

Can museums be a potent force in social and urban regeneration?

Viewpoint
Informing debate

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Museums are experiencing what many believe is their biggest culture shift in 150 years. In this *Viewpoint*, Simon Tait asks: Have we moved into the age of the 'social museum'?

Using detailed case studies of current initiatives, he looks at how far museums now go beyond the display and interpretation of collections; their potential role in local regeneration; and whether they can create a space where social issues can be examined in a way the public finds accessible.

Key points

- Museums are playing a part in social change, tackling a range of social issues, such as crime prevention.
- Curators feel they have a role in making sense of history – and the myths that may surround it – in modern terms. They are aware that their curatorial choices need to reflect and respond to other voices within the local community.
- Curators themselves are coming from a range of different backgrounds, often with little if any traditional curatorial training.
- If museums and galleries fulfil their new role as being a major supporter of the local economy, both tourist and citizen should benefit.
- Museums are seen as central spaces of mutual understanding and cohesion where cultural identity can be developed. This may be driven by museum professionals or communities. Such identities may reflect previously unacknowledged histories or more recent social change such as migration or post-industrialisation.
- The extent to which museums can be a focus for economic regeneration varies greatly, depending on the nature of the communities, what investment regenerating authorities are prepared to make in museums, and town planning.
- Remaining challenges include: convincing other agencies of museums' role in tackling social change; reflecting the speed of social change, which may require adapting complex organisational structures; acknowledging concerns about traditional curatorial remits; exploring legitimate areas that some still feel too sensitive for social history; addressing the physical accessibility of older museums.

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The social museum

Museums in Britain are experiencing what many believe is their biggest culture shift in 150 years. The emphasis is moving away from the care of objects towards the telling of stories as curators and museum planners, managers and directors strive to meet the requirements of new and varied audiences.

As long ago as 1975 the Czech museologist Jan Jelinek wrote:

“A backward glance at museum development shows that museums only fully develop their potential for action when they are actually involved in the major problems of contemporary society. Museums are institutions intended to serve society and only thus can they continue to exist and function.” (1)

In her 2005 book *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction (2)*, American academic Janet Marstine expands on Professor Eileen Cooper-Greenhill’s coining of the phrase “post-museum”, a museum which “actively seeks to share power with the communities it serves”, a museum which “instead of transmitting knowledge to an essentialised mass audience... listens and responds sensitively and encourages diverse groups to become active participants in museums’ discourse”.

In July this year historian Tristram Hunt wrote in *The Observer*:

“From Leicester to Dundee, Liverpool to Bradford, Britain’s cities are becoming ever more diverse. They constitute a frequently uncomfortable, often fractious landscape of religions, races, ethnicities and communities. And there are fewer and fewer neutral spaces in our public realm for people to gather and reflect around art and objects which successfully encompass parts of their multiple, competing cultural hinterlands. The museum, as a quintessentially urban institution, is one such place.” (3)

Traditional museums had been largely study centres of science and of fine and applied art, devised for educating the public. Museums began to change in the 1970s and 80s with the development of industrial archaeology as a serious and popular study, and the adoption of the ‘open air museum’ – collections of historical buildings transplanted to a museum site and restored (4).

Museums started to focus more on sociological studies. However the emphasis was on entertainment and nostalgia – particularly through re-enactment – rather than serious examinations of social conditions and attempts to explain social development and conditions of the past, or how they might be relevant to the present.

The biggest material influence to change museums in the last 20 years has been the National Lottery. Since 1995 the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has invested £1.4bn in museums and galleries, mostly for capital developments and, though one or two have famously failed, most have been deemed successful.

The support of lottery funding in particular had two knock-on effects:

- It encouraged other funders – local authorities, charitable foundations, private givers, occasionally corporate business and latterly government departments other than the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – to contribute in response to the credible business plans the HLF increasingly insists upon.
- Museums themselves grew more ambitious about developments. Projects which would have been deemed far beyond available resources – such as the long-anticipated Shetland Museum in the country’s northernmost city which finally opened in 2007, the £26m Great North Museum due to open in Newcastle in spring 2009, and the £68m Museum of Liverpool scheduled for 2011 (see page 6) – now seemed attainable.

In the later 1990s museums began to address current social concerns. The Science Museum in London has examined issues such as AIDS and the effects of smoking in quickly mounted temporary foyer exhibitions which respond to news reports; the Waterfront Museum at Swansea (see page 13) presents a constantly changing news page in its forecourt on subjects relating to its themes of post-industrial development. Other developments have included curators and conservators taking a more public role, demonstrating techniques live or via CCTV links as in Liverpool’s Conservation Centre, and providing ‘live labels’ for audiences, as at the Tullie House Museum in Carlisle, adding their own scholarship to expositions on elements of their museums’ collections for particular audiences.

This *Viewpoint* considers whether we are now in the age of the “post-museum”. Are museums now the potent force in social and urban regeneration they have been promising to be?

A new mood: using history to examine modern society

In their paper *Knowledge and Inspiration: The democratic face of culture*, written for the MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council) in 2006, John Holden and Samuel Jones of Demos say boldly:

“Because of the knowledge they hold and the inspiration they offer, museums, libraries and archives are essential to our social and economic survival.”

