SHARE Front of House Forum

*University of Cambridge Botanic Gardens*

11 February 2015 1015 – 1530

**Welcome:** Jane Felstead, Visitor Services Manager, Fitzwilliam Museum

It’s wonderful to see lots of familiar faces, especially as this is a forum led by its members. Please talk to any of the steering group (Amanda, Linda, Jane, Phil, Ian) throughout the day about anything you’d like to see covered over the coming sessions.

**1030 – Welcome:** Beverly Glover, Director of the Botanic Garden, University of Cambridge

Welcome to the Botanic Gardens, it’s wonderful to have this opportunity and to show you what we do here.

This is an unusual museum, being a biological collection. However, it is still a collection, and as such, is still curated. We hold a collection of 8000 species, arranged in a listed landscape covering 40 acres. We have a vibrant education programme, focusing on schools, along with an adult program focusing on horticulture and welcome 250,000 visitors per year.

This is not Cambridge’s original botanic garden, which was founded nearer to the city centre in 1762 as a physic garden, feeding into the study of medicine. John Stevens Henslow founded the Botanic Gardens in 1846, driven by the idea that botany was worthy of study within its own right, and that the study of botany feeds into the study of life in general. He persuaded the university to buy this site, which was originally outside the city limits.

This garden is very different in design to any other similar Botanic garden as it was arranged according to family groups, in particular, the Systematic Beds. The scientific heritage of the garden has always been strong, and it was laid out with related plants close to each other to highlight their similarities and contrasts. As this was before ‘species’ had been discovered, this was a very novel method of arranging a collection.

The living collection contains research collections, national plant collections and the largest arboretum in the East of England.

I’ve been here for 1 ½ years and have just appointed our newest curator. The ongoing vision of the Botanic Gardens is to develop the current collection and enable the visitors to engage with it.

**1045 – Keynote Speaker:** Tony Butler, Executive Director, Derby Museums Trust and Former Director of the Museum of East Anglia Life, Stowmarket

It’s good to share and I believe everyone involved with museums has an equal right to learn and share that which is contained within them. Our museums need to engender a spirit of curiosity in all those who work at and visit our museums.

Derby Museums Trust is one of the largest museums partnerships in England and includes the Derby Museum & Art Gallery, Pickford’s House, and the Silk Mill.

I was at Museum of East Anglian Life for many years before this, which is very much at the heart of the community, with a large number of volunteers as well as regular staff. It was noticed that those involved with the museum seemed happier through this museum.

Robert D Putnam’ research book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* examined how the sense of community in America has declined, even into that most American of occupations – bowling. More Americans are now bowling than ever before, but not in leagues. They are bowling alone.

We wanted to look at ways to use the museum to encourage the community to come together and strengthen their sense of belonging and ownership. To focus on the optimisation of experience, those things which give you pleasure and enjoyment, that which enables complete engagement with a subject. We wanted to build upon this, to make people’s lives better, to increase their engagement with their community. As part of this, the volunteers at the Museum of East Anglian Life developed kits to encourage those visitors with dementia to gain further enjoyment from their world.

What makes people happy? Trust – meaning – status-fairness-helping others-respect-adaptability-trust.

Those who worked at the museum built networks of acquaintances, built friend groups, built stronger networks of people they could help and be helped by.

The Happy museum project was launched in 2007, based on the 5 ways to well-being: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, and give.

We produced a paper that discussed the various qualities and ‘offers’ of museums. Apart from the gift shop, museums often sell enjoyment and engagement. They are places where people meet, where they encounter new things, they are social spaces, spaces to meet the unexpected.

In a world where public spaces are increasing private, museums remain an open space for engagement.

Museums, through volunteering, provide excellent opportunities for people to give back to the community. People working together become teams, they gain knowledge, a sense of personal achievement, and also give back to the community.

65% of museum volunteers go on to volunteer elsewhere in their community, with the museum acting as a springboard for this increased community engagement.

The Happy Museum principles:

* Create conditions for wellbeing
* Pursue mutual relationships
* Learn for resilience
* Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past
* Be an active citizen
* Measure what matters (Quality over quantity)

A number of museums around the country have developed programs based on these principles.

