# Experiencing the Tangible Past:
## the use of museums in History schoolteaching at secondary level in England

David Wills

The word 'museum' now covers a greater range of institutions than ever before: from the 'traditional' approach of the British Museum to the 'time-travel ride' of the Jorvik Viking Centre (see David 1992). Similarly, the experience which can be offered to visiting school parties, including the provision offered by the institution's education service, varies. A museum may be 'hands on', as is the Archaeological Resource Centre at York (booklet *Discover the ARC: a first guide*). Museum educators may personally lead a session, but in role - as a Victorian schoolteacher perhaps (*Museums Journal* 1993). However, in most cases, the schoolteacher will be leading the party. This is because even where a museum *has* an education department, there will often not be enough educators to handle all of the parties that visit: the Tower of London was said in 1991 to be receiving over eight hundred children per day, and to have only three museum teachers available (Hooper Greenhill 1991: 6).

This study does *not* set out to be a comprehensive review of the current provision offered by museums in England to schools. Its aim is to suggest that more could be being done to help secondary school History teachers to exploit the enormous educational resource which they represent. I shall, firstly, look at the values of using objects as learning tools, and at the nature of the questions which need to be asked of children in order to realise that potential. I shall go on to examine the role of museum education departments, and to make some general comments about their publications output. I shall finally look particularly at the opportunities for education offered by four traditional-style museums, since most museums in England are still quite 'traditional' in the type of experience they offer to the visitor. These have been chosen as examples of the four main categories of museum: national, local authority, university and independent. I shall be reviewing the information available to teachers who will themselves be directing the learning of their pupils during a visit to these institutions.*

## The role of objects in the schoolteaching of History

Objects from the past are important for education because they have an immediacy which texts do not - they are *tangible* (Lipe 1984: 4). They can offer the feeling of having an authentic contact our society and the societies which made them (ibid). Having a *photograph* of an object is not an adequate substitute: there is no sense of its proper scale, or its actual shade of colour, or of its 'feeling of age' (Durbin 1990: 6). Because they provoke this emotional response, objects can arouse the curiosity and enthusiasm of children (Durbin 1990: 4; Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 98). Research has suggested that children who learn through objects remember what they have learned longer than when the same ideas are communicated via the written or spoken word alone (Hooper-Greenhill 1987: 46; Durbin 1990: 5).

Learning using objects can also assist in the development of many important skills, including the ability to:
- observe and examine with accuracy
- communicate the visual information so received in another form with accuracy
- hypothesise and deduce - original form or function, for example (Pearce 1990: 185; Corbishley 1992: 1; Durbin 1990: 5).

The National Curriculum for England prescribed the use of 'artefacts' in History teaching at both primary and secondary level (Department of Education and Science 1991: 34). All too often, however, schools fail to realise the enormous potential of the objects on display in museums. Museums are seen not as places of learning in themselves, but as adjuncts to the classroom (see Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 114). Where pupils are asked to do tasks, these are often in the nature of making sure the pupils are paying attention, rather than being learning exercises in themselves. The worksheet produced by a primary school teacher for her pupils' visit to Ely Museum in April 1994 is a classic example of this approach. The questions require informational answers, without any *thought* about the objects in question being involved. For example:
'Roman central heating hypocaust. Draw the pattern that you can see on one of the tiles.'
'At the far end of the room are 5 drums. To which regiment do they belong?'
'Who won the world's first bicycle race? Where? When?'

In contrast to this is the approach suggested by Durbin, Morris and Wilkinson, which is a useful starting-point for the *sorts* of questions that can be asked of an object (1990: 7-12). My version of this follows.

1. Physical features: what does it look and feel like? (the first stage in analysing an object is observing its appearance)
- What colour, shape and size is it?
- What is it made of?
- How do you know?
- Is the object complete?
- Has it been altered, adapted, mended?

2. Construction: how was it made?
- Is it handmade or machine-made?
- How do you know?
- Was it made in a mould or in pieces?
- How has it been fixed together?

3. Function: what was it made for?
- How has the object been used?
- How *much* has the object been used? (signs of use - see under 1.)

4. Design: is it well designed?
- Why is it the particular shape it is?
- Does it do the job it was intended to do *well*? (is it a *practical* shape?)
- Why do you think that it was made of these particular materials?

- Is it decorated?
- How is it decorated?
- Why does it have this decoration?