Museums in particular, they say, gather new knowledge as well as storing knowledge of the past. The objects they collect have the capacity to offer fresh interpretations of the world. Accepting that, the questions then are:

- to what extent are museums capable of contemporary interpretation?
- for whom are they making the interpretation?
- is the audience given options to make its own interpretation?
- are those who would benefit most from this discourse taking the opportunity to do so?

In one respect museums are a neutral ground where issues such as juvenile crime can be discussed outside the influence of agencies like the police and courts. But there is finally a curatorial choice of what issues are discussed so they can never be entirely neutral.

One example is London's Museum in Docklands. Its 2008 exhibition *Jack the Ripper and the East End* pulled apart much of the myth that surrounds the brutal killings of prostitutes in the late 19th century. It related them to the environment of Victorian Whitechapel, setting this against the drink/drugs culture of the present and comparing the vice industries of the East End of 1888 and 2008. “It is a popular and frightening story and much of its appeal was due to the response of the press at the time, which we wanted to examine. But rather than concentrate on who the murderer might have been – though we look at all the propositions – we wanted to see how different the East End was then compared to now and what similarities there might be through interviews with people involved today,” said its curator, Alex Werner. “It is what we think we should be doing now, taking the reality of history that has become popular romance, stripping away the myth and making sense of it in modern terms.” It has proved popular for a relatively young museum that has been struggling because of its location off the tourist track.

In 2007 Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery mounted what might have been a simple historical exposition as its contribution to the bicentenary of the Act abolishing the slave trade in this country. The exhibition looked at Olaudah Equiano, the 18th century former slave who became a writer and abolitionist. But as well as examining his appealing and somewhat mysterious story, the museum took the subject to the modern black community of Handsworth in Birmingham, relating it to Key Stage 3 history and citizenship studies. The exhibition also questioned the role in the slave trade of Birmingham's two historical icons, Matthew Boulton and James Watt – whose statues stand outside the museum – in selling steam engines to slave-trading ship owners.

The Galleries of Justice, Nottingham: can museums prevent crime?

The Galleries of Justice – looking at the law, justice and punishment – was established a decade ago. The old Shire Hall, Nottingham's former county jail and courthouse, was converted in 1998 at a cost of £5.5m.

Despite having virtually no permanent collections at that time, in 2003 it won the first £100,000 Gulbenkian Prize for Museums. The award was largely due to its unique relationship with its alter ego, the National Centre for Citizenship and the Law (NCCL), which takes issues of citizenship and the law first to Nottinghamshire's youth and now wider afield.

In the same year, the Galleries took over Her Majesty's Prisons collection, establishing a permanent holding which is now the core of a new long-term crime and punishment exhibition. As well as being tableaux sets, the Victorian courtroom, police station and cells are used for re-enactments – last year Oscar Wilde was famously retried here, and acquitted. The museum has also developed a relationship with Sudbury Open Prison: prisoners have helped catalogue the collection, reorganise the café which is for the first time making a profit as a result, and mount the long-term exhibition.

The NCCL is the education provider charity for the Galleries. Its objective is “to keep kids away from crime and out of prison” through a series of programmes. “The NCCL's USP is crime prevention,” says its head Katy Archer. It was started by Tim Desmond – a former teacher, then head of education and now the Galleries' chief executive – as a way to address the problems of violent crime on Nottinghamshire's estates, working with youth services, the probation service, the police, the courts and other local agencies.

Crime in Nottingham and the surrounding county is seen as linked to post-industrialism. The great local industries of bicycles, cigarettes, pharmaceuticals and mining once guaranteed employment and education was popularly seen as unimportant. But those industries have all virtually disappeared and the future for young people here is far from assured.

Working with young offenders proved difficult, with the potential for confrontation too great and not well serving the purpose of crime prevention, so the aim was diverted to young people in vulnerable areas.

“How our organisation has evolved,” Tim Desmond said, “is that the Galleries of Justice is a small regional museum with lofty national aspirations on significantly interesting issues.”

The NCCL has developed a series of programmes, with ARC – Actively Reducing Crime – proving itself in Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and Wandsworth in 2008. ARC is a citizenship outreach programme designed to engage schools, local education authorities and communities in active crime prevention as interpreted through the citizenship modules of the national curriculum. The main objective is for local specialist agencies and businesses to work together with young people to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, tackling a range of issues from arson to graffiti. ARC has been delivered to a dozen or so secondary schools, around 600 young people. Each ARC programme costs £5,000.

“In 2008 the organisation's board of trustees decided to separate the identities of the NCCL and the Galleries of Justice,” said Ms Archer, herself a museum professional. The NCCL continues to operate as the Galleries' education provider, but it has also become an agency of social change in its own right with a distinct national remit. “This creates a more sustainable model and a way to champion our work and development nationally.” However, as a museum, it has been difficult to make the national argument: agencies such as children's services, youth services or the criminal justice board fail to recognise how a museum can have a role within their domain.

“I feel very strongly that the sector has a part to play in social change, and that developments like generic social outcomes have started to create models for mapping the work in this area,” she said. “There is tremendous potential for other museums through their sites, collections, programmes and education services to achieve similar outcomes.”

Investment, ambition and our 'heritage cities'

In 2002, the MLA launched Renaissance in the Regions in England with a government investment of £300m up to 2011. The aim was to boost regional museums because "user expectations were exceeding the resources which could be provided, a great deal of potential was going unfulfilled, museums were ill-equipped to deliver against recognised roles in education, learning inclusion and quality of life".

