

INTERPRETATION, EVALUATION AND SOCIAL HISTORY IN MUSEUMS

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996/97 Leeds University Business School carried out a pilot study on behalf of the Social History Curators Group (SHCG), the broad aim of which was to investigate the most effective methods of presenting history, through an evaluation of best practice at museums and other heritage sites. The study hoped to identify best practice in communicating history to museum visitors, to inform both the development of exhibitions and the amendment of existing displays. The pilot study reported in this article was effectively a scoping study of the issues identified in a review of the existing literature and a questionnaire sent to SHCG members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is not always easy to identify where to find reliable research about the effectiveness of communication in a museum context, although the emergence of 'visitor studies' as a recognised discipline in the UK has helped to provide a home for a wide range of studies. A great deal of museum visitor research has been carried out in the USA, mostly in art museums, science centres, zoos and aquaria. Relatively little has been done (either in USA or UK) in history museums. Generally speaking, British history curators have shown greater professional interest in content and educational potential rather than in audiences or indeed interpretative methodologies, although those have certainly not been completely neglected. (Kavanagh, 1989).

One reason for the large amount of studies in the USA is that it has long been established practice for funding agencies to demand project evaluations as a condition of making a grant (Falk and Dierking, 1992). Evaluation has slowly become accepted as an important part of museums work in the UK. The Heritage Lottery Fund - since 1995 the most significant source of funding for museum projects - has introduced (particularly in its Museum and Galleries Access Fund) a greater emphasis on evaluation. A lot of evaluative research is currently being carried out in the UK by consultants commissioned by museums or by students on museum or heritage courses. Most of this is (and will probably be)

unpublished. There is therefore a need to co- ordinate and publish existing research.

As pressure increases from stakeholders to see evidence that museums (individually and collectively) are achieving clearly articulated targets, visitor research is likely to become an increasingly important part of many curators' work plans. There is a need to empower museum curators to conduct this research, but very much taking into account the realities of resource constraints. There is no one right or wrong way to evaluate museum displays or activity if data is collected in an orderly and systematic manner to solve an identified problem. Many experienced researchers advocate the combined use of different methodologies to give greater rigour, reliability and depth to their work (Bicknell, 1995). Small-scale research is valid, particularly where it is informed by a major demographic survey, or can be triangulated by different research methods to build up a holistic picture.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

In May 1996 a previously piloted questionnaire was sent to a sample of 300 museums, subjectively selected on the basis of their recognised social history collections. Seventy-three questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 24%, not high enough to encourage sophisticated statistical analysis of the returns. Many questionnaires did however include data on more than one museum or site under the same governing body of an organisation. The responses need to be interpreted carefully. The response rate was low and those responding are likely to include the more innovative and forward thinking professionals. Positive results may therefore be exaggerated and negative ones understated.

TYPES OF MUSEUM RESPONDENT

Respondents were asked to indicate from a list of eight opinions, which most appropriately described their museum. The 92 responses included multiple-site returns and a few instances where the respondent felt their museum included 2 or more of the types offered.

The 'other' museums classed themselves as Folk Museum, Historic Fort, Maritime Museum, Motor Museum or Transport Museum. There is no benchmark or total population data available for the whole local/social history sector against which to compare this sample. What is apparent - if this sample is reliable - is that while four categories account for over 80% of history museums in the UK, there is a significant 'tail' of specialised museums who do not want to be classified more broadly.

Table 1. Types of museums

Description	Number	Percentage
Local/social History Museum	36	39
Social history galleries/department within a multi-disciplinary museum	18	20
Industrial Museum	12	13
"Period" historic house	10	11
Other Museums	8	9
Industrial site (single type - e.g. watermill)	4	4
Heritage Centre	3	3
Archaeological site or interpretation centre	1	1
Total	92	100

Where the responses to this question proved the most interesting was in a comparison between the description ticked by the respondent, the brief description of 'permanent' history displays given in response to another question, and the information given in guidebooks or publicity leaflets. Looked at separately each did not always confirm the description given by the other sources. For example one museum describes itself as a 'Folk Museum', obviously unhappy with the option of 'Social History Museum' offered and yet describes its displays as social history collections. Others describe themselves as 'period' houses or industrial museums and yet clearly local and social history interpretation and collections form a large part of the displays. Some describe themselves as 'Local/Social History Museums' and yet admit that displays contain little local or social history context.