5. Value: what is it worth?
- in symbolic terms?
- in economic terms?
- in historical terms?

## Museum education

'Education' has during recent years been regarded as an area of expansion within the museum world (Pearce 1990: 186). In a recent survey of museum education services, almost a fifth of respondents had experienced growth in staff funding and services since 1990, although a further quarter reported *cuts* (Conybeare 1993: 14). In the year 1992/93, according to the same survey, almost 65% of museums had some form of education service (Conybeare 1993: 15). The impetus for this can, I believe, be attributed to the feeling, beginning in the 1980s, that the public should get value for public money spent on the past (Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 135); the feeling that publicly-funded bodies such as English Heritage should not merely be concerned with the preservation of archaeological material but also for 'promoting the public's enjoyment and knowledge' of it (English Heritage 1986: leaflet *The Work of English Heritage*). Museums were in some ways being persuaded to be 'accountable' to the public. Not only had they to persuade more people to come through their doors, they also had to give the visitor a better experience once they got inside (Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 66ff). Museum education departments are one solution to the problem of poor communication between museum and visitor. Their brief is to produce better communication between exhibits and a specific audience (Gee 1979: 66).

The necessity for such a communication is increased by the unwillingness or inability of museum curators to effectively communicate with a large section of their potential audience. It is the curators who largely organise what the public sees, although often in consultation with other professionals such as museum designers and educators (Hall 1987: 23). Far too much of what I term 'object-worship' is still evident in museums today. The best example of this occurring is, I believe, the British Museum.

The British Museum certainly *intends* to teach its visitors about history. This is suggested by former Director Sir David Wilson's claim that it collects objects for their academic and historical value, and very rarely because they are 'stunningly beautiful' (Wilson 1989: 25). In practice, though, the British Museum is today, as Pitt-Rivers found it in the nineteenth century, 'simply bewildering' as an educational museum (Hudson 1987: 32). This is due to the lack of *context* given to the object presented. For example, we are given facts about ancient sculpture - who made it, what it is made of, when it was made - and so we are encouraged to worship the object itself. We are not encouraged to think about what it might tell us about the society which produced it. To do this would require the exhibition of less objects and of more models and reconstructions, which, I think, its personnel could not bear to do because of their (understandable) infatuation with the wonderful things in their care. David Wilson has written that 'the public are interested in original objects....not in models, copies or

dioramas' (Wilson 1989: 119). He may be right, but without more historical background, the objects mean very little to the majority of visitors who see them. This is why museum education departments are so vital as a source of communication.

Children are only one of the audiences which museum educators are trying to reach. With the arrival of a National Curriculum, museum educators had a new *focus* for their efforts with schoolchildren: departments now knew what *every* school was doing, and could market its promotional output accordingly. A recent OFSTED survey showed that most teacher-training sessions provided by museums were directly related to the National Curriculum (Office for Standards in Education 1993: section 7). One institution at least went so far as to design a display along National Curriculum lines: exhibits in the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry' s Xperiment! gallery were closely matched to the Attainment Targets in Science (Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 73).

However, the publications produced by museums often, in my view, have not kept up with the importance for learning attached to objects in the History National Curriculum. Firstly, all too often, museums do not give their attention equally to the needs of primary and secondary school teachers. An OFSTED survey of INSET sessions provided for teachers by museums and galleries recorded that 'The great majority of INSET sessions in 1991-92 were designed for primary phase teachers.' (Office for Standards in Education 1993: section 6) Secondly, too many publications produced by museums for teachers still too closely resemble what I consider to be one of the least impressive museum-inspired publications I have ever seen. I am referring to *Information for Teachers on the Archaeological Collection* of The Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (as it was then known) in Cambridge, produced by a Working Party for the Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely Education Committee. It consists simply of a *description* of what is to be found in the Museum, with no suggestions as to how the displays could be used by teachers. To be fair, the publication claims to have a 'final section....of worksheets and teaching programmes which have been used in the museum', but this is clearly not part of the main publication, since they are not contained in the - apparently undamaged - copy which I have studied.

These general observations made, I shall now turn my attention to publications currently produced by my selection of museums. The museums are considered in order of size.

## Museum case-studies

### A national museum: the British Museum

The British Museum Education Service has a teaching staff of eight, with a further eight support staff (correspondence with Mr J. Reeve, 13/4/1994). Its publication output is prodigious, well-informed and up-to-date. Its regular *Information for Teachers* gives details of forthcoming exhibitions and study days for teachers. The example from 1992-3 illustrates how firmly the BM connects its output to the National Curriculum: in the margin are given the parts of the National Curriculum to which the events listed are relevant. For example,

'Europeans in Caricature 1770-1830' - Key Stage 4 History

"Imperial China' - Key Stage 3 History.

