**ACE Convention, Edinburgh, 2017**

I volunteer at The Higgins Bedford and in February I was asked if I would be interested in attending the ACE convention in March. I was lucky enough to receive a bursary from SHARE Museums East and off I went with a little trepidation of what was awaiting me and the weight of representing our museum and art gallery.

ACE, the Association for Cultural Enterprises, " is an association of Members and Associate Members who are passionate about their work in the cultural and heritage sector" whose "aim is to promote commercial best practice in the cultural and heritage sector by providing training and networking opportunities and facilitating the sharing of information and experience between members." One of the many events they organise is the annual convention and trade fair which this year was to be held in Edinburgh.

In preparation I read the aims of the convention from the ACE website, discussed what we as a museum wanted to get out of it and combined these aims after which I poured over the convention timetable to find the most appropriate sessions.

 As a museum we are in the process of streamlining our retail products so that we reflect our permanent collections, ongoing exhibitions/projects and local area better and then to build cohesive ranges for each of those areas. This convention would be ideal for honing our ideas by:

* Learning from those who know by attending sessions about developing product ranges
* Sourcing products and services by meeting suppliers and seeing a wide variety of product ranges
* Extending the network of influential contacts by meeting people from throughout the heritage and cultural sector
* providing inspiration

Even the train journey up to Edinburgh was exciting and seeing iconic landmarks such as the Kilburn White Horse, Durham Cathedral, The Angel of the North, the Tyne bridge, Sage Gateshead and Holy Island with its scaffold encased castle and Lindisfarne Abbey infused the trip with heritage and culture before even reaching Edinburgh.

Edinburgh is a beautiful city and I arrived early enough to have a couple of hours to walk round and admire it and take some photos. I got back in time to change and make my way to The Fruitmarket Gallery for the drinks reception which was crowded noisy and buzzing with anticipation of an exciting convention ahead. I didn't get to meet up with anyone I knew from SHARE but I did chat with some very friendly people and was able to raise a glass to Howard Hodgkin with everyone, one of whose pieces is in our current exhibition *Picasso and the Masters of Print* and which I knew would have really pleased the curator of that exhibition, Victoria.

On Tuesday morning everyone descended on the Corn Exchange by bus, train or taxi which divided everyone up by their approach to life according to Caroline Brown, Chair of ACE, in her Welcome speech. The morning passed with registration, Fresher's meeting, Welcome, "The Big Picture", by Dr Bridget McConnell, chief executive of Glasgow Life, which made me want to visit Glasgow, coffee, a first foray into the trade show, Question time and an excited meeting up with other members from SHARE, including the other recipients of a bursary. Liz and Denise from Gainsborough House and Palace House were amazing, they were generous with their advice, offers of help and introductions and as much time from them as we wanted and their excitement and enjoyment of the whole thing was infectious.

After lunch, sited in the middle of the trade fair, the afternoon was taken up with four more sessions of talks, each which had a choice of three. So many of them sounded interesting, but I kept to my aims of attending those relating to retail and developing product ranges.

 After the sessions it was a rush to get back to the hotel to change and then walk across the city to the National Museum of Scotland where everyone was piped in to the drinks reception on the ground floor. The meal was upstairs under the high glass roof and it was a beautiful place for a dinner. The tables were mixed with people from other areas, but that was no barrier to conversation and everyone enjoyed the evening, which after the Best Product Awards were handed out, ended with music and dancing.

Wednesday had more time for visiting the trade show to hunt for suitable products and chat to suppliers who were all really helpful and friendly. There were three more sessions of talks to choose from plus a fourth session from the International Speaker, Stuart Hata, director of retail operations, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and president of the MSA, the Museum Stores Association. The Chair's Summary wrapped up all the themes of the convention and bid everyone farewell until Brighton next year urging us to go out and be brave, provocative, risk-taking and aggressive as that's what can bring about change for the good.

The overall feeling of the conference was one of friendliness combined with enthusiasm to get the most out of the two days. Regardless of status everyone was keen to share knowledge and answer questions. I had felt quite nervous about attending being only a volunteer, but everyone was so welcoming and eager to listen as well as to share that I gained one thing from attending this convention that I had not expected and that was confidence in my role.

The sessions I attended were

* Exposed! The restored Mary Rose Shop is back , Paul Griffiths, The Mary Rose
* The Secret Garden - RHS licensing rejuvenated, Cathy Snow, The RHS
* Developing an artisan & craft range for the National Trust, Genevieve Sioka, The National Trust
* Originality by design, Adam Throw, The Barbican
* A Museum Store world, Stuart Hata
* How to create a practical digital strategy, Simon Hopkins, Turner Hopkins
* Visual Matters - unlocking the potential of your shop through visual merchandising, Lynda Murray, International Visual

I feel I gained more than just meeting our aims. The whole experience was motivating, inspiring and thought provoking and maybe I won't be able to put many of the ideas into practice now, but I have been inspired and the ideas and processes will stay with me, developing and waiting for the time they can be used best.

The words and phrases that reverberate from the sessions I attended that I will keep with me are

Relevance, lighting, local connection, authenticity, pop-up shops, storytelling, UK, distinctive, style guide, customisation, social media, museum store Sunday, persona exercises, flow, user journey, title, focal points, colour, sense of place, own brand merchandising, artisan and products that reflect the place.

Thank you SHARE Museums East and The Higgins Bedford for giving me such an inspiring experience.

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