Renaissance has been controversial in some respects; support is not felt to have trickled down to the smaller, often more community-based independent museums. However, visitor numbers have steadily increased: in 2007 14m visits were made to regional museums in England.

Andy Burnham, now Secretary of State at the DCMS, was a political adviser to the Culture Secretary, Chris Smith; in 1999 he was tasked with sounding out the possibility of imposing free admission on DCMS-funded museums. "When I was a young fresh-faced spin doctor," he told a journalists' lunch in May 2008, "I wasn't sure this was going to be the best thing for the department to focus on, and as an adviser I found it very hard to convince the Treasury. I can't believe the impact the policy of free entry to museums and galleries had: it brought a sense of energy and vibrancy to the whole cultural sector."

The mood was already changing, with London museums alone seeing a rise of 32 per cent in visits between 1999 and 2003. English museums drew 15 per cent more visitors in 2006 than they did in 1991. In 2008 for the first time a museum – the British Museum – is the most popular visitor attraction in Britain. In his 2006 report (5), Tony Travers of the LSE said that Britain's museums were worth £1.5bn a year to the economy, "adding up to a significant sector, not a peripheral pastime; it is not something froufrou outside of the rest of the economy" and they represented a British export as key as the car industry or hedge funds.

Although heritage is a large part of what makes the older British cities attractive to visitors, it has often been difficult to persuade city authorities that museums are not a static attraction. As Janet Barnes of the York Museums Trust said, "If they come and it's crap they won't come again, people's expectations are so high".

Cities are discovering new pockets of economies such as:

- the student economy: many cities have universities either invested in them or campuses close by whose students form a low-income but aware and growing section of the community. To attract students new developments must incorporate inexpensive and informal bars and restaurants: entrepreneurial museum directors are working hard to do this. In Sheffield the Millennium Galleries have made a considerable success of the Azure Café whose menu and opening times pay particular court to the students of Sheffield Metropolitan University opposite.
- the evening economy: heritage cities are acknowledging that city visitors, both tourist and local, want inexpensive entertainment after 6pm and are having to invest in late opening on one or more days in the week.
- a cultural economy: some cities have only recently discovered the potential of the cultural economy and lack of investment in it. Despite a range of museums and galleries, Manchester has found that only 2 per cent of visitors are going there for culture, and museums and galleries are sharing £3m from the Regional Development Agency to raise the cultural offer in the city.

Museum of Liverpool: one city, many voices

Liverpool's cultural renaissance is being celebrated in 2008 by its designation as the European Capital of Culture. But one of the most controversial schemes associated with the year will not, in fact, open until 2010. The £68m Museum of Liverpool, flagship of the National Museums Liverpool (NML) group, will be Liverpool's first 21st century public building. It is hoped it will attract 750,000 visits a year, provide work for 78 people and add another 321 jobs in the immediate vicinity. And admission will be free.

The museum is rising on the Pilotage in the old Liverpool Docks, beneath the iconic Liver Birds, former site of the rather ramshackle Museum of Liverpool Life. The new museum will be able to display many more items from the collections than its predecessor could, but it is also being designed to be more in contact with local communities and its visiting public. "Fifteen years ago the reminiscence movement for old people got going, but the Museums Association Conference in 1995 said that that was not what museums are for," said Janet Dugdale, director of urban history for the new museum. "Now things are different: you can't have museums that are about history that are not socially responsive any longer."

A key activity for curators has been making contact with the Liverpool communities it will have to represent if it is to tell the city's story completely. Current programmes involve the last dockers who finally lost their jobs in 1998 after a three-year strike and the Chinese community – Britain's first Chinatown was in Liverpool – through which links have been made with schools in Shanghai. One contact was John Hamilton, leader of Liverpool Council during the strife-torn days of the Militant Tendency's control over the local Labour Party; he not only gave researchers his memories of local politics in the city, but made his large collection of memorabilia available. "In his will he said the museum must take what it wanted, or nothing, but we took a lot," Ms Dugdale said. "It's an important archive, but it wouldn't have come to us if we hadn't been talking to him."

In 2007 NML opened a new International Slavery Museum coinciding with the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. This explored both the modern impact of the historical trade and examples of slavery in the 21st century. "The slavery bicentenary was exciting, it gave an impulse to start looking at modern reflection – you could do the same for immigration, for economics, for imperialism, any number," said Ms Dugdale.

The Museum of Liverpool will have a new emphasis on immigrant societies on Merseyside, weighted towards story-telling rather than the intrinsic importance of objects. For example, the museum has in store a large collection of Singer sewing machines, but only one will be displayed: it had been the sole possession of an Italian immigrant tailor in the 1930s. "There's nothing special about the model, there are hundreds like it but, because of the story it helps to tell, the object has taken on the power to move," Ms Dugdale said.

This approach, the museum believes, will help reach a new audience who will be able to identify more happily with what it has to say. The museum will have powerful spaces in which unexpected things can happen for visitors. However these are not neutral spaces; they depend on historians, curators and designers creating a set and visitors bringing their own experience to them. "People look for things they can identify with, and when they find themselves the response has got to be positive," Ms Dugdale said, "but it will take time, perhaps 20 or 30 years, to develop.

"The museum voice is our response as curators, but we must enable other voices to be heard. A city museum has to have many voices," she said.

York Museums Trust: tourists and citizens

York Museums Trust took over responsibility for the city-owned museums – the Yorkshire Museum, York Art Gallery, York St Mary's and York Castle Museum – in 2002. The city would provide an annual revenue grant but YMT would have to manage, programme and improve the sites as an independent charitable trust.

The trust has embarked on a programme of improving the venues gradually, working first on converting St Mary's Abbey church into a contemporary art venue for which it commissions a site-specific work of art each year, then upgrading the York Art Gallery, and now developing the Yorkshire Museum, originally an archaeological display, into a community museum, all at 'affordable cost'.

For Janet Barnes, who created the trust, the first target was to persuade the city authorities that what York could most offer tourists was heritage, not retail. "The emphasis had been on shopping, and that the museums and galleries were a niche interest that could look after itself," she said. Then, the devastating effect of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 on economies in the north of England made it imperative to encourage other industries: tourism was the first call. Now, Ms Barnes said, the museums' and galleries' involvement in the economic health of York is seen as key: on the trust's behalf she chaired the Creative York group for three years and is currently chair of the Arts Council Yorkshire board; she is chair of the Art Museums Directors group, a member of the court of the University of York, a director of the new tourism partnership in Visit York and a director of the Yorkshire Hub partnership implementing Renaissance in the Regions.

The museums have to make a presence outside their own precincts, she believes. One popular initiative with local people in 2008 has been the Grand Tour in York, a hang of facsimiles of great paintings from the National Gallery and York Art Gallery in unconventional places on the streets and in the green spaces of York.

The trust has found it difficult to interest the HLF in its improvement schemes. Last year it lost out to York Minster which was awarded £10m for its refurbishment. "We don't complain because it is another way of pointing up the importance of the heritage sector to the city's economy," Ms Barnes said.

Yorkshire Museum is fundraising for a £1.2m programme to recast its collections and create new displays on York's Roman past, the medieval period, the natural sciences and an audio-visual history of York. This should be completed by 2010. York Castle Museum has a programme of upgrading the displays, concentrating on social history. The famous Victorian street scene has already been re-interpreted, and curators are working involving visitors more in the three new studios – displays, costumes and textiles, and military. A new Sixties exhibition is aimed at both those who remember the decade and young people.

York's National Railway Museum, a branch of the Science Museum, might be a rival to the YMT sites. There had been fears that educational programmes, for which the trust must charge, would be hit by the fact that admission to NRM has been free since 2002. But by the time the programmes had come fully on line the trust's relationship with local schools was well established. Overall visitors increased from 325,000 in 2002 to 510,000 last year.

York's museums are having to work hard to improve what they offer tourists, but see the needs of both tourist and citizen as much the same: if the museums and galleries fulfil their new role as being a major supporter of the local economy, both kinds of visitor will benefit in the quality of their time in York.

Sense of 'we' – social capital, local identity, and the neutral space

The very word 'museum' used to be seen as a barrier to accessibility but the word has lost much of its inhospitable connotation; according to Visit Britain the most asked question by tourists after the usual logistical ones is, 'where is the museum?' More problematic now is the physical nature of traditional museums: entrances up broad flights of steps; a front 'information desk' which can be as much a deterrent to the casual visitor as a focus of guidance; subdued lighting required for conservation but creating a sepulchral atmosphere; objects kept behind glass on pedestals; poorly placed and uninformative labels. Although much of that has changed, adapting such buildings to more contemporary ideas of exhibition and access has been difficult – the British Museum, the V&A, the Walker Art Gallery and even the newly recast Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow could still pass as grim tabernacles rather than places of enlightenment.

Too often a museum's collection is seen as a sealed discourse excluding non-scholars. But, as British Museum director Neil MacGregor told a House of Commons seminar on Britishness in June 2008, the importance of an object is at least as much what the viewer can subscribe to it as the curator interprets from it. This can mean that inert objects take on a political significance. An obvious example would be the British Museum's own Elgin Marbles, but it is difficult to know to what extent ordinary Greeks or Britons give the Parthenon Frieze a diplomatic role.

More interesting is the controversy around the film *300*, a 'comic book' treatment of the classical story of the Spartans' defeat of the Persians at Thermopylae: modern Iranians took exception to what they saw as the demonisation of the Persians in the film. An internet campaign tried to subvert the film's marketing by referring to museum objects which they claimed showed the humanitarian and civilised nature of the Persians against the militaristic and barbarous philistinism of the Greeks.

As MacGregor said, the dilemma is how we might approach cultural differences in a way that actually sparks conversation rather than merely drawing a dividing line. Behind Mark O'Neill's total recasting of the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow is the belief that to attract new audiences visitors have to be able to identify with what the displays show: once they see themselves, they are hooked.

One issue museums are increasingly exploring is migration. In the 2006 report of the Campaign for Learning (now renamed Culture Limited) commissioned by the Home Office, Chris Wood and Hannah Gould wrote that while many organisations deal with the practicalities for migrants, there are:

“almost none that touch on those people's needs for cultural, spiritual, social and moral inclusion in British society. This is something that is given almost equal priority by the people who know new arrivals best (the organisations at the sharp end of asylum, refuge and immigration issues) but the practical needs make their day jobs so demanding that there's precious little space to tackle it. Museums are a ready-made solution to that need.”

