

The cultural crucible - A management and policy direction for regional and local museums?

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Abstract

Museums are about people. Museums need to connect with people through embracing their interests, their passions, their very humanity. Without this connection museums have little relevance or purpose in society. Instead, they become merely repositories for a set of curios; funded to what purpose? Value to contemporary society is critical for museum longevity. How can museums achieve this connection in new ways? One route might be to make deeply local connections; to seek ancestors who have made a contribution to culture that has hitherto gone unheralded. The Lost Singers of Somerset project has reclaimed such a heritage for today's consumption. Somerset people gave their songs to Edwardian folk music collector Cecil Sharp, who duly published and promoted them. As the songs went on, in oral culture and elsewhere, the singers' role diminished. This research has re-discovered the song-bearers, and the intangible cultural heritage that they bore. The challenge has been to integrate these discoveries into the realm of museums and the museum audience. Using The Lost Singers project as a case study, this paper explores the idea of the museum as a 'cultural crucible', capable of engaging its audience with both tangible and intangible culture in new ways.

What does this mean to Asian Audiences?

Traditional song is a world-wide phenomenon. All cultures are capable of celebrating the contribution that folk song has made to society. Yet, how many folksong collectors and folklorists have chosen to research the song-bearers themselves and to go further and make familial connections with those alive today? We all have ancestors, and a very tangible connection can be made to song heritage through family history, archival, and museological research. Through this we can celebrate our song-bearing ancestors, new life can be breathed into old songs, and the journey of this intangible inheritance can be passed on to our descendants with the power and pride that family connection imparts. The museum's role in this as 'cultural crucible' is essential, it is the appropriate space for shared cultural enquiry, continuum and exposition.

This paper presents ideas for a new role for local and regional museums in the UK. This is the museum as a cultural crucible, a place where emotions, intellectual endeavours and cultural rooted-ness ignite to create a new space for enquiry, belonging and discourse; a place where arts and artefacts collude in a people-powered dialectic of tangible and intangible culture. It is time to change how we think about museums in society. Why? Collections of objects have reached crisis point, stores are bulging. There is also a widening recognition that museums are more than 'things' .

Material concerns

It is a widely held belief that in UK museums we simply have too much stuff, with many museum stores at capacity, there is strong evidence that we have over-collected. The problem has been around for some time as revealed by, for example, the south-west's Social History and Industrial Collections Survey of 1988 (Staelens 1989). Of the 106 museums visited, 95% had, what can best be termed as a junk store, a collection of miscellaneous, poorly documented or unprovenanced material. These were the forgotten objects, subjected to the strictures of ethical museum object disposal regimes; they continued their existence in a kind of museum limbo, forlorn evidence of collecting out of control.

Many of these stores were poorly maintained and some of these collections, especially large industrial or agricultural items, were simply left outside, gently disposing of themselves through neglect. The introduction of the Museums and Galleries Commission's Museum Registration Standards Scheme in 1988 (MGC, 1988), encouraged museums to take a long hard look at their collecting activity and to produce collections management policies. One of the immediate effects of these policies was the curtailment of un-controlled collecting through

the mechanism of each registered museums defining the purpose and the parameters of its collecting activity. But problems still remained.

In 2003, the Museums Association launched an 18-month enquiry into collections that culminated in the report, *Collections for the Future* (MA, 2005). Museums Association president Charles Saumarez Smith, in his foreword to the report, notes that the research was "prompted by a sense that collections have been relatively neglected in policy terms in recent years and that it was time to attempt to resolve some of the debates about collections... the time is right for substantial change in the way museums think about their collections" (MA 2005, 3).

This augured well and the ensuing document covered collecting, disposal, access, touring and so forth, all the usual topics alongside suggestions for future management and policy plus case studies. Disappointingly, intangible culture failed to get a mention. A consideration of this would have added substantially to the debate concerning how museums think about their collections and develop them. An inherent part of making meaning in local museum collections was not part of the enquiry.

Intangible cultural heritage is concerned with living culture and its connectivity with the past. It is a people-centred, active, evolving, involving cultural dynamic. Its inclusion in museum thinking is essential in order that a community can engage with their museum in meaningful ways, ways that engender them as stakeholders. Stakeholding, in turn, is important in establishing the social relevance of the institution and at the same time has the effect of improving museum sustainability.

