SHARE FOH Forum Meeting

25 September 2014

Sutton Hoo, Suffolk

**1030- Welcome from the Visitor Operations Manager at Sutton Hoo, (Ruaidhrí O’Haverhan?).**

Sutton Hoo is delighted to welcome us to their site, and share its history and atmosphere. It was taken over by the National Trust in 1998 and opened to the public in 2002. During this period a new burial site was discovered, highlighting the continued archaeological potential of the site.

The estate on which the burials were discovered was owned by Frank and Edith Pretty in the 1930s, a wealthy landowner and farmer. Upon his death, Edith was left to manage the very large estate. She was interested in spiritualism, and on an occasion when her similarly interested friends were staying at Sutton House (now Tranmer House), ghostly figures were seen dancing on the mounds.

Edith Pretty decided to investigate and was put in contact with Basil Brown, a local farmer’s son who knew the landscape and soils types extremely well. Excavation started in 1938 on Mounds 2, 3 and 4, despite Edith wishing to start with Mound 1 (use of numbers is modern in order to identify the mounds). The team found a ship burial, with only small pieces of treasure remaining in the ground, indicating that the site had been plundered.

Basil returned in 1939 to excavate Mound 1, only to find that this too had been plundered. However, due to the changes to the shape of the mound over the centuries, the plunderers missed the centre of the mound, and thus the hoard, by about 1 metre. Contained within the mound was one of the most significant finds in the UK, including extraordinary finds of gold and weaponry.

After the hiatus caused by the Second World War, Basil returned in the 60s. The land had been requisitioned during the war, and the MOD had driven their tanks across the burial site. The excavations had luckily been covered up, as the ship had become sand over the centuries, which would have blown away very quickly if left exposed. Now, the areas beneath the ground were investigated, with several new mounds discovered, including one in the 80s, containing a horse, his warrior and harness. From comparison with similar sites in Scandinavia, it was determined that there must be a feasting site near the burial mounds.

The National Trust is dependent on its volunteers, with attitudes towards them having drastically changed recently. The volunteers are the Front Line, they provide the welcome and the knowledge that visitors have come to expect from NT staff. They are not just stewards and guides for the site, there is a site maintenance team, looking after the lawns, trees, sheep and ensuring the site is litter free. Volunteers also make up the sewing team, creating the costumes on display in the exhibition hall, as well as archivists, cleaners, woodworkers and the café team.

Many have been here since the site opened, helping to build bridges with the local community. Woodbridge is very close, just over the river but the river does act a barrier, making it important to create a sense of community with them.

Tranmer House opened very recently as a hands-on experience of the 30s, the period when the excavations began, with everything that would have been in such a house on display and available for visitors to touch and gain an understanding of. By expanding the activities and experiences available on site, the National Trust is hoping that people will spend more time here, and potentially spend more money.

**1040 – Simon Floyd, SHARE Coordinator**

Welcome to SHARE, a model of how museums can develop. The level of engagement this forum has garnered is constantly encouraging further development. SHARE now has a fund to develop programs for the museums across this area, and soon, London. It provides training programmes, assists museums to develop their resources and facilitates cohort working, e.g. Collectional Development and Family Engagement.

All museums have something to contribute to SHARE, whether they are large or small organisations, and it is through the networks, courses and days such as today that SHARE is hoping to encourage the cross-pollination of ideas that will help all museums within the network. This forum has produced lots of ideas, many of which are now beginning to seed. There are now Front of House qualifications, looking at FoH engagement and focusing on improving their perceived position within the museums they work in, particularly their importance in enhancing the visitor experience.

SHARE has run some Mystery Shopping trials with the Museum of London, the University of Cambridge Museums, and those in Ely and Norwich, looking at the possibility of museums sharing this scheme so all may benefit.

IWM Duxford and UCM are looking at creating an Eastern Region volunteer award scheme, again highlighting the importance of FoH.

As ever, SHARE events are a chance to network, to discover new ways of looking at issues or problems, and to continue the development of this network.

On a final note, the Arts Council has agreed to fund SHARE for the next 3 years, enabling the ideas and projects discussed so far to continue to grow.

**1050 – Keynote Speaker: Mark Taylor, Former Director of the Museums Association**

Volunteers and Front of House being somewhat of a mystery to Mark, this will be as informative for him as the rest of the group.

It is important for everyone in museums to stay alert to changes, trends, moods and initiatives so nobody loses out. Following the ‘Perfect Storm’ recession, there are lots of changes to the amounts of funding available and how it is allotted, this process has changed museums.