The above responses beg the question, what element of a museum defines its category - the site, the building, the collections, the way they are interpreted or the way that the staff and public perceive them? In the context of this project it is important to know what the differences between museums actually are, (and if they are significant), how curators present them and how

the public perceive them. It is also important to discover what barriers, if any, are created by the way in which the public perceive particular museums, and if these can be removed by changing the museum's image through its displays and in its publicity.

PRINCIPAL METHODS OF INTERPRETATION USED IN PERMANENT AND TEMPORARY DISPLAYS/EXHIBITIONS

Table 2 below shows quite clearly that the approach to interpretation in history museums remains generally conservative. Over 60% of museums principally use a basic combination of labelled exhibits in cases, interpretative panels and exhibits on open access. About one third seem to rely heavily on interpretative

Table 2. Principal methods of interpretation used in permanent and temporary displays/exhibitions

Method	Permanent Displays Percentage (n = 73)	Temporary Exhibitions Percentage (n = 62)
Labelled exhibits in cases plus associated interpretative panels	74	71
Exhibits on open access (not cased)	71	52
Labelled exhibits in cases	60	60
Film/video/slides integrated into display	42	35
Interpretative panels with some exhibits	34	31
Objects available for touching/handling	33	24
Interactive display (non-computer)	33	35
Oral history evidence integrated into display	30	35
Replicas/reproductions used	27	21
Interactive display (computer)	23	8
Working exhibits integrated into displays and working regularly	21	3
Listening posts/audio tours	12	3
Integrated panels with few or no exhibits	10	15
Costumed interpreters every day	8	2
Storage areas visible/accessible	8	2
Regular guided tours (at least daily)	7	2

panels with some associated exhibits and nearly 10% say they principally have panels with few or no exhibits - even in their 'permanent' displays.

Five more possibly user-friendly methods do make an impact, being used by about one third of museums. They are:

- objects available for touching/handling (33%)
- working exhibits (23%)
- interactives (low and high tech) (33%)
- oral history material (30%)
- film/video/slides (42%)

All of these methods are tried and tested. They have been widely practiced and used for many years. They have all been advocated in publications, on museum studies courses and at conferences. It has to be asked why they are not more common place. Is it a resources issue or is there resistance to acknowledge and adopt these practices?

Comparing the frequency that different methods are employed in permanent displays and temporary exhibits is interesting although reveals nothing which practitioners will not already be familiar with. The practicalities of mounting temporary exhibitions may explain why there are fewer occasions when exhibits are on open access or available for touching/handling, why other media are used less, why there are fewer interactives and fewer working exhibits. At the same time labelled exhibits in cases and interpretative panels are equally popular in both. You are also more likely to find interpretative panels without exhibits in temporary exhibitions - the '2D' displays' which make both popular space - fillers and convenient vehicles for touring to non-museum venues such as libraries and community centres. The overall impression is that - in social history - temporary exhibitions tend to be the poorer relations of the permanent displays, a situation in marked contrast to the world of visual arts. A comparison of the status of visual arts and social history in many of our museums might encourage some reassessment of the role of temporary exhibitions, though the financial arguments - the importance of investing in a core infrastructure - will always be strong ones.

As Heritage Lottery Fund schemes are completed it will clearly be interesting to compare the interpretative approaches used with the (albeit rather crude) baseline indicated by this pilot research. As to the future, there does not yet seem to have been much serious thinking in respect of whether traditional displays are in fact the most appropriate medium for both enjoyment and learning in a museum context, or indeed for collections in Or Out of a museum.

The drive for greater accessibility to museums in general ought to encourage more radical thinking.

NON-EXHIBITION METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

The questionnaire explored two of the most common methods of interpreting history in a museum context (other than exhibitions) - publications and events.

The modern history museum seems to be well endowed with three things: postcards, information for teachers and worksheets for children. The latter are not as much in favour with museum educationalists as they once were, but there is evidence here that 80% or more of history museums have at least given some serious thought to schools' audiences. Furthermore, most of the other types of publications listed are available in nearly one half of the respondent museums. No detailed assessment of range, content, relevance, quality or authorship was attempted ' but the general picture is one of publications playing a substantial role in active and passive interpretation.

