

# Social History in Museums

Volume 34



# Social History in Museums

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# Editor's foreword

There were Keepers, Assistant Keepers and Curators of Social History. There were a smattering of Oral History Officers and Contemporary Collecting Curators. There were Officers of Audience Development, Collections Rationalisation and Collections Interpretation. And there were a handful of Chief Executives, Directors, Heads and a single President. For an organisation categorised by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Museums Association (MA) as a 'subject specialist network', the SHCG 35th Anniversary conference in Leeds in July 2009 was attended by quite a cross-section of the museum profession.

The conference was dedicated to discussing the past 35 years of SHCG, reflecting on the changes that the profession and sector have experienced, assessing the impact of the group and its ethos on the wider museum community, and hearing case studies of collecting, display and audience engagement projects from different museums throughout the country. Through these presentations, many of which are reproduced here, there is the teasing-out of the issues, concerns, and views that bound, and still bind, members from different disciplines, in different roles, at different positions in their organisational hierarchies, and at different stages in their professional careers.

But it is also clear that these concerns, although constant in many respects, continue to change and evolve in response to the changing professional environment. SHCG was formed in the turbulent and politically polarised 1980s, in a confrontational atmosphere skilfully captured here by May Redfern. Subsequently this intellectual energy and purpose came to dominate policy-making, particularly since 1997 and in bodies like Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). At the same time the divisions of the 80s, the rhetoric of Scargill, Thatcher and Tebbit have given way to the 'third way' of Blair and Brown, and the 'compassionate conservatism' of David Cameron's Conservative party. This change is not only reflected in the assumptions of the policymakers, but also represents a significant shift in the tone of the political debate.

In his summing-up of the conference, David Fleming talks about there being a 'culmination' in the new Museum of Liverpool, uniquely a National Museum dedicated to ordinary life. If this is indeed the case and we are about to reach the end of this phase of the group's life, it begs the following question: how does an organisation born out of one particular historical moment, carry out its purpose in a new one, where many of its former aims are now policy realities, and where many of its outriders now occupy the commanding heights of the profession? What next for SHCG?

This volume is split into two parts. The first looks explicitly at the past 35 years of SHCG, tracing the lines of development and interconnectedness between the group and the wider profession. The second is a collection of case studies presented at the conference which represent a snapshot of the current practice of Social History in museums.

Steph Mastoris, in his piece celebrating SHCG, singles-out the "willingness to host a row" as one of the Group's admirable qualities. So, although I always welcome any thoughts, comments and responses to the articles in the journal, this year I would be especially pleased to also receive diatribes, polemics, rants and angry ripostes.

**Michael Terwey**

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# Part 1: 35 years of SHCG



# “There's a ghost at every feast...”

*Crispin Paine, museum consultant, former SHCG chair (1981-82) and editor of SHCG News (1981-83), opened the 2009 SHCG conference with this deliberately provocative paper exhorting us to ask ourselves whether SHCG really has made a difference in the last 35 years.*

There's a ghost at every feast, they say, and certainly a party-pooper at every party. I've been given that job today. Yet what I want to say this morning isn't meant merely to be annoying, though I'm afraid it may be.

Happily Steph has agreed to respond to these few bad-tempered gripes, and no-one could be better qualified to do so – so my first piece of firm advice is to listen to him rather than to me.

I went a while back to visit a much-praised new town museum. I came away thoroughly depressed. A wonderful building, imaginative, beautiful, superbly detailed. A splendid entrance area, magnificent shop and café, an imposing education suite and generous big temporary exhibition area, a lively programme of events and a strong local team of volunteers. I nearly missed the actual displays – small, cramped, over-designed and above all lacking in any real theme or argument.

I got home to find an invitation to speak today, and if I'm letting off steam, it's because I genuinely believe we have a real problem. It isn't just that one of two museums miss the trick – I believe that we social history curators have seriously lost our way.

Museums in this country – and indeed most developed countries – have improved out of all recognition over the past generation. They are better in almost every respect – in public services, in collections care, in management and hence cost-effectiveness and efficiency, and so they are hugely much more respected by the public than they once were.

As museum people we can be proud of what we've achieved. But as social history curators, I'm afraid, I believe we've lost our way.

## **Theory and display**

We've lost our way because we have no underlying principles on which to base our work. At one level this is simply the boring old post-modernist crisis that everyone goes on about. How do you present an exhibition on the history of a city if you've no historical theory on which to base your story? I well remember when we opened the Museum of Oxford, being damned with faint praise by a Marxist friend who said it wasn't bad for a liberal effort. As a good 60s lefty – so I thought – I was deeply hurt.

Naive, huh? It seems incredible, but I'd never been made to realise that you couldn't do history, let alone present a historical exhibition, without having, whether you recognise it or not, an underlying metanarrative, an underlying ideology.

It would be nice to think that no-one nowadays could be so innocent. But looking at modern social history displays, I'm afraid I'm not so sure.

Think about the local history displays you know, even some of the newest. (I'm talking mainly about local history museums) What is their underlying ideology? Yes, we must consult the public and make sure our displays are what our audience wants, but I believe strongly that every museum display is a creative act that has to be laid at the

door or one person or one group of people. We should be able, I suggest, to see clearly what that creative individual or group believes – what the story they are telling is, how they understand the history they are presenting. Too often we can't. We simply get a rag-bag of different themes and subjects: the local manufacturing industry (long superseded by service industries), Boggsville in Wartime, a Victorian collection of art, with no examination of the role of the donor or why he might have given it. And so on. Like so much local history writing, so many local history displays are mere antiquarianism, a collection of jolly objects which simply don't tell a story.

So my first moan is that, as a profession, we social history curators simply don't know what we're doing.

## SHCG

What about SHCG itself? Has SHCG helped? I'm afraid I'm not at all sure it has.

When SHCG was founded all those years ago, it wasn't actually new. It grew out of the old Group for Regional Studies in Museums. GRSM was in those days the nearest thing to a group for social history curators, and many of us joined it. But many of us felt uncomfortable in it. The reason was that GRSM seemed very rural, and rather folksy. Its grand old people were curators like Geraint Jenkins, and we young things fancied ourselves as urban, political and cutting edge. (truly...). So one year we organised a coup, elected ourselves to the Committee, changed the name and constitution. It worked. Membership soared, even if a few old hands fled to the Society for Folk Life Studies.

But looking back all these years later, I'm not sure it wasn't all a dreadful mistake. The Group for Regional Studies in Museums was just that: a group for people concerned to study and reflect, through collecting and interpretation, regional difference, especially in material culture. If it was dominated by Wales and Scotland, and tended to focus on pre-industrial society, well, perhaps that just reflected the nature of the subject.

By contrast SHCG didn't have then, and I'm not clear that it has yet, anything like such a clear remit.

## Leicester

But it's not only our fault. When Geoff Lewis took over from Raymond Singleton at Leicester, still the larger of only two museum studies courses at the time, he brought all teaching into the Department. Before then museum studies students at Leicester University who specialised in social history did three-quarters of the MA in English Local History. Breaking that link, I believe, had a profound effect on social history in museums. Extraordinary that a simple rejigging of a single university course could have such an effect, but I believe we still haven't recovered to this day.

Geoff was succeeded by Sue Pearce. Sue effectively invented 'museum studies'. She brought not only her own extraordinarily imaginative and challenging approach to collections and collecting, but she also created new links between the museum world and the worlds of academic archaeology and anthropology. Virtually single-handed she invented a new academic discipline, and made us all understand the importance of museums in modern culture and the central role of collecting in the human psyche and in the making of meaning.

But. And I believe it's a big but – the link with social history remained broken.

Despite all the good work that's gone on in museums, in universities and in training courses, I believe that social history in museums has lost the opportunity to work with

social history scholars. We have failed to persuade them – most of them – that objects actually matter, that objects carry priceless information. And they have failed to show us how our work fits into a wider pattern of study, understanding and explication of the history of people in this country.

In the last few years there has been an explosion of interest in material culture studies, and in the role of museums in mediating them. But, unless I'm wrong, this new excitement has very largely bypassed us social history museum people ourselves.

## Collecting

But anyway, at least we've been steadily building up collections. Well, have we? On the contrary, I submit that we've totally lost our nerve. Every few years we have a spate of saying to each other 'we must develop a proper thought-through strategy for contemporary collecting, something like a UK version of Sweden's'. And then all that happens is that individual museums go off and do their own entirely predictable thing: the local football team, gays and lesbians, the local Sikh community, the Home Front, a failed local manufacturing industry. What's more, apart from the odd football strip and a couple of 1970s records, most of what is collected is oral history recordings and some paperwork. Valuable of course, but scarcely evidence of commitment to a belief in material culture's unique contribution to collective memory or historical analysis.

As a result every survey, from the one I did ten years ago for HLF to Suzanne Keene's last year, shows that our social history museums contain a random rag-bag of objects with huge parts of our past completely ignored. 'Hidden From History' is dead right.

Evidence is everywhere, but let me draw your attention to the Museums Association's current campaign 'Effective Collections'. Frankly, this campaign may be well-intentioned, but it's very dangerous. I think it's in danger of damaging our museums more than anything for the past two hundred years. Why? Because it seems to suppose that a good museum collection is one that is useful here and now, rather than one that may be useful at various points over the next two hundred years and more. It's the thinking that nearly destroyed the UK's ethnography collections in the '60s and its natural science collections in the '70s.

But it's our fault. It's because we can't offer a coherent intellectual and social justification for our collections that we expose them to the dangers of 'rationalisation'.

## Public services

So have we been concentrating on public services? Well, perhaps we have. Certainly most museums you visit nowadays give you a leaflet setting out a programme of events that looks lively and imaginative. But how many of them are really based on the sort of social history curatorship of which we can be proud?

And that's the point I'm trying to make this morning. Not that museums are rubbish. They aren't. As I say, we can be very proud of what we do as museum people (well, you can anyway...). It's what we do as social history curators I'm complaining about.

Maybe I'm just unlucky, or simply badly travelled, but I can't think of one social history display in recent years that's made me go "WOW! That's a really imaginative approach – I now have a quite different and much richer understanding of that subject." Getting a new understanding, a new attitude, is to my mind the definition of enjoyment. I got that sort of enjoyment just two days ago from the V&A's Baroque exhibition.

Can you help me? Can you think of a social history / local history exhibition or gallery that makes you go Wow, not because of dramatic displays or objects, but because it gives you a new understanding of the subject, a new excitement?

And yet we talk all the time – I do – about the power of the original object, the importance of understanding where we come from, the contribution that a well-chosen collection can make to community well-being and personal enrichment. It's not good enough.

## Conclusion

Where are the exciting new displays? Where are the ground-breaking books? Where are the well-researched collections? I mean ones that really show what museums can achieve? In the social history field, not around, I'm afraid.

So what can we do? Well, what we DON'T need to do is to start talking in the strange jargon of academics. In fact, curators aren't, I suggest, primarily in the business of text at all. We communicate not through text as a writer does, nor through art as an artist does, or movement and light as perhaps a dancer does, or through music as a musician does. Though we use those skills, our genius is to communicate through collections – assembling them and deploying them in order to create meaning and convey it to our different audiences.

As social history curators, of course, we use documents, architectural studies, oral history, landscape studies – all sorts of things. But our own particular role, I suggest, is to understand and to communicate social history through COLLECTIONS OF OBJECTS.

We need to somehow persuade the world of this – and perhaps we need to persuade ourselves first.

But we do need words! We need them to articulate a clear understanding of the role of material culture in social history, and in the understanding of social history. We need to talk much more effectively to our archaeologist, anthropologist and visual culture colleagues. We need to forge much stronger links with all those material culture specialists beavering away in the universities, many of whom, one gets the impression, think a lot about museums as institutions and as cultural media, but never think at all about social history collections.

There's a real dearth of publications discussing the role of museums in social history or social history in museums. The few there are seem all to be written by Gaynor Kavanagh – and very good they are too! But we need very much more debate and discussion.

If there's even a tiny bit of truth in my claim that we don't really know what we are doing, then we need to be thinking and discussing until we jolly well do. Then we'll be able to persuade our chief officers, our councillors, our Boards and our funding bodies that what social history curators do REALLY MATTERS. And, God knows, we're going to need all the influence we can muster over the next few years.

# From GRSM to [www.shcg.org.uk](http://www.shcg.org.uk): Some thoughts on the first 35 years of the Social History Curators Group

*Steph Mistoris, Head of the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea and former SHCG Journal Editor, reviews, and celebrates, 35 years of dynamism, debate and Annual Study Weekends.*

Considering its concern with the past, the museum profession is rather bad at recording its own history. This is particularly true of the numerous specialist groups and organisations that have developed in the last half century, which have often made very real contributions to the world of museums. Some would say that they represent the essence of dynamic curatorship in their striving to raise the standards of practice, sharing of knowledge and providing informal fellowship and networking opportunities. The very dynamism of these groups along with their changing personnel usually means that rarely do they have their own histories written down and hence their professional contributions fairly assessed.

I found it very useful, therefore, to be asked to contribute to the discussions at the Social History Curators Group's Annual Study Weekend at Leeds in 2009, when the theme for the meeting was to consider developments in social history in museums and especially the contribution of SHCG since its foundation in 1974. As an active member since 1982 this was a useful opportunity for me to take stock of my own feelings about the group, although I was desperate in my desire not to wallow in nostalgia, apart from sharing with those present some rather scary photographs of members looking very, very much younger than they do today!

During the weekend's formal presentations as well as the ad hoc discussions over food, drink and travel that are often the most stimulating parts of ASWs, opinion on the impact of the group ranged from benign all-round goodness to deep regrets that it had not reached its full potential as a theoretical and academic body. For me, this latter assessment missed the point that SHCG, as a membership organisation not locked into any official obligations or partnerships to other groups, has always remained dynamic in work and opinion. In this way it reflects the way in which history curatorship has changed and reacted to intellectual, financial and professional considerations. Any faults of non-delivery on hard theory should be blamed therefore more on the profession as a whole, rather than SHCG itself.

This is not to ignore the intellectual symbiosis that lies at the heart of the group's success. For me, this is most easily seen in the way that the human/social history approach to museum interpretation was developed by members of the group and now is an established norm for not only history museums, but also industrial collections and even some fine and decorative art galleries. Although it could be argued that such a change in approach by museums only followed a more broadly-based intellectual movement in post-war British society, nevertheless the members of SHCG were the only people to debate and think through in detail the implications and benefits to museums and their communities. This laid the foundations of the expansion of the social remit and purpose of museums that is a universally accepted thesis today.

So what, for me, are the key landmarks in the history of the group that have been of benefit to the museum profession as a whole? Obviously, its foundation as the Group for Regional Studies in Museums (GRSM) in October 1974 is fundamental. The inaugural gathering in Leeds aimed to bring together those museum curators who wanted to explore more fully the interrelationship between their collections and regional

identity. This multi-disciplinary approach owed much to the training in human geography and social anthropology that underlay the education of many of the first generation of professional history curators, and was (and still is) at the heart of the work of The Society for Folk Life Studies (SFLS). When this society was founded in September 1961 it had attracted a very broad church of specialists in material culture and intangible heritage – academics, writers, private collectors and practising craftspeople as well as curators – and to an extent, the foundation of GRSM was aiming to create a museum wing of SFLS. No surprise then, that the people who arranged the first meeting of GRSM were those two prolific academic curators, Peter Brears and the late Geraint Jenkins.

The next key date in the history of the group comes in 1982, when a number of young curators took over the running of the group and within a year or so created a much more dynamic organisation. The change of name to Social History Curators Group was the most obvious signifier of this new energy, but more fundamental was the way in which the membership started to position itself as urban history curators, socially committed and politically aware, keen to improve not only the quality of the group's publications and overall image, but professional training and curatorial ethics. It is perhaps significant that at this time there was a considerable overlap in the committee membership of SHCG with that of the Museums Professionals Group – then in its greatest period of acting as a ginger group for the Museums Association.

During the mid 1980s SHCG really got into its stride and the standards of much of the group's output were raised to the level we expect today. Both the Journal and News expanded in size and quality of production, the annual study weekends and training days became much more effectively organised, and membership grew. Belonging to the group was seen as not only a way of self improvement but a key requisite of professional networking and picking up the latest ideas. The group became the focus for the first serious debates on contemporary collecting, women's history (spawning the pressure group Women, Heritage and Museums – WHAM! – along the way), and the role of the museum as a facilitator of community identity. This was also the period that saw the creation of that backbone of history curatorship, SHIC – the Social History and Industrial Classification system. Many active members of the group were instrumental in both the development and widespread adoption and use of this system. By the end of the decade members of SHCG were sufficiently confident in these new approaches to publish a collection of short essays on their work. The volume, *Social History in Museums, a Manual of Social History Curatorship* was published in 1992 and is a remarkable achievement that has much of relevance to us today, although it has been largely forgotten by the group and disregarded by the profession in general.

One of the strongest features of SHCG is the way in which it not only welcomes curators just starting out in their careers but rapidly involves them in the running of the group. In many organisations generational change is often stressful and creates rifts and factions. Thankfully SHCG has been fairly free of this and so my next landmark for the group comes in around 1996, when a new generation of young history curators smoothly assumed control of the committee and started to focus attention on a number of new professional concerns. One of the most important of these was interpretation within the museum and the group funded a research project into this, seeking out best practice and fostering debate on such issues as evaluation and the centrality of the artefact.

My final significant date in the development of SHCG so far is rather boringly the dawn of the new Millennium in 2000. Chronology aside, it was in this year that the group began the development of online resources that continues apace today. The edition of SHCG News for April of that year announced that the group had developed its own website and by the following year the long-term project to establish listings of significant reference material for history curatorship was re-launched in its current

on-line format as firstBASE. In 2005 the proliferation of email allowed the SHCG List to be introduced as a viable method of sharing news and identification queries with the membership, and then in 2008 Object Lessons was launched. This combines downloadable information and loan-boxes of handling material as resources for self-directed learning in material culture.

It is significant that all of these on-line developments have been focussed on facilitating and developing learning amongst the group's membership. After its role as a network and publisher of curatorial best practice, SHCG's greatest contribution has been in the provision of training. Right from the beginning of the group practical, hands-on training events have been an essential part of its annual programme. Indeed, as the nature of other museum training has become focussed more on generic, less knowledge-based skills the work of SHCG has grown in importance. Here is an area of self-help that we must all continue to support and increase in the future, both through our on-line and physical presence within the museum community.

By their very nature, history museums embrace a very broad range of disciplines and engage with their users in many ways. In this way, SHCG's meetings provide very useful opportunities for networking as well as seeing or hearing about what's new in history museums. Despite this, however, the group has remained very geographically focussed on England, Scotland and Wales. It has only held one meeting in Northern Ireland and has never ventured to the Republic, or indeed sought members there. Furthermore there have been no attempts to forge links with history curators in Europe and beyond, and all of the (few) papers given to the ASWs on non-UK museums have been volunteered by the speakers themselves as part of a studentship or exchange with a specific museum. Hopefully our global presence through the web will redress this in the coming decade.

So what is it that has kept me a paid-up member of the group for 27 years and an attendee of 25 out of the 35 ASWs to date? As I hope I have explained, the group has a vibrancy and dynamic rarely found in other societies to which I belong, and much of this comes from the constant intake of new members. Sadly, many people only stay active in the group for a few years and this velocity of membership loses it much knowledge and talent, and contributes to the very short-term institutional memory. To help counteract this I have compiled lists of SHCG's chairs and secretaries since 1974 (Appendix 1), the dates and editors of the Journal and News (Appendix 2), and the location and themes of the Annual Study Weekends (Appendix 3).

