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Beavers to Weavers: working with community groups and industrial history collections to build a natural history exhibition

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Abstract

Beavers to Weavers: The Wonderful World of Animal Makers is a temporary exhibition about things made by animals, open from 6 July 2018 – 6 January 2019 at Leeds City Museum (LCM). While the exhibition focuses on Leeds Museums and Galleries' (LMG) zoology collection, and is curated by a natural science curator, its development has been enhanced by collaboration with the assistant community curator based at Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills (LIM). There has been a strong community input in its development and content, with community groups involved in making objects for display in the exhibition. Responding to the community curator's work with salvaged printing blocks, we have used a printing press on display at LIM to produce labels, using handmade paper made in community workshops.

We have found that a subject specialist curator working alongside a community curator in exhibition development has been beneficial in many ways.

Keywords: Exhibitions, community groups, collaboration, industrial history collections, animal makers

Background

In 2014, a group of LMG curatorial staff were considering what contemporary collecting should take place to reflect the centenary commemorations for WW1. We considered how future colleagues would feel 100 years in the future, and what they would want to see. We also thought about what we wish had been collected 100 years ago. This got me thinking about the growing role of museums as memorials for extinct species. With extinction rates increasing, museums are inevitably

becoming a memorial to more and more species by preserving their remains and DNA. But there's much more to animals than just their bodies; the behaviour of animals can be their most interesting or defining feature. Whether it's the songs or nests of birds, or the light emitted by glow-worms, things that animals make are a hugely important part of their lives. These behaviours can also enrich our lives as well. By collecting things that animals make, we can keep an archive of the behaviour of animals.



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I decided to propose an exhibition displaying things made by animals, focusing on the lives of animals, rather than the deaths illustrated by animal remains. Originally named *Made in Nature*, the exhibition would display things made by non-human animals (including objects, sounds, and light) alongside human-made art, contemporary craft, and other made objects. The skill of other species could be illustrated by comparing like with like, for instance nests and baskets, or bird song and choral music.



Figure 1. Protective tubes made by marine worms. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.

The exhibition was originally planned for 2017, but was then postponed while my job-share colleague Clare Brown was on maternity leave. In the meantime, another LMG site, Leeds Art Gallery (LAG), acquired funding for a touring exhibition called *Natural Selection*, to open in June 2018 – just a month before *Made in Nature*. Although *Natural Selection* is an art exhibition, it has a strong emphasis on nests, including bird nests from the collections of Bristol Museums, and a large bowerbird bower model made by the artist Andy Holden.

Rather than try to compete directly with this exhibition, we decided to think about how to make our exhibition distinct, to attract a different audience.

Beavers to Weavers

We decided to focus completely on non-human animals, and to design the exhibition in a family-friendly way. The rebooted exhibition would:

- welcome everyone, including children
- show how amazing animals are at making things
- display beautiful, amazing, and humble objects
- include lots of colour and music
- be environmentally friendly.

Although community engagement was always part of the plan with *Made in Nature*, working with community groups would become central in the exhibition's development.

The exhibition was renamed *Beavers to Weavers*, placing the emphasis on non-human animals, and appealing more to a family audience. This also rhymes, and we felt it would go down well on social media.



Figure 2. European Beaver. © Leeds Museums and Galleries

Community engagement

Community engagement is a key part of LMG's work, with specialist community engagement staff working across LMG's nine sites. From the beginning stages of the exhibition, we had hoped to include work made by community groups. As part of distinguishing *Beavers to Weavers* from the LAG exhibition, we decided to make community engagement a central part of exhibition development. I went to a community team meeting to discuss the exhibition and see what ideas we could come up with.

Chris Sharp is the Assistant Community Curator at LIM and Thwaite Mills Watermill. We felt that collaborating on this exhibition would work well. We had worked together previously at family events in local libraries, using zoology objects to link with the 'Animal Agents'-themed 2018 Summer Reading Challenge, a national initiative encouraging children to use local libraries during the summer holidays. We found that combining a subject specialist curator with a community curator at public events worked well, and was also enjoyable.

