

## Research for all

Martin Bellamy considers what's needed to make museum collections meaningful.

Museum objects in themselves are relatively dull and sterile. What brings them alive and makes them relevant to our visitors are the stories they have to tell. Sadly, all too often, these stories were not collected when objects were acquired and their relevance has long been forgotten. In order to unlock their secrets we now need to invest some time and energy on research. After all, sound, authoritative knowledge is the bedrock of any museum and ought to underpin all aspects of our work. How can we increase access and interpret our collections to as wide a public as possible if we don't know what we have or why it is important? Without research museum collections will become forgotten and meaningless.

However, if we are to avoid the old perception of research as curatorial self-indulgence or skiving we need to embrace new ways of thinking about this activity. In the beginning museum research was essentially antiquarian in nature. The object was researched in terms of its own intrinsic worth, highly detailed and increasingly arcane, taking little account of any historical context. By the 1970s this approach was scorned and the context became all. Objects started to become props in bigger social or economic debates. The object type was what mattered, not necessarily the particular object, with the exception of a few notable firsts and lasts.

What we are now doing in Glasgow Museums is taking a third way in which we look at objects in terms of the stories that they can tell. The very particular and specific stories that an individual object has can then be used as a means to address more general broader themes. It is far more interesting to learn that 'Mrs Smith used this mangle to do her washing every Wednesday until 1954', to convey advances in domestic technology, rather than stating blandly that 'mangles were used until the introduction of twin tubs in the 1950s'.

Essentially we are trying to unlock the hidden stories within objects. To do this we need to take a more multidisciplinary approach to our collections. We can then expand the number of objects available for research from the narrow bounds of individual collections into the whole museum collection. Objects which have been neglected in terms of their artistic merit can suddenly find that they are incredibly valuable in terms of geology or technological history.

We also need to relax our institutional control over knowledge by involving our stakeholders more meaningfully. If we integrate them more into the research process who knows what fascinating stories may be revealed? As the Museum Association code of ethics says, we are obliged to 'cultivate a variety of perspectives on the collections to reflect the diversity of the communities served by the museum'. The trick is how to manage and capture the research that enables us to do this.

Glasgow Museums Service is famed for its Open Museum, and we are very good at getting objects out into different communities where they can take on a new resonance. What we are perhaps not so good at is capturing the object-specific evidence of the Open Museum activities. I hope that in the future we will be able to ensure that information gleaned about objects in this way is treated with the same respect as information from other forms of research, and that it is recorded with the same reverence. To do this we need to work in a much more integrated way to develop common goals to preserve this community knowledge for posterity.

Quite how we do this in practice is still up for grabs, but inevitably new technologies will be part of the solution. A free-for-all Wikipedia\* style collections catalogue may (or may not!) be a step too far. But surely this more inclusive approach to research and knowledge management has to offer a way forward for museums?

### Editor's note:

\*Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)) is an internet-based encyclopaedia in which entries can be created and modified by anyone, with their content moderated by volunteers. The system is an interesting model for collaborative meaning-making. However, recent commentators have suggested that in the long term it leads to bland, 'lowest common denominator' perspectives (Andrew Orlowski in *The Guardian*, Thursday April 13 2006 and <http://tinyurl.com/8mr5x> ).

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Only the best knowledge is good enough for the least informed  
*Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand*