

University museums and outreach: the Newcastle upon Tyne case study

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Abstract

This paper describes developments in attitudes to public access and outreach at the University of Newcastle over the past thirty years, and the impact of those developments on the University's Museum of Antiquities. The author describes some of the ground-breaking educational initiatives undertaken by the museum, and the plans for its future as part of the Great North Museum.

Early days

When I first began work at the Museum of Antiquities at Newcastle in 1978 the University was very clear as to the Museum's role. It was there to assist teaching firstly and secondly to provide a basis for research. The museum was always a curious phenomenon because, although it was run by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, the collections were mostly owned by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. When the joint agreement to establish the Museum was signed in 1956, the Society was very firm that members of the public were to be allowed in for free. The then University of Durham was equally firm that the Keeper of the Museum had to be a longstanding member of the academic body, preferably at the level of Senior Lecturer. When the University of Newcastle upon Tyne was created, and the agreement renegotiated, this was still adhered to.

By the time I took over responsibility for the Museum of Antiquities from Dr David Smith in 1989 and later added the Shefton Museum of Greek Art and Archaeology to my portfolio, I had already become very aware that a university museum was in an unenviable position, caught between the demands of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on the one hand and the museum world on the other. These two sets of demands were often contradictory. To serve the needs of the academic community one had to ensure that one's collections were fully involved in the teaching and research of one's institution, but in order to get the support and, more importantly, the funding from museum sources, one had to be working with the public, mounting temporary exhibitions, and running an education program for schools and adults. I felt the Museum could not concentrate on one area of activity alone, but had to keep all the balls in the air at once; let one fall and the impact on our finances could be catastrophic.

This wasn't always very easy. Every year, directives would come down from on high instructing me to concentrate on research or teaching, never on public outreach. No-one actually told me to stop engaging in public outreach – the upper echelons were vaguely aware that this would mean the loss of some valuable income – but neither did they actively encourage me. The Museum's staff were simply seen as somewhat eccentric and not a little difficult but, as we kept within budget, there was no incentive to stop us and the Museum was largely left to its own devices for several years.

There was then a definite sea change. HEFCE announced that universities were not just for teaching and research but for teaching, research and public outreach. Suddenly the Museum of Antiquities and the Shefton Museum began to be looked upon very favorably and a real interest was shown in what they were doing.

Achievements

The two archaeological museums had always run a very successful schools education program but now a properly qualified Education Officer was engaged and it became possible to do more community work. A series of projects were carried out with local schools, including *Benwell: Centre of*

the Universe with a secondary school in Benwell. This involved a class of 11 year olds, who covered all abilities and origins, coming into the Museum of Antiquities and choosing their favorite object – it could be of any date but had to have been found in Benwell; they then had to write a piece about why this object particularly appealed to them before helping to produce a website on the subject.

Then there was *Reticulum*. This began in 2000 and was first funded by the Department of Education and Science. It was designed to help the junior schools in Blyth District find a way of using the computing equipment they had been provided with by a government initiative in order to learn about the Romans in Northumberland. This proved an amazing project. Not only did children of all abilities respond with enthusiasm but teachers with many years' experience begin to blossom and develop new ideas. Even the children of St Andrew's Roman Catholic First School, who weren't due to study the Romans that year but didn't want to miss out, took part as they used the project for their literacy hour and redesigned the Museum of Antiquities' new publicity leaflet and posters.

The *First Cohort Project* built on *Reticulum* and took in schools up the coast. Then the *Flavinus Project*, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, invaded the remote primary schools of Northumberland. *The Curator as Artefact* was the published assessment report and a teacher's pack was made available in print and on-line. The *Reticulum* methodology is now used throughout the North East of England, the rest of Britain, America and Australia, and has revolutionized the teaching of history. It is regularly mentioned in government reports as an example of best practice. It was, however, the shortlisting of the project for the Gulbenkian Museum of the Year Prize in 2004 that brought home the realization that our outreach work had had an impact. From all over Northumberland people were phoning us to wish us luck. Jo Catling, the project's education officer, found even taking the dog to the vet or going to the supermarket took longer than usual as people kept stopping her to say they were rooting for us. We didn't win, but to us the real prize was in discovering how much the local community saw us as one of them and were supporting our activities. For a university museum this was truly something to be proud of.

