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Dublin AGM: A personal view **- Steve Thompson: Scunthorpe Museum**

Well, wasn't it a great meeting! At least, that's how I felt about it. An excellent programme and a conference superbly run by Jo and Nigel and his team in Dublin. There were one or two things that I was a bit bothered about before the meeting, because I wanted our first AGM to be a great success. The first was, how many people would turn up. If only a few people had ended up going it would have been a big setback, but in the event, with over a hundred people there, it was as big a draw as we have managed yet. Another item was the annual dinner. Now this may seem like a minor issue, but actually, people remember these things, either for better or for worse. Following the Manchester meal, there was talk of not having an annual dinner at all. Fortunately, it went very well, and contributed to the overall success of the conference.

Having spoken to one or two other people, it also seems that we haven't yet managed to get the balance right between the conservation and curatorial sides of our group, and this was raised at the most recent committee meeting. Which is to say, we are aware of this, and we will continue to strive to represent the interests of conservation in the manner that we undertook to as part of the founding of NatSCA.

Of course, it was in Dublin, and I'm sure everybody had a good time out of the conference as well as in. However, what really made it for me was the content of the programme, and sadly, you can't always say that about these things. For me personally, it was particularly interesting, as I took away a number of things that have been influencing the way in which I, and possibly the rest of our team in North Lincolnshire, are looking to develop the service here. But I hope that everyone will have listened and taken away lessons from the things the speakers had to say.

Three talks in particular stood out for me, the first being Joe Cain's, and the message he had for us right at the end of his talk. That is to say, are we giving an unreasonable view of natural sciences to the people who visit our museums? When we go to school we are told "this is the way it is, learn it". As undergraduates, we discover "this is the way it probably is, but, well, we're not really all that sure". If you go on to do post-graduate work, it's a case of "well we don't know, it's your job to go and find out". In museums, we tend to adopt the first attitude, spending more time on storytelling and less on encouraging exploration. I think we should be encouraging people to ask more questions about the world around them, and get away from the idea that we know all the answers.

The second talk was that of Eve Graves, and again there were questions being asked about our broadly closed approach to how we use our collections in trying to interpret the natural world. Her students have been taking objects and interpreting them, but coming at it from the other end. In other words, we usually use objects to illustrate points we are trying to make. But if you start by simply asking questions about objects, you find that there is a great deal more to say. Our world is not split neatly into different topics, so that, for example, a fossil or an animal bone may have geological, biological, archaeological, religious, technological, decorative and symbolic significance, but we tend to pick up on just one aspect at any one time and ignore the others. Wouldn't it be so much more interesting, even exciting, to show more of these aspects or, dare I say it, encourage our users to discover them for themselves.

The third talk that made me sit up was Peter Davis's talk on eco-museums. The understanding I took away from that was that an eco-museum, in so far as it has been defined at all, is where a community takes on directly the role of preserving and making accessible the heritage of their own area, and does so in a holistic fashion, cutting across the traditional museum disciplines, in a way that seems to me to reflect more the way life really works. As Peter pointed out, we do not have any eco-museums in this country, but that does not mean that we don't do the things they do. Indeed, we do, but we tend to do them all in their own little compartments and, by the way, in so doing, split our users into little interest groups. As I sat there, it occurred to me that this was very much the kind of way I had been visualising the way I thought my own home institution should be going, although I have still been thinking in terms of natural sciences. My thoughts were to be getting more people directly involved, working much in the local communities, and drawing in the archaeology and social history aspects. But I am now looking at the idea, with my colleagues, of a more holistic approach across all our disciplines, and developing a service that is more not simply community focused but community driven. Of course, we all know how hard that is to achieve.

None of this is new, I know, and we have covered this ground in past events and museums studies students are fed it on their courses. But there is a difference between knowing these things intellectually and seeing them as a practical starting point for improving museum services. I left the conference with my head fairly buzzing.

Of course, I could be completely wrong, or it may be that this approach will work better in a dispersed community like North Lincolnshire than in a predominantly urban environment, we shall have to wait and see. But I do know that museums throughout the country are suffering a decline in usage, and this adds to the already great pressures we face in our jobs. I felt that the things coming out in the conference offered ways of making ourselves more relevant or attractive to people “out there”, and that perhaps the title, “Natural History is Cultural History”, had a more practical significance than I had realised going in.

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