In one respect this short-term memory is fortunate, because one of the other things I admire about the group is its willingness to host a row. A close reading of the SHCG News archive (hopefully, soon to be available along with the Journal on the website) ably demonstrates this. From 1982 to 1984 members were arguing openly with the staff of the Department of Museum Studies at Leicester over training; in 1983 and 1984 with members of WHAM!; while in 1985, 1988 and 1993 amongst themselves about the human history approach and industrial history, the social purpose of museums and that old chestnut, the role of the artefact. In all of this the group has never succeeded in developing or refining a theoretical party line, but such debates have certainly helped advance current practice.

For me, therefore, SHCG comprises a community of practically-minded museum workers with whom to talk long and socialise hard, from whom to learn much and return home professionally refreshed and invigorated.

## Appendix 1

### GROUP FOR REGIONAL STUDIES IN MUSEUMS AND SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

#### Chairs & Secretaries

<i>Year</i>	<i>Chair</i>	<i>Secretary</i>
1974-77	Geraint Jenkins	Peter Brears
1977-78	David Sekers	Richard Langhorne
1978-79	<i>David Sekers</i>	<i>Richard Langhorne</i> <i>(implied in AGM minutes)</i>
1979-80	<i>David Sekers</i>	<i>Richard Langhorne</i> <i>(implied in AGM minutes)</i>
1980-81	Peter Brears	Gaby Porter
1981-82	Peter Brears	Gaby Porter
1982-83	Crispin Paine	Gaby Porter
1983-84	John Shaw	Sue Kirby
1984-85	Stuart Davies	Sue Kirby
1985-86	Suella Postles	Sue Kirby
1986-87	David Fleming	Rosie Crook
1987-88	Jenny Mattingly	Rosie Crook
1988-89	Mark Suggitt	Dieter Hopkin
1989-90	Elizabeth Frostick	? Dieter Hopkin
1990-91	Sue Underwood	Susan Jeffrey
1991-92	Ian Lawley	Susan Jeffrey
1992-93	Bill Jones	Susan Jeffrey
1993-94	Marij van Helmond	Alison Cutforth
1994-95	Alisdair Wilson	Maggie Appleton
1995-96	Tim Corum	Maggie Appleton
1996-97	Liz Carnegie	Maggie Appleton
1997-98	Harriet Purkis	Lucy Allchurch
1998-99	Nigel Wright	Lucy Allchurch
1999-2000	Janet Dugdale	Lucy Allchurch
2000-01	Janet Dugdale	Zelda Baveystock
2001-02	Catherine Nisbet	Zelda Baveystock
2002-03	Catherine Nisbet	Zelda Baveystock
2003-04	Zelda Baveystock	Meg Ashworth
2004-05	Zelda Baveystock	Hannah Maddox
2005-06	Briony Hudson	Hannah Maddox
2006-07	Briony Hudson	Hannah Maddox
2007-08	Jill Holmen	Hannah Maddox
2008-09	Jill Holmen	Hannah Maddox
2009-10	Victoria Rogers	Hannah Maddox/Georgina Young

## Appendix 2

### GROUP FOR REGIONAL STUDIES IN MUSEUMS AND SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

#### Newsletter/Journal and News

##### Newsletter/Journal

###### *GRSM Newsletter*

		<i>Editor</i>
1	Dec 1975	Richard Langhorne
2	May 1976	Richard Langhorne
3	Dec 1976	Richard Langhorne
4	Jan 1978	Stephen Price
5	Sept 1978	Stephen Price
6	(after April 1979)	Stephen Price (No.6 referred to as "ready to go to print" at AGM on 8 April 1979)
[7]	September 1979	Stuart Davies (Proceedings of GRSM annual conference, Gloucester, April 1979)
8	Oct 1980	Sam Mullins
9	Sept 1981	Sam Mullins

###### *GRSM Journal*

		<i>Editor</i>
10	Oct 1982	Sam Mullins

###### *SHCG Journal*

		<i>Editor</i>
11	Nov 1983	Sam Mullins
12	Dec 1984	Sam Mullins
13	1985-86	David Fleming
14	1986-87	Steph Mastoris
15	1987-88	Steph Mastoris
16	1988-89	Steph Mastoris
17	1989-90	Steph Mastoris
18	1990-91	Steph Mastoris

###### *Social History in Museums*

		<i>Editor</i>
19	1992	Stuart Davies & Jane Whittaker
20	1993	Jane Whittaker
21	1994	Jane Whittaker
22	1995-96	Jane Whittaker
23	1997-98	Nigel Wright
24	1999	Nigel Wright
25	2000	Nigel Wright
26	2001	Steph Mastoris
27	2002	Rebecca Fardell
28	2003	Rebecca Fardell
29	2004	Rebecca Fardell
30	2005	Rebecca Fardell
31	2006	Rebecca Fardell
32	2008	Michael Terwey
33	2009	Michael Terwey

## News

### *GRSM News*

1 c. December 1981  
2 April 1982  
3 August 1982

### *Editor*

Crispin Paine  
Crispin Paine  
Crispin Paine

### *SHCG News*

1 Winter 1982/83  
2 Spring 1983  
3 Summer 1983  
4 Winter 1983/84  
5 Spring 1984  
6 Summer 1984  
7 Winter 1984  
8 April 1985  
9 Summer 1985  
10 Winter 1985/86  
11 Spring 1986  
12 Summer 1986  
13 Winter 1986  
14 Spring 1987  
15 Summer 1987  
16 Winter 1987  
17 Spring 1988  
18 Summer 1988  
19 ? Spring 1989  
20 Summer 1989  
21 Autumn 1989  
22 Winter [1989/]1990  
23 Summer 1990  
23 (*sic*) [*recte* 24] Winter 1990  
25 Spring 1991  
26 Summer 1991  
27 Winter 1991  
28 Spring 1992  
29 Summer 1992  
30 Winter 1992  
31 Spring 1993  
32 Summer 1993  
33 Winter 1993  
34 [Spring] 1994  
35 Summer 1994  
36 Winter 1994  
37 Spring 1995  
38 Winter 1995  
39 Spring 1996  
40 Autumn 1996  
41 Summer 1997  
42 Spring 1998  
  
43 Autumn 1998  
44 Spring 1999  
45 Autumn 1999

### *Editor*

Crispin Paine  
Crispin Paine  
Crispin Paine  
Gaby Porter (Acting Editor)  
David Fleming (Acting Editor)  
David Fleming  
David Fleming  
David Fleming  
Mark Suggitt  
Ian Lawley  
Nicola Bleasby, Caroline MacFarlane  
& Robert Rose  
Nicola Bleasby  
Nicola Bleasby  
Nicola Bleasby

46	April 2000	Nicola Bleasby
47	November 2000	Nicola Bleasby
48	July 2001	David Broom
49	Dec 2001	David Broom
50	May 2002	David Broom
51	June 2003	David Broom
52	Dec 2003	Sarah Maultby
53	June 2004	Sarah Maultby
54	Dec 2004	Sarah Maultby
55	June 2005	Sarah Maultby
56	Dec 2005	Sarah Maultby
57	June 2006	Sarah Maultby
58	Dec 2006	Sarah Maultby
59	June 2007	Sarah Maultby
60	Dec 2007	Sarah Maultby
61	July 2008	Lydia Saul
62	Dec 2008	Lydia Saul
63	July 2009	Lydia Saul
64	Dec 2009	Lydia Saul

### Appendix 3

#### GROUP FOR REGIONAL STUDIES IN MUSEUMS AND SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

##### Annual Study Weekends

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Theme</i>
1973 November	Birmingham	<i>Seminar to suggest the creation of a curatorial group (Referred to in preamble to 1974 inaugural conference)</i>
1974 October	Leeds	Inaugural meeting
1975	<i>-no meeting-</i>	
1976 February	<i>Penrith</i>	<i>Vernacular pottery (Not referred to at AGM of 1977)</i>
1977 March	Dyffryn House, Cardiff	Museums in urban areas, & recording at St Fagans ( <i>This AGM refers only to minutes of the Leeds meeting</i> )
1978 April	Birmingham	Urban museums
1979 April	Gloucester & Cheltenham	Contrasting two towns
1980 June	Manchester	Decline in the cotton industry
1981 July	Edinburgh	Drink & the drink industries
1982 June	Carlisle	Market town
1983 June	Hebden Bridge	Textiles
1984 July	Norwich	Museums & social history
1985 July	Sunderland	Ten years of social history

1986	September	Portsmouth	Social history museums & the media
1987	July	Nottingham	Interpretation
1988	July	Cardiff	Childhood
1989	July	Glasgow	Popular culture
1990	September	Hull	People at the centre of museum displays
1991	September	Oxford	Environment
1992	September	Kirklees	Collecting
1993	July	Newcastle	Personal experiences
1994	July	London	Objects
1995	July	Carlisle	Communication
1996	June	Edinburgh (& Glasgow)	Marketing & evaluation
1997	July	Liverpool	Identities
1998	July	Reading	Partnerships
1999	June	Belfast	Can history heal?
2000	July	London	Work
2001	July	Wolverhampton	Social Inclusion
2002	July	Newcastle	Object Lessons
2003	July	Manchester	Urban & rural
2004	July	Bristol	Hidden histories
2005	July	South Wales	Bringing history to life
2006	July	Edinburgh (& Glasgow)	Use of collections
2007	July	Sheffield & Hull	Emotive issues
2008	July	London	Sport & leisure
2009	July	Leeds	35 years of social history

# Social history museums and urban unrest: How a new generation of social history curators set out to modernise museum practice in the 1980s

*May Redfern, Museum Consultant, looks at how SHCG members responded to the turbulent political and social conditions in many British cities in the early 1980s.*

Some of today's most influential museum leaders who advocate social justice agendas found that the Social History Curators Group (SHCG) in the 1980s was one of the best places to bring about long-term change in museum practice.

The SHCG, founded as the Group for Regional Studies in Museums in 1974, emerged from the Society of Folk Life Studies, which was made up of academics, writers and other professionals, including those from the museum profession, who shared an interest in the regional ethnology of the British Isles.

Then, according to Steph Mastoris, long term member of the SHCG and now Head of the Waterfront Museum in Swansea:

*'There was a growth in the late 1960s and into the early seventies of local history museums. The people who set them up did have an intellectual rigour, which previously didn't exist in the older museum tradition of displaying social history collections as "bygones". They weren't just pipe smoking tweedies. Yet there was a group of younger curators who had graduated in the early seventies and who were then coming into these newer, largely urban museums. It was the era of the decline in traditional, heavy industries, social deprivation was high and the first flush of major consumerism was in progress. These curators were asking why this wasn't being reflected in their museums, but the folk life-trained people weren't that interested. So by the early 1980s the SHCG became a focus attracting these bright young museum people who felt that the existing group was out of touch. The change of name from Group for Regional Studies in Museums to Social History Curators Group in 1982 says it all.'*

The growth of local history museums at this time attracted recent graduates who were part of a new generation that were 'energetic and bright (usually products of the grammar school system, rarely of the public school), they soon infiltrated the museum world infrastructure, appearing as first committee members, then chairs and then members of influential task forces' (Davies, 2008).

Rachel Hasted, now Head of Social Inclusion and Diversity Policy at English Heritage, began her career at Lancaster Museums Service in 1976 and wrote for the SHCG journal in the 1980s:

*'Both my parents left school at 14. My sister and I were the first in the family to go to university. After my post-graduate diploma in decorative arts at Manchester University, the class sector that was dominant in the fine and decorative arts sector hit me between the eyes. I didn't feel at all comfortable. So I became more and more fascinated with social history, since it spoke to me more about my own experience.'*

So greater access to higher education meant that the intake of young museum professionals became more diverse and better representative of society at large (Fleming, 2002, p. 214). To these historians, museums represented 'a vehicle to widen

public understanding of the value of studying history and the importance of (selective) preservation of the heritage' (Davies, 2008).

They wanted to change the emphasis and potential of collections in confronting social exclusion, although the term would not have been widely used within a museum context at that time (Fleming, 2009).

## Museums and Social Change

The desire to change the order of things was part of a broader social shift that had its roots in 1960s radicalism and which grew into various protest movements that had proliferated since the early 1970s. As a result, disrespect for authority carried over into all intellectual, political and cultural pursuits and formal social movements emerged. This led to more durable, stable patterns of activity that were grounded in determined efforts to build coherent organisations that resulted in lasting social change (Boggs, 1995, p. 65).

In the same year that the SHCG was founded – 1974 – the term social exclusion was first used in France, within a specific political context. Again, this had its roots in the 1960s:

*'Exclusion discourse began to appear in France during the 1960s...politicians, activists, officials, journalists and academics made vague and ideological references to the poor as "the excluded"'* (Silver, 1995, p. 63).

French minister Rene Lenoir estimated that: "the excluded" made up one-tenth of the French population:

*'mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal, asocial persons and other social 'misfits'. All were social categories unprotected under social insurance principles at that time'* (Silver, 1995, p. 63).

In the UK, other terminology was emerging. The concept of a cycle of deprivation was applied for the first time in 1972, when Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State Social Services (for the Heath-led Conservative Government) highlighted the persistence of deprivation and problems of maladjustment, despite improvements in living standards.

By the end of the decade, Peter Townsend published the first full account of poverty in the UK, which acknowledged that both qualitative and quantitative measures needed to be used to demonstrate levels of poverty, suffered by those who had slipped through the net of the Welfare State. It also highlighted the fact that definitions of economic deprivation were disputed amongst government advisers and academics. This was to set the benchmark for poverty measures for all future governments in the UK.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It was from these foundations that the New Labour government of 1997 was to take its lead. It followed the European Union definition on social exclusion, which focussed on what happens when: "the social bond linking the individual with society breaks down. The concept of citizenship includes political rights and duties and obligations on the part of the state to aid the inclusion of the excluded." This was distinct from two other definitions of exclusion: (1) Solidarity (which emerged from Anglo-American liberalism): specialisation in the market and social groups occur because individuals freely differ. Individuals are excluded because of discrimination, market failures and unenforced rights and (2) Monopoly (from Marxist sociology): exclusion comes from the interplay of class, status and political power that serves the interests of the included. Exclusion is combated through citizenship, equal membership and full participation. From: SILVER, H. 1994 Social Exclusion and Social solidarity: three paradigms, *International Labour Review*, vol. 133, no. 5/6, 531-578

## Museum as Social Commentator

Such political rhetoric embodied a profound shift in thinking that was to include key social history museum workers, who against this backdrop began to transform their approach to collections. They started to show that it was possible to move social history museums from insular, antiquarian organisations to outward looking centres of formal and informal education provision; a unique social communicator of both local environment and global concerns (Fleming, 2009).

As David Fleming explained in the SHCG Journal from 1987:

*'The old antiquarian, anecdotal approach to history by museum-based local historians has shifted...away from objects as displays towards objects as evidence, objects in context, objects as illustrations of social themes and social history. No longer do the key to the Town Gaol, or the underpants of the world's fattest man, stand alone (or together) on display, as local history: now more likely is that they are used to illustrate patterns of social pathology, poverty, the rise of the police state, diet, the linen industry'. (Fleming, 1987).*

Now the emphasis was on providing context, communication and access. This was coupled with the explicit intention of making museums more democratic and people-focussed through the increased use of social history collections.

## The On-Going Influence of Social Historians

Rachel Hasted's interest in feminism led her to a feminist history conference in London in July 1985, where Sylvia Collicott gave a paper on *The Use of Local Documentary Evidence in Teaching History as an Anti-Racist Strategy*.

Rachel Hasted, now Head of Social Inclusion and Diversity Policy at English Heritage, explains explains:

*'Sylvia Collicott was important for her work in the 1970s and 80s to use research on local history to teach local, national and world links in history. I don't think people in museums realise the influence of the approach that teachers in Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) had on creating new, inclusive ways of looking at the past in this way. Her colleague Rozina Visram, author of *Asians in Britain* was commissioned by ILEA to do a study at the Geffrye Museum in the 1980s looking at how they could adopt an approach that had an emphasis on pulling out the documentary sources through original research and making the local, national and world links. For example, where did the mahogany for 18th century furniture come from? Who cut it? Why did it come to Britain? Rozina then went on to be an advisor for Nick Merriman's influential *Peopling of London* exhibition at the Museum of London. So whilst historians such as Collicott and Visram didn't ever have a permanent job in a museum they influenced the course of public social history very greatly.'*

*'I remember giving a paper at the Feminist History Conference based on some research I had done on the Lancastrian Witch Trials. I was asked: was I talking about black women or white women? I then had the realisation that our personal history as curators was absolutely linked to what we were portraying in our displays. It was not just about the far past, but included our own attitudes and assumptions. I went back to Lancaster and started looking around and realised that the displays were not representative. So I put black Lancastrian children in the museum. My boss got annoyed but I said: 'What are you going to do?' We started to make links in children's education packs, which examined the working lives of children in the 19th century with the way in which coca cola cups are still made. It was about consciousness raising in a very class based profession.'*

Whilst local and regional museums had become the real innovators with audiences, they were nevertheless vulnerable to funding cuts in the 1980s (Lang, et al., 2006, p.13). At the same time, urban riots had enabled – at least some – museum professionals to play an active part in acknowledging the social causes and consequences of inner-city unrest.

### Museums at the Centre of Urban Unrest

In 1981 a series of riots in key cities took place at Toxteth in Liverpool, Moss Side in Manchester, Chapeltown in Leeds and Brixton, London.

Lord Scarman was commissioned by Government to lead an inquiry following these riots. He acknowledged that the riots stemmed from racial disadvantage and racial discrimination and represented the result of social problems, namely poverty and deprivation.<sup>2</sup>

In Liverpool, as a response to the Toxteth riots and Scarman's findings, Michael Heseltine (then Environment Secretary in Thatcher's cabinet) created a Merseyside Task Force, with the intention of improving social conditions through a variety of regeneration initiatives. During the 1980s, Liverpool's unemployment rate reached 25%. The City's process of decline in the 20th century paralleled the waning of heavy industries. The closure of the Tate and Lyle sugar factory in 1981 was just one such example (One North East, 2009, p.13). It was under these circumstances, together with an acknowledgement of the quality of the collections at both local and national level, that national status was achieved for Liverpool's museums and the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside were formed.

Writing in the SHCG Journal in 1990, Loraine Knowles described that the purpose of the new Museum of Labour History was to represent working class life on Merseyside. However she also acknowledged the frequent criticism that:

*'Liverpool's role in the slave trade [which] does not feature very prominently in the displays at the Maritime Museum is a frequent criticism...the recent Liverpool 8 inquiry [in 1989] into race relations in Liverpool, which was chaired by Lord Gifford, considers that the Maritime Museum glosses over Liverpool's role...Gifford recommends that Liverpool's museums and public institutions, when they present Liverpool's history, give a full and honest account of the involvement of Black people in the City'. (Knowles, 1990, p.10).*

Four years later, the Broadwater Farm riot took place in Tottenham, in the London Borough of Haringey. It was during this riot that PC Keith Blakelock was killed. The riots started after a young black man called Floyd Jarrett was arrested and the subsequent search of his home by police officers was said to have led to his mother's death (Lord Gifford also led the subsequent public inquiry).

