Communities and history in twenty first century museums in the United Kingdom: Museums as a means of social change

Dr Sheila Watson, Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester

Abstract

Publicly funded museums in the United Kingdom are expected to support a range of government initiatives and devote considerable efforts towards social inclusion and supporting community development. Drawing on specific examples this paper investigates the way history in museums has been used support community identities and examines some of the issues that such instrumentalism raises. The nature of public history and, in particular, museum histories, and the impact history museums can have on community identity when they work closely with their communities are also considered.

Two British case studies are presented. One examines issues arising from national museums' exhibitions in 2007 to commemorate the 1807 Act to abolish the Slave Trade. The other looks at community engagement in a local history museum as part of a regeneration programme in a deprived area in Great Yarmouth in Norfolk.

Introduction

What is the purpose of museums? For the late Stephen Weil, museums were influential organisations with the capacity to make contributions towards 'the task of building a just, stable, abundant, harmonious and humane society' (Weil 1996: 95, cited Sandell 2007: 173). While the use of museums to support social and political agendas is not new (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, Bennett 1995 the way in which museums can act as agents of social change has received a great deal of attention over the past ten years in the United Kingdom. Public

sector museums are required to deliver evidence of policy effectiveness with regard to social, education and economic agendas. They are expected to foster inclusivity, address social problems, confront past and present wrongs, encourage positive role models and values, support self esteem and pride amongst the marginalised in society, and encourage community identity and cohesion and, more recently, foster British nationalism. This direction has been encouraged by a variety of factors, including the impact of New Labour upon the museum sector, resulting in more emphasis on social, educational and economic outputs. Of course not all initiatives have come from the government. Museum leaders such as David Fleming in Liverpool and Mark O'Neill in Glasgow have developed new ways of working in a socially inclusive manner. They are inspired not so much by an external agenda but by a passionate commitment to social inclusion and a just and equitable society. Their work, admired by many throughout the sector, is imitated and emulated. In addition there has been a great deal of research in universities, investigating the social role, impact and potential of museums in society (for example, Sandell 2007, Hooper-Greenhill et al 2004) and this has influenced a new generation of museum studies students. In addition museums and other agencies have been encouraged to work together in regeneration schemes to support deprived communities and improve economically underdeveloped areas. The twin agendas of social inclusion and economic development have led museums to adopt a range of strategies to support communities[1] which include outreach sessions, educational schemes, and public history sessions that complement and support the work done by museums to attract tourists.

For Weil instrumentalism required many changes within museums, including an acknowledgement that the communities museums served should be involved in deciding the role the museum played in society. For him communities paid for museums and thus, for this

---

[1] The concept of community is a complex one. Here it is taken to mean a sense of belonging amongst those who share a range of interpretive practices (Watson 2007)

reason alone, 'the community is legitimately entitled to have some choice – not the only choice, but some choice- in determining how that instrument is to be used' (Weil 2002: 49). Hooper-Greenhill's vision of the post-museum echoes this concept when she argues that the post-museum, evolving out of the modernist museum, will become more responsive to communities, moving beyond the museum walls into 'the spaces, the concerns and the ambitions of communities' (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 82). There is, thus, an inherent tension between this idealism and the role of the state. Instrumentalism, such as that witnessed recently in the United Kingdom, assumes that the state knows best while museums are also expected to engage with communities and to accommodate new aspirations.

While all types of exhibitions and programmes within the publicly funded museum are required to support government policies, history has a special place in delivering official messages about the sort of society in which the state wishes us to live. In a liberal democracy devoted to social justice, equal opportunities and inclusion, few would argue that such instrumental use of history is a bad thing. However, this approach has a tendency to position the community as beneficiaries and recipients of histories and programmes related to historical messages the state wishes the community to accept and absorb. Where does Weil's idea of choice – some choice – fit into this model? This in turn leads us to many other questions. How can museums move beyond the museum walls to engage with the concerns and ambitions of the community and, in the spirit of democracy, work in equal partnership with the community while at the same time they are required to deliver certain types of messages? How do museums deal with issues of conflicted histories, contested histories, and forgotten histories? What sort of histories does the museum promote and how do these impact upon the public? Questions about the type of history a museum creates and curates are rarely considered by those who wish to interrogate the instrumental function of the museum, and so it is to this I now turn my attention.

