

Museums for the Future: Recognising new relevance for University Museums

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The theme of this talk, and this conference, is the renewal of university museums. Its aim is to ask how as curators and managers to secure not only the survival of the collections we care for, but also how to ensure they contribute in relevant ways to the institutions to which they belong. All of us, who work with university museums probably agree that the answer, in theory, is short and simple - we need to find ways of making our University's take notice, appreciate what these museums and collections do and support them accordingly. But how to do this is not always that obvious. So my talk is an account of the approach we took at the University of Reading. This case study looks back over a process (and the lessons learnt) whereby the University took steps to establish a co-ordinated and strategic approach to the management of its university museums, alongside a period of major regeneration that has seen capital improvements of more than £12million and the reinvigoration of its collections.

To put Reading's story in context, I want to start by saying something about the position of UK university museums today and how this has developed in recent years. Many working in the University museums sector will agree that we can look back over a period, in the past decade, of immense change for University Museums, one in which their profile has been transformed, partly by the concentration of major

redevelopment in the sector, but also by renewed recognition of their value and importance.

'University Museums in the United Kingdom - A national resource for the 21st century' (UMG, 2004 - www.umg.org.uk)

In 2004 the UK University Museums Group, published: 'University Museums in the United Kingdom - A national resource for the 21st century', a report aimed at raising awareness of the sector, its achievements and its potential for contributing to agendas of modern higher education. Although extremely wide ranging in its coverage of both strategic and good practice, it is primarily a work of advocacy, aimed at funders and decision makers that analyses the position of the sector and identifies key indicators for effective management of university museums and their success.

The report also marked the culmination of the UK university museums and collections survey - an exercise that had taken, on and off, over 15 years to complete and which for the first time provided an overview of the collections held by UK higher education institutions.

National Survey of UK University Museums 1989-2002

The survey describes an estimated 400 university museums and collections still held by UK universities, but of which around only 25% are regularly open to the public. These include anything from Chinese art to marine biology, and collections ranging in size from fewer than a hundred items to major institutional collections housing millions of objects and specimens. Some of these have been formed in the recent past (notably many thriving collections relating to art and design teaching) but a high proportion fall

into the category of traditional teaching collections. The best known UK University Museums belong to the relatively small group of larger and older universities, dominated by great collections of art, archaeology, ethnography and natural history. Together they amount to around 10% of the total, while the rest comprise an eclectic group of mainly smaller collections, mostly associated with departmental teaching and often inaccessible to all but specialist researchers. Larger university museums are eligible for core funding, currently from the AHRC (the UK government-funded Arts and Humanities Research Council) to support their stewardship costs. As well as contributing to teaching and research they must also demonstrate they meet access requirements in relation to the public and appropriate standards of collections care. In addition many of these core funded museums are eligible to compete for funding from external sources, which over the years has enabled these museums to undertake capital schemes as well as develop a range of public programmes and collections activity.

My interest in University museums is a long-standing one. Back in the late 1980s, when working in museums but outside the university museums sector, I was asked to undertake the very first part of the UK survey. This was to be the start of a project to map all university museums and collections in the UK. From those earliest surveys it was clear how little was known at the time of university museums and collections outside their own universities and that this lack of recognition was compounded by isolation and neglect.

In the worst situations collections were simply invisible - long forgotten in some dusty cupboard and many of those who had responsibility for looking after them were apparently defeated by the challenges of maintaining and defending them.

Without intending to over-state or exaggerate, the good news is that as the UMG 2004 report shows the situation has changed dramatically in many UK universities. My situation has changed now too. Towards the completion of the UK survey I finally found myself working within the sector. Having spent the best part of a decade commenting on the problems faced by university museums from the outside and advocating ways in which university museums could be improved I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to see if I could put into practice some of the advice I had been giving for so long.

