

# Flickr round East Lothian



Salvation Army wedding

East Lothian Museums Service has been posting images of their collections on photo sharing site Flickr. Sarah Cowie takes us through the slideshow...

"The groom is wearing the trimmings of a Bandmaster and would have been an unpaid Local Officer"

When museum visitors can give additional interpretation like this, it's a real blessing for over-worked curators. But Tracy Clark was able to enlighten us without ever visiting the museums run by **East Lothian Council Museums Service (ELMS)**.

Much has been written about the past authoritarian nature of museums, where one curator's interpretation of an object was seen as the only story it could tell. Over time, museums have recognised that visitors construct their own meanings and knowledge, and they have had to change their practices to accommodate this. Digitized collections on **Scran** have potentially a wider audience, but you need a subscription for full access, and the information presented is still provided by the museums service. We needed a more democratic way to share our collections, and so ELMS set up their own account on **Flickr**.

Flickr is a photo sharing website where people can share photographs and leave comments about images that interest them. When we put a selection from our collections online, we hoped that people would comment on the objects, share their stories, or perhaps even use the images in their daily lives.

But is a website mainly used to share personal photographs really the place to encourage public interpretation of our collections? It depends what you count as interpretation. Nothing much was really gained from the person who left the comment 'Nice bell!' about our **Samuelston School Bell**. And most of our photographs, whilst they have been viewed many times, have had no comments. There are some success stories though. One of our most popular photographs, **Victorian Children 1880s**, has been viewed over 4,500 times. One Flickr member was able to tell us who was in the photograph, as it was taken by his great-grandfather. He even corrected us on the gender of one of the children who we had thought was a girl! We have since altered our museum database to reflect this new knowledge.

We decided at the start that we would offer our collections under a **Creative Commons Licence**. This means images can be freely copied, distributed and displayed, as long as ELMS is credited and they are not being used for a commercial purpose. Images from our collections have been used in many different ways, such as digital artwork, a backdrop for a play, and within a **Schmap** (a digital travel guide).



Samuelston school bell



Victorian children, 1880s

Many within the heritage profession interested in similar schemes have come to us muttering in hushed voices about rude comments or inappropriate use of collections. Recently we had a request to use one of our Orange Lodge banners by a user called 'orangekkk'. We declined. As yet, we have had no inappropriate comments left by users. Regular checking of comments and reporting of any users leaving such comments is the relatively straightforward solution to this problem.

Indeed, the issue with Flickr is the staff time required to maintain our account. You need to become part of the community to encourage comments. The more you network, the more feedback you get. Someone also has to be responsible for wading through the large number of requests to become part of other people's groups. I have now turned down the chance to become part of the Modern Architecture of Baghdad group four times!

So what is the future for Flickr? One group we were looking to engage with through the internet was the 16-25 year old age market. It looks as if we have had little success in this area and our sights are turning to social networking sites such as **Bebo**. We hope instead to create a more community-orientated Flickr account, by adding individuals' family photographs to our collection online. This is part of a wider European project that includes partners from England, Italy and Hungary, all of them interested in digitizing family photographs. By doing this, we hope that the ELMS Flickr site can become, like museums themselves, the holder of the local area's identity and history, interpreted through the eyes (and keyboards) of the community.

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