At local level the sense of 'we' can identify not only a community with a museum, the community can create one. In March 2008 Nick Merriman, director of the Manchester Museum, opened a gallery named 'Myths about Race' which tested the Victorian legacies of prejudice, but is to rename it 'The Forum': it will attempt to institute more of a dialogue with different communities in the multi-faceted society of Greater Manchester. "We see museums as locations where cultural identity can be developed, central spaces of mutual understanding and cohesion," he said.

The Lightbox, Woking: a community-led campaign

Woking is a quiet railway dormitory, a 25-minute train ride from central London and notable for little except the nearby Maclaren Technology Centre where the latest Formula One racing cars are conceived. Local people, however, were not content with this image, and 77 of them decided to create a museum that would help discover their community's history and provide a showcase for it and their own aesthetic endeavours.

In 1993 Gill Washington, a local silversmith, teacher and chairman of Woking's arts and crafts society, found common cause with the local history group – she wanted somewhere to show the work of local craftspeople and artists, they wanted a museum. They thought of acquiring and converting one of many local disused buildings for, perhaps, £1m.

They formed a charitable trust, but as their fledgling campaign coincided with a property boom, any museum would need to be purpose-built. Woking Borough Council was sympathetic and gave the new trust a small site unattractive to property developers.

The trust had not seriously considered developing a museum themselves, but persuading professional museum builders to take it on under the umbrella of Woking Council turned out not to be an option. The only museum professional on the board of local interested residents was a heritage lecturer with experience of fundraising, Marilyn Scott. "It was the only town in Surrey without a museum, and we couldn't see why," she said, as the trustees set about creating a collection and writing a museum script.

They found they were able to draw on:

- Brookwood Cemetery, created in the 1850s as the largest in Europe, with its own railway and platform at Waterloo Station. The cemetery housed 24,000 graves and, though still in private hands, its story gives locals a link to the Victorian way of death.
- Brookwood Hospital, a mental asylum, had an in-house museum containing everything from 19th century lockable shoes for women internees to the apparatus for performing lobotomies in the 1950s. When the hospital was closed the collections were given to the people of Woking with no suggestion as to where they might be seen.

- In the 1880s Woking was host to the first mosque in Britain, created by a linguistics professor, and the draw for one of the first immigrant communities from the Indian sub-continent whose descendents still live in the now integrated neighbourhood.

Many contributions from local people also helped compile a local history which leans heavily on living memory. "A lot of our collection is oral," said Mrs Washington. "Right from the start volunteers were recording memories of Woking life, from commuting to visiting the mosque. It's a working museum at the centre of our society."

Ms Scott found that several wealthy potential supporters were prepared not to give money but other, perhaps more valuable, philanthropy, such as the extraordinary collection of 20th century British art built up by the media millionaire and owner of the local football club, Chris Ingram. 400 pieces are now on long-term loan to the museum.

At first the HLF was unenthusiastic but the ambition and the local council's growing interest – Ms Scott persuaded them to donate a 15-year, index-linked service agreement – led eventually to a £1.6m lottery grant. Part of the ambition had been to have an international competition for the architecture: this was won by Marks Barfield, designers of the London Eye, and used the work of local artists and craftspeople. Grants from charitable trusts as well as local individuals and companies made up the eventual cost of £7m.

On top of winning the £100,000 Art Fund Museums and Galleries Prize for 2008, the museum's architecture has won an RIBA award, and its first birthday was expected to see the arrival of its 100,000th visitor, double the number that had been hoped for in its first year.

Ryedale Folk Museum: working with schools

Located in the North Yorkshire Moors, Ryedale Folk Museum is probably in one of the most beautiful settings of any museum but it has struggled to survive with a limited catchment and income. In 2006 manager Mike Benson gave it for a day to a group of 14-year-old pupils from Acklam Grange in Middlesbrough, a comprehensive school of 1,400 children. Their job was to “make the museum interesting”, as one of them said, for a much larger group of 11-year-olds.

Benson, a former shift metal worker from Middlesbrough who had come to museums through volunteering on education schemes, knew the school and its Young Enterprise programme, devised to improve confidence, raise aspirations and improve self-motivation and supported by regional businesses through the now-defunct Enterprise Adviser Service in conjunction with then DfES.

“They’re not going to be museum curators, but not only have none of them ever been to a museum before this project, this is the first time most of them have been out of Middlesbrough,” said Acklam Grange’s headmaster, John Bate, on the October day the kids took over. “What they’re getting, both the year 11s and the year 7s, is a look at life outside their normal experience. For that it becomes immensely valuable.”

They were led by Lucy Toner, head of vocational studies at the school. In the scheme they had to pick a topic to pursue, create a business plan, raise capital by selling shares, assess risk and finally devise a programme. Usually, she explained, such projects

would be in-school – running a café for the sixth form, perhaps. “It was the children who decided, when we put the museum to them as an option for Young Entrepreneurs,” Ms Toner said. “It meant a lot more work for us – we had to make several visits here during the preparation, an hour’s coach ride – but it was more than worth it.”

“This is a learning process for us, too,” Mike Benson said. “We need to know how to appeal to as many sections of the public as possible, and children have too often been the forgotten part of the museum visitor profile. As an educational resource we have to be able to look at ourselves from the schoolchild’s point of view.” The Acklam Grange experiment has been repeated successfully several times at Ryedale.

