteenth-century artist and biographer Giorgio Vasari describes two paintings which were in Santa Chiara: Pietro Perugino's 'Lamentation' and Lorenzo di Credi's 'Adoration of the Shepherds', now in the Palazzo Pitti and Uffizi respectively.<sup>13</sup> The paintings were housed in large frames that were probably similar to an altar frame currently displayed in Room 50b.<sup>14</sup> Two tin-glazed terracotta lunettes by Andrea della Robbia, which surmounted the paintings, survive at the Accademia in Florence.<sup>15</sup> A processional cross, now in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, probably stood on the altar when not in use.<sup>16</sup> Representations of these artefacts were included in the digital model.

A number of changes were made within the digital Chapel that were not made physically. For example, glass windows were depicted in the reconstruction, but not in the apertures of the actual display. When the altarpiece was installed in 1908-09 it was positioned further back in the Chapel than it would have been originally. In addition the altarpiece would have sat on a stone altar-step with an altar-block in front of it, but although neither of these were acquired by the Museum both could be added in the digital model. It would have been possible to recreate a full altar setting digitally with some creative license, but only objects known to have been in the Church were included in the reconstruction. Some aspects of the church's original appearance were not known with complete certainty. The *pietra serena* columns that flank the entrance chapel contain iron hinges, which would have supported a gate restricting access to the chapel: gates were not added because their form was uncertain but their existence was acknowledged in the subtitles. The focus for the displays as a whole was on the interior of the church so an exterior tour, which would have taken the film beyond the desired length, was not pursued.

The placement of the touch-screen interactive was given careful consideration. The design team were naturally anxious to maximise the aesthetic impact of the chapel and were anxious that the touch-screen might impinge negatively on the vista they were keen to create. From an interpretation point of view, based on observation studies of interactives elsewhere, it was vital that the screen be in a clear visual relationship with the chapel, and that the user of the interactive should be able to glance at the real chapel whilst following the virtual fly-through.<sup>17</sup> The final position, outside of the Chapel slightly to the left of centre, met both requirements (see Figure 3). The interactive always starts with a screen shot from inside of the church nave looking towards the chapel.<sup>18</sup> The initial screen of the walk-through was designed to reflect the viewpoint of the interactive user in Inside the Church (Room 50).

The interactive was planned on the basis that at the end of the walk-through most visitors would be ready to move on and continue their visit. However a series of additional options were provided to allow visitors, who wished to do so, to find out more about the church. These options were broken down into several categories. One focuses on the people involved with the history of the church, whether as patron, architect, artist, or the nuns who lived in the attached convent. The next option provides different viewpoints in the church to show how access to different parts of the church was restricted. Another option allows visitors to see a selection of other Florentine churches of different scales, styles and dates to give a sense of the diversity of churches that existed side-by-side, and to place the Church of Santa Chiara into context.

### **Music for Santa Chiara**

Ambient period music within the Chapel was considered but the project team did not want to create an explicitly devotional atmosphere or to redisplay the Chapel as an authentic 'period room'. Visitors sitting on the bench in front of the chapel have the option to listen through headphones to a hymn, *Jesu Corona Virginum* selected via a touch-screen.<sup>19</sup> Although the Poor Clares took a vow of silence, the nuns sang some of their prayers; *Jesu Corona Virginum* was selected as an example of the type of hymn the nuns sang during Mass. The recording was made especially for the V&A as part of a collaborative project with the Royal College of Music funded through the Arts Humanities Research Council's Knowledge Transfer scheme.<sup>20</sup> This project produced thirty new recordings of period music delivered through fourteen audio-points distributed throughout the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries.<sup>21</sup> The provision of music throughout the galleries had multiple aims. In this context an important objective was to deepen engagement by providing context and atmosphere through the unique experience of listening to the same music as sixteenth-century worshippers. Several strategies were used to encourage visitors to connect the music to the display. The attractor screen for the control panel of the audio-point uses details of the Santa Chiara Chapel to draw visitors' attention and reinforce the connection between the audio content and the object.

### **Text panels and object labels**

The audio-point and touch-screen interactive are important elements in the interpretation of the Chapel but the object label also retained its traditional importance. The Chapel display was part of a clear, coherent and consistent information hierarchy reflecting the best practice within the V&A's text guidelines.<sup>22</sup> The text related to Santa Chiara was more active than that used for previous displays and focused more on use and context. There is, of course, only so much that can be said in a 50-70 word label but for visitors who decided to engage more deeply with the displays Inside the Church and the Chancel, the texts for each individual object built a larger and richer picture.

A selection of texts from Inside the Church were tested with visitors from different faith backgrounds to help ensure that the team had pitched them at a reasonable level, expressed key tenets of Christianity accurately and not made any assumptions inadvertently. The provisional title for the gallery was Sacred Spaces 1350-1600 but this was changed as some visitors felt that the title suggested that Judaism and Islam would be included in the display which was not the case. Inside the Church was felt to be a more accurate title. Some Roman Catholic visitors felt strongly about the use of past tense when referring to beliefs that are still current, and made other helpful suggestions about how certain concepts should be expressed. Visitors from other faith backgrounds made comments that reminded the project team that it was important not to assume that the meaning of some terms was obvious or clear. Some texts were adjusted and all of the texts for Room 50b were also read by Father Rupert McHardy of the Brompton Oratory to ensure that ideas about Catholic belief and liturgy were expressed accurately and sensitively.

## Impact & conclusions

The project team committed a great deal of time and resources to displaying and interpreting the Chapel, endeavouring to communicate new research to a wide audience. Although the Chapel retains the physical position it has had since 1908/1909 when it was first installed in Room 50, its latest redisplay almost 100 years later provides a very different intellectual framework. As part of Room 50b: Inside the Church 1350-1600, and The Chancel subject display within that gallery, the Chapel is surrounded by objects that acknowledge their original context and function within the Catholic church. The Chapel is accompanied by a richer interpretive framework than at any other point in its history. Yet at the same time, the subtle physical changes to the Chapel have maintained, and arguably, heightened the aesthetic impact of the architecture. The decision not to recreate the altar and to allow visitors to enter a Chapel that was once only accessible to the priest and those assisting with Mass is a reflection of the desire to continue to present the Chapel as an artefact for aesthetic appreciation and contemplation, rather than as a literal recreation or evocation of a sacred space where Mass was celebrated. At a time when the relationship between museums and religion is generating increasing discussion, debate and research, the Santa Chiara display would seem to offer a valuable case study to add to the expanding body of literature.<sup>23</sup>

Planning for the digital (or 'high-tech') interpretation of the Chapel began as far back as 2003. Both the touch-screen interactive and the audio-point were planned with an expectation that they would have a minimum life-span of five years (as opposed to twenty-five years for the physical displays). It seemed reasonable that after five years the software or hardware might need to be upgraded, modified or fundamentally changed altogether. Whilst the digital media used to deliver the reconstruction will inevitably date, the research that made the reconstruction possible will retain its usefulness for future applications. If planning for the digital reconstruction of the church were starting now then mobile based interpretation would clearly be a significant consideration. Mobile-based interpretation is likely to be the longer-term future for the 'high-tech' interpretation used in the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries and in many other museums. Both the digital reconstruction and the music could be adapted to work on visitors' own mobile devices, whether a smartphone or a tablet. The idea of using augmented reality to recreate the interior of the Chapel or to virtually place the entire church of Santa Chiara within Room 50 is another exciting option since the research and technology exists to make this viable. Augmented reality offers the potential to layer virtual interpretation around all of the Inside the Church displays without impinging on the aesthetics of the display.

This article has focused on curatorial, design and interpretive intent rather than assessing the impact of the display on visitors. Nevertheless, the question of how visitors respond to the recast Santa Chiara Chapel exhibit is clearly an important one given the amount of time and resource that was invested in it. A summative evaluation of the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries was undertaken in April 2010 by independent consultant Matthew Petrie.<sup>24</sup> Petrie's evaluation focused on five different areas of the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries and not the whole sequence of rooms. Inside the Church (Room 50b) was not included, but The Renaissance City: Cityscape and Villa (Room 50a) was and it is reasonable to take the findings from this space as a rough provisional indication of probable behaviour. The average length of time visitors spent in Room 50a was 3 minutes 40 seconds, in line with benchmarks established by evaluation of other new permanent galleries in comparable museums. Petrie's evaluation suggests that subject displays with interactives and other interpretive devices are well used and that these elements deepen engagement. Around 40% of visitors to the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries reported using an interactive and reported a longer dwell-time than non-users. This suggests that the touch screen

interactive and audio-point associated with the Chapel are likely to attract visitors' attention, increase dwell time and deepen engagement.

However at present it is impossible to offer any firm conclusions about patterns of visiting in Inside the Church (Room 50b) or about engagement with the Chapel display and its interpretation, and it is for this reason that summative evaluation will be undertaken of this display in early 2013. This research will focus on a number of aspects of the Chapel display and its interpretation, and provide insights into how visitors respond to both. Experience suggests that summative evaluation usually identifies valuable findings that can either inform iterative improvements or be applied to future projects. The results from the forthcoming evaluation will form the basis of another paper which will explore visitor behaviour and the impact of the display in more detail.

### **Acknowledgements**

Dr Martin White and Mikael Gkion at the University of Sussex guided the construction of the digital model; Aya Yoshimura, Sveinn Olafsson and Ropertos Georgiou (MSc students) at the University of Sussex built the wireframe model; Guilia Nuti, Aaron Williamon and others at the Royal College of Music provided the music. At the V&A, Eric Bates developed the interface used in the galleries; Dr Donal Cooper championed the idea of a digital model and his research informed its development; Dr Meghan Callahan provided additional research and expertise throughout; Peta Motture, was group leader for the Room 50 and headed the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries project team as whole.