Beyond the Ark (1999)

'Beyond the Ark' was published in 1999 as one of eight regional surveys covering universities and higher education institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It deals with an area covering the English counties of Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Hampshire, commissioned by the South Eastern Museums Service. This is a region that includes the University of Oxford, probably the single most significant university in terms of museums and collections in the UK, if not the world, but also nine more institutions that held a total of 38 museums and departmental collections - in other words the report reflected the full diversity of UK university museums and collections. And while it showed that its university museums were amongst some of the finest and most extensive anywhere, it also revealed a familiar story of lack of resources, limited involvement of collections in university

teaching and research and general absence of planning and policy to support co-ordinated development.

The University of Reading Museums and Collections: A Case Study

The University of Reading, situated roughly equidistant between London and Oxford, is in many ways a more typical regional University than Oxford and fitted more clearly the pattern revealed by the survey.

Its origins date back to the nineteenth century and by UK standards today is a small to medium-sized university, based around three urban campuses. The survey recorded six significant collections, all of which were formed at least in part for teaching. The biggest and best known, is the Museum of English Rural Life. It grew out of the University's interest in agriculture and in the immediate post war period of agricultural revolution, and remains the first and most significant collection of social history of its kind in the country.

The earliest of the Reading's museums are, however, the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology, whose formation began in 1909 and Cole Museum of Zoology, built up between 1907 and 1939. Both are archetypal university teaching collections. The Ure Museum created by Percy Ure in the early decades of the last century is a remarkably comprehensive collection of mainly Greek pottery. The Cole Museum is a very fine example an early 20th century comparative anatomy teaching collection, arranged according to Hunterian principles.

The other main University collections include those of the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication (an important collection of printed ephemera, and objects relating to the practice of typographic design, printing and the history of letterforms); geology teaching collections, a University herbarium of around 250,000 specimens and a fine collection of European drawings dating from the 16th to the 20th century.

The Reading University Museums and Collections Development Project was set up as a direct response to the 'Beyond the Ark' survey. By no means all or even most universities that were surveyed chose to take such positive action as a result of the UK survey, but an encouraging number have done so, and Reading was one of them.

The work of the Reading project was extremely varied and there is not time to describe it all, but for the purposes of this talk there are three main areas that I want to focus on, namely governance, practical collections development activity and, finally, structural reform.

Governance

The familiar pattern in most universities that hold collections our surveys found is of a number of discrete collections and museums, scattered across departments and faculties or existing as semi autonomous institutions - Reading was no exception. Small collections operated within the separate environments of their own academic context - few shared resources or were subject to any central or co-ordinated

approach to management or care. Therefore, a key recommendation was for universities to strengthen, or where necessary create, committees or working groups to oversee the coordination of collections development across their institutions.

At Reading, as elsewhere, prior to the project and the report, there was no real mechanism for 'joined up thinking' about collections. So one of the first tasks was the transformation of an existing University committee set up to oversee archives into what has now become the University Committee for Museums, Archives and Collections or CMAC. A new remit was drawn up and its membership overhauled. This was, in effect, to become the committee to which I would report the activities of the project. But it also took on additional tasks - to develop new university wide policy for museums and collections, to ratify formal policies for individual collections on acquisitions and disposals, and, most importantly, to consider how to embed the contribution of collections into wider university strategic planning.

To succeed in these ambitious goals did require a degree of commitment by colleagues across the university who had to be chosen on the basis of their likely ability to champion museums and collections. One of the most crucial was the appointment of a Pro-Vice Chancellor as its chair - at a stroke the committee was able to be heard and have impact at the highest levels. Another was the configuration of its membership - to include both collections managers, to represent the collections at a departmental level and a number of influential academics from across the University, who provided a vital user perspective and strategic overview. When academics recognise and are able to articulate what collections can do for them as resources, half the battle is won within your university.

Drawing up and considering policies and strategies was also an important unifying exercise that gave focus to the committee, as did the allocation of a modest, but useful budget to support collections activity. Clear policy and appropriate criteria was agreed for how this money was to be spent - in this case to help match fund external grants and to support projects that enhanced access and learning.