The museum has also worked with the more local Malton School’s sixth form to make a film about emigrants from the region to Canada. In Malton Hospital’s new geriatric wing displays of objects – changed quarterly – have been built in to help with reminiscence therapy. Last winter it carried out a Polish project with a dozen primary schools in the area, designed to break down barriers between the Polish migrants in North Yorkshire and more traditional communities.

The Enterprise Adviser Service for the North East no longer operates, but Corinne Templeman, then the Enterprise Adviser North East for the Tees Valley, was at the museum to see the experiment. “What these kids are getting out of this is not just about today,” she said as she lent a hand with face-painting. “They’re getting lessons in English, art, maths and geography as well as history, using the museum as a theme. It’s about planning, organisation, teamwork, problem solving – about how lessons at school can relate to life beyond.”

The Black Cultural Archives: defining a community

The Black Cultural Archives (BCA) were founded in 1981 as the African People’s Historical Monument Foundation, after the poem by the founder, the late Len Garrison, entitled *Where are all our monuments?* which asks why the black diaspora in Britain has been accorded no history. An academic, Garrison identified a reason for black children’s general under-performance at school as their lack of a sense of place in British society and history. He believed that a resource for schools on the cultural make-up of Britons of African-Caribbean background could to some extent fill this gap. That is still the BCA’s belief.

The archives were created in the shadow of the Brixton Riots but did little more than accumulate material and make some connections with local schools. In the late 1990s, however, Brixton town manager, Paul Reid, offered a large derelict building in central Brixton, Raleigh Hall, as a potential home for the BCA. People in Brixton were unhappy that although Brixton was a definable place, there was no clarity as to what defined it “except that it is not Streatham and is not Clapham,” he said. “Over a period of time we identified that we wanted to do something about celebrating the achievement of the black presence in British society, and discovered that we had the BCA two minutes away.”

The BCA was a volunteer-led project with one full-time archivist: consultants were brought in to look at systems, structures and skills. "From our perspective the aspiration was outside the reach of the organisation. There were things that we needed to find – we needed to be able to convince people, and it needed money." Reid was seconded to the project as director, a post he will hold until the museum is open, and a black businessman, Stafford Neil of Ernst & Young, was headhunted to be chairman. Proper cataloguing of the collection began in the spring of 2008, with a grant from the HLF, and there is now a full-time staff of five. Raleigh Hall was given on a long lease in 2006, and in 2008 HLF made a further grant of £4m with the London Development Agency contributing £1.3m, leaving £1.5m still to be raised.

When Garrison began the archive there had been a strong militant sense, an anger over racial politics, which has now been replaced by a more pragmatic approach. "The sense of place has now replaced the politics," Reid said. "In the archive around that period what we were collecting was a lot of Black Power stuff, material about 'stop and search', campaigns against police, campaigns for justice and so forth. In the 80s we thought that if we rioted a bit we might get some money, but instead we just got more police."

The new museum will be about the black British story, not defined by its difference from white society but in terms of its own history, its contributions and achievements. There are few objects in the collection and much relies on the oral history being gathered among black communities. "It's not the possession of objects that is important here, it is the story and we feel that for new young audiences it is the story and the story-teller, the interpretation, rather than a collection that will be important."

The museum will have a permanent exhibition as well as temporary exhibition spaces, a large interactive archive, teaching spaces and performance area. Raleigh Hall is next to a small public piazza named Windrush Square after the liner that brought many of the first immigrants from the West Indies in 1948. The new centre will have its own open-air performance space linked with the square, with a large screen to show images and performances, which will not be targeted on a solely black audience.

"There is something about black culture which is just dynamic and expressive, so we want to bring the archivist and the historian closer to the poet and the musician, and not only have integrity that can stand up to academic scrutiny, but can stand up to 'wow factor' scrutiny – we want people coming back," Reid said. "People are learning in different ways now, and if we

diversify our methods we feel we're able to reach more people."

Paul Reid is sceptical about local claims that the museum will be part of a new 'cultural quarter'. Although Raleigh Hall is next to the elaborate Tate Library, close to the art house cinema The Ritzy and near to where a theatre once stood, he believes such designations are not genuine expressions of communities. He is already working closely with police, schools and youth services in formulating programmes the BCA centre will address. "Crime is a big issue here, drugs is a big issue, environmental quality, how places are used," he said. "The discussion is about how we claim the space, how we look collectively as a community on this open public space and programme activity into it with a view to changing the behaviour that takes place in it."

Although the BCA began as a resource to give black children a sense of their place in British society, its purpose is now wider. "I'm very aware that there are important issues and projects that take place in the black community that are hidden, maybe in a church hall somewhere, and there's a constituency that reinforces its own marginality," Reid said. "I want the project to make that margin confident enough to come out of the shadows, so if you come to us you will have conversations with people you have not met before, because the place just demands that of you. We can have the conversations that are happening in people's front rooms, provocative and sensitive as they might be, because that is part of British society. It's here."

The plan has active cross-party support on Lambeth Council thanks to a programme of networking among senior officers and members, as well as remoter funding authorities like the HLF and LDA, but more particularly among the social and, increasingly, business communities. "There's a saying, 'black people don't need to be limited to selling yam in the market' " Paul Reid said. "There's something about the symbol of the project – what does it stand for? Why does everybody want it to happen across such a range of communities and interests? Fundraising is hard, it's something we're not accustomed to, but we will make it happen because people want it to."