The cultural crucible

Thinking again about collections, if it is accepted that the process of collecting has diminished as a museum activity then what

should museums be doing now? Progressing the people-centred rather than collections focused approach is worthy of exploration.

There is a debate here of some longevity. Putting people at the heart of museum activity, the notion that we have participants rather than consumers, was explored by Peter Jenkinson in a Museums Association conference paper in 1993. At this time, community focused museums were starting to emerge, for example, at Springburn, in Nottingham, Walsall, Tyneside, Liverpool and many other places. People had become the focus for activity, an example is a 1993 project in the West Midlands consisting of an exhibition, video, and education pack entitled, *Take Heart - people, history and change in Birmingham's heartland* (see Davies, 1993). However, some curators were unhappy with what they considered was a trend to remove the primacy of the object in museum work. There was a lively debate in the pages of the *Museums Journal*. Kevin Moore and David Tucker took the position that displays should be 'object rich' (Moore and Tucker, 1994). An alternative view was expressed by David Fleming:

...let us have social history museums that are responsive to social change, that mean something to people, and that avoid a slavish adherence to immutable laws born of tradition, timidity and introspection (Fleming, 1994).

A view mirrored in the editorial to the September 1994 edition of the *Museums Journal* :

The object centred display approach is the perfect excuse to stick to the emotionally straight and intellectually narrow path of traditional curation (Davies, 1994, 7).

The debate might be viewed as a clear signal that times were changing. Davies further reflects that, 'curators need to decide where they and their institutions stand in relation to society' (Davies, 1994).

Alongside this debate, the role of the arts

in museums was developing. Traditionally the locus for education through matter, museums were now seeking public engagement through the encouragement of 'self'. Who am I and what can I do? Identity, creativity and community enter the museum psyche.

Museums and artists

In 1965, the UK Government published a White Paper entitled *A policy for the Arts; the first steps* (HMG, 1965). In museum terms it highlighted a link between museums and the arts and a shift from the traditional museum/library partnership. Certainly, by the mid 1980s, in the UK, museums were becoming more like 'cultural spaces' and were engaging with artists of all kinds, visual, performance and experimental, for example the Eduardo Paolozzi exhibition 'Lost Magic Kingdoms', at the Museum of Mankind in 1987, Deanna Peterbridge's show in 1991, and Peter Greenaway's exhibition in 1993, (Arnold, 1994). Artists were juxtaposing art works and museum exhibits in Oxford University's Pitt Rivers Museum (Dorsett, 1995), and in Jersey Maritime Museum, (Thomas, 1997) too.

Some went further and were prepared to encourage new ways of thinking, and the creation of new meanings, with regard to collections and the process of collecting. A good example was Mark Dion's Beachcombers project at the Tate, which challenged the authority of archaeological meanings, and museum interpretation in relation to found objects from the Thames foreshore (Beckwith, 1999).

People as artists

In the past decade that idea of museums hosting an 'artist in residence' has become more commonplace, for example in 1995, the Museum of Mankind worked with Nigerian sculptor, Sokari Douglas to create an exhibition for the Africa '95 festival (Mack, B J, 1995), and artists were engaged in

Sheffield as part of the council of Europe's 'Year of the Bronze Age' (Parsons, J, 1996). Museums and galleries were also working together as part of this trend, for example the joint commissioning between Southampton, Eastbourne, and Tate St Ives in 1996 (Kelly, J, 1996). All of the aforementioned activity was however largely artist centred and the potential to include the public, to enable individuals to develop their own creativity and heritage stories remained to be further explored. An early example in the sphere of music and museums occurred in Scunthorpe museum in 1991, when songwriter Dave Vermond was employed to lead a song-writing residency using the Beryl Cook art exhibition as stimulus. It is evident that museums were changing. But the fundamental question must be, in to what? In the late 1990s the Government's social agendas were starting to have an impact on this question.

Social exclusion

In 1997, the Government created a Social Exclusion Unit and enshrined in it the key concepts in the new Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) guidelines for museums wishing to bid for its £7 million Museums and Galleries Access Fund (Davies, S, 2000).