With the Government changing before our very eyes, there is an increased focus on what is seen as ‘essential’, excluding that which is ‘desirable’. There is not enough time to look at what should be done, hence there is far less empathy and understanding of culture as it is not an industry focussed on money-making and secondary spend. The Government is not looking at the benefits to education, well-being and social inclusion that Museums can bring.

There is more social pressure, less money and mobility, and museums must adapt to these changes. Building secure links with the local community will help in this situation, looking at the role of the organisation within the community, what can it do for them?

The Government are now only minor investors in the creative and cultural sector, so museums must change the way they seek funding. More funding is needed so museums must now look to other sources in order to survive. Individual giving is of major benefit, however this is not something that is part of our culture due to the common misconception that all museums are funded. Museums must encourage involvement and engagement with their activities and collections. Luckily, due to changes in the governance of museums, the public sector museum is now changing.

The rate of Museum partnerships and mergers has increased, and there are still many more to come. There are an increased number of trusts looking after museums, but this arrangement does not work for every organisation. Flexibility within museums must increase, such as working with local libraries or other centres of culture. If moves like this are done for the right reasons, then it can work. What is most important is to diversify the sources of income, if an organisation is dependent on a single source which suddenly fails, that museum will be in danger of closure.

Ways of expanding the range of income sources include licensing, looking at different ways to fund-raise, working with public sector bodies to commission programmes from the museums, e.g. working with dementia patients, young offenders or refugees. If museums are able to get to grips with what these bodies are looking for, they will be able to access these funds, e.g. receiving funding from the Health Budget for work with dementia patients. Diversification will encourage secure funding management.

Fortunately, when museums are facing problems, they can become closer to their community, as that is who they are for. Whether by using the museum as a community centre or using their program to look at issues of social concern, it’s possible to strengthen community bonds.

A museum’s staff are its most important asset; a poor collection surrounded by enthusiastic and engaging people is far more like to succeed than a great collection with bored and disinterested staff. Many different skills are needed within a museum setting, e.g. curating, marketing, management. Museums must make the most of their staffs’ strengths, not merely loading up on academics. FoH staff who can use their skills to help visitors to interpret the collections will greatly improve the staff/visitor relationship.

The definition of a museum has changed recently, highlighting that a museum’s worth is in how it treats visitors, not just the size of its collection. This is a major change from the previous attitude towards the public accessing museums. The relationship has moved from Teacher-Pupil, to more of a library set-up, encouraging self-driven exploration of the museums. It is vital to remember that visitors are customers, museums must learn to listen to what they want, to stop controlling interpretation of the collection, accepting others’ opinions of what is possible within the museum. This feeds into how the effectiveness of the museum is measured, it’s not just about bodies through the door, but the impact that it has upon its visitors.

The overarching attitude of FoH towards their job used to be that they were there to protect and keep sticky fingers off the collection. This has mostly changed but there are still some staff with the attitude that the public aren’t welcome, meaning they do not see FoH as a valuable role. Prizing the collection over and above the benefits of an engaging FoH team will not help a museum. By transforming the visitor experience, the visitor will feel that museums are now open to them. FoH staff and volunteers from the local community will increase the welcome visitors feel as it will be from people like them, rather than being met by a team of academics whose sole focus is the historic value of the collection. FoH act as a liaison/advocate point for the museum, encouraging people to feel a part of the museum they are visiting.

The basic route to progression, either in your staffs’ careers or skills, is to invest in it, if left alone stagnation will occur, and the effectiveness of the workforce will decline. When FoH is involved with what’s happening behind the scenes, it will increase their knowledge of the collection, and enable them to better inform the visitors. They will feel a part of the museum. This attitude begins with the director, if FoH are clearly valued at the highest level of the organisation, the rest of the staff will also appreciate the role they play within the Museum. Progression can occur through encouraging members of the FoH team to develop specialisms, enabling them to make specific contributions to the running of the Museum.

Half of all museums in this country are independent and are run, and kept open, by their volunteers. Even the large museums have some dependence upon this source of staff. This relationship is being professionalised, but there is still a subtle difference between paid staff and volunteers. The latter group are likely to have a different motivation to paid staff, but it is still important to value their contribution. They have their own place and role to play within the museum.

