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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Archaeology

**Beyond the Looking Glass:  
Object Handling and access to museum collections**

By

**Alexandra Grace Walker**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 2013



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

**ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Archaeology

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BEYOND THE LOOKING GLASS: OBJECT HANDLING AND ACCESS TO  
MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

By Alexandra Grace Walker

For many, a museum visit may consist of gazing at objects locked away in glass a cabinet accompanied by signs forbidding touch, and complex and often confusing text panels. But what message does this present to the visiting public? How can the public connect with museums and their collections if objects are beyond their reach? Why is handling reserved for the museum elite and not the general public?

The value of touch and object handling in museums is a growing area of research, but also one that is not yet fully understood. Despite our range of senses with which we experience the world around us, museums traditionally rely on the visual as the principle means of communicating information about the past. However museums are increasingly required to prove their worth and value in society by becoming more accessible, not just in terms of audience but by opening up their stored collections, and government agenda is pushing for culture to feature in the everyday lives of the public.

This research pulls apart the hierarchical nature of touch in the museum, demonstrating the benefits of a “hands-on” approach to engaging with the past, investigating the problems and limitations associated with tactile experiences, and puts forward a toolkit for tactile access to collections. It suggests that handling museum collections, not only enhances our understanding of the past, but provides memorable and valuable experiences that will remain with an individual for life.



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# Definitions and Abbreviations

ACE – Arts Council England

AHRC – Arts and Humanities Research Council

DCMS – Department for Culture Media and Sport

DfES – Department for Education and Skills

HLF – Heritage Lottery Fund

GLO – Generic Learning Outcome

GSO – Generic Social Outcome

HCC – Hampshire County Council

HCCMS – Hampshire County Council Museums Service

HE – Higher Education

ICOM – International Council of Museums

LCE – Learning and Community Engagement

LIRP – Learning Impact Research Project

MA – Museums Association

MEAL – Museum of East Anglian Life

MLA – Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

Nef – New Economics Foundation

OBL – Object Based Learning

PANAS – Positive Affect Negative Affect Scales

RCMG – Research Centre for Museums and Galleries

SSM – Special Study Module

UCL – University College London

V&A – The Victoria and Albert Museum, London

VAS – Visual Analysis Scales

YAC – Young Archaeologists' Club



# Academic Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

I, Alexandra Grace Walker, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Beyond the Looking Glass: Object Handling and access to museum collections

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed: .....

Date: .....



# Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a long time in the making. Starting simply as the focus for my PhD research, over time it has come to mean so much more, and would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of several people. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the many individuals who have contributed to what has been a significant and influential chapter of my academic career thus far.

Firstly, I thank my colleagues at Hampshire County Museum Service for their honest opinions and insights into object handling within Hampshire museums, as well as their enthusiasm for and interest in my research. I extend my thanks to colleagues who agreed to be interviewed for my research during what was a difficult and uncertain time for the service. I would like to thank Chris Elmer and Stephen Lowy for the opportunity to work on the collections survey, which provided the basis for my investigation into current practice of object handling, and their faith that its development is important to museum engagement. I also thank the Learning and Community Engagement team, specifically Emma Hart and Ruth Kerr, for providing me with countless opportunities to witness first-hand the benefits of a hands-on approach to learning in the museum.

I give my thanks to Matt Garner from the Southampton City Archaeology Unit and Leader of the Southampton Young Archaeologists' Club (YAC), along with all the other leaders, assistant leaders and helpers for their support and confidence in my research, and for permitting me to put my hypothesis to the test during several YAC meetings. Thanks also go to the many club members who participated in my research by sharing their enthusiasm and frank opinions of hands-on archaeology. I would also like to acknowledge the influence of the South-East Wales YAC branch; starting as a member in 1995 and becoming a leader before heading off to university in 2002, I obtained so many valuable experiences, and will forever be grateful for the dedication and encouragement of its enthusiastic volunteer leaders, particularly the wonderful Dorothy Astbury.

To the many individuals who responded to countless questionnaires, evaluations, feedback forms, and entered into lively debate around the subject of object handling, I am extremely grateful.

To my City Life Church family I am incredibly thankful. In particular, I thank my friends Hannah Brown and Abigail Jones for the many prayers, encouragements and coffees that kept me motivated, especially during the writing stage.

My supervisor, Professor Stephanie Moser has been a constant source of support, guidance and advice throughout the past seven years as a post-graduate; first as an MA student and a PhD Candidate. I am thankful that during the times I doubted my work and could not see the end, she always encouraged and motivated me to persevere. Her continued and never ending belief in my research has been invaluable. Thank you.

To my parents Patrick and Jennifer Walker I am eternally grateful; without their unfailing love, support and encouragement, I would not be where I am now. Thank you for always being there, never allowing me to give up, and for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. Words can never truly express how thankful I am to you both.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my beautiful friend Fay Martin (25<sup>th</sup> June 1985 – 17<sup>th</sup> January 2010). Her passion and commitment to make a difference wherever she could, have been, and always will be, an inspiration.

# Introduction

*'Objects are what matter. Only they can carry the evidence that throughout the centuries something really happened among human beings'*

*Claude Lévi Strauss (1908-2009)*

We are surrounded by objects all the time, among which we live work and play (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p.104), and we handle these objects as a matter of course for a variety of reasons (Pye 2007, p.13). The objects we own tell a story about how we live, what we do and the people we think we are. So it is with objects from the past. Objects are created for a reason; they have a purpose, be it a practical one in the case of a tin opener perhaps, or a sentimental one such as a frame housing a special family photo. Beyond their function, however, I believe objects have much more to give. They inform us about the people who made them, about the people who used them, and ultimately they tell us much about how we encounter the world around us. Indeed, Pearce (1995, p.3) notes that 'our relationship with the material world of things is crucial to our lives because without them our lives could not happen'.

A significant and integral part of this relationship with objects is the act of collecting. Approximately one third of Britons and Americans describe themselves as collectors (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p.108). For many, this becomes a way of life, visiting auction houses, antique shops or attending car boot sales, looking for that highly sought after item to complete their collection. Collecting is a way of remembering an event or experience; objects are given sentimental value which has nothing to do with monetary worth. Collecting objects is not a new thing; it is something people from all levels of society have been doing for many centuries and part of this process of collecting is the displaying of these prized possessions. New acquisitions are given a location among their counterparts on a shelf, on the mantelpiece, in a display cabinet. Some of our great museums developed from this desire to collect objects; The British Museum in London and Ashmolean Museum in Oxford being perfect examples of this evolution from private collection to public institution.

But what is this fascination with collecting and displaying objects? What is it about *things* that draw us in? Hooper-Greenhill (2000, p.108) argues that objects enable reflection and speculation. Objects give abstract concepts such as *the self*, *home* and *nation* a material and tangible form. The spectacles someone chooses to wear do not simply enable clearer vision; they express an idea about the person wearing them. That favourite armchair is not just a piece

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of furniture; it makes a house a home. A flag is not just a piece of fabric with a specific design; it is imbued with the identity of a nation.

All of us, whether we are more inclined to engage with our surroundings through one sense over the other, experiences and understands our world through touch (Candlin 2004). However our engagement with material culture tends to utilise sight rather than touch; Paterson (2007, p.1) notes that while extensive studies into sight, sound and the body have taken place, touch has been 'largely neglected, forgotten'. How are we to understand the deeper, hidden meanings of objects if we do not physically take them in our hands? How can we engage with and reach an interpretation of the past without taking hold of evidence from preceding cultures and societies? How do we truly experience something if we do not participate in it? The traditional view of museums as a place of scholarship and curatorial expertise is shifting towards them being public-oriented and having a social role whereby public engagement is key (Travers 2006, MLA 2009) and collections are vital in this shift. Where previously, museums were concerned with creating blockbuster exhibitions drawing in crowds of visitors, catering to the tourist industry, thereby resulting in a lack of consideration of the needs of audiences (Hooper-Greenhill 1995, p.143-4), now they are looking for ways in which to make their stored collections more accessible to society (Wilkinson 2005, Keene 2008). Glaister (2005, p.8) asks:

'If an object sits in a store for ten years, without anyone looking at it, and if it is not published or made available on the internet, can that museum be realising its responsibilities towards the object and towards the public? If we, as a profession, are merely acting as caretakers and not as collection activists then we are not fulfilling our obligations'.

Indeed, research has shown that visitors who interact and engage with objects have richer experiences than those who simply look and read labels (Collections Trust 2009, p.11)

I describe myself as a *collections activist*; I always have been and believe I always will. This activism stems from an early encounter with objects whereby my perspective of history changed entirely. Whilst learning about Iron Age Britain at primary school, archaeologists brought a collection of artefacts to help my class understand a culture very different from our own, through object handling. That was the day I made the decision to become an archaeologist. Since then I have worked to engage others with the past through object handling in a variety of different roles; initially as a member, and later leader, of the South-East Wales Young Archaeologists' Club, as a leader of the Southampton Young Archaeologists' Club, as an archaeologist, and now as a museum professional for Hampshire Museum Service.

We are at a juncture in heritage, whereby access is of utmost importance; conversations are taking place, discussing why access is essential, but there is a distinct lack of cohesion in how this is achieved. I firmly believe that object handling meets the need to be accessible and that engaging all visitors in a tactile encounter with objects is vital in a society so heavily dependent on material culture. Object handling is a means by which people experience the past and gain a deeper understanding of their ancestors and heritage. It enables an understanding of the world in which we live, and a sense of identity. In order to know where society is going, it is important to understand its origins.

Presenting a case for the benefits of physical access to collections often feels like the frontline of battle, since although museums acknowledge that tactile engagement with objects is worthwhile, it appears this experience is still reserved for a small percentage of the population. I believe museums are sometimes limited by their mantra to safeguard and protect collections for the future (Museums Association 2009), making them hesitant to explore ways of increasing access through touch; an action perceived to cause lasting damage to collections. However, this thesis is not a collection of reasons why museums should make access to artefacts a priority over scholarship and conservation, as I do not believe this should be the case. Rather it is an investigation into current practice, respecting the viewpoints of both those working within a profession under increasing pressure to be more accessible (see for example the Museum Association's Effective Collections project), as well as those who have benefited from tactile engagement with objects, and presenting a means by which greater access can be achieved through a comprehensive framework (chapter nine).