Six months afterwards, Rachel Hasted started work for the museum service, which was housed opposite the Broadwater Farm Estate. Hasted remembers that:

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<sup>2</sup> However, Scarman denied the existence of institutional racism but later acknowledged that he could have been "more outspoken about the necessity of affirmative action to overcome racial disadvantage." Other critics argued that broader issues such as high levels of unemployment were not acknowledged and race relations were unfairly blamed for the outbreak of violence.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc\\_parliament/3631579.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm) [accessed 11.11.09]

*'I had to go through police barriers to meetings, which were always interrupted for hecklers. Bernie Grant was leader of the Labour Council and was operating in the eye of the Tory press. There were stark divisions between the estates that were populated by majority black or white communities. A road divided the estate. There was a similar division between the poor and wealthy areas.'*

Hasted wrote about this in the SHCG journal at the time:

*'According to the 1981 Census 30% of Haringey residents were living in households headed by someone born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan. Another 11% of heads of household were born outside the U.K. This is some indication of the fact that Haringey is one of the most ethnically mixed areas of Britain. This situation was absolutely unreflected in the collections and activities of the museum until the mid-1980s. The museum up to that time portrayed a homogeneous White society dominated by values which were middle class and male orientated...[it is also] the sixth poorest borough in the U.K'* (Hasted, 1992, p.31).

Hasted reacted to this by working on various exhibitions in attempt to redress the balance:

- *Local Herstory* – Lives of Women in Haringey: opened by Stella Dadzie whose oral history of Black women in Britain, *The Heart of the Race* had just been published.
- *Inventing Ourselves*, which featured oral history and photography of lesbians and gay men.
- *Re-memembering the Past*: photographic essays representing the Black population of Haringey to add to the permanent collection as it lacked any Black content.
- *The Tottenham Outrage*, which looked at the murder of a policeman by two Latvian social revolutionaries whilst robbing a payroll van in 1905, at a time when Tottenham was known as 'Little Russia'. This was also significant because it showed that there was a history of rioting in the area.

Hasted remembers it as 'an exciting time but it was also hard, I got redundancy papers served on me most years. It could be uncomfortable. This was a grass roots movement; it was not coming from national museums. It is also a generational thing. As social change became acceptable there were people in museums that were ready to embrace it.'

Meanwhile, in the North of England during the Miners' Strike, David Fleming experienced a direct connection between SHCG activity and the wider world:

*'I was travelling south from Yorkshire to Norwich for the 1984 SHCG Annual Study Weekend in a car driven by Mark Suggitt, with Peter Brears as the other passenger. When we got to Nottinghamshire we were stopped on the A1 by police, who wanted to know who we were, and why three men, two of them with Yorkshire accents, were travelling together in a car to a part of the country where flying pickets (from Yorkshire) were likely to be heading because, of course, Nottinghamshire miners were breaking the national miners' strike at the time. I remember Brears getting out his Leeds City Council ID to show that we were, in fact, museum people merely travelling through, not to, Nottinghamshire. Personally I was outraged at the strikebreaking, but didn't say so on this occasion!'*

## Hull and its People

A few years later, the new social history gallery at The Old Grammar School in Hull, where David Fleming was Principal Keeper, represented:

*'a move away from the focus upon mass movements and structural developments in social history; towards a greater focus upon individuals and personal experiences...by attempting to assess the role of the individual within the wider social and economic framework [it is] significant in that it tries to tackle difficult subjects and subjects not commonly included in museum displays, such as orphans, courtship, marriage, child birth, contraception and child abuse'* (Frostick, 1992, p 46).

It was a deliberate attempt to *'balance the strong sense of people and local identity with a wider national perspective'* (Frostick, 1992, p.49).

In common with other cities in the UK at this time, it was usually Labour run local councils that gave financial backing to social history exhibitions and displays. For example, the Greater London Council (GLC) funded the touring exhibition *A History of the Black Presence in London* that was launched in mid 1980s, when Paul Boateng was Chair of the GLC police committee and vice-chair of the ethnic minorities committee. Boateng said in the Foreword of the exhibition catalogue that it was; *'an important step in the necessary process of bringing the history of the black presence in London to the centre stage of our consciousness.'*

## Legacy

Hasted says:

*'People now have an expectation of what they will find within an interpretation of the past, which is different from expectations of thirty years ago, particularly in terms of the technology and information that is available. It is now much more about what people want from their heritage. There is an expectation that the tangible should be linked to the intangible or the personal story and for social historians this is very good news. So we now have broad support from the population at a public expense. Ultimately, a politician is unlikely to ignore this, since this is what the public want. Things have changed hugely over my working lifetime and will continue to change. It is up to us to work with where we find ourselves. I don't see that there is any intention of giving up on social inclusion just because there may be a new government on the way.'*

Steph Mastoris acknowledges *'the symbiosis between organisations that pursue social inclusion and their leaders, who work with elected politicians who must comply and match agendas as public representatives. Directors like David Fleming and Mark O'Neill are inherently politically savvy. There are still many curators who are not like that today.'*

David Fleming says:

*'I think the main legacy is that proper scholarship – and I don't mean just antiquarianism and connoisseurship – began to be applied by a new breed of curator (trained and qualified historians) to history studies and practice in museums, which meant that social history became far more prominent – people's history rather than the history of artefacts produced for middle class use. In other words, developments in museums mirrored those in universities.'*

*'It was hard work. The forces of reaction were strong, senior and, as they saw it, fighting for survival in the face of subversion by commie upstarts. When some of the upstarts started landing more senior posts, and the old guard retired, willingly or otherwise, the nature of the conflict changed. The lasting legacy can be seen most clearly in history museums, but there is no doubt that the nature of current debates about social change/ social inclusion/social justice in museums owes a lot to the debates which started in the 1980s. I think what we achieved in Tyne and Wear Museums in the 1990s showed many people, including Government, what could be done.'*

Now, after more than a decade of government investment for institutions prepared to tackle social exclusion, the legacy of social history museums and greater access has been institutionalised by many museums.

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# Social history: from product to process

*Cathy Ross, Director of Collections and Learning at the Museum of London, delivered this paper on the first day of the 2009 SHCG Conference. In it she gives an overview of the development of, and the interrelationships between social history in museums and social history as an academic discipline over the last 30 years.*

This weekend is all about reflecting on change. What changes have museums seen over the past 30 years; how has curatorial practice changed; how have we changed. What I want to focus on in this talk is changes in social history, the academic subject with which we share a name. How has the subject changed over the past 30 years, and have changes in academic approaches to the past resonated with our work in museums? Or not.

Like many history curators I take it for granted that there is something of a gap between history as practised in museums, and history as practised in universities. Generally, I tend to think this gap is regrettable. I have long felt twinges of irritation that academic history isn't more interested in what we do, and I've done my fair share of opining that we in museums should be upping our game in terms of aligning ourselves more explicitly to what they are talking about in the senior common rooms.

So is the gap real? Have museums and universities been ploughing separate furrows over the past 30 years, staring at each other with some unease across an unbridgeable gap? A large dose of hindsight does help to shift your views and I have to admit that after writing this paper, I'm now not so sure that gap is the right way to describe the relationship between university history and museum history over the last 30 years. What I actually want to do in this talk is to look at the resonances between the two 'history practice' camps, to give a very broad brush account of how both have changed, and how both have responded in their own way to the changing zeitgeist.

That there has been change in both camps is undeniable. On the museum side, the broad arc of change could be described as 'from product to process', the title of this talk. What I was trying to capture here was the shift in focus from what we collect, to how we collect it; from the time when the curatorial mission was largely about acquiring things in order to make museums tell stories deemed absent in the other collections; to the present day curatorial mission, which is largely about engaging people in the story-telling. The 'froms and tos' of academic history aren't exactly parallel, in that the 'product' of professionally-authored texts still rules the roost, but the last 30 years has seen enormous shifts in the questions historians ask, and the ideas they explore. The inevitable conclusion of this paper is that although the institutional context is different for academics and curators, we are all creatures of our time and the histories we put together are as much about making sense of the present, as understanding the past.

Turning first to changes in academic history. Here are two quotes about social history, 20 years apart. Between the early 1960s and the early 1980s social history went from 'Cinderella' to 'atom bomb', a rather weird mixing of metaphors but hopefully conveying the drama of the change. First, here is Harold Perkin, writing in 1962:

*'Social History as a separate discipline is the Cinderella of English historical studies. Judged by the usual criteria of academic disciplines, it can scarcely be said to exist: there are no chairs and, if we omit local history, no university departments, no learned journals, and few, if any text books.'* (Perkin, 1962, p.51)

Twenty years later, Harold Perkin held one of several chairs of social history in English universities; societies and learned journals were flourishing. Cinderella, as the historian J.H. Plumb wrote in 1982, had arrived at the ball with a vengeance:

*'Naturally, other forms of history are not dead, even though some of them are corpse-like, but there can be little doubt that the historical imagination, for better or worse, has become intoxicated with social history. ...Over the last 10 years the flow of monographs and articles on the social history of England has increased, mushroomed like an atomic explosion.'* (Plumb, 1982, p. viii-ix)

It is easy to forget the novelty of social history as an academic subject. In the 1950s and 1960s it was 'the new history', a youthful challenge to the well-entrenched bastions of political and diplomatic history; a vigorous outgrowth from economic history which had put down its academic roots in the first half of the 20th century. Academic social history was essentially a post-war creature; which is not to say, of course, that what we would now call social history books weren't being written before. And, as Perkins acknowledged, local history was already on the academic radar, thanks to the cluster of activity around the University of Leicester, where the pioneering Department for English Local History had been established in 1948.

The rise of social history was phenomenal: it 'hurtled to prominence', in one historian's words (Evans). But what exactly was it? Should it be defined negatively as 'history with the politics left out', as G.M. Trevelyan (1944, p.11) in a much misquoted passage ruminated? Or was it history with the politics and the economic underpinnings of society left in, as the influential Communist Party Historians Group of the 1950s saw it. Was it history that confined its studies to a distinct part of the past: the life of the working class and other marginalized groups whose existence was at that time little studied; was it 'history from below' as opposed to 'history from above'. Alternatively, should social historians take the totality of past society as their remit, because the questions they were asking were Big Picture ones, and theirs was an approach as much as a 'field of study'. In his 1962 article, Harold Perkin, took the latter view, pointing out that the metaphor of fields of study was not a helpful one. Dividing up the 'academic soil' of the past into parcels of land on which different types of historians investigated different things, left very little room for newcomers:

*'The social historian differs from other historians only in the questions he asks and the answers he seeks. Finding a place for him does not entail a re-allocation of holdings. It merely involves allowing him access to the evidence.'*  
(Perkin, 1962, pp. 51-52)

That social history was in fact 'total history' was of course the view of the Communist Party Historians Group, whose work brought an analytical rigor to the interpretation of the past in the 1950s. All of society was their concern, past and present. Eric Hobsbawm, one of the many distinguished members, later described social history as 'that shapeless container for everything' (1998, p. 249).

This debate about definitions was of course an academic one, but curiously relevant to social history curatorship as it emerged in the 1970s. Was social history in museums to be defined by separate fields of object study, or should social history curators see the entire collections, fine and decorative art included, as potentially part of their remit? Given that the institutional *raison d'être* for curators is bound up with objects, it was perhaps inevitable that the former view prevailed. Most museums saw social history curatorship as activity around a distinct category of object. Exactly what this was varied from institution to institution but, as with the academic discipline, it was often easier to define things negatively. Social history objects were neither the art collections nor the

science collections (unless rebranded 'working history'); they were sometimes the costume collections and possibly the photograph collections. The only certainty was that they were definitely, where such things existed, the folk-life collections.

It was perhaps the urge to build a power base within their institutions that led social history curators to be such enthusiastic collectors of objects in the 1970s and 1980s. Social history curators were omnivorous: gathering up domestic china, old toys, packaging and cosmetics from house clearances, rescuing shop fittings from family firms, redundant equipment from hospitals and light fittings from soon to be demolished cinemas. No area of human activity was uncollectable. Curators addressed themselves to the material culture of industrial collapse, rescuing the contents of factories and workshops as they shut. They pioneered contemporary collecting and added oral history practice to their repertoire. It was perhaps slightly ironic that curators with such strong people-centred values, should be quite so object-centred in their activities, but this was about asserting a presence in the institution. It was also about playing a part in the struggles of the times. The economy was shifting, with traumatic consequences for many communities: engaging in 'rescue' probably seemed the right response.

How much was all this informed by the social history hurtling to prominence in the new plate-glass universities? Its probably fair to say that most, if not all social history curators shared the general sense of mission that informed the new history; seeing their work as constructing a fairer view of the past, one which asserted the presence of 'ordinary people' and their experiences in how we think about the past. Class tended to be the dominant concept for explaining the past, and although this was as much a reflection of popular understanding as political ideology, it chimed with the new history where Marxist sympathies were very much to the fore. The archetypal text was E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, and in paperback in 1968, which, as the title so clearly signals, puts class at the centre of his analysis of what happened to the English between 1760 and 1820. A beautifully written and seductive book, it did much to spread the values and mission of the new history, which was also about rescuing:

*'I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.'* (Thompson, p.13)

Whether the Museum of London is typical, I'm not sure, but it provides an example of the curatorial mood of the time. Curators saw their work as building a big-picture narrative for the future, and there was a sense of urgency. They were consciously engaged in a rescue operation, and any delay meant loss. As a curator recalled, *'sometimes it was too late and likely museum artefacts had to be wrested away from the scrap merchants'* (Lane, 1996). Curators were very much in charge of this history-making, directing the operations and developing a 'hunter's instinct' for their work:

*'Curatorial decision-making, in an ideal world, should be based on perfect knowledge of the 'story' we would like to tell and what is available for us to collect – and a perfect ability to respond to change – to get out and record, collect, store, process and display. In an imperfect world all one can hope to do is to attain a thorough understanding of one's subject as a mental construct, familiarity with it on the ground and to develop a hunter's instinct for recording and selective acquisition.'* (Ellmers & Dewing, 1990)

This hunter's instinct bought many thousands of objects into the Museum of London's collections in the 1970s and 1980s. In an ideal world all would have been catalogued at the point of acquisition, but alas they were not.

Meanwhile, back in the ivory towers, matters were moving on. By the 1980s social history had gone mainstream but 'the new history' was not so new anymore and the next generation saw things differently. Class-based views of the past were under attack from those who saw greater significance in race and gender as the great organising principles of social relations. The empirical method and narrative tendency of history practice were both under assault from structuralists to whom there were no such thing as facts, only language and signs. History was being redefined as 'a shifting problematic discourse' (Jenkins, 1991), Marxist history was 'a busted academic flush', and the new history was cultural:

*'The Marxist influence on social history was substantial and long-lasting, yet by the 1980s it seemed increasingly anachronistic. For some, it consigned social history to the study of inflexible structures and placed too heavy an emphasis on conflict models of society. Second, cultural interpretations of historical experience seemed liberating, offering more potential for exciting new avenues to be explored. Cultural history, it rapidly became clear, was much more than the history of culture, be it 'popular' or 'elite'. It was concerned with the search for meanings, and particularly with understanding how people in the past made sense of their world. The emphasis was less on 'society', and particularly not society as a set of structures; it was on individuals, attitudes and beliefs. Cultural historians were interested in group activity but of a less formal kind – not so much in trade unions or political societies but in carnivals, celebrations, rituals and festivals.'*  
(Evans)

Cultural studies brought a new flavour to history. Linguistically self-conscious to a fault, it was more interested in sub-texts than substance, analysis rather than narrative. It loved to deconstruct. In many ways the cultural studies approach to the past was wilfully a-historical, but it was the catalyst that enabled race and gender histories to flourish, along with a raft of new cross-disciplinary hybrids such as cultural geography, from where some of the most original 'urban history' studies in recent years have come. The irreversible shift from social to cultural was marked in 2004 when the Social History Society changed the name of its journal to *Cultural and Social History*. This was all good news for museums. The emphasis on race, gender and identity opened up new ways of thinking: the establishment of WHAM (Woman and Heritage in Museums) in 1984 being, of course, a sign of the changing times. The cultural studies climate also created a new interest in museums as institutions in their own right, complete with sub-texts, discourses and a privileged place in social meaning-making. Under new scrutiny, curators themselves became far more self-critical of their own languages and practices: no bad thing. Hunter-gatherers began to evolve into enabling-facilitators.

Academic interest in the actual objects also looked up, with some types of museum object benefiting from the new intellectual climate rather more than others. Costume collections found themselves at the centre of a new cutting edge academic subject – fashion theory. Oral history went from strength to strength. Other types of object fared less well. The Museum of London's working history collections seemed to have little to offer the new approaches to the past, beyond supplying evidence of the ill-gotten gains of Imperialism. In terms of new material entering the collections, this is the point where the focus shifted from product to process. Big narratives took second place to an emphasis on diversity, multiple perspectives and layered meanings. Curators continued to acquire objects such as packaging, clothes and toys, but the decision-making was shared with others and more often than not the objects acquired represented personal stories, often from diaspora communities. Overall, curators had many reasons to be cheerful about academic history's 'cultural turn'. It made for a broader, more inclusive subject scope and the SHCG Journal is testament to how this has resonated in museums over the past decades.

Eric Hobsbawm's 'shapeless container' definition of social history dates from 1980, and its full version underlines the cultural flavour of that time:

*'Social history, that shapeless container for everything from changes in human physique to symbol and ritual, and above all for the lives of all people from beggars to emperors.'* (Hobsbawm, 1990, p.249)

So, is this all embracing totality the final word? Having embraced culture, is there anywhere else that academic social history can go? The answer is, of course, yes. And in the final part of this talk I want to look at one current development which promises much for bridging the gap, real or perceived, between universities and museums. This is yet another 'new history', and this time it's digital.

I'm not really sure whether digital history is an academic discipline as such: yet it is real and has an entry on Wikipedia:

*'Digital history is the use of digital media and tools for historical practice, presentation, analysis, and research. ... It is a difficult term to define.'*

The definition is perhaps less important for us at this stage than what it does, which is to open up an astonishing quantity of new source material for historians of all persuasions, professional and amateur. Many of you may already be familiar with one of its best-known manifestations, *Old Bailey on Line*: which makes it possible to search the criminal court proceedings of Middlesex from the 17th century up to 1913, and is quite simply 'the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published'. The material forms an extraordinarily rich seam of compelling human stories, which are already finding their way into the public imagination, most recently through the TV series 'Garrow's Law'. One of the historians behind the Old Bailey, Tim Hitchcock, is pushing the digitizing mission onwards, this time with records of poor relief and medical care in eighteenth-century London. As he muses on his blog, the consequences for how we make sense of the past are truly mind-boggling:

*'Soon, 40 million words of everyday manuscripts from eighteenth-century London – hospital and workhouse records, parish and voting records – will be available online in a keyword searchable form. And of course, you can add to this all those artefacts and images – tied perhaps less securely to our finding aids, but newly accessible in a new way, through museum websites and commercial image galleries ... what is being created is an entirely new and comprehensive library of the textual and artefactual leavings of the dead. And the question I find myself continually asking is what do we do with it?'* (Hitchcock, 2009)

His own answer to his question is an encouraging one for museums. Hitchcock has a vision of what he calls 'lifelines in the infinite archive':

*'...I believe that the technologies of knowing that have evolved in the last few years, mean that for the first time in generations, it is possible to put 'lives' at the centre of our analysis. To move beyond the 'text' as the object of study, to society, to lived experience, to the individual, and the collective – to lives.'* (Hitchcock, 2009)

There are obvious reasons for museums to get excited about the possibility of tracing individual lives of real people, in and out of the gaols, hospitals and other institutions that shaped their experiences. The emphasis on ordinary people (whether described by historians as working class, non-elite or plebeian) suits our mission, and it has much to offer us in the way of new historical contexts for the objects. A recent book by John Styles, *The Dress of the People*, is a good example. Although methodologically

traditional, it makes use of these new searchable sources to open up a subject traditionally seen as closed because of the supposed lack of surviving evidence.

