

A Report on Exhibition Development and Delivery

# BEYOND STORYTELLING: EXHIBITING THE PAST

DR GILLIAN O'BRIEN



LIVERPOOL  
JOHN MOORES  
UNIVERSITY

A Report on Exhibition Development and Delivery

# BEYOND STORYTELLING: EXHIBITING THE PAST

DR GILLIAN O'BRIEN





# CONTENTS

<b>Summary</b>	3
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	3
<b>Section 1.0</b>	
1.1 Role of a Modern Museum	5
<b>Section 2.0</b>	
2.1 Exhibition Content	7
2.2 Audience	9
2.3 Objects	10
<b>Section 3.0</b>	
3.1 Methods of Delivering Information	13
<b>Contributors</b>	16



## SUMMARY

Liverpool John Moores University sponsored a workshop held at the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland in 2019. The workshop explored how museums help visitors engage with the past and considered how the role of the museum has changed over time. It also considered how museums ensure that the stories they tell are informative, educational and entertaining and assessed different methods of weaving source material and evidence into the stories told. Much of what was discussed is outlined below. It is hoped that this report will prove useful to anyone developing an exhibition.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people were involved in the production of this report. Thanks to Liverpool John Moores University for sponsoring the workshop, and for its continued support of this and associated projects. Thanks to all those who participated in the workshop: Jessie Castle (LJMU/JCA Architects), Danielle O'Donovan (Nano Nagle Place), Regina Fitzpatrick (Oral History Network), Gina O'Kelly (Irish Museums Association), Brian Crowley (OPW), Brenda Malone (National Museum of Ireland), Siobhan Pierce (National Museum of Ireland), Lar Joye (Dublin Port), Eamon Darcy (Maynooth University), Julia Walsh (Tipperary County Museum), Padraig Clancy (Dog Bird Projects) and also to Marie McMahon (Tipperary County Museum) and Jean Wallace (Shannon Heritage) for their expertise, insights and support.

GILLIAN O'BRIEN  
 Liverpool John Moores University, July 2020  
 Email: g.p.obrien@ljmu.ac.uk



**Titanica, Ulster Transport Museum**

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

## Section 1.0

# MUSEUMS

## 1.1

### ROLE OF A MODERN MUSEUM

- Museums should challenge assumptions and preconceptions.
- Museums should present multiple narratives.
- It is important that museums present complex and difficult history, not just sanitised history.
- A visit to a museum should spark curiosity rather than explain everything.
- Traditionally museums and curators have assumed a sort of a protective guardianship over information and often made definitive statements about an object or an event. Museums today should explain their sources and how the understanding of events and artefacts has changed over time.
- There is a need for museums to be more transparent: showing process, telling what we know, how we know it and what we don't know. For example, labels could contain information such as: 'This object was given to us by x who said y about the object.'
- Museums should be prepared to trust their audience. Visitors are smarter and more robust than they are often given credit for. They can cope with divergent interpretations of events.
- No museum can be all things to all people and it shouldn't try to be.



## Section 2.0

# CONTENT, AUDIENCE AND OBJECTS

## 2.1

### EXHIBITION CONTENT

- Authenticity is key. Objects and accounts should be presented in an evidence-based way that is honest about what we know and what we are surmising.
- When creating a museum or an exhibition there must be detailed discussion of the story that is being told. While it's important to present a balanced view, it does not need to be one that gives equal weight to all interpretations. That said, museums should make a considerable effort to present multiple narratives, and to present difficult history.
- Silences and gaps in narrative do not make for a successful museum.
- Information should be layered. Don't overload visitors with content, but provide them with opportunities to find out more if they are interested.
- Have the confidence to tell the local story. Frame it in the context of the regional, national or international story, but keep the focus on the local element. Make the visit original and specific.
- Education isn't just for schoolchildren, it's for all visitors.
- Education is an integral part of every aspect of the museum and education programmes should go hand in hand with exhibition development. All museum visits are educational and that starts in the narrative and the interpretation.
- The education programme team plays a vital role in interpreting exhibitions. They have insight into what prior knowledge the public has, and what it will and won't comprehend. Consulting with the education team at an early stage in the exhibition design process improves the visitor experience.

## DEVELOPING THE CONTENT

- Exhibitions should inform, inspire and spark curiosity.
- Start with as much possible content as possible and then refine. It's a skill to be able both to refine the content and to make it accessible and interesting. It is important to be able to verify everything that appears in the exhibition and to expand upon it if asked.
- Consult as wide a range of stakeholders as possible. Stakeholders often comprise sponsors, professional bodies and government or local authorities, but community and volunteer groups, researchers, historians and other experts can contribute important exhibition content and should be included from the earliest stages of the project.
- Vary the content. Objects and documents are vital, but photographs, film, oral testimony etc can be equally compelling. Good pacing and varying the texture of the exhibition is vital when it comes to keeping or sparking interest. If tours are part of the plan then careful pacing is needed to avoid long silences or talking for too long, both of which can result in the loss of the visitor's attention.
- Don't try to incorporate everything into panel text or a tour. It is often sufficient to focus on one element of a story – often the local story or a story prompted by the collection.
- Accept that contradictions do happen and that the past is not always consistent.

