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## NatSCA News

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Title: Museums Association - Collections Review East Midlands Consultation Meeting Snibston Discovery Park, Coalville Thursday 9 September 2004, 10.00a.m.

Author(s): Not Listed

Source: Not Listed (2004). Museums Association - Collections Review East Midlands Consultation Meeting Snibston Discovery Park, Coalville Thursday 9 September 2004, 10.00a.m.. *NatSCA News*, Issue 4, 37 - 39.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/317>

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**Museums Association – Collections Review**  
**East Midlands Consultation Meeting**  
**Snibston Discovery Park, Coalville**  
**Thursday 9 September 2004, 10.00a.m.**

**Present:** Beverley Baker (Galleries of Justice), Michael Cooper (Nottingham City Museums & Galleries), Yolanda Courtney, (Leicester City Museums), Jim Grevatte (EMMLAC), Melissa Hall (Newark Museums), Mary Hider (Leicester City Museums), Glyn Hughes (Newark Museums) Ron Inglis (Nottingham City Museums & Galleries), Paul Jefford (Lincs Vintage Vehicle Society/Lincs Road Transport Museum), Susan Lansdale (EmmS), Steph Mastoris (Leicestershire Heritage Services), Francine Smith (Derby City Museums), Jonathan Wallis (Derby City Museums/MidFed), Jerry Weber (EMMLAC), Ros Westwood (Derbyshire Museums Service), Graham Whalley (Nottingham City Museums & Galleries/ NatSCA), Helen Wilkinson (Museums Association), Franne Wills (Lincolnshire Heritage Services) David Worthington (East Midlands Hub).

**Apologies:** Mike Cavanagh (Kettering Heritage Quarter), Sarah Levitt (Leicester City Museums/MidFed/ EM Hub), Susanna Smith (National Trust EM), Keith Harrison (William Carey Museum), Doddington Hall

### **Welcome & introductions**

Steph Mastoris (Chair) welcome everyone to the meeting, and particularly Helen Wilkinson who has been the instigating force in the development of the MA Collections Review. He suggested that the discussion be structured along the lines suggested by the MA for regional consultation meetings, and invited those attending to introduce themselves and give an outline of their experience with, and interest in, collections. This highlighted a number of areas for discussion.

### **The MA Collections Review – presentation**

Helen Wilkinson explained that the Review arose out of the MA's ambition to set policy agendas in the future. Collections and collecting was the foremost issue, partly because of the emphasis on learning and access in recent years; there was a need to mesh the latter more integrally with collections. Consequently, the MA had appointed a Steering Group, then set up two Working Groups, leading to the consultation paper, which was launched earlier this summer. The consultation process ends on 1 October, after the MA Conference where this will be a major theme.

The MA anticipates two outcomes: (1) a final report, driven by case studies and good practice, aiming to change the way people work; and (2) the strengthening of subject specialist networks (for institutions, rather individuals). It is hoped to launch the report in Museums & Galleries Month in May 2005. The MA hopes that MLA and a charitable foundation will support the networks, probably through project-led activity, which has been shown to be more productive than funding infrastructures. The MA is aware that such networks would have to fit with the regional hubs and *Renaissance*, and must consider interdisciplinary working.

From the consultation meetings, the MA seeks: feedback on what the networks could do and what they would need; and debate on the philosophical ideas raised, perhaps with a view to a revision of the Code of Ethics in the longer term.

### **Networks**

The meeting divided into three groups to discuss the practicalities of setting up and running subject specialist networks, and to suggest examples of good and poor practice.

Feedback:

- Natural Science Network – started with mapping for a database, which provided a European summary of natural science collections. Staff time was provided free by large museums. The positive

outcome was a product that is still used. However, once the project ended, with withdrawal of resources by the larger institutions, it was difficult to maintain and develop. The sustainability has been dependent on individuals. It is suggested that national initiatives need a regional infrastructure to be workable and sustainable;

- Institutions must see such projects/networks as having value, significance, outcomes or other benefit if they are to dedicate staff and resources. They must also link with corporate objectives;
- The Coalmining Collections Forum was cited – doing sterling work but struggling to sustain itself because of lack [of resources and clear leadership](#);
- Networks need to (1) undertake a mapping exercise; (2) have a development plan; (3) develop regional or national agreements on progressing collections.
- Networks would probably end up being subject-based. Preferably grounded in a region, but may extend beyond;
- There is a need to think beyond a focused use of specific collections or subject areas; there is much to be gained from imaginative links and interpretations with other areas and collections. Independent museums, which have to be visitor-focused, link with other museums through county fora to do this well;
- If concentrating on the visitor experience, museums need guidance on storage and disposal, and to think laterally about more dynamic ways to use the collections e.g. handling, disposal to private collections. It was agreed that museums could better value or judge the items in their collections if there was better documentation; perhaps there should be a greater emphasis on retrospective documentation rather than mapping;
- The different nature of collections in museums, libraries & archives was discussed – it was felt that museums’ cataloguing and storage issues were more complex due to the diverse nature of the collections. Lack of subject specialists on hand often made it difficult to make decisions about display, storage and disposal. Collections need to be seen and judged in different ways e.g. their specialist importance, artistic value, as well as their social historical and local significance;
- There are already too many groups. Invigorate and support those that exist instead of starting more.

