

Bridport Museum Case Study: 'The Right Stuff'

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Overview

Between 2019 and 2023 Bridport Museum Trust carried out an innovative collections review project called 'The Right Stuff' (TRS). Supported by an Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund grant managed by the Museums Association, the project was designed to make the museum and its collection more sustainable and more relevant and had the involvement of the community at its heart.

TRS nudged the whole organisation: staff, volunteers and trustees, into reviewing collections storage for a more sustainable future for the museum, and helped us answer significant and fundamental questions about our collection:

- **Why do we have certain objects?**
- **Should we have them?**
- **Who cares?**

The project has informed a review of our Collections Development Policy, and going forward we will only collect those items which tell strong stories of Bridport and the surrounding area, its people, places and events.

TRS took place at a time when the sector has been rethinking collections in the context of climate change and sustainability, culminating in the publication of updated guidance by the Museums Association 'Off the Shelf: A Toolkit for Ethical Transfer, Reuse and Disposal' in 2023.



Background

Bridport is a small town in Dorset, located within the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. The museum opened in 1932 with a founding collection of fine art, and since then around 50,000 items have been added to the collection, including archaeology, geology, fossils, taxidermy and material relating to the social history of the area, in particular the rope and net making industries that dominated the town for centuries. In 2017 Bridport Museum underwent a £1.3M redevelopment supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The refit of the galleries prompted thinking about the collections. With only 5% of objects on permanent display, the remainder was proving a challenge to manage and, in some cases, justify.

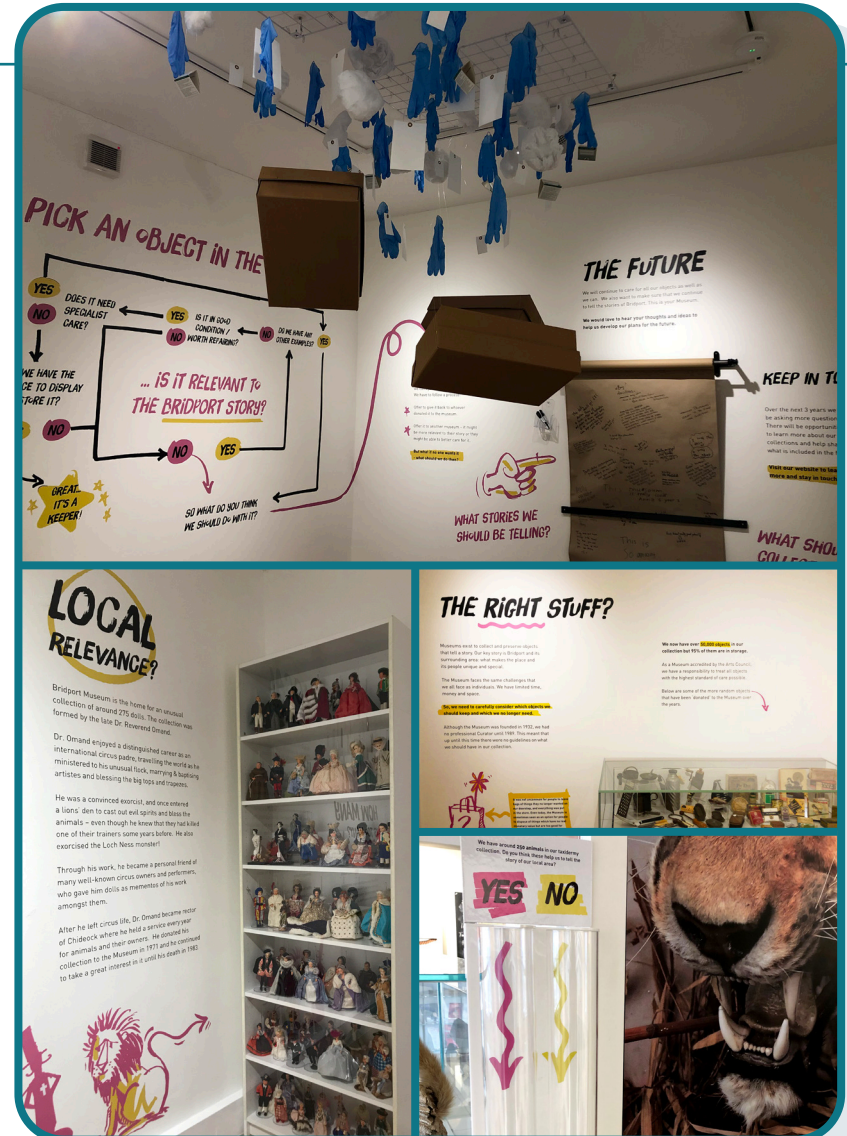
In the words of former Director Emily Hicks:

“We know there are some great objects and some frankly random objects, such as an incredibly popular roaring tiger. During the first 60 years of the museum there

was no professional curator and no collecting policy. The collections therefore contain tatty cigarette packets, Oxo tins, and pieces of rusted metal - the kind of things that would never be accepted now. However, we don't know what the people of Bridport, (our core users and audience), think we should be doing with it all.”

With the current collections store reaching the end of its useful life, and an ambition to create a high quality, community focused collections centre to complement the refurbished museum, there was a pressing need to undertake a review, and establish our future capacity needs.

The vast majority of collections work at Bridport Museum is undertaken by volunteers, and we applied for a grant of £101,100 from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund managed by the Museums Association to provide additional paid capacity for the duration of the project and engage the community with the process.



Project Outcomes

The project launched in October 2019 and was impacted in its first 18 months by the Covid 19 pandemic. The proposed timeline for TRS (Year 1: planning, Year 2: community consultation, Year 3: collections review and rationalisation) proved to be over-ambitious, and despite our intention to reduce the collection by 30%, very few objects have actually been disposed of.

However, there have been positive outcomes for the museum:

We have a refocused **Collections Development Policy** informed by community feedback gathered through TRS activities.

We have an innovative **Collections Assessment Guide** which has been co-created with our volunteer team, and designed to be used in the context of new acquisitions as well as collections review.



Having actively engaged with developing the Collections Assessment Guide our volunteers are now demonstrating **increased confidence and ownership of the review process**, which will enable them to continue beyond the formal end of the funded project.

TRS activities have provided **opportunities for volunteers** working in different teams to come together, and many have engaged directly with the collections for the first time.

The language we use around our collections is more accessible, and with TRS principles embedded in the museum's work, **there is no longer any danger of collecting multiples** of items or random objects.

A new team of **'Community Curators'** have been recruited who will act as advocates and points of contact – our ambition is to have one for each of the villages which fall within our collecting area.



How we did it *Involving the community*

Our application to the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund committed us to working closely with the local community to explore what a museum collection means to them. We stated:

Together, we will be bold – asking ourselves what we should keep, why and where.

Having been awarded the funding, the doubts began to surface. In the words of Emily Hicks:

“A community engaged collections review? We began fretting whether that was too much like ‘airing our dirty laundry’ in public? Could we really be upfront about the state of play? What if people didn’t understand what we were asking? Or didn’t fully appreciate the constraints on museum collecting? And finally, what if they said things we really didn’t want to hear?”

The enforced closure of the museum during the pandemic provided an opportunity to consider and address these concerns.

We used the time to commission some informal, friendly project branding and developed a list of key messages around the constraints and challenges of collecting, in simple, accessible language.

We also reviewed our activity plan to see what could be adapted and delivered digitally. Some social media campaigns were planned to coincide with community events which had to be cancelled due to Covid 19, others were designed to start sharing our key messages and capture the views of the community. We asked direct questions, for instance:

We have items in our storage that take up too much space for our small historic building. If we will never be able to display something, should we be storing it?

We have limited space & funds... What do you think is more important for us to collect & display? Art by local artists or Art about our local area?

When packed our doll collection takes 6% of our current storage capacity...Do you think we can justify them as part of our collection?

How we did it *Involving the community*

While the questions were designed to elicit yes / no answers, we were encouraged to see that a number of people used the comment facility to engage more deeply with the topic and suggest alternative uses for objects.

Once the museum re-opened post-pandemic we were able to deliver a wider range of activities which encouraged visitors to identify the objects they valued, and respond to broader questions about the collections. We relaunched with a temporary exhibition titled 'The Right Stuff' which introduced the project and encouraged the community to consider some of the curatorial challenges around managing and developing historic collections. We also ensured that TRS had a presence within the museum as a whole, with voting tubes placed near key objects, a

portable 'Museum Selfie' frame, and a 'Mini Museum Inspector' trail for younger visitors. With TRS now in the public domain we tried to anticipate the questions and concerns our community might have and developed a set of FAQs which remain available on our web-site.