While 80% of history museums provide teachers' information packs and worksheets for children, only 66% appear to provide training sessions for teachers to - presumably - help them get the most out of a school visit to the museum. However, 60% arrange object handling sessions, probably mainly for school visits and a similar number organise holiday activities with an historical theme, again mainly for school-age children. Taking the data from Tables 3 and 4 together suggests a significant investment in resources by history museums with the objective of trying to maximise the educational potential of their collections.

Activities for both adults and children (out of school hours) are modestly represented in the survey results. Small scale living history events seem to have established themselves quite well (41%) and one in three museums run short courses in historical subjects. The latter is anecdotally reported as being an important growth area in those museums with appropriate facilities. Musical performances (with an historical theme assumed) have reached a similar status in history museums. Large scale living history enactment's will always be the domain of the few because of the space, facilities and resources required.

Table 3. Supportive publications used in history museums

Type	Number (n = 74)	percentage
Postcards	67	91
Teachers' education packs	61	82
Worksheets/activity sheets for children	60	81
Background histories in book/monograph forms	38	51
General guide book to the displays	35	47
Information sheets on particular exhibits	34	46
Museum trails	31	42
Other	11	15

Table 4. Educational events and activities

Type	Number (n = 68)	Percentage
Training sessions for teachers (specifically on history themes)	45	66
Object handling sessions	41	60
Holiday activities with an historical theme	40	59
Living history events (small scale)	28	41
Costumed interpretation for school parties	25	37
Short courses on historical subjects	20	29
Musical performances	20	29
Living History re-enactments (large scale eg Sealed Knot)	5	7
Other	11	16

EVALUATION

An important aspect of the questionnaire survey was to produce data on the degree to which exhibitions and history museums in general were being evaluated.

No attempt was made in this pilot study to ask any sophisticated in-depth questions. We therefore have to assume that the answers being offered refer to current or recent experience. On that basis about two-thirds of history museums have carried out visitor/user surveys, though we do not know how frequently they do so or if in the questionnaire responses and anecdotal evidence, however,

Table 5. Evaluation methods used in museums

Method	Number (n = 74)	Percentage
Visitor/user survey	48	65
Analysis of visitors' comments (written or verbal)	43	58
Self-filling questionnaires (in the museum)	34	46
Analysis of visitor figures (ie more than just monitoring)	33	45
Non-visitor market research	26	35
Evaluation of proposed exhibits at the design stage	13	18
Focus group study	11	15
Observation study	10	14
None	10	14
Analysis of media coverage (ie more Than just monitoring)	9	6
Other	6	8

suggests that the latter is very rare. It would seem that many of these museums use self-filling questionnaires as the basis for their visitor research. Although not highly regarded as a technique, they may be adequate if a small number of unsophisticated questions are being asked. Only one third of museums claims to have done any 'non-visitor' surveys which, given the importance attached to them in the literature (Hood, 1983), is disappointing. A relatively high number of history museums claim to analyse visitors' comments (58%) but disappointingly few seem to regularly analyse their visitor figures (45%). The analysis of visitors' comments is perhaps surprising given the lack of profile this technique receives in the literature.

Respondents' comments add some helpful qualitative information to the questionnaire data. Two thirds of the respondents claimed to use visitor/user surveys but in many cases they are clearly not carried out on a regular basis. As one admitted, "... last study carried out in 1991; now rather out of date". The scope and quality of questionnaire surveys vary enormously. Some are very focused, linked, for example, to specific activities and perhaps consisting of only three or four questions. Others are professionally conducted omnibus surveys. More common, though, appear to be surveys conducted by in-house staff or using students looking for a dissertation topic, using small samples not statistically tested for their validity. A few also draw on other people's surveys notably those prepared by Regional Tourist Boards. However, the overall picture does not inspire confidence. While the message that "doing visitors surveys is a good thing" may have got across, the practice is still patchy and the

application evidently often poor, despite the availability of both baseline statistics (Davies, 1994) and some sound advice on what to 'do' (Runyard, 1994). The recently formed Visitor Studies Group has much to do.