Armley Mills (now LIM) was once the world's largest woollen mill, and has a fantastic collection of objects

linked to the textiles industry, with objects such as looms having nice parallels with animal making skills. Chris had already worked with printing machinery at LIM, and had salvaged old printing blocks, and used the Albion press for printing labels and signs. We felt this collection and the LIM itself were a natural fit with the themes of the exhibition.

Activities

Chris had long-standing relationships with a number of different community groups who he thought would be interested to work on the exhibition with us. We worked with people from all over Leeds to make a termite mound, a nice representation of individuals cooperating to build beautiful things together.

We worked in different ways with different groups, adapting to the abilities and interests of each. Generally speaking, we would introduce people to the topic of animal makers, working with objects such as nests and cocoons to discuss different animals. It was enjoyable to share stories of animal making we had seen. We would then start working on the termite mound, with each person making their own termites. These were combined as a giant collage in the exhibition space. We used printing blocks that Chris had made himself from scrap materials. We printed hundreds of termites onto waste paper such as pages from broken books, old tickets, embroidery patterns from charity shops and tea bag wrappers. We also made our own paper made from waste paper, including circles from hole-punchers and used envelopes.

The printing activity worked with people of all ages and abilities. We worked with Peer Support Service for People Living with Dementia funded through Leeds City Council, which includes carers as well as people living with dementia. We were able to work over several weeks with the Peer Support Service, including working at LIM as well as the Leeds Discovery Centre (LDC). We made homemade paper and Chris also demonstrated the Albion printing press at LIM. The High Rise Visual Arts Group, part of Pyramid of Arts, is a group of adults with severe learning disabilities who work together on art activities, and they also printed termites for the collage.

Chris has been working with the Hyde Park Source Colour Garden Volunteers at LIM for some time, and they felt they would prefer an activity that involved more outdoor working. They collected willow from

around the LIM site, and wove beautiful baskets which made nice comparisons with bird nests.



Figure 3. Hand-printed termites made by community groups. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.



Figure 4. Dunnock nest. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.

Working together in a partnership was very successful. I provided objects, natural science information, and an extra pair of hands. Chris had expertise with community groups, artistic talent, and established relationships with a range of groups.

As well as working with these groups, we also ran a family workshop on the subject of animal homes at LDC, where children and their families printed termites. We also ran a session of Tiny Tigers at LCM, where toddlers and their parents also contributed termites. We produced hundreds of termites, which were combined to form a 4 metre high termite mound in the exhibition.

Environmentally friendly

We had wanted the exhibition to be environmentally friendly from the beginning. The content touches on conservation, and it seemed hypocritical to not try to limit the environmental impact of the exhibition. Having like-minded colleagues made it easier to make environmentally friendly choices, and Chris,



Figure 5. Young visitors weaving on an interactive activity made of reclaimed materials. Visitors are also encouraged to tie luggage tags to the weaving wall to provide feedback. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.

Ruth Martin (LCM's Exhibition Curator), and I all shared this aim. Our Assistant Registrar, Nadine Loach, is chair of Sustainable Exhibitions for Museums, and was also a very helpful source of information.

Although some compromises had to be made in balancing our budget, we found that trying to make environmentally friendly choices helped us focus the look and feel of the exhibition.

We printed some of our labels using printing blocks and the Albion printing press that are part of the collections at LIM. Seeing the printing collection in action was also popular with the public. Chris made his own paper-making equipment using picture frames and net curtains bought from charity shops. We used this to make our own paper from waste paper for labels and termites.