A further temporary exhibition titled 'Curator vs Chaos' was held the following year. This showcased a random selection of artworks held by the museum and sought community input into the future shape of the Fine Art collection. By the end of 2022, with an estimated 10,000 people having engaged in our programme of activities, we felt ready to review our Collections Development Policy in the light of the feedback received from our community.



How we did it *Reviewing our collections*

Our plan to work with a cohort of activity participants to develop a new Collections Development Policy turned out to be impractical in the context of a looming Accreditation deadline. We considered combining formal and informal language to produce one document which would be accessible for non-professionals while meeting the standard expected by Arts Council England, but this proved too challenging.

We have instead developed an easy to read guide to the policy which incorporates the TRS branding for every day use, alongside the formal version of the policy for Accreditation.

During the course of TRS our Collections Consultant developed a matrix to help us review the collections in an objective way. We had an opportunity to test this during 2021 and 2022 when we were asked to clear an off-site store of objects which turned out to be mainly unaccessioned.

We realised that it was preferable for items not to make it into the collection in the first place rather than being rationalised later, and that what we needed was a tool which could be used in 2 ways – to review potential acquisitions and support the review process.

Two versions of what became known as our Collections Assessment Guide were tested with the collections volunteers in July 2023, in a focus group which encouraged open discussion around the review process.

This resulted in some challenging questions around our process, for example:

How valid is it for voting by the public, based on what they see on display within the museum or shared via social media, to be used to make judgements about whole collecting areas?

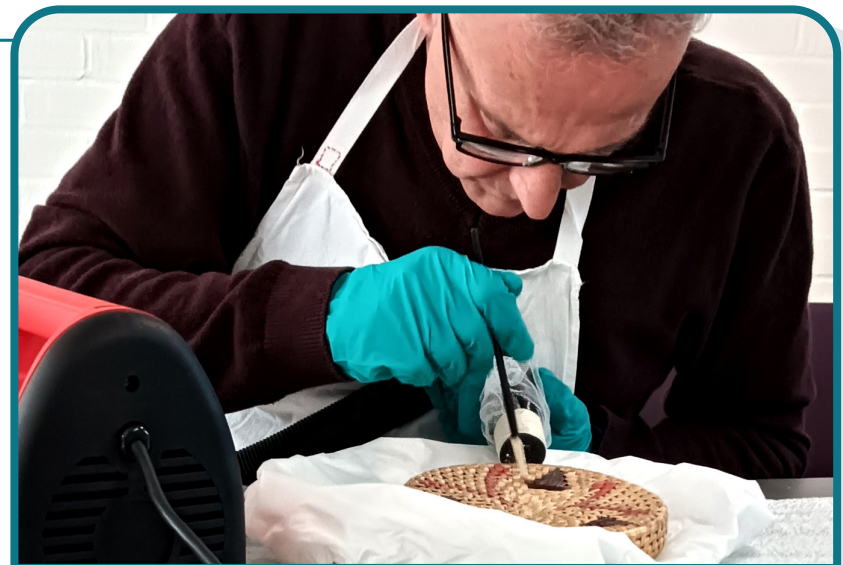
How far should museum policy be influenced by current public opinion? Will future museum trustees be blamed for disposals if the opinion of future generations differs?

What does 'local' actually mean? If for instance an object has been washed up on Chesil Beach, does it necessarily belong to that area? It might have travelled some distance before arriving there.

How we did it *Reviewing our collections*

TRS included funding for paid collections staff to undertake a survey of our existing documentation, and test the robustness of our inventory, and we continued this process with our team of Community Curators, who were recruited in the final stages of the project. We were aware that the museum's name and location meant that there was a perception that the collections focused on Bridport, whereas in fact our collecting area covers over 30 villages in the surrounding area. We started to tackle this by putting a call out to local parishes and community groups via the Bridport Local Area Partnership, and engaging with the public at the Bridport Charter Fair, and successfully recruited 15 volunteers from 13 collecting areas (including Bridport itself).