### **References:**

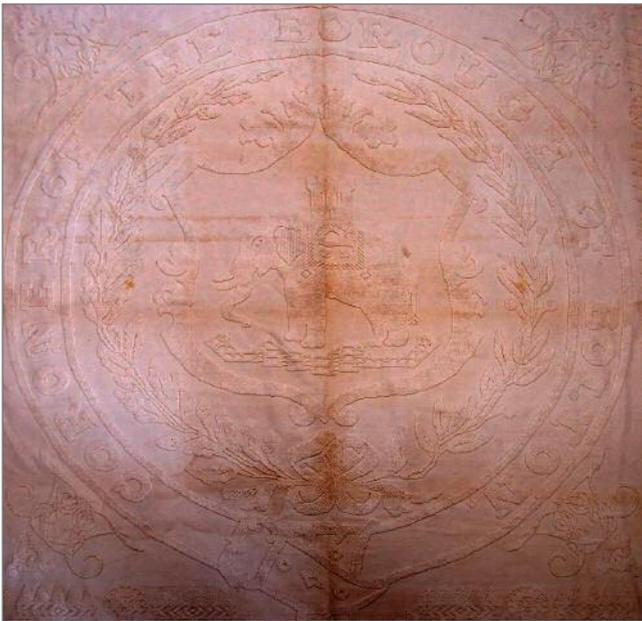
- 1 Chancel Chapel from Santa Chiara, Florence. V&A 7720/A-1861
- 2 Altarpiece and tabernacle from the Santa Chiara chapel, Florence. V&A 7720-1861
- 3 Meghan Callahan and Donal Cooper, 'Sacred Space in the Modern Museum: Redisplaying the Santa Chiara Chapel in the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries. Part 1: The Chapel's History in Florence and London', *V&A Online Journal* (Issue No. 5, Summer 2013) (forthcoming).  
For views of the East Hall in 1909 and 1923 see Paul Williamson (ed), *European Sculpture at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1996), pp.16-17
- 4 Peta Motture, 'Inspire, Engage, Preserve, Connect, Transform: meeting the aims for the new Medieval & Renaissance Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum', in Gregory Chamberlain (ed), *Museum Narrative & Storytelling: engaging visitors, empowering discovery and igniting debate* (Museum Identity Ltd, 2011), p15-32. For a concise overview of each gallery:  
[www.vam.ac.uk/page/m/medieval-and-renaissance-galleries](http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/m/medieval-and-renaissance-galleries) Peta Motture was Group Leader for the Room 50 displays as whole as well as being head of the whole project team; Stuart Frost was the Lead Educator/Interpreter for Room 50 and the rest of the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries. Dr Donal Cooper and Dr Meghan Callahan both acted as subject parents for the Chapel display.
- 5 Choirscreen from 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands. V&A 1046:1-1871.
- 6 Creative Research, "*Medieval and Renaissance Galleries: Front-end research, May 2003,*" Victoria & Albert Museum, [www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-research/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-research/)
- 7 Susie Fisher, "*What do Medieval and Renaissance really mean to people? – Front End Qualitative Research, December 2002,*" Victoria & Albert Museum, [www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-research/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-research/)

- 8 Stuart Frost & Elin Simonsson, unpublished reports 2009, Victoria & Albert Museum.
- 9 Stained glass from Mariawald, about 1520-1530. V&A: C.220A, 221,236, 237, 239, 244, 247, 266,267, 288, 294, 296, 297, 298,300, 301, 311, 320, 323, 325,326-1928; C.120-1945
- 10 Models for reliefs for the Santa Croce Pulpit, 1480-81, Benedetto da Maiano. V&A 240, 241, 242-1889
- 11 Floor tiles from the Lombardini Chapel in the church of San Francesco, Forlì. V&A 30-1866
- 12 The interactive has been the focus of a conference paper, Michael Gkion, Zeeshan Patoli, and Martin White, 'Museum Interactive Experiences through a 3D Reconstruction of the Church of Santa Chiara' (paper presented at The IASTED International Conference on Graphics and Virtual Reality, Cambridge, 11th -13th July 2011)
- 13 Lorenzo de Credi, Adoration of the Child, Uffizi. Pietro Perugino, Lamentation, 1495, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.
- 14 Arch of altar, Florence (possibly). Museum no. 548-1864. See Meghan Callahan and Donal Cooper, "Set in Stone: Monumental Altar Frames in Renaissance Florence." In Peta Motture and Michelle O'Malley (eds) *Re-thinking Renaissance Objects. Design Function and Meaning* Oxford; Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 33-35
- 15 Richa, Giuseppe, *Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine divise ne' suoi quartieri, XI, Del quartiere di S. Spirito, parte prima*. Florence: Pietro Gaetano Viviani, 1756: 84
- 16 Processional Cross, about 1460-80. Museum no. 17.190.499  
<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/120008212>
- 17 Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre, "Engaging or Distracting – Visitor Responses to Interactives in the V&A British Galleries, June 2003," Victoria and Albert Museum  
[www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interactive-explore-the-church-of-santa-chiara/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interactive-explore-the-church-of-santa-chiara/)
- 18 To listen to the piece of music Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Renaissance Music.' Accessed 20 August 2012 <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/r/renaissance-music/>
- 19 "The Listening Gallery," Royal College of Music, <http://www.listeninggallery.rcm.ac.uk>
- 20 For a fuller account of the project see, Stuart Frost & Giulia Nuti, 'Another Dimension: Integrating Music with the Medieval & Renaissance Galleries' *V&A Online Journal* (Issue No. 4, Summer 2012)  
[www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-no.-4-summer-2012/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/research-journal/issue-no.-4-summer-2012/)
- 21 V&A Text Guidelines  
[www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-text-guidelines/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-text-guidelines/)
- 22 Crispin Paine, 'Introduction: Museums and Material Religion', in *Material Religion – The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, Volume 8 Issue 1 March 2012, Berg Journals pp. 4-9
- 23 Fusion Research and Analytics, *Case Study Evaluation of FuturePlan: Medieval and Renaissance and Ceramics Galleries Phase I and II, March 2010*, Victoria and Albert Museum.  
[www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-research/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-gallery-research/)

# Unravelling hidden histories: Researching the Bolton Museum caddow quilt collection

*Erin Beeston, Collections Access Officer at Bolton Museums, shares an insight into a hidden social history revealed through research into Bolton's collection of caddow quilts.*

Bolton Museum owns a collection of sixteen *caddow quilts*, handwoven textiles that are uniquely a product of Bolton. These distinctive all white cotton counterpanes were produced from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the Museum collection includes examples made between 1794 and 1915. Detailed research of this collection provides a set of tangible historical sources with which to interrogate the grand narratives surrounding the age of the handloom weavers, and also reveals a hidden layer of personal histories of the weavers, vendors, owners and donors.



The Coroner's Quilt central motif shows the elephant and castle, historic emblem of Bolton. From the collections of Bolton Library and Museum Service, photograph courtesy of Barry Yearsley.

*in Britain 1660-1800* (1991). In recent historiography, John Styles and Amanda Vickery (Styles: 2006, Styles: 2009, Vickery: 2009) have explored cotton goods in the context of 18<sup>th</sup> century technology, trade and consumerism and the history of the home. These studies utilised diaries, letters, post-mortem inventories, probate records, Old Bailey proceedings, the records of manufacturers and retailers, and to a lesser extent the 'goods' or objects themselves.

In an article entitled 'What were cottons for in the early industrial revolution?' (2009) Styles included an illustration of a Bolton counterpane now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A #T.12-1935]. This counterpane was also highlighted by Styles in the V&A exhibition catalogue for *Quilts 1700-2010: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* (Styles 2010: 51). Yet, a close study of the Bolton made counterpanes or 'caddows' has not been undertaken since 1971, and in this instance it is unclear whether the Canadian researcher, Harold Burnham, saw any Bolton counterpanes other than those on display.

The historical value of quilt collections has been recognised internationally in material culture studies since the mid 1970s and later in the fields of museology, decorative arts, and folklore studies. Yet, social and economic historians tend to overlook the use of textiles as primary historical documents, tending instead to use them only to illustrate arguments derived from print sources (Hood: 2009). Beverly Lemire took a product centred approach to her landmark work on cotton, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer*

One of the purposes of the 2010 V&A exhibition was to demonstrate the agency of quilts in bestowing familial heritage. V&A Director, Mark Jones, explained that oral narratives and personal histories handed down with such everyday objects reveal why they are regarded as 'objects of emotion' (Jones: 2010: 7). The Bolton caddow collection has the potential to reveal multi-layered emotions, meanings, and histories. Stories flowing from these object histories can challenge grand narratives and tropes, such as the contentious demise of the handloom weavers, assigned to various decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the conventional polarisation of gender roles in the cottage industry that suggests weavers were almost exclusively male. When these objects are carefully studied in tandem with written sources, from archival material to the curators notes in the daybook or accession register, an old label, correspondence with the donors (who are often descendants of the weavers or recipients of the quilts), a catalogue entry, an old enquiry on file, a 'hidden history' can be uncovered.

