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## **Audiences achieved - the Museum Resource and Learning Centre in Herefordshire two years on**

Katherine Andrew

Herefordshire Heritage Service  
Museum Resource and Learning Centre, 58 Friars Street, Hereford HR4 0AS

Email: kandrew@herefordshire.gov.uk

### **Introduction**

Herefordshire Heritage Service came into being in its current format with 1998 local government re-organisation, taking back a county museum service role that it had relinquished in the 1974 local government boundary changes. From 1974 to 1998, the service had served only the City of Hereford.

The new expanded service saw staff striving to deliver collection care in far from satisfactory conditions, but access for staff to collections was difficult to say the least, and for the public very limited indeed due to the following factors.

- 1 Collections stored at over 12 dispersed sites
- 2 Different sections of collections in different buildings and within them, on many different floors
- 3 Offices and stores at different sites
- 4 No lift access to stores
- 5 No climate control
- 6 No disabled access to the sole meeting room

Plans were put in place to address these issues, culminating in the Museum Resource and Learning Centre project. This three phase project created a purpose designed facility from what had been a 1950s telephone repeater station. Located in central Hereford it has brought all collections storage and staff onto a single publicly accessible site and created a learning centre within the complex. With capital funds from Herefordshire Council and a significant investment from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the construction phase of the project was completed, collections were moved in and the building was officially opened by Princess Alexandra in April 2008.

The author has written extensively on the development of the centre in previous editions of NatSCA News, which have told the story of the risk assessment approach taken to planning the facility and the story of the design and build.

### **The Audience Development Plan**

An Audience Development Plan, commissioned and written in 2004, formed part of the original bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund. This was developed by the consultant Annie Hood following interviews and workshops with amongst others, staff, stakeholders, special interest groups, volunteers, senior managers and non-users. The ADP identified a number of key audiences and the offer that should be made to them.

- 1 General Public – family groups and tourists
- 2 Education sessions – primary, secondary and further education/higher education
- 3 Adult learning – special interest groups and Friends
- 4 Researchers and specialists
- 5 Volunteers
- 6 Minority ethnic groups
- 7 Low income groups

With construction completed, and collections back on-site (though not necessarily in the correct locations), a full service to the public started in January 2008 using the ADP as a blueprint for facilitating access. With the site open to the public, it was also possible to apply to move from provisional Accreditation to full Accreditation under the MLA scheme.

**The ADP review**

After eighteen months of operation, we commissioned an evaluation and review of progress. Annie Hood re-interviewed the original consultees and analysed the performance against targets achieved. A revised ADP was created to provide a plan for the way forward.

It was concluded that most targets had been met and many had been exceeded, but that the service was at risk of becoming too reactive to demands as people become aware of the facility and what it had to offer.

The following sections describe the types of access offered to the range of audiences and the lessons learned from two years of public access to the facility.

**The general public**

The centre was never intended to become a tourist destination or a visitor attraction in its own right, but instead to provide a base to support the offer at our existing sites.

The requirement of being "open to the public" to meet Accreditation requirements did however cloud the approach we took in the first couple of years of operation. In our first 18 months of operation, we had opened from 10am to 4pm on weekdays, attracting the occasional visitor, but most visitors had come with a query. It was rarely possible to align the enquirer with the relevant staff member at their first visit, since all work part time.

Following the review of the ADP, we have moved to a system of curatorial drop-in days, with two mornings a month from 10am to 1pm clearly advertised as covering specific collection areas and staff required to set this time aside in the diaries. This means that we can deal with identifications and donations on the spot, reducing the backlog of un-collected identifications or un-wanted donations and saving the enquirer a return trip. We can provide drop-in access to the stores on these days to answer a quick collection enquiry and with the relevant staff on duty; appointments can be made there and then for return visits.

