

## Museum Visits Re-visited

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In 1994, I wrote in this journal about the use made of museums by schools in England in their teaching of History (Wills 1994). I looked at examples of the extent, nature and quality of education services offered by museums. I concluded that, in many cases, the tasks suggested by museums for visiting pupils were educationally rather limited. In short, the potential of museum objects as learning resources was being squandered. As I write (1997), in the intervening three years there have been some important developments in this field. The approach to using objects and the types of questioning of pupils suggested by Durbin, Morris and Wilkinson (1990), which I outlined in my previous article, seems to have become the orthodoxy, at least among museum education theorists (Chadwick and Stannett 1995 : 37, 74, 75; see section I below). A major new survey and report has been published - the first of its kind - on museum education services throughout England (Anderson 1997). And, at a personal level, further experience of putting my ideas into practice has led to changes of emphasis in my own use of museums when taking pupils. I felt that the time had come for me to re-visit museum education.

### I

In my previous article, I noted that the provision by museums of education services for schools was patchy. Some had education officers and published suggested tasks (often worksheets) for pupils, some did not.

The report to the Department of National Heritage of January 1997 - which describes itself as 'the first comprehensive report in the U.K. on museum education' (Anderson 1997 : vii) - has confirmed with statistics some of my suppositions about the state of museum education, and raised a number of the same key issues and conclusions as my article of 1994. As my examples taken from the different types of museum in this country (national, local authority, university, independent) suggested (Wills 1994 : 121-125), the efforts made by museums to meet the needs of school pupils are variable.

The report has found that provision for museum education is a patchwork. Approximately 50 % of museums (usually but not always the smaller institutions) make no deliberate provision for education, 15 % make almost none and in the remaining 35 % it ranges from basic to comprehensive.' (Anderson 1997 : vii; see also p. 14). This evidence was the result of two questionnaire surveys which were 'the most comprehensive yet undertaken on museum education' - Anderson 1997 : 11; see also iv for details of the conduct of these.)

The report emphasised, as I did (Wills 1994 : 118-9), the special value of museum objects for education, including as vehicles for the learning of skills such as observation, communication and deduction.

'Museums at their finest are universal educational institutions of immense expressive power and authority ... Through museums, we have direct contact with people of all ages and cultures ... The unique characteristic of museum learning is that it is based

on first-hand, concrete experience of real objects, specimens and works of art ... They have a responsibility to help people to acquire skills which are distinctive to museums and heritage sites, skills of perception, feeling and imagination as well as analysis, critical evaluation and communication ...' (Anderson 1997 : xii, 6, 9).

The report points out the necessity for schools in the 1990s to use museums as a resource (see Wills 1994 : 119) :

'The introduction of the National Curriculum in England ... has provided clarity and focus for schools' use of museums. For the first time, schools are formally encouraged to provide children with access to a wide range of primary sources ...' (Anderson 1997 : 50).

But it goes further than the current legal position, and makes a recommendation that :  
'the Government should ask public bodies with responsibility for curricula and assessment to encourage every school ... to make regular, effective and creative use of museums ...' (ibid. 60).

The report echoes my concerns that, currently, schools fail to realise the learning potential of museums because the tasks set for pupils require purely *informational* answers (Wills 1994 : 119; see section II below), when it states that :

'Galleries are not effective at communicating detailed information or complex concepts.' (Anderson 1997 : 23).

Finally, the report calls on museum professionals to encourage visitors to use their resources in a more valuable way :

'It is far more important that museums should enable the public to develop these skills [i.e. of analysis, critical evaluation, etc.] than that they should simply give them information about their collections. We are born with a capacity for these kinds of learning, but they will only develop if museums, as the experts in this field, actively help us as children and adults to acquire them.' (ibid. 9; see also 30).

It calls for more guidance and training from museum professionals for other educators (see Wills 1994 : 118, 125) :

'The effective use of museums as a learning resource depends primarily on teachers and other educators ... Some educational institutions recognise that museum learning requires new skills, and invite museum educators to run training courses for their staff and students ... [but] The current ad hoc voluntary arrangements are not sufficient to provide teachers and other educators with the help and guidance they need.' (Anderson 1997 : 66).

It 'recommends' that :

'museum directors and governing bodies should ensure that education is central to their missions policies and strategic plans, and is accepted by all staff as a core function of the museum' (ibid. 22).

The final sentence of the report leaves us with a reminder that :

'Museums are a vast public educational resource that awaits development. They are a resource we can no longer afford to neglect.'

## II

I suggested in 1994 that tasks for pupils to complete in a museum should not simply be designed to make them read a label. Instead, pupils should be encouraged to study

an object closely in order to explore such issues as its manufacture and its intended and actual use.

However, in spite of the results of modern thinking, such as that of the author of the report for the Department of National Heritage, professional educators continue to attempt to use museum galleries to impart specific factual information. Beyond this, however, the exact information to be collected by pupils is often regarded as almost irrelevant : the setting of 'closed' questions is imply seen as a way of getting pupils to investigate a gallery. I continue to hear of visits which have taken place this year (1997) for which the tasks set were mainly concerned with the gathering of names and dates.

My approach when organising a museum visit has been to set very specific questions about the objects themselves (rather than their labels). I give here some examples which I used during a visit to the Imperial War Museum in 1996 (the intention behind the questions is included in square brackets) :

'How do you know immediately that this case does not contain equipment which was used in battle ?' [to promote discussion of the impracticality of a *dress* uniform].

'How are these two helmets different ? Which is better for protecting the head ?' [to promote discussion of design and function].