## 2.2

## AUDIENCE

- Who is the audience? Who do you want your audience to be? How do you want them to engage? What sort of numbers can your museum cope with? If you don't know who the audience is then you don't know what they want and you don't know who isn't visiting or how to get those groups through the door.
- Museums come under huge pressure to focus on the tourist – the visitor who comes only once – but for most museums it's the local population who are the most important.
- Different voices should be used for different audiences – literacy level is too often confused with intelligence.
- Museums need to provide different levels of information. Different audiences learn in different ways, so it is important to have a range of methods of imparting information.



Nano Nagle Place, Cork

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

## 2.3 OBJECTS

- Avoid the temptation to put everything in your collection on display.
- Tell the story of the objects – not just their historical use and purpose, but the story of how they came to be in the museum and how we know they are authentic.
- Objects are often a reflection of privilege and wealth. Many stories can't be told through a museum collection so it's important to explore strategies for representing those histories without objects.



**National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, Dublin**

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

## Section 3.0 DELIVERING INFORMATION

### 3.1 METHODS OF DELIVERING INFORMATION

#### TOURS

- At a historic site tours can be very effective, particularly on sites where there isn't a natural flow. Supplementary information is also necessary for those who do not take part in a tour. They must be able to glean some information about a site even if there is no tour running. In museums tours should not simply regurgitate the panel text.
- The length of the tour may be dictated both by budget and dwell time considerations. It is important to keep visitor flow running smoothly.

#### SELF-GUIDED TOURS

- Clear guidance should be given so that visitors know how to navigate the exhibition or site.
- A map is not always necessary for self-guided tours. Simple information or even a rationale as to why you should 'go this way' is often sufficient.

#### HANDS ON

- Handling objects (or reproductions) can leave a lasting positive impression on the visitor.
- Encourage all visitors to handle objects; very often the 'hands on' element is focussed exclusively on children, but adults need and want this just as much.

#### AUDIO

- Audio can be very effective, but doesn't work for all sites. When considering the use of audio make sure to check whether the sound will bleed into other sections of the exhibition.



### PANEL TEXT

- Panels must be interesting but accessible. There can be different depths of knowledge assigned to different panels. Visitors can cope with complex information. Don't oversimplify the information, even if you simplify the language.

### LABELS

- Labels must provide information about the object, but consider also including information on how it came to be in the museum as the journey of an artefact to the museum is often as interesting as the artefact itself.

### TECHNOLOGY

- Technology is expensive and often unnecessary. It requires regular maintenance, is rarely as good as the technology people have in their homes and it dates rapidly. In some circumstances it enhances an exhibition, but it is a very costly addition and should be carefully considered.
- Where there is limited space touchscreens can be very effective. They are useful for offering layers of information so that visitors can drill down if they have a particular interest.
- Audio-visuels with good illustrations, accompanied by spoken word, poetry or inner voice, can be very effective.

### ORAL HISTORY

- Oral history can have a number of roles in a museum setting – as a primary source to inform visitors about an object/event; as a means of engagement with schools or communities; as a method of presenting information in a different way.
- It's important to treat oral history sources like any other source from a curatorial perspective but also to bear in mind the sensitivities around the use of oral accounts.
- Curators should be well informed on the legal and ethical considerations around collecting, using and presenting oral history e.g. data protection, consent forms etc.
- When commissioning oral history projects museums should consult with organisations such as Oral History Network of Ireland (OHNI) for accurate and up-to-date guidelines for best practice.
- Oral histories can often be explored in greater depth through accompanying online exhibitions/podcasts etc.



Workshop

PHOTO GINA O'KELLY

### SOUNDSCAPES

- Sound in an exhibition does not need to be restricted to voice. Soundscapes can be very effective but must fit within the space. Sound bleed can be very distracting.

### SPACE

- The type of space the museum is in often dictates the stories that are told (in both positive and negative ways). Make sure that the building becomes part of the visitor experience. Tell the story of the building (even if the building has very little to do with the collection of the museum).
- Think about the design of the exhibition. Is it permanent or can it be altered for changing exhibitions and the changing needs of the audience? There needs to be planning for visitor capacity, circulation and flow through the museum.
- Visitors need to be comfortable in the exhibition space; there should be room to move around and seats to sit on.

### EXTERNAL PRESSURES

- Narratives should not be sanitised to meet political expediency.
- Strategies need to be developed to fit the museum's need and vision with the vision of the funding bodies. While there may be a temptation to cram as much of a collection as possible into display cases, this is far from ideal. Designers often create a permanent display, but museums may wish to use the cases for different objects at different times and this flexibility should be incorporated into the design.
- Museums must be seen as an important education and research space for local, regional and national communities and not just as a product for tourism development.