In 1998, the 'people first' policy was also included in the Museums Association's re-definition of a museum (MA, 1998);

Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.

They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.

There is growing evidence that museums are beginning to recognise their agency as potential drivers of social change and important work is undertaken in difficult domains like Northern Ireland (Heywood, 2000). At this time an important policy

document was issued by central government, the Department for Culture Media and Sport's (DCMS) Centres for Social Change, (DCMS, 2000). Mark Suggitt's view is that this policy is,

...a blueprint for challenging institutional mindsets... to eject it is to send a clear signal that museums and galleries people would prefer to return to the tweedy ghetto of antiquarianism and sterile connoisseurship (Suggitt, M, 2000, 27).

The cultural crucible

The above analysis of UK museum development in moving toward a more 'people-centred' approach suggests that museums have and are becoming more society-oriented, but have they gone far enough? Following the social inclusion agenda is one route to audiences however I would suggest that museums can go further by embracing local distinctiveness and people's own sense of enquiry and creativity.

Let us consider the idea of the museum as a cultural crucible; a museum and arts centre amalgam with individual, family and community activity at the heart of it. This could, I would suggest, include the following dimensions;

The *democratisation* of museum management - enabling the community to participate in policy and management issues at a meaningful, practical level, not as a tokenistic gesture.

People's Shows - In the 1990s, the public were being encouraged to make their own exhibitions and to show their collections in museums, for example, 'The Open Museum' project in Glasgow, which gave people the opportunity to choose objects from the reserve collections to make their own exhibitions and the 'People's Shows' phenomenon which began as a pioneering show held at Walsall in 1990. The movement gained momentum and in 1994 there was a nation-wide People's Show which involved

nearly fifty venues (Baker, B,1992, and Carroll, P, 1994). The People's Show movement has declined and yet individuals are still amassing their own amazing collections. Surely, more museums can and need to develop places and spaces to bring these in and out of their orbit, most importantly in association with the collectors themselves.

Live art and participation - Celebrating and passing on the locally distinctive manifestations of material and intangible culture through utilisation of the museum as venue and repository becomes a source of inspiration through usage of the collection, archive and other heritage assets. Such assets might also include the building, its locality, the staff, and so on.

People's Expertise - Recognition and engagement of expertise outside the museum. As an example, re-enactment is booming in the UK and the website <[www. re-enact.com](http://www.re-enact.com)> lists hundreds of re-enactment groups and their suppliers. Here we find a mass of historical activists and specialists engaged in a specific period, event or artefact research and its recreation, embracing often meticulous research and the re-creation of ideas about tangible and intangible culture. The new museum model of the cultural crucible should consistently welcome and work with this burgeoning community of heritage enthusiasts.

Engaging academia - Too long outside the museum fold, with the exception of nationals and university museums, communities of scholars await meaningful engagement with museums to mutual benefit. The situation is beginning to be addressed with Arts, Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding newly available, also and one-off projects like The Somerset Folk Map which engages a county museums and arts service with research expertise based at Bournemouth University (Staelens and Bearman, 2006).

Working with passions - The cultural crucible idea recognises the crucial importance of emotional engagement in valuing heritage in a locality. The amazing success of the Channel 4 television programme Time Team, where a group of archaeologists and historians do a 'dig' in three days with the support of local people, and *Who do you think you are?* a BBC television show where a celebrity is taken on a journey through their family history, demonstrates the public's fascination with local and personal pasts.

Recognition of forgotten intangible cultural treasures - In the case of Somerset, recent work has focused upon a legacy of folk song and most importantly, song bearers.

There will undoubtedly be other dimensions worth adding to this list. This list is provided as a basis for discussion.

Policy and personnel

The cultural crucible paradigm will require a new kind of curator, someone able to manage the holistic nature of working with culture in the fullness of all of its expressions. This in turn will require changes in the way that curators are trained, as well as a policy shift at a national level, in particular the recognition and integration of intangible culture into the museum domain.