Our audience sector for high volume visits to the site is the family audience with events badged originally as "Open Days". These consisted of an overall theme and a range of activities to include store tours, sections of the collection showcased in the learning room, demonstrations and hands-on activities. We ran eight or nine such days in the first two years with themes as diverse as Earthly Treasurers, Toys, Ready Steady Dig, Sounds Great, Destination China, Heritage Open Days, Inventions and Out of this world.

We benefitted significantly from being able to market these events as part of the Renaissance West Midlands Hub "Family Friendly" brand. This was particularly effective when our events coincided with a major marketing campaign that included bus-back advertising, radio and newspaper adverts and targeted mailings to BME and C2DE addresses. Our July 2008 event for national archaeology week attracted our biggest attendance to date (303 people) and resulted in people travelling as far as 50 miles cross-country to attend.

Open day events however were and remain very staff and resource intensive and attendance was very variable (Table. 1). We also realized that serious enthusiasts attracted by the chance to see the showcased items did not enjoy sharing the space with small children wielding gluey paint brushes and sprinkling glitter. As a result we have streamlined our approach to deliver three large scale drop-in activity days in the long school holidays aimed at a family audience and to supplement these with booked shorter sessions for children in half terms and the summer holiday. We have also decided to concentrate on an adult audience for Heritage Open days.

In future, we feel it would be better to market these large scale events as Activity Days and aim to attract 150 to 200 participants to each event. We will build on partnerships with the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust and specific projects such as "Overlooking the Wye" so that we can share audiences and widen awareness of each other's activities.

The Easter event is therefore always likely to have a geological theme and the July event, an archeological theme (to tie in with National Archaeology Week) (see Figs. 1-5). In the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games, the July events also co-incides with the Open Weekend.

Improved access to collections for staff, the regular tours we hold and systematic storage of like material stored with like has meant that all staff have gained a much better understanding of the collections. This has



**Fig. 1.** Atrium of Resource Centre set up for "Volcano" open day in April 2010, with our partners, the Herefordshire & Worcestershire Earth Heritage Trust display and merchandise for sale.

resulted in being able to complete a re-display of our permanent exhibition and to date to create two major object based shows in the temporary exhibition gallery and numerous single case displays and "collections interventions" from our own material into touring exhibitions. For example, the "Tooth and Claw" photography exhibition of predators provided the perfect show case for natural history taxidermy, this summers monsters and mythical beasts children's workshop has a wide selection of biological forms on offer as inspiration from a Woolly rhino tooth to a goat skull.

Natural history material is also a regular feature of the exhibitions created for the Mobile Museum. A creative learning approach is adopted to these displays, with objects selected to tell the story of the exhibition, rather than necessarily for the reason they were collected. Examples from the herbarium of twigs and foliage form part of the years' Folklore and Fairy Tales' exhibition and a study skin of a rat for instance has been a regular exhibit in exhibitions as diverse as hedgerows and the bi-centenary of the slave trade. The site provides secure parking and a charging facility for the Mobile Museum on its Herefordshire tours. The vehicle is part of a fleet of three shared between nine authorities in the West Midlands - Herefordshire's vehicle is shared with Shropshire.

#### **Education sessions**

The service has built up an education service since 1998 which has a good track record of working with primary schools in the county but had not developed an offer for secondary schools.

#### **Primary Schools**

A new primary school session "Britain since 1948" was created to run as an all day session at the centre and has been well received but numbers booking remain low. "The Magic Turtle" an art and literature session was developed using the print collection (including several prints featuring animals, landscapes and plants) as inspiration for poetry and print making for KS2 secondary school pupils, although feedback is excellent, it too has received disappointingly low numbers of bookings.

We are currently undertaking the West Midlands pilot for a roll out of "Take one Object" a schools offer first developed by the National Gallery around single painting. Our iconic 2.4 m long sturgeon specimen has been selected as the object and the first professional development session with teachers created great excitement.

The offer to schools across cultural services is about to be reconsidered – in a largely rural county with small schools and declining school budgets, trips out to our sites seem hard to market.