### What is a caddow quilt?

'Caddow' or 'Caddy' quilt became the local name for a particular type of all cotton handwoven counterpane manufactured principally in Bolton.<sup>1</sup> In the area the term 'caddow' was certainly common by 1760 and endured in print as well as in the local dialect well into the 1900s. In the Bolton Archive collection, the earliest reference to a 'caddow weaver' discovered thus far dates from 1763 [BN/PGB/1/140A Bolton Archive]. Over a century later, Dr G. von Schulze-Gaevernitz in *The Cotton Trade in England and on the Continent* (1895) commented on the uniquely long-lived handloom weavers of Bolton and their speciality products. He described the counterpanes in detail:

*...the dying hand-weaving clings to a speciality for existence – counterpanes of peculiar patterns and with words woven in, mostly Bible verses. The patterns are formed by the weaver raising the weft, at the proper place with a small hook to form a shed.* (Schulze-Gaevernitz: 1895: 105)

Schulze-Gaevernitz is describing a caddow quilt, yet he did not pick up the colloquialisms of 'caddow' or 'caddy'. The main distinguishing feature of a Bolton counterpane is the raised knops of the weft thread which were lifted with a pick or a hook as described. The structure of the quilt is a tabby weave, using a fine warp and a fine primary weft with a heavier secondary weft yarn to form the pattern (for an illustration of the construction of a typical weft proportion see Burnham 1971: 25). The caddows were woven on large, broad looms, eliminating the need for the centre seam typical of other handwoven bedcovers. The caddows were usually bleached; all of those in the Bolton Museum collection are white, although documentary evidence suggests they were traded between middlemen as grey and thus requiring bleaching [Counterpane price list BOLMG: 1981.28.2.IND]. Regular designs recur on the caddows, which usually have a central design motif, often a star shape or text, within a medallion, shield or rectangle. This is surrounded by multiple borders of chains, of flowers and other emblems. Inscriptions such as prayers, mottos or names are often included in a legend below the medallion, particularly if the centrepiece does not incorporate such text.

### What were they used for?

The eighteenth century marked a growth in demand among the middling sort for new domestic comforts including elaborate furniture, soft furnishings and bedding (Styles, 1993: 537). Amanda Vickery describes the cotton counterpane as a 'quintessential late Georgian commodity, displacing earlier decorative bed rugs and common even in cheap furnished lodgings by the 1790s' (Vickery, 2009: 214). The Bolton counterpanes were made for use as bedspreads and brought an 'appearance of crisp decorative cleanliness to beds' (Styles, 2009: 312). Evidence from the Bolton collection suggests that, as the decades passed, their use became increasingly ceremonial or commemorative

alongside or instead of the primary function of the counterpanes as bedspreads. Of the Bolton collection, a quarter of the counterpanes were made by the weavers of the product for their kin to mark births, betrothals, marriages and other family matters. The flexibility of the quilt patterns enabled the weavers to include text and numerals, arranged in whatever way was desired. Evidence from advertisements and other correspondence show that such dedications were commonplace. In a letter dated 26 December 1738, Henry Escricke, a Bolton middleman, wrote to his contact in London, 'I can get your Counterpanes made as good as you please and your names wove in it or what else you please' (Escricke cited in Wadsworth & Mann 1968: 266). This elevated the Bolton counterpanes from purely functional bedspreads to documents of kinship, friendship, or affiliation. These inscriptions of ancestors led to the care of the quilts as family heirlooms to be treasured and passed on from generation to generation, until in the case of the Bolton quilts, they became museum objects.

### Who were the weavers?

There are sixteen caddows in the Bolton Museum collection through which details of the lives of the weavers can be extrapolated from both the objects and accompanying written records. Details range from where the weaver was working and around what time, allowing use of the census to study a particular street or weavers' colony, to, in the most thoroughly documented pieces, the name of the weaver who can then be traced using various sources. For example, BOLMG:1963.6.BY entered the collection with specific information from the donor, it was made at Roscoe Fold, Breightmet, and was said to have been gifted from father James Walmsley to his daughter Leah as a wedding present in 1846. The notes made at the time suggested James was the weaver of the counterpane as well as the first superintendent of Breightmet Sunday School. The design gives nothing away; the caddow is white with floral motifs in four borders with a central wheel-like design without an inscription. Using the information from the donor, James can be traced on the 1841 census, when he is indeed living at Roscoe Fold, working as a weaver with a number of neighbours listed more specifically as 'counterpane weavers'. In a recent ICT project aimed at encouraging older Bolton residents to use computers, memories were transcribed for a new website. Julie Hewitt recounted the local history of the Breightmet area, including Roscoe Fold (which is now the site of a school):

*Roscoe Fold was a square of cottages erected... around 1800... and was totally isolated by farms, with Holts farm lying opposite... Three of the eleven cottages held the services for Sunday and normal school. The pupils would climb upstairs by a ladder and the teacher would sing from above for those below. Most were handloom weavers who would make bedspreads from morning til night in the cellar to be sold onto Bolton people.*

(Hewitt: c.2007: [www.boltonrevisited.org.uk/a-breightmet.html](http://www.boltonrevisited.org.uk/a-breightmet.html) accessed 23 May 2012)

The combination of the family history communicated by the donor of the quilt, accompanying information from the census, and the reminiscences of a Breightmet resident, provide a colourful insight into the life of the weaver, where he lived, how Leah was schooled and the everyday routine of his neighbours – who were also weavers.

Like James Walmsley, the handloom weavers of the Bolton Museum caddows are presumed to be male. Those acquisitions that entered the collection with family provenance or anecdotal stories almost all cited grandfathers as the weaver, and only grandmothers as recipients. Only the accession information for 1963.62.T, inscribed Ann Eliza P. Morris 1888, suggests that Mrs Morris was the maker, however, the entry reads as though the curator believed the inscription was a signature, whilst a dedication seems more likely in the light of recent research. Evidence from other sources show

instances of women being trained as handloom weavers in Bolton (Barton: 1882: 32-34, acquisition information for BOLMG: 2005.184). Further evidence from the 1841 census returns for Roscoe Fold show Ester Ramsden aged 30 listed specifically as a 'counterpane weaver', living with her husband, who was listed as simply 'weaver'. In the cottage industry of the 18<sup>th</sup> century handloom weavers were predominately male, operating a cumbersome, large loom whilst the women of the family spun the cotton yarn. This evidence from the 19<sup>th</sup> century demonstrates that it is likely Ester and her spouse Samuel operated the loom together and that many female kin of weavers were directly involved in the weaving process. Further study of the weavers' colony at Roscoe Fold and other objects in the Bolton collection could reveal more about the gender of caddow weavers, and the familial partnerships in production that developed during this period.

### The caddow and its cousins

Some problems of recognition for the non-specialist curator arise from a number of other types of coverlets that either share key characteristics or were intentionally made to emulate the Bolton quilts. There are international imitations of Bolton quilts in areas where Manchester goods were commonly exported or migrant weavers settled during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In American museums, woven counterpanes with a raised weft loop can be found with designs differing to British quilts, for example the eagle motif (Schwartz: 1958: 330-34). In eastern Canada, a weft-loop technique known in Quebec as *boutonné*, resembles Bolton caddows but these were woven on narrow looms, necessitating a centre seam (Hood & Ruddel 1991: 77). Elsewhere in America, candlewick coverlets also featured designs embroidered with twisted cotton roving, similar to those used to make the wicks of candles. These too were made on the



This 'God bless our home' design features on the two latest caddows in the Bolton Collection made in 1915. From the collections of Bolton Library and Museum Service, photograph courtesy of Barry Yearsley.

loom, with a stick or wire used to raise the weft thread to create the pattern, in a similar method to the composition of the caddow (Betterson, 1978: 99). Illustrations of these related coverlets are available, particularly in museum catalogues such as that of The American Museum in Britain, and comparative illustrations of *boutonné* and Bolton quilts are helpfully aligned in articles by Adrienne Hood (1991, 2009).

Amongst British textile collections there is also the potential for confusion with power loom woven coverlets, which were produced to emulate their hand-woven in the loom predecessors. For example, in the Bolton collection OLMG:2006.153.2 is a counterpane, originally white and later dyed yellow, woven in Bolton to raise funds for St Mark's Church

during the 1890s. It features an illustration of the church, surrounded by several decorative borders with the name of the Church inscribed below. Whilst stylistically it is similar to a caddow and made in all white cotton, upon inspection of the composition of the quilt, it is a satin weave, produced on a power loom. It is the 'knops' of the raised weft thread that allow a clear identification of a caddow quilt. The technological progress of the power loom during the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not advance quickly enough to supersede this kind of work undertaken by weavers operating handlooms, who could hand pick up the weft thread to raise the knops, creating this texture. Geoffrey Timmins noted in *The last shift: the decline of handloom weaving in nineteenth-century Lancashire* that uncertainty remains amongst historians as to when particular types and grades of fabric were taken over by the power loom, and suggests that the delays in technology may have provided the opportunity for hand weavers to remain in their trades beyond the 1840s (Timmins: 1993: 24). Nine of the sixteen Bolton caddows date from the 1840s to the 1890s, with a further two quilts that date from the 1910s, revealing that these Bolton weavers continued to work at their looms beyond the mid-nineteenth century. A. J. Taylor, writing in the 1940s, asserted that after coarser clothes were abandoned to the power loom 'it was only in the manufacture of the finer fabrics of Bolton and Paisley that that handloom retained any measure of supremacy' (Timmins: 1993: 30, Taylor: 1949: 117). There is scope to revisit this debate in the light of evidence from the Bolton collection.

