

Museum Service and Income Generation

Background

1. Finance & Administration Committee 27 March 2008 asked that the Museum 'be encouraged to explore other commercial opportunities and respond to the Committee'. This report sets out recent work and opportunities investigated from 2006 onwards in relation to the Museum Service Forward Plan, and what it is possible to achieve at the Museum meanwhile, within the current limits of the building, staffing and budgets.
2. The framework within which the Museum operates, as an accredited public museum, is determined by the Museums Association *Code of Ethics* which describes the framework for commercial activities in a public museum service:

"Establish principles to inform trading and commercial activities so that they are consistent with the aims of the museum and, where possible, enhance the quality of the service. Do not allow trading and commercial activities to bring the museum into disrepute, reduce public access, subject the collections to unacceptable risk or jeopardise finances."

Museums Association *Code of Ethics for Museums* 10.7

3. The Museum's main sources of income are all 'visitor driven' and are: admission tickets (£5,268), fees from taught sessions for schools (£6,903) and sales of souvenirs (£10,241), plus income from the donations box (£689) – figures given are for the year 2007-08. In recent years the Museum has introduced a new scale of reproduction charges (for commercial use of images of collections) and hiring of galleries for private as well as corporate functions, but these can only occasionally supplement income with relatively small amounts. Ultimately, Museum income drives directly or indirectly from the collections and collections-based services which attract people to the Museum in the first place, and the Forward Plan 2006 seeks to improve use of collections and premises in ways which should support income-generation in future. Stage I, the Heritage Quest Centre Project, will enable some income to be generated directly through admissions for public tours and paying activities (workshops, classes). Stage II, improvements to the Museum and Castle site, seeks to develop it as a local amenity and visitor destination, with improvements to the reception area / shop and a range of other options. To this end, a feasibility study was commissioned from PHT Consultants in 2006 and its recommendations were considered by the Resource Centre Project Team and used to develop the Forward Plan. Key components of Stage II would be the extension of the Museum to provide a new special exhibitions gallery and multi-purpose education & activities room. Current and future opportunities are summarised below.
4. Grants and fund-raising are also forms of income and take up much staff time, especially at present for the Heritage Quest Centre Project, however these are for specific, additional activities and not for off-setting Museum Service running costs. There is regrettably little scope for substantial sponsorship in rural north-west Essex, despite repeated investigations and the occasional, small donation towards a specific event. Usually the cost in staff-time spent chasing sponsorship significantly exceeds the return, and would be better spent improving collections, displays and other areas of the service to attract more visitors and users. Fundraising for capital investment is undertaken through Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd, making use of its charitable status to attract donations and grants unobtainable by local authorities.

Admissions charges & donations box

5. A recent review of charges agreed to retain the Museum admission fees at £1 adult, 50p discounts, children (18 and under) free, in the interests of striking a balance between income generation and encouraging access to collections. The logical time to review admission charges would be after improvements to the Museum and Castle site envisaged in the Forward Plan Stage II, meanwhile the Heritage Quest Centre should open by 2010 and it is proposed to charge a similar admission charge for members of the public on guided tours of the HQC. A 'double' ticket, for Museum and HQC, could be offered at both sites, to encourage visitors to one to visit the other, and could also be sold at outreach events at other venues, to 'capture' potential visitors while their attention is held.
6. Experimental free admission in August 2006 showed that while donations box takings arose sevenfold, the increase was not quite sufficient to match the likely takings from admission tickets. However, the donations box (an historic wooden water closet) has been 'animated' with a 'flush' sound activated by coins, to encourage visitors to part with their change. There will also be a donations box in the foyer of the Heritage Quest Centre.

Collections-based learning services and activities

7. Fees for booked sessions with the Learning (Education) Officer have recently been increased to £2-50 per head / £40 minimum per group, and represent a significant source of income however one that will temporarily be suspended with the retirement of the current Education Officer until her successor has been appointed and had time to develop an equivalent range of sessions. For the Museum to hold its place in an increasingly competitive market, improvements to premises and a constant review of sessions offered will be needed. The Heritage Quest Centre will enable alternative types of session, with more objects for handling, to be developed. Stage II improvements to the Museum includes a new multi-function education and activity room (with sink and toilets) to improve facilities for school groups. Beyond that, the limiting factor will be staffing (one Learning Officer).
8. The Museum also has a very small collection of school loan boxes, using historic objects and natural history specimens, which are available for schools. Usually just a few loans are made each term. Restricting factors are: availability of suitable loan items which can be 'spared' from the main collections; lack of storage space for the loan collection, and lack of staff to administer and develop / repair loans (museums with well-established school, loan collections generally have administrative and technical support for the loans service). Policy will therefore be for a 'quality' rather than 'quantity' approach, to improve the content and marketing of the loan collection while keeping the size of the loan collection small enough to be managed within existing staff capacity. The Heritage Quest Centre Project will first of all enable more handling material for general educational use to be identified and extracted from the current collections, and secondly, will develop a new set of history and science kits for use by Uttlesford schools.