History in museums

History in museums is one of the ways in which communities explain to themselves and others how they came to be and who they are today. History in this context can support community identity and self esteem. At their simplest museums legitimise certain versions of history and confer authority upon the stories they tell (Sandell 2007: 84). Museums are also the places where newcomers into a community – national, regional or local – can literally see and also experience some of the group's memories (Zerubavel 2004:3). Museums are places of assimilation and this can work both ways. The existing majority population may use the museum to present newcomers' history, practices and customs to itself. This presentation becomes a way of acknowledging the existence of alternative memories and patterns of behaviour as part of the existing community's repertoire of practices. However, this method of identifying separate community groups, (such as those based on ethnicity or religion), within a larger community such as a nation, can have the opposite effect to that intended. Newcomers may appear to threaten deeply held beliefs and customs and encourage an essentialising of the nation's character and history by those who feel anxious about the newcomers' practices and beliefs. In a similar way different readings of history by some communities wishing to include their version of events into a mainstream story may challenge deeply held views of others. Museum history can also alienate people and perpetuate a sense of grievance and injustice. Museums can therefore become places where debates take place about what it is to belong to certain communities, the values communities value, and what is expected of those who belong. Such debates are often expressed by fraught and contested interpretations of events, historical individuals and their significance.

Thus museums of history are powerful institutions. They present, however, a different sort of history from that obtained from reading a text. They engage with a public whose understanding of history is often far from that of the academic who writes or reads such texts.

History in museums often appears to adopt an approach that was common in the nineteenth century. The visitor is disconnected from what is represented, allowing an intellectual attitude that facilitated the ordering of the material world into a supposed rational schemata (Mitchell 1988 cited Beier-de Haan 2006: 192, Macdonald 2002 or 3: 3- 4). Hooper-Greenhill (2008) has suggested that the idea of learning through looking, which we can call disembodied learning, was a dominant pedagogy of the modernist period. This approach was typical of the nineteenth century historian who celebrated reason and evidence and, from these tools, created a view of the past that was professional and supposedly impartial. Within the museum this view of the past held sway. Its role was to deconstruct the collective memories of the past, which were often dismissed as myths and legends and to incorporate dispassionate facts into a rigorously researched and impartial historical narrative (Carr 2008: 133). Some historians in the twenty first century, despite postmodern critiques of historiography, continue to maintain, at least as far as the general public is concerned, that history deals with facts, that it searches for truth and that it aims to reconstruct and represent the past, understand it and interpret it (Evans 2006: 4). However, museums are biased. The very act of collecting material culture, displaying it and representing certain narratives to the visiting public requires selection and this requires choices to be made. The question therefore arises – whose bias and whose choice does and should the museum present?

For many historians working within the museum field there is a general view that 'those equipped with extensive knowledge of context and specialized skill in evaluating available evidence and liking it to other knowledge are best suited to interpret the past for those who come with curiosity and enthusiasm but little else' (Kyvig 2007: 4).In other words the curator knows best. Interestingly the only alternative offered to this is to provide objects without interpretation (ibid). However, a quick glance at the way in which museums operate

throughout the Western World demonstrates that there are some places where museum histories are provided by the communities themselves. Many of these are temporary displays – exhibition spaces 'loaned' to the community or a section of the community for a short space of time. Examples include the community access gallery called *The Forum* in the Migration Museum Adelaide, Australia, where each community group representing a different strand of immigration into Australia, chooses not only what it wishes to show but also the story the community wishes to tell (Szekeres: 2002). Such examples are, however, the exception and are frequently associated with temporary exhibitions. Professionals tend to retain control over their history collections and the stories they tell.

Let us now turn to public history. What sort of history does the public understand and experience? For the majority of people their history 'is far more pervasive than the professionals'' (Lowenthal 2002:211). It is part of their everyday lives, manifest through their practices and their beliefs, through the way they react to events and the assumptions they make about them. When people visit a museum only a few of them will bring to the experience a dispassionate and professional critique. Instead, as research into learning suggests, people bring with them a view of the world and they relate what they see, hear and experience to what they already know and remember (Hein 1998).

History exhibitions depend on memory and require visitors to understand not only conventions such as the text panel, but many also expect them to possess knowledge of certain interpretations of historical events and characters. However, individuals will bring with them not only their own personal understanding of history but the perspectives of the communities to which they belong. For Lowenthal this public knowing is 'historical knowledge' – that understanding that we all have of the past and it is not history (Lowenthal

2002: 212). This 'historical knowledge' has many names. Some, such as Jordanova, argue that it is history but a non academic, often barely articulated sense of other times, a 'history' shaped by emotions, fashion, style, personal experience and popular memories' (Jordanova 2000: 245).