### De-coding the object

One aspect of the caddow quilts that has baffled researchers for decades is the combinations of letter and numbers that appear to be codes or initials on some examples. In the Bolton collection these include XF11 [BOLMG: 1935.13.10], BSS F12 [BOLMG: 1969.L.T.1], and SF 13 [BOLMG: 2012.119]. Harold B. Burnham in the first major research undertaken on the Bolton caddows in 1971 explained:

*One unexplained characteristic of most of these coverlets is the presence of cryptic letters and numerals in the lower left corners that vary from coverlet to coverlet. Whether these are weavers' marks, drapers' identification marks or whether they indicate a pattern number is not now known.* (Burnham: 1971: 24)

Meticulous notes made by Rick Bradbury, Curator of Industrial History from 1974 to 1996, listed the codes on caddows in other museum collections or on those which were brought into the museum for identification. The current theory, based on Bradbury's notes, evidence from a *List of Prices for Weaving Counterpanes 1874* [BOLMG: 1981.28.2.IND] and the observations of Linda Eaton, textile curator at Winterthur Museum, is summarised by American quilt researcher Laurel Horton:

*[The numbers]10, 11, 12 refer to the width of the piece in 'quarters,' that is, quarter-yards. Linda Eaton theorizes that F and SF indicate fine and super fine, which are terms used to describe qualities of textiles. I've also seen X F – extra fine...SF pieces generally have fewer plain weft yarns between the secondary roving inserts. That leaves one or two letters at the front for the ID of the weaver – or pattern ID.* (Horton, L. 2012 pers. comms., 24 April)

Many weavers also incorporated the date or year into the design, whilst other puzzling combinations appear such as the numerals '1901' on BOLMG: 1970.1.T caddow. This caddow was made to mark the birth of Peter Russell in 1819, but also features the other year-like number in the corner, the meaning of which remains a mystery.

### Entering the museum collection

The caddow quilts are a part of a wider local history textiles collection, a collection cultivated early on in Bolton's public museums. In the latter half of the 1700s Bolton was one of the towns at the forefront of the industrial ascendancy of south east

Lancashire. A century later, the town's industrial magnates funded The Chadwick Museum of natural and human history (opened 1884), Mere Hall art gallery (opened 1890) and a museum of folk life at Hall I' Th' Wood (1902). These museums were founded at the bequest of Dr Samuel Taylor Chadwick, funded by local mill owner J. P. Thomasson, and lastly established by Lord W. H. Leverhulme respectively. Further industrial partners of the museums included Alderman B. A. Dobson of the Bolton firm Dobson & Barlow. It was Dobson who donated Samuel Crompton's only surviving original Spinning Mule in 1886 [BOLMG: 1886.50]. Dobson reinforced the firm's Bolton pedigree through celebrating the work of local inventor, Crompton, whose Spinning Mule of 1779 was the machine later made commercially successful by Dobson & Barlow. Lineage, and thus heritage, was important to businessmen like Dobson, whose influence led to the notably early inclusion of textiles machinery in the development of Bolton's public collections. It is in this context that the Bolton 'caddow' or 'caddy' quilt collection began.

In 1902, Hall I' Th' Wood [HITW] a wooden framed Tudor house, and home to Samuel Crompton from 1758 until 1781, opened as a museum of folk life. The museum was arranged by curator, Walter Midgley, as dress set rooms. The second room displayed historic local textiles, including the earliest recorded acquisition of a caddow [1902.105.HITW] 'The Coroner's Quilt', which was on display by 1903 (Midgley:1903: 34). Woven in 1846, it was originally commissioned by the Counterpane Weavers Association as a gift for John Taylor, the first coroner for Bolton Corporation. Rowland Taylor, his son, succeeded him as coroner and donated the quilt to the museum. This caddow bears a large representation of the Borough coat of arms, the elephant and castle, and initially served a ceremonial function as a gift presented to the coroner at a mass meeting of the Counterpane Weavers Association. John Taylor recounted the occasion in his autobiography:

*September 9th, 1846. – This evening dined by special invitation with the Association of Counterpane Weavers, on the occasion of a presentation to me of a very large counterpane for services rendered, and with a suitable address thereon thanked them, and recommended love, peace and arbitration, and union with their masters.* (Taylor: 1883: 164)

The counterpanes represented a bygone age to the curators in the 1900s, Thomas Midgley wrote of the first exhibit: 'a fine example of local Handloom weaving of the middle of last century' (Midgley:1903: 34). Yet, as later acquisitions demonstrate, while these caddows were preserved in a museum, a handful of elderly handloom weavers still resided and worked in Bolton's cellar dwellings until the 1910s.

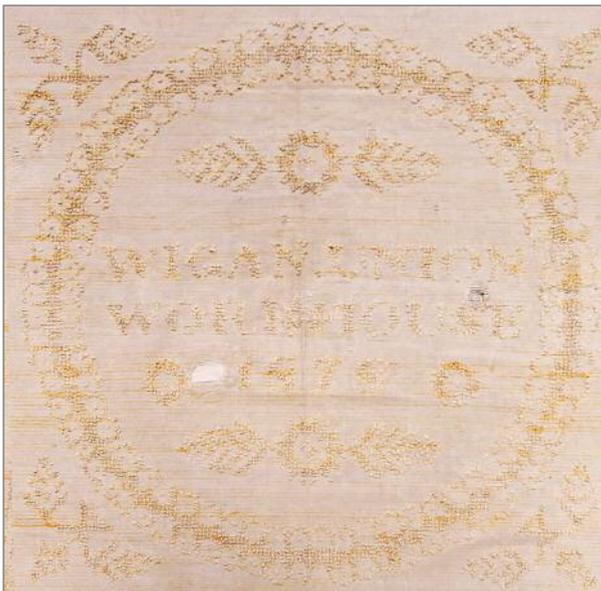
There are further phases in collecting that can be identified in the growth of the caddow quilt collection, particularly periods under the guidance of specialist curators. After the first two acquisitions, the plain 'F11' caddow [BOLMG: 1935.13.10] was received in the Chadwick Museum register as a donation, listed as 'for the Victorian collection'. Following the retirement of the Chadwick Museum's second curator, Thomas Midgely (son of Walter) in 1934, and the impact of the Second World War, the progress of all aspects of collecting slowed. A centralisation of displays at the current Le Mans Crescent site occurred after the closure of the Chadwick Museum in 1956, when the town's industrial collection, including the Spinning Mule, were moved to Tonge Moor Library. A revival of the collecting of caddows began in the 1960s, at a time when the various departments of the museum collection began to define themselves with new categories; for example 'bygones' and 'textiles'. Six caddows entered the collection between 1963 and 1971, intriguingly attributed to both 'BY' and 'T' categories with little consistency. At this time, several donors recollected their grandparents as the recipients of the counterpanes at the end of the previous century or even believed their grandfather to be the weaver. A short lapse in the acquisition

of caddows was ended by the interest taken by the Industrial History Curator Rick Bradbury, who recorded the items in the department daybook throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, accessioning five caddows. Two of the five donors were able to provide some object history, with information about their ancestors. The recipients of 1980.60.IND Jethro Hamer and Margaret Gregson Worlsey, whose names are inscribed on this caddow given on the occasion of their wedding, were the donor's great-grandparents. The donors of 1984.51.IND also had some knowledge of the weaver of the caddow, although not their exact identity, it was thought to have been woven in a Turton Street cellar dwelling. The remaining acquisitions were purchases or had lost any accompanying personal recollections.

The only 21st century acquisition, BOLMG: 2012.119, was discovered in the attic of a house in Westhoughton. The building is known to date from the 1850s, but the current owners had no prior knowledge of the quilt that they found. Westhoughton Local History Society endeavoured to find a link with a local weaver or previous occupants of the house, but without the oral testimony of a descendent this task is difficult. As the centennial approaches of the date of the last caddows in the collection made in 1915, the possibility of associating the quilts with further personal testimonies grows increasingly unlikely.

### The last caddows

The accepted historical narrative of the decline of handloom weaving places the complete demise of handwoven manufacture even of fancy goods, like the all cotton counterpanes, around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, although the exact decade is hotly debated (Timmins:1993: 30-31). Yet, caddows in the Bolton collection show that a small group of craftsmen, with looms remaining in their cellars, persisted to utilise their skills to make handwoven counterpanes until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was either conducted for rare commissions, made by workhouses and hospitals, such as INV:9346, the Wigan Union Workhouse caddow dated 1878, or on an ad-hoc basis for family members. The two



Central motif of the Wigan Union Workhouse caddow, 1878. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century counterpanes were commissioned by workhouses, asylums and hospitals. From the collections of Bolton Library and Museum Service, photograph courtesy of Barry Yearsley.

latest counterpanes in the Bolton collection, BOLMG: 1971.37.T and 1984.51.IND, both date from 1915, eight years after the proclamation by a *Manchester Guardian* journalist visiting Bolton that he had met 'the last of his race' (Haslam: 1907: 45). Both have the same design and are presumed to have been made by the same weaver. From accession information we can determine the weaver of one of the quilts was Edwin Draper, the grandfather of Irene Ronson nee Street born in 1912, who made the quilt inscribed *God Bless Our Home* three years after she was born. Irene, at the point of loan for BOLMG:1971.37.T (the quilt was later donated), stated he was 'the last hand loom weaver in Bolton who made

one quilt for each grandchild'. When Dr G. von Schulze-Gaevernitz visited Bolton in 1895 and met a cottage weavers' union numbering only fifty members, he noted 'the almost fanatically spoken-out determination to be the last of their trade and to teach their handicraft to no younger person' (Schulze-Gaevernitz: 1895: 106). While Schulze-Gaevernitz perceived a deliberate determination not to pass on the specialist skills of the caddow weaver to the next generation, Edwin Draper, aged 65 in 1915, on the other hand was determined to leave each grandchild a caddow as a keepsake.