Over the last few decades museums have increased in variety and in popularity. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century more people are going to museums than ever before, and more scholars, critics and other academics are writing about museums (Conn 2010, p.1). In particular, the role of museums in society has evolved from one of private showcase to institution for public learning and engagement (Faulk and Dierking 1992, p.xiii, Hooper-Greenhill 1995, p.143, Travers 2006). For many institutions the priority is to protect collections for the future generations, however increasing pressures from above – governing bodies and funding sources – and from below – the visiting public – place museums in a difficult position whereby they must consider different ways in which to present the heritage they preserve (Black 2005, p.1). Governing and funding bodies push institutions to enhance access to collections; the public no longer wish to be the 'passive recipients of wisdom from on high' (Black 2005, p.2) instead they want to participate in meaning-making (see Hein 1999), and from my own research within the profession, it is clear there is a desire to optimise the engagement of the public with available sites, collections and heritage.

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The educational role of museums is well established and has been part of museum agenda for many years, with physical access to collections being an important aspect of this engagement (see for example Hooper-Greenhill 2007). At present research into the benefits of object handling within formal education settings (i.e. schools) is vast and encouraging (Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2004, Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2006). Results from this research reveal stories of valuable experiences of school age children, who through their encounters with objects have acquired new information or deepened their understanding of a topic studied at school, learnt new and valuable skills, gained insight into a different social situation and organisation, been inspired to explore and experiment with increased confidence, and been impacted in some way as a result of their experience. It is indeed encouraging to discover that through tactile museum experiences, children are excited about their world and heritage.

Not only have school groups benefitted from physical access to collections. In recent years, much focus has been on engaging with minority and disadvantaged groups; for example those with physical disabilities, visual impairments or learning difficulties. It can also be argued that the introduction of legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the Equality Act 2010 have contributed greatly to an increase of access for minority groups.

While much is being done to make those groups who would not normally visit the museum feel included, I believe the question to ask is what is on offer for the public as a whole? I do not suggest disadvantaged and under-represented groups should have less choice, rather I propose that a visit to the museum should be an engaging experience for everyone: all levels of society should be able to engage with and experience the past. Indeed Black (2008, p.3) states:

‘If museum or heritage site managers believe that everyone has a right of ‘access’ to our shared inheritance in museum collections, and that museums can make a profound difference to the lives of communities and of individuals, they should face up to the consequences and seek a practical reflection of these ideals.’

An ideal method of learning within the museum would encompass a hands-on access approach; this I have seen through my own experiences as a museum professional working with different groups and individuals. Tactile encounters with objects are far more engaging than through sight alone, nevertheless it is important to understand the inherent problems touch can bring, namely the issue of how to protect collections from damage through handling. Conservation is sometimes viewed as an on-going battle with time and decay; conservators present their work as:

‘The action of safeguarding the objects and structures which compose the material remains of the past, and it aims to ensure that these remains are available to use and enjoy today and in the future’ (Pye 2001, p.9).

In America, conservation is referred to as *Historic Preservation*, further emphasising the role of preserving the past for the future. The major concern of this thesis however is not so much preserving the past for the future, although this is undeniably very important, rather the investigation is into how the past can be interpreted, experienced and enjoyed in the present. While many objects may appear to stand the test of time, in a short space of time touch can cause a vast amount of damage. The long and turbulent history of Stonehenge, a prehistoric stone monument, provides a good example, since over many years millions of people have interacted with the stones for a variety of reasons. In the early 1960s, visitors to the site numbered between 300,000 and 400,000 per year, reaching 800,000 by 1970 (Council for British Archaeology 1999). Visitors freely explored the site, not constrained by today’s barriers, but increasing visitor numbers damaged the surrounding earthworks, and vandalism caused much concern, resulting in the closure of the centre of the stone circle in 1978 (Council for British Archaeology 1999, English Heritage 2011). Now physical access is limited to those who apply for the privilege. Whilst stone may appear durable, withstanding the damaging effects of the weather, it was during this short space of time that the stones suffered most. This thesis asserts that the conservation needs of objects need not exclude them from handling opportunities; sensitive consideration and careful planning ensures that tactile engagement is a safe and enjoyable experience (see chapter nine).

One of the main obstacles to overcome in suggesting a hands-on approach to exploring, interpreting and learning about museum collections relates to the assumptions and miscommunication between professionals of different specialisms working in museums. This research has identified an observable chasm between museum educators and conservation staff; museum educators witness first-hand the benefits of hands-on learning for the public, often wishing to open this up to a larger percentage of the public than the standard groups currently benefitting from the opportunity, whereas conservators are primarily concerned by the damage caused to objects through handling. Neither viewpoint is more valid than the other, what *is* important is to establish an understanding of current practice of tactile access to museum collections, and create a successful and sensitive means of engaging with objects through touch. This thesis demonstrates that by working together, museums can create an experience that goes beyond traditional encounters with collections. By addressing the hierarchical nature of touch in the museum and asserting that a hands-on approach to learning is integral to our understanding and indeed appreciation of the past, this thesis reveals that handling objects can not only

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enhance our understanding of the past, but of ourselves, as well as providing memorable and valuable experiences that remain with the individual for life, regardless of their place in society.

Our journey through this thesis, begins with an exploration of the development of the museum in the United Kingdom from private collection to public institution, since through this we discover that touch in the museum is not a new concept, but one that has undergone a great change. Museums of the sixteenth century were very different from twenty-first century museums as we understand them today; the first museums were open to a select audience who were expected to handle collections during their visit, whereas today museums strive to be accessible to all. As the purpose of education evolved in the nineteenth century to one in which all classes of society were entitled to learn, and one more focussed on visual interpretation, museums became one of the means of educating the lower classes. This resulted in a shift from tactile experience to one based principally on sight, which has to a certain extent carried through to today where modern museums employ largely visual means to display their collections. Chapter one examines this evolution of British museums and discusses how the early hands-on experience of the eighteenth century visitor is returning in the twenty-first century.

Chapter two explores the power of objects by addressing theoretical approaches to understanding material culture combined with an examination of UK government agenda for the heritage and culture sector. This sector is under an increased amount of pressure to survive the economic downturn, as well as providing the public with a valuable and engaging experience. High on Government agenda is access; exploring recent white papers and government affiliated documents (see Henley 2012, Museums Association 2012, Davey 2011, Morris 2011, Rogers 2009, Keene 2008) reveals that museums have a role to play in the cultural education and experience of the public, but suggestions for how this can be achieved are few. Theories enabling us to *read* objects offer a means by which this desired access can be achieved, and pivotal to these theories is touch.

At the beginning of my research, apart from acknowledging the benefits of tactile engagement with specific groups, the study of object handling was in its infancy. Since 2005, there has been a marked increase in research focussing on touch as a means of engaging with collections. University College London Museums and Collections embarked on an important and influential investigation of the value of touch in museums (Chatterjee 2008), bringing together a range of professionals and experts from the world of museums and heritage, suggesting that a hands-on approach in museums and beyond is the next step forward; it is no longer about disseminating, it is about engaging with the public. Chapter three places this thesis in context by introducing

the varied and influential research that has taken place during the past decade, which has undoubtedly given tactile engagement with culture a much needed voice.

In addition to understanding the recent research into object handling, an understanding of learning in the museum and the contribution object handling offers to this, is important. Much research exists in the area of learning; academics present many different theories, which can often be used alongside each other in order to build a picture of how an individual makes meaning out of the world surrounding them. Chapter four outlines the principle theories on intelligence and learning that have formed the basis of this research, demonstrating how object handling works to meet the different learning styles and preferences of individuals.

Chapter five presents the three part methodology employed in this thesis in order to reach an understanding of how tactile access to museum collections can be made available to all. The following three chapters (six, seven and eight) contain the results of the research carried out for this thesis; consisting of an investigation into handling collections in existence in Hampshire County Museum Service and how they are being used (chapter six), the viewpoint of museum professionals with a duty to care for collections and disseminate their stories to the public (chapter seven), and finally a presentation of Hampshire based projects whereby object handling was a key component (chapter eight). Rather than producing a one sided, and perhaps biased, view of the benefits of object handling in museums, it is important to recognize how museum professionals address the demand for a more hands-on approach and what the limitations are in terms of conservation and ethical issues. It was essential to explore tactile access from a number of standpoints, to achieve a firm foundation on which to base a framework for making increased access possible. The methodology relies on theoretical approaches introduced in chapter two, and uses varied means of collecting and analysing data.

The final chapter of this thesis draws on my findings, offering a framework for object handling that is sensitive to both the needs of the user and the objects themselves. Contrary to many frameworks that have been put forward, my recommendations not only place importance on the collections to which greater access is desired, but suggests a means by which the people using these collections are also considered. This framework, which I have called *Five Values to achieve Accessible Collections*, aims to enable museums to make access to collections through touch a reality rather than a concept; in this framework, value is placed on collections, communication, purpose, people and audience. What I argue is that the value of an object should not result in an elite group of individuals claiming the right of object handling.

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The past belongs to us all, regardless of our knowledge or social standing. Let us remember this and use it to our advantage.

# Chapter One

## The Journey of Touch in the Museum

*Take it to a museum / display it behind the glass /  
So your treasure will be seen / by all the people that pass.  
And with your name on a label / letting everyone see /  
That you are fifty times richer / than they will ever be.'*

(Metal Detector by Jose Vanders)

Museums have existed in one form or another for centuries, but for many the word conjures an image of lofty institutions, containing relics of the past locked in glass cabinets, accompanied by complicated academic text intended to enlighten the viewer; they are seen as impersonal and inaccessible. But is this a fair representation? The museum we think of today has not always existed. Modern museums offer a variety of services and can be considered a leisure experience rather than simply an opportunity to learn. Comfortable seating is placed strategically throughout gallery spaces. Coffee and cake are offered in the café. Visitors purchase a piece of (replicated) history or art from the gift shop. Auditoriums provide space for business conferences, film screenings, and music concerts. It is not simply a place to learn about a culture or civilisation, but an overall experience, competing with shopping centres, cinemas, restaurants, theme parks and so on (Kerlogue 2004, p.viii). This is a far cry from its beginnings, and in order to understand how these establishments have reached where they are today, we investigate the origins of this tradition of collecting and displaying objects.