**Kilkenny Famine Experience,  
MacDonagh Shopping Centre, Kilkenny**

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

## CONTRIBUTORS

### JESSIE CASTLE

Visiting Research Fellow, Liverpool John Moores University  
& Historic Building Consultant at JCA Architects, Cork

She has been involved in a number of site-specific developments including Spike Island, Co. Cork; Nano Nagle Place, Cork; Lifetime Lab (former Cork City Waterworks) and Michael Collins House, Clonakilty.

### PADRAIG CLANCY

Consultant, Dog Bird Projects

He is currently a Fáilte Ireland Mentor to visitor experiences awarded Small Grants. Recent projects include RCPI, Tenement Museum Dublin and Irish Stock Exchange. He has previously worked on interpretation and collection care across cultural institutions, local authorities and community groups.

### BRIAN CROWLEY

Works for the OPW as collections curator for Kilmainham Gaol Museum and the Pearse Museum

He is the author of several articles and 'Patrick Pearse: A Life in Pictures'. He is the former board member and chairman of the Irish Museums Association.

### EAMON DARCY

A historian of early modern Ireland and teaches at Maynooth University

He is interested in the interface between academic and public history and has co-curated a number of museum exhibitions in the Long Room in Trinity College, Dublin, and in the Russell Library, Maynooth.

### REGINA FITZPATRICK

Founding member and director of Oral History Network, Ireland

She worked on the GAA Oral History Project (2008-2012) and has carried out oral history interviewing, consultancy and training for organisations including Kilkenny County Council, Dublin City Council, Maze Long Kesh 'Unlocking Heritage' Project and St Michael's Regeneration Board, Dublin.

### LAR JOYE

Port Heritage Director, Dublin Port

Previously he curated the 'Soldiers & Chiefs: the Irish soldier at home and abroad from 1550' exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland. He played a key role in the Decade of Commemorations 2012-2107, involved in a variety of projects including the '1913 Lockout: Impact & Aftermath' and 'Banners Unfurled' exhibitions and a number of World War I exhibitions.

### BRENDA MALONE

Curator at the National Museum of Ireland

Particular areas of interest include the development of the idea of 'nation' and how this is collected and portrayed in the National Museum through its historical, military, Irish independence and Irish folklife collections. She has curated many exhibitions in history and military history, and has collected widely in the area of contemporary social history and difficult histories. She is also the author of 'The Cricket Bat that Died for Ireland', a blog that tells the often complex and contentious stories behind the historical artefacts collected by the museum.

### GILLIAN O'BRIEN

Reader in Modern Irish History, Liverpool John Moores University

She has worked as the historical advisor for the development of Fortress Spike Island, Co. Cork; Nano Nagle Place, Cork; Edmund Rice Heritage Centre, Waterford and the redevelopment of Kilmainham Gaol and Courthouse, Dublin.

### DANIELLE O'DONOVAN

Programme Manager, Nano Nagle Place

She has previously worked at Fota House and Strokestown Park House for the Irish Heritage Trust and with the Tenement Museum Dublin.

### GINA O'KELLY

Director of Operations, Irish Museums Association

She has previously held senior roles with Black Church Print Studio, Common Ground, Solomon Gallery and Dalkey Castle and Heritage Centre.

### SIOBHAN PIERCE

Education and Outreach Officer for the Archaeology and Natural History Museum branches of National Museum of Ireland

She has worked for the National Museum for nearly two decades, primarily in museum education, but also as an exhibition curator, and in both roles has advised and developed exhibitions for the museum.

### JULIA WALSH

Education and Outreach Officer in Tipperary County Museum, with responsibility for the museum's public programming

She has developed numerous creative programmes for the formal and informal education sector, as well as developing the museum's formal Education Policy for MSPI.

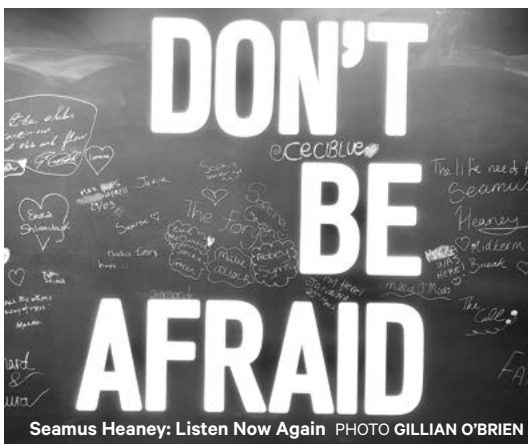


**Athlone Castle, Co. Westmeath**

PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

**Beyond Storytelling: Exhibiting the Past**  
A Report on Exhibition Development and Delivery

Dr Gillian O'Brien



Seamus Heaney: Listen Now Again PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN



Spike Island PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN



Cobh Heritage Centre, Cork  
PHOTO GILLIAN O'BRIEN

REPORT DESIGN ÍDE DELOUGHRY