Digital history is already transforming the available source material, but there are two other prospects for the future to note. The first is that it could be said to rather suit what we do. As one museum-based historian has pointed out, digital history is about searchability and databases rather than written narratives: in this it is like museums where making exhibitions is more about framing original evidence, in all its fragmented lumpiness, as authoring a single-strand argument:

*'Digital history is more about creating pathways through information and interpretation than about achieving a whole picture or a final product. Database-driven history can reflect both the impossibility of historical 'completeness' and also be true to the fragmentation that is the mark of our own time in history... Although arrangement into themes may not be as complex a form of interpretation as that required for writing a critical study in the shape of a book, it is nevertheless a process that requires expert guidance to ensure scholarly value and an appropriate reading context, as museum curators know through their long experience of thematic approaches to collections.'* (Arthur, 2008)

The last point to make about digital history, and perhaps the most exciting one, is its democratic nature and interactive possibilities. Tim Hitchcock has already made the obvious link between his interest in 'lifelines' and the work of family historians:

*'The point about building upwards from individual lives, is that it allows us [academic historians] to connect in ways that most historians cannot, to the greatest body of readers and historical researchers ever – to the family historians. By making this project about lives, we generate something they want to read; at the same time we analyse something we want to explain.'* (Hitchcock, 2009)

He might have added, something they might want to contribute their own research to. The idea of harnessing the vast power of the family historians to the collective effort – creating one vast 'dispersed research community' of curators, academics and ordinary people – is probably an impossible dream, but maybe not.

In this paper I have tried to trace some broad resonances between academic social history and social history in museums over the past 30 years: the rise of social history from the 1960s, mirrored in museums by the mission to rescue and big-picture narratives; the rise of cultural history from the 1980s, mirrored by a more inclusive yet more self-conscious way of meaning-making in museums. How might digital history resonate with social history curators of the future? The first thought to end with is that it won't resonate at all unless we pay serious attention to moving our collections on line. If we want to join the digital excitement and make common cause with other types of historian, we just have to make our objects searchable. The future may indeed be cataloguing, at least for a few years. The second thought is that digital history may finally bury the assumption that social history in museums is just about the social history collections. These subject distinctions may still be useful in matters of institutional housekeeping, but they do not need to limit the questions we ask of the past and the stories we find there.

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# SHCG: A community of practice based on empathy and rigour

*Mark O'Neill, Head of Arts and Museums/ Director of Research at Culture and Sport Glasgow, reflects on the role of SHCG on his work in museums over the last 25 years.*

This has been a strange piece to write – I have always avoided personal writing, mostly because it is so difficult to get the tone right: the borderline between sharing experiences and self-indulgence is a narrow one. But don't worry, this piece is not going to include any embarrassing revelations. I will however try to capture something of my experience and not just give an objectified account of My Life in Social History, because that is a large part of what the discipline is about. We frequently ask people to talk about their lives, claiming it will bring all sorts of benefits to them and others. Why should we escape the task of self-revelation, even if embarrassment at the prospect makes us suddenly sceptical about the benefits?

I joined SHCG while doing the Leicester postgrad during 1985/6, where I took Gaynor Kavanagh's Social History module. I had studied English and History at University College Cork (1973-79) – but not social history. However I immediately felt at home in the world of social history, with its interest in and empathy with those ignored or marginalised by traditional forms of history from above. This identification with outsiders wasn't particularly because I was Irish – I hadn't felt particularly at home in Ireland either. It was also appealing I think because it suited what might be called a reforming zeal, a desire to change things (not least museums) for the better. This was shared by most of the small group of us taking Gaynor's module. We were very angry about things, an anger compounded by the sense of powerlessness of being a student, of not being able to make a difference. I suspect we were a difficult group (sorry Gaynor).

My first full-time job was as founding curator of Springburn Museum, where I worked from 1986-1990. During this time the SHCG was my main arena of professional socializing, socialisation and development, all of them critical for me in my position as the sole manager/curator of a small museum. SHCG was what would now be called my Community of Practice and my experience of its conferences, seminars and committee meetings built on my internships from Leicester – with Geoff Marsh at the Museum of London and Stephen Price, Peter Jenkinson and Karen Hull (now Knight) at Birmingham. What was really important was not so much the technical learning, but the sense of shared values and of a struggle which was worth the effort because it would make a difference. The good fortune of getting the opportunity to set up a new museum from scratch was accompanied by a huge (though of course largely self-imposed) workload and by an even greater degree of anxiety (also self-imposed). It also meant that I could try things out – in fact I could try everything out. The issues which SHCG was preoccupied with at the time included community engagement and consultation, representation of people through their images and voices, contemporary collecting and exploring the historical background to recent issues. The exhibition programme which developed in Springburn reflected all of these. Every year we would do one major exhibition on a large theme of contemporary relevance (Work, Housing). These went back as far as possible and came right up to the present. In addition we did a smaller exhibition each year based on a demographically defined group – mothers, teenagers, under-12s, or intergenerational groups. These had varying amounts of history – the main thing was to represent their lives in the museum and history was explored through their eyes and interests. Many of these projects involved working with artists and it was a really inspiring experience to see them elicit creativity and self-expression from people who never thought they had any talent. Some of these built on

existing skills – a group of grandmothers did a knitting project for example. Their creations included a very tactile knitted model of Springburn Park (for which I supplied, at their insistence, a very distended football pitch). When asked what they really wanted, they said 'A man!' (most women over 60 in Glasgow's poorer areas are widows, due to the low life expectancy of men). So they knitted one. Despite numerous threats, they didn't make him anatomically correct.

Contemporary collecting was a recurrent theme – led by Mark Suggitt and Steph Mastoris (with whom I will forever associate the word ephemera). While trying to take photographs myself, I learned both my technical limitations but more importantly the limits to what an outsider could photograph. I organised a photographic competition with serious cash prizes (I think £100 was the top) and the distribution of leaflets door to door to 3,000 houses. We got three entries. I tried another tack, and got a DJ from a local radio station to speak to a group of young people from the local secondary school (2 volunteers from each form). We gave them disposable cameras (then an exciting innovation) and asked them to photograph their room/home. The most striking quality of the c 300 photographs of domestic interiors this produced was the divergence between the grim exteriors of the tower blocks most of the young people lived in, and the thought and care with which the interiors had been decorated – evidence, if any were needed, of how easy it is to stereotype people on the basis of appearances or neighbourhood.

Just before leaving Springburn (and my salary of £11,000) a year I organised the 1989 SHCG annual conference in Glasgow, based in the University of Strathclyde. This was the first – and the last – conference I ever organised: having taken on the responsibility I failed to enlist the support of SHCG colleagues in Scotland such as Steven Kay or Helen Clark who would have been keen to help. It took me years to generalise the lesson about how to work with other people – some would say I have a way to go....

In 1990 I became Keeper of Social History in Glasgow Museums – in extremely stressful circumstances. Appointed over the internal candidate, Elspeth King, who was renowned for her work in transforming the People's Palace into a leading social history museum, I became immersed in the controversy, which made planning and practical work difficult. The redisplay of the People's Palace was delayed because I was asked to find a solution to a Visitor Centre to Glasgow's medieval cathedral which had run out of funds and had been rescued by the city. The proposal to turn it into a museum of world religions was met with some scepticism within SHCG, because it seemed to suggest that class was not the key basis for social analysis and community engagement. For me it represented an essential aspect of museum social history – a determination to recognise what was important to people in objects irrespective of museum taxonomy. And the power of taxonomy should not be underestimated. Some colleagues took the view that we had no religious objects. 'What a ghastly idea' wrote one, 'bringing all these objects which have nothing to do with each other together.' And of course class and other forms of inequality run through religion as much as any other domain of existence. Many more museums recognise religion as a key factor in social life, especially since Bosnia, Kosovo and 9/11 – but St Mungo's remains the only museum of world religions in the UK. The understandable hypersensitivity around issues of faith is such that most displays are celebratory reflections of diversity, with little or no sense of conflict or oppression based on religion.

In 1984 Donald Horne wrote that museums in Europe and in Britain in particular, represented a past where there was little or no conflict, and where reforms just happened, rather than having to be wrested from the ruling elites through long and costly pressure. While historic conflict is far better represented now, the tendency to create Whiggish displays of progress which locate all conflict safely in the past still

needs to be guarded against. This view informed how we approached the redisplay of the People's Palace (in two stages from 1995 and 1998). Different versions of the city's history (capitalist, socialist and civic) are shown opposite each other, and contemporary issues (e.g. poverty and alcohol abuse) were represented. The problems of how to deal with difficult and sensitive issues remain a concern of SHCG.

With the arrival of the HLF in 1994 the major task facing Glasgow Museums – the refurbishment and redisplay of Kelvingrove – became possible. Eventually Kelvingrove became all consuming, leading to my gradually drifting away from being active in SHCG. The step from social history's forms of engagement (oral testimony, consultation) to Visitor Studies was a short one, and through the 1990s we learned how to deploy these in ways which had a real impact on displays (Hooper-Greenhill 2006). While social history had a direct impact on how we approached Kelvingrove, in the choice of some of the stories, and in particular in introducing some of the dark side of Glasgow's past and present (such as sectarianism and violence against women) into the city's most prestigious venue, its main influence was indirectly, through Visitor Studies

I sometimes feel that I am coming close to Old Buffer status (or what Ashish Nandy calls a Keynote Wallah) because people have started to ask me about Leadership. I find these hard to respond to, as my experience has involved applying for jobs that came up, slowness in learning to delegate (see above), impatience ('give it here') and a kind of righteousness ('how could they have done it like that?') which required me to come up with alternative approaches and which even I find annoying. Looking back now at what I was learning from social history and its practitioners within SHCG, one way of describing it would be as ways of systematizing empathy (O'Neill 2001). Recent analyses of managers who effect change, such as that by Jeanne Liedtka of the University of Virginia School of Business (who teaches the leadership module on the Museum Leadership Institute of the Getty Foundation) has found that an empathic attitude to customers combined with an experimental approach to product innovation are key factors in their success. Her research for this included a study of my approach to the Kelvingrove project (Liedtka et al 2009). This was founded on combining staff creativity, empathy with a wide range of audiences tempered by rigorous visitor studies and prototyping key display techniques (Liedtka, Fitzgerald 2005, O'Neill 2007, Economou 1999).

The personal, subjective nature of empathy makes it difficult to write about 'professionally' but it is central to understanding the realities of people's lives and how they are affected by large scale social and economic forces as well as by personal and local events. Many social historians chose their discipline because of an empathy with people excluded from traditional history and its focus on 'high politics.' Free secondary and university education equipped many people from hitherto excluded groups to work in museums and they brought new understandings of diverse communities with them (Fleming 2002). This representative role was not deterministic however. An empathy with one excluded group can be extended to others, while co-option to an establishment perspective remains a temptation for those who have climbed the ladder and can see the advantage of pulling it up after them. Empathy is often dismissed from serious consideration by many scientific, social science and even humane disciplines (utilitarianism, logical positivism), and there is always a danger of projection and stereotyping. Nonetheless it is increasingly recognised as central to understanding human history. In *Humanity, a Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Jonathan Glover (Director of the Centre of Medical Law and Ethics at Kings College London), explains the atrocities of that period through a study of the processes by which 'normal human feelings' were repressed so that people were able to view their fellow creatures as sub-humans – to view them without empathy. It has been a central thread in European moral philosophy at least since the 18th century (in, for example, Adam Smith's Theory

of Moral Sentiments) and it is at the heart of many of the humanities, from the study of literature and philosophy to anthropology and history – moderated always by rigorous processes to compensate for its limits.

Another prominent figure during my time of most active involvement with SHCG was Stuart Davies, who was instrumental in securing Renaissance in the Regions funding for non-national Museums. This achievement is perhaps only the most prominent of that of social historians in the past thirty years. Along with educators and visitor studies practitioners, social historians have played a critical role in opening up museums to new audiences – far more than is acknowledged in the literature of the New Museology, which gives too much prominence to Foucauldian Theory as the driving force. More personally, my membership of SHCG laid the foundation of many aspects of what turned out to be my career (something which I never expected to have, much less planned). The way I work and every project I have been involved in was informed by the very effective and creative combination of empathy and rigour which is a key characteristic of social history and its museum community of practice, the SHCG.

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# Social history in museums: 35 years of progress?

*In his summing-up of the 2009 Conference David Fleming, Director of National Museums Liverpool and former SHCG Chair (1986-7), celebrates the successes of the past 35 years.*

The first thing I ought to say is having the old guard like Crispin Paine, Stuart Davies and me at this conference feels rather like inviting a group of argumentative Morris Dancers to perform at a Kaiser Chiefs concert. We are all grateful for the chance to relive former glories and, indeed, fight old battles, in front of a young and (I'm relieved to say) captive audience.

The second thing I want to say is to note the wonderful transformation of Leeds Museums, which is itself not unconnected with the rise of social history in museums. In my time at Leeds Museums in the 1980s the organisation was a shambles, with a few pockets of excellence. Leeds Museums today is a professional outfit, committed, extrovert, lively, communicative, younger, more female, better educated, and more popular, and therefore more valuable. There is, indeed, no comparison, and there has been a gigantic improvement in Leeds Museums, for which, as a native of Leeds, I am particularly grateful.

Next, I would like to refer to the general discussion at this conference on Thursday past. Your speakers tracked the development of social history in museums. There was a reference to social history being described as the "Cinderella of English historical studies" in the 1960s, though I would take issue with this in that you would have to discount the growing importance and influence of the school of English Local History at Leicester University for this statement to be true.

There is no doubt, though, that the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a growth in interest in social history, with a background of a more democratic education system, which resulted in a new preoccupation with people's history and working class history, with social change, and even a growing sense of an entitlement to social justice. These developments have influenced museums profoundly.

So, in 1982, the historians tell us, the Group for Regional Studies in Museums became the Social History Curators Group (I would like to point out that I joined SHCG – I wouldn't have been seen dead in GRSM!).

The change of name was symbolic of a shift in thinking, which was characterised in museums by: younger people; more women; more working class people; better educated people; more socially aware people; a growing interest in education and the role of the museum as a communicative device; and last but not least, a shift away from objects and towards stories, as the cold reality set in that museum collections were almost heroically unrepresentative of most people, most of the time.

The outcome of all this was better museums, better displays and exhibitions – in my own experience, the Old Grammar School in Hull in the 1980s, Discovery Museum in Newcastle, South Shields Museum and Sunderland Museum, all in the 1990s. Museums were transformed all over the country, and so were audiences. At Hull in the late 1980s, audiences doubled in size. The same thing happened at Tyne and Wear Museums in the early 1990s. In Liverpool, since 2001 subject to a similar policy of democratisation, audiences have grown four-fold.

My key point is that social historians led the way in the democratisation of museums, and this should never be forgotten.

Crispin Paine said in his paper on Thursday that he's "depressed", that social history curators have "lost our way", we don't know what we are doing, we have no underlying principles, and that the break in the late 1970s by Leicester University of the links between the Departments of Museums Studies and of English Local History meant that museums lost their links with social history scholars. Moreover, SHCG has not helped, he said, through its shift away from object-centred to people-centred studies and approaches. We've "lost our nerve", we are not building collections, we ignore huge issues, there are no good displays, no well-researched collections, no decent books.

Crispin is right about one thing, which is that the best museum studies course in the world suffered at Leicester when it was cut adrift from the world-renowned academic excellence of the Department of English Local History. This was a mistake that handicapped museum studies at Leicester for many years.

However, developments in museums are not totally reliant on what happens at Leicester, mercifully, and I would take issue with everything else Crispin said. In saying that museums need to communicate through collections, not text, Crispin is showing his age. This is an old-fashioned notion. I say we should communicate through exploring ideas, and that the techniques of this are many and varied.

We DO have an underlying principle – it's called social history, it's the study of people, in a museum context, and so it's for a lay and diverse audience. There is plenty of scope for detailed scholarship and for research, but the outcomes are targeted at the general public. Indeed, I would argue that social history sprang from a mating of academic Marxist economic history with academic local history. This might not sound too appealing to everyone, but it's a fact.

This, then, is the great social history achievement – social inclusion and the role of museums as agents of social change. Social history has had huge influence across all disciplines in museums, and the opposition to an inclusive approach has, by and large, been overcome. I would cite two examples: the DCMS publication *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Libraries and Archives for All* of May 2000, and the Group for Large Local Authority Museums' *Museums and Social Inclusion* report of October of the same year.

And so now the key themes of museums of all kinds are involvement and ownership; representation and identity; relevance and value.

Much of this will culminate, I hope, in the £72 million Museum of Liverpool, due to open to the public in Spring 2011, which I see as the next major step for social history, on a scale that is not possible in a municipal context, where most social history successes are to be found: a national museum of social history, not about war, weapons or ships, but about people!

If, as Stuart Davies suggested, we are too conservative, then this makes me think that we should drop all pretence of neutrality, and have the courage of our convictions. The context is right, the principles are in place. Let's keep moving forwards in the great social history adventure that has helped change the nature of museums worldwide.

## Part 2: Social history in museums in 2009



# Collecting 20th century rural culture at the Museum of English Rural Life

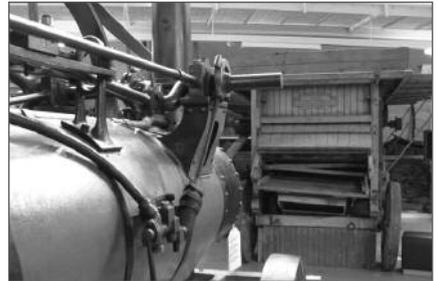
*Roy Brigden, Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life, details their project to rebalance their collection through a project of strategically targeted acquisitions.*

This is a new kind of project under way for the period 2009-12 at the Museum of English Rural Life with £95,000 worth of backing from the Heritage Lottery Fund's Collecting Cultures initiative. We are one of 22 museums around the country participating in the £3m scheme which is all about providing money for acquisition of collections material, thereby counteracting to some degree, however small, the relentless whittling away of museum purchase funds over the years.

Our programme is about collecting material that says something about the countryside, our relationship with it and its role within society generally, over the course of the 20th century. It might be thought that as a museum of rural life this is something that we should have been doing anyway. Whilst it is true that we aim to interpret the countryside in a way that is relevant to all, particularly today's largely non-rural and suburban audience, it is also fair to say that we have for some long while been working against a host of constraints.

In the first place, our collection, in common with rural museums everywhere, is dominated by the nuts and bolts of working the land. MERL was established in the early 1950s to memorialize the passing of a countryside powered by the horse to one powered by the tractor and the internal combustion engine. It is a collection dominated by tools, implements and machines that say a great deal about the technology and techniques used in the countryside but remarkably little about the countryside itself and its cultural place in our society over time.

Secondly, for years our collections have grown through a process of almost automatic accrual: that is to say through the steady accumulation of similar material. Ideas about what a rural museum collects have become very ingrained. People tend to offer more of the same; curators tend to accept more of the same. So the collection gets bigger but it doesn't move forward; it doesn't leap out into new areas. Hackneyed perceptions of the rural past get reinforced and the old stereotypes get steadily more entrenched.



**Rural collections have traditionally been dominated by the technology of farming**

Thirdly, there is the conundrum of contemporary collecting. Technology dominates the collection but we're not collecting the more recent technology of the countryside partly because it's just too big and difficult to deal with and partly because its appeal to the visiting public may be negligible. We're shying away from it and consequently the object collection fails to tackle satisfactorily the second half of the twentieth century and virtually falls short of confronting the last quarter of the century at all.