However whether it is called 'historical knowledge or 'historical sense' (Rüsen 2008: x), heritage[2] or history or something, else, those who seek to understand this sense of the past acknowledge that cultural practices and various phenomena contribute to it (Rüsen 2008: x), not just the formal study of history managed and directed by professional historians. (check ')

Each individual possesses not only their own personal memories but memories of events or people, but those they share with others – public historical knowledge. This historical knowledge is formed in a variety of ways. It may be the result of government initiatives. National leaders may dictate what sort of history is taught and acknowledged publicly. They may encourage certain types of interpretations of past lives and events through public ceremonies, the creation of memorials, the funding of museums and the encouragement of certain historical traditions and the neglect of others. However, historical knowledge is also very personal. It is formed by families, by individuals with whom we come into contact, by friends, interests and hobbies. Each one of us takes what we want from the information that comes our way and weaves it into our own individual understanding of the past. This

---

[2] Heritage is a word often used to describe the practice of history in museums or other 'heritage' sites. For many the use of history within the present is what distinguishes it from history in an academic sphere and it is the former that is heritage. In other words heritage is when history is used for some present purpose. (Schofield 2008: 18) This idea is one adopted by Smith who describes heritage as 'a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present. (Smith 2006: 2)

understanding changes as we grow and experience new things and as we reshape our memories to help us deal with events and life changes we experience.

Other types of public historical knowledge are formed by communities, whether these are communities of geographical location, ethnicity, class, interests, sexual orientation, lifestyle preferences, or religious affiliation. Indeed it is public historical knowledge that, in part, binds these communities together and supports their identities. Some communities may develop historical knowledge that is deliberately oppositional to that espoused by official versions as made explicit in formal commemorations or museum narratives.

It has long been evident that historical knowledge is rooted in a range of emotions that have little to do with dispassionate historical 'evidence'. Indeed memory and feeling are very closely linked. We tend to remember more vividly something that happens to us if we also experience a strong emotion at the same time. Communities develop and nurture memories linked to such feelings, particularly if these memories are linked to some sense of grievance or injustice, or to a perceived threat to community identity. As Zerubavel points out: individuals fuse personal history 'with that of communities to which they belong and this helps to explain for example, the tradition of pain and suffering carried.by American descendants of African slaves'….(2003: 3). If individuals feel strongly that their community group has been badly treated by other communities in the past, then any museum exhibition that attempts to present a dispassionate view with various perspectives of the circumstances of that treatment, is likely to be rejected. Similarly certain types of historical knowledge are dependent on positive emotional reactions. Wartime victories, for example, become embedded in national and local community memories as they are associated with strong feelings – for example relief, pride, euphoria, excitement as well as sadness at the loss of loved ones and the sacrifices that war entails. However, any exhibition that challenges the

expected emotional response, for example by eliciting shame instead of pride, is likely to be rejected (Crane 1997: 48).

Historical knowledge as Lowenthal points out 'is by its nature consensual.' (Lowenthal 2002: 214). What is remembered by communities is a collective memory that tends to resist historical re-interpretation (Crane 1997). Inevitably there is a great deal of forgetting in the process of community memory building and, once any community has adopted a view of the past, that community may prove very resistant to attempts to resurrect different, forgotten versions. Indeed, they may find it difficult to accept that there are other perspectives, but retain their preferred understanding of the matter even in the face of historical evidence to the contrary. What one community accepts as history another may challenge as propaganda or myth. Perhaps the work of Bodnar (1992/4) on culture and the past, Connerton (2008) on remembering and forgetting, and Jordanova (2000) on guilt and history can help us understand these complex issues further.

Bodnar, working in America, draws a distinction between 'official culture' and 'vernacular culture' He argues that

> 'public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future. It is fashioned ideally in a public sphere in which various parts of the social structure exchange views. The major focus of this communicative and cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures' (Bodnar 1992: 15; cited Wertsch, and Kosyaeva check 2002: 99).

Thus we can understand public memory, as 'a site of contestation between competing voices' rather than 'a body of information that is somehow encoded , stored and retrieved'

(Brockmeier 2002 cited Wertsch, and Kosyaeva 2002: 99). Bodnar argues that there is an inherent conflict between official and unofficial vernacular culture in which the former represents the aspirations of the leaders in society whether they are national or cultural or political leaders in local communities. Here they share an interest in social unity, the continuity of existing institutions, and loyalty to the status quo. However, vernacular culture depends on many specialised interests and represents smaller communities keen to assert the validity of their views rather than those of the nation (Bodnar 1992; cited Wertsch, and Kosyaeva 2002: 100). The vernacular can also support the national as some groups will wish to complement and reinforce official versions of the past by stressing their attachment or their contribution to it (ibid).

Connerton (2008) has examined the role of memory and forgetting in public life. He questions the assumption commonly held that remembrance is often seen to be a virtue whereas forgetting is a failing. He points out that while some types of forgetting may be repressive, others provide opportunities for the formation of a new identity (2008: 62). For example, in the 1950s the search for active Nazis in various previously occupied countries in Europe was abandoned in an attempt to build coherent civil societies and to establish legitimate post totalitarian states (Judt 1992 cited Connerton 2008: 62). However, forgetting may well involve those whose grievances and injustices are forgotten becoming alienated from the national life that is thus being created by such an absence of memory.

Within the field of anthropology there has been an increased understanding that 'otherness' is implicit in the academic subject and has resulted in self doubt and guilt about the ways in which certain peoples have been portrayed. In history this sense of otherness is recognised but has not permeated the discipline as much as it has perhaps, in anthropology (Jordanova 2000) For Jordanova this anxiety about otherness within anthropology is derived, in part, by the ways in which certain communities have been oppressed. Their marginalisation has been

seen as in part a result of the othering that has, in some instances, denied them their humanity and has resulted in guilt. Guilt also exists within history but this is not something that is so readily acknowledged in the same way as it is in anthropology. Instead it manifests itself in public history in ways in which groups of people, communities, are represented in the past or chose to represent themselves. There is some expectation amongst those who fund museums in the UK that they will right previous wrongs and present sympathetic and revisionist versions of past events and thus support new ways of public understanding of the past.

Thus it appears that there will always be a danger of tension between official memory as made explicit in formal institutions such as museums and some community memories. At the same time official and vernacular culture are inherently oppositional particularly when they involve elements of guilt and forgetting. The example of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade illustrates these theories.

The bicentenary of the 1807 abolition of the Slave Trade in the UK in 2007.

Recently the Labour government in Britain has become interested in the ways in which British values, rooted in the nation's history, can be promoted by cultural institutions such as museums. This is partly because of increased anxiety, since the terrorist attacks of July 7 2005 on the London underground, that multiculturalism has led, in some cases, to the alienation of small sections of the national community from the majority. However, as my example will illustrate, this aspiration needs to be placed within the context of the nature of history, public historical knowledge and the way it is used by different community groups to support their identities. The example I wish to use is the museum involvement in the commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807 which was commemorated in the United Kingdom with a range of different exhibitions and events, funded partly by the government through various agencies and through the Heritage Lottery

Fund. This bicentenary remembered an Act of Parliament in 1807 that abolished the slave trade in the United Kingdom, though an Act to make slavery illegal was not passed until 1833.

In 2006 the Government launched a campaign to encourage the celebration of this bicentenary. A bicentenary advisory group was brought together to co-ordinate efforts and public funding was made available through various agencies to enable the celebrations to take place in a variety of ways.[3]

The message from the Government was one of celebration as well as commemoration. The bicentenary was seen as an opportunity to bring different communities together. While the victims were to be remembered commemoration was to be placed within a historical narrative of British democracy, equal opportunities and anti racism initiatives. However, the story of slavery in Britain is complex, contentious and difficult. While historians agree that the Transatlantic Slave Trade was inhumane, unjust and resulted in immediate and long term suffering to slaves and their descendants there is disagreement over the extent to which African and Arab slavers contributed to it and were responsible for it, and the long term economic benefits to Britain's economy. Nor was it entirely clear during the planning stages of the bicentenary how consultation with interested community groups was to be managed. Indeed, some groups indicated that they did not want the slavery issue to be commemorated at all (Foggett 2008).

At a conference held in York on 18 and 19 September 2008 academics, museum staff and members of community groups involved in government sponsored projects to commemorate

---

[3] http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/media_releases/2464.aspx (accessed 25 September 2008)

the abolition of the Slave Trade met to discuss the preliminary findings of research into public reactions to museum activities.

Project evaluation is ongoing. However, preliminary findings and the responses of representatives of community groups invited to the conference suggest that there were deep divisions between the way different groups regarded the exhibitions and the whole idea of commemoration. For a few delegates the whole idea of commemorating abolition was abhorrent because it emphasised the redemptive act of abolition and not the act of enslavement and the responsibility of the participating nations. For some representatives of Afro Caribbean groups, such as Toyin Agbetu, founder of Ligali,[4] the commemorative process ignored the views of the descendants of slaves and led to anger and a sense of disenfranchisement. In his contribution to the conference he argued that, for many people of black African origin, 2007 represented the year Britain rewrote and 'institutionalised through its museums, libraries, galleries, media and education system, a new narrow romantic abolition mythology about the nation's involvement in the Maafa' (Agbetu 2008). He viewed the focus on the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself, in museums and in other public media, as an attempt to rehabilitate Britain on a world stage that ignored the views of black British citizens who had not wanted this bicentenary commemorated in any way. For them, he argued, 1807 meant nothing – it was one event in a long history of suffering and oppression. Roshi Naidoo[5] argued that there was in museums, besides an attempt to redress previous misrepresentations of slavery, resistance to challenging British values by which British history is seen through a lens of progressive tolerance and freedom.

---

[4] Ligali,is a Pan African Human Rights Organisation that challenges the representation of African people and culture in the British media. The website states that 'Our remit is to actively campaign for cultural, economic, political and social justice on behalf of the African community.'(http://www.ligali.org/ accessed 25 November 2008).
[5] a consultant who works on issues of race and ethnicity.

Other groups saw some museum efforts in equally critical but different ways. For example the establishment by the National Museums Liverpool of the International Museum of Slavery, funded by HLF with the aim to 'encourage African and Caribbean groups to share their interpretation and perspectives on our collective histories and heritage' (HLF 2008) offended its Friends organisation. In a letter to the director, David Fleming, the Chairman said:

> "Members of the committee feared that political correctness might result in a brushing aside of the African contribution to the trade, while Liverpool's role in the abolition campaign might be downplayed. The committee had decided they would provide no support towards the International Slavery Museum" (Steel 2008:5).

While this paper does not offer a critique of the Museum its displays emphasise not only the suffering, injustices and oppression of the slaves but also foregrounds the efforts of the slaves to free themselves.

The national story in Britain is a complex one that embraces a range of diverse and sometimes oppositional perspectives. While we have to be careful not to accept the voices of vocal minorities as necessarily representative of the majority view we need to respect them. Discussions at the conference suggested that, for some representatives of the Afro- Caribbean community in Britain, the history of the African slave trade was deeply felt and experienced. Historical knowledge was not dispassionate and based on historical research. Their experiences of racism and the disadvantages they had to overcome in their lives were partly attributed by them to the historical effects of slavery. Their memories, both personal and communal, were very different from those of the white communities who visited the exhibitions. In contrast some white communities, for example, the Friends of National

Museums Liverpool, interpreted the stories in the new galleries according to their preconceived understandings of the slave trade as just one of the many past injustices in a nation's history. Within this narrative the emphasis on abolition provided evidence of a forward thinking, tolerant and freedom loving nation. As Wertsch and Kosyaeva (2002: 104) and Crane 1995 have pointed official meanings are not always accepted when they contradict existing knowledge. Some British Afro Caribbeans rejected official meanings despite efforts by the museum to provide a perspective that presented the sufferings and injustice of slavery. Some Friends of the Museum positioned themselves as authorities who bore witness to the official story and confirmed it, chosing to prioritise one memory over another in order to support community versions of historical events (Connerton 2008). They preferred the traditional reading of the focus on the role of the city in the abolition of the slave trade.

Thus use of the historical exhibitions to promote certain narratives, whether they derived from the government or museum, will never be wholly effective (and indeed maybe counter productive) without recognition that history and the public's understanding of it is very different from that of the professional historian. Here different historical events within a national narrative can be seen to represent values such as freedom and tolerance on the one hand and oppression and injustice on the other. Both interpretations are fundamental to the way different communities understand the past and conceptualise their identities within the nation in the present.

Local history and the community.

Research into local communities and their involvement in museum displays in Great Yarmouth, in Norfolk, also suggests that smaller communities provide themselves with

preferred readings of history and these are integrated into their sense of identity[6] (Watson 2007a) and this case study provides evidence of how museums, if they avoid an instrumentalist approach and adopt an open empowering attitude to their communities, can develop museums that support self esteem and community cohesion. Between 1995 and 2003 a Heritage Partnership in the town, (consisting of local and national heritage organisations), worked with local communities to redisplay all the museums in an area of severe economic and social deprivation and, in the process, enabled the local people to tell the stories they wanted to tell in their museums.