Museums in regeneration, working against post- industrial stress

How far museums can be a focus for regeneration in post-industrial urban environments varies greatly, sometimes depending on the nature of the communities and the investment the regenerating authorities are prepared to make in museums and realistic town planning. For example:

- Birmingham has a fine traditional museum and art gallery with collections of international importance, yet its neo-classical edifice – once at the heart of the city – is now in the off-centre administrative quarter. The public tide drifted first towards the new specialist shopping district around Broad Street; this itself has been superseded by the Selfridges development at the once reviled Bull Ring. The most faithful living evocation of the city's industrial past is probably its jewellery quarter.
- The Museum in Docklands has evoked the lost history of an area once the busiest commercial docks in the world but since replaced by the mixed Canary Wharf developments of banking and publishing east of the City of London. It has presented important, thought-provoking exhibitions such as the use of black slaves in London commerce, and the environment of drugs (alcohol) and prostitution which was the setting for the Jack-the-Ripper murders in nearby Whitechapel. Yet it has found itself off the tourist track and has not yet had the impact its exhibitions may have deserved, though this may change with the Olympics nearby in 2012.
- The shift of the Royal Armouries from the Tower of London to Clarence Dock on the Aire at Leeds has succeeded in drawing around it a large hotel and apartment blocks, but Leeds' centre is still its business quarter a mile to the north.

In some regions, post-industrialism is a lesser issue than, for instance, migration. This is being addressed in cities such as Bradford and Liverpool, and to a lesser extent in small museums such as Ryedale Folk Museum (see page 10).

The National Waterfront Museum, Swansea: the knock-on effects of regeneration

The rather conventional Swansea Maritime and Industrial Museum, a branch of the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW), closed in 2000. It reopened five years later a quite different entity in a largely new building recording the industrial achievement of Wales and the post-industrial realities. The role given to it by Swansea City Council, one of the principal funders with the Welsh Assembly, the Heritage Lottery Fund and NMGW, was unequivocal: regenerating the old Swansea South Dock area.

Director Steph Mastoris sees it as the technological counterpart of the Big Pit an hour away at Blaenafon and another branch of the NMGW, where ex-colliers guide visitors through the actual pit galleries 300 feet below ground and the displays of equipment used over the pit's two centuries before it closed in 1980, representing heavy industry in action.

At Swansea the use of objects is minimal, often seen in hologram presentations, and the displays make much use of technology. When the first bid for lottery funding was made in 1999 the HLF was sceptical about its regenerative potential, "they were really only interested in the heritage role," Mastoris said, "but there was a policy change". Swansea also wanted the new museum to be a physical landmark. Architects Wilkinson Eyre linked an elegant new glass and brick structure with the old museum, a former tram shed. In the end HLF made its biggest grant to that date of £11m towards the £31m costs.

But the starting point for this museum was not technology but people and essentially the impact industrial development has had on them and their communities. Issues are addressed at interactive points where polemical statements on subjects such as pollution are made and visitors asked to respond. It deliberately has a mix of events at any time – on one day in July 2008 there was a family history conference, a performance of contemporary dance and a new temporary exhibition about emigration from Wales on offer. As a national museum, admission is free. "People say it doesn't feel like a national museum, we have a very leisurely approach," Mastoris said. "They come in for half an hour sometimes, knowing they can come back at any time."

The Waterfront Museum is also set up to address current issues through history. Last year it featured slavery, drawing criticism from the Institute of Ideas for climbing on a topical bandwagon when there was no history of slavery in Welsh industrial history. "Actually there was, as we showed, and we also looked at current trafficking in humans and the incidence of a white slave trade in modern Wales, so it was very relevant," Mastoris said. In 2010 an exhibition will examine the Tonypany Riots of 1910, when miners revolted against pit owners, and industrial unrest to the present. The museum has just appointed a new curator of modern and contemporary industry to take forward the collections deliberately to reflect and engage on current issues. "What we want to do is tone down the techy bit and look more at how future developments will impact on people and communities," Mastoris said.

The regenerative success is the subject of an on-going survey on the impact on the Welsh economy, but an HLF report has already given a glowing assessment. This year a £30m leisure centre opened next to the museum, and the yachting marina in the docks nearby has been enlarged by a third. Pubs and cafés have been upgraded, restaurants have opened, all providing new employment, while the museum itself has created 50 jobs. Visitors to the museum were projected at 200,000 a year, but since its first year the figure has been consistently above 250,000. The leisure centre is expected to have a knock-on effect on the museum, generating up to another 500,000 a year. "Regeneration can sometimes take decades to be significant, the process takes time," Mastoris said, "but we think it's happened."

What happens next?