The use of Visitors' Comments Books was an unexpected finding. Many curators see these as an important source of qualitative information about their visitors. As one museum, for example, "we keep a visitors comments book which is read and signed by us each week". In local authority museums this may be the result of campaigns to improve responsiveness to customer comments (as part of wider customer care initiatives). Allied to the comments book was the occasional formal acknowledgement of the contribution that attendants can make. They are at the sharp end of visitor reactions and comments (good and bad) but are often an under-used source of intelligence. One museum did, however, have a system whereby attendants were encouraged to diligently record verbal comments made to them (or overheard). Self-filling questionnaires were widely used. They are a cost-effective way of getting a lot of basic information, usually of a qualitative kind. In many museums they combine a way of collecting visitor comments and suggestions, a complaints system, a visitor profiling method and a marketing tool (building a mailing list). They can also be used to help evaluate visitor reactions to an exhibition or activity, or indeed to the whole museum. Provided the limitations of the self-filling methodology are recognised and understood, they can be a very cost-effective way to compile almost instant feedback on an aspect of the museum's work.

There were relatively few comments on other methods. Three museums were enthusiastic about the benefits of analysing media coverage. While much of this can be manipulated, it does provide a simple means of demonstrating 'public' reaction to what the museum is doing. Visitor figures are analysed to identify seasonal trends but also to assess the possible benefits of changing opening hour patterns. Focus groups and observational studies are seemingly only used by the larger museums as part of front-end evaluation for major changes in presentation.

The questionnaire went on to ask respondents which (up to three) of a given list of nine evaluation techniques did they consider the most important (see Table 6 above). Most of the options on offer found some measure of favour with respondents, except those which require the evaluation of knowledge acquired as a result of visiting a museum, this despite the importance attached to it by museum educationalists (Jackson and Hann, 1994). Least popular of the rest - interestingly - were those which had an educational evaluation element or evaluated visitors' behaviour. Resources may of course be perceived as a significant barrier to using at least

Table 6. Evaluation techniques considered the most important

Technique	Number (n = 69)	Percentage
Finding out who the visitors are	64	93
Visitors' reactions to different types of exhibit	48	70
Visitors' likes and dislikes	41	59
Visitors' preferences for future developments	40	58
Visitors' perceptions of history before and after visiting	28	41
Visitors' behaviour in the gallery exhibition	26	38
Visitors' understanding of individual exhibits	21	30
Visitors' sum knowledge before and after visiting	5	7
Visitors' retention of detail after visiting	2	3

some of these techniques. The most popular forms of evaluation - visitor profiling (92%), visitor preferences (59%) and reactions to different exhibits (70%) were significantly biased towards planning the future.

On this evidence it would appear that social history curators are more interested in assessing the reactions to exhibits (as a measure of satisfaction or approval) rather than exploring the learning value of what they do. If further research confirmed this hypothesis then one might speculate that social history curators are more interested in engaging with their communities as a process than in longer term education and learning objectives.

INFLUENCES ON THE HISTORY CURATOR

Two questions (see Tables 7 and 8) attempted to explore what might be some of the important influences which shaped a history curator's approach to history interpretation. The results give an incomplete picture - much more sophisticated research would be needed beyond the pilot stage. But there are nevertheless some useful pointers to the possible value of future research. One interesting observation was that history curators appear to put much more faith in 'seeing' good practice at a museum (50%) or being personally inspired by someone else's work (20%) than in more formal methods of learning or acquiring expertise such as conferences, seminars, courses or reading the Museum's Journal. Curators were also generally loyal to museums as vehicles of historical interpretation, considering that only television documentaries were more effective than museums when it came to historical interpretation - and then only narrowly so. Human inter-actives and films/videos also scored well but books were surprisingly poorly regarded as an effective means of historical interpretation.

Table 7. Most important factors in shaping approach to historical interpretation

Factor	Number (n = 64)	Percentage
Visiting 'best practice' museums	32	50
Someone whose work/ideas have impressed/ influenced	13	20
Attending conferences/seminars	8	12
Attending a museums studies course	7	11
Literature in museum exhibit evaluation	5	8
Reading the Museum's Journal	4	6
Other	7	11

(Some respondents identified more than one.)

Table 8. Most effective methods of historical interpretation

Methods	Number (n = 67)	Percentage
Television documentaries	52	78
Museums	49	73
Human inter-actives (e.g. lectures; guided tours)	33	49
Films and videos	24	36
Costumed drama	10	15
Non-fiction books	9	13
Formal education	9	13
Literary fiction	7	10
Live performance arts	6	9

(Respondents invited to tick up to three of the methods.)

QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE

The quantitative sections of the questionnaire yielded some interesting data which ought to prompt debate among history curators, although this pilot survey was not sufficiently statistically rigorous for its results to be used as the only basis for policy or strategy.

More useful, in some respects, are the qualitative elements of the questionnaire. Respondents were invited to give their views or provide information on a range of issues. These are difficult to convert into quantifiable comparable information but do offer the opportunity to express perceptions and subjective opinions which may reflect, among other things, the culture as well as the practice of history museums in the late 1990s.

RENEWAL OF DISPLAYS

Respondents were asked to describe the permanent history displays/exhibitions in their museums and state when they had last been renewed. This revealed (from a sample of 50 'dated' displays) that 70% had been renewed at some point during the previous ten years. (There appear to have 'peaks' of activity in 1991 and 1996 but these are unlikely to be statistically significant.) The fact

that 30% of the displays are more than ten years old - and some are more than twenty years old - should give rise to concern.

MUSEUMS CLAIMED TO REPRESENT "BEST PRACTICE"

Respondents were invited to name three LJK museums which they felt best reflected social history museum 'best practice' in the LTK and also give their reasons for their choice.

In all 57 museums - or parts of museums - were recommended but only 19 of these registered more than one vote. These are tabulated below:

Croydon Clock Tower ('Life times')	11
Newcastle Discover ('Great City')	6
Tullie House, Carlisle	5
People's Story, Edinburgh	5
Imperial War Museum	5
Museum of London	4
Blists Hill, Ironbridge	3
Grange Museum, Brent	3
Hull: Old Grammar School et al.	3
Museum of the Moving Image	3
Coventry ('Godiva City')	3
Beamish	2
Jorvik	2
Kelham Island	2
Market Harborough	2
People's Palace, Glasgow	2
Museum of Lynn Life, King's Lynn	2
Glasgow's The Open Museum	2
The National Heritage Fishing Centre	2

The limited nature of this pilot survey and the size of the sample means that this list cannot have any credibility as an authoritative statement about actual best practice. The most that it can do is give us some pointers as to which places are perceived by SHCG members as being-examples of best practice. And even their views are hardly objective. Three respondents were so totally loyal to their own museums that they named it among their list of three. One might also observe that the list is heavily influenced by where SHCG has held recent Annual Study Weekends, the geographical distribution of the membership, informal networks (voting for friends) and peer group influences (ff you are told enough times that a place is wonderful ...).

Leaving aside such cynicism, what were the key reasons for the choices and how may they illuminate curators' preferences for particular interpretation and evaluation techniques? The responses reveal - as might be expected - a range of possible factors or influences.

- deals with real things rather than replicas or reconstruction'
- people-orientated approach
- thematic rather than chronological
- good design
- information vertical and accessible at any level
- object-rich displays
- mixture of communication media/mix and balance of techniques
- use of interactive techniques
- imaginative approach to interpreting objects using oral history
- good research
- integration/range of techniques used
- effective graphics and texts

This summary of respondents' views is a useful commentary on curatorial preferences. It will be noted that 'best practice' is not perceived as simply being about good techniques. It is as much as anything about an attitude to interpretation (and all the comments were exclusively about interpretation) rather than variables which can be reduced to a simple formula. However, if this survey were looking to identify key interpretation techniques, then the following are clearly highly valued by many history curators:

- interactive technologies (low and high tech)
- oral history
- use of a range of techniques (rather than relying on one)

This list is unlikely to be authoritative. Most respondents make vague references to 'good' or 'excellent' displays without articulating what they mean by it. However, we can probably assume that excellence in interpretation is generic - in other words not particular to history museums.

If that is so, we may ask - what is distinctive about 'best practice' in history museums? The answer to this seems to be:

- use objects wherever possible even if 'telling a story'
- be people-orientated (rather than institutional orientated)
- be 'ordinary' people orientated (rather than the rich and famous)
- use oral history
- be thematic/analytical rather than chronological/descriptive

It is a moot point how much further forward this actually gets us. The respondents from within SHCG have given us some pointers but a great deal more objective research is required to establish the value or impact of these techniques and values. And, of course,

respondents almost entirely neglect evaluation - other than the occasional reference to market research or marketing.