## Conclusions

The Bolton caddow quilt collection and related archival and printed material are yet to be fully dissected by researchers. An interdisciplinary approach could reveal even more about these quilts and their meanings as museum objects and as historical sources. The potential for the caddows, and similar samples of local textiles held in museums across the country, to be utilised by social and economic historians as a source to be critiqued rather than as merely an illustration is evident. Whilst there are limitations to using such organic collections, which often develop on an ad hoc basis or around the interests of particular curators, to be seen as representative of a time or place, they can illuminate a stagnant line of historical enquiry. The story behind the object can reveal a 'hidden history' not acknowledged in accepted historical narratives. Those uncovered by initial research into this collection often stem from the marrying of oral tradition or memory with historical sources. As Sue Prichard explained, memories associated with a quilt, embellished and handed down through generations 'are uniquely individual – focusing on the intimate rather than the worldly' (Prichard: 2010: 21). Memories, when studied alongside the tangible, the historical, provide new ways of making meaning.

The potential for further studies arising from initial investigations of the collection are wide ranging. What, for example, could these objects tell us about handloom weaving communities, their interaction with the home as a space of work and family life? Scope for further research also includes the relationship of the caddows to their power loom facsimiles, and American off-spring. When did the technological developments of the power loom catch up with the handloom weaving of Bolton's fancy goods, and does this subvert assumptions about the speed of the full industrialisation of the textiles industry in the North West? In closer studies of these objects, can quilts with fewer provenances be matched to a particular pattern, or the style or signature be assigned to a known weaver? Can there be a continuation of the personal histories and stories – do the great-grandchildren know that their ancestor's quilts are in the museum collection?

The collection is not static, with a recent acquisition in the spring of 2012 it remains to be seen if more local quilts are held in personal collections, which may come forward to be identified or donated. The quilts are not the most accessible of sources, the opportunity to display a textile of this size and weight is rare. Yet, with a summer exhibition of 'Textile Treasures' on the horizon in 2013, the Bolton public will once again see the 'famous local product' on display. With new audiences, and a new generation, approaching 100 years since the last quilt was made, there are doubtless more hidden histories to be revealed.

## Bibliography:

Barton, B. T. 1882: *Historical Gleanings of Bolton and District 2nd series*, Daily Chronicle, Bolton.

Beeston, Erin and Horton, Laurel. 2013: 'Bolton's Cotton Counterpanes: Hand-Weaving in the Industrial Age' pp. 7-36 in Hazel Mills (ed.) *Quilt Studies: the Journal of the British Quilt Studies Group* Issue 14, pp. 7-36.

- Betterton, Shelia. 1978: *More Quilts and Coverlets from The American Museum in Britain*. Butler & Tanner Ltd.: London.
- Burnham, Harold B. 1971: "Bolton "Quilts" or "Caddows": A Nineteenth Century Cottage Industry, *CIETA Bulletin* 34, no. 2, pp. 22-28.
- Haslam, James. 1907: 'The last of his race, an old hand-loom weaver', *The Manchester Guardian* (31 December 1907) Manchester, p. 45.
- Hewitt, Julia. 2007: 'The History of Brightmet: Roscoe Fold', <http://www.boltonrevisited.org.uk/a-brightmet.html>, accessed 23 May 2012.
- Hood, Adrienne D. and Ruddel, David-Thierry. 1991: 'Artifacts and Documents in the History of Quebec Textiles' in *Living in a Material Culture World: Canadian and American Approaches to Material Culture*, Pocius, Gerald L. (ed.), Institute of Social and Economic Research, St John's Newfoundland pp. 55-91.
- Hood, Adrienne D. 2009: 'Material culture: the object', Barber, Sarah. & Peniston-Bird, C. M. (eds) *History Beyond the Text: A student's guide to approaching alternative sources*, Routledge, London & New York pp. 176-198.
- Jones, Mark. 2010: 'Directors Foreword' in Prichard, Sue (ed.) *Quilts 1700-2010: Hidden histories, untold stories*, V&A, London p. 7.
- Lemire, Beverly. 1991: *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain: 1660-1800*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Midgley, Thomas. 1903: *Guide book and catalogue of the Hall-I'-Th'-Wood Museum* Bolton: J. W. Gledsdale printer, Deansgate.
- Prichard, Sue (ed.) 2010: *Quilts 1700-2010: Hidden histories, untold stories*, V&A, London.
- Schulze-Gaevernitz, Dr G. Von 1895: *The Cotton Trade in England and on the Continent*, Manchester: Marsden & Co Ltd. (Hall, Oscar S. trans from German)
- Schwartz, Esther I. 1958: 'Early Commercial Weaving in Paterson' *Antiques* 74 (October), pp. 330-34.
- Styles, J. 1993: 'Manufacturing, consumption and design in eighteenth-century England'. In: J. Brewer and R. Porter. eds. *Consumption and the World of Goods in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Routledge, London, pp. 535-542.
- Styles, J. 2006: 'Lodgings at the Old Bailey: Lodgings and their furnishings in eighteenth century London', in Styles, J. & Vickery, Amanda. (eds.) *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America*, Yale University Press, New Haven pp. 61-80.
- Styles, J. 2009: 'What were cottons for in the early industrial revolution', in Riello, Giorgio. & Parthasarathi, Prasannan. (eds.) *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 307-326.
- Styles, J. 2010: 'Patchwork on the page', in Prichard, Sue (ed.) *Quilts 1700-2010: Hidden histories, untold stories*, V&A, London, pp. 48-51.
- Taylor, A. J. 1949: 'Concentration and Specialization in the Lancashire Cotton Industry, 1825-1850' in *The Economic History Review New Series*, Vol. 1, No. 2/3, pp. 114-122.
- Taylor, John. 1883: *Autobiography of a Lancashire Lawyer Being the Life and Recollections of John Taylor Attorney at Law and First Coroner of the Boro of Bolton*, Bolton Daily Chronicle, Bolton.

Timmins, Geoffrey. 1993: *The last shift: the decline of handloom weaving in nineteenth-century Lancashire*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Vickery, Amanda. 2009: *Behind closed door: at home in Georgian England*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London.

Wadworth, A. P. & Mann, J. De L., 1968: *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire 1600-1780*, Augustus M Kelley, New York.

**References:**

- 1 The origin of the name caddow is uncertain, according to the Oxford English Dictionary in previous centuries it was used to describe a coarse, woollen blanket. It is unclear when the term was transferred to the 18<sup>th</sup> century cotton bedcovering.

# Collecting practice: An exploration of acquisitions at Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums

*Jenny Brown is Curator of Industrial and Social History for Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums. She offers a thoughtful response to 'Collecting practice in Social History museums' by Lauren Ephithite, published in Social History in Museums Volume 36 (2012).*

Ephithite's article reported on current collecting practice in social history museums, explored whether museums continue to collect and highlighted the potential impact of other areas of work on collecting activity.

Having taken part in the original survey, I was interested to see how my own experiences compared with those of other respondents. Ephithite (2012) reported that 76% of respondents' collections were formed largely from donations. Furthermore 91% of respondents reported continuing to collect through donations with 94% viewing collecting as an important part of their work and that of the museum. Ephithite also identified several key barriers to collecting including lack of staff time, lack of money and lack of storage, with tasks such as existing collection management problems, displays and enquiries identified as tasks which may take priority over collecting.

This paper seeks to explore the issues around the donating-collecting experience further, using the historic and contemporary collecting practices at Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums as an example. It will look at how our collections have been formed, explore how other work-based tasks relate to collecting activity and ask whether the museum sector effectively communicates the social value of collecting, specifically donations from the public.

## **The development of Aberdeen's collections**

Aberdeen's museum service was founded in 1885, with the creation of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Industrial Museum. Donations were a staple of our early collecting, including such notable gifts as *To Pastures New* by Sir James Guthrie, presented in 1888 by Francis Edmond.

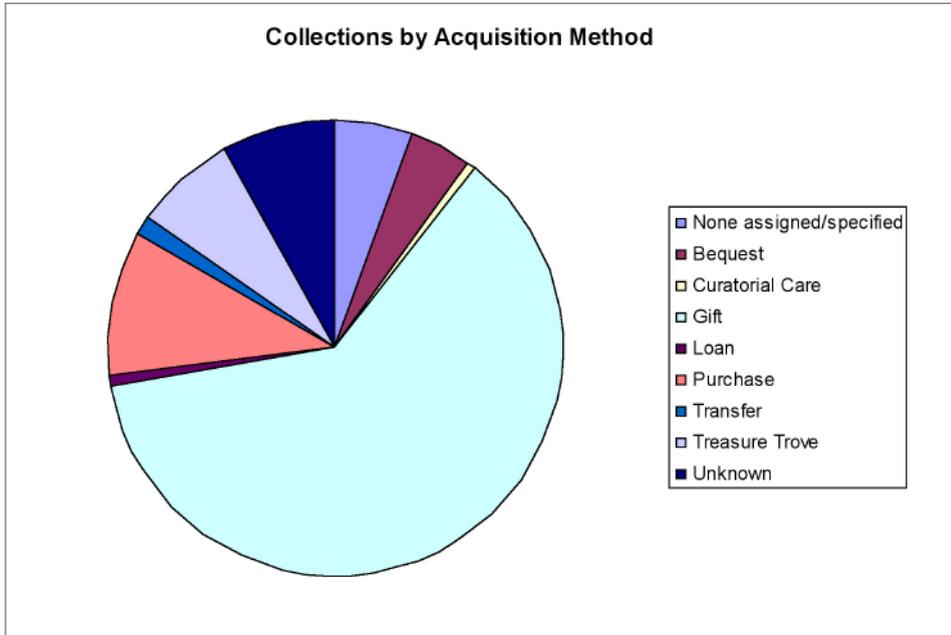
The founding collections included not only art presented or bequeathed by local patrons but also contemporary examples of local industry and craft. Many of our most significant objects from 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century industry first appeared as exhibits at the annual Art and Industry Exhibitions staged by the Aberdeen Trades Council, and were later presented to the Museum as gifts.

