

Scholarship, commerce or both

The Scottish Mining Museum has embraced both God and Mammon, and feels better for it. Fergus Waters explains ...

An optimist might have hoped that, by now, the Scottish museums community would have moved beyond the habit of seeing success as a museum and success as a visitor attraction as competing objectives. Yet this rather sterile debate continues to absorb us.

For the record, the Trustees and the curatorial team at the Scottish Mining Museum have long taken the view that the aims of maintaining and interpreting our collections on the one hand, and engaging the interest of the general public on the other, are complementary – indeed, indivisible – rather than contradictory. We see no conflict in marrying our responsibilities as collectors to our ambitions for commercial success: and no reason to apologise to our learned peers for being a five-star visitor attraction.

Interpretation is as necessary to good collecting as it is to good business. There is no dilemma, but there is a duty to address a broad audience, of whom scholars are just one part. If that sounds impossible, then let us start by remembering that one need not address all sections of the audience simultaneously.

Is there any reason, for example, why a museum should not set out to engage the interest of the very young? We can see none, and we are proud of having created the Balloon Mine, a mobile and marvellously economic resource where children pay 50p to tunnel for as long as they like through a series of interconnected tents, in search of balloons. When they emerge from the 'mine' and burst the balloon, they find it contains a slip of paper entitling them to a small prize, usually a pencil or rubber. The idea of exploring an enclosed space in search of reward – the essence of mining – is thus simply, but effectively, conveyed.

Two points are worth making about this kind of initiative. First, imagination matters more than budget (our modest investment in this case has repaid itself many times over). Second, if the initiative is not swiftly successful, walk away from it. Nothing is more wasteful of time and resources than trying to make a go of an idea which the public like much less than you do. There are equally valuable lessons to learn from failures as from successes.

It is also important to tune one's expectations, and therefore strategies, to a realistic appraisal of one's marketplace. Our visitor market at Newtongrange is smaller than we might wish, and wishing won't make it bigger. But there is incremental growth to be had from targeting groups like schoolchildren who, if they enjoy themselves, will pester parents to bring them back. Equally, if people enjoy their visit to the museum, they are more inclined to spend time and money in the shop and the cafeteria, and to recommend the experience to others.

It would be wrong to see the prodigious effort we put into education merely as a cynical ploy for footfall: though we are not too proud to take those benefits from it. It also satisfies a more elevated agenda. Our decision to enmesh our educational products with the school curriculum has led us into close working relationships with a range of partners who add value through their knowledge, the synergy of their aims with ours, and resources additional to our own.

We see our schools programme as an excellent fit with the core purpose of a museum dedicated to telling the story of a vanished industry and the communities it created. At the same time, it has given us access to new sources of funding to manage and deliver these activities. We are doing just what we're here to do, and making a modest profit from it.

Good business development supports, rather than distracts, the museum. It impels us constantly to review how we can make best use of our assets – the buildings, the collections, and the staff – in advancing our core agenda. That means, for example, ensuring staff have the training, the backup and the systems they need to maximise their contribution.

In short, being a better visitor attraction helps us be a better museum. Excellence in one facet encourages, rather than displaces, excellence in the other. We aspire to both.

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Honor sinks where commerce long prevails.

Walter Bagehot