At the beginning of the project few local people visited the partners' sites. Indeed two museums run by English Heritage, the Rows House and the Old Merchants' House, were boarded up because of vandalism. Local people had broken many of the windows. Children had, on occasion, stoned the custodians and English Heritage was thinking about closing the sites to the public altogether.

These museums, along with those of all the partners, were located in an area of severe economic and social deprivation. Local people suffered from low levels of employment, poor educational attainment, relatively high levels of drug and alcohol abuse and a corresponding sense of poor self esteem. There was a general feeling in the area that it was shameful to live there. Indeed one person in a consultation exercise confessed he always lied about where he lived when he was outside the area as he knew that the place had a poor reputation with outsiders (Watson 2000a : 36). The partners received government funding within the SRB

---

[6] This case study has been described in more detail in the following publications: Watson, S 2007 ' History museums, community identities and a sense of place: rewriting histories' in S. Knell, S. MacLeod and S. Watson (eds) *Museum Revolutions: How museums change and are changed*, London, Routledge, 160 – 172 and Watson, S. 2004 'Museums and social inclusion: Managing consultation with specific target groups: a British case study' in M. Dreyer and R. Wiese (eds) *Zielgruppen von Museen: Mit Erfolg Erkennen, Ansprechen und Binden,,* Freilichtmuseums am Kiekeberg, Rosengarten-Ehestorf, 85 – 98

(Single Regeneration Challenge Fund) Scheme to provide improved heritage attractions to help support tourism and, at the same time, to encourage local self esteem and pride.

The partners agreed a strategy that, from the beginning they would consult and involve local people in all the decision making about the redisplays of their museums. During the process of consultation people indicated that the existing Maritime Museum did not provide them with any sense of enthusiasm for their maritime past and they wanted a new museum on a different site, a fish factory called the Tower Curing Works, which would tell the story of their town over two thousand years. Indeed local people indicated that they cared very much about their town's history and felt that it had been lost and neglected. They could not understand the sorts of displays the museums had which focussed more on collections than human stories. As they believed that people throughout the area from outside the town looked down on them they thought museums could have a role in demonstrating to outsiders as well as to the local people themselves that they had a proud and interesting history (Watson 1999, 2000a).

Between 1997 and 2001 regular focus groups with three different constituencies were held, local people living within the deprived areas, the wealthier local people living in more affluent areas of the town and seaside holiday makers in an attempt to work out what sort of new local history museum *Time and Tide* would serve them all and what sort of stories it would tell. Representatives from hard to reach groups such as those who were unemployed or who had never visited a museum were recruited by an outside agency and these individuals were paid to attend the sessions (Watson 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001). In addition other types of consultation[7] exercises were held. The new museum was eventually opened in 2004 under the

---

[7] These included participation in a Town Hall open day when over 2,000 people looked at the Partners' ideas for the museum and commented on them, and visits to local groups and societies over a period of time, along with consultation with a range of interested parties.

name of *Time and Tide,* having been developed over seven years, during which time local communities were encouraged to work with museum professionals to determine n all the themes and display techniques it used.

When they came into contact with local people museum staff soon abandoned their preconceptions that they were not interested in the past and their own history. The questions they asked people included: What was the point of this new museum? What would it mean to you? Would you visit it and why or if not did you want it? What were the key stories it should tell? Should it be themed, run in a timeline, focus on topics such as Yarmouth and Norfolk, the environment? How important was archaeology? How should we present the objects and the building?

The consultation findings were fed back to designers, who then developed designs and took them back to more focus groups. Feedback from the groups was incorporated into the displays, indeed dictated the stories and the methods of interpretation.

Some things became very clear early on. For everyone, particularly those in the deprived area, this museum was about who they were in the world. It was to tell a story of a place and a people over time to show to others that Yarmouth had a proud history and its people were proud to be part of that. Everyone thought that it was important for the museum to show others, i.e. visitors this, but they also wanted to show this story to their children and grandchildren. Some people indicated that they did not want to come to a museum themselves but they thought it was important to have it because it showed the town to be a place with pride in itself and it would tell tourists that it was more than just a seaside holiday place.