These include a remarkable set of 23 process samples from the manufacture of paper, described in the 1898 Art Gallery & Industrial Museum catalogue as having been 'Presented by Messrs. A. Pirie & Sons, Ltd., Stoneywood, Aberdeen. 1897'. Remarkably 115 years later, the samples of boiled and bleached pulps are still squishy – a testament to the care with which the manufacturer prepared their gift to the museum.

One of Aberdeen Maritime Museum's key exhibits when it opened in 1984 was a model of the SS Thermopylae. This exquisite builder's cased model was presented by Aberdeen shipbuilders Hall Russell and Company in 1891, the year it was launched – an historic example of contemporary collecting (Edwards, 2007: 27).

In 1937 the Regional Museum opened in the basement of the Art Gallery complex featuring natural and local history, with further exhibitions on local history and archaeology in James Dun's House, which opened in the 1970s (now both sadly closed). The museum service also acquired Provost Skene's House (a 16<sup>th</sup> century town house with period room settings) in 1953 and Aberdeen Maritime Museum in 1984.

Returning to Ephithite’s original survey question about how the bulk of the collection was acquired, I have drawn the following data from our collections management system<sup>1</sup>. These results should be taken as indicative, as it will be affected by incomplete, inconsistent or inaccurate data. It does not include backlog items (now thankfully much reduced) and some records will represent more than one item, either due to bulk accessioning for practical purposes or changes in cataloguing practice (such as the introduction of the components facility in newer systems).

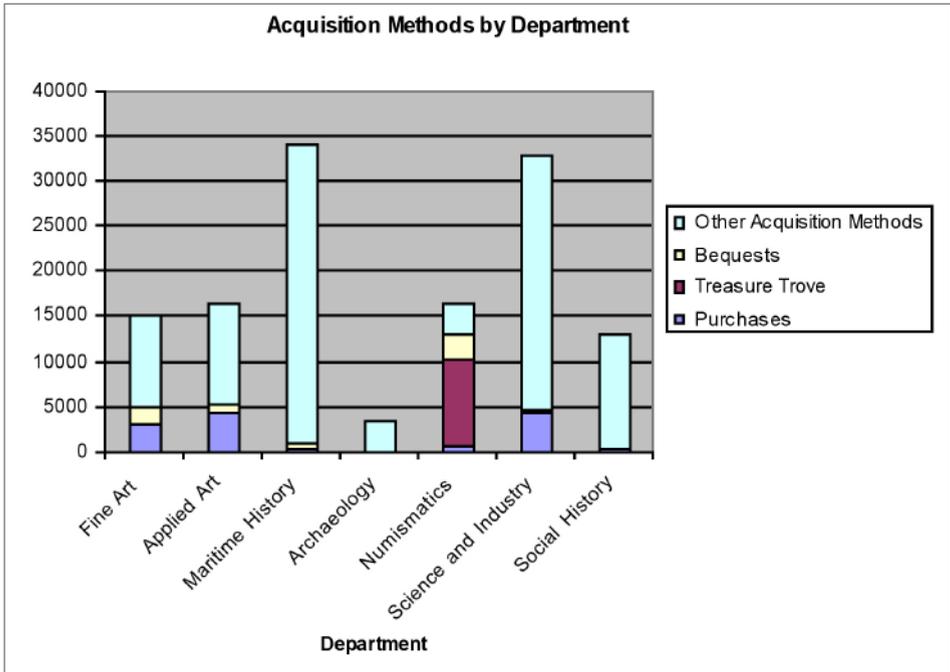


This chart illustrates the breakdown of the collections by the recorded acquisition method. The bulk of the collections by far, some 62%, was acquired by gift (our term for donations to the collection), followed in much lower numbers by acquisition through purchase (10%), treasure trove (7%), bequests (4.5%). The remainder is either unknown (8% - including unreconciled items from our backlog) or unspecified on TMS (5.5%), with transfers from other council departments (this is a separate category for internal audit purposes), long term loans (not including exhibition loans) and curatorial care (largely civic collections we do not own but are nominally responsible for).

The figures for purchases, treasure trove and bequests were then broken down by department and compared with an aggregated figure for other methods of acquisition, of which the bulk is presumed to be gifts.

Interestingly the number of individual purchases made for the Science and Industry and Applied Art departments are higher than those for Fine Art, although the total financial value of these purchases can be safely assumed to be higher. Aberdeen does have a purchase budget as well as several monetary bequests for purchases to the collection but staff are expected to apply for grant aid to supplement these funds. The Friends of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums regularly support the purchase of acquisitions across the collections.

While treasure trove acquisitions are restricted to the Archaeology and Numismatics departments as would be expected, bequests also form a considerable proportion of the Numismatics collection where we might expect them to be the unique preserve of the art collections. Ephithite claims (2012: 51) that 'it may be difficult to source high quality



material in Social History unlike other disciplines such as art', but although most of these bequests are several decades old, Aberdeen's experience still indicates that private individuals with significant non-art collections will bequeath them to a museum. Indeed the 'eBay effect' and 'Private Collectors' identified as barriers to collecting by the survey respondents suggest that high quality social history items are available but that museums are often priced out of the market. The logical response is to cultivate relationships with collectors and dealers and encourage philanthropic gifts, bequests or simply good prices for social history objects, in much the same way as art colleagues do.

In fact, I would argue that the role of private collectors and 'active collecting' (Ephithite, 2012: 50) in the formation of many museum collections is hidden from this kind of numerical analysis. The model of the private collector who seeks a permanent home for his collection has frequently received the attention of greater minds than mine in academic literature. Amongst Aberdeen's collections are a number of smaller collections, often identified with the collector/donor's name, and no doubt similar examples can be found in museums across the country. These collections have been put together by people passionate about their subject and as such are often both exquisite and exhaustive, offering the museum the chance to acquire a comprehensive collection of significant objects when they might not otherwise be able to do so. In social history terms, some of Aberdeen's most significant items were gifted in this way.

These gifts may entail a longer term relationship between the donor and the museum, a relationship which is often specific to the curator in question. The relationship may begin with an exhibition loan, enquiry or by chance and be cultivated by the curator, with a view to securing the collection. The curator actively seeks to establish a relationship and generate a gift or bequest just as they might develop a relationship with a dealer to secure important purchases at better prices.

And the relationship may continue after the donation. The Kenneth A. Webster Nursing Collection was put together by a Senior Nurse Tutor at Foresthill College (Aberdeen's nursing college) as a teaching resource for student and pupil nurses, and grew exponentially as alumni passed expired or redundant material to Ken. The collection

was gifted to Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums in 1996, we then employed Ken with the assistance of Museums Galleries Scotland to help catalogue the collection in order to capture his extensive knowledge of nursing practice. Ken continues to receive additions from the many nurses he trained and worked with, which he passes to the museum, and has aided curatorial staff on the development of exhibitions.

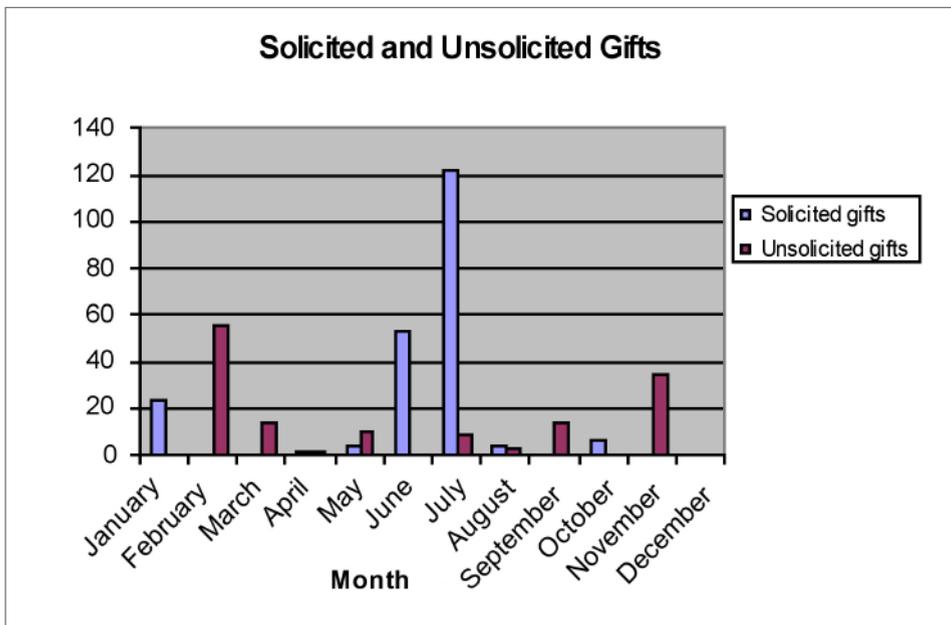
Although the bulk of our collections were acquired by gift, it is by no means true that these items are of a lower quality. The presence of these privately created collections within the service also indicates the complex relationships which may arise from a donor gifting material to the museum, which we will return to later.

### Collecting and other activities

The barriers to collecting identified in Ephithite’s survey included lack of staff time and lack of storage, which from my own experience are closely related to the tasks many respondents indicated as competing priorities: existing collections (including collections management problems), displays and enquiries.