Ceredigion Museum’s (Aberystwyth) program was Harvesting the Knowledge, using the collection to engage and develop the personal, social and vocational skills of marginalised young people.

The Manchester Museum educated their staff on the nature of play, thereby enabling them to facilitate their visitors’ further engagement with the collection.

The Garden Museum in Lambeth’s project, Flowers for Love and Money, took the cut flower market as its starting point, analysing the ethics of it. The Museum funded a community group to develop a cutting garden within in the grounds of the museum, with the proceeds from the sale of the flowers feeding back into the community group running it.

Woodhorn Museum, Northumberland, engaged a comedian in residence to break down barriers and offer new ways to help people access the collections. The FOH team had classes in joke-telling and all reports confirmed the visitor experience was much improved.

Derby Silk Mill is the Original Factory, and was closed in 2007, with the idea to redevelop the entire museum. The local community is involved with this project, they are learning new skills and building items for the re-opened museum. This project aims to engender a sense of curiosity within those taking part. Derby has the Head Quarters of several large engineering companies, so already has a heritage of making.

The museum ran a range of sessions asking the community to contribute their ideas as to what the museum should be, what they wanted to get out of it. It’s encouraged innovation with regards to display structures and seating, now made from milk crates. Ideas have come out of the community and are engaging members of that community to build their own museum.

It was also important to ask for feedback from all those involved in this process, evaluating the practice and then feeding that back in. There is also feedback relating to those involved personally.

They now run an annual mini makers fair, with contributors from around the country, linking engineering and innovation to the site.

The Silk Mill project is about engagement, and Derby Museums Trust are looking to spread this across all their museums. In the natural history museum, a gallery is being developed to display how nature feels to the community, how they respond to nature personally, as well as to gather ideas and feedback about what was important to the local community, what they want from the museum. Young people from a local college were encouraged to engage with the project, and the museum is now working with the local university across many subject areas, design, research etc.

It is important to encourage those outside the museum structure, as well as those working there, to feel a sense of ownership and engagement with museums and their collections.

Notice Nature, Feel Joy at Derby Museum & Art Gallery opens on 27 March 2015.

**1130 – My eyes and ears; working with my front of house team:** Elie Hughes, Curator, Ely Museum

My role is not that of the traditional curator, I manage the museum and liaise between the staff and trustees. Front of House are the public face of the museum, they welcome the visitors, ensure the museum is clean and that things are working, take phone calls and are the visitors’ interaction point across the museum. With 4 Front of House and 4 behind scenes staff at Ely, there is a balance between the input each team has into decisions about the museum.

Front of House play a vital role in the future planning of any museum. Talking to them about the current state of the museum, and where they would like to see change, allows those behind the scenes to garner a clear idea of how the museum currently engages with visitors and where this can be improved. The team see how visitors use the spaces, what they engage with, what they don’t see. They know what people are interested in, why they visit the museum. They provide key in-the-field information about the visitors.

They provide valid information about how the set-up of the museum is engaged with by the visitors, e.g. if a map is confusing visitors will ignore it. The behind scenes team would not know this as they do not have that level of first-hand engagement with the visitors. FOH are the people that visitors interact with, they field the questions, they get the comments and feedback, and if this information is not communicated across the museum staff, things will not change. As per the title of my talk, they **are** the eyes and ears of the museum.

Practical exercise designing a museum:

What was included: café/galleries/education/stores/staff facilities/welcome area/children’s area/toilets/lift/retail space/car parking/bike & buggy park.

People’s positions within the museum influence what is seen as important, all views are equally valid and should all be included when planning the future of the museum. Front of House also give feedback from the visitors about what they would like to see.

Do not underestimate the knowledge that Front of House staff have, and encourage them all to contribute.

**1200 – Morning round up:** Kate Carreno, Assistant Director, Central Services, Fitzwilliam Museum

This morning has highlighted the importance of front of house in visitor engagement and that there is no substitute for this, however, it is also clear that this is an area of ongoing development.

Take home messages from the morning:

-The problems arising from joint –ownership of projects, e.g. the display structures at the Silk Mill, who owns that design. When something is ‘owned’ by so many people, how can it retain its own identity?