The methodology adopted allowed museum staff to build on each consultation exercise. Once a set of groups had given their views on the museum, the next set would be shown not the

original stimulus boards but new ones which illustrated the main areas and topics the previous groups had wanted to see exhibited. Each group was also encouraged to add in new ideas. Thus museum staff began to build up a picture of what was considered by a range of groups from all classes and many occupations and interests to be key historical topics for their new museum. Several important issues were identified very early on. The Fishing Industry that had declined and disappeared in the 1960s and the Rows were key topics that needed a great deal of museum space and an experiential method of display (Watson 2007b).

Perhaps, more surprisingly, the prehistoric background to the town and its rise on a sandbank some time before 1000 AD along with its medieval past were important topics for many of the community groups. Museum staff assumed that for most people the most interesting element of Yarmouth's past was that within living memory. Merriman (2000) has shown that many people access history via a personal past.

However, origins were important to a people who felt they were despised by others. History and archaeology were important because it gave them a sense of pride in their past. They lived not just in a place that was poor and despised by others, but somewhere with a long and interesting history. This was expressed quite literally by members of one group who wanted a great number of objects to be put into this area. Here large numbers of objects were seen to indicate long and important past histories. Within the new museum the Early Years Gallery was given more space than originally planned to accommodate this aspiration. All those consulted were keen to ensure that the displays are underpinned with scholarly research and detailed text panels outlining key aspects of history for which no material culture remained. Evaluation showed that this was one of the most popular areas of the museum, after the reconstruction of the Rows and the Fishing section (Watson 2005).

The groups agreed very early on in the consultation process that their history should not be a sanitised version of what had happened. They were interested in 'gritty realism'. The fishing industry was not to be glamorised. It was a filthy, hard and dangerous trade and many who worked in it suffered poverty and destitution. However, fishing was a key to the way in which local people saw the development and history of their town and this industry above all was to be promoted 'Yarmouth's soul'; although subsequent research suggests that the economic and social importance of the fishing industry to the town over time was greatly exaggerated by people, for whom it became symbolic of all they had lost (Watson 2007b).

Evaluation of the museum after its opening (Watson 2005) suggests that it has provided local people with a strong consensual and united view of the past. This view of the past is one that reflects back to them their own perspectives of their community histories and re-enforces their sense of place.

Conclusion

The impact of history in museums on individuals and communities should never be underestimated. There is still a great deal of research to be done on the ways in which certain messages in exhibitions are accepted by visitors or rejected by them. However, research outlined here suggests that attempts to present versions of events without an understanding of the way in which people practice history is likely to result in rejection of the narrative and the perspective the museum offers by many visitors. This is, perhaps, inevitable. Museums, as Crooke reminds us, can help create an environment in which people put painful memories to different uses (Crooke 2001). While consultation, similar to that carried out in Great Yarmouth, can help museums understand the histories that communities create for themselves and the uses to which they put them, these meanings and uses may not be those that museum professionals or the government wish to promote within the public sphere. There is therefore

a tension between the aspirations of those who wish to use museums to promote certain historical stories and the empowerment of communities. The idea of an overarching narrative that will allow individuals to link their life stories to the grand story and thus feel a common bond with others is one that is the aim of many of those who wish to develop and sustain loyalty to the nation state's 'imagined community' (Wertsch and Kosyaeva 2002: 97; Anderson 1982). However, the example of the attempts to commemorate the Abolition of the Slave Trade shows that the grand narrative is difficult to sustain in the face of conflicting ideas of national history and national values. Tensions between instrumental use of history and the democratisation of museums have yet to be resolved and present one of the greatest challenges facing history museums in the twenty first century.

Anderson, B. 1991 *Imagined Communities, reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism,* London : Verso.

Agbetu, T 2008 'Restoring the Pan African Perspective: Reversing the institutionalisation of Maafa denial' abstract of paper at the 1807 Commemorated Conference, 18 – 19 September 2008, Kings Manor, York.

Bennett, T. 1995 *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics*, London, Routledge.

Beier-de Haan, R (2006) 'Re-staging histories and identities' in S Macdonald (ed) *A Companion to Museum Studies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 186 – 197.

Bodnar, J. 1992 or 1994 *Remaking America : public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century* Princeton, N.J. ; Chichester : Princeton University Press, 1994

Carr, D. (2008) 'The reality of history' in J. Rusen (ed) *Meaning and Representation in History*, Oxford and New York, Berghahn Books, 123- 136.