Separate leaflets are available giving more information about how the Museum can fit into the Art, History and Religion curricula (*Information for Teachers* Spring and Summer 1994).

The Museum also produces a number of full-scale 'resource packs' relating to the various historical periods represented by its collections. Again, they are closely related to the topics demanded by the National Curriculum. The pack on *The Roman Empire* has a useful chart reproducing the topics of Core Study Unit 1 at Key Stage 3 with the parts of museum galleries which are most relevant to these topics indicated alongside ('Rome at the British Museum - orientation for teachers'). Much further useful background information for teachers is provided in other sections of the pack, including: the text of the panels in the 'Rome, City and Empire' gallery; notes on the Roman army; and a really excellent brief guide to the current state of knowledge about the Roman period, which I would recommend for all teachers, by Simon James ('The hitch-hiker's guide to the Roman Empire'). Nowhere, however, do we here have suggestions for ways for school parties to use the museum except in very broad terms. This is equally true of another pack, on *The Celts*.

However, other packs, as well as having lots of useful information, have italicised questions relating to particular objects which can be seen in the Museum. Examples of this type of publication are *Women in the Middle Ages*, *The Crusades in the Islamic World*, and 'Religion in Roman Britain' (part of the larger resource pack on *Roman Britain*). These questions, which could usefully be put to pupils, range from straightforward observation -

'Can you see how she arranged her meetings with her lover?' (from *Women*)

and drawing -

'Draw the design in here to remind you' (*Crusades*)

to comparison of design -

'Compare the treatment of the hair with a portrait of Christ on a gold glass medallion' ('Religion'),

comparison of construction -

'What are the similarities in the way they are made and decorated?' (*Crusades*),

explanation -

'What do you think the chains and the position of his right hand signify?' ('Religion'),

inference -

'How can you tell that this ring may also have been a gift?' (*Women*),

and considerations of motivation -

'Why do you think a king might commission an object decorated with this subject?' (*Women*).

The rest of the text is not at a suitable level for pupils, so these packs are not in themselves worksheets, but they give teachers some examples of the *sorts* of questions which pupils could be asked to consider during a visit. The approach which a visit could take as a *whole* is not suggested. Nevertheless, the British Museum's published guidance to schools is certainly extremely helpful and extensive, though it goes only so far.

A local authority museum: City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

Bristol's local authority-funded museum (and its satellite institutions) currently has eight full-time and three part-time education staff (correspondence with Mr A. Mathieson, 8/4/1994). The education service says that 'We do not tell teachers how our material fits into the curriculum but do concentrate on ways of using a variety of material (for history - artefacts, maps, documents, photographs, film, oral history tapes, sites, etc.).' (ibid.) To this end, the museum's list of publications includes items on *History from Photographs* and *Archive Maps*. However, although the city museum has a number of items of interest to pupils at secondary level, the majority of the publications which are relevant to History are directed at primary teaching; and of those which are not, none is targeted *specifically* at secondary pupils (two cover 'Key Stage 2 to A Level', and the others have no designated audience). A large-scale guide to Avon museums has only appeared in print for *primary* schools (Area Museum Council for the South West). This book is admirable in some of its advice for the use of a museum: it directs us to the book by Durbin, Morris and Wilkinson (1990), in order to teach children how to look at objects; and it tells us to avoid simple 'label copying' and work which could equally well have been done in the classroom (Area Museum Council for the South West: 4, 6). In terms of History, however, the book does not offer any concrete suggestions of what to do in a museum. This is disappointing. This gap is only partly filled for primary schools by two other publications which give examples of previous work done by schools using artefacts and documentary sources respectively.

A university museum: Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

The museum has four full-time curators, but no education officer (correspondence with Dr C. Chippindale, 17/5/1994). Some guides produced externally in recent years have attempted to fill this gap in personnel.

Two guides to the anthropology displays, which cover peoples who could be covered as part of the History National Curriculum (Department of Education and Science 1991: 48), offer suggested tasks for pupils to do whilst in the museum. In the guide, which has a short section on 'The Plains Indians', to the main anthropology gallery (J. Smith. *Teacher's Package: the Anthropology Gallery*), some are not particularly exciting:

comprehension/observation exercises -

> 'Find these objects which are in the centre of the Museum and note where they come from.'

and some rather pointless drawing exercises -

> 'Find object no. 18. Draw the object in the space provided.'

Other suggested activities are more rewarding, including:

some rather more taxing and worthwhile drawing exercises -

> 'Draw your own teepee using ideas from the Plains Indians Case to decorate it.'

and -

'Here is a picture of a[n] Aborigine boomerang: can you suggest what it was used for.'