There is a mood to move museums into a role of contemporary social relevance, from the British Museum down to the Ryedale Folk Museum, that is almost immutable. There is also a new breed of museum people – somewhere between curator, manager and visionary – who do not fit into the conventional job description for a museum curator. But there are key challenges:

- **Time.** Many museums are committed to reappraising their collections and their stories with contemporary connotations, but believe that the time scale is comfortably long – 20 to 30 years is a common estimate. They maybe wildly over-estimating; the internet and associated technologies, themselves evolving to become ever faster, are making the museum world move much more quickly than could be conceived even five years ago. Changes in society are happening at great speed and may demand a rapid response from museums.
- **Training.** The new breed of museum people comes from every background – a town planner, a steel worker, a teacher and a PR consultant are four who feature in our case histories – and have often had scanty if any conventional curatorial training in collections care, and this is essential if they are to understand the essence of curating and object interpretation. At the same time, the sector still has many valued traditional curators who are not familiar with the new technologies, nor with the new social exigencies which have been passing them by: they are nonplussed when asked to reassess collections from a social angle not connected with their original acquisition. There has been a fear that traditional curatorial skills are being sacrificed to ‘the story’, but Karen Brookfield, deputy director (policy & strategy) at the Heritage Lottery Fund, believes this fear is lessening, and that while the ‘dynamic creative spirit’ that has been developing over the last decade has not diminished, the acknowledged primacy of the object has to an extent begun to reassert itself. Nevertheless, traditional curators need to be encouraged to open out their thinking and processes of communication.
- **Institutional blockages.** Many museums, particularly national ones, are long-standing and complex organisational structures, many with departmental structures within them. Their complexities often make it difficult to take on new ideas, methods and interpretations, though the encouragement of the HLF is bringing change. New ideas, no matter how widely held and approved, too often cannot be seen as fitting into existing matrices. The HLF is encouraging the trend away from the ‘institutional constipation’ with its consultants advising bidders for project funding to look into its local communities for inspiration, and is monitoring the results which show piquant cases of taking on challenges, such as the newly reopened Lynn Museum’s work with Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and traveller teenagers in Norfolk.
- **Funding.** Financial support is far too patchy, often depending on the entrepreneurial talent and lateral thinking of a curator. Nottingham’s NCCL (page 4) has a proven track record yet struggles to survive with project funding. There needs to be positive commitment from Regional Development Agencies, local, regional and central governments to ensure there are funding partnerships behind such initiatives.
- **New societies.** There are also legitimate areas of British society that are still felt by some to be too sensitive to take their place in a social history, and the final case study explores one example.

Proud Heritage: acknowledging 'new' histories

"We believe for us to have full equality, it is necessary for our history, our culture, to be afforded equal recognition, and for the full diversity of our lived experience to be recorded and represented." That statement could come from any section of the community that has a place in the recorded history of the nation, but this one does not. The quotation comes from the website of Proud Heritage, an organisation hoping for charitable status and which aims to represent between 3m and 6m lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gender (LGBT) Britons.

The idea of a museum was born out of a political throw away line during the 2004 London mayoral elections when one candidate suggested there should be a gay museum, and the other candidates saw the benefits rather than harm to agreeing that there should be. However, when the idea was taken up by a group of LGBT people there was no positive support from the Mayor of London or the London Assembly, although the group was given space at City Hall to mount an exhibition making their case in the summer of 2008.

Proud Heritage was created, and this year launched its own website, but the ultimate aim, said its executive director Jack Gilbert, is to open a museum dedicated to the "history, heritage, lived experience and development of the tolerance (of LGBT people) in the community". Proud Heritage has chosen the museum path "because that is the footstep in society where we can introduce ourselves and establish our heritage – because there is a heritage".

The aim is also to imbue a sense into existing museums that there is an LGBT heritage that is part of every community. But a trawl of collections through the MLA revealed almost nothing designated in that way. Proud Heritage's document *Summarising the Challenges* said: "The approach to diversity within the broad cultural sector, though welcome, has not delivered an equitable distribution of resource between diversity strands. Indeed, the gap analysis, priorities and awards for the Cultural Leadership (programme) and Museum, Libraries and Archives Partnership networking development funding stream have failed to address LGBT diversity at all."

Although there is undoubted prejudice against LGBT people in all levels of society, within museums it is more likely that the place of gays and lesbians in the modern British story is too newly acknowledged to be categorised yet. Proud Heritage is using the web to hurry the process along.

In the summer of 2008 the organisation created a virtual museum on its website, Proud Nation, based on narrative rather than objects. This is making connections with other museums. Proud Heritage is also making connections with archives containing LGBT material so that a national map of information can be created. Collecting has also begun, of oral testaments, written history, recordings, films and objects, and a building has been identified in King's Cross where the museum will open by 2013, Gilbert said.

About this paper

This *Viewpoint* was written by Simon Tait, a freelance journalist, author and editor. The former arts correspondent of The Times, he is the author of *Palaces of Discovery: The changing world of Britain's museums* (Quiller Press, 1989), and a founding trustee of the Gulbenkian Museum of the Year Prize, now the Art Fund Museum of the Year Prize. He is the editor of Museum News.

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Footnotes

1. *Museum*, No 1/2 1975.
2. *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, Janet Marstine (ed), 2005, Blackwell Publishing.
3. *The Observer*, 6/7/08.
4. These were mostly independent enterprises, such as the Ironbridge Gorge Museum at Telford and the Weald and Downland Museum in West Sussex, but at St Fagan's near Cardiff the National Museum of Wales also founded an important pioneer with its community of vernacular Welsh buildings that has now been designated Wales's National History Museum.
5. *Museums and Galleries in Britain* by Tony Travers, Dec 2006, jointly commissioned by the National Museums Directors' Conference, the Museums Association and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.