Fourthly, apart from a few high status bits of technology – the special steam engine or the special tractor – there is almost no convention within rural museums of purchasing material for the collection. Most new acquisitions are in the form of donations and almost by definition of very modest financial value. Without a tradition of buying, rural

museums rarely have a purchase fund of any note or a track record with agencies offering purchase grants. In consequence, the higher monetary value material rarely comes their way. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The result of all this – and my comments relate to MERL but I would suggest the issues affect the whole sector – is that we've rather backed ourselves into a corner as far as the dynamic of the collection is concerned. The purpose of this project, therefore, is to make a break and start a new programme of collecting that confronts these issues. At least half of the funding has to be spent on actual purchase of material for the collections with the remainder going on a range of linked outcomes including an exhibition, publication, learning programmes, and specialist meetings.

Purchase of additional material for the collections is the nub of the project so what are we trying to collect and why? The first thing to say is that we are not trying to collect the kind of material that we already have, for reasons already explained. So we are not looking to add significantly to our collections of farm machinery and equipment. Secondly, we want to include more contemporary material amongst the selection we make, although the project is about the whole of the 20th century and to abide by HLF rules everything must be at least 10 years old. Thirdly, we need, in part to demonstrate justification for the funding, to target some relatively high status items that it would otherwise be virtually impossible for us to acquire through our normal acquisition processes. Fourthly, we want to acquire material that will build together into a story about the place of the countryside in 20th century culture that will engage urban and rural audiences alike.

To accomplish these purposes, the first thing we did was simply divide the 20th century into ten decades and allocate a minimum of £5,000 to each for purchases, to be spent on one object or more likely a series of objects per decade. This is obviously a rather crude but nevertheless I think necessary device aimed at ensuring that the whole period gets its fair share of treatment.

Clearly, we've given ourselves a very broad canvas on which to work and accordingly a diversity of ideas and opinions about what to collect is vital to the success of this project. It's one of the advantages of being a university museum that there is a wide range of expertise from different disciplines available to tap on site. We are also publicizing the project through professional and specialist networks like the Rural Museums Network, the British Agricultural History Society and of course the SHCG. Engagement with the public is important, for example by getting editorial coverage in the press and in magazines such as *Country Life* and *Farmers Weekly*, coupled with an invitation for people to submit their ideas. *Farmers Weekly* readers got into quite a lively debate on their message board about amongst other things binder twine and wellie boots when discussing what ubiquitous items from the 20th century countryside were worthy of being collected. In the Museum we have a regularly changing and updated display case devoted to the project and we also have a project blog (<http://collecting20thculturalculture.blogspot.com/>) which acts as a continuously running record of what we are doing, what we are collecting and why, and which has a facility for feeding back comments.

So that's the background to the project. What I want to do now is look at some of the things we have collected – or are thinking about collecting – and share some thoughts and reflections that have arisen as a result. One strand that we are working on is iconic objects of the 20th century that have a countryside connection, and particularly if the items concerned have moved from primarily rural associations across into mainstream culture. The classic example of this is the Landrover which first appeared in 1948 as a general purpose farming vehicle – one that you could harvest a crop with one day and



**Landrover – made the cultural shift from farm vehicle to urban chic**

second half of the twentieth century, regarded now in these globally warming times with affection and derision in almost equal measure. If the right Landrover or the right Aga come along with the right story, we'll collect them.

A 20th century icon with a rural connection that we have already acquired is a Barbour jacket from the 1980s. Barbour began the century in the north east associated with prosaic workwear for fishermen and farmers and shepherds. Motorcycle wear was their best line in the 1930s. The all-weather outdoor gear they majored in during the Second World War had obvious civil applications afterwards in the field and on the grouse moor. And then in the early 1980s, following the introduction of a lighter range of jackets – the Bedale, the Beaufort and in our case the Border – there was an extraordinary breakthrough into urban chic. So something that began as required wear for your average hunt follower is now to be found being sported by Lily Allen and the like. This is all about symbols, associations and meanings attached to objects and there's a lot more for this project to explore along these lines.

We sourced that Barbour jacket via eBay, as we have with a number of other items purchased. They include some Laura Ashley material from the 1970s when smock type dresses and small floral print milk maid type dresses, with strong pastoral associations, were so fashionable amongst the baby boomer graduate generation. There is a Britains toy tractor, a Fordson Major, from 1948. Britains began as makers of toy soldiers but it was during the inter-war years that they also started making farm models in response to a growing demand for less militaristic toys. This is the classic farm tractor shape that seems to be embedded in every child's DNA, whether they're from town or country. Another eBay purchase, a Chad Valley Jigsaw from the golden age of jigsaws in the 1920s, presents the classic country cottage scene – the chocolate box image of the countryside which occupies another shared part of our cultural DNA. That's what this project is about.



**Chad Valley jigsaw, 1920s: an image of the countryside that is deeply embedded in the national psyche**

The whole programme could have been made for eBay and we have used it extensively. For all its frustrations, to have an ever-changing searchable database of countless thousands of available social history items is a remarkable development for collecting purposes. Best of all, the facility to communicate with the seller, both during and after a sale, whilst not always productive, means that it is possible for the system to deliver up well-provenanced material with a story to tell.

Another theme we have been developing is the interaction between town and country over the course of the century. There is the idea, for example, of the countryside as a green lung for the town, a venue for outdoors pursuits and exercise, which was coming to the fore in the inter-war period. One way of representing that is with a poster from 1933 for special weekend rambler tickets on the southern railway. It was purchased from another type of internet auction site hosting a variety of specialist sales where the lots can be viewed together beforehand but where the auction itself takes place online.



**The rise of the suburb in the inter-war period – a land between town and country**

We are also looking at the emergence of the suburb in the 20th century – neither town nor country – which has come to have such a pervasive impact for good or ill on English cultural life and values. It led to the purchase of a Triang dolls house from the 1930s, the classic suburban house with architectural echoes back to the first Elizabethan age combined with the mod-cons of a garage, indoor bathroom and electric light. Here were lifestyle aspirations being established and reinforced even at the level of children's play.

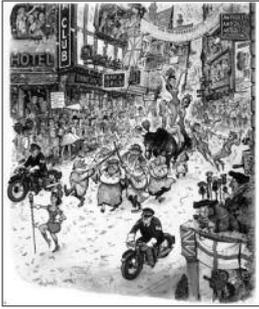
That was acquired from a private collector with an all-consuming passion for collecting toys from the vast Triang range. The world of the private collector is a very good place to go for sourcing

a particular object of a specific type and date. These people have a very focussed and extensive knowledge of the detail which can be useful. However, their attention is usually on the object itself rather than on its provenance so the individual back-story of the item, so vital for museum purposes, is often not there. We have a beautiful object to present our theme with but we have no idea who was the lucky child it was bought for originally.

I mentioned that this project was enabling us to purchase – a rare opportunity – some relatively high status or high value items of the kind perhaps not usually associated with a museum of rural life. And of course it is relative because in the art and decorative arts world the few thousand pounds we have to spend doesn't go very far. Examples so far include a big set-piece arts and crafts sideboard from the beginning of the twentieth century. Purchased from a specialist dealer, and made by Shapland & Petter in Barnstaple, it represents a re-working of the farmhouse dresser, industrially made but to craft principles, for the suburban villas of a new century. Then there is an original Grow Your Own Food poster from 1942, signed by the artist Abram Games, and purchased from his daughter so it comes with a unique package of detail and additional information. From the post-War era, we now have an original watercolour by Norman Thelwell entitled 'The Age-old custom of beating the balm-cake at Abbots Dawdling' which was reproduced as an illustration in *Punch* in April 1960 and which is timeless in its comment on the peddling of rural myth and bogus tradition.

At the other end of the scale, we are also acquiring low status objects, though these can be no less collectable nowadays, that make their own little contribution to the story about the place of the countryside in our culture. A thatched cottage biscuit barrel, a piece of Carltonware with a design date of 1932, came from Alfies Antique Market in Marylebone, a wonderful place to rummage through the material culture of the last century and talk to the very knowledgeable dealers who trade there.

From this it is apparent that commercial art and design are emerging as important project themes because of their capacity to crystallize the mood of an era in an accessible way for our purposes. They can also be tracked through the 20th century



Watercolour by Norman Thelwell, 1960. Its caption in *Punch* was 'The age-old custom of beating the balm-cake at Abbots Dawdling

from arts and crafts efforts in the early years to boost rural industry, through to the inter-war period with artists such as Eric Ravilious and Edward Bawden taking the inspiration they derived from the countryside into their more commercial commissions, and on into the 1950s with Terance Conran's Nature Study dinner service and Lucian Ercolani in High Wycombe re-working the Windsor chair of old into the Ercol range of furniture and a style icon for a new age. Spotting and locating these rural connections is greatly assisted by the ease with which material in specialist auction catalogues, whether from the London-based Christies and Bonhams or the principal regional auction houses around the country, can be scanned, and bid for if necessary, online. Always the drawback is that the transaction is conducted through an intermediary, the auction house, and not direct with the seller so that again the vital details of provenance usually suffer.

Another strand of the project is the representation of the countryside in popular culture. Feature films are an example and we have been acquiring film posters as a way into the subject. Far from the *Madding Crowd* of 1967 was the first big screen version of a Hardy novel. It was directed by John Schlesinger, starred Julie Christie, Terence Stamp, Peter Finch, Alan Bates etc, and was filmed on location in the Hardy country of Dorset & Wiltshire. David Shipman in his two volume work on *The Story of the Cinema* (1982) declared that there had never been a better film about the British countryside. The *Go Between* of 1971 was based on L.P.Hartley's 1953 novel and benefited from a screenplay by Harold Pinter. It was shot in and around Melton Constable Hall in north Norfolk and makes the stifling beauty of the golden summer setting a strong thread in the story. Other films present the countryside in a very different light: weird and menacing as in *Straw Dogs* (1971) with its stark Cornish setting or the wet, bleak and unwelcoming Cumbria of the darkly funny cult classic *Withnail & I* (1986).



*Withnail and I* film poster, 1986. A different view of the countryside

Popular music and the countryside is a theme that surfaces at different points through the 20th century and one to explore with the help of memorabilia and the memories of those who participated. Latterly, it has been the music festival, from the Isle of Wight in 1970 when 600,000 followers descended in chaos on a farm to see Jimi Hendrix et al to the counter-culture pillar of the establishment that Glastonbury ultimately became. These and other avenues are taking the Museum into unfamiliar but rewarding areas of collecting, a long way from ploughs and wagons. In these early stages of the project we are opening up the territory and acquiring random pieces of a very large jigsaw. The real essence of the project, which will become more apparent and pronounced further down the line, is to fit these pieces together into a picture that tells a story about the countryside and its place in our culture of the twentieth century.



# Leeds social history collections: From “bygones” to “community history”

*Kitty Ross, Curator of Leeds History/Social History, Leeds Museums and Galleries, traces the development of a social history collection within a large city museum service.*

Leeds Museums and Galleries were delighted and proud that SHCG chose to base themselves in Leeds for the 2009 conference, thirty-five years after the group first met there. Much has changed over the intervening years with regard to the interpretation and status of the social history collections in Leeds, especially with the opening of the new Leeds City Museum in 2008 and its dedicated *Leeds Story* gallery.

This paper looks at the long gestation and development of the social history collections in Leeds. A story which will be similar to many other municipal collections.

The earliest record of a museum collection in Leeds was that amassed by the local historian and antiquarian Ralph Thoresby (1658-1725). In 1714 he published his '*Ducatus Leodiensis*' with an inventory of his collection, which included many local books and manuscripts. Among the more intriguing items were the 'hand of Montrose', cannon balls from the Battle of Leeds, the charred ends of houses struck by lightning ("the artillery of heaven"), the Abbot of Kirkstall's stirrup and Queen Elizabeth's walking stick. Sadly, few of these items survived. Much of the collection was sold and scattered (and some actually thrown away as rubbish).

The story of public museum collections in Leeds does not really begin until 1819 when the Leeds Philosophical Museum was opened by the Leeds Philosophical & Literary Society. This was sold to the City Council in 1921 to become the Leeds City Museum. Further City Council-owned sites opened as follows: Leeds City Art Gallery (1888), Kirkstall Abbey (1889), Temple Newsam House (1922), Abbey House Museum (1927), Lotherton Hall (1969), Armley Mills Industrial Museum (1982) and Thwaite Mills Watermill (1990).

The early collections of the Leeds Phil & Lit reflected the interests of its founders (mostly local surgeons and industrialists) – mostly natural science, world archaeology and anthropology, numismatics and scientific apparatus. However there were a few items of local antiquarian interest, collected in a rather haphazard way. A selection are listed below:

- 43.1831 musket balls, Marston Moor
- 40.1836 dental instruments (antique)
- 86.1839 cloth – series of specimens illustrating the manufacture (also flax, iron, silk, dyeing – donated by industrialists)
- 23.1844 button from coat of Captain Cook
- 59.1863 photograph, Blenkinsop's locomotive
- 56.1867 Firelock, Leeds Volunteers 1809
- 6.1881 model of Cleopatra's needle, Whitley partners, Leeds
- 11.1885 painting, interior of St John's church
- 14.1902 horseshoes of packhorses, Burley Road, Leeds

Some of the more curious items were donated by the Morley antiquarian Norrison C. Scatcherd (1780-1853) who gave the museum a scold's bridle (brank) and coin-clipping shears associated with Arthur Mangey, a Leeds silversmith hanged in 1696. The latter are displayed in Leeds City Museum.

However, the museum did not make a concerted effort to collect local social history material until the appointment of Henry Crowther (Curator 1893-1928) and his daughter, Miss V. M. Crowther, the first Curator at Abbey House in 1927. They began seriously to collect what they termed "bygones" in 1914. The 1914 acquisitions included purses, sugar nippers, candle snuffers, old keys, horn drinking cups, verge watches, nutcrackers and a caltrop. In 1915 they added old Leeds police batons, a willow pattern sauceboat, a model mangle, candle boxes, a painting of Kirkstall Abbey and a Columbia typewriter. The first non-ethnographic or military costume was acquired in 1917 (a Victorian bonnet and umbrellas).

During the 1914-1918 war, they seem to have made the first stab at contemporary collecting (although little of the material seems to have survived). Items included Leeds printed recruiting bills (1916), Leeds-made Howitzer shells (1917) and various trench souvenirs.

In 1927 the collection acquired a home when Abbey House Museum opened. The early displays were augmented by the 1928 Cliff bequest of Leeds and Staffordshire pottery and consisted of a miscellaneous display of these "bygones", local archaeology and views of the Abbey (gifted by Rev. Egerton Leigh in 1905). An early inventory lists a "Torture" case in the Cliff pottery room displaying local police truncheons, the Morley brank and dental instruments.



Norman Hall at  
Abbey House Museum  
in the 1930s



Bomb-damage dolls  
at the City Museum  
in 1941

A setback for the collections came on 14th March 1941 when a stray bomb hit the City Museum on Park Row. However, most of the social history collections were stored at Abbey House and survived.

Dr David Owen, who was Curator from 1947-1957 was a geologist who had previously worked at Liverpool Museums from 1936. However, he actively encouraged the development of Abbey House both with building up its children's collections and developing the street displays. This was continued under Mr. C. Maynard Mitchell, who was Director from 1957-1978. Mitchell had originally come from York Castle Museum and brought Dr. Kirk's ideas with him to Leeds. Three reconstructed streets were laid out between 1955 and 1958, incorporating the contents of local (and not so local) workshops which had recently closed, such as the last clay pipe maker in Leeds (Sampson Strong). The toy collection was expanded greatly at this time, including contemporary collecting (such as Waddington's games and a complete run of Corgi toys from 1964). Indeed the whole collection grew enormously during the 1960s and 1970s, often without much focus. It was common practice to bid for auction lots to acquire one particular item, but then accession everything else regardless of its quality, provenance or relevance to the collection. This meant that every nook and cranny of Abbey House was full when the museum came to be emptied for refurbishment in 1998, but has also created a rich and varied collection, full of surprises.

Under Peter Brears (Director from 1978-1994) the focus turned to industrial history, with Leeds Industrial Museum (at Armley Mills) opening in 1982. There were other grand plans but no funding or political will to make them a reality. A conceptual "Museum of Leeds" was really a guided walk to link existing sites along the river Aire and the ambitious idea to create "The Largest Street Museum in Europe" at Abbey House would never have got scheduled monument consent. Large scale collecting for these projects rapidly filled existing storage space.



T-Shirt on display at the new Leeds City Museum in 2008

In 1994 a major restructure brought the Museums and Galleries together for the first time. This brought together parallel collections which had built up without reference to each other. In some cases, the separate departments would bid against each other for items such as Burmantofts pottery. In 2004 the service moved to a single collections database (TMS, Gallery Systems) which has helped to integrate the collections and break down artificial delineations between, for instance, decorative art and social history.

Significant investment since 1998 has helped to redisplay Abbey House Museum and to open a new Leeds City Museum in 2008. Along with participation in projects such

as *Moving Here*<sup>1</sup>, these developments have encouraged a move towards more community focussed collecting and a chance to reassess the existing collections. Since the 2008 restructure the team responsible for the social and community history collections includes Curators of Leeds & Social History, World Cultures, Industrial History and Community History, plus three part time assistants. At Leeds City Museum there is at least the opportunity to tell the “Leeds Story” for the first time and to have dedicated space and programming for community displays in partnership with local groups and individuals.

With the City Museum now open, the current priority is to concentrate once more on the collections: documenting and researching what we have (and publishing this on the web), rationalisation (especially where we are sitting on other people’s local history) and a programme of proactive collecting, especially contemporary and community material.

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1 Moving Here was an initiative led by the National Archives in partnership with a range of different museums and archives to create an online database of material relating to migration to Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ([www.movinghere.org.uk](http://www.movinghere.org.uk)).

# Medicine: A suitable case for treatment?

*Jim Garretts, Senior Curator at the Thackray Museum, describes how a social history approach can be employed to bring alive the history of medicine.*

The Thackray Museum is the largest medical museum in the UK. It offers a series of lively, award-winning galleries which '...tell the story of medicine...' from Roman times to the present day and which consider future medical advances, encouraging exploration of the collection on two floors within the historic setting of the Leeds Union Workhouse, which opened in 1861. The single certainty that applies to all humans is that we won't live for ever. While a very small proportion of us will die through accident, conflict, natural disaster, human intervention or suicide, the overwhelming number of deaths will result from illness and disease. Humans are highly complex organisms and despite the great discoveries made through research since the nineteenth century, there are still medical problems that remain unsolved.

This article considers the museum's approach to interpreting its collections and making them accessible to diverse audiences in a variety of ways. As the subject matter is both scientific and historical, the museum decided that the best way to address this problem was by adopting a social history model to demonstrate how society has coped with the problems of illness and disease over the last two millennia. A variety of methods of interpretation brings a potentially complicated subject within the reach of a wide range of visitors. The museum takes the view that visitors are most comfortable assimilating information by proceeding chronologically from some point in the past, pausing in the present and then looking ahead to the future. We know about ourselves in the present; we can find out about the past and we can try to predict what is to come. For example, the average life expectancy in the UK at present is around 79 years, but did we always live as long as this and if not, why not? How long might we live in the future?

Most visitors to the Thackray Museum therefore begin their 'medical journey' on the ground floor by being taken back to a vivid full-scale reconstruction of a Leeds street in 1842, the year in which Edwin Chadwick published his famous *Survey into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Classes in Great Britain*. The average life expectancy in Leeds at that time varied from 19 years for workmen through to 44 years for the gentry. Visitors not only see the living conditions of ordinary people for themselves; they also hear them and smell them. This assault on the senses keeps that experience in their minds as they move forward to the present and the developments in modern prosthetics.