There has been some concern with several large museums starting to outsource FoH, alongside their security, reflecting the attitude of the director, and those around them, that FoH is not a valuable part of the venue. The main problem with this approach is the limitation it can cause to the FoH’s knowledge of the collection, decreasing their effectiveness with regards to fielding questions from visitors, and they will no longer be ambassadors for the venue. Outsourcing is also likely to result in swifter turnovers of staff, preventing the retention of knowledge. They will also be seen as a threat by the volunteers to any progression through the organisation. A third of participants on past SHARE courses have been volunteers, highlighting their large profile within this sector. If volunteers are discouraged by the presence of outsourced FoH, the sector will lose a significant number of its workforce.

1145 – Jeremy Althorpe, House Manager at Aldeburgh Music, Snape Maltings

**Volunteer handbooks and other processes.**

Aldeburgh Music depends on a huge team of volunteers, especially for the festivals, including a definite progression within the available roles. There is plenty of overlap with the museum sector due to this reliance on a voluntary workforce.

It was started in 1940 by Benjamin Britten and friends, as the Aldeburgh festival, holding concerts and exhibitions within venues across the town of Aldeburgh and local area. Many building were used, including halls, local churches etc., to perform world premieres of pieces.

It became obvious that the available premises were not capacious enough, so Snape Maltings was acquired and converted to an 800 seat theatre and performance space, as well as several other performance/workshop spaces.

250 concerts are held per annum, along with 12 exhibitions. The size of these events range from 20-30 people at a concert, to 2000 people a night for the best part of a week, e.g. the Britten centenary celebrations, which held an added international attraction.

These events are run almost entirely by volunteers, often members of the audience and donors, who are giving their time as well as their money. After they enquire, they receive a brief outline of the volunteer person profile, commitment etc. Those who choose to apply will be put through training courses, alongside current volunteers, in order to become acquainted with the rest of the team at the same time as learning what the role entails. Everyone starts as an invigilator, for the exhibitions and concerts etc. They receive instruction on what to do, how to behave, react. They are monitored in order to rate how much involvement and dedication they have with the organisation. This role lasts a year and those who match the requirements will remain on the volunteer team, whereas those who have not met the required standards will leave the team. This maintains the standards of the volunteers, as well as ensuring the volunteers feel they are valued, that they play a vital role. Despite the possibility of bad feeling resulting from this ‘cull’, it would be far worse if those who are asked to leave were permitted to remain upon the team.

Volunteers contribute around 10,000 hours per annum, usually shared between 150 volunteers. They act as guides, front of house managers and staff the visitor centre. They also act as ambassadors as they represent Aldeburgh Music to the audience members and visitors. When concerts are broadcast, it’s not just the 800 or so in the audience that are watching them, it can be people around the world.

After their 1st year, they become ushers, followed by another round of training, which is conducted by another volunteer further on in the role progression. This ensures a focus on standards and discipline. If they are still happy to continue, they shadow the current members of staff. Some of which have been there since the concert hall opened, but are still highly enthusiastic and interested in what goes on at Aldeburgh as they want to be there. The vast majority stick with the ushering, with only a few volunteers progressing beyond this point.

They are then assessed as to where they will be most beneficial, and where their interests lie. Having already seen what FoH do, they will be aware of the role responsibilities so the main judging criteria is whether they have the commitment levels to maintain the high standards expected of them.

Further training follows with regard to FoH, as to the extra responsibilities.

There are two handbooks, one for ushers and one for FoH. These act as a vital document as a point of reference, it means they will know what is expected of them, what they should expect from the organisation and what will happen if they fail to meet these expectations. They were developed alongside the volunteers, and there was a focus on making it as relevant to the volunteers as the management. It must evolve, as problems are faced and handled, with the solutions laid down clearly.

One of the greatest problems in FoH can arise through absence and all staff are made aware of the impact this will have on the rest of the team, as, at worst, it can result in the organisation contravening its performance licence, i.e. not having the requisite staff to audience ratio. This would mean the concert could not go ahead, and even if not a live broadcast, this would have a severe impact upon the organisation and its reputation.

The standard number of enquires is 24 a year, and this can result in no new volunteers, maybe due to not feeling they meet the requirements, it’s not what they were looking for etc. Establishing a base level of expectation, with no favouritism etc., means that everyone knows what’s expected of them and that they will be treated equally. Favouritism and the like, merely undermines the manager involved, as they are bending their rules to suit themselves, rules which ought to apply to all volunteers equally.