Respondents were also asked to indicate where they felt best practice in historical interpretation could be found outside of museums. This produced some rather eclectic comments. Interestingly, places which were listed by some as good practice museums also appear among these responses - Jorvik and the National Fishing Heritage Centre, for example, and most places were heritage sites. There were some differences in the reasons given for best practice here from those given for museums. A selection of key words used included: 'imaginative interactives'; 're-enactments'; 'sense of energy and creativity'; 'creating the atmosphere of a working railway'; 'it really engages visitors'. Overall, the combination of good information and energy seemed to be the magic ingredient. One might conclude that the reaction of curators to non-museum heritage is more emotional than their cooler professional appraisal of museums.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Respondents had the chance to give their general observations on any of the topics covered by the questionnaire. Again, this naturally resulted in a number of disconnected comments, perhaps the most interesting of which are reproduced below:

- We put greatest faith in a free ideas team approach; the team that works in-house understands the collection and audience - designer - panels done remotely are deader than exhibits
- ... the important thing in interpreting and presenting historical subjects is to start with the basis of the real thing, rather than the re-created
- My own personal attitude is that people want to visit a site to look around the building, look at objects (now and again reading the label) and in general avoid being 'taught' (obviously school visits being the exception). Many 'flavour of the month ideas on interpretation originate from academics who do not relate to the general public and are incapable of doing so (and often unwilling to do so). Their ideas are of use only in the realm of museum academics who I avoid wherever possible.
- Museums ... have what everyone else wants - the authenticity and authority of the collections, but interpretation in museums is still hampered by the exclusivity of the object overpowering those other associations that give the interpretation depth and human interest.

- Museums are unique because of their collections, but their ability to tell stories in an appealing manner is not.
- However good the displays are, there are many other factors which affect the public's enjoyment of and education from displays - good atmosphere, relaxed state of mind, good welcome, sense of where you are and where you are going within the museum, good toilets and coffee shop, clear labels, booklet to take away, good lighting etc.
- Broadening access is the major problem we face. Social History Museums are uniquely placed to appeal to a broad cross-section of our communities. To me the challenge is how to open up the resources, collections we hold to local people (whether through formal education, life-long learning, outreach drama and so on). To combine the dormant skills memories held by the community with the artefacts and collections we hold in trust. This does not mean abandoning professional standards but mean breaking down false barriers of pseudo professionalism erected to protect museum/curators' status. If social history museums are to become more than dull repositories of dead artefacts or theme park reconstructions of Victorian life, we need to rethink our priorities.
- Museums can be very effective if well done and try to include hands on activities; audio-visual presentations, costumed interpreters - people are more likely to remember 'history, (facts etc) if it is presented to them in a lively way.
- This survey is very building based. We have also set up information panels around the city, shared our curatorial skills with teachers in schools, taken objects to groups and festivals etc. We also do small displays, usually with material from private collectors and enthusiasts. The assumption of one homogeneous group/audience is difficult to deal with - 'best practice' can and does vary according to target group.
- In many ways it is better to go to non-professionals for their appreciation of historical interpretation exercises The gap between what we think and what we do is perhaps more prevalent than many professionals would care to admit.

These comments capture a selection of cultural assumptions held by social history curators at the time of this survey. Rather like much of the other information collected it is highly subjective and not necessarily representative. But from it can be distilled some of the key cultural beliefs and values of social history in museums which have developed during the 1980s and 1990s - real things, ordinary people and making them accessible to each other. The purpose of social history in museums should be about

integrating the museum into the community and the community into the museum.

The election of a new Labour government in May 1997 has offered a wonderful opportunity for social historians in museums to take a leading role in articulating new government policies in a museum context. There is a double dividend to be earned. The central plank of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's policies is access. Social history collections can be among the most accessible in any museum and the inclination of most social history curators to be interested in reaching the widest possible spectrum of society make them natural champions of access. Secondly, this government's determination that all publicly funded bodies should contribute to combating social exclusion (in all its forms) and to supporting community and economic regeneration is particularly challenging for many museum directors and governing bodies. But once again this ought to be an area where the social history curator can shine and make a real contribution. The policies published so far by the new government reflect the policy objectives in many local authorities and so should not come as a shock to those in the public sector. Museums must change in order to respond positively to this generous spirited agenda. Social historians in museums are uniquely equipped to take the lead.

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