This last exercise has moved on from simply making sure that we are paying attention to getting us to *really look* at an object. We are being asked to consider - to *deduce* - its function. And, ultimately, how we know what it is for? One of the school/home

activities could in fact be the focus of the entire visit, with the pupils collecting information from the museum in their own way in order to complete this major task: 'Imagine you are a different person in a different land: write a diary describing a typical day.'

A second guide (C. Patel. *Teachers' Package: The Americas 1492*) is for a temporary exhibition, which has more relevance to primary schools, where 'the Aztecs' forms part of the National Curriculum in History (Department of Education and Science 1991: 29). It is worth noting here that the guide is again asking the right questions:

> 'Why does the bowl have an eagle on it?
> Why does this bowl not look like our pottery today? (Because they did not use glazes.)
> Why not?'

The archaeology gallery had in 1990 some suggested information sheets and worksheets for Upper Junior and Lower Secondary pupils produced for it by a seconded teacher (Rock, A.L. 1990. *Information Sheets and Supporting Worksheets for Teachers: World Prehistory and Local Archaeology, University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge*, Cambridge: Cambridgeshire County Council). This publication is disappointing for the purposes of secondary History for two reasons. Firstly, it has suggestions for only *some* of the periods represented by the display in the museum. Namely, it does not cover anything after the Roman invasion of Britain. Secondly, the proposed exercises are, overall, less satisfactory than those in the anthropology guides. Again, many are comprehension or 'find and draw' type:

> 'Find (and draw) a stone tool used in farming' (B.3)
> 'How was the flint brought to the surface?' (B.6).

Some other questions do move beyond this level:
'Why do you think man was so interested in drawing animals?' (C.3)
'What is your theory to explain the use of the stag antlers?' (E.5)
'Imagine that you have iron weapons. What advantages would you have over a user of bronze weapons?' (F.9)
But whilst some of the sheets here have a number of these more valuable exercises together (F.16-17, concerned with Case 38), others are comprised almost wholly of unsatisfactory questions ('Farming', D.4-D.9).

<u>An independent museum: Ely Museum</u>
Being a small institution, Ely Museum has no education officer, and its curator is only part-time (interview with Dr R.J. Carman, 29/4/1994). The curator endeavours to be there when school parties plan to visit (ibid.), and loan boxes are available (R.J. Carman. *Ely Museum School Scheme*). Currently, it is only primary schools which visit the museum (interview with Dr R.J. Carman, 29/4/1994). The museum has one publication addressed to schools (ibid.). It is comprised of lists of the contents of the loan boxes and of the museum displays, and also a section of 'Some historical themes illustrated by the displays' (R.J. Carman. *Ely Museum School Scheme*). This publication is unfortunately not related to the National Curriculum: at the very least, it would have been useful for the displays to have been grouped according to Study Units. The final section is potentially of great use to teachers, but it simply lists the themes, not suggesting *how* they might be explored or approached by visiting parties. The only suggestion is that 'the use of worksheets is strictly limited': the curator does

not recommend the use of worksheets because he believes that children should be allowed to explore the museum for themselves (interview with Dr R.J. Carman, 29/4/1994).

The special character of this Museum is alluded to in the booklet: the displays 'are designed to provoke and challenge rather than simply present "facts".' Yet is not mentioned that it could thus be extremely useful to plan a visit with the History National Curriculum's Attainment Target 2 ('Interpretations of History') particularly in mind. The following is an example of text from the Fenland Room:
[the 'Undertakers' and 'Adventurers'] 'were responsible for the drainage works, but were encouraged by the national perception - not shared by Fenland people - that drainage was in the country's best interest....Its impact on the environment and society of the Fenland can never be reversed....the ordinary people of the Fens....had little chance to influence these enormous changes.'

## Conclusion

I have argued that exercises *merely* designed to make sure that pupils are on-task, that they are looking at displays and reading labels, are not exploiting the full value as educational resources of objects in museums. Pupils *do* need help to make the leap from looking at objects in a superficial way, to asking questions of objects and using them as sources of historical information. Worksheets comprised of *these* sorts of questions *are*, I believe, of value to help pupils to remain in this more analytical mode of thinking throughout their visit.

Currently, I believe, museum educators are failing to meet the requirements of teachers in several respects. Most importantly, teachers need to be given *specific* suggestions for *valuable* tasks which they can use with pupils on visits to a particular institution. It may be asked why teachers cannot be expected to find these approaches for themselves? But, I suggest, museum educators should be taking the lead, since it is they who have had extensive experience of teaching through objects (Hooper-Greenhill 1987: 44).

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