Whilst Ephithite (2012: 53) quite rightly identifies displays, community work, education events and enquiries as public facing activities and commends their community focus which ‘prove [museums’] worth and value’, unfortunately I cannot agree with her that collecting does not demonstrate the worth and value of a museum. My argument has two layers – firstly that the public facing products of curatorial work such as exhibitions are closely related to collecting; and following on from this that collecting donations is a clear indicator that the donor understands the worth and value of museums (the social value of collecting).

As demonstrated above, there are many methods of collecting but I would like to focus particularly on methods of collecting donations. Donations are not purely random – they can be solicited by the curator, can arise from exhibition research with source communities and be gifted by visitors inspired by the resulting exhibitions. The following table shows the varied gift relationships within the museum context. These figures are drawn from our collections management system and represent Science and Industry and Social History<sup>2</sup> acquisitions in 2010<sup>3</sup>. The following examples (drawn from the same period) highlight some of the ways in which curatorial work actively develops the collections.



2010 was the 125th anniversary of the opening of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Industrial Museum. *1885: Industrial Aberdeen*<sup>4</sup> was an exhibition exploring the industrial life of the city at the time, bringing together collections which were part of the original displays as part of the museum's aim to 'educate the mechanical classes'. In response to political agendas to increase acknowledgement of the city's granite heritage, I drew on our collections to develop a granite themed handling collection for schools to accompany the exhibition. The granite industry collections are very strong on hand tools, photographs and ephemera but lighter on the working conditions and experiences of the granite workers.

I filled this gap by approaching the director of one of the remaining granite manufacturers in Aberdeen. Mr Robertson had approached me the previous year regarding donating the minutes of the Aberdeen Granite Association<sup>5</sup>, and we remained in contact. In addition to securing the gift of the minutes around this time, I requested some modern personal protective equipment for the handling collection to highlight the historic health issues of this industry. These were gifted in January. Subsequent to these gifts, Mr Robertson also lent us the Chain of Office of the Aberdeen Granite Association for the exhibition (which is now on long term loan and I hope will be gifted in due course) and continues to advise and assist us with the annual Granite Festival programme.

Another major social history exhibition that year was *The Caring Profession*<sup>6</sup> which looked at the history of nursing and the experience of nurses in Aberdeen and North East Scotland. As part of the research for this exhibition I appealed to the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary Nurses' League for volunteers to help develop the exhibition's themes and stories. As I worked with these volunteer nurses over June and July to develop the themes and objects for the exhibition, I encouraged them to take part in oral history interviews and received donations which expressed their own experiences of nursing, all of which are now part of our permanent collections. Happily the peak of unsolicited gifts in February were also nursing items repatriated by the descendants of an Aberdeen trained nurse who had moved to New Zealand in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The remaining unsolicited gifts included ones inspired by exhibitions. For example, during the 2009 exhibition *Wireless*<sup>7</sup> a visitor telephoned after visiting the show to ask whether we would be interested in a BayGen FPR 2 Freeplay Wind-up Analogue Radio. This gift was unexpected but filled a gap in our radio collection and offered the opportunity to talk about renewable energy and consumption in relation to the oil and gas displays at Aberdeen Maritime Museum. My enquiries about the condition and completeness of the item encouraged the donor to look for the original instructions and packaging for the radio, ensuring a better quality of the gift when it was finally donated in 2010.

In fact, only 33% of the gifts accepted in 2010 were 'random' in that they were not the result of my actions or a response to the museum's exhibitions programme. These figures and examples demonstrate that the high proportion of gifts to Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums does not indicate a passive or reactionary response to offers. Instead, collecting is often closely linked with exhibitions and community work.

### **The social value of the donating-collecting experience**

Thus far, the focus of this paper has been firmly on the museum and the curator as active collectors rather than on the donors who have contributed the bulk of the collections. As Bergen (2012: 248) notes, given the importance of relations between donors and museums for acquisition and the development of collections, the subject is surprisingly little represented in the literature.

Bergen's (2012) fascinating paper looks at the relationship between the 'collector-donor' and the museum, stopping to take stock of a relationship which many of us take part in everyday. Bergen works for the development service of a large Canadian university,

negotiating gifts in kind for the library. Her article focuses on private collectors who then donate the collection to an institution, analysing that transaction in the light of a key anthropological text on gifts – *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss (1923). Mauss' work on giving in traditional societies demonstrated that the 'logic of giving' has three phases – giving, receiving/accepting and reciprocating. The voluntary action of giving creates a social connection between giver and receiver so that in accepting a gift, the receiver also accepts the connection. The donor in this relationship has authority over the receiver because the receiver has the obligation to reciprocate (the counter-gift) although this does not clear the original debt (Bergen, 2012: 243-244). Bergen (2012: 244-245) identifies that in the museum context the first two stages often occur simultaneously and are governed by a legal agreement between the two parties. This agreement absolves the museum from any form of monetary compensation although in practice forms of symbolic recognition or acknowledgement are often used (such as naming a room after the donor).

Aberdeen practice reflects this – the donor offers the gift which is then considered by the museum and if accepted a legal document is sent to the donor. When signed this document transfers title to the object to the museum, with a tick box option for the donor to indicate whether they wish to be acknowledged on catalogue and label credit lines, for example 'Presented in 2010 by Mrs Jones'.

Anthropologists assign great weight to the role of the gift in creating bonds of mutual obligations, binding a community together. However, this form of exchange tends to take place in egalitarian societies. My personal experience is that exchange transactions in museums are not quite so simple and clear-cut. There is a tension between the museum as recipient and the curator as the museum's agent. In Mauss' analysis the donor gains authority through the obligation created. In the museum context, the curator feels the obligation for counter gift and acknowledgement resulting from the exchange whereas the institution's legal agreements seek to absolve the institution (including the curator) from that obligation. Bergen (2012: 245) sees this in the way that donor's desires to remain involved in the collections display and interpretation 'might make museum curators and staff uncomfortable, or even embarrassed'.

The museum occupies a position of authority in the community meaning the gift relationship does not take place between equals, contributing to the tension felt by the curator between the obligation to the donor and the museum's desire to be absolved of obligation. Instead the relationship between donor and museum may be more akin to a redistribution exchange as identified by Polanyi (1957, quoted in Hylland Eriksen, 1995). According to Polanyi, instead of direct exchange between individuals redistribution is a centralised, hierarchical form of distribution where a central actor receives goods from members of society and commits himself to redistribute them. As a system within society it confirms and strengthens the legitimacy of the central actor but also creates a safety net for the needy.

If we apply this model to museums, the museum acts as the central actor receiving gifts from members of the public which are then redistributed to the society at large through their preservation and display. In this model, the gift is an acknowledgement of the authority of the museum on the part of the donor and the counter-gift is the obligation for the museum to share the resultant wealth (objects, knowledge) with the community. The gift creates social ties binding the participants together, sharing a collective wealth regardless of status.

We are all familiar with the obligations created by gifts. In our professional lives I believe this obligation underlies dialogues about the sanctity of public trust in museums and the importance of inclusive community engagement. The drive to gather evidence of public value (and thus value for money) created by the political climate of the last 30-40 years (Appleton, 2001) has focussed very much on the 'public-facing' activities that Ephithite

identifies – asking who our audiences are and looking at how they have benefitted from their experiences. This places the emphasis squarely on the value of the museum's actions – their 'impact', to borrow a phrase from the Museums Association's recent discussion paper – rather than acknowledging the independent and voluntary actions of the 'community'.

To my knowledge, no efforts have been made to capture the motivations, values and experiences of donors even though they are essential *actors* in a transaction which gives all our collections an intangible, social value.

## Conclusions

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that the development of Aberdeen's collections through gifts is not a passive process but that gifts are often an integral part of public facing activities and a common response to our exhibition and public facing work. Finally, anthropological theory highlights the significance of a gift to the museum in creating an obligation which can not be wholly discharged, thus creating an enduring social bond.

In conclusion, little attention has been focussed on the role and motivations of the donor and this area of research may be beneficial for the articulation of this social value of gifts. This in turn should be used to advocate the continuing importance of our curatorial work as an important means of valuing the significance of an individual's gift and undertaking the obligation for return of value to the community. The last few decades have given us a great body of evidence of the value of museums to our audiences. It has also given us a vocabulary we should now use to communicate the importance of collections as an expression of their source communities, who have always been active agents in the creation of museums.

## Bibliography:

Appleton, Josie (2001) 'Museums for 'The People'?' in Appleton, Josie (ed.) *Museums for 'The People'?* London: Institute of Ideas, pp.14-26

Bergen, Caroline (2012) 'Material object and immaterial collector' in *The Thing About Museums* (2012) Dudley, Sandra, Amy Jane Barnes, Jennifer Binnie, Julia Petrov, Jennifer Walkgate (eds.) London: Routledge

Edwards, John 'Big and Oily: collecting the North Sea Gas and Oil Industry' in *Social History in Museums* (The Social History Curators' Group, 2007) Volume 31, pp. 27-31

Hylland Eriksen, Thomas (1995) *Small Places, Large Issues: An introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology* London: Pluto Press

Mauss, Marcel (1923) 'Essai sur le don' ('The Gift'), *L'Année Sociologique*, Paris

Museums Association (2012) *Museums 2020 Discussion Paper*  
<http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=806530>

Polanyi, Karl (1957 [1941]) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* Boston, MA: Beacon

## References:

- 1 This (and all the following data) was extracted from Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Collections Management System (The Museum System by Gallery Systems) on 18 September 2012.