This can be managed by using this diversity, relating this back to the diversity of the community, making the organisation more democratic to reflect current civic society. By involving many people, the museum then reflects its local community and increases the sense of shared ownership.

-The importance of gathering volunteers’ thoughts as part of an ongoing process to access what’s happening in the museum.

**1345 – What could possibly go wrong? Conversations between Curators and Front of House:** Mark Elliott, Senior Curator, Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology (MAA), University of Cambridge

I am responsible for the Asian, African and European anthropology collections at the museum. I have worked there since 2003, and have been a curator since 2012. I worked previously in Calcutta on my PhD in curation and visitor experience.

MAA has always been a university museum, linked with the teaching of those subjects. Now it’s aiming to appeal more to those outside the university, which has seen a dramatic increase in visitor numbers. Its redevelopment aimed to open up the museum to the public, including a front door, increasing the visibility of the museum, its collections and activities.

Part of the museums interest was to improve the welcome, and to involve the visitors and other users in the museum, developing a community feel.

The FOH engagement with the redevelopment itself was limited, the new displays were designed by me and our education officer. We did however work with focus groups and used visitor tracking to design the new layout of the museum.

There is a new FOH team, mostly comprised of volunteers as we wanted to increase the numbers of people engaged with the museum and with the visitors. This is a large team, which is positive in some respects, but it does mean that there are now a large number of people to gather together when group consultation etc. is required.

The team is still very small compared to other museums but the engagement of FOH and visitor services in the redevelopment and planning is not as far along as it would ideally be. This is partly due to reluctance from curators to engage with them, but both teams are looking for different things from the visitors.

Problems in communication between curators and other staff: ‘I don’t have time for this now’

Walk-throughs are now being arranged for the FOH staff over a couple of sessions during the install of the temporary exhibitions, this allows them to get an overview of the exhibition, to learn things that aren’t necessarily in the exhibition text and to ask any questions of the curator. However, this is a brief moment and is often late in the exhibition development when the curator is at their busiest so least able to deal with questions/inquiries once the time scheduled for the FOH tour is over. If it were much earlier in the development stage, the FOH team would be involved in the current exhibition so it would not be the ideal time for them to be engaging with a future exhibition. A balance needs to be found in the different schedules of the two teams.

Ideally focus groups would be involved in the development of exhibitions, but as the budget will not always allow for this, FOH provide key information regarding visitor behaviours and interests as well as how the layout of the exhibition will affect the demands made upon the staff, e.g. staffing numbers, as well as how it will affect people’s movement through the space.

An example of the importance of FOH feedback was during the Buddha’s Word exhibition. There was concern that the altarpiece constructed in the space would be treated as a ritual altar, as opposed to an exhibition display. Towards the end of the exhibition run, an ‘extra’ Buddha was introduced to the space as an interactive alternative to the display altar.

However, this Buddha attracted offerings as per a ritualistic altar which was not something that had been anticipated, and created issues with regards to how these offerings were treated.

**1415 – Front of House support. Culture Finder App demonstration:** Hannah Kershaw, Digital Associate, University of Cambridge Museums

The Culture Finder App project has been in progress and planning for around a year, and the aim is to create a platform for people to plan their journey to Cambridge through the objects within the museums and around the town as well as the museums and the better known locations themselves.

Through several rounds of feedback from museum staff, the system has been adapted to address various concerns that were brought up, such as the prior need to sign in through Facebook and how users created their tours.

<http://www.culturefinder.org.uk/#!/intro>

**1430 – *Lights, Camera, Action!* SHARE first annual Volunteer Awards 2015 and Mystery Shopping Phase 2:** Simon Floyd, SHARE Co-Ordinator, SHARE Museums East

This is the 7th meeting of the FOH forum and 2 initiatives have directly sprung from this forum, the Volunteer Awards and Mystery Shopping, which are both open to all museums in the East.

The FOH forum works on the principles that the involved organisations contribute what they can for free (and that all contributions are equally valued), that everyone involved benefits and it works on a peer-peer basis wherever possible. John Orna-Ornstein, Head of Museums at the Arts Council, has described the network at ‘Exemplary’.

A program supporting volunteers has been developed, using a 3 pronged strategy: Volunteer Development Cohorts, a Volunteer Coordinators’ Forum (akin to the Front of House Forum) and the Volunteer Awards which are being launched today, thanks to a suggestion from Amanda Lightstone and Nikki Hughes.