Visitors then ascend to the first floor, where they proceed through displays on topics covering surgery, anaesthetics, antiseptics, dentistry, the use of modern plastics in medicine, hip replacements, hearing aids, pregnancy and maternity. One of the 'star' attractions on the first floor is the gallery displaying Dr John Wilkinson's collection of over six hundred ceramic drug jars, dating between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and which includes the largest collection of English pharmacy jars in the world. The visitor route finally returns to the ground floor, encompassing *LifeZone!*, a large interactive gallery for young museum users, one of the museum's two temporary exhibition galleries, the museum shop and the café.

The museum incorporates four concepts of children's museums throughout its galleries, as defined by the Children's Museum of Indianapolis in the United States and as described by Berben, Cox and Lord (1996):

- Education justifies every object, activity and event;
- Bright, vivid colours and dramatic lighting effects are used to capture attention;

- Exhibits are placed carefully to afford even the youngest [visitor] a good look;
- and
- No matter how sophisticated the exhibit, human contact remains the most important source of learning.

Visitors are encouraged to discover information for themselves in a variety of interactive ways which cater for a wide range of ages and expectations. There are buttons to push, levers to pull, flaps to lift, drawers to open, videos to watch, sounds to hear, questions to answer and panels to read. The tone of the museum text is conversational, as advised by Gascoigne (2007), so that the panels 'talk' to users rather than at them. One visitor may know nothing about the subject, while the next may be a world authority. As Swift (1997) recommends, the museum's interactives are designed to:

- Enhance interest, appreciation or understanding of objects or themes elsewhere;
  - Be robust, reliable and require little maintenance;
- and
- Operate effectively without staff support.

Complex ideas such as hip replacement procedures are explained through the use of models and captioned videos, showing a metal hip stem inserted into a leg bone and engaged with a plastic cup fitted in a pelvis. This method 'paints the picture' much better than any amount of text.

The museum is by no means limited to its displays as a means of engaging the visitor. The Medical History Resource Centre is open to anyone by prior arrangement, whether they are a casual enquirer or an academic researcher. It comprises a substantial library, including the largest collection of medical trade catalogues in the UK, which is an invaluable resource at the museum's disposal. The museum also enjoys strong partnerships with the medical profession, the medical industry and universities, whose students undertake research on the collections. Public *History of Medicine* lectures take place each month between October and March; these are tailored for the non-specialist and are delivered by experts in the field in a lively and engaging way. Sessions led by 'Living History' actors enable very young visitors to meet Florence Nightingale and assist her in the Crimea. There are also conducted local walks around Leeds, a city with a rich medical heritage. Just across the road from the museum is Beckett Street Cemetery, Britain's first municipal cemetery, which opened in 1845. Approximately 180,000 people are buried on this sixteen acre site, of which at least four are local surgeons.

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# New approaches at the Castle Museum

*Martin Watts, Director of Lifelong Learning at York Museums Trust, explains the thinking behind the establishment of 'studios' to enable visitors to experience museum objects and their uses first-hand.*

Objects never lose their power even for museum professionals and the Castle Museum in York is exploring new ways to share them with the public.

Like many museums, at the Castle we have more objects than space to show them. Some are just so delicate that you cannot show them for very long, some are too small and some are too complicated. Some are dull without extensive interpretation, some are just plain dangerous. And it is not possible to truly appreciate some objects without their being some form of use or activity.

So we decided to create three special spaces in the museum that would help with this. We ended up calling them studios, although we did initially call them the armoury, kitchen and wardrobe. The collections they cover are textiles and costume, military and anything to do with kitchens, cookery and domestic economy.

These are not alternative education rooms where the collection of duplicates can be fished out for people to play with – they are a space to genuinely explore, question and create with the collection.

In these spaces we wanted the visitor to understand through investigation and to get up really close to the objects. We wanted spaces where we could explore how objects were used or made and to use and make them for real.

Objects can mean more when they are in action – how do you make ice cream without a freezer is the first question, but then there is the experience of the cold ice, the abrasive salt and the amazing luxury food to eat. This sort of investigation not only allows us to reach back and empathize with people from the past, it also adds to curatorial knowledge and furthermore can show gaps in collections. Also you end up doing some surprising stuff like talking to the head Chef at Heston Blumenthal's or finding the old Quince trees in Yorkshire.

We wanted somewhere where we could share our expertise with the visitor. Locked in our institutions and in the curator's heads is a huge wealth of knowledge that so often needs the glass taking away and more than a label to express itself.

We wanted spaces to be highly professional so that we could invite experts, particularly from the trades and occupations associated with the objects, to come to the museum. This develops community and business links and helps to generate demand and sustain the project and the museum into the future.

We wanted to do this for all visitors coming to the museum every day not just as a special lecture or event.

We wanted somewhere where we could listen to the public; visitors are often keen to tell us about their experience, objects, family and life. The success and enjoyment of their visit is much greater if they feel that they and their lives and experience have been acknowledged, listened to, and been given worth by the "experts" at the museum and we learn so much from them.

The studios can also provide an informal space to think about subject areas that are difficult and contentious and are often handled best as an informal conversation; child labour, race, healthy eating, self image. They are also really useful for dealing with that

endless list of anniversaries, special celebrations, and public initiatives that we increasingly need to do. How can we fit in our contribution to the 500th anniversary of the coronation of Henry the eighth?!!

And above all we wanted a space where staff can experiment, try things out, make a mistake, explore ideas and concepts.

### **Getting stuck in**

Designing the studios needed an iron will, because, in essence, two of them only really needed an empty space. And everyone wanted to fill it up, put display cases in, put interactive gadgets in it, put marketing in it, put computers in it.

Although they are largely empty they are not without thought and design. The military and costume studios have a simple layout and some cupboards to temporarily lock objects away in, good lighting and some graphic wallpaper. The kitchen was different because it needed equipment: gas, hot and cold running water, drains, smoke detection, fume and smell extraction, as well as internal cameras and screens. Constantly throughout the design and build we said we wanted to do things for real, do real cookery, make a real mess, pour pints of gravy on the floor, and on top of that we wanted it to be safe, legal and to the highest health and hygiene standard to allow visitors to eat the products from it. And when this fantastic space was created it then needed to be possible to make it safe so that if it was not in action with staff, visitors could still go in and sit and watch a DVD unsupervised.

Over the last year among the subjects we have explored were: honey, Tudor swords, prison food, the table etiquette of James I and VI, patch work, 1960s fashion, 18th century weapons of law and order, rag rugs, dolls, shoes, curry, pace eggs, hospital beds and nurses caps, Victorian underwear, tea, infantry tactics, mince pies and ice cream.

We had some serious heart searching and discussion on the principle that underlies the studios and the collection care and management. At the same time we developed the concept of not having a specific handling collection (often referred to as a teaching or schools collection). All objects in all collections without exception would be available as long as sufficient safeguards were in place to ensure the safety of the public, staff and object.

Once an object was chosen, we worked out what level of handling was appropriate and what safeguards were needed to reinforce the message that this is a special object, a special occasion and a privilege for us all to be using. This meant that we had to work out how to control the access and increase the numbers of people capable of handling objects safely by training them. We had to accept that it is perfectly possible for volunteers, education and guiding staff to all be trained in how to do it and how to supervise visitors.

We also had to get a balance between the use of replica, or modern substitutes and using the real thing. However we tried to start from the principle of using the original object and working back from that to replica and modern substitute rather than always assuming that using the original was not possible.

Staff. None of this would have worked without the staff. Firstly having curators who were up for it, and wanted to explore their collections and could see the special opportunity that the studios offered, who could see the excitement and benefit and wanted to share that with the public. Secondly, the guiding staff have made huge strides. Moving from a role that was often passive and security orientated to one where we wanted them to give practical demonstrations and supervise the visitor. They had to learn how to do the activities overcoming any natural diffidence, to say nothing of learning a host of new skills and passing health and food hygiene training.

Each studio is supported by a growing band of volunteers. They undergo the same training as paid staff. They are then capable in principle of delivering the programme of activities. In practice the confidence needed to handle the studio on your own as a volunteer is fairly large and not all of them have yet done so. Some activities really benefit from having two people.

The Kitchen studio has had a surprise inspection by the food hygiene inspectors and achieved a 4 star rating.

The studios project has raised a further set of ideas and questions. How can we involve guides and volunteers more in the choice of what goes on? In the future visitors will help decide as well. What constitutes a museum experience and how long need it be? What do people remember from a visit? A smell, a taste, a touch, a sound, a conversation, a recipe? How accessible are the chosen themes and in what time of year should they be pitched? Developing layers of interaction? Doing experiments that we don't actually know the outcome? Can we extend the range of people working and demonstrating in the studios, for example to blind and partially sighted people, and children? So many different sorts of studio spring to mind: music studios, toy and play rooms, and somewhere to get all the amazing tools and crafts that we all have.

Above all it is a reminder of the wonderful power of objects and the delight of sharing them.



# New approaches at the Castle Museum: Cooking and connecting – An experience of running the Kitchen Studio

*Gwendolen Whitaker, Curator of History at York Museums Trust recounts her experiences in one of the Castle Museum's 'studios', and leaves us with an authentic and delicious recipe for marmalade ice-cream.*

## **Amuse-bouche**

Food connects us all. It shapes the pattern of our everyday lives and always has done. How and what we ate in the past is constantly fascinating because it is always relevant and accessible to us today. Food is about survival, trade, a reflection of changing fashions and societies as well as an individual sensual adventure.

What better place to explore how we use food than in a kitchen at the heart of one of Britain's best-loved museums of everyday life?

The Castle Museum is a time tunnel, a physical scrapbook of life in Britain since the 1500s and as you wander from period room settings to military displays, costume galleries and prison cells so you discover objects which weave into the story of domestic and culinary routine: a delicate wooden tea caddy, a microwave, baby's feeding bottle, a butter churn, a soldier's chocolate ration, a dolls' tea set. The Kitchen Studio provides an environment to animate these objects to 'think outside the case' and redefine their role in connecting with visitors, staff and volunteers.

## **Starter**

### The space

Set in the museum's hearth gallery amongst displays of 1940s and 1980s kitchens the studio is a neutral environment equipped to modern catering standards. It was chosen to register the kitchen as a food producing business to enable it to operate at the highest health and hygiene regulations and to reach its fullest programme potential. Working with advice from Food Safety Officers at City of York Council, cleaning, maintenance and communication systems were developed. All these factors have been tricky to introduce and maintain but have ensured that the studio now runs efficiently, and can confidently welcome any visiting chef or food professional.

### The programme

The flexibility and potential of such a rich social history collection enables programming of the space to be diverse. The first year has been a journey, working out how the space would work and how it sat within the visitor experience and the roles of staff; (the word staff in this article applies to museum guides, curators and volunteers). Initially the programme provided formal learning offers and a core of daily demonstrations; however it was soon clear that potential far outweighed this and other offers were added including more object handling, a cookery day course, specialist training and demonstrations from guest chefs. Topics for the core of daily demonstrations reflected collection diversity and strengths, gave the opportunity for underused objects to come out of store, and included pace eggs, ketchup, butter, ice cream, jam making, tea and mince pies.

Finding ways to create demonstrations, which were also conversations, was crucial. Staff needed to be equipped with the right research and techniques to make them confident to engage visitors to participate – less watching, more doing. They were

provided with tailored packs, which contained detailed research of topics, collection information and step-by-step advice and instruction on how to use equipment, carry out recipes, and present to visitors. Demonstrations were also developed to include layers of interaction and activity, from spice grinding, making up your own tea blend, play dough pastry cutting for children and pastry pie forming for grown-ups.

Tips on the types of topics and questions staff could use to fuel conversations helped to ensure that visitors could offer their opinions, experiences, and advice into the mix.

It was important to remain faithful to original methods and techniques to safeguard the integrity of the experience. In many cases this involved integrating original artefacts in sessions. Attention to detail and not always taking the short cut was also important, from using the Victorian method of sealing preserve jars with writing paper and water, writing labels with pen and ink and using a whistling kettle for making the perfect cuppa. (Translating and adapting original recipes or 'receipts' is an article in itself!)

## **Main Course**

### New directions

One of the most refreshing experiences involved in the development process was discovering how this space could reach out and make connections with local food producers and suppliers.

Like many regions, Yorkshire is proud of its local produce and it was important to reflect this in sourcing ingredients for the kitchen whenever possible. Sometimes this was a more expensive and time consuming option but shopping at the city market, using organic meats from Yorkshire farmers, supporting the local nursery and purchasing catering equipment from local firms all helped us to integrate with and celebrate the world outside the museum. Not only could the space reflect the traditions of the past but could help tell the story of today, making comparisons and contrasts. This commitment also had its rewards, with donations of ingredients, time and expertise from local companies interested and supportive of the studio's goals. A demonstration of Mrs Beeton's spicy apple jam, complete with a showing of the collection's bizarre and frightening Apple Bonanza peeling machine at York's Food and Drink Festival (all using local produce from the stalls) helped to show that the Studio was part of its community.

Researching topics led to interesting and surprising directions and partnerships, from talking with the Soil Association about the historical use of essential oils in cookery, (apparently the ancient Egyptians liked to experiment) to chatting to Taylors of Harrogate about the complexities of creating a tea blend and the vast glossary of tea tasting terminology (which we had fun trying to master!).

Like the process of exhibition development, designing studio sessions helped to reconnect with the collection. Discovering how chronologically coherent the underused cookery book collection was proved invaluable, and inspired a studio staff trip to explore the wonderful specialist cookery collection at the Brotherton Library in Leeds. After an interesting morning delving into the cookery books at the museum a local chef enthused by Soyer's *Shilling Cookery Book For the People* offered to deliver a 'making the most of a Sunday Roast' session, looking at thrifty cookery.

## **Experimenting**

Some topics worked better than others. The topic of pace eggs (decorated Easter eggs) was probably the most problematic session. Due to their fragility and the environmental conditions inside the kitchen, the objects themselves were displayed

in a small case outside. Immediately this created a barrier, another glass wall, for demonstrators to overcome. The quantity of eggs needed and the time they took to dye successfully was also an issue, fundamentally we were asking visitors to spend time watching an egg boil! An unappetising side effect of the demonstration was the stench which certain natural dyes produced and the addition of pungent vinegar (needed to fix colour on the eggs). All of which served as a reminder of how all our five senses play a part in making our experiences. Some visitors refused to enter the studio because of the smell barrier.

The most successful sessions were, unsurprisingly, those which involved tasting and seeing historical cookery equipment really working. Butter making can be magical, churning and watching a creamy liquid turn into pale butter which was then shaped into delicate patterns by traditional moulds. In this case an original glass churn was used with replica sycamore butter moulds.

Similarly, making ice cream was like carrying out a scientific experiment, with joy (and relief) for both visitors and demonstrators when smooth, decadent Georgian lemon and bergamot ice was dished up. Alongside this demonstration, visitors could compare the traditional churn with the modern Freeze Ball and taste some traditional favours, including brown bread, made up for the museum by a local ice cream producer. This firm was so interested by the historical flavours that they also offered to create the winning ice cream for our 'design a flavour' competition (very delicious Drunken Fig, figs drenched in Marsala wine). This demonstration also offered the most challenges when it came to equipment and logistics, including needing an ice-making machine to keep up with the daily demand and vast quantities of salt. This constant use of salt also led to corrosion issues (even kitchen cupboard handles started to rust) and involved a review of cleaning and preservation methods. The pewter moulds used in the session were sourced through specialist advice and were bought through an antique dealer. Examples from the collection were kept in a case outside the space but close to the studio's huge glass viewing window.

The mince pie demonstration used three recipes to track changes in ingredients and traditions. It comprised a Tudor minced beef version (we were lucky enough to see the original recipe at the Brotherton Library) a lighter Georgian recipe from West Yorkshire cookery writer Elizabeth Moxen and Nigella's vegetarian option. However, using large quantities of luxury ingredients, including good quality mince beef, rosewater, saffron and brandy over 3 weeks in a very quiet time for the museum was an economic gamble, but very tasty and gave studio staff the opportunity to take away their own jars of historic mincemeat!

### **After the washing up**

There is no doubt that the Kitchen worked well and this was largely due to the enthusiasm and commitment of the studio staff. The first year of running proved to be an exciting taster of things to come, as well as highlighting challenges for the future. A space like the Kitchen Studio can grow and change as a relationship between objects, visitor and museum is forged, and perhaps it's this 'unknown', which makes it such an interesting tool. I hope the many visitors and staff who take part in studio sessions leave with an appetite to find out more, with a refreshed interest, excitement and respect for the connections that our everyday past can serve us.

### **And finally ... Dessert**

Every demonstration included a 'tricks of the trade' take-away for visitors to experiment with at home; this is one of my favourites:

## Kitchen Studio shot glass marmalade ice cream

*You will need:*

- A large mixing bowl
- A bag of ice (about 2kg or approx 5 trays of ice cubes)
- 1 1/2 cups of salt
- A small glass (like a shot glass) full of whipping cream
- Tablespoon of marmalade
- Teaspoon of sugar
- Tea towel

Stir together the cream, marmalade and sugar in the glass.

Place the glass into the mixing bowl.

Crush the ice; you could use a rolling pin or a metal potato masher.

Put a layer of ice in the bowl and sprinkle salt on top.

Pack more ice and salt around the glass, right to the top.

Cover the bowl with a tea towel and leave for about 30 mins.

Give the mixture a stir and cover again for another 30 mins.

After about an hour you will find delicious home made ice cream!

*Why not experiment with different flavours?*

*Why not put fruit at the bottom of the glass before you put the ice cream mixture in?*

# Re-building the Westoe Netty at Beamish

*Helen Barker, Collections Access Officer at Beamish Museum, describes how a project to rescue and reconstruct an iconic public toilet was the ideal opportunity for a programme of audience engagement work with local people.*



The Westoe Netty by Bob Olley

**Netty:** North East English dialect: outside toilet, possibly from the Italian *cabinetti* or from the English “to go to [the] Necessary” (public toilet) (Griffiths, 2004, p.113)

The Westoe Netty is a late nineteenth century gentleman’s public urinal from South Shields in South Tyneside. Used mainly by miners on their way to work at Westoe Colliery, the Netty was made famous in a painting by South Shields artist Bob Olley.

Westoe Colliery closed in May 1993 and the Netty fell in to disrepair and was eventually bricked up. Threatened with demolition in 1996, Bob Olley and a group of enthusiastic helpers rushed to save it, demonstrating clearly the significance of the building to the South Shields community. For many years the Netty was stored in a South Tyneside ship yard before Beamish Museum collected the building in 2007.



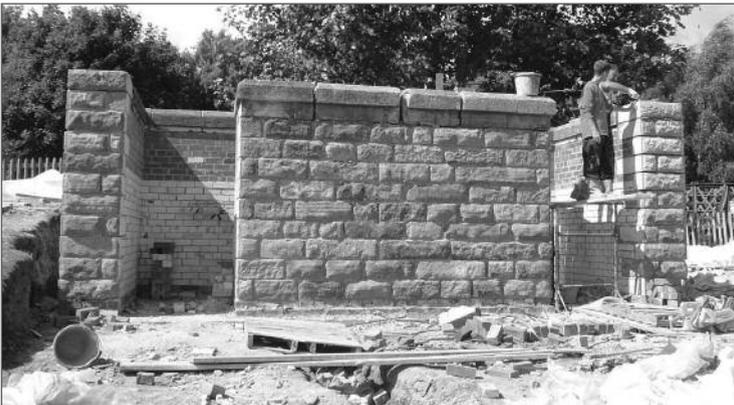
The Netty bricked up in its original location



Urinals numbered and ready to be moved by Bob and co.