In particular touch and the museum has travelled a considerable journey, starting at a place of touch, via an absence of touch except for a certain elite, arriving at an important and relevant debate surrounding access for all. Where etiquette dictated tactile engagement with collections in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, why have we reached a point where it is now expected to keep our hands off? Where early visitors to museums appreciated the power of touch to reveal interior truths, why do we require visitors to simply gain surface information through sight? Where the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appreciated the power of object handling in learning, why do only select groups of society engage in this activity? From exploring the journey of touch in the museum through this chapter, we can learn from the experiences of the past, allowing this information to inform how object handling is approached today.

## Origin of the word *Museum*

One often considers *Museum* to be a more recent European term, used to express the collection and display of cultural objects for the enjoyment and enlightenment of society that began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Findlen 1989, Abt 2008). However if we trace the origin of *museum* back to its first appearance we would be surprised indeed. *Museum* has two definitions; firstly it originates from the ancient Greek word for cult sites devoted to the muses – *mouseion* (Abt 2008, p.115). The muses, goddesses of poetry, music and the arts, protected the fine arts and educated men about the mysteries of the world and it is almost certainly the source of our modern word *museum* (Findlen 1989, p.60). Its second definition relates to the famous library at Alexandria founded in 280 B.C. (Abt 2008, p.115) which became a meeting place and research centre for scholars in the classical world (Findlen 1989, p.60). Interestingly, Findlen argues that the term's original meaning placed it in the private and exclusive realm, however this early museum in Alexandria transformed its meaning to one of public and institutional, whereby culture became available as a collective experience for classical civilisation (Findlen 1989, p.60).

Abt (2008) suggests, however that *museum* is more than likely attributed to Aristotle's travels to the island of Lesbos in the mid-340s B.C. Aristotle began collecting, classifying and studying the botanical specimens he found on the island, and in the process produced a methodology for this study, which required social and physical structures for learned inquiry and the evidence necessary to pursue it (Abt 2008, p.116). One could argue that this collection was an early form of museum dedicated to the pursuit of research, enlightenment and understanding of the world in which Aristotle lived.

## Curiosity and Collections: the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

Although, as we have discovered, early collections and museums were in existence in the classical world, it was during the renaissance, and in particular the sixteenth century, that we see the first appearance of organised collection and display taking place in Western Europe with the arrival of the *cabinet of curiosity*. This period saw the discovery and exploration of new and exotic places outside Europe, and an intense fascination with the marvellous, unusual, unexpected and extraordinary gripped society (Kenseth 1991, p.25). Cabinets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had many different names including *pandechion*, *studiolo*, *gabinetto*, *wunderkammer*, *galleria*, *kunstkammer* or *kunstschrack*, however *musaeum* quickly became the most widely accepted and most broadly used term to characterise this process. Abt suggests this was a deliberate attempt to resurrect and refer back to the classical learning associated with the Alexandria institution. Using this term was not simply a poetic reference to this past practice of displaying objects, but offered a 'conceptual system through which collectors interpreted and explored their world' (Findlen cited in Abt 2008, p.120), and to a certain extent many

wunderkammer were 'private and devotional places' for the collector (Putman 2001, p.10), arguably harking back to the tradition of a secluded and sacred place for the muses. Whatever the interpretation, it cannot be denied that these collections went beyond the ordinary and obvious, to explore hidden knowledge of the world; the Tradescant's cabinets for example (discussed below) were part of a socio-cultural movement, a microcosm of the world encapsulating its curiosities in one place (Lidchi 1997, p.158-9).

What characterises these early museums is the methods by which objects were displayed as well as the types of objects on display; where today we may arrange artefacts chronologically or thematically, many cabinets opted for a display that evoked wonder and stimulated creativity (Putnam 2001, p.10), sometimes placing unlinked objects side by side and emphasising difference through displaying large items adjacent to small ones. There were no set standards for how an individual might order their collection; instead they were personal spaces, influenced by daily life. Items of religious significance perhaps imbued with a sense of the miraculous were popular, but many items related to science were frequently collected and displayed (Belk 1995, p.21). Through time collectors became increasingly concerned with classifying and organising artefacts in order to convey meaning, and objects were grouped according to two categories; human-made *artificialia* and items from nature *naturalia*, with religion as a third category used by some collectors (Belk 1995, p.53, Mauries 2002, p.52).

It is important to highlight that use of the term cabinet does not denote a piece of furniture. Instead these were rooms, often quite sizeable, in which both *artificialia* and *naturalia* were presented alongside each other using all available space – the floors, walls and ceilings too. Their location was as varied as the collections they contained, and similar to antiquity the idea of the private space and public space overlapped (Abt 2008, p.122) with cabinets found within the walls of palaces, church institutions, and universities as well as the homes of academics and merchants. Often attributed to wealthy individuals of the time, Bennett (1995, p.27) states that few collections were available for the popular classes to view, but when opportunity did arise, the message presented was often one of 'power to reserve valued objects for private and exclusive inspection'. However countering this argument, Mauries (2002, p.25) suggests this was not simply a case of demonstrating individual wealth and power, but an attempt 'to define, discover and possess the rare and unique, but also at the same time, to inscribe them within a special setting which would instil in them layers of meaning'. In a letter to Christian I of Saxony in 1587, Gabriel Kaltermarckt recommends which types of object are considered important in a cabinet:

'A well-equipped art collection ought primarily to contain three things. First, sculptures. Secondly, paintings. Thirdly, curious items from home and abroad made of metals,

stone, wood, herbs – whether from above the ground, from within the ground or from the waters and the sea. Next, utensils used for drinking or eating which nature or art has shaped or made out of such materials. Then, antlers, horns, claws, feathers and other things belonging to strange and curious animals, birds or fishes, including the skeletons of their anatomy.’ (Gutfleisch and Menzhausen 1989, p.11).

Not only did the cabinets contain preserved specimens and ethnographic artefacts as Kaltermarckt advises, they contained fictional artefacts such as a Scythian Lamb or Narwhal Tusk; collectors at this time were attempting to understand the world and mythologies from other cultures, at the same time as marvelling at their otherness.

As private collections, often situated adjacent to the collector’s bed chamber in the innermost part of the home, became well known, the numbers of individuals visiting increased and therefore these collections became *musaeums* in the sense they had been in the classical era; a space ‘for learned discourse in the presence of its objects’ (Abt 2008, p.122). Collections were transformed from simply a private collection to a public space for learning, and one which was accessible to the public. Guests were shown around the collection by their host and invited to touch the artefacts. Classen (2005, p.275) notes that this experience was important as a two way interaction; not only was the host expected to offer their collections for handling, but the visitor was expected to handle them. She likens this to being invited to a person’s home for dinner and not eating any of the food – a social expectation that was to be fulfilled and not doing so was deemed unacceptable.

An increase in visitors and the public importance of collections led to donations of assemblages to government spaces as in the example of Aldrovandi’s museum. His consisted of a collection of *naturalia* displayed in a room adjacent to his study, developed from private passion to a public place for scholarly research and discussion (Abt 2008, p.122). As his collection became ever more popular, he decided to bestow his cabinet to the Senate of Bologna for display in government (Abt 2008, p.122). This is not a unique example, some of the famous institutions we frequently visit today stemmed from early curiosity cabinets; Sir Hans Sloane’s sizeable collection contributed to the foundation of the British Museum and The Tradescant’s and Elias Ashmole’s collections formed the Ashmolean Museum (Belk 1995).

Much collecting in this period can be attributed to the exploration of the New World, where objects, specimens and often people were brought home as souvenirs and curiosities. This practice however was an expensive one, with collectors looking for patronage from the church or the monarchy in order to purchase choice items to display (Abt 2008, p.120). One could argue that this notion of patronage, enabling both collection and collector to enter the

fashionable realms of society – namely the royal court during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – mirrors that of modern day sponsorship. Having a recognised, respected and global business or individual backing a project brings that collection into the public sphere through the association with a name. Putnam (2001, p.8) suggests the Wunderkammer's 'lack of rational classification, with its bizarre sense of accumulation and juxtaposition', so aesthetically appealing to artists, was seen as unscientific toward the end of the renaissance period and led to the dispersal of collections and creation of the traditional museum institution we are so familiar with. However it could be argued that many of these early collections were instrumental in developing the field of scientific research through the publication of collection catalogues. Ole Worm's example published posthumously in 1655 as *Museum Wormianum* can be seen a starting point for his thoughts on philosophy, science and natural history, and like Aldrovandi, Worm was one of the first seventeenth century scientists to use his collections tangibly in teaching (Schepelern 1990, p.83).

### Touching the past: seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

Mauries (2002, p.51) states we can see a 'direct line of descent' from cabinets of curiosities to private museums of the Renaissance. Indeed the Tradescants' collection, which became known as *The Ark of Lambeth* for the number of artefacts it contained, has been coined as the first museum admitting the public access for a small fee of six pence (Abt 2008, p.124). In 1634 Peter Munday, a well-known and intrepid traveller of the time, visited the Tradescant's *Ark* where he spent an entire day enthralled by the items on display, commenting that he could see more curiosities in that one place than if he spent his whole life travelling (Swann 2001, p.1-15).

Following this intense collecting of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, we see during the latter part of the seventeenth century a change take place in which the idea of the public good, sparked by the English Revolution, opened up debates concerning the ownership of culture (Abt 2008, p.23). As discussed above, several private collections built up over many years, like that of Aldrovandi and the Tradescants, were donated to institutions not only for the benefit of the public but often in exchange for fiscal input into the collector's research and publication. The example of Tradescant's collection is interesting in demonstrating the format and development of early museums, and indeed the way in which visitors interacted with the exhibits. Tradescant the Younger, a naturalist and Charles I's gardener, inherited his father's collection and continually added to it, earning its reputation as one of the best collections in size and quality in England. It attracted visitors from not only Britain, but Europe, who paid Tradescant to lead them through the collection. Elias Ashmole was one such visitor, who became a friend and colleague, assisting Tradescant in producing a catalogue, and on whom the collection was bequeathed on his death (Abt 2008, p.124). Ashmole combined Tradescant's

artefacts with his own and in 1683, eight years after first offering to donate his collection to Oxford University, The Ashmolean Museum opened for visitors, containing ten exhibition rooms, three larger public spaces, a laboratory and lecture hall 'designed for the study of natural philosophy' (Ovenell 1986 in Abt 2008, p.124). Ashmole's stipulations were that the museum be fully accessible to the public, and staff salaries generated via admission fees. During tours, visitors were actively encouraged to engage with the collections through a variety of senses; Celia Fiennes, an English traveller, in 1702 mentions a visit to the Ashmolean during which she touched several items including a cane that through handling she discovered 'looks like a heavy thing but if you take it in your hands it's as light as a feather' (Classen and Howes 2006, p.201). Classen and Howes note that although the curators were aware of the destructive nature of touch, they were hesitant to prevent visitors from handling artefacts in the collection as they believed touch to be an important means of gaining knowledge and understanding about the objects on display (Classen and Howes 2006, p.201).