9. The fee of £2-50 per head / £40 minimum per group also applies to adult groups (usually local societies) who request an evening talk either at the Museum or local venues. This is reactive – staff usually give a handful of such talk per year depending on requests – and acts as a small supplement to other education income. The barrier here is lack of staff and staff-time, as the majority of requests are for historical, archaeological or general ‘about the Museum’ topics. The great majority of requests are therefore for the Education Officer (retiring) or for Curator, whose additional workload of evening/weekend meetings and functions (many organisations besides Council and Museum Society) and managerial as well as collections responsibilities, limit the time available to give talks and – more particularly – the time required to research and develop new topics within her area of expertise (archaeology). There is no immediate scope for increasing this line of income generation.
10. Because the scope offered by the collections for study and talks vastly exceeds the number of curatorial staff, the Museum has occasionally ‘bought in’ external specialists to run collections-based workshops for ‘special interest’ audiences on various subjects, such as ceramics or costume. Charges have been made accordingly to cover expenses and make a small profit. The Heritage Quest Centre and its outreach programme will offer scope for a wider range of such sessions using geology, archaeology, local history and natural history collections, and for a range of interests from general family sessions to more ‘in-depth’ sessions for those with some knowledge.
11. The outreach programme for the HQC also envisages the re-introduction of evening classes as an occasional activity, as the Centre and improved access to collections will make these easier to run logistically than previous classes (pre-2000, with Madingley Hall, Cambridge University, and 2003 Museum’s archaeology evening class). There is a proven, keen audience for classes. Previous Museum classes have sold out quickly, but proved too time-consuming to research, prepare and administer without affecting other essential areas of work. It is estimated that a term of classes at the HQC could raise £1,000 from fees if work programmes for staff can be prioritised accordingly; in practice, one set of classes per year would be the maximum sustainable.

Commercial Activities

Museum Shop

12. Sales of souvenirs at the reception desk are mostly to school children and families, and the range and price of souvenirs are selected accordingly. As an arm of the museum service, the stock offered also needs to reflect the collections and related local heritage topics, consequently the museum also stocks a small range of local and specialist publications which are highly relevant but have a lower rate of turnover. The large number of attractive gift shops in the town centre mean that there is little to be gained from competing in the general ‘gift’ line but given additional resources, there could be scope for developing lines special to the Museum and its collections. Development of the sales desk and income from sales depends on four factors, all of which must be co-ordinated and addressed in any improvement plan:
 - size of shop
 - storage for stock
 - staffing for shop
 - budget for investment in new lines

13. **Size of shop** – this is very restricted and cannot be increased in its present location. PHT Consultants advised that investment of £10,000 - £15,000 in a total re-fit with an overhaul of stock lines could improve turnover of sales by 50%, but not within a short-enough time-frame to make this worthwhile before other Forward Plan Stage II improvements provide better options. If a new special exhibitions gallery can be provided in the extended Museum building, the current special exhibitions area, which opens directly off the Foyer, could house a much bigger and more attractive shop and reception desk, with some casual seating for visitors as well.
14. **Storage for stock** – there is a chronic lack of space in the Museum for all storage (collections, equipment and shop stock) with some unsatisfactory spaces being pressed into service. Any increase in the size of shop / range of stock must be accompanied by improved storage for stock. If the local history archive, photos and prints collection moves to the Heritage Quest Centre, the small store which they currently occupy on the ground floor next to the special exhibitions area would become available as a stock store for the shop.
15. **Staffing of Shop** – the current reception and sales desk is staffed by a rota of 30+ volunteers, mostly retired, with the exception of Saturdays when a Saturday Assistant is employed. While this keeps salary costs minimal, it imposed limits on the size and operation of shop, and carries hidden costs in limiting further development and in staff time spent assisting and nurturing the large team of volunteers, and occasionally having to fill in for them at short notice if a volunteer fails to turn up. Historically, 3 hours per week were allocated for all shop-related tasks in the Visitor Services Officer's job description, although in practice it takes more time than this, at the expense of publicity and other Museum activities. There being no administrative support for Museum staff, the Museum is reliant on a dedicated Museum Society volunteer for regular cashing-up and basic record keeping for sales of souvenirs and tickets. Any significant increase in the shop and its operations *must* consider the staffing required to match the scale of the operation and corresponding audit requirements, especially if EPOS tills or payment by credit card are to be considered. To maximise the potential of a bigger and more commercial operation in the special exhibitions gallery, a mix of paid reception / shop staff assisted by able volunteers would be needed. The Forward Plan suggested that the most cost-effective option, for further consideration, would be to combine the Tourist Information Service with Museum front-of-house, there being a number of tourism- and museum-related advantages for such a move. Since recent transfer of the TIC to the Town Council, this part of the Forward Plan may have to be revised.
16. **Budgets to invest in new lines** – most of the purchase budgets are used to buy small 'pocket money' souvenirs which guarantee a quick turnover. Some new lines are brought in to match special exhibitions (themes in 2008 will include Victorian childhood and pets). Increasing the range and quality of stock will need investment and in some cases the return will be recovered over a longer period. Lack of budgets and staff time currently restrict work in this area but when fund-raising and other service priorities allow, the range of Museum postcards would benefit from renewing. The use of digital processes and reproduction costs need investigating to see if the unit cost is affordable, given that postcards (and also calendars and similar souvenirs) take a long time to sell in sufficient numbers to repay the initial outlay. Also for future investigation, and to be fuelled by the Heritage Quest Centre Project, are reproductions from the Museum collections. PHT advised that there is little scope for commercial partnerships and