Much of the original Netty was collected, some bricks that had been 'adopted' by locals for a £1 charity donation were even returned after an appeal in the local press. Additional glazed bricks were acquired and some new bricks, which form the decorative dado around the inside of the building, were commissioned as the originals were badly damaged.

The building was carefully pieced together, as other buildings at Beamish have been, and the Westoe Netty was re-opened at Beamish in July 2008.



Almost finished – the Netty rebuilt at Beamish

*'I learnt that they [the museum] involve other groups as well which is good for the community.'* (Museum visitor on viewing the groups work in the exhibition)

Beamish celebrates the lives of ordinary people in the North East and the Netty certainly represents a slice of everyday life for many people in South Shields. The impetus to save the building had come from this community and so their involvement in its re-construction at Beamish was a hugely important part of the project. The re-building of the Netty was an ideal tool to engage groups from this area with the

museum, to collect and celebrate their memories and stimulate a real sense of ownership and pride in their local history.

Beamish worked with four groups from South Tyneside and the surrounding area on a project inspired both by the Netty and the wider sanitation related collections at the museum. In the same way that Bob Olley had been inspired by something very everyday to create a piece of art, participants in the project created artwork inspired by ordinary objects. These ranged from decorated toilet bowls to soap advertising to ash closets. Many of the participants were also inspired by their own memories of the Netty.

The groups involved in the project were Sight Service South Tyneside – a support organisation for people who are blind or visually impaired; clients from the North East Council on Addictions (NECA) in South Shields, young people from South Tyneside and employees of Northumbrian Water – the organisation which had sponsored the project.



Netty wall created by Sight Service

*'It was a surprise seeing other group's projects. Everybody had different ideas'*  
(Participant from Sight Service)

Each group visited the museum to explore the collections and take part in an object handling session. The groups drew their inspiration from chamber pots, soap and soap packaging, toilet paper and packaging, trade catalogues, oral histories and images from the photo archive.

After the initial visit each group decided what they would like to create for an exhibition which was planned to coincide with the opening of the Netty at the museum. Sight Service worked with clay and decided to produce small models interpreting their own memories of sanitation and the Netty as well as a larger group piece depicting the Netty wall.

NECA decorated toilet seats and the young people and Northumbrian Water created decorated toilet bowls and bed pans!

Each group worked independently to produce their exhibition pieces with support throughout from museum staff. Bob Olley also worked with one of the groups, visiting them and talking about his inspiration and reminiscing about the Netty.

Oral histories were used to inspire participants to create art but they were also very useful in encouraging people to share their own memories. Oral histories were collected from some of the group members who remembered the Westoe Netty in its original location. These have been added to the oral history archive at Beamish to create a permanent record that can be explored by museum visitors.



Young people from South Tyneside creating decorated toilet bowls

*'We had a good laugh doing it'* (Participant from Sight Service)

As a tool to engage members of the South Shields community the Netty was extremely effective. Participants who remembered the Netty in its original location enjoyed sharing stories and reminiscing about their local area. Toilets are certainly something which we all have experience of and it was very easy to find common ground, or common humour, when working with the groups. One of the best things about the project was the humour and sense of fun which all of the groups seemed to experience.

*'I will remember the young people enjoying the event and talking about it on the coach on the way home'* (Youth Worker)

50 people were engaged directly with Beamish through this project, many of them new to the museum. Many more people were engaged through ancillary activities such as a temporary exhibition about the project in South Shields library and coverage in the press. All of the groups involved directly in the project returned to Beamish for the celebration of the opening of the Netty.

Other outcomes of the project included the opportunity for the groups to show and celebrate their work at the museum and to share their memories with a wide audience. The project has generated sustainable links between Beamish and people in the South Shields community as well as gaining for the museum an exhibit which has its roots firmly in the local area.

## Update

Since this paper was presented in July 2009 the decision has been made to further enhance the interpretation of the Westoe Netty at Beamish by plumbing it in and creating a working exhibit. In order to do this the Netty is currently being dismantled and is awaiting plumbing. Future visitors to the museum will be able to experience the true sights and sounds of a Victorian public toilet!

## References

Griffiths, B., (2004) *A Dictionary of North East Dialect*, Northumbria University Press

# Working together: Engaging communities in developing exhibitions

*Liz Taylor, Audience Development Officer for Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, describes how a range of different community consultation and engagement methods were used in the development of a social history exhibition project.*

## Introduction

This paper focusses on the 'Hair: Community Stories from Birmingham' exhibition which was displayed at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery between July 2008 and April 2009. The exhibition explored hair, culture and identity in Birmingham over the last 50 years, principally through personal stories and objects belonging to local hair salon owners, their customers and other local people. The displays were focussed on four Birmingham hair salons, relating to different communities in the City, and included an African Caribbean salon, Asian ladies salon, an 'alternative' salon (Punk, Goth, Emo) and a traditional men's barber shop. The content of the exhibition was also highly interactive, including audio stories, films, touchable objects, dressing up, colouring in, magnetic games and a 'Hair Swap' AV interactive that enabled visitors to try out different hairstyles on their own portrait image.

The development of the exhibition was very much community-led; it involved local people in a variety of ways ranging from a Community Action Panel advisory group, to consultation focus groups, oral history interviewees and groups working on community projects that were displayed in the exhibition. Community members were instrumental in choosing the overall theme of the exhibition along with major aspects of its narrative, content, interpretation and promotion.

## Exhibition's aim

This exhibition formed part of the Museum's 'Ask the Audience' project, a Heritage Lottery Funded initiative which was aimed at widening participation by, and representation of, non traditional audiences in the Museum, especially Black and Minority Ethnic communities. One of the project's main objectives, laid out in the funding application, was to develop an exhibition related to the Black presence in Birmingham. The wide scope of this objective enabled a comprehensive programme of community consultation and engagement to shape the entire exhibition and ensure its relevance to the target audience.

## Why work with local communities?

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery approached this project from a community perspective as it recognises the huge mutual benefits of engaging communities in developing exhibitions for both local people and the Museum itself.

Community participation in an exhibition can help the Museum to broaden its knowledge of certain themes, historical periods and communities; see things from new perspectives; learn more about the kinds of things that will attract non traditional audiences into the Museum and develop strong advocates for the Museum amongst local communities.

Community participation in an exhibition can likewise benefit community members by empowering them to share their own histories, gain new knowledge and skills, increase their confidence and help to foster community cohesion and cross-cultural understanding.

## Involving local people in a variety of ways

'Hair: Community Stories from Birmingham' involved a large number of people from local communities in a range of different ways.

### The Community Action Panel

The Community Action Panel is a voluntary panel of diverse local people who meet once a month at Birmingham Museum and Art gallery. Their main aim is to work with museum staff to help the museum change and develop to better meet the needs and interests of its local communities. During the development of the exhibition, the Community Action Panel took on the role of exhibition advisory group and offered advice, suggestions, perspectives and ideas throughout the development process. One of their very first suggestions was that, whilst the exhibition should encompass the Black community, it should not be solely about them as this could exclude other people. They advocated for an exhibition theme that was about 'common ground' but where BME stories could also be explored. They came up with a range of potential 'common ground' themes that we could test more widely with target audiences through consultation focus groups.

*The Community Action Panel were surprised and pleased to find that they had so much say in the development of the exhibition, 'The things we've put to the Museum have been taken on board. I wasn't sure they would be.'*  
(Community Action Panel member)

### Consultation focus groups

We held two stages of consultation with focus groups, to test out some of the Community Action Panel's ideas. The first stage tested potential theme ideas for the exhibition. Participants, who were from a range of BME and white communities, were asked their opinions on a variety of themes ranging from fashion to celebrations, food and migration. People overwhelmingly liked the idea of an exhibition based around fashion and style. Further discussions led to the identification of the theme of hair and identity as a focus for the exhibition, 'It's a very good thing because you don't know why people are wearing the head scarf, why they have different hair styles.'

The second consultation stage focussed on narrative and sub-themes, once the overall theme of hair and identity had been decided upon. The theme of hair is potentially massive and the exhibition needed a narrative structure that would help to focus it. One of the Museum's original ideas was to group the exhibition into types of hairstyle/identity, such as hairstyles that have a political aspect, a faith aspect or a fashion aspect. However, consultation revealed that people were worried that this approach would 'label' people and could enforce stereotypes. They preferred an approach where the objects and stories could be explored in a less 'categorising' way. This led us to the idea of using a number of local hair salons as a framework for the exhibition and to construct the whole exhibition around the 'personal' voice rather than a more formal 'curatorial' voice.

### Hair salons, community groups, individuals

We worked with four hair salon owners, their customers, and other local people to collect objects and stories related to hair and identity in Birmingham. Some people loaned their own objects for the exhibition; others offered a fresh perspective on an object already in the Museum's collection. Every label for an object, artwork or photograph in the exhibition was a personal quote from a Birmingham individual.

For example, one woman talking about a photograph of a Black woman with a 1960s Afro hairstyle commented, 'The Afro was very much a political statement because before then everybody was straight-haired either using hot combs or relaxers. And that was to kind of fit into society and look like other kids. And so the Afro was like the liberation, a symbol of wearing our natural hair, of being ourselves and not being anything else.' Alongside this quote, another woman commented that she wore the Afro simply as a fashion thing, highlighting that we were right not to construct the exhibition in a 'categorising' way as one hair style can have very different meanings for different people.

### Community group projects

We also wanted to incorporate a couple of community projects into the exhibition, providing another means for communities to be involved. This part of the project involved working with two community groups to produce two outputs that could be displayed in the exhibition. We worked with an NVQ hair and beauty group who created six Black hairstyles on mannequin heads and a film about their chosen hairstyles and own experiences. 'It's a great chance for our work to be seen.' (NVQ participant). We also worked with a Young Unaccompanied People's group to create a hair sculpture for the exhibition, based on their own sense of cultural identity.

### Community festivals

We promoted the exhibition through information stalls and participatory activities at local community festivals. Attendees were encouraged to leave their own hair story and have a photograph of their hairstyle taken – both of which were then added to the exhibition. This was to encourage individuals, along with their friends and families, to come and see themselves within the exhibition.

### **Challenges and solutions**

The project was new, creative, exciting and innovative, and so was not without challenges.

Perhaps one of the hardest things was managing expectations and helping participants to understand the parameters that they had to operate within. Although we wanted local people to shape the exhibition as much as possible, we had to ensure they understood the planning processes that the exhibition had to go through (theme, narrative, content, interpretation, display etc) and staff, time, money and space constraints. For example, at one point, the Community Action Panel came up with the idea of structuring the exhibition around the number 11 bus route that goes through the city and encompasses a range of diverse communities. Museum staff highlighted that it was important to test this theme idea, along with other ideas, with target audiences. The outcome was those consulted were unable to divorce the bus route from the bus itself, and many had negative associations with the bus including lateness and anti-social behaviour. This indicated that the idea would not be as popular as the Panel thought it would be.

It was also difficult working with people on a project with such a long time scale. When we first started consulting people about the exhibition, it was not due to be displayed for another 18 months. We helped to address this by keeping people well informed of how their ideas had impacted on the exhibition's development, sending them summary reports and inviting everyone who had participated to the exhibition launch party.

The project participants were all volunteers so it was important that this was taken into consideration throughout the planning process. We had to make it as easy as possible for them to participate – often meeting them in their own community rather than the museum. We provided refreshments and incorporated time for socialising at the start of meetings. We had to factor in additional time for if people forgot they had a meeting

with us or had to pull out at the last minute for personal reasons. When working with community groups, we worked to their own timetables – attending evening meetings and incorporating their break-times into the days session. We also evaluated the project throughout to ascertain how the project was going and how participants felt about the part they were playing. This helped us to further develop our community work practices.

At times, there was nervousness amongst museum managers about allowing the community to have so much say in an exhibition's development and associated concerns about the quality of the end result. This was natural, as it was the first time we had worked in this way with communities and the Museum had a reputation to preserve. It was the project worker's role therefore to highlight the huge benefits that participation by local communities could bring to the exhibition, remind managers of the ultimate purpose of the 'Ask the Audience' project, ensure the project was managed effectively and regularly update Museum staff on progress made.

### **Project legacy**

As with any project, it was fundamental that the project had a strong legacy once the exhibition had ended.

The exhibition surpassed its target visitor numbers of 30,000 within 6 weeks of opening and comments cards evaluation showed a cultural diversity of attendees including 42% first time visitors. 80% of people said they would like to visit the Museum again.

The success of the exhibition has given the Museum confidence and skills to adopt a similar multi-layered participation approach to a much bigger project – the complete redevelopment of its Birmingham history galleries. This project includes the development of three advisory groups, a comprehensive community consultation programme and a wide range of community engagement projects which will be displayed in the galleries.

The exhibition has successfully demonstrated to staff that community participation can help increase and diversify the Museum's object and oral history collections, and bring new knowledge to existing objects in the permanent collections.

The Community Action Panel's important role has been recognised, their funding has been continued and they continue to offer their advice to the Museum on a range of services, work areas and projects. A number of people participating in the exhibition were invited to join the Panel, enabling them to have a continued involvement with the Museum.

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery has now developed an Audience Development Strategy and Action Plan (2008-13) to formalise this kind of work and properly embed it in the organisation.

# Bread, glitter & neon: Artists in residence interpret social history

*Hannah Crowdy, Interpretation Manager for National Museums Northern Ireland and formerly Collections and Interpretation Officer for the Grosvenor Museum in Chester, describes how a collaboration with contemporary artists enabled new interpretations of a collection of social history.*

## Introduction

With its high street frontage and welcome refuge for the accidental passer by is the Grosvenor Museum really that different from a Chester bank, bakery or bookshop? This question is the crux of the art residency partnership between the museum and artists Grennan and Sperandio.

In 2008 the museum was approached by Simon Grennan, the UK representative of international artist duo Grennan and Sperandio. Were we, he asked, interested in working with them as artists in residence? Our curiosity suitably peaked we responded with measured enthusiasm. The idea was undoubtedly an exciting one but we were concerned about whether the usual museum woes of not enough money, time or space would hamper the project. Reassured that external funding would be sought, time input from the museum would be moderate and that the artists had no desire to work physically on site, we embarked upon the Grosvenor Museum's first art residency and our first direct collaboration between social history and contemporary art.

## Background: The Grosvenor Museum and its Social History Collections

The Grosvenor Museum, for all its grand aristocratic name, is a local museum like many others. Founded in 1885 to represent the history of the city and educate its residents the 'Grosvenor' moniker was applied in appreciative recognition of a generous grant towards the museum's establishment by the first Duke of Westminster.

Social history was not a priority for the original museum. As a result the social history collections developed in an ad hoc fashion, and whilst there are some notable items within them, such as a complete set of Bressan recorders, they are not of great standing or academic interest. In terms of their interpretation the museum is also hampered by the lack of a dedicated permanent gallery for social history items. Some pieces are displayed in the museum's Period House and some in a small Timeline gallery but meaningful interpretation has had to take place by other means, including temporary exhibitions, reminiscence sessions and community outreach projects. The residency therefore represented a valuable new extension to this repertoire; a chance to interpret the somewhat neglected collections in striking, different and engaging ways.

## Logistics of the Residency

The recent *Museums Journal* article, 'Insider Knowledge', recognised lack of funding opportunities as one of the major obstacles to the development of art residencies but did identify that 'The Leverhulme Trust stands out for its willingness to engage with artists.' (Gray 2009, p.37) Our project is testimony to this, as it has been funded in its entirety (£12, 490) by The Leverhulme Trust.

The Trust places special emphasis on 'the removal of barriers between different disciplines' (Leverhulme Trust, 2009) and this is something that our residency certainly represents. The art residency managed and facilitated by an art curator is a relatively common one; that working specifically with not only social history collections but also social history staff much less so.

The residency is a partnership between the museum and the two artists. Its deliverables are officially seven new pieces of artwork, displayed in a case in the museum foyer, each of which unites a social history object from the collections with material gathered and/or created by Grennan and Sperandio in the context of contemporary Chester. To this end 'the artists will balance their archive research with research and reflection upon the social networks of contemporary city'. (Grennan & Crowdy 2008, p.4). In practical terms this has manifested itself in interactions with, amongst others, P&A Davies of Chester – a famous firm of local bakers – and a flighty group of skateboarding children.

Within the museum walls the artists have been granted opportunities to interact directly with the stored collections. Their artists' eyes, so different from curators' eyes, have alighted on a number of hidden, unassuming or forgotten objects that now have a rare chance to see the light of day.

Each art installation is a strong visual interpretation, and it is hoped that visitors react and respond to this in the first instance. However, as a very different venture in a somewhat conservative city it was recognised and encouraged that other forms of interpretation should be provided to help people understand and appreciate the process. As a result each piece is displayed with a panel explaining the project as a whole and its own dedicated panel. Images are provided and thoughts explored to illustrate the artistic process. In addition four public lectures have been programmed in to accompany and demystify the displays.

### The Works of Art

From the outset the artists aimed to 'employ contradiction, shifts in context and humour, establishing a reciprocally illuminating relationship between each object from the collection and the material from daily life.' (Grennan & Crowdy 2008, p.4). An examination of one particular piece illustrates how this worked in practice.

'The Sidings', named after a low-rent auction house on the outskirts of Chester, was the second piece to be installed. It consisted of an early 20th century plush elephant from the museum collections reunited with its bread 'parent', created specifically for the display (which ultimately had to be made from cake rather than bread, due to issues with 'the cottage loaf technology'). The bread/cake elephant served to interpret the toy as a domestic item, a child's 'utensil' that is the 'daily bread' of childhood: used, worn, loved and ultimately discarded. Overall the piece worked on an emotional level; appealing to memory, nostalgia, familiarity, love and regret. One of the most popular items in the museum was introduced to P&A Davies, one of the best loved and longest established businesses in Chester and their resulting bread/cake elephant was a labour of love, just as the creation of the toy would have been. The high street museum finds a natural partner in the high street baker.



*The Sidings*

One point to stress here is that each of the new pieces of artwork is meant to be temporary and transient, just as genuine social history objects were also originally intended to be. The creations will not make their way into the museum collections, as in isolation they are meaningless; it is only when paired up with their original object that they become imbued with meaning. Photography and the written word are then used to capture this moment of meaning and provide the lasting legacy for the project.

## The Benefits

The project is only just over the half way stage so it is impossible to evaluate it thoroughly. However, its benefits have shone through from the start and can be detailed.

Marrying contemporary art with social history has been a potentially risky venture, as the two would not normally meet within a local museum context, and there has been much scope for mismatch and misunderstanding. Yet overall the experience has been a positive and painless one. Undoubtedly the acute social awareness and engaging people skills of the artists have helped the residency along, and created essential common ground for interaction between the two disciplines. Crucially this has helped us to look beyond the traditional academic differences which segregate and define our museum disciplines, to the common aims of communicating to and engaging audiences that may unite them.

From a curatorial perspective it has been particularly refreshing to have someone approach your collections not only with a fresh eye but also one that is unconstrained by issues such as provenance, condition and importance. Hannah Redler of the Science Museum captures this valuable freedom when she says, 'Artists speak with a very different tone – one that we as curators can't always use. Artists have a licence to be provocative' (Gray 2009, p.35). The spur used in the first piece, 'Over Caldry Brook', was unlikely to have ever made it to display, as it came in as part of a bulk donation in the early 20th century and is not unique or special, nor has it a provenance or any personal stories attached to it. Yet to the artists it stood out for its shape, its meanings, its resonance in terms of the strong equestrian traditions of the city of Chester and, crucially, its provocative nature.