The committee also acquired a useful advocacy role. News about what was going on - success in funding through the sponsorship of CMAC - filtered out to many parts of the University and has also become a regular and helpful way in which developments are reported upwards through the University committee structure to the University Senior Management Committee and the University Council.

It also works as a way of bringing key policy decisions under one authority.

Departments for the first time looked to a central university committee for advice and guidance over collections matters, and began to understand that over issues such as disposals and acquisitions that decisions required ratification by a formal committee on behalf of the University's governing body.

Collections Development

The next step was to work on individual projects aimed at collections development - by this I mean not, by and large, the creation or development of new collections, but finding ways to reinvigorate how existing collections were managed and used.

Like most departmental collections, those at Reading were in need of every kind of help, ranging from cataloguing to the major overhaul of sad and out-dated displays. Our approach to this was pragmatic - we addressed what we had the skills and resources to achieve and focussed attention on any opportunity we could find to attract additional resources to help. Initially, high impact activity often took precedence over much needed background tasks, but we also spent time in developing basic forward plans that identified achievable goals.

Of course to do this required, first and foremost, new resources as well access to experience of the wider museums scene and funding environment. It was clear that a key measure of success would be demonstrating the capacity of collections to attract funding, as well what a collection or museum could contribute to the university. In the just over three years the smaller collections attracted more than £200,000 towards collections care and access projects. This was not a huge sum, with no single grant amounting to more than £30,000, but its impact has been considerable, and has shown the University how external funders are prepared to support well planned and articulated projects, particularly those that bring clear benefits in terms of collections management, research, teaching or outreach.

To give an idea of what we achieved, this is just some of the work that was carried out in this period with individual collections:

Four separate projects have been funded by a project fund set up by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (now the AHRC). This was specifically designed to support collections development and access projects for smaller university collections. One of

my key roles therefore was to help identify and formulate proposals, from which has stemmed projects to refurbish the displays of the Cole Museum; to undertake a cataloguing and storage project on the Typography collections; to develop online teaching resources for the University herbarium and the re-display of the Ure Museum as a learning environment.

Other initiatives arose out of the need to find ways to improve the day -to - day management of the collections. Without regular and dedicated staff time it is impossible to make any real progress; even funded projects are virtually impossible to manage without it. So the case was made to create part-time junior positions for two of the most important departmental collections - the Cole and Ure Museums - as assistant curators. These posts combine curatorial responsibilities with departmental administrative and technical duties and have achieved a huge amount in terms of establishing routine collections management, regular involvement of volunteers and the development of learning and access programmes, particularly for schools and external audiences.

A small project to promote collections research also attracted external funding that enabled the University collections to join up with other regional collections to develop a simple web-based gateway. Another project linked our geology collections with those at a local museum to provide inset training for teachers and joint sessions for local schools between the University and the museum's science galleries. A small grant allowed us to research and write an audience development strategy for the Ure Museum.

While the smaller collections were the main focus of the initial collections development project I now want to turn to the second phase. This saw the University building on this work to bring together its various strands under a new structure that has marked an important step from short-term project to a long-term vision and commitment, on behalf of the University, to sustainability for its museums and collections.

Those who know of Reading and its collections are most likely to have heard of its largest and most distinctive museum, the Museum of English Rural Life, or MERL. Unlike the smaller collections it was not a priority of the collections development project at the start. However, by early 2002 MERL and the University had reached a critical moment. For more than 10 years the Museum had been the subject of efforts to raise sufficient funding to rehouse its internationally important collections of rural history.