### **Secondary and Further Education/Higher Education**

Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) Art College and blacksmithing students now undertake familiarisation tours as part of their induction. This results in regular requests by individuals for return visits to study collections as source materials for projects – including many natural history requests. The results displayed at the end of year art college show certainly include lots of natural science inspiration.

In the last year, we have started to work more closely with the Art College and have issued three live briefs for museum service projects resulting in a leaflet design, an interventive exhibition and three short films for the mobile museum display.

We have also been able to offer to re-run relevant adult learning seminars delivered via the WEA as repeat sessions for the blacksmithing students.

### **Adult learners**

We offer three types of interaction for adult learners;

1. A general introductory talk followed by a tour of the centre or a tour of particular sections of the collection, supported for bigger groups by tea and cake served by our Friends group.

These tours are popular with local history societies, WIs, Friends, U3A, other museums, Probus and special interest groups. In order to manage groups, we require two members of staff per ten visitors and we ask visitors to leave bags and coats in lockers before entering the stores. We are also considering offering tours to school groups to look at specific items. Currently around 50 groups a year (500 individuals) visit the centre via this route.

The benefit is a dawning of understanding of the nature of museum collections and their needs in storage. Visitors are always impressed by the size and organization of the larger stores. A major disadvantage however, is that the natural history store, as the smallest store and the only one without compactor racking can only be shown comfortably to one or two visitors at a time.

A charge is made for group visits.

2. In depth taught session with collections access – for two years we have run a spring series of morning seminars (2 to 2.5 hours long) where the presentation is prepared by the curator and the theme explored through the collections displayed in the seminar room.

University for the Third Age and WEA (Workers educational authority) have both used this facility with lecturers either drawn from museum staff or external tutors. Natural science topics have included "What's my habitat", "Introduction to geology" and "History of Geology in Herefordshire". Preparing the sessions and in particular getting out and replacing the specimens is time consuming, but it does allow collections to be inspected closely. For natural history collections, the use of specimens in this way harks back to the specimen rich displays of nineteenth century museums.

A charge is made for seminars, in the case of WEA, we charge for staff time and room hire, WEA charge for attendance. WEA are interested in exploring partnerships with other museums to deliver similar activities.

3. Practical workshops – to date these have concentrated on mainly on textiles with a hugely popular course on making a Victorian corset (run three times), a group of workshops on different techniques linked to a summer exhibition of quilts and other sewing techniques. From "Countryside to cabinet" has covered insect collecting and mounting and has been run twice. Again, a charge is made for workshops.

### Researchers and specialists

These individuals now have access to a dedicated research room and our specialist library. Visits are pre-booked although drop-in access is now possible for short preliminary enquiries. The research room is monitored by CCTV and researchers are supervised, especially with high risk items such as eggs. We were averaging around 200 individual research visits a year, although with drop-in access starting this year, this seems to have decreased. Drop-in enquiries have recently started to be monitored, in two months, eleven in-person identifications were dealt with.

In person research visits are not charged for, but we are considering charging for staff time of more than twenty minutes to undertake a research query received remotely.