Recent research suggests that the idea of the intangible cultural heritage may not have filtered into the thinking of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the Government funded agency linked to the DCMS, who lead in the UK on museum standards. This is evidenced by the absence of reference to intangible culture in acquisition and disposal policies hitherto submitted for the accreditation process and yet the MLA accreditation scheme's acquisition and disposal policy template is well designed to allow the inclusion of all kinds of collection including intangible culture. So perhaps it may happen.

Many local museums identify contemporary collecting within their acquisition documents. This is only a step away from living breathing humanity and the recognition of the importance of local distinctiveness in the guidance of museum policy and management (cf. Clifford and King 1993).

Training

The intellectual path of traditional object centred museum studies that started with Raymond Singleton at Leicester University in 1966 is ready for change. ICOM has begun to address the issue of intangible cultural heritage through its *Curriculum Guidelines* (Boylan, 2006). The profession is recognising that it is time to broaden museum training into the realm of intangible culture, to train museum professionals to engage meaningfully and comprehensively with local culture in this globalised world. The recognition of the value of the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* adopted in October 2003 by UNESCO's General Conference and its integration into museum training can only serve to strengthen the world of museums.

In response to this, the museum studies masters programme at Bournemouth University is leading the way, it has been re-designed and re-validated and from Autumn 2006 to include a unit on contemporary collecting and intangible culture and has attracted an international student cohort.

People and place

The Museum Associations report *Collections for the Future* (MA, 2005) may be interpreted as indicating the necessity for a disposal and dispersal regime, for example the idea of distributed national collections, however where this will lead is unclear. Are we perhaps witnessing a diminution of object focussed collecting, as part of a global

museum trend to centre on people and place rather than the tangible collecting frenzies of the past?

The idea has been around for some time, for example, back in 1973 there was a Museums Association conference session on community history and several papers were presented on the Community Industry programme, and there was recognition that even university museums had to address the issue of giving communities access to their heritage, (Robertson, A, Taylor, W, Clegg, M, Watson G, and Cossons, N, 1973),

Is it time for UK museums to take stock, to learn from the principles and policies of community engaged museums worldwide such as the activities of the New Jersey Historical Society (Yerkovich, 2006). And to embrace the integration of intangible culture and the people focused approach that it engenders into their policy and management to deliver the museum as social centre and community nexus.

Clearly, in the UK this has happened to a limited extent in the realm of local history museums and collections established during the folk museum movement in Britain, between the two world wars. Most have already embraced living heritage, a widespread example being in the field of the collection of oral testimony, and testimony has an essential place in intangible culture and in the development of the idea of the cultural crucible. But development is required in this area.

Oral testimony

For a typical example, of this museum based collecting activity there is the oral history archive at the Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury in the west of England. This was begun in 1973, and now contains 480 recordings and transcripts, covering village and town life, agriculture, customs and traditions, recreation, family and working life. Many aspects of intangible cultural heritage

will be recognised here, and the collection has just received a substantial heritage lottery fund grant to digitise the whole of the archive, initially stored on cassette tape, open reel and typed transcript.

However, the critical policy and management question must be what next? In most cases, oral historical archives are just that, archival, items that are stored and consulted as one would a book or webpage, occasionally used to en-liven a display in a sound-bite manner, sometimes used by the media for programme making, occasionally published as memoirs. It would be interesting to research their usage.

The perception is that in actuality it is the process of collecting, information management and archiving that drives such projects on, with the primary imperative being the gathering of memory and interviewees being valued perhaps simply as vessels of memory, to be emptied. The notion of intangible cultural places a totally different emphasis upon this kind of activity. It is the person who is valued, not simply their words. It is their way of being in the world, their skills, beliefs, knowledge, stories, and so on, which are to be celebrated and perhaps protected from the unwelcome predations of globalization. The acceptance of the idea of intangible culture in the UK museum domain could perform a useful role in a reconsideration of the practice and methodology of oral history, giving an opportunity to freshen an already fascinating cultural-historical engagement.