**1345 – Niki Hughes, Volunteer Co-Ordinator, IWM Duxford and Lynsey Coombs, Head Gallery Attendant, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), Cambridge.**

**Managing volunteers through a period of organisational change and difficult situations.**

**Niki Hughes:** There is always change represented in the heritage industry, simply stepping into a museum highlights the changes that have developed over time, e.g. historic re-enactments where the participants have mobiles.

When organisations refuse to change with the times, they become stagnant. Very few organisations have stood still successfully for long periods of time. There is a common misconception that volunteers are against change, but this is not the case as volunteers actually fear the unknown, rather than change.

Often this is because they are not aware of the entire picture, they only know the fragments that have been filtered down to them, so are uncertain as to how that will affect them. Because they love the work they do for their organisation, they are more likely to complain, more likely to question what’s happening, as it is affecting something they are so passionate about. This needs to be considered by those instigating these changes, if the voices of the volunteers are ignored, they may feel alienated and isolated. This can cause backlash and upset.

How to change?

What are you changing? Why are you changing it? Do not change for change’s sake, just changing things to make your mark upon the organisation will benefit no one.

Plan it out thoroughly, how will it affect the running of your organisation in the meantime? Do you have set milestones?

Communicate with your staff and volunteers, explain the plan.

Acknowledge the feedback, take it on board.

Involve the volunteers, use their skills, and avoid imposing situations upon them unless it is completely necessary.

**Case Study**

Niki started at IWM Duxford in 2006, and after assessing the situation for 2 years, identified where improvements could be made and decided to set this in motion.

Volunteers have been managing the site for many, many years, roughly since 1975 when Duxford Aviation Society was founded. When Niki joined IMW Duxford, those who wished to volunteer on the site had to join the DAS first, which involved a yearly membership fee. Niki wanted to change this situation, so that membership was no longer a prerequisite for volunteering.

The plans for the changes were shown the green light by senior management, who assessed all the adjustments that would need to be made, the insurance differences etc.

A formal letter was sent out to the volunteers, which may not have been the ideal way to inform them of the planned changes and generated a large amount of feedback. However, by communicating with all the volunteers on an individual basis, most of these worries were addressed. There was a ‘them and us’ situation for a while, between the IWM and DAS volunteers, as both were worried that the changes would affect their standing at the museum. But with a small amount of work and reassurance, these worries were laid to rest and the change has proved very beneficial.

**Lynsey Coombs** came from a historical buildings background, having worked with English Heritage (EH), before joining MAA. She worked with volunteers in particular when she was at Audley End, trying to transform the volunteer role from ‘Invigilator’ to ‘Engager’.

When Lynsey joined Audley End, only 50% of visitors went to the house, as the main draw was the gardens and farm. The team within the house were very long established and had what was perceived by visitors as a negative attitude.

EH made changes to the house, removing the red carpets marking the ‘permitted’ route through the rooms and replacing them with i-mats, to move away from the strictness of the previous experience, allowing visitors to move through more of the rooms. The coal gallery and nursery were opened as hands-on spaces, allowing visitors to engage with the house practically.

The first 2 floors are manned by paid staff, with the top floor manned by volunteers. They were recruited, interviewed and assessed for their suitability to the new spaces in the house. With these changes, the house was made more welcoming.

Process

* Take the time to understand the organisation and the volunteers.
* Have a clear picture in your mind for where you want to be, check that this matches the management’s idea of what they want, and then involve the volunteers in the ideas process.
* Plan in detail. Will additional training be required? What might go wrong? How can this be coped with?

If you’ve considered all the problems, there is more backbone to the idea

Having other people to speak to is incredibly helpful, someone to bounce ideas off or garner advice from.

Friends vs Volunteers.

At Duxford, the Friends only volunteer for Friends related events.

At the Fitz, the Friends felt that they had a monopoly over the volunteering opportunities. It’s no longer exclusively for the Friends, but they are looking at developing roles specifically for the Friends. Maybe creating a role to assist with the work the Friends do? Such a running Christmas or summer events?

At the Botanic Garden, it’s no longer a requirement for FoH volunteers to be part of the Friends group, and they are only slowly recruiting more people from outside the friends group.

Next session: 11th February at Botanic Garden, Cambridge. Topic: What FoH, paid and unpaid, want from curators and senior management.

Summer session: Letchworth? Topic: Audiences.

As per request, Liz Elmore SHARE has collected all attendees email addresses and will circulate them to the group. This was agreed by all in attendance.