Similar to the Ashmolean, The British Museum grew out of the collection of Hans Sloane, a physician, naturalist, doctor and collector in the eighteenth century (Abt 2008, p.126). His collection amassed during time spent in the West Indies, included thousands of coins, medals, antiquities, drawings, books and manuscripts. He bequeathed his collection to the nation of England on certain conditions; that his heirs received £20,000 and the collection be housed and maintained at the cost of the British Government. Whilst the estate's trustees were initially turned down, the availability of a building (the Cottonion Library for which the government had taken on responsibility) and another large collection of manuscripts (the Harleian collection) combined with a Parliamentary act in 1753, the year of Sloane's death, resulted in the creation of the British Museum. Its remit was that of 'public repository of objects and text that would be maintained in perpetuity by the English government and overseen by a government appointed board of trustees' (Miller 1974 in Abt 2008, p.126). The British Museum, like the Ashmolean, encouraged visitors to engage with the items on display through touch. Sophie de la Roche, a German novelist and traveller visiting the museum in 1786, describes her enjoyment and wonder at being able to touch objects within the museum's collection, saying 'nor could I restrain my desire to touch the ashes of an urn on which a female figure was being mourned. I felt it gently with great feeling.' (De la Roche 1933, p.107-8).

Although these 'public museums' were technically accessible to all, they were often in reality inaccessible. Opening every day except Sundays and public holidays, from eight to eleven in the morning and two to five during the summer, two to four in the winter, visitors to the Ashmolean were admitted one at a time, led through the building by the keeper or an assistant (Abt 2008, p.124). The British Museum opened to the public from nine in the morning to three

in the afternoon, sometimes four to eight in the afternoon during the summer (Abt 2008, p.26), on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday, reserving Tuesdays and Thursdays for artists and private visits (Candlin 2008, p.12). A visit was not as simple as ours are today. At the British Museum, an individual's only means of entry to the institution was via a lengthy application process, requiring a letter giving details of social standing, status and residence. This was passed to the principal librarian, the most senior member of staff, for approval before the applicant could collect their ticket which was very rarely useable on the day of collection. Only ten tickets were available for each hour the museum was open. As the popularity of the British Museum increased, so did the number of applicants. Names were placed on a list for the next available ticket, and applicants were encouraged to regularly check their position on the list with the porter (Wilson 2002, p.38).

Although these two museums were originally intended for scholarly research and enlightenment by certain echelons of society, access slowly widened due to a variety of pressures, including financial for the Ashmolean, and Government responsibility to its citizens for the British Museum. This widening access resulted in a change in the way visitors were encouraged to engage with the collections on display. As we have seen from these two examples, representing many other institutions during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, touch was considered an important supplement to sight during a visit, since sight was seen to only reveal surface information whereas touch enabled one to reveal 'interior truths' (Classen and Howes 2006, p.202, Candlin 2008). It was through this tactile engagement that visitors were truly able to understand and gain knowledge about collections, and touching sculptures and exotic artefacts was thought to be a form of aesthetic appreciation (Classen and Howes 2006, p.02). All this was about to change.

### Declining touch: the nineteenth century museum

During the nineteenth century, touch was no longer deemed a suitable form of behaviour within the confines of the museum, and sight became the sense of choice. Multisensory engagement changed to visual learning. Candlin (2008, p.11) suggests in order to understand this change we must consider *who* was touching rather than focussing on *when*. Classen and Howes observe that in the 1800s sight became a *noble* sense for *civilised* society and that by the mid nineteenth century the experiences of Sophie de la Roche and Celia Fiennes in handling collections had 'become a sign of vulgarity and insubordination – of a lack of civilised behaviour' (Classen and Howes 2006, p.207). This can be attributed to two factors: firstly this being a period of rising visualism, and secondly the era of the public museum. Everything that was innovative and developmental about this century placed sight at the forefront; industrial capitalism emphasising visual display of goods, visual surveillance in social institutions, and

visual technologies such as photography (Classen 2001). This visualism transferred into all areas of society causing distinctions to be drawn between the different senses so that they were classed as either noble or base.

The second factor which triggered a move from touch in museums to visual appreciation was the development of the public museum. Classen and Howes (2006, p.208) remark that museums during the nineteenth century adopted many of the visual trends seen elsewhere in society, becoming a platform for testing and presenting these 'scientific paradigms'. Candlin (2008) adds that public museums provided access to all, not simply the wealthy elite. Pressure from Government and other reformers for museums to have a role in educating the working classes, resulted in a dramatic change in levels of access, therefore affecting the sensory modes by which visitors engaged with collections (Candlin 2008, p.14). Because of the rising importance of sight as a civilised sense and increased access to the masses, museums required visitors to simply look at the objects on display rather than interact with them through touch as their seventeenth and eighteenth century counterparts once did. This was not simply due to a fashion for the visual, nor was it only to prevent damage to artefacts through extensive handling. Candlin (2008, p.13) states that class played a significant part in the departure from tactile engagement, since the uneducated and unwashed classes were deemed unworthy of handling collections; it was an entirely different activity when the educated and wealthy elite did this. Sophie de la Roche reveals her disgust at a female warden handling objects during her eighteenth century visit to the Tower of London:

'It seems impossible that a woman, furthermore so ungainly in appearance, should be put in charge of pure gold and all that a crown implies' (de la Roche 1933, p.129).

Sophie was not alone in her opinions about the lower classes, Celia Fiennes and Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach (a German traveller and diarist) both see their touch as being far superior and the touch of the working classes as destructive and inferior (Candlin 2008, p.13). Uffenbach comments 'the people imperiously handle everything in the usual English fashion ... they run here and there, grabbing at everything and taking no rebuff from the *Sub-Custos*' (von Uffenbach in Classen 2005, p.281). As a result of these factors, it was deemed impossible for two different levels of access to be offered, preservation and conservation of objects became a concern, and the sheer volume of visitors meant that touch was no longer permitted in the nineteenth century museum.

Bennett (1995, p.42) notes that display techniques had changed considerably in the late nineteenth century, from the object being the focus of awe and wonder, to the object as illustrative of an idea or concept. Sir William Henry Flower, Director of the Museum of Natural History, followed the view that a well arranged museum was a collection of labels illustrated by

objects and in 1898 gave advice regarding the use of objects within museums, stating that 'lastly will come the illustrative specimens, each of which as procured and prepared will fall into its appropriate place' (Bennett 1995, p.42). The information provided on labels was seen as important in educating the museum visitor, with the object simply acting as a representation; a stark contrast from the early display of objects in cabinets of curiosity.

Interestingly, despite the move towards a more visual and hands-off approach to learning, object teaching, as Hooper-Greenhill (2000, p.105) notes, was a major form of pedagogy in Europe and North America in the second half of the nineteenth Century at a time when the target of knowledge was understanding, through observations of the natural world. Indeed, Candlin (2008, p.16) remarks that despite museums forbidding touch, object handling was seen as important and highly valued by experts, particularly curators who were expected to have experienced much tactile engagement during their training, and carry this into their careers by interacting closely with their collections.

## Touch in the Twentieth Century and beyond

The museum we think of today, acquired its form through its journey during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; as we can see from the history presented above this has been a long and complex journey, which still continues today (Bennett 1995, p.19, Abt 2008, p.132, see also Weil 2002). In the nineteenth century the organisation and display of objects was central to the concept of the museum; if objects were correctly and properly arranged they possessed a power to convey knowledge, meaning and understanding (Conn 2010, p.7). This has changed somewhat during the twentieth century where the function of objects has appeared to shift, acting as a means to provide evidence for themes and topics of displays and exhibitions rather than simply allowing the objects to speak for themselves. Objects almost reached a point of becoming set dressing in display cabinets, and where handling opportunities have been made available, are designed to address a need by offering objects deemed not essential thereby protecting the more delicate and valuable items in the main collections (Candlin 2004, p.72).

During the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century the museum is shaped by a need to preserve its collections as well as meet the needs of the visiting public (Abt 2008, p.132). Indeed considering the modern museum, and the many forms in which it appears, the new exhibition and display techniques used and in some cases the complete lack of objects (see Conn 2010), we see a struggle between the museum's desire to preserve heritage at the same time as meeting the demands to present objects in the most accessible way possible. Over the years, many of my colleagues at Hampshire Museum Service have questioned whether the level of public interest in heritage can be attributed to the fact that much of the collections are boxed

up, out of sight. Whilst it may be a practical conservation concern that makes some museums un-touchable, it also expresses a message that preserving artefacts for the future is far more important than interacting with them in the present (Classen 2005). However, most museum visitors want that physical connection with artefacts rather than simply relying on the visual (Classen and Howes 2006, p.217). Black (2005, p. ix-x) pushes for a more engaging museum that interacts with its visitors, stating his belief that 'direct visitor participation leads to learning'. He comments that the early twentieth century museums saw themselves as educational, responsible for creating knowledge through research of collections and disseminating this to the public in 'formal scholarly displays'. Museums during this period, held objects in trust for the nation and future generations and therefore access was given out reluctantly, requiring the public's gratitude and placing the museum professional in a place of power (Black 2005, p.1).