Some of these were existing volunteers from the Front of House team, others were completely new to the museum. Each curator who came forward was provided with a list of objects relating to their area, and invited to select a shortlist of 10. These were then retrieved by members of the Collections Volunteer team, who fed back on any challenges they noted in locating the items. The curators were then invited to visit the Coach House store to meet with a Collections Volunteer, and given the opportunity to handle the objects, with a view to selecting one or two for inclusion in a final TRS exhibition which opened at the museum in October 2023.



COULD YOU BE A COMMUNITY CURATOR?

- ALLINGTON
- ASKERSWELL
- BETTISCOMBE
- BOTHENHAMPTON
- BRADPOLE
- BRIDPORT
- BROADOAK
- BURTON BRADSTOCK
- CHARMOUTH
- CHILDECK
- CHILCOMBE
- DOTTERY
- LITTLE BREDY
- LITTON CHENEY
- LODERS
- LONG BREDY
- MARSHWOOD
- MONKTON WYLD
- MORCOMBELAKE

What we learnt

Our application to the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund anticipated that the review and rationalisation process would be undertaken during the course of the 3 year project, but we have learnt that the process of disposing of objects appropriately is incredibly time consuming!

A key moment in the project was when we realised that we would need to seek community input into the development of policy and procedure, rather than necessarily involving them in the review process itself.

The disposal process will be a long-term commitment based on the tools developed during the project, and we have started to engage with individuals and organisations who might be interested in accepting objects which are selected for disposal in future.

Through TRS we grew to understand that not all rationalisation decisions can rely on guidance from the community – there are certain sections of the collection where specialist input from experts will be essential. For example, while we received broad community support for keeping fossils - they were a particular favourite with the children who completed the Mini Museum Inspector trail - we will be working with the Jurassic Coast Trust to review and assess the collection in more depth.

The project helped us to think about who our community actually is – Bridport is a town which attracts a large number of tourists, so at certain times of the year our audience is primarily made up of people from outside our collecting area. Many people who live locally have retired to Bridport from other areas of the country. We were reminded that as well as being part of the museum community our volunteers are also part of their local community, with access to a range of different networks.

TRS has provided an opportunity to improve our documentation and collections care as part of the review process. Our volunteers are photographing, condition checking, labelling and repackaging, as well as identifying objects for disposal. As one member of the team put it: 'the idea is to handle the object once!' This has reinforced the need for a good workspace, and planning to ensure that resources are used as efficiently as possible – we now have a rota for using the laptops with access to MODES.

Conclusions

In their recently published guidance 'Off the Shelf: A Toolkit for Ethical Transfer, Reuse and Disposal' the Museums Association observe that:

If museums are to be financially and environmentally sustainable, and relevant to the communities we serve in the 21st century, we must take an immediate and proactive approach to collections management and review.

Our trustees have estimated that for Bridport Museum to be sustainable we need to rationalise the total collection by up to 30%. The ambition to achieve this within the scope of a 3 year project was not achieved, however aiming high has driven organisational change and the impact of this should not be underestimated.

Despite the challenges of delivering TRS in the context of a global pandemic, we estimate that over 10,000 people engaged in TRS activities which have informed

the creation of a new Collections Development Policy and Collections Assessment Guide – the tools which will empower our volunteer team to take forward the long term project to rationalise our collections.

Our initial nervousness at 'airing our dirty laundry' in public turned out to be unfounded and we were pleasantly surprised at how willing people were to engage with the process, and the level of understanding emerged around the challenges faced by museums in caring for the collections they hold on behalf of their communities.

'Off the Shelf' reinforces the idea that 'ethical transfer, disposal, reuse and deaccessioning are everyday and necessary parts of a sustainable collections management approach' and we move forward confident that our team of collections volunteers are on board with this. As one has put it:

'TRS is always in the back of our minds'.

References & Links

Emily Hicks. [How to identify the Right Stuff.](#)

Blog published by the Collections Trust, 15 July 2021 (collectionstrust.org.uk/blog/how-to-tell-the-difference-between-right-and-wrong)

Tim Burge & Shelagh Ball. [The Right Stuff.](#)

Case study presented the Museum's Association conference 'Future of Museums: Disposal', 28 June 2023 (youtu.be/TH6pOvawpAw)

Bridport Museum. [The Collections at Bridport Museum: A Guide, 2023](#)

(www.bridportmuseum.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/BridportCollections_24.pdf)

Museums Association. [Off the Shelf: A Toolkit for Ethical Transfer, Reuse and Disposal, 2023.](#) (www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/disposal/)

