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NatSCA News

Title: Developing a collections centre in partnership with a specialist supplier

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Source: Andrew, K. (2008). Developing a collections centre in partnership with a specialist supplier. *NatSCA News, Issue 15*, 18 - 19.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/169>

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We are fortunate in the UK that our biodiversity is one of the best documented and understood anywhere in the world. But it is constantly changing. If, as a society, we are committed to tackling the environmental challenges ahead then scientists and the public need to face the future together. Unless we engage with and help equip the wider public, there is a danger that we won't be able to assess what is happening or understand how wildlife responds to environmental change. We know that there is an army of enthusiasts ready to come to the aid of the natural world – and we are doing everything we can to mobilise it.

Developing a collections centre in partnership with a specialist supplier

Katherine Andrew, Principle Heritage Officer, Herefordshire Heritage Service

Herefordshire and its museum service

Herefordshire Heritage Service, the County Museum Service for Herefordshire came into being in 1998 with local government re-organisation. In the first ten years of operation, the re-established county has gone through major change, undertaking major development and rationalising use of buildings.

Museum service buildings and collections

In the late 1990s, with collections stored in more than twelve different locations across at least eight different buildings, the need to create a single collection facility was recognised. Time wasted in travelling between sites, over-crowded and therefore inaccessible storage with conditions varying between acceptable to totally unsuitable (for example the Wye Street store regularly flooded to a depth of a metre) were the major drivers to achieving this goal.

The acceleration of an idea into reality was accelerated with the re-development into a supermarket of the Grimmer Road store for the social history and archaeology collections. The viability of Churchill House Museum, housing period room settings, the Brian Hatton Gallery and the stored textile and decorative art collections was also, at this point, called into question and plans were put in place to close this site, with the site vacated in the summer of 2002.

The Friar Street site

The service had been unsuccessfully trying to locate a suitable replacement building for some time. In 2000, it was given a few weeks to purchase a redundant telephone repeater station in Friar Street, central Hereford. This L shaped building consisted of two five-meter high large rooms, a two storey block of smaller rooms and a basement containing a nuclear bunker and the boiler room.

The Museum Resource & Learning Centre project

A tender for phase 1, a basic refurbishment of one of the large rooms to create a store, was let in 2001. A Heritage Lottery bid was also being developed, but time scales meant that a rapid refurbishment was needed to allow collections to be re-housed and so allow the Grimmer Road site to be demolished.

Ocean Design won the tender for the initial fit-out, designing a basic system of ten compactor units with shelves at 750mm pitches and about 20 drawers for small objects. The archaeology bays were designed to take the standard sized archive deposition box, three deep per shelf. Compactor rails were installed to run the full 20m length of the store, a cost effective investment, worth making in order that additional compactors could be added later. The second large room was filled with re-used wide span shelving from the Grimmer Road site.

Phase 2

The Heritage Lottery Fund awarded the project a grant of £585,000 in the summer of 2002. In October 2002, store 1 was filled, with 17 compactor bases (33 aisles) in total in order to accommodate the costume and textile collections from Churchill House Museum.



Fig 1. New storage for the taxidermy specimens, no longer in overcrowded shelves.

A major organisational re-structure had occurred by this point. With the arrival of a new museum manager, a detailed scrutiny of the plans was undertaken. These showed some significant flaws in terms of the best use of the space and sustainability. For example the new build element was drawn with two lifts yet only a stair lift was planned for the original building leaving the basement area inaccessible.

Working closely with the Heritage Lottery Fund monitor and using the Prince 2 methodology as the project management framework, both the refurbishment (phase 2) and the proposed new build extension (phase 3) were re-designed, allowing work to commence on the phase 2 refurbishment in the spring of 2004.

Ocean Design again worked closely with the service designing a small scale reference library compactor unit and re-designing the layout of store 2. One bay of racking from store 1 was re-located since the large number of compactors had become difficult to work with, with a single access aisle. A small mezzanine was created to store the least accessed large items (ploughs, harrows etc) and the racking system made most effective use of the ceiling height.

Project planning for phase 3

The service was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund project-planning grant and commissioned a detailed storage needs assessment from Ocean Design as part of this process. A number of other museum collection facilities were visited to look at storage furniture and public access and interpretation of stored collections.

A lengthy process of refinement of layouts followed, working in conjunction with the architect to ensure that collections would fit into allocated spaces. A number of specialised units were selected, for example, cupboards with vision panels for decorative art collections, entomology cabinets capable of taking existing sizes of drawers, herbarium cabinets, large and small rolled textile storage units and two aisles adapted as visible storage in store 1. Major refinements were planned, for example adding 150 extra drawers to store 1 and extra shelves to reduce stacking of archaeology archive to two boxes high. Making best use of existing cabinetry was an important part of the planning process, with units that had been bought off-the-peg incorporated into the plans and adapted, for example, work surfaces added to plan chests and drawer units re-allocated into new store areas. Only the wooden Hills carcasses become redundant in the process.

Phase 3

A further two stage bid process followed, securing £1.3 million of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund in late 2005. The project was tendered with work starting on site in the spring of 2006. The good relationship developed with the supplier and their thorough understanding of the collections became a vital element in the success of the project. For example, as building work progressed, a number of errors on drawings or un-thought through issues became apparent, Ocean Design were able to adapt, or in some cases, completely re-design storage layouts to accommodate this.

The site was returned to the service in October 2007 and, since then, staff and the local removal company have been moving collections and putting material through a quarantine freeze cycle. The centre opened to the public.

Conclusion

Although work on the collections is on-going, it is clear that space calculations have been accurate, that the correct proportion, number and sizes of drawers, shelves and cabinets have been ordered and that the collection will fit in the new stores. The storage furniture works well; it is well finished and easy to work with. The store layouts allow effective behind-the-scenes tours to take place with eight public open days planned for the first full year of opening and numerous pre-booked groups visiting the site. The site achieved full Accreditation in March 2008.

Further information

The theory behind the planning of this collections facility using the ten agents of deterioration is set out in:

Andrew, K.J. 2006 "Minimizing risks from the ten agents of deterioration in two new West Midlands Museum Resource Centres" Collections Forum; 21(1-2):70-84

Further detail on planning the Herefordshire Museum Resource Centre can be found in:

Andrew, K. 2005 "Applying the theory of minimizing the risks from the ten agents of deterioration at Hereford Museum Resource & Learning Centre" Natsca News 6:23-26

Ocean Design & Management, the storage partner for this project can be contacted at Rye House, 29 London Road, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP11 1BJ tel 01494 473350 www.odam.co.uk