Although museums have a long history themselves, the area of Museum Studies is much younger. With the construction boom of museums in the later twentieth century, so too was there a boom in writing about them. As Conn (2010, p.1) points out, despite there being a connection or relationship between the two, this has not necessarily been a happy one. It is only over the past two decades that museum studies has emerged as a recognised discipline, with many volumes and papers produced, lectures and conferences delivered, debates and discussions initiated. Most notably the University of Leicester have paved the way with numerous volumes dedicated to exploring not only the history of museums, but theory and best practice, learning and education, and more. In addition University College London's Museums and Collections have explored the use of touch in museums through a series of studies and workshops beginning in 2006 (Chaterjee 2008). Their exploration of tactile engagements have indeed marked a new era for museums, where the issue of access is uppermost at a time where the economic climate has placed pressure on museums to demonstrate their worth and value to society, particularly in terms of publicly funded institutions. Through the combined research of individuals from within and outside the heritage sector, much is being done to demonstrate the value and worth of object handling, and as a result museums are beginning to think creatively about what this could mean for them.

One of the distinguishing features associated with the modern museum is the role of interactives; however this may not be as recent as first thought. Witcomb (2008, p.353-4) states that while interactives and interactivity were prevalent in the 1980s, their life began in the nineteenth century where visitor activated models, film and scientific theatres were employed to engage visitors with scientific methodology and experiment. Since then, interactives have had a strong link with science museums and science centres and have impacted the way interactives are understood by the museological community. Within this context the way their purpose and

nature has been understood has resulted in interactives being reduced to a hands-on element tagged onto an exhibition, generally involving computerisation, so that many museums will view only certain parts of exhibition areas as interactive, identifying interactives as entirely separate from interpretation (Witcomb 2008, p.354). It is important to remember that during the nineteenth century, museums saw themselves as institutions relying predominantly on a visual culture and therefore those that could not see were thought unlikely to gain benefit from, or even be interested in visiting a museum (Cassim 2007, p.184). Whilst interactives have had a longstanding connection with science museums, many interactive elements in modern museums have been targeted specifically at visually impaired and blind visitors, and to begin with these were the main groups to engage in tactile experiences as it was assumed those that could see did not need to touch (see Candlin 2004, Classen and Howes 2006, p.216).

Witcomb (2008, p.353-4) notes that modern – late twentieth and early twenty-first century – museums offered interactives as a fun and playful way of discovering within the museum context; it can be argued that this is something almost expected by the modern visitor. Many exhibitions and displays employ interactives in one form or another, whether that be a computer strategically placed within the exhibition space, audio tours at heritage sites, children's holiday activities or costumed interpreters at the ready to converse with visitors; one almost expects an element of interactivity during a visit to a museum or heritage site. However Witcomb suggests there is a common misunderstanding that interactives are seen as:

‘a process that can be added to an already existing display and that most often involves some form of computerized technology ... This is why many museums typically regard only certain of their exhibition areas as interactive and why they see interactives as fundamentally different from conventional forms of interpretation’ (Witcomb 2008, p.354).

Candlin (2004, p.72) highlights that most handling and interactive opportunities offered to visitors are a way of giving access without allowing control over what they engage with; granting touch without posing any threat to the main collections, she argues that ‘this level of access is arguably palliative’. Despite this rather sweeping statement, Candlin does raise our awareness of the continued struggle that museums face, between their duty to the public and responsibility to care for the collections of the nation. Indeed Black (2005, p. 1-3) notes that in recent decades, pressures from above (Government and funding bodies) and below (the visiting public) are causing museums to reconsider the way in which they order their priorities of protection and presentation, in order to engage with society.

## Chapter One: The Journey of Touch in the Museum

The current climate in which this thesis is presented is a difficult one. Abt (2008, p.132) argues that although the public museum is an ever changing and evolving place, it is one that is 'shaped by the demands of preserving objects to address societal need'. Alongside this, the history of the museum, presented above, demonstrates the changing value of touch. From an expected form of engagement with curiosities, becoming taboo as the uneducated masses enter the museum, to a limited form of access in the twentieth century, we now find ourselves at a crossroads whereby admitting the value of object handling sparks a debate about how we are able to marry up touch with preservation. Add to this, pressures from within the profession, twenty-first century museums face the challenge of becoming audience focussed, meaning that museums and the audiences they serve become partners in interpreting heritage. For me, touch plays a central role in this, since through touch we gain insight into the hidden history of objects and our relationships with them.

# Chapter Two

## The Power of Objects

### Theoretical approaches

*‘Vision often appears to determine the way we perceive the world. However, touch is the sensory modality that verifies the reality of what we see by allowing us to confirm the physical presence of objects and people around us’*

(Wing, Giachritsis, Roberts 2007, p.31)

It is an inbuilt, natural curiosity in every one to touch the things around us; this is how we experience the world we live in. Our everyday experiences and tasks are carried out through handling objects in our environment; the keyboard used to type this thesis, the key used to open your front door, the telephone used to call a loved one. Without a tactile engagement with objects, our world would be an entirely different place. As Wing, Giachritsis and Roberts (2007, p.31) highlight, our perception of the world is to a certain extent dependent on what we see before us, but our understanding is enhanced through touch. Our reasons for reaching out and touching may vary, however the outcome will be based on the feel of an object. But how do we construct meaning about objects and ourselves through this physical engagement, and how do objects hold such power in our lives? This chapter, through an exploration of theoretical approaches, examines ways in which objects have meaning beyond their obvious appearance and function, demonstrating the important role touch has in understanding material culture.

Firstly, to place this research in context, it is important to understand the climate in which this thesis is presented; cultural education and engagement is high on UK Government agenda and museums are increasingly considering how they contribute to society’s sense of worth and identity by becoming more engaging and accessible to the population. In a world where we encounter and handle objects as a matter of course, what happens in the storehouses of our heritage: Museums? For many, the word museum conjures a particular image; dusty buildings, in which objects are displayed behind glass cases or hidden from sight, boxed up in dark, soulless storage rooms. But in reality, is this interpretation fair? The International Council of Museums (ICOM 2006, p.3-9) code of Ethics for museums state that:

‘Museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development ... provide opportunities for the appreciation, understanding and management of the natural and cultural heritage ... work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve.’

The emphasis here appears to be that of museums and communities working together, however these three points of the code (two, four and six) still hint at a recurring problem; museums

retain power and hierarchy in society over the people for whom collections are stored and cared for. When museums produce text and descriptive labels for exhibitions, they appropriate the right to interpretation, removing the freedom of the visitor to create their own individual meaning of an object. Black (2005, p.150) argues that collections are what make museums great, and that ‘all visitors deserve the opportunity to be inspired by what they discover in the museum’. I suggest that if museums are to conform to this code of ethics, and celebrate collections with visitors, they must think creatively about how to facilitate this.

In the last decade, much research has been carried out to understand how museums engage with the public, and more recently Government agenda has focussed on this engagement as perhaps the main purpose of museums. Numerous papers highlight the potential and importance of museums connecting with the communities around them and becoming accessible to all (see Henley 2012, Davey 2011, Morris 2011, Rogers 2009). What is interesting about these documents is for the most part they only go so far as to say that culture is important in society and that society should be given opportunities to engage with it, lacking an in-depth examination of the potential unlocked by tactile encounters with collections. However, of note is the Museums Association’s Effective Collections programme which aimed at bringing collections out of storage for the benefit of the British Public (Museums Association 2012a; Keene 2008; Cross & Wilkinson 2007; Wilkinson 2005). Thirty-four projects involving more than one-hundred UK museums demonstrated a wide range of uses for collections beyond exhibitions, and although the project originally aimed at encouraging museums to review their collections, loans, disposals and outreach policies, some of the most significant outcomes revealed ways in which museums have established new partnerships and innovative ways of working to make the most of stored collections (Museums Association 2012b). In addition to this, the Museum Association’s current campaign *Museums 2020* offers an exciting opportunity for museums to transform the way they engage with the public and play a part in “improving people’s lives, building communities, strengthening society and protecting the environment” (Museums Association 2012c, p.3). As part of the *Museums 2020* campaign, BritainThinks conducted research with the public to ascertain their attitudes towards museums, the results demonstrating that the public see museums’ essential purposes as caring and preserving heritage, holding collections and mounting displays which utilise more of museums’ stored collections, and creating knowledge for and about society in which education is for all and not just the academic or elite (BritainThinks 2013). This research by the Museums Association is just the first step in the process of becoming more accessible; there is still much to be done to promote the importance and power of touch in museums.

While the transfer of museums and libraries from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to Arts Council England (ACE) in October 2011 took place, Baroness Estelle Morris (2011) conducted a review of ACE's ten year strategic framework *Achieving great art for everyone*, 'to provide us with an independent, expert view about how we shape it, placing our new responsibilities at the heart of our mission' (Davey in Morris 2011, p.ii). ACE recognised the invaluable role museums have in society, providing places for people to come together, engage with culture and connect with each other (Morris 2011, p.iii). By asking Baroness Morris to investigate and review the strategic framework, ACE demonstrated their respect for the museum sector and its importance in society; her findings demonstrate the successes of the sector as well as highlighting opportunities for new encounters with culture. She underlines the overarching goal of the culture sector as being engagement, arguing the need to place greater emphasis on 'the public being active partners and creators with museums and libraries' (Morris 2011, p.15). Reading this document, I felt a thrill of excitement as Morris built to a crescendo, increasingly asserting the importance of engagement and partnerships between cultural institutions and the public. However, she stops disappointingly short, stating that 'many museums and increasingly libraries rely on local volunteers in everything they do' (Morris 2011, p.15). Having the opportunity and potential to suggest something quite ground-breaking, she goes no further than discussing the value of volunteers.

Similarly in his *Cultural Education in England* document for DCMS, Darren Henley (2012) highlights the value museums add to the cultural education of children and young people. His recommendations suggest that educational institutions (namely schools and colleges) should visit museums, galleries and heritage sites and interact with cultural professionals such as archivists and curators (Henley 2012, p.23-28). Henley also recommends that visits to such sites should not be a substitute or simply a trip for entertainment, but should sit alongside classroom work in order that it augments learning (Henley 2012, p.40). This is indeed a great recommendation and recognises something that museums have been striving to achieve; encounters that work alongside and enhance learning, rather than simply taking place for the sake of it. However, again I feel this does not go far enough, sticking for the safe option of proposing that schools *visit* museums, rather than suggesting opportunities for engagement.