We used Dufaylite for text panels, made from recycled and recyclable card. We found this easy to

work with, and it was a similar cost to foam board, which has usually been used in previous exhibitions. With the help of Amy Jenkinson, Assistant Curator of Industrial History, we used bobbins from the industrial history collection as plinths. Larger objects were displayed on industrial bobbins, while pinned entomology specimens and other tiny specimens were displayed using cotton reels with Plastazote. These served as natural plinths, and added colour with their yarn. They formed a nice link between spinning and weaving and many objects in the exhibition, such as nests and cocoons. The names of some of the yarn colours also referenced the objects, such as 'royal blue' for queen cells, 'light mole' for a mole cricket, and 'rose' for rose leaves cut by leafcutter bees.

We used recycled and reclaimed paint from Seagulls, a local paint supplier. We also used reclaimed materials from Scrap in Leeds to make interactives such as a weaving wall.



Figure 6. Small objects were displayed on cotton reel plinths, some with appropriately-named coloured threads. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.

Exhibition look and feel

Ruth and I had wanted the exhibition to be welcoming, cosy and homemade, but also wanted to avoid it just looking unprofessional. Working alongside Chris provided a good focus for the exhibition design. The printing blocks he had salvaged provided our font, as well as an illustrative look to the whole exhibition. Chris used the words 'joyous and bright' when referring to the exhibition, a phrase we kept returning to when making design decisions. We commissioned a local illustrator, Steve James, to produce a series of colourful animal characters to add context and images of living animals to the displays. These became central to our marketing campaign for the exhibition.

Conclusion

It has been brilliant to work with other people on *Beavers to Weavers*, and of course an exhibition can't be produced in isolation. We are very grateful to the staff of the Natural History Museum, Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, and Manchester Museum for lending objects for display. Dr Susana Carvalho of the University of Oxford kindly lend us chimpanzee stone tools for this exhibition.

While *Beavers to Weavers* remains a natural science exhibition, working closely with Chris and the community team has made it more accessible and welcoming to a wider range of people. It has been very enjoyable to work with Chris and Ruth, and with different community groups. It has served as an example of the importance of natural science objects in community engagement work, and the therapeutic value of nature. I very much look forward to working more directly with the community team in exhibitions and programming in the future.



Figure 7. Example of exhibition artwork created by illustrator Steve James. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.

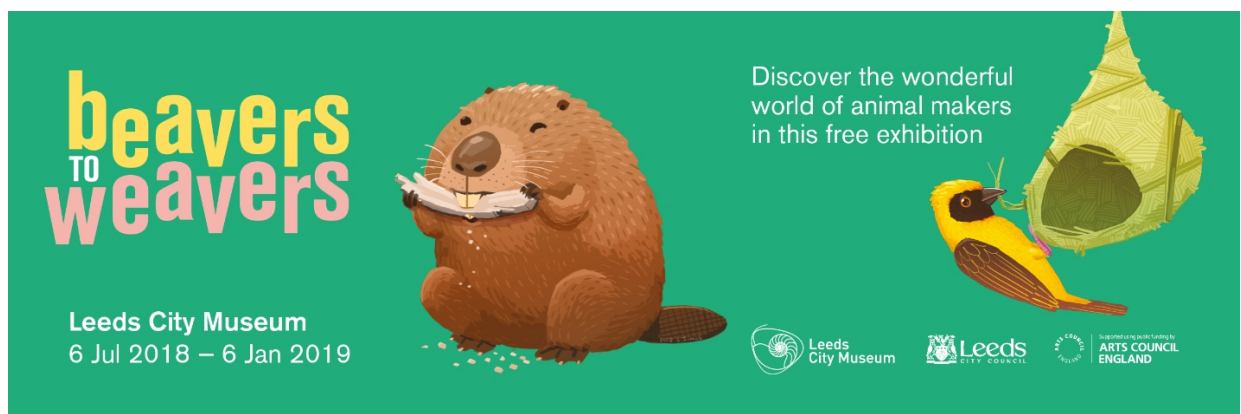


Figure 8. Example of marketing material, featuring artwork by illustrator Steve James. © Leeds Museums and Galleries.