A Somerset story

The UNESCO list of *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* contains nothing from the UK. Reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but this does not mean that such phenomena are absent from these islands. The country enjoys a rich heritage of folksong and dance, custom, belief, folklore and regional tradition

some of which can be found frozen in museum displays, for example in the west, the Dorset oozier in Dorchester and the mighty Giant and Hobnob in the Salisbury and South Somerset Museum. Copious calendar customs and traditions and skills are still regularly pursued with some notable examples like the Abbot's Bromley Horn dance, that are able to demonstrate a 1,000 year heritage (Buckland, T J, 1980), and every November a number of brave local people will charge up and down the darkened streets of the small Devon village of Ottery St Mary with flaming tar-barrels on their backs, now known worldwide through their website, www.tarbarrels.co.uk.

Much of this 'folk' legacy is lost and some merely disconnected. In Somerset a recent project was undertaken in an attempt to re-connect local people with their intangible culture through the agency of the county museum service, the arts service, libraries and archives. This is the recently published, *Somerset Folk Map*.

The Somerset folk map

In 1999, Mayberry and Binding published the *Somerset: the Millennium Book* (Mayberry and Binding, 1999). It traced 2,000 years of the county's history but contained no reference to a unique culture of collected song in the county. A hidden heritage, long forgotten was about to be rediscovered.

In 2003, the county curator, David Dawson in collaboration with the county arts officer Sue Isherwood agreed to fund a new departure for the county council in the domain of intangible cultural heritage. This was the publication of the *Somerset Folk Map* (Staelens and Bearman 2006). A freely available document intended to demonstrate and celebrate the rich heritage of Somerset folk songs, traditions, and calendar customs.

The map had four aims; to celebrate the folk song legacy of the county through recognition of the song-bearers from whom

this culture was gathered; to connect the descendants of the song-bearers to their heritage; to encourage people to seek and share the continuing traditions and calendar customs prevalent in the county; and, most critically, to locate and record the dates and location of each singer identified by folk music collector Cecil Sharp during his collecting journeys in the county from 1903 - 1916. Cecil Sharp scholar Dr Chris Bearman and myself formed the research team.

The key idea behind the map was 'connectivity', the process of connecting people to their culture in a very emotive way, through their family and their ancestors. Cecil Sharp collected over 2,000 tunes and songs from over 300 singers in the county. Three hundred singers likely to have living descendants, people who if they knew about their singing ancestors might feel very proud of the connection.

Classical folk

The music made by the Somerset people and collected by Cecil Sharp was quite stunning, comprising folk songs with beautiful melodic qualities that inspired internationally acclaimed classical composers like Percy Grainger, Gustav Holst, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. This is a body of orally transmitted culture that must surely be considered as a candidate for recognition as a masterpiece of intangible cultural heritage.

Many will have heard of the compositional output of these men, indeed Holst achieved his initial international acclaim through the publication of his work, *A Somerset Rhapsody*, which was based upon Somerset folk songs. But something is missing from this story. It is those who sang the songs in the first place, the people who learned songs from the community around them, at home, at work, in the pub, on board ship and in numerous other contexts and who, in singing them, embedded them in a social and physical context.

Louie Hooper

To take one example, Percy Grainger's passacaglia *Green Bushes* was composed in 1905-6. One of its themes is from the *Green Bushes* tune collected from Louie Hooper, an out-worker for the shirt-making industry of the Somerset town of Yeovil, who lived in the hamlet of Westport. Without her contribution the piece could not have been created and yet her role has gone largely un-recognised. The Somerset Folk map aimed to redress this balance and to re-connect the families of these folk singers with their singing ancestors and their legacy of music.

The folk map was specifically designed to bring the 300 or so singers to public attention, using library, archive and museum sources both within and outside the county. The research was greatly assisted by Sharp's collecting methodology which precisely noted the date and place of songs, tunes and dances collected, who from, the singer's age and in many cases, Sharp also photographed his contacts.

Cecil Sharp Archive

It is a unique archive known to folk music scholars because it is curated in the library and archive at the London headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) in London, and at Clare College Cambridge, but it is not known to the folk of Somerset. Cecil Sharp published some of the songs in five volumes of *Folk Songs of Somerset* from 1904 - 1909, but these are no longer in print and are difficult to obtain. The Somerset Folk Map project re-directed the information back to its county of origin and into the hands of Somerset people through the distribution of 20,000 copies of the folk map available free of charge from libraries, museums, tourist information centres and other arts and community venues.