Connerton, P 2008 'Seven types of forgetting' in *Memory Studies*; 1: 59 – 71

Crooke, E 2001 'Confronting a troubled history: which past in Northern Ireland's museums?' *International Journal of Heritage Studies,* 7: 2, 119 – 136.

Crane, S. 1997 'Memory, distortion and history in the museum', *History and Theory* 36, 4: 44– 63.

Evans, R. (2006) 'What is history?' in H. Swain (ed*.) Big Questions in History*, London, Vintage, 3 – 7.

Foggett, M. 2008 'Audience-led Consultation: partnership Working with London's African-Caribbean community' Unpublished paper delivered at the conference 'Out of the Comfort Zone: Exploring sensitive issues' organised by the Visitor Studies Group, 1 February 2008 at the British Museum.

Hein, G. 1998 *Learning in the Museum*, London and New York, Routledge.

Hooper-Greenhill 1995 *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London, Routledge

Hooper-Greenhill, E. 2000 *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London and New York, Routledge.

Hooper-Greenhill, E., Dodd, J., Philips, M., Jones, C., Woodward, J., and O'Riain, H. 2004 *Inspiration, Identity, Learning : The Value of Museums*, Leicester, RCMG.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. 2007 'Interpretive communities, strategies and repertoires' in S. Watson, (ed) *Museums and their Communities*, London, Routledge 76 – 94)

Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2008) teaching notes for Learning and Visitor Studies in Museums and Galleries, Distance Learning MA in the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester

Jordanova, L. 2000 'History, "otherness" and display' in ed E. Hallam and B. Street (2000) *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness*, London, Routledge, 245 – 259.

Kyvig, D. E 'Foreword' in A.K. Levin (ed.) *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities*, Plymouth: Altamira Press, 1 – 5.

Lowenthal D. 2002

Macdonald, S. 2002 *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*, Oxford and New York: Berg.

Mitchell, T. 1988 *Colonizing Egypt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Merriman, N 2000 *Beyond the Glass Case: The Past, the Heritage and the Public*, London UCL, Institute of Archaeology.

Szekeres, V. 'Representing diversity and challenging racism: The Migration Museum' in R. Sandell (ed) *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London: Routledge, 142 – 152.

Sandell, R 2007 Museums, *Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*. Routledge.

Steel P. 2008 'Liverpool parts with its friends' *Museums Journal*, 108/6 , 5.

Watson, S. (1997) *Follow up Focus Group Work Report*, Great Yarmouth Museums

Archives.

Watson, S. 1998 *Focus Group Report,* Great Yarmouth Museums Archives.

Watson, S. 1999 'Using focus groups: The Great Yarmouth experience', *Social History Curators' Group News*, 44: 6-9.

Watson, S. 2000a 'The Great Yarmouth Experience,' *Significant Others*: Society of Museum Archaeologists, special issues of *The Museum Archaeologist*, 25: 35 – 8.

Watson, S. 2000b *Tower Curing Works Display Themes Report*, Great Yarmouth Museums Archives.

Watson, S. 2001 *Tower Curing Works Display Themes Report* ,Great Yarmouth Museums Archives.

Watson, S. 2004 'Museums and social inclusion: Managing consultation with specific target groups: a British case study' in M. Dreyer and R. Wiese (eds) *Zielgruppen von Museen: Mit Erfolg Erkennen, Ansprechen und Binden,,* Freilichtmuseums am Kiekeberg, Rosengarten-Ehestorf, 85 – 98.

Watson, S. 2005 *Museums and communities: Time and Tide, a case history*. Unpublished paper.

Watson 2007a 'Museums and their communities' in S. Watson (ed) *Museums and their Communities*, London, Routledge, 1 – 31.

Watson 2007b ' History museums, community identities and a sense of place: rewriting histories' in S. Knell, S. MacLeod and S. Watson (eds) *Museum Revolutions: How museums change and are changed*, London, Routledge, 160 – 172.

Weil S. 1996 'The distinctive numerator' in Weil, S 2002 *Making Museums Matter*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press

Weil, S 2002 *Making Museums Matter*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press

Wertsch, J. V and Kosyaeva T. Y. 2002 Linking little narratives to big ones: narrative and public memory in history museums' *Cultural Psychology* 2002: 8: 96- 112.

Zerubavel, E. 2004 *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Shape of the Past*, London: University of Chicago Press.