I believe these documents are not bold enough in their recommendations. Rather than simply stating that cultural institutions are important in society and that society should have opportunities to engage with culture, they should be exploring ways in which this can become a reality. In his book *The Engaging Museum*, Black (2005) repeatedly asserts the importance of partnership between the museum and public, suggesting that tactile engagement be at the heart of this; I wholeheartedly agree. For me, object handling is a means of interacting not only with

our past, but with one another. Objects have the power to unlock hidden histories about ourselves as well as enabling engagement with the world around us; touch is one means of achieving this and should be more available in heritage contexts. As T B Brazelton states ‘touch functions on many levels of adaptation, first to make survival possible and then to make life meaningful’ (Brazelton 1990 in Lythgoe 2005). We should be encouraging society to make life meaningful through tactile engagements with culture.

### Touch alone is not enough

In terms of human development, touch is the first sense to form (Lythgoe 2005, p.1). Before we are born we explore our surroundings through our sense of touch. At eight weeks we respond to a touch on the cheek. At twelve weeks we begin exploring our surroundings through sensations in the mouth; sucking the thumb and making mouthing and licking movements. At thirty-two weeks the extent of information we are able to process through our sense of touch includes temperature, pressure and pain. We start our lives ‘perceiving the world through touching it or being touched by it’ (Lythgoe 2005, p.1). This development does not stop at birth; from that point onwards touch is integral to the exploration of our surroundings, working alongside our other senses to make sense of the world around us.

Our senses do not exist in isolation; the purpose of having a variety of senses to experience the world is due to the simple fact that we cannot understand our world without using each sense in conjunction with another. Aldersey-Williams (2005, p.2) states that ‘we use our senses in concert’ and that without all our senses our experience of the world would be quite flat. When we think we are using one sense, we are, in fact, using a combination of several to understand our surroundings; for example in turning the pages of a book, it is not simply the touch of the paper alone that gives us the impression of texture, it is the sound as the paper rustles as well as the way light bounces off the surface, that aids in our conception of that texture. Lythgoe (2005) describes this as ‘cross-talk’ between our senses and cites examples of individuals for whom one sense directly affects another; a synesthete with neuronal cross-wiring between two of his senses resulting in the words he hears producing a taste in his mouth, a blind patient who ‘sees’ images each time he touches an object, and a restaurant worker who experiences a bitter taste each time he shapes a hamburger with his hands.

In his paper for the V&A’s *Touch Me!* exhibition in the summer of 2005, Lythgoe re-counts a story of a man blind from birth, given sight through a corneal graft. After his operation, he asked to visit the Science Museum in London to see an exhibit of a lathe he had heard about but not been able to ‘see’ (through touch) as it had been behind a glass case. On touching the object, he gained a deeper understanding, and commented ‘now that I’ve felt it I can see’

(Lythgoe 2005, p.1). His observation was that he was blind to objects he had been unable to touch, and even now with his new sight he needed to make a physical connection with the object in order to properly 'see' it. Lythgoe notes that for many of us this is a bizarre concept; to be blind to an object in front of us until we make physical contact with it. However when we consider the information we are able to glean from an object simply through sight we understand that touch provides an opportunity not only to affirm this observed information, but to gain extra information that can be obtained only through a tactile experience.

### Touch is social

While we understand that touch is a means by which we experience and sense the world in which we live, it is also a two-way process providing a complex exchange between people (Lythgoe 2005). Through touch relationships are created between people; touch provides an experience, it allows us to acquire knowledge, and allows us to communicate. Touch helps us express what words alone do not achieve, for example consoling and comforting a person in need is sometimes as simple as placing an arm around their shoulder, giving the message of compassion and care which in words may not carry the same weight.

Touch is social. When we touch another person it produces a response in that person affecting our feelings as well as theirs (Aldersey-Williams 2005). We use phrases such as 'keep in touch' with friends and acquaintances, alluding to the near future and the next time we might meet. However, Aldersey-Williams (2005) notes we live in a world where physical contact with people is becoming increasingly limited through a reduction in the size of family units, more people living alone, and an increasing reliance on machines and gadgets; we are living in a 'touch starved society'. Nevertheless the power of physical contact cannot be ignored.

As well as the more abstract notion of touch, the act of touching produces chemical and physical changes in the brain and in the body. Research has shown that a lack of touch and physical contact with infants and children from an early age can result in abnormal brain development, particularly in the area that deals with emotions (Lythgoe 2005). Without touch, one might grow without some of the necessary life skills needed, due to the slow and in some cases complete lack of development of mental and motor skills.

Despite living in a 'touch starved society' we continue to focus much of our lives on touch; as Aldersey-Williams (2005, p.3) states 'we experience touch vicariously' not through physical engagement with each other, but through television programmes about gardening, DIY, cooking, through playing computer games, email and social networking sites. This contrast can also be seen in the design world, where some designers are concerned with the feel of their

products as well as the look, designing objects with different textures and shapes, whereas others aim for touch-less technology in order to increase hygiene and convenience. Regardless of this, Aldersey-Williams (2005) argues that ‘how things feel is critical to our response to them’.

### A hierarchy of touch

It can be argued that a hierarchy of touch exists, whereby select groups are represented in specialist projects aimed at engaging the public with museums and heritage, and the general public is largely neglected in terms of object handling and access to collections. In conversations with staff at Hampshire Museum Service (see chapter seven), many expressed a sense of privilege to have daily tactile interaction with objects as part of their professional role, acknowledging this is not something experienced by the whole population. It cannot be denied that the effort exerted into providing workshops for specialist groups appears more prevalent than those for the wider public. Indeed we have already seen in the previous chapter that with the rise of the visual as the dominant sense, touch was assumed to be necessary only for those who could not see, rather than being seen as a means of interpretation and understanding by everyone (Cassim 2007). As a result, the public’s engagement with collections is largely through museum exhibitions and displays, in which objects are invariably placed within glass cases with low level lighting alongside either basic or complex descriptive labels.

Touch exhibitions, solely dedicated to object handling are a recent development, emerging from the familiar tradition of loans services for schools, which first developed in the nineteenth century (Hooper-Greenhill 1991) providing the evidence to suggest that artefacts from museums could be handled in a safe environment, not just by children, under supervised, controlled conditions (Cassim 2007, p.163). For most museum professionals, the term object handling is associated with school, reminiscence and specialist community groups, rather than an activity on offer to the general museum visitor (see chapter seven). Whilst, academics acknowledge that the majority of museum visitors are made up of middle-class individuals, in full or part-time employment, Black (2005, p.146) suggests this may perhaps be due to the education levels of the general public, since social class and working status correlates almost directly with those who choose to visit a museum.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

Having laid the foundation of touch in museums, and the pressure these institutions are under to engage with their communities, we now turn to the power of objects to consider some key theoretical approaches to understanding objects in the world and how we engage with them. Here I discuss three different, anthropologically rooted theories – Agency, Object Biographies, and Textuality and Metaphor – discussing them within the context of tactile engagement. My

aim is to present evidence to support the claim that touch enables us to engage with and interpret material culture.

### *Agency*

Eastop (2003, p.102) remarks that where people are known to have agency, objects are traditionally thought not to. However Alfred Gell's seminal work *Art and Agency* (1998) reveals that objects (his theory focusses on artworks) are experienced as though they have agency, which Ahern (2001, p.112) defines as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act', further stating that 'all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation'. This definition is open and not restricted simply to people with the ability to perform actions through free-will, and indeed many anthropologists have explored this theory to encompass the link between objects and agency. As such it can be argued that objects have social lives much in the same way people do, often determined by their status as commodities where they are moved about and re-contextualised, gaining new insights and meanings depending on the context they end up in (Hoskins 2006, p.74).

The way an object is perceived is linked to its agency; objects stimulate emotional responses from individuals and contain elements of their creator's intentions. Gell's theory suggests that objects are created in order to influence a person's thoughts and actions. Objects that may simply be seen as inert, with no particular purpose or function, are in fact imbued with 'complex intentionalities and mediate social agency' (Hoskins 2006, p.75, See also Gosden and Marshall 1999); Taking this further, the model implies that objects not only assume different identities, but they are agents with the ability to affect the people who engage with them. Gell argues that all social agency is realized through the medium of objects (Gell 1998, p.20, Tanner & Osborne 2006, p.2). Therefore we must consider our interactions with the world around us, which is an inherently material one, questioning the objects we engage with in order to understand the reason why we react in certain ways.

In the context of this thesis, object handling enables us to investigate the agentic nature of objects, since through this tactile engagement we experience an array of reactions and emotions. Take for example the role of objects in reminiscence work; the purpose of this is, through the use of objects, to encourage participants to remember their past experiences and express these to other people in the group, as a form of therapy to great success (see chapter three for examples). In this sense objects act as agents to provoke memory because the objects are imbued with meaning for each individual. Similarly, objects used for schools sessions act as agents for learning, as through touch, pupils are often excited and intrigued, spurring their desire for knowledge and understanding.

*Object Biographies*

Where we might consider persons to have lives and objects not, experience tells us something different. Just as people change through time, dependent on events and encounters, so to do objects (Eastop 2003, p.101). Biographies can be applied to objects much in the same way as they can be applied to persons (Kopytoff 1986, Eastop 2003). Anthropologists have, for centuries, analysed societies through the life stories of various categories of people, enabling them to examine what a particular ethnic group considers a desirable model of a successful life. Kopytoff draws on W.H.R. River's article in 1910 *The Geneological Method of Anthropological Inquiry* in which the author argued that by super-imposing relationships between people on genealogical diagrams, we can also trace social structures through time. Taking this further, River's suggests these social structures can be observed through physical movement of objects – a biography of an object demonstrating ownership, however Kopytoff (1986, p.66) suggests biographies of things do not necessarily need to focus on ownership, but can incorporate other matters and events.

In carrying out biographies of objects, similar questions one might ask of a person can be considered, including those about its status, provenance, its construction and by whom, what its career has encompassed thus far, how its use has changed through time and through different owners, and what will happen when it is no longer considered useful (Kopytoff 1986, p.66-7). As objects move through their lifespan, their use changes. In terms of ethnography Kopytoff argues that using an object out of phase conveys meaning and messages to society; this is best demonstrated through the example of Suku huts in Zaire which have different uses at each stages of life – family home, guest house, widow's home, teenager's hang-out, kitchen, goat or chicken house, and final collapse. If a hut at the stage of kitchen is used to house guests, messages are expressed about the visitor's status (low) and the compound-head's character (poor, lazy). In the same way, Kopytoff argues that we place biographical expectations on things: using the example of a Renoir painting, he asks how we would feel were it incinerated, should it end up in a private inaccessible collection, hidden away in museum storage, or sold to a collector in another country. Our answers to these questions 'reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgements, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects labelled 'art' (Kopytoff 1986, p.67).

