

N. W. Museums Federation Report

Report on Social History Curators Group Conference
'Choose it, Use it, Lose it?'
July 2006 Edinburgh

My learning outcomes were:

- To gain a better knowledge and understanding of issues affecting Social History Curators
- To improve my knowledge of display methods in different museums
- To engage in the debate about acquiring, storage and disposal of Museum Collections

In July 2006, I attended the Social History Curator's Group Conference in Edinburgh after being awarded a Professional Development grant from the NW Museums Federation.

The Conference was called 'Choose it, use it or lose it?' and focussed on curating collections in the 21st century. Though many interesting themes were discussed, some were of particular relevance to me and my work at the Museum, and helped me to develop in my career as a Social History Curator.

The first day of the conference focussed in on general issues affecting Social History collections in museums today. There were some very interesting presentations about current trends in museums in relation to collections and the changing roles of museums in presenting collections to the public. I found Nick Poole, the director of the MDA's, presentation on making collection information accessible to the public particularly interesting as there is a lot of work to do in our Museum to make this possible.

The following day, we travelled to Glasgow, starting at the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre. Our sessions were focussing on 'choosing and using' objects for our collections.

The Resource Centre, although in the middle of an uninviting industrial estate, is a fantastic facility for museum professionals, members of the public and researchers.

All of Glasgow Museums reserve collections are stored here. After a tour of the open stores we heard from Morag MacPherson, Open Museum Manager, about their exciting work making the collections accessible to the public. They run special days where anyone can drop in and have a tour of the stores (where all objects are stored visibly) and also run sessions for local schools. I found their work very interesting and, though we wouldn't be able to run a similar project in our museum, it definitely started me thinking about making our collections more accessible.

After lunch, we went to Kelvingrove. Although the museum and gallery were not officially open after their Glasgow Council funded refurbishment, Mark, the Head of the Museum Service, gave us a guided tour round the whole building.

It was absolutely enormous, but all of it was thoroughly enjoyable, even to a jaded 'Museum Professional'! The objects were undeniably of great beauty and interest, but for me, the various ways in which they had been displayed was what stuck in my head.

In particular, the display of weaponry alongside natural history was very interesting. It graphically showed how man had developed their armour with inspiration from the natural world.

Their labelling was also very good. I noted that in the art gallery section of Kelvingrove, the main information on the labels was descriptive of the painting and was designed to make you look at the details and meaning of the painting, with the artist and date of secondary interest.

I thought that the whole museum and gallery was a fantastic example of what we would all like to do if we had the money, and took a great many ideas back with me to implement in the museum and gallery where I work.

The final day of the conference was held back in Edinburgh and began with a trip to the National Museum of Scotland.

The morning session was dedicated to collecting projects at National Museums Scotland and we heard of some very interesting projects including 'Collecting e-Scotland' a new project aimed at acquiring modern Internet equipment for collections.

I also enjoyed Wendy Turner's talk on NMS's Granton Store very entertaining. They have been redeveloping their store and I found myself sympathising with many of the problems they faced as I have undertaken similar projects in the past.

We then had a tour of the museum's new Scottish History gallery. This gallery was immensely built up by the Project Co-ordinator before we arrived at it – it is their newest gallery and cost a good deal of money. I'm afraid that I was completely underwhelmed when we arrived. Though the gallery held some fascinating artefacts which told the story of Scotland's history, they were not displayed to their best advantage. The text was very small and looked old-fashioned and the cases were dark and cluttered. It was a complete contrast to Kelvingrove!

After lunch, we heard about eh new collecting projects with community focus at Hull Museums which were fascinating and gave me further ideas about how to develop community projects with the collections I work with.

The conference ended with a debate on Disposal from museum collections. Engaging in this debate about disposal, which was chaired by Caitlin Griffiths from the Museums Association, was one of the major reasons I wanted to attend this conference. I felt that it was a very important topic for all museums, but especially for our museum which has very limited storage space indeed. Although our discussions raised many interesting, and complex, issues, nothing was actually finalised after these discussions. This was entirely to be expected, but was still a little frustrating. I am very encouraged, though, that the MA is producing guidelines for Disposal which will be out by Christmas.

Overall, I feel that my participation in the SHCG Conference 2006 was extremely useful to me in terms of professional development.

Not only did I fulfil all the learning outcomes and come away with some very good ideas to implement in my workplaces, but I gained valuable networking opportunities with other delegates and with speakers.

I am very grateful to the North West Museums Federation for funding my conference fees and travel costs – it was a very useful and enjoyable experience.

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