'Explain how these cigarettes are an example of *propaganda*.' [how packaging can be used to influence people].

Such questions do, however, only go so far. I still believe in encouraging pupils to make specific deductions from objects. But I began to realise that in asking such questions which focus very closely on the objects, the pupils were thinking about them *in isolation*, rather than using them as *evidence* for wider historical issues. What did it matter that a pupil could interpret the picture on the side of a cigarette packet ? What would be more valuable was for him or her to put *several* such examples *together* to produce a hypothesis of how propaganda was used during the First World War.

Such issues were at the forefront of my mind when, in May 1997, I was asked to produce a worksheet for the gallery 'Time Present and Time Past' on behalf of NatWest Group. The worksheet is reproduced at the end of this article and comments on the reasoning behind the worksheet follow here.

### III

'Time Present and Time Past' is a small gallery at the headquarters of NatWest Group in London. In the words of its publicity leaflet it :

'focuses on developments in banking from the introduction of paper money to electronic payments. Artefacts on display document the influence of technology, relationships with customers and social aspects of banking life.'

I was commissioned to attempt to make the museum more accessible to younger visitors by producing a worksheet containing activities and ideas for children up to the age of 14. So that the worksheet would be accessible to children of various ages and abilities within this range, I attempted to make these tasks as 'open' as possible. Although I intended the tasks to be 'entertaining' - since it was thought that young visitors would be coming as part of a family unit rather than a school party - I also wanted them to be challenging and educational, addressing particular skills and historical, economic, technological and social themes which arise from the display. Notes on each section of the worksheet follow.

1) *What things are used for.* This does not direct children to particular objects, or even to one area of the museum. Instead, it encourages children to 'investigate', to forage around in search of answers. The principle of encouraging children to think about the *function* of objects is preserved, however. The alternative would have been to direct children to, for example, a set of money scales and ask "What are they used for?". My revised approach encourages children to think about 'function' as an overarching issue.

2) *How people's lives have changed.* This *does* encourage children to accumulate 'facts', but is TRUE/FALSE format ensures that children do not waste time writing out 'informational' answers. More important is that, again, children 'forage' around the gallery in a thematic way, and that they think about the changes in women's lives and status which the objects represent.

3) *Design.* A more challenging question, focusing on the relationship between design and technology.

4) *Technology.* An exercise designed to encourage children to think about the functions of machines and their effects on the workforce and customers, using any objects as evidence.

5) *Attracting the customers* will hopefully encourage children to evaluate the messages and effectiveness of differing advertising approaches.

#### IV

In summary, it seems that - as I had hoped in 1994 - museum professionals have realised the need to promote the idea that museum objects have a number of educational values, beyond simply imparting 'factual' information. This has not yet always been taken up and made apparent in the tasks prepared by class teachers for their pupils. My current approach to visits seeks to encourage pupils to both analyse individual objects and to use them as evidence to answer more general historical issues.

#### References

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Wills, David, 1994, 'Experiencing the Tangible Past : the use of museums in History schoolteaching at secondary level in England', *International Society for History Didactics : Mitteilungen*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 118-126.

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### Time Present and Time Past

**Welcome ! This museum tells the story of NatWest Group. It also tells the story of how banks have changes, and the stories of people who have worked in them. We hope that the ideas on this sheet will help you to get the most from your visit.**

#### What things are used for

There are lots of objects in this museum. Find one object which matches each of numbers 1-6. Write what it is in the empty column.

1	Something used to check the value of money.	
2	Something used to help protect money when it was being moved.	
3	Something used as payment, instead of coins and notes.	
4	Something used by a bank to write records of their business in.	
5	Something for people to keep their savings in at home	
6	Something used to copy letters	

#### How people's lives have changes

Look out for some items which tell you about women working at the Bank. Find out whether these sentences are **T R U E** or **F A L S E**.

1	In the 1920s, women operated some of the earliest accounting machines.	<b>TRUE</b>	<b>FALSE</b>
2	In 1922, bank managers thought that women were suitable for all tasks.	<b>TRUE</b>	<b>FALSE</b>
3	The Bank tried to recruit young women in the 1960s to become typists or clerks.	<b>TRUE</b>	<b>FALSE</b>
4	The Bank's first female manager was Betty Nichols, in 1987.	<b>TRUE</b>	<b>FALSE</b>

### Design

Look out for the section on *Methods of payment - bills of exchange and cheques*. How has the **design** of cheques changes over the years? (for example, how has the shape, size, colour, printing, illustrations changes?) Can you think of **why** any of these changes to cheques might have happened?

### Technology

Say whether you **AGREE** or **DISAGREE** with this statement: '*Machines have become more and more important in banking.*'

#### **AGREE/DISAGREE**

Try to say **why** you answered the way you did. (in other words, what **evidence** do you have for your answer?)

How will **new technology** change the way people use banks in the **future**?

### Attracting the customers

Look at section on *Different products - young people*.

Which way of attracting young people to

- open a bank account, or to

- save money

do you think works the best ? why ?

Which do you think is the worst ? why ?

### Summary

During the last three years there have been some important developments in reflecting about the use of museum objects as learning resources.

The efforts made by museums to meet the needs of school pupils appeared to be rather variable. Although museum objects can be of great value for the learning of skills such as observation, communication and deduction, schools rather seemed to stress the informational dimension of learning from objects. In general, museum professionals opted for a similar approach.

David Wills stresses the importance of the exploration of an object by setting very specific questions (about the object itself, not about its label). What might be even more valuable is the use of the objects as evidences for wider historical issues. These ideas have been worked out in a worksheet for the gallery "Time Present and Time Past".