Following long and complex negotiations with the UK Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) the University had reached an impasse. After more than a decade of fundraising and planning the University found themselves facing the possibility that the whole scheme might founder: An £11 million scheme to re-house the museum was being held up in terms of a decision from HLF because of concerns about the Museum and the viability of its business plan. At the same time, the AHRC, had concerns about the museums' management and governance structures and its eligibility for funding under their core-funding scheme. In a position where the University were seeking public funding to support MERL's redevelopment, it was clear that the price would include change and reform, both structural and strategic.

Embedding new structures: University Museums and Collections Services

The solution that provided the key was to establish an overarching museums and collections service for the University, to incorporate the Museum of English Rural Life and to provide support for all its collections under a single organisational structure, to be known as the University Museums and Collections Service (UMACS).

Briefly, its remit is to be responsible for the direction of MERL and provide the strategic planning and development of the University's museums and collections. UMACS sits within the executive structure of the University as part of Information Services, alongside the University Library and Information Technology (IT) service. As well as the management of MERL, it provides University-wide services for collections - such as funding development, learning programmes, volunteer training, management and conservation.

With the new structure in place, agreement was finally reached with both HLF and AHRC. HLF made an award of £5.17 million and the AHRB reviewed its funding and agreed to its continuation. More than £4million from the university and the remaining for other donors was secured and building plans were finally agreed. Less than two years later the move to its new premises began.

MERL has in effect been reborn. For the first time its collections are housed in appropriate conditions and new displays are being completed this autumn following a year of development work. The Museum that had been focussed on the long and

gruelling business of redevelopment for many years, but at last can begin to look ahead.

The challenge is to make sure our activities address both institutional objectives of teaching and research, but also to its mission to contribute to the wider community. Making our museums visible and attractive to non-university audiences has become crucial to how we measure our success: A brand new schools programme is being launched this autumn, aiming to link into various aspects of the National Curriculum including, science, technology and art and design; an extremely active and valuable team of volunteers (now numbering over 60 regular participants ranging from students to retired members of the local community in their 80s), who will be working on a variety of projects that include our newly launched guided tour scheme, allowing visitors to see behind the scenes, work on the Museum garden and a recently funded project to take the Museum into the community through a programme of activities linked to regional agricultural shows.

Of course engagement also means the reinvigoration of links with the University's research and teaching agendas. The first undergraduate modules will start being taught here at MERL this autumn as part of the Centre for Excellence for Teaching and Learning, supported by the Higher Education Council for England, provided by funding over 5 years to develop new and innovative approaches to undergraduate collections-based learning. It has also provided invaluable resource for capital schemes and collections-related projects. This is very exciting initiative that has transformed the way we make of collections for teaching across a whole range of disciplines.

Working alongside academic colleagues we are looking at ways to develop exciting new research ventures on, for example, film and contemporary collecting. This includes a project to create new films on rural crafts today that we plan to make available in the gallery, thanks to a recent Designation Challenge Fund award. Film screenings from our film archive of rural subjects, will be among an already popular programme of seminars, workshops and family activities. The Museum has also set up a MERL Fellowship scheme, to support academic researchers working on its collections and a Forum for Rural Research to bring together academic colleagues, on a cross-disciplinary basis, both of which contribute to a re-invigorated academic strategy.

Lessons

Finally, a few words on what were the key factors in this transformation.

First, the catalyst of an external view that provided an opportunity to embrace change that the University chose, fortunately, to pursue. Crucially, the University recognised that the important and urgent issues they faced were, essentially, strategic ones - why does the university need these collections, and if it does and can make something of them, are there ways we can do this, and at an acceptable cost?

Second, the collections development project that provided a chance for the University to reassess and reform its governance and oversight of its collections under the direction of a committee with university-wide strategic responsibilities.

Third, the project galvanised activity designed to demonstrate how collections development could contribute to the University's objectives, while bringing about much needed initiatives to upgrade standards of stewardship.

And fourth, building on the success of the collections development work on smaller projects, and prompted by the need to meet the requirements of external funders who needed evidence of proper strategic planning and effective structures, the establishment of a university museums and collections service, embedded within the University Executive.