The steering group partners for the Volunteer Awards are University of Cambridge Museums, National Museums Scotland, Imperial War Museum Duxford, Hertfordshire’s Museums Development Officer, Chelmsford Museum, Bridget Yates and David Blackburn.

So far this project has been researched, a large amount of work has gone into deciding the process of nomination, the award categories and the criteria on which they will be judged.

There are 7 categories:

-Bringing Innovation

-Going the Extra Mile

-Front of House Volunteer

-Behind the Scenes

-Outstanding Young Volunteer

-Volunteer Management

-Community

All volunteers can be nominated, in some cases this includes Trustees but please check the guidance first.

The Judges are looking for volunteers who make them think:

-‘I wish I’d thought of that’

-‘That’s really made a positive difference’

-‘What amazing commitment’

-‘This group/person really understands what their museums needs’

-‘I wish we had more groups/people like this in the region’

-‘We can easily use this project/result to inspire others’

So if this makes you think of any of your volunteers, please nominate them!

The Judges’ areas of expertise cover a wide field, including Brian Horner, from Volunteer Norfolk, Bridget Yates who runs the Understanding Museums course, Tim Williams, the Development Director of Archant Publications (representing the PR side), Sarah Lloyd, History Professor at University of Hertfordshire (covering the academic side) and a Senior Manager from John Lewis Cambridge who has yet to be confirmed (for the business side).

The nominations process is now open, with all the information and forms on the SHARE website. The deadline is Friday 26 March, the nominees will be shortlisted in April, judged in May and then will be announced on 4 June in Bury St Edmunds.

The prizes on offer are invitations to the award ceremony for all nominees, a certificate also for all nominees and a trophy to keep for the winners of the categories.

The Mystery Shopper Scheme came from a need that had been identified by those in the FOH Forum, and it’s by a Steering Committee consisting of Museum of London, Welwyn Hatfield, University of Cambridge Museums, Norfolk Museums Service and SHARE.

The aims of this scheme are to raise the profile of Visitor Services, to monitor the quality of the services, to encourage staff development and to gather new income, insight and ideas.

The Pilot Scheme ran last summer (2014) on a reciprocal basis, all museums involved both received and initiated visits. The organisations involved were Museums of London, Norfolk Museum Services, University of Cambridge Museums, Ely Museum and Welwyn Hatfield.

The scheme provided an objective assessment of the organisations communications, whether over the phone or via the website. It produced feedback on the welcome visitors received, whether the information given was appropriate and covered the necessities. The museums were also rated on their facilities, their displays and activities/catering/ retail where applicable. This produces an all-round view of the museum and its FOH staff.

The Pilot proved that the scheme was useful, and it provided a dual benefit, both from the feedback museums received from their mystery shoppers and the experiences that their staff had when visiting the other museums. Adjustments have been made to the administration, the training, the structure of the scheme and the feedback.

2015’s Mystery Shopper Scheme will involve up to 18 museums (now recruiting till the end of March) with training on 17/18 April, and the visits running from April to October, with each museum committing to 6 visits. Again it will be reciprocal –give a visit, get a visit. Museums staff or volunteers can take part in the scheme, and SHARE will handle the allocation of the visits.

The Museums that apply must be able to commit at least 2 shoppers, ensure they attend training, visit the museums and gather the feedback. The Museums will also cover the costs of the visits, and be expected to use the feedback produced. Share is committing to recruiting the museums taking part, providing the training, allocating the visits and collating the data, providing visit feedback for all museums in the scheme, supporting the organisations involved, covering the coordination cost and evaluating the results.

The Pilot Scheme report will be up on the SHARE website soon, which can be used to take the case for Mystery Shoppers to trustees etc.

**Next SHARE Forum: Chelmsford Museum 10.15am - 3.30pm Thursday 11 June 2015 with keynote speaker John Orna Ornstein, Director of Museums Arts Council England**

Thank you to Nicky for organising today, to Lou for the minutes and to Liz for all her organising, and to all who came and contributed.

*Please get in touch with Linda, Amanda or Jane with any hot topic suggestions for June 2015*