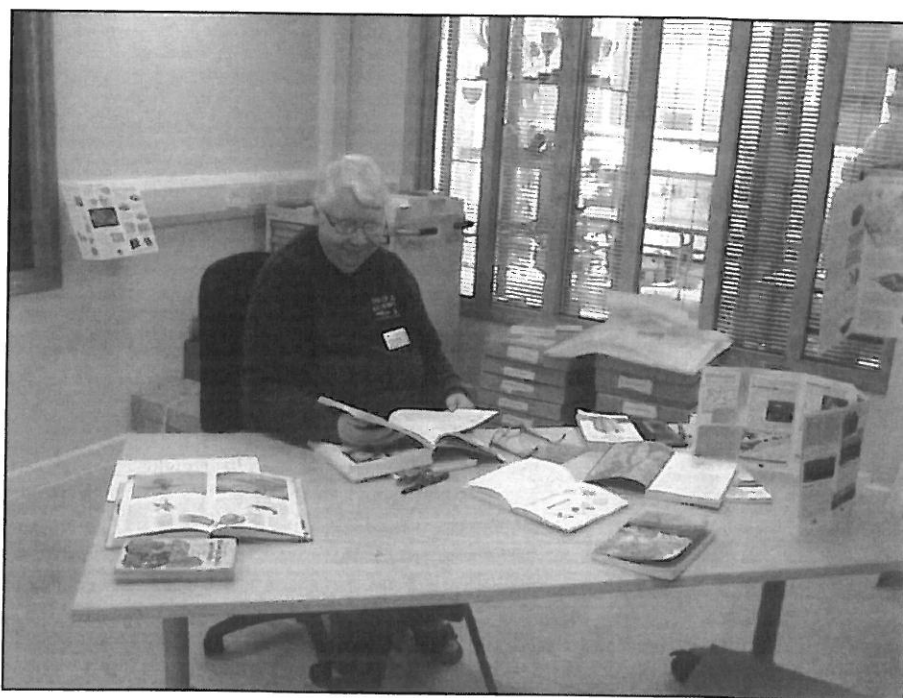
### Volunteers

Volunteers are an essential part of our service and come in two forms;

1. The work-experience placement – normally one week for school students, up to six weeks for students on undergraduate or postgraduate courses.

Students with us for a week undergo a carousel of activities and work shadow front of house, learning and collections functions. Those with us for longer periods will do a week of service familiarization before concentrating on specific projects. We have hosted up to 40 work placement students in a year, but as a result of the ADP review, are now offering opportunities at set periods rather than responding to requests. Even with a limit of 25 placements a year, this equates to a work experiences student with us once every two weeks.

2. Regular long-term volunteers – these support the work of curatorial staff and report individually to them and undertaking specific projects (Fig.2). Currently we are averaging 20 to 25 individual volunteers with us each month, with each member of the curatorial team supervising at least two or three volunteers, textile volunteers tend to work in groups. As a result of the ADP review, we have now decided to cap volunteer numbers at 30 on the books at any one time. We are however, nearing completion of the relatively unskilled re-packing and collection sorting tasks and now need to move to a point where volunteers are concentrating on data entry and delivering strategically planned objectives. These may mean that some volunteers are no longer able to work for us.



**Fig. 2.** Tess Ormrod, our regular geology volunteer – on this occasion identifying geology specimens at an open day.

Often individuals who come as work experience students or researchers will go on to become long term volunteers. Sixth form students for example can opt to do a regular community volunteering slot and one of this summer's work experience student, who photographed the herbarium sheets has elected to return on Friday afternoons to continue working on this collection. Volunteers contribute in excess of 2,000 hours a year of work to the service the equivalent of 1.5 additional full time members of staff.

### **Ethnic Minority groups**

When the audience development plan was first put together in 2004, Travelers were the largest minority ethnic group in Herefordshire, followed by the Chinese community. By the time the centre was completed in 2008, with migration from Eastern Europe following changes to European boundaries in 2004, the minority ethnic make up of Herefordshire had changed significantly. The service already had good links with Travelers in advance of work on the centre and has continued to assist with Traveler family history events

We have approached reaching BME audiences and raising awareness by working with the wider Cultural Services to develop a "Destination" brand, concentrating an open day and a series of events and activities across museums and libraries. To date, we have hosted Destination China, Destination Japan and Destination Africa. The 2011 theme is Destination Poland.

### **Low Income users (or C2DE socio-economic groups)**

The metal detectorist community was identified as a key low income group amongst our potential users and indeed data from the first couple of years of Portable Antiquities scheme demonstrates that in fact most reporting is from socio-economic groups D and E, traditional non-users of museums. We have hosted dedicated behind the scenes visits and talks for the local metal detector society, although the group prefer to meet in a local pub. The finds liaison officer for the Portable Antiquities scheme has recently moved his surgeries to the centre, to tie in with the drop-in days.

We choose to partner with WEA to deliver our adult learning programme as the organisation as a policy of providing subsidised training for low income users. We have attracted a few participants due to this who might otherwise struggle to attend.