### **Clarifying the use of museum collections**

There was a broad-ranging discussion on this issue. The MA wonders whether museums should use their collections more actively, rather than preserving and storing? It was agreed that there should be a clearer sense of what is a used and/or reserved collection.

[Perhaps there was a need for certain, less scientific subjects to create taxonomy so that museums could judge their own collections better?](#)

How do we decide on what is of long-term value for future generations? If we base our collections on current use and importance, we could destroy items that may be of important significance for future generations. It was agreed that we should assess objects in terms of their ‘importance’ as objects first, followed by their social historical importance, and local significance. Often, communities are the best source of local knowledge – it is vital to get information about the items in our collections from local people so that we, and future generations, know how objects worked or were used. The recording and transfer of knowledge and information about each object is important.

### **More ambitious and better targeted collecting**

This is a difficult area. There are urgent issues of bulging stores and documentation backlogs that prevent some museums from engaging in contemporary and proactive collections policies. Others are nervous about making the right decisions in [acquiring](#) for a temporary or holding collection.

A systematic approach to collecting can be boring; it is often felt that the most interesting collections are those collected by one person with a particular interest or viewpoint. [Steph Mastoris outlined his previous work on systematic contemporary collecting of advertising ephemera and domestic packaging, as an example of an individual initiative. This had a number of important spin-offs into other areas such as the social history of home decoration and eating habits. He felt it was important to distinguish between proactive col-](#)

### lecting of historic material and collecting contemporary items.

We tend to collect what people value now, or older people use as trigger points for reminiscence. In collecting for the future, how do we judge what items will be of similar interest for future generations? And will they value or be interested in what we consider of significance now? This is a debate for national discussions and collections.

There was interest in Newark Museums' group of lay local advisers, brought together through local media appeal, who support the museums on acquisitions and disposals. It was felt that the active engagement of curator, artefact and community e.g. through such initiatives and through reminisce work, informed the collection and elicited a local viewpoint on significance and importance.

It was thought that science museums were engaging with the development of collections of technological items (e.g. mobile phones, computers) from the last thirty years of dynamic change. Items would appear in general museum collections by donation; it would be important to support their acquisition with knowledge about how people used them and what importance they had in their lives; they would be objects for reminiscence with the next generation(s). It was agreed that recording e.g. digital photography showing objects in context, and oral history, was useful in enhancing the knowledge of objects that were currently being collected.

It was suggested that there isn't enough contemporary collecting being undertaken in the natural science field e.g. for use in monitoring environmental change, and that many identifications are not being backed up by specimens. There is a wider need for more natural science collections – but who will collect, fund, maintain?

### **Role of the private collector**

Partly due to the Portable Antiquities scheme, there are more developing relationships between museums, special interest groups and enthusiasm collectors' clubs.

Concern was expressed that, if scientific items go to private collections, they leave the public domain and are lost in mapping, journal [citation](#) etc.

It was acknowledged that many collections are already a mix of public and private e.g. Lincs Road Transport Museum where some vehicles are owned by the Trust, others by private individuals – all accessible to the public (who are not concerned where ownership lies). Many collections in museums started out as private collections, and many private collections are put on public display.

There is a massive amount of public interest in objects and collecting, and enthusiasm for the past, stimulated and maintained by TV and the media. The county fora and friends' groups are very important in advising on specialist areas and in stimulating community involvement.

It was felt that perhaps the MA Code of Ethics needs to be revisited, as there is a great potential for more productive relationships between private collectors, collectors and enthusiasts clubs and museums. Education, outreach and access work have already contributed to blurring the boundaries.

### **Summary**

Helen Wilkinson felt that there was still a long way to consensus on many points. The consultative meetings and discussions are raising more questions rather than answering those posed by the MA. She invited any further comments to be emailed to her ([helenw@museumsassociation.org](mailto:helenw@museumsassociation.org)) preferably by 1 October.

Steph Mastoris thanked everyone for attending and for their lively contributions. Notes of the meeting would be made available to those attending, and discussed at the EmmS Practitioners Panel on 7 December. Ros Westwood proposed thanks to Steph Mastoris and Helen Wilkinson for guiding the discussion. The meeting then adjourned for lunch.