- 2 Aberdeen's collections management system is divided into seven departments (Archaeology, Numismatics, Fine Art, Applied Art, Maritime History, Science and Industry and Social history) to which editing rights are restricted to the relevant curatorial staff. The figures were limited to the Science and Industry and Social history acquisitions for this year because they all fall within the SHIC classification whereas other departments' acquisitions may fall outwith SHIC.
- 3 2010 is chosen because all acquisitions from this year have now been catalogued onto the collections management system and are therefore retrievable. These Science and Industry and Social History areas of the collections also benefitted from a higher profile in 2010 due to a higher number of exhibitions. There is no social history venue for our service and therefore no permanent exhibition for social history subjects.
- 4 *1885: Industrial Aberdeen*, Aberdeen Maritime Museum, 3 April to 20 June 2010
- 5 Presented in 2009 by Paull and Williamson Solicitors (secretary for the association, acting on Mr Robertson's instructions)
- 6 *The Caring Profession*, Aberdeen Maritime Museum, 9 October 2010 to 5 February 2011
- 7 *Wireless*, Aberdeen Maritime Museum 15 November 2008 to 1 March 2009

# Many stories, one West End: A suburb in the spotlight at Newcastle's Discovery Museum

*"The new Jerusalem. Brasilia. An island of advanced development in an old country. As famous as Rome or Paris. The Venice of the North... These are the words of politicians and they've all been applied in recent years to the city of Newcastle. A city that has been re-designed to the sound of drums and trumpets". Road to Blaydon, Tyne Tees Television (1986)*

That sound can be heard loudly and clearly in *Archive for Change* film footage, in the latest exhibition to occupy the Peoples' Gallery at the Discovery Museum. As the Boy's Brigade marches to the tune of *the Blaydon Races*, bulldozers crumble and sweep away the brickwork of yesteryear, signalling the dawning of an era of continual reshaping of the West End of Newcastle. *West End Stories* places its subject in the context of how the world we live in today has been influenced by the Industrial Revolution, war, political change and the migration and movement of people. The exhibition brings together objects, images and oral histories that describe and illustrate an area with many distinguishing features that form its identity; from the Roman occupation to the rise and fall of the local armaments industry and from the devastating effects of governmental sanctions in the 1980s to the increased rate of immigration to the area.

Since its origins in the mid 1990s, the Peoples' Gallery has commonly been devoted to exhibitions with a community focus or a strong community involvement. For the first ten years, the gallery housed up to eight exhibitions each year, often with low budgets and an archaic approach to the curatorial process. In 2005, the current crop of outreach and community engagement professionals began the task of taking the gallery into the twenty-first century. Rather than a handful of shows lasting for around six weeks each, the number of annual exhibitions was reduced to two, each with six-month durations. On top of the considerable changes in programming, the aesthetics were upgraded, as outdated interpretative text panels were replaced with vinyl and space was made for interactives. In recent times, the Outreach department have had to share the gallery with other divisions and make way for exhibitions with larger budgets and, every so often, less of a community input but *West End Stories* has the chance to reaffirm the *peoples'* place in the Peoples' Gallery.

Rather than a be all and end all, the exhibition is intended as the starting point in an Outreach project, working with people of the West End of Newcastle, an area that is largely underrepresented in Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums' collections. The background work that informed the exhibition included workshops and other engagement activities with residents of Elswick, Scotswood, Fenham and Benwell, the four key districts that make up Newcastle's West End, allowing them to have a say in the development of their local museum. Over an eighteen-month period, the Discovery Museum's Outreach department had a strong partnership and working relationship with the St. James Centre for Heritage & Culture and the St. James Centre Heritage & Environment Group, both of which are based at the church of their namesake in Benwell. For more than a century, the west of Newcastle has been a place in an almost constant state of flux. The area was once home to a thriving industry that profited as a result of the World Wars but subsequently struggled and was forced to adapt when peace was restored. Unemployment was widespread in the post war years and large-scale demolitions of entire streets in favour of high-rise tower block developments added insult to injury. Economics, politics and privatisation schemes have continued to impact upon the area, creating a landscape that has been fluctuating continuously. The aim of the exhibition is not to communicate these topics but rather to hint at the issues

and their implications for the locality and its generations of inhabitants, using the material that has been collected and selected.

On entering the exhibition, visitors to *West End Stories* will find themselves in a gallery space with a conventional layout on the surface. But on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that traditional arrangements have been thrown out of the window. The artefacts have been grouped neither chronologically nor thematically but in an unsystematic fashion that is rarely seen in Tyne & Wear Museums' exhibitions. It is the intention of the curatorial team to offer the audience a selection of objects, images and audiovisual recordings that describe and suggest, as opposed to presenting a linear narrative. However, if one wishes to begin their navigation of *West End Stories* with the oldest exhibit, a large piece of decorative Roman masonry is mounted on a plinth, coupled with a nearby set of four framed images of archaeological finds. These items are contextualised in a short film about the excavation of a Roman fort at Benwell, which can be viewed on two of the six LCD screens. Dotted around the exhibition are photos by the late Jimmy Forsyth, the Welsh-born photographer who played an important role in documenting Newcastle's urban landscape of the fifties, sixties and seventies and the people who resided in it. These black and white prints, one of which captures the immediate aftermath of a road accident in 1958, are placed alongside watercolour and ink drawings, decorative arts, scale models and social history items that include a wooden police truncheon.

In a move that is perhaps more characteristic of contemporary art venues than of history museums, there is a noticeable lack of text. The introductory text is very brief, labels are short and sweet and the idea is that by removing the 'museum voice', visitors will be given more room to explore and decide for themselves what to make of Newcastle's West End. Instead, the majority of the interpretation, if that word still applies in this context, is offered in the form of spoken words, many of which are contained in the *Archive for Change* film loops. In what is almost an exhibition within an exhibition, three LCD screens (each with headphones) sit side by side, showing and telling the stories of the west-enders from the 1960s to the present day. *Archive for Change* was co-ordinated by three filmmakers and local community groups with the aim of collecting and showcasing film footage that tells the complex story of the West End from the perspective of the people who have witnessed the many changes in their area, emphasizing, preserving and celebrating their stories. A similar feature of the exhibition is the *Woolly West* project, in which residents of Scotswood and Benwell recreated landmark buildings and scenes from the West End's past and present using wool. The group have loaned a selection of their knitted items and they are creatively displayed together with a short film combining animation and spoken dialogue to explore how a community survives and responds to attacks on its identity caused by never-ending re-development.

*West End Stories* harks back, in terms of financial constraints and design, to the community exhibitions in the Peoples' Gallery of the 1990s. The show had a budget only a quarter of the size of exhibitions curated by the History department, who normally rely on Heritage Lottery funding and have large steering groups to answer to. This was thanks in part to the acquisition of readymade interior display walls that have been re-used from the previous exhibition. The six pillars in the Peoples' Gallery have a somewhat dictatorial influence on every exhibition held in the space, allowing little room for negotiation in the positioning of the interior fixtures but the Outreach team have gone with the flow and the results are satisfying. One of the interior walls from the previous exhibition was removed and another was rotated, creating a corridor through the centre of the gallery, two aisles that meet and form a V-junction and two spacious areas towards the middle and at the back. In line with popular contemporary museum practice, visitors can access a set of old maps of Newcastle using touch-

screens and see them in articulate detail on an LCD screen, when the technology is actually working, reminding us of the drawbacks of digital and interactive exhibits.

A key output of the project is to make collections and exhibitions more relevant to the West End of Newcastle and this includes the displaying of some archival objects that may never have seen the light of day again. Among them are a photograph of rowers on the Tyne at Elswick, dated 1864, which although missing its top section, has been preserved and protected from further deterioration with careful use of acid-free mounting materials and environmental monitoring. There were concerns that showing an evidently damaged item would look bad for the museums service but the conservators have done an excellent job of mounting and framing the photograph and it sits nicely with its neighbours. Other artefacts that have been given some long-awaited show time include a five-piece set of *Tam o' Shanter* wood carvings that had spent endless years gathering dust in the Laing Art Gallery store rooms. The carvings, made in 1860 by the artist Gerard Robinson who died in Newcastle's west end, illustrate Robert Burns' poem of the same title; a tale of humour, horror, sadness and social commentary. They are displayed altogether and the imagery, which features macabre and self-indulgent scenes of taverns, dancing, devils and phantoms, could be seen as a reflection of the sense of fear and uncertainty felt in an area where you never quite know what's going to happen next. There is an interesting juxtaposition of the ghastly metaphors with a photo of a smiling baby, taken by Jimmy Forsyth in c.1960, creating a most implausible contrast of innocence and immorality.

It is hoped that people will be encouraged to look at the area they live in from a different angle, think about what has happened on their doorstep and consider the many layers of history and stories that have shaped their heritage. Though the target audience is principally Newcastle's West End residents, as an outsider, studying the exhibition has been a real education; I never knew the extent of the hardships and hindrances that have fallen upon the people of the area throughout the years. I think the themes and issues that arise have been conveyed very effectively through the participation of the local community and the considerate methods of integrating their contributions into the show. And *West End Stories* is only the beginning, as the chief curator explained, "I'd like us to fully embed ourselves within all the amazing heritage and cultural projects that are happening in the West. I think we need them more than they need us".<sup>1</sup> Putting on a temporary exhibition and running a programme of events that connect with people and get them into the museum is always a good investment but it's a short-term solution. And so, the Outreach team envisage a long and sustained partnership with people and groups in the west of Newcastle, working with them both in and outside the museum. A multitude of objects, memories, local contributions and rarely-seen collection items have been assembled in a museum that is itself located in Newcastle's West End, at the gateway to one of the most diverse and dynamic places to be found anywhere in the world.

### **References:**

1. Personal communication with Discovery Museum Outreach staff, 14 March 2013.