Not all our outreach was directed towards schools. We made a point of giving talks to local groups, such as Women's Institutes, Retired Gentlemen's Associations and Local History Societies. One year we provided 35 lectures; this may not sound like many, but there were just two of us involved and that's quite a few evenings to commit. These lectures were very time consuming as our catchment area of Northumberland and Tyne and Wear was very large, and one often ate a lot of cake, but they were a very worthwhile way of meeting one's constituents. These events rarely result in higher visitor figures but they do result in an ever increasing network of goodwill. One also meets some very interesting people and there have been times when I've used these groups to try out an idea for a temporary exhibition or research project or if I needed a particular contact. Colleagues in the Department of Archaeology often approached a farmer or developer with some trepidation as to whether they would allow excavation or survey only to find that I'd been there before and prepared the diplomatic ground, usually without realizing that's what I was doing. These small scale outreach activities pay dividends but, I will admit, they are not always easily quantifiable dividends.

One of our early projects was *Projecting the Past*. It took temporary exhibitions to the waiting area of the Freeman Hospital, the canteen of the Nissan Factory at Washington, the ante-room of the Council Chamber of Newcastle City Council, the Rates Hall in the Civic Centre and St Mary's Roman Catholic School - all places that wouldn't normally show an exhibition. This was taking the Museum to the people rather than expecting them to fight their way past the students on campus, because one thing university authorities do not always understand is that the general public find students in the mass quite frightening.

We also took part in *Northumbria For All* in 2005. This was part of a North of England Museums, Libraries and Archives Council project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and was intended to investigate barriers to museum visiting in the area. The Museum of Antiquities' part in the project was to research the problems of rural transport. Throughout the May half-term buses were provided to bring visitors to the University's museums from the far-flung villages of Whittingham, Redesdale, Wooler and Edmundbyers. In this project we were aided by two international Museum Studies students on placement, who saw a great deal more of Northumberland than they had bargained for.

2007 saw the Museum participating in the *Museum of My Life* project. This was an arts project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund through New Writing North and was part of a regional project to engage people in their local museums through creative writing. Our project involved two groups of adults who came to the Museum of Antiquities one day a week to work with our Poet in Residence, Maureen Almond, and later our Artist in Residence, Gilly Rogers, as well as with the Museum's staff. This project resulted in a fascinating exhibition of poems and 'memory boxes' which were placed carefully in the First Gallery to provide insights and personal views on some of the Roman artifacts. The contributors to the project enjoyed their relationship with the Museum and, to our great delight, asked if they could continue to work with us. Mondays became very busy as members of the group assisted us with organizing our archives.

The *Museum of My Life* team were also able to assist us in our collaboration in two projects with Culture Lab within Newcastle University. The first formed part of the European 6th Framework INSCAPE project, whose aim was to develop a suite of tools to support the authoring of interactive stories. Two mock museum galleries were set up and explored by a mixture of virtual and augmented reality. The second project involved providing the raw data for Culture Lab staff to produce an interactive table which allows the visitor to access and question information about individual objects. Both of these projects represent cutting-edge research into how to provide intellectual access to museum collections for visitors and the *Museum of My Life* members much enjoyed their involvement in the future of museum display.

Great North Museum

No matter how involved a museum's staff is in outreach work, their core work has to be within the museum building and those at Newcastle University were no longer in good order. The Museum of Antiquities' building, which was built as a coke testing station at the end of the Second World War, was well past its sell-by date, to the extent that a colleague in the School of Architecture started to use it as a teaching aid for his first year students as it demonstrated just about every ill a building can fall prey to, except Death Watch Beetle. The Shefton Museum was on the first floor of a teaching building and visitors had to have the courage of their convictions and a certain grim determination to find it. One visitor, who engaged my whole hearted sympathy, wrote in the visitors' book that the museum was like Everest: difficult of access but worth it when you reached the summit. I've always felt that we should have awarded each successful visitor a bottle of wine for finding us.

There is also the problem that modern museum visitors have higher expectations than they had before and an academically rigorous but somewhat dry permanent display isn't going to enthrall them. At Newcastle we tried to solve the problem virtually by using the internet. Indeed, the Museum of Antiquities was the first museum in Britain to mount an exhibition on the World Wide Web and this area of our operations was continually expended so that the collections burst out of the constraining walls of the actual museum and reached out to the whole world. This was unbelievably successful: in our last full academic year (2007–8) the Museum's websites had over 2.5 million virtual visitors, making this one of the most active heritage websites in Britain. At any time of the day or night there were virtual visitors on-line. But this was never going to be more than a temporary solution.