The map encourages people to search for themselves, giving information on how to explore family history, where to find out about

the songs, and also to how to hear them. The idea being that families will re-connect with their singing ancestors and that perhaps some of the songs will find value and relevance today and have new life in the hands of musicians of the moment. It is the type of project that could be replicated anywhere in the world that has a strong body of collected traditional songs.

Above all the contact is personal and the impact can be very powerful. Our research has revealed, for example that my own daughters are the great, great, grandchildren of Frances Haskings one of Cecil Sharp's source singers. We have located her songs and one of them has already been used as the central theme of a new musical composition. The connection to this collection of intangible culture is both personal and emotional. Marketing professionals would be deeply envious.

Songs and the people

So what does this all mean for the idea of the cultural crucible? Well it means, as I see it that museums whether in the UK or in Taiwan, or elsewhere have an opportunity to connect people with aspects of their intangible cultural heritage, in this case their folk song heritage, in a very potent and meaningful way, through individuals, family and community.

The knowledge that singing ancestors left behind part of themselves in music, in songs that can be sung today and that can tell us a little about them and their world in a very personal sense is amazing. Museums, libraries and archives, if interrogated in the right way, from the perspective of people and not their products, have a means to enable folk to get up close and personal with their intangible cultural heritage. Museums can then further this engagement by providing the resources and the place for the blossoming of new intangible cultural expressions inspired by such treasures. This is the creative space

in the cultural crucible.

Co-existence

All of this is not to negate the value of museum objects. The idea is that intangible and tangible heritage should co-exist in museums. Perhaps they should never have been separated in the first place. Tangible museum, library and archive collections can develop the appreciation of intangible culture in myriad ways. For example, in the case of the Somerset song bearers, they can tell us something of the physical lives of these singing ancestors.

Shirts and brooches

The Ralph Vaughan Williams Memorial Library for example, contains Sharp's photographs of the singers and many are now available on the internet on the EFDSS website, www.efdss.org. In Somerset local history collections, there are photographs of shirt workers, the shirts that they made, even small items of personalia treasured and handed down in the family may be discovered. For example a research meeting with a descendant of singer Lucy White revealed an unknown photograph of Lucy wearing a Victorian day dress decorated at the neck with a gold brooch. The same brooch was then provided for examination. Direct contact with descendants can also assist historical interpretation and representation, for example Sharp's photographs of Lucy White portrayed her as an aged peasant, bow-backed with a rough woolen shawl drawn around her shoulders. The family photograph revealed the costume of a person of quite different social standing. Family contact may serve to bring new meanings to established truths.

Routes to roots

The museum as cultural crucible, should be envisaged as a museum/creative space, a place for dynamic engagement stimulated by

both tangible and intangible cultural collections, and a place for the production of new cultural expressions of local distinctiveness; somewhere for people to explore new routes to their roots.

A key development area for museum managers is policies that embrace ancestry and locality. Real engagement, valuing the culture of each person and endeavouring to promote the museum as a community space, a space for them, a space for creativity, engagement, cultural connectivity, personal enrichment and self-awareness, made possible by the embedding of intangible and tangible cultural heritage in museum policy.

The BBC television programme *Who do you think you are?* succeeds because it could be anyone's story. There are revelations and tears aplenty and many journeys to places where ancestors lived, worked and died. People are fascinated by people. In the UK, in a post-colonial, fragmented multi-ethnic society, the English are learning to value their ancestors, creating connection where links have been broken.

The challenge for museum managers is to ensure that museums become the locus for this activity, firmly placed at the heart of society, an essential component of strong, healthy communities.

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She recently completed a major commissioned research study for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) on 20th century museum trends in the UK, *Tales from the Tunnel of Goats* (2003) and a commissioned *Somerset Folk Map* for Somerset County Council (2006). Her research interests lie within the domain of intangible culture, specifically traditional song. A CD of research output, *Somerset Sisters*, has been critically acclaimed and has featured on BBC 'Songs of Praise', 'Woman's Hour' and the BBC World Service. Yvette is also a professional musician, trained music amateur and natural voice practitioner.