The Hub Family Friendly targeted marketing campaigns to BME and C2DE audiences was extended to Herefordshire & Worcestershire in 2008 and meant that for the first time, we were part of a large scale targeted marketing campaign. We certainly noticed a difference in audiences for the promoted events.

With increasing budget restrictions and the need to recover costs, we continue to offer free entry to our open days and a number of free activities, but increasingly we are seeking to recover £1 per head per activity that we need to purchase materials for. Ensuring a mix of free and paid for activity ensures that we do not discriminate against lower income users.

**Table 1.** User data from April 2007 to August 2010

Activity	April 07 –March 08	April 08–March 09	April 09 –March 10	April 10 – Aug 10
Individual researchers	141	257	223	70
Pre-booked tours no/ no of individuals	40/357	46/517	58/592	22/245
No of Open days	5	7	8	3
Open day visitors	366	887	774	353
Volunteer hours	1699	1939	2226	1268
Work placements	5	27	40	13
Meetings	122	236	217	104
Total visitors	1063	2785	2701	975

### Where do we go from here?

The review of our audience development plan basically advised that the future direction should be made up of less activity but more purpose, and indicated that action was needed in the following areas.

- 1 Marketing strategy and an awareness campaign needed
- 2 Family Friendly activity days restricted to three or four a year in main school holidays
- 3 Volunteer numbers capped at thirty, more strategic approach taken to work programmes, travel expenses to be met
- 4 Proactive approach to work placements, no more than 25 a year
- 5 Customer care training for all staff based at the centre
- 6 Develop staff skills in creative learning
- 7 Some sessions for schools to continue to run from the centre
- 8 20 meetings or courses a year for adult learners
- 9 Orientation visits continue for HE/FE students, build stronger links with the colleges
- 10 As ethnic makeup of the county changes, activities for BME and low income groups need to keep pace with the changes
- 11 MRLC activity and targets at the hub of service activity

We have embraced the findings of the report and this year will be running only three family friendly open days plus the open day aimed at adults for Heritage Open Days in September (Fig. 3-5). As budgets continue to be squeezed, we are concentrating our open day efforts on week days in the longer school holidays, thereby avoiding having to pay staff to work over the weekend. Selling our offer continues to be our hardest task - we have good routes for marketing visitor attractions and an established primary school age audience, but activity for adults that requires booking and payment continues to be a struggle.

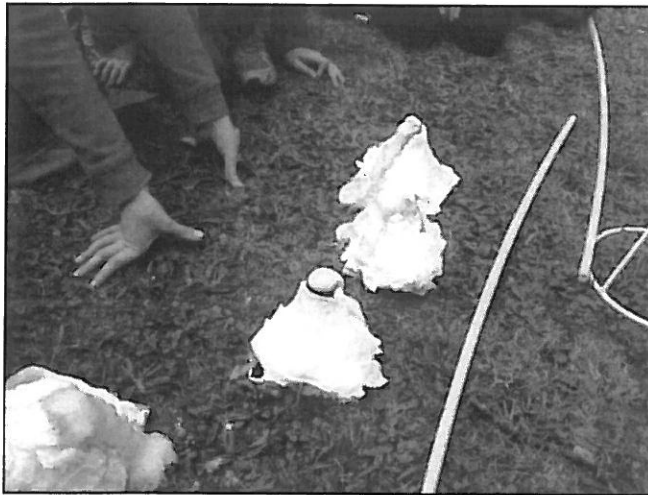


Fig. 3. Mini bicarbonate volcanoes at the "Volcano open Day".



Fig. 4. Giant bicarbonate volcanoes at the "Volcano open Day".





**Fig. 5.** Devonian fossil scenes created by participants at the Volcano open day - incorporating volcanoes, simple land plants and armoured fish.

Although our natural history collections are fairly small - constituting around 10% of our total holdings, we continue to use them extensively in all of our activity and ensure that audiences continue to be achieved.