At the same time the University was struggling with what to do with the Hancock Museum. This museum of natural history is owned by the Natural History Society of Northumbria who own the collections and the building but there is a legal agreement in place that the University will be responsible for the museum until 2058. The 19th century building was in a poor state, needing a new roof and a complete overhaul of its heating, plumbing, and electrical systems. It was decided that all the University's museum problems could be solved in one ambitious project – The Great North Museum.

This is a £27.5 million project which has involved gutting the Hancock Building and giving it a new roof. There is also a large extension which has been built on the back of the old building to take storage, staff offices, café, education suite, a very impressive temporary exhibition gallery and the joint libraries of the Museum of Antiquities, the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle and the Natural History Society of Northumbria, and the offices of both societies. The main part of the building has been given over to galleries displaying the collections previously housed in the Hancock, Shefton and Museum of Antiquities along with some of the ethnographic material from the Hatton Gallery. An offsite store cum resource centre is to be based at Discovery Museum, to the west of the city centre, so valuable display space in the main building will not be taken up with the reserve collections which are needed for teaching and research.

It was decided early on that, as Tyne and Wear Museums had run the Hancock Museum for the University for some years, it should take on the responsibility for the Great North Museum. It should be emphasized, however, that the Great North Museum will remain a university museum, still with responsibilities for teaching and research but in a better position to fulfill the University's outreach needs and to provide the high level of display and interactives that the modern museum visitor expects to see. The new museum is seen by the University as being a major element in its Beacon Project.

Beacon

The aim of Newcastle and Durham Universities' Beacon project is: firstly, to change the culture of the two universities towards public engagement; and secondly, to work with people within the local community to produce research of mutual interest.

The research envisaged is covered by three themes:

- Energy and the Environment
- Aging and Vitality
- Social Justice and Social Inclusion

The intention is to involve twelve academics from the two universities and twelve members from the local communities in work on these themes. In order to ensure that the widest range of participants from the local communities can take part, funding is available to pay people to come out of their day jobs to so that a good range of contributors can take part.

The Museum's formal role is currently under discussion but Newcastle's Beacon Project has already been able to draw upon its museums' staff's years of experience in public outreach to provide contact names and advice. We have also identified a number of ways in which the Museums' varied collections can be linked to the three proposed research topics.

From my position of 30 years of public outreach within a university context I am aware there are some problems which will need to be overcome.

Firstly, changing the culture of a university is never easy. Academics who are totally absorbed in their own research are rarely inclined to welcome new initiatives. Some, I regret to say, also probably don't

have the social skills to engage effectively with other people. It will also be hard to convince some colleagues that public engagement is cost effective, as the obvious outputs of research assessment exercises, successful funding bids, good teaching quality assessment results, etc will not be evident.

There is also a fear that our academic colleagues will see public engagement as being the sole responsibility of those specifically involved in the Beacon Project and not as having any relevance to themselves. It will behoove the Beacon Project team to get across the message that involving the public, even in regard to quite esoteric research, often gives one different insights which can only enhance one's own research. In this the Museums' record is being quoted extensively.

It should also not be underestimated how hard it is to engage the public. It took us the best part of 30 years for the Museum of Antiquities to be truly regarded as the archaeological museum for the North East of England, other than in the scope of its collections. For the Museum to be considered as somewhere that reflected the local public's interests, somewhere one automatically went with an object that needed identifying or when children were doing a school project or needed work experience, has taken time and effort. And the Museum had a sign with the opening hours blatantly displayed; open access to a university is not so obvious.

In the case of the Beacon Project, both the universities of Durham and Newcastle are involved, and this results in an enormous catchment area. It is also an area which has had a very low take up of tertiary education. There is little tradition of public involvement with either universities, other than at the level of the professional classes. The project will be covering the counties of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham and Cleveland. It's a very long way from Hartlepool to Berwick upon Tweed, so there is a fear of the project being spread somewhat thinly. Nor are the concerns of the people of the West End of Newcastle or parts of Middlesbrough, which the media invariably use when they need examples of inner city deprivation, going to bear much resemblance to the concerns of those who live on isolated farmsteads in North Northumberland. Yet they are all our local community, their opinions are equally valid and they all have potentially interesting contributions to make.

Those universities who do not have a Beacon Project will, no doubt, be watching the progress of those that do with some interest. However, museum curators in universities have been engaging with the public for many years and it is important that they continue to do so. University museums, which invariably have to prove their worth and usefulness to their colleagues, can lead the way and should grasp the opportunity to do so.

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