From an audience perspective the project has given us the opportunity to surprise, challenge and delight our visitors. The foyer case is the first thing to confront their eye-line as they enter the museum and to be greeted by, for example, a bright red glitter ball pierced by a spur or a pair of gold boots flaunting neon antennae, sparks curiosity and encourages engagement with the collection. The value of a 'talking point' cannot be over estimated, and whether people's views of it are positive or negative the fact that they have been inspired to voice, discuss and debate their views is certainly an achievement.

## Conclusions

So is the high street museum any different from other high street services? This residency would seem to suggest not; in fact the museum is as much a facet of the everyday as any shop. Its 'products' are just as varied, its success just as dependent on placement and display and its 'customers' just as poised on the cusp of whether to buy or not to buy: in the case of the museum that is to actually buy into the displays and interpretations offered. Just as a shop may launch a new range to increase the incentive to buy, so the new interpretations offered by this residency have provided new incentives to buy into our collections.

Grinnan and Sperandio are masters in 'work that explores the margins between mass and museum cultures' (Grinnan & Sperandio, 2009), margins that are in fact no more substantial than the physical works of art they create, the boundaries between different museum disciplines, or the lost ephemera of social history.



*Curzon Park North, the third work in the series*

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# Building a social enterprise at the Museum of East Anglian Life

*Tony Butler, Director of the Museum of East Anglian Life, calls for museums to focus less on doing more, and more on the happiness of our visitors, users and staff.*

In his Stephen Weil memorial lecture in 2006 David Fleming beautifully described a museum as a social enterprise, judged 'not what it is but what it does'. It is described similarly as stimulator of economies, a collective psychologist and ultimately as a 'stairway to heaven' enabling individuals, regardless of their place in the world, to experience transformational encounters. Fleming's use of the word enterprise is interesting and limiting – interchangeable with the word organisation. Whilst I agree that museums must be concerned absolutely with what they do, it also matters what they are. A true social enterprise, business minded, opportunistic but exuding progressive values and a sense of social justice, offers a template for the social history museums of the future. This paper describes the Museum of East Anglian Life's (MEAL) progress from social history museum to social enterprise in which the 'bridging' of social capital is not just as a by-product of being a museum but a first principle. The museum's vision is not only to be an inclusive institution but a participative one in which individuals are not only consumers or beneficiaries but co-creators of their own space – where they can ponder life's complexities and think about the world differently.

The Museum of East Anglian Life is situated in Stowmarket, Suffolk. It has 15 historic buildings including a working mill and Abbot's Hall, a splendid Queen Anne Manor house, 45,000 objects ranging from steam engines to costumes, farm machinery to domestic items. It has rare breeds of Suffolk animals such as the large black pig which is farmed and sold as meat. All this is set in 80 acres of Suffolk landscape with four County wildlife sites. MEAL is an independent museum functioning as a small business which is terribly important, as it encourages risk taking.

In recent years MEAL has become much more than a museum. Its 14th century tithe barn hosts musical and theatre events and an annual Beer Festival. It is home to other arts organisations including the East Anglian Traditional Music Trust and partnerships have been formed with diverse organisations such as Dance East and London Sinfonietta both of whom have commissioned works inspired by the museum's landscape and collections.

The museum has produced imaginative work with the Traveller community. In 2006 and 2007 it hosted a Gypsy Arts Festival, bringing European and British Romany performers together. In 2007 it played host to Kal, probably the most popular band in Serbia.

The museum has long worked with marginalised people. In 2009 the regional housing strategy for Travellers was launched at the museum. Another project, which was an immense source of pride, was a collaboration with the Alzheimer's Society to train individual carers working in rural villages to use museum objects to assist with therapeutic care for people suffering from dementia.

The social enterprise model enabled the museum to develop meaningful social activities and be financially rewarded for doing so. According to the Social Enterprise Coalition:

*'Many commercial businesses would consider themselves to have social objectives, but social enterprises are distinctive because their social or environmental purpose is central to what they do. Rather than maximising shareholder value their main aim is to generate profit to further their social and environmental goals.'*

The Big Issue and Jamie Oliver's Fifteen Foundation are perhaps two of the most famous social enterprises. The social enterprise model sits fair with the cultural sector. Existing charities can use their trading arms as a vehicle for the business (as was the case at MEAL). The model thrives on social and economic localism – a predominately local economy using local produce, employing local people to provide goods and services for local customers.

Abbot's Hall Enterprises was set up in January 2007. Its aim was to provide training and skills development for learning disabled adults, offenders and the long-term unemployed, therapeutic placements for people in receipt of individualised social care payments, and the retail of horticultural products. Its programmes include a 10 week work-based learning course developing land-based, heritage, literacy and numeracy skills. A fully equipped training centre and IT suite has been set up as well as a horticultural production unit. The museum also established itself as a regional centre for volunteering and participation.

In three years the benefits of this approach have been palpable. It has helped 40 people find jobs, provided 45,000 volunteer hours each year, enabled 120 people to receive accredited training and even helped 3 people find supported accommodation. In truth many of the enterprises' activities could have been carried out anywhere, in a training centre or college, but what made them of value to clients was that they took place in a museum. A rare Fordson tractor was restored by a group of young people who had previously left school with no qualifications. A 19th century shepherd's hut is currently being restored by the work-based learning team. It made the site more active and visibly looks like a working community, whether it's the Community Mental Health team in the walled garden, or Mary and Ann who have been working on the costume collection for 15 years.

Participants were not just improving themselves, but seemed genuinely motivated by the status of volunteering in a museum. As far as the public agencies are concerned, their primary objectives for their 'clients' was to improve their skills and confidence so that they could re-enter the workforce or live more independently. However having seen the bonds which were made, we started to think differently about the purpose of the programme; being at the museum clearly made volunteers happy. They became social and supported each other outside of work. They ran each other to the shops, supported each other in times of personal problems, people who had previously led isolated lives now had new-found confidence. They began to trust others, they had new-found status and they became more adaptable. Far from being a refuge the museum was a spring board. To see the bonds which build amongst the most unlikely of people was touching. A good example was the relationship made between John and Gordon.

John was a prisoner on the Resettlement programme from HMP Hollesley Bay. He was coming to the end of a six year sentence for armed robbery and at lunchtime would eat with Gordon who had Downs Syndrome and was part of the gardening team. During their time at the museum Gordon's mother died, she had been his main carer. At the age of 41 this was a cataclysm in Gordon's life. John offered friendship and support which was a great comfort to his new friend.

By making the mental shift from museum to social enterprise where assets in the broadest were valued, we began to appreciate what made our museum work wasn't just the buildings, collections or even its public programme, but the value of the relationships built across the organisation. The relationships and bonds between individuals are the major cogs in the machinery of a community. Anyone reading George Ewart Evans will know that reciprocity was key to the functioning of an agricultural village right up until the First World War (Evans, 1956).

In his book *No More Throw-Away People*, the American social activist, Edgar Cahn calls these types of social transaction, the 'Core Economy':

*'Family, neighborhood, community are the Core Economy. The Core Economy produces: love and caring, coming to each other's rescue, democracy and social justice. It is time now to invest in rebuilding the Core Economy.'* (Cahn, 2000)

Cahn pioneered the idea of Time Dollars or Time Banking as it became known in the UK. Mini enterprises have been set up where individuals pool services or skills which can be drawn upon at any time.

This approach builds strong social networks in which professionals are but one component. In order to deepen these networks, cultural organisations ought to alter their priorities. We spend too much effort building infrastructure and institutions rather than developing social networks. A culture of measurement means we treat visitors as numbers. I recently attended a seminar where two directors of international museums seemed to compare success of their work as to the size of the queues out of the door. Frequently funders see the value of a cultural experience in terms of its usefulness in improving the education attainment or employment prospects of its users.

At the moment the only way of measuring the success of MEAL's participants in its social enterprise is to examine what they don't do. They don't claim benefits, because many are now in work; they don't see their GP as much because they are active as volunteers and healthier. These statistics tell only half the story – we need to find a new measure or at least a way of articulating that it is the quality of people's relationships which make them happy.

As Richard Layard in his book *Happiness* states that "Public policy can more easily remove misery than augment happiness." (2007, p231).

The American psychologist Martin Seligman (2003) wrote that society would be far more successful if it enabled mental wellness rather than concentrating efforts on treating mental illness. He talks of three stages of happiness. First the Pleasant Life, which consists of having as many pleasures as possible and having the skills to amplify the pleasures; that is the generation of positive emotion. Second, the Good Life, which consists in knowing what your signature strengths are, and then recrafting your work, love, friendship, leisure and parenting to use those strengths to have more 'Eudaemonic Flow' in life. Third, the Meaningful Life, which consists of using your signature strengths in the service of something that you believe, is larger than you are.

In crude terms one can derive positive emotion from seeing a beautiful work of art or eudemonic flow from engaging in an absorbing activity – MEAL's steam engine volunteers attest to this. The great challenge facing cultural organisations is to the extent to which they can help people live meaningful lives. Few sectors can engender participation both in terms of creating content or social interaction. Museums and libraries are invariably at the centre of their community. Their collections or book stock are frequently familiar, comforting, and even when displays challenge assumptions they are done within an environment of an institution which still engenders a high degree of trust. Layard points to a number of fundamental ideas as being a key to promoting happiness such as trust, respect, helping others and fairness.

Earlier this year MEAL began to try to articulate somehow, the extent to which being involved with the museum made them happy. A simple happiness questionnaire based on the New Economic Foundation's Five Steps to happiness was issued to all staff and volunteers (80 were issued 48 were returned). Respondents were asked how many friends they'd made, how many new things they'd learnt and whether involvement at the museum had made them more active. It also asked more searching questions – had being involved with new social networks made them look at the world differently

and whether that experience had encouraged them to give something back to the community.

The results were encouraging. On average people made 4.5 friends, learned at least six new things and most considered themselves more active. Furthermore many people genuinely felt that their contribution at the museum, however small, was in the service of something larger than them.

Comments included:

*'It has given me a community respect and I now help neighbours and last year my partner and I helped out in a soup kitchen on Christmas Day.'*

*'Some people I work with have disabilities. Once I got to know them I thought differently and they are actually quite amazing people'*

Next we looked at whether it would be possible to discern historic levels of happiness by examining life in the Suffolk village of Stowupland at four points in time, 1850, 1901, 1950 and 2001. Using the happiness index developed by the University of Bhutan in the 1970s the project compared, over time, biodiversity, time spent between work and family, strength of community organisations as well as more conventional indicators such as life expectancy, education and economic well-being. By interviewing local people we looked at the quality of their relationships with their friends, family and the environment as well as wealth and social mobility. The result was the *When Were We Happy* web based exhibition. If there is a perception that stocks of social capital are low, the materials to build it clearly exist. There are more clubs and societies in the village than ever before, far fewer single parent families than in 1900 and most people contacted saw their extended friends and families more than twice a week.

Next year the project will be extended by inviting school children to use the happiness index and our happiness questionnaire to design themselves a 'happy day'. They will be asked to consider their own strengths and discern how they might use them in a greater cause. They will then put themselves in the position of a child in 1900 and see whether they would have shared the same values and experiences.

Another exciting new piece of work is with Meru Museum in the central highlands of Kenya. The two organisations have similar social and cultural values. Both are situated within agricultural heartlands, both have strong collections of social history, both have intrinsic links with their communities – Meru Museum is a centre for regional herbalists. The two museums are working together to develop a social enterprise at the site of a traditional courthouse. Here 30 acres of land will be cultivated with traditional varieties of crops and herbal remedies providing training and skills development for people living with HIV and Aids, and orphans and vulnerable children. Skills will be shared, building on the commonalities of developing community and social capital.

## Conclusion

I've worked in museums since 1997, which I think coincides with what could be described as the good times for culture. It was a time when expansion and growth were unprecedented. Our major towns and cities have a slew of new, beautifully designed and inspiring museums. These new museums and the policy of free admission have inspired increasing numbers of people to enjoy arts and their heritage. But this kind of exponential growth can't go on forever. The current financial crisis has shown the limits of growth. A desire for growth has skewed the way people who work in culture think. By proving our contribution to the economic potential of a locality or the country as a whole, we get more money, and with more money we can do more stuff for more people.

This is fine to a point but I think it has created a rigid, mechanistic mindset in the practice of museum people. We spend much time trying to prove to the treasury for the next Comprehensive Spending Review or our next round of local authority budget setting, that culture can contribute to objectives in a range of areas from reducing crime to improving educational attainment, to improving health and contributing to economic regeneration. Whilst this may be true, for me this approach has taken much of the joy out of our work. We may be culturally richer than ever before but are we happier?

I think our efforts should be less geared to producing more cultural stuff and should concentrate on the happiness of our people be they visitors, contributors, staff or volunteers. We often pride ourselves in putting people at the heart of the museum – we should put the museum in the hearts of our people. This is the way to build the social capital which is the keystone to the resilient and sustainable communities of the future.

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# Book review



# Over a red hot stove: Essays in early cooking technology

Ivan Day (Editor)

## Prospect books

Blackawton, Totnes Devon, 2009, pp. 208, hb, ISBN 9781903018675

This book is the outcome of two recent conferences held in York under the aegis of the Leeds Symposium on Food History on the themes of the technology of 'Open Hearth Cookery' and 'Baking from cereal crops to oven baked goods'. Six of the chapters in the book are based on talks given at these two meetings while the two additional chapters have been contributed by the respected food historians, Peter Brears and Ivan Day.

The first chapter is by museum curator David Everleigh who examines the early 16th century origins and then in useful detail the later developments of the cast iron kitchen range in Britain. The 1960s saw the demise of the traditional kitchen range. Everleigh's emphasis is on the kitchen range in England where by the early 19th century coal was established as a common domestic fuel and cast iron was a ubiquitous material found in both the home and throughout industry. Various avenues of historical enquiry have been researched including probate inventories, patents records, iron foundry records, ironmonger's catalogues, old recipe books, county archives and commentary from diverse individuals whether they be an observant foreigner, a local dialect poet, clever inventors and of course the experiences of ordinary cooks who used the kitchen range on a daily basis for everyday household warmth, hot water and cooking.

The historical associations of the cast iron kitchen range are as a welcoming and warm centre of the home but also as the demanding and often inefficient domestic tyrant devouring fuel and requiring the drudgery of regular cleaning and polishing. This account allows for both these perceptions and successfully gives the reader a well illustrated and confident account of the history of the kitchen range.

The following chapter on 'Ox roasts-from frost fairs to mops' by Ivan Day explores the intriguing histories concerning the public spectacular of ox roasting in England. He examines in detail the famous London frost fairs of the 17th and 18th centuries and shows the extent of their particular commercial and sporting attractions.

Other historical ox roasting accounts are associated with some of the older country fairs and public amusements; their origins remain obscure but several are clearly linked to the festivals of the medieval church and to the provision of charity in the form of free meat and drink to the poor. In the 19th century celebrations of ox roasting were certainly held during some hiring or mop fairs (especially in the English Midlands), times when large gatherings of people were present and public treats and amusements likely. More formal occasions when an ox roasting occurred included the celebration of local civic, national and royal events; the invited audience could listen to and then endorse patriotic and nationalistic sentiments followed by a sampling of succulent English roast beef. Historically most of these celebrations were mostly funded by local worthies but Day also draws attention to a remarkable instance of self help when in 1858 the supporters of the Oldham colliers (then enduring a bitter strike) organised by public subscription their own parade, ox roasting and subsequent feast for the hungry colliers. This example is a reminder that a careful study of these classic feasts can yield new

insights and aid the discovery of further historical knowledge. This chapter is illustrated by a generous number of widely sourced and excellent historical illustrations. The author's keen pursuit of his chosen subject is evident throughout his valuable overview of ox roasting in England.

Many readers will be familiar with the several historical images of the great medieval kitchen in Windsor castle with its high ceiling and impressive roasting hearths inset into the walls. Peter Brears' expert account of the kitchen traces both its physical and board social development through the centuries up to the disastrous fire of November 1992 and its recent restoration. The antiquity and royal associations of the castle kitchen are famous and in his careful study Brears investigates both the history and practical operation of the substantial hearths and ovens used for roasting beef and other meats for the royal household. So, in this chapter the great and sophisticated iron spits, meat screens and fierce fires necessary for roasting a complete ox and barons of beef of kitchen are illustrated and take centre stage. However, with a sure touch, other significant aspects of domestic history of the castle kitchen are mentioned including the staffing and military style management of the kitchen and its place as an attraction for visitors. The author stresses the significance and constancy of roast beef as proud and nostalgic symbol of English royalty and historic English identity. As such, Brears gives a fascinating and striking account of a venerable kitchen.

The practical and commercial application of pioneering 17th and later 18th and 19th century clockwork technology to the culinary chore of roasting over an open fire is the focus of Ivan Day's study of that ingenious family of clockwork spit jacks and rotisseurs. The clockwork spit's early origins in continental Europe are traced by Day and its initial manufacture and promotion in London by the celebrated instrument maker, Joseph Merlin (1735-1803) are discussed and illustrated. Later versions of Merlin's clockwork roasting spits are also expertly examined by Day and supplemented by helpful illustrations and technical sketches.

Day gives close attention to explaining the mechanical operation of various spits and their fittings while their individual utility as kitchen equipment is also assessed. Such contraptions were mostly found in wealthy households but by the late 19th century the standard vertical bottle roasting jack was widely available.

Puzzling and now long obsolete the clockwork jack or spit is rescued in Day's account from the obscurity of culinary history. His knowledge and obvious respect for these antiquarian culinary servants will hopefully encourage many individuals [whether they are mechanically minded or not] to reconsider old examples of mechanical spring jacks, smoke jacks, bottle jacks, existing in their own collections.

The final two chapters of the book look at two specialised aspects of baking history. Firstly, the historian Laura Mason examines the history of 'Barms and Leavens – Medieval to Modern' in the English yeast baking tradition. The science behind the baking is fully presented by the author. However, her story is a long and complex one drawing on many fragmented sources to present an account of the gradual divergence of barm intended purely for brewing and barm suitable for baking. The 19th century saw the widespread arrival of improved commercial brands of yeast and chemical rising baking agents and therefore a steady decline in the domestic knowledge of homemade sour leavens and the preservation of yeast. One outcome has been a historic loss of a diversity of regional home made breads although Mason notes that a few craft bakers may be willing to revive this tradition.

'Baking in a beehive oven' is the title of the final chapter by the American food historian, Susan McLellan Plaisted, and it is a concise and interesting 'hands on'

description of the use of a traditional clay or beehive ovens. Her meticulous research on the history of English and colonial American beehive ovens informs her own practical experiments with bread ovens in America. Historically, the amount of labour, time and skill involved in the full use of bread ovens is daunting; Plaisted examines the various constructions and shape of old bread ovens, the necessary provision of prepared bundles of wood firing as fuel, setting and management of the fire within the oven, then the clearing of the oven prior to baking. Beehive oven baking was achieved by using the retained heat of the oven and careful judgement was required by the baker in order guarantee the success of early batches of bread, then a succession of other pies, cakes, biscuits and confectionery.

One minor quibble is that informative as both these chapters by Mason and Plaisted are, their accounts each lack a single illustration which contrasts with the other well illustrated chapters in the book.

In conclusion, this book is a most helpful and pleasing addition to the history of food in Britain and deserves a place on the bookshelf.

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# Social History in Museums

Journal of the Social History Curators Group

Edited by Michael Terwey

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