In interpreting museum collections, Kopytoff's biographical approach is useful as it enables an examination of different layers of an object's past, present and possible future. Kopytoff (1986, p.67) states that 'biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure' and I would add that through touch these obscurities are even more visible and available to

interpretation. During its lifespan an object is handled and used for its intended purpose, and one might argue that on entering a museum collection its purpose and status is once again changed. However this is not the end of its life and using object biographies can inform the way we study and preserve artefacts as well as how we engage with them (Eastop 2003, p.110). Kerlogue (2004, p.vii-viii) argues that the time an object spends in a museum is usually the later part of its life, but it is ‘the one in which the object is held in highest esteem, so that its life is deliberately prolonged through conservation and care’. We should continue to explore objects through touch once they enter the realms of a museum in order to fully understand their biographies. In school sessions, the concept of object biographies is useful in illustrating theoretical concepts to pupils. For example during a project at Dunkirt Barn Roman Villa (see chapter eight) one pupil’s engagement with an oyster shell inspired biography based questioning – what is it, how was it made, who used it, how did it get to the site etc. – resulting not only in the pupil’s knowledge of Roman diet increasing, but their understanding of trade and the means by which this past culture transported oysters from the shoreline to an inland villa site in Hampshire.

Often visitors focus on the value of an object on display to generate their understanding of its importance and status, however as Kopytoff (1986, p.69) argues the saleability for money is not what necessarily informs the status of an object. Since many museum collections consist of rare, invaluable and irreplaceable artefacts, how can visitors come to understand the cultural value of things if they are not to explore their qualities? The value someone places on an object is very personal and varied, informed by different individual encounters and interpretations. What one may consider to be high value, others argue have little value or significance. Through tactile exploration, and I believe this should be a social act including participants with different knowledge, we can learn much about an object’s journey from creation to museum artefact.

### *Textuality and Metaphor*

In addition to the theories discussed above, Judy Attfield’s (2000) work on the textuality and metaphor of objects aids our understanding of their importance. Metaphor as a linguistic construction allows us to produce meaning beyond the obvious since it enables us to create links between seemingly disparate domains: social and cultural (Tilley 1999, Attfield 2000, Tilley 2006). Attfield (2000, p.129) argues that metaphor ‘allows things to exist in their own thing-like terms merely framing them in language for discursive purposes without lapsing into solipsism’; it is a conceptual framework facilitating links between things in the cultural sphere, experienced through a material world rather than through language. Tilley (2006, p.62) suggests ‘the material object is a powerful metaphorical medium through which people may reflect on their world in and through their material practice’. We can interpret the metaphor of objects as memories,

which vary from person to person. What may act as a particular metaphor for one individual may have an entirely different meaning for another, whether that is positive, negative or ambiguous. To take this further within the realms of this research, I would argue that through a tactile engagement, an object can *speak* to us, providing the metaphor or link to a memory or interpretation. There is not one single meaning for each object, but several layers which are unlocked through touch. Therefore the theoretical framework of metaphor is useful in arguing that touch is vital to our understanding since the non-verbal properties of an object can only be fully grasped through tangible exploration.

## SUMMARY

The theories discussed above reveal that objects have complex histories, creating difficult choices for those with the responsibility to care for and display them within the museum context (Eastop 2003, p.110). Understanding that objects can be read in many different ways, producing a variety of interpretations and meanings for each individual, creates an awareness of the potential tactile engagement provides for bringing the past into the present in both a personal and meaningful way. The nature of object handling enables a connection with the past in a very different way than looking at an object from a distance, through a glass case.

Having considered the ways in which objects can be understood, several questions arise on a similar thread. How do museum objects become more important than the objects we use during our daily lives? What happens to an object at the point of entering the museum environment? How does an object's value change from being that of something which once belonged to a person, to something belonging to a collection which can tell us about a past culture or society? Pye (2001, p.73) acknowledges that many visitors see 'museums as places full of dead objects and there is a general agreement that objects change or are changed when they enter a museum'. Indeed once an object is taken out of its original context objects are changed (Holden 2005, p.11). Cramer (cited in Pye 2011) comments that as a result museums take on a tomb like quality and Kopytoff (1986, p.76) hints that objects are 'withdrawn from their exchange sphere and deactivated, so to speak, as commodities'. This is where touch offers a route to making museums more accessible, pulling away from this sense of museums as tombs containing relics of the past. Since there is increased pressure for culture to play a significant role in society, museums must think creatively about how they make their collections accessible, and the following chapter demonstrates ways in which attempts are being made to do this through the use of touch.

## Chapter Three

# Current Research in Object Handling

Despite the volume and weight of anecdotal evidence, the value of object handling within heritage contexts is little understood (Chatterjee 2008, p.1). Until more recently, most significant studies in how people learn through touch were carried out in clinical psychology; the majority addressing the physiological aspects of handling rather than the learning, social and wellbeing benefits (MacDonald 2007, p.108). With increasing pressure from outside sources for museums to widen audience participation and increase access to their collections, museums' strategic planning policies increasingly promote object handling as a means of achieving this (Pye 2007, p.13). Through designated object handling sessions, connections are made between the public and their past cultures and communities, however museum practitioners often do not fully understand why this is such a valuable practice. The value of object handling is a new and growing field of research, developed over the past ten years by academics from a range of disciplines, all contributing fascinating concepts and ideas to an incredibly important and relevant debate about increasing access to museum collections. In this chapter I introduce some of the ground-breaking work contributing to this area of research, setting the context for this thesis and demonstrating why tactile engagement is a valuable activity to be taken seriously.

### *The Power of Touch*

Perhaps the first significant research to consider is the *Magic Touch* conference and subsequent *Power of Touch* publication produced by the Institute of Archaeology, UCL. The aim of both conference (2004) and publication (2007) was to encourage 'discussion and re-evaluation of the use of touch in museums and other heritage contexts', exploring what is already known about touch, examining prejudices associated with touch, why it may be forbidden to the visitor, and offering examples of successful object handling within museums (Pye 2007, p.11-13). Important to note, is the way the conference gathered a host of individuals researching the field of object handling, bringing case studies from a variety of different groups and contexts; including reminiscence, visually impaired groups, conservation, outreach and haptic technology (the 'field of tactile exploration involving technological interfaces' (Chatterjee 2008, p.2)). Many contributors agree a need to understand not only the value of touch, but what it actually means, since touch produces both positive and negative experiences for the handler (Geller 2007, p.63). UCL's research demonstrates how object handling extends beyond the confines of museums and galleries, considering concepts around its history, professionalism, memory, discovery and virtual touch.

Geibusch (2007, p.73-88) introduces the idea of holy and magic touch, with a focus on relics. He explores the notion that relics, having been imbued with a magical power due to their association with people and/or places, offer believers a sacred experience as seen in the example of mittens worn by the cleric Padre Pio, famous for receiving the stigmata in 1918 and his role as miracle worker and healer. Many individuals who touched relics associated with Pio reported miraculous encounters, which Geibusch attributes to the idea that relics are remarkable due to their physical contact with a saint, or indeed in some instances derived from a saint. He argues that the materiality of these objects is rooted in being perceived 'not just as reminders but remainders' (Geibusch 2007, p.78). This theory can also be seen in the concept of *The King's Touch* discussed by Thomas (2005). This was the practice of the reigning Monarch touching those afflicted with the King's Evil, the name given to scrofula or struma (an inflammation of the lymph glands of the neck), while a passage from the Gospel of Mark 'They shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover' was read aloud by a cleric (Thomas 2005, p.354). This practice, begun by Edward the Confessor in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, was popular with many monarchs, reaching a height during the reign of Charles II in the 17<sup>th</sup> century where contemporary writers claim nearly half the country's population had received the King's Touch (Thomas 2005, p.355). Whatever the reason for this practice and the achievement of a cure, the touch of the monarch, similar to the touch of relics, demonstrates the power of a tactile experience. As Geibusch (2007, p.83-84) states simply 'to look at a relic is only half the story', perhaps controversially arguing that despite the detriment to objects, in the eyes of conservators, 'using up an object in this way is not the museum's loss so much as the visitor's profit'.

Building on Geibusch's argument, MacDonald (2007) encourages us to consider the idea of 'contaminating touch' and what this means in terms of handling collections. She describes the state of object handling (in 2007) as remaining restricted 'to privileged users, such as curators, researchers or sponsors' resulting in an emphasis on studying objects behind glass cases unless you are a school group taking part in structured handling sessions (MacDonald 2007, p.108). In contrast to this previous strand of research, MacDonald wished to explore the idea of professional touch in contrast to the touch of the public, by interviewing a number of professionals in the museum field and antique dealerships. Through these interviews she discovered that professionals perceive their touch and handling to inform essential object-expertise and many 'had collections of their own. They enjoyed handling objects, and the pleasure in handling was likely to be closely connected with the development of expertise' (MacDonald 2007, p.118). Despite this, MacDonald's interviewees were unable to easily relate to museum visitors' experience of tactile prohibition, even though they admitted themselves 'passionate about the importance of direct contact with artefacts' (MacDonald 2007, p.118). Pye

(2007, p.121-22) observes that in conservation and restoration, the investigation of an object is a tactile process, where both sight and touch are essential; conservators handle objects on a daily basis but often forget that this tactile engagement is not available to the public. Touch and handling objects can be damaging and therefore the prohibition of touch is often used as a form of conservation, however Pye observes 'how much more powerful it can be to make physical contact [with an object]' (Pye 2007, p.134). Findings from a report commissioned by Resource (See Munday 2002) demonstrated the possibility of increasing hands-on access to collections, requiring conservators to think more carefully about the management of touch as part of preventative conservation (Pye 2007, p.135).