licensing, e.g. with greetings card companies, as generally it is only specific 'popular art' subjects which are commercially viable (characterised as 'paintings of cats'). However there is local interest in the historic photograph collection and staff feel there may be potential in selling quality reproductions of selected images. Digitisation of these collections will be dealt with partly by the Heritage Quest Centre Project and partly through local assistance with digitising glass plate images, which often provide some of the best images but need special copying equipment which the Museum does not possess. Other ideas for increasing the range of reproductions and publications are likely to arise as the Heritage Quest Centre Project evolves with more staff time directed to working with the collections and public.

Reproduction Charges

17. This is another occasional, reactive opportunity, arising when the Museum is asked to supply an image of something from the collections for a commercial publication or for use in film, website or television media for commercial purposes, where there is not a *quid pro quo* marketing and publicity benefit to the Museum Service. A distinction has to be made between 'commercial' and not-for-profit / academic use since access to and dissemination of information on the collections is a fundamental public obligation of the Museum Service. A scheme of charges was drawn up in 2005 based on best practice and competitive levels in other museum services, and has been increased in line with inflation. Income is difficult to predict and depends on many external factors – the success of the film *Gladiator* for instance prompted a couple of requests by publishers and a television company for images of the Chester gladiator relief in the Museum's collections, and the Henry Winstanley anniversary in 2003 led to one television company being allowed to use his self-portrait in a documentary for a fee of £200.

Visitor facilities

Refreshments

18. The idea of some sort of café facility for visitors has been raised from time to time and this was considered in detail by the PHT report. Even assuming that premises could be adapted or extended to create a sufficiently large café space, it would be difficult to support a commercially viable café, especially with so many competing food and drink outlets already in the town centre. However, visitor surveys have shown that a small proportion of visitors at least would welcome the opportunity to get a cup of tea or coffee on site, and the Forward Plan Stage II envisages simpler and achievable ways of providing this with minimum outlay of resources. The current Museum building lacks space in the entrance areas for any kind of drinks machine and it is necessary to keep food and drink out of the galleries as far as possible. If special exhibitions move into an extension as envisaged and the current special exhibitions gallery becomes the reception and shop, there would be room to include some casual seating with a water cooler and a small but high-quality machine for hot drinks. Improvements to kitchenette facilities (discussed below) would allow home-made teas to be offered at events and activities, provided that Museum Society volunteers or other organisations (WIs for instance) were willing and able to provide the teas.

Hire of premises

19. In 2003 the Museum introduced hire of the public galleries for corporate entertainment and has hosted several business events, including the launch of the Saffron Walden Business Forum. There have been a few business hirings, but there is limited custom and the Museum has extended hire to private functions, which may become a more useful market to pursue in Stage II. Two Sunday morning christening parties have been held (handy for churches!) and one birthday party, with another booking for November 2008. Typically these events bring in between about £150 and £250, depending on the duration and number of guests, but staff and energy costs have to be deducted from this. Hirings have to be stewarded and are dependent on availability of the small team of Casual Assistants (normally employed to open the Museum on Sundays and Bank Holidays) and / or Security Officer (p/t), if not the Visitor Services Officer as well. There are obvious restrictions of the type of event suitable for Museum galleries, and hiring must take place outside public opening hours.
20. Under Stage II of the Forward Plan, the multi-purpose education & activities room envisaged in an extended building, with toilets and kitchenette, would be designed so that it could be opened and closed separately without affecting the security of the rest of the Museum. This would present opportunities for evening hire for a modest fee to other local organisations, as there are a good number of local societies wanting premises and the Museum can offer on-site parking for evening meetings, unlike many other town centre venues. An increase in the team of Casual Assistants might be needed to provide a sufficient pool to steward regular evening lettings, and their costs would have to be met from the hire fees. The income generated would probably be modest but it would help to cement the Museum's role as a community venue and to engender other visits or forms of support .
21. The education & activities room could also enhance hiring for private functions, especially if it opened directly onto the grass towards the Castle ruins which would be conserved and opened up to the public as part of Stage II. Subject to appropriate safeguards, hire for DIY children's birthday parties could be contemplated for instance, or even for small wedding receptions. Further uses of the Castle site, appropriate for a scheduled ancient monument, will need investigation at Stage II. These might include licensing for outdoor weddings in the keep and use as a small-scale outdoor venue for drama and music.
22. In considering all these options, it should be borne in mind that while the income likely to be generated may be sporadic and not always very large, they may generate other, secondary benefits by encouraging people to visit or re-visit the Museum and Castle, use its other services or purchase souvenirs, or be more prepared to support fund-raising appeals if they have had a previous 'good experience'.