The link between touch and memory is something which has perhaps been explored more than other concepts raised in this chapter (see for example Kavanagh 2000), with many researchers and museum professionals extolling the successes and positive experiences of reminiscence participants. However, of equal importance is exploring the link between object handling and memory in different environments. Rowlands (2007), investigating the effects of older people moving from their own curated domestic homes to care managed environments in North London, argues that the curation of personal space occurs through a memory of touch. By caring for objects, we care for ourselves and others, 'through the faculty of touch' (Rowlands 2007, p.140). Rowlands' research, involving architects, town planners and anthropologists, investigated the needs of older people 'in care'. Eighteen participants, from Harringay, North London, were interviewed about their experiences of moving from their own home into a care environment. Rowlands (2007, p.140) notes the assumption participants would feel a sense of loss of care of their self in the move, was frequently contradicted by their actual responses. Instead, the domestic home became a reminder of 'their growing incapacity to care surrounded as they were by the material legacies of previous abilities to care.' In other instances the new home provided an opportunity for reflecting on a former life through the curation of objects brought with them, whereby objects are imbued with memories of times, places and people. Jacques' (2007) case study considers reminiscence work carried out with older people in local authority care homes in Lincolnshire. Having created resources based on home life, work life, and courtship and marriage, sessions are conducted using a selection of six handling objects with a group of roughly ten participants (Jacques 2007, p.154). The resources are tools for triggering memories and opening up conversations. Jacques notes that through regular evaluation of sessions delivered, evidence demonstrates that objects are powerful for awakening the senses of participants and aids the recall of memories; object handling enabled them to connect with the past in a deeper way (Jacques 2007, p.155). Not only did these sessions have a visible impact, encouraging even those normally silent to participate, but residents gained a

sense of value by imparting their knowledge to the carers, and a sense of confidence through handling familiar objects (Jacques 2007, p.156).

As we explored in chapter one, through time many museums and galleries increasingly focused on visual culture as the means by which objects are displayed, resulting in those with limited vision being excluded from many exhibitions and displays. Despite this early exclusion, blind and visually impaired people have not entirely been left out; one of the first touch exhibitions took place in 1976, using sculptures at the Tate Gallery, London, and smaller opportunities took place in museums across the country, usually by special arrangement (Pye 2007, p.20). Although not the sole driver for increasing access, the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act, 1995, and increasing political pressure, has seen museums improve facilities for people with all sorts of disabilities; including the creation of projects and resources for these excluded groups on a relatively small scale (Cassim 2007, p.163) appointing specialist staff with a remit for promoting access, as well as developing touch exhibitions for more general audiences such as the V&A's *Touch Me* Exhibition in 2005 (Pye 2007, p.20). Museums are beginning to change the way they display collections, with many institutions installing tactile elements into exhibitions. Despite many museums opening up access to collections an obstacle still remains; how to balance preservation and conservation with the requirements of those who experience the world through touch. Once various factors have been considered, in choosing items for handling, Cassim (2007, p.165) notes that 'what is left may represent a fraction of any museum's collection'. Taking this issue of access for visually impaired groups, Khayami (2007, p.183) argues that touch is often considered to be an alternative to sight, and that blind or visually impaired visitors' experiences of artefacts and artworks is only partial, or indeed one could say incomplete, compared to that of a sighted person. The BlindArt projects bring together artists who are both partially and fully sighted to provide 'a multisensory interactive art experience for a diverse audience' (Khayami 2007, p.183). Responses to the inaugural *Sense and Sensuality* exhibition in 2005, demonstrated the power of a tactile experience where touch is usually forbidden. Important to highlight, is the fact that every visitor to the exhibition was invited to touch; not just blind and partially sighted, all visitors were given the same opportunity. Artists and visitors alike commented on how liberating, inspiring and enjoyable it was; one visitor remarked their experience was one of 'overthrowing years of not being allowed to touch art. Quite mind-bending', another stated it was 'a privilege to be trusted by the artist to touch' (Khayami 2007, p.188).

The concept of learning through touch is perhaps one which has previously been investigated in terms of institutionalised education; with school and visually impaired groups generally those for whom provision for handling is made. Often, loans box collections offer a valuable service

for groups unable to visit museums for a variety of reasons, and the Nottingham Loans Collection, resurrected in 2004 following a Renaissance in the Regions report (Resource 2001) and ChildWise report in 2004, is a successful example of such a service. The museum collections are made accessible in three ways: resource boxes for schools; resources boxes for communities; cased collections. Evaluation of these resources demonstrated a difference in the learning and understanding of individuals through handling *real* museum objects. Teachers and pupils commented that through handling, historical enquiry skills were developed and deeper understanding of topics was achieved. Pupils observed that it helped them ‘learn a lot of things while having fun’ and helped to ‘convey the harshness and brutality ... which cannot be conveyed by statistics and pictures’ (Trewinnard-Boyle and Tabassi 2007, p.199). In higher education, the potential for object handling is demonstrated by Lamb’s paper on the Bate Collection of Musical Instruments held by the University of Oxford (Lamb 2007, p.201-14). Philip Bate, who gifted the 300 piece collection to the university in 1970, placed an importance on access for scholars, believing it vital that these scholars be permitted to play the instruments, enabling comparison between historical and modern examples (Lamb 2007, p.201). The growing collection, consisting of 1800 instruments in 2007, is all available to a certain degree and comprises of modern instruments loaned out for performances, modern replicas of historic instruments, historic instruments and other instruments such as folk examples. The level and type of access varies, and the categories, in which the instruments fall, are determined by rarity and conservation issues, with a detailed framework advising which instruments can be borrowed (Lamb 2007, p.202, p.205). Initially instruments are categorised by three criteria: rarity of the instrument; the risk of damage through use; and state of use. Following this, two matrices produced analyse the instruments by considering rarity, risk and condition. From these matrices each instrument is given a score from one to thirteen, which then determines its loan eligibility. Most importantly, Lamb (2007, p.213) notes that despite the difficulties associated with the management and care of a collection of this type ‘the benefits of extended access...should not be underestimated’ and that playing an instrument from the collection is ‘intensely personal and cannot be expressed easily in words or diagrams’.

As Pye states in the preface, the aim of the *Magic Touch* conference and *The Power of Touch* publication was to begin a discussion about tactile access to museum and heritage collections as well as considering or questioning the current emphasis placed on preserving collections for the future and ‘encourage increased acceptance of touch alongside sight as a means of studying and enjoying objects in museums’ (Pye 2007, p.11, pp.26-7). As a result of this pioneering gathering a rich variety of research has been produced, of which I present a selection below.

## Touch and the Value of Object Handling

During a six month period from November 2006 to May 2007, University College London Museums and Collections, held a series of workshops with the aim of investigating and gaining a better understanding of touch and the value of object handling in museums (Chatterjee 2008, p.2). Covering a variety of topics within the field of object handling research, *Touch and the Value of Object Handling* gathered experts from a number of different disciplines bringing with them their research and findings. Within this setting, scientists communicated their knowledge of the psychological and neurological systems of touch in the body, and museum professionals brought with them their observations of touch and object handling in terms of access through loans boxes, interactive displays and technologies. What I believe to be exciting about this series of workshops is the innovative approaches offered by such a wide variety of researchers; as Chatterjee suggests ‘the union of these two groups afforded a unique opportunity to understand the true value of object handling’ (Chatterjee 2008, p.2). In her introduction to the subsequent edited volume Chatterjee highlights the potential museums have in learning, enjoyment, health and social care through a multisensory approach to object handling, but also acknowledges that there is still much research to be carried out in different areas such as therapeutic touch and investigations into conservation and preservation (Chatterjee 2008, p.4-5).

The series addressed concepts and ideas in a variety of research areas including: the history of and what is meant by touch, new technologies for object interpretation, reminiscence and memory, therapeutic approaches, and knowledge transfer in object handling (with a focus on disadvantaged and underrepresented groups). Very much a two way process, researchers presented their work, encouraging delegates, many of whom were from the museum sphere, to think cross-disciplinary rather than being constrained by ‘discipline-centred discourses’, as well as workshop delegates offering their practical experiences of touch within the museum profession (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.275-6). This was particularly useful in relation to the idealistic discussions of touch and object handling, since many participants recounted stories and anecdotes, supporting the argument that people have an emotional experience to objects, rather than simply gaining knowledge from them (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.276).

At the beginning of this research, scientists offered insights into the concept of touch and its importance, suggesting that prohibiting touch produces problems; it is through a tactile engagement that we gain an understanding of the temperature, compliance and weight of an object, to name but a few. Predictive grip is a feature of our innate and unconscious use of touch in our daily lives; through this we make predictions about objects, particularly the weight of things, which aids us in making a prediction about an object we are about to handle. Wing (2006) argues that by sight alone we are restricted in the judgements we make of our collections.

Taking this further, Critchley (2008, p.61) discussing the neuro-scientific nature of touch, explains that the 'skin is a main interface between an individual and the outside world' and that it 'informs and guides close interactions with the immediate environment'. Through touch, which is an exploratory sense, we experience emotions which motivate our behaviour and can reinforce memories (Critchley 2008, p.61). In this setting Critchely (2006) argues that touch can change the emotional response we have to something and therefore it has a part to play in the handling of museum collections paving the way for further discussions on increasing access.

As technology is almost essential to our functioning in the world, a discussion of new technologies for enhancing object interpretation, including haptic and interface technologies, is vital for museums. In his paper addressing the use of haptic interfaces in haptics research, Giachritsis (2008, p.75-76) states that 'touch could be considered as the ultimate sense which allows us to build a complete representation of the world', and that haptic research is 'the discipline of studying how human beings gain information and knowledge about the tactile world through the haptic system'. Doonan and Boyd's project CONTACT attempted to address problems associated with teaching material culture in archaeology and classics by creating both real and virtual networks, of students, experts and objects. Their aim was that through this network students would encounter archaeological material via the mediation of experts in that material, both virtually and in real time allowing them a deeper understanding and experience of archaeological material (Doonan & Boyd 2008, p.107).

Although this and the many other projects discussed at this workshop demonstrated the potential of haptic technologies to create valuable experiences of artefacts, what cannot be denied is the power of the real artefact. Indeed Renaud (in Doonan and Boyd 2008, p.112) comments that a digital artefact lacks a reality that comes from being in the world. Doonan and Boyd (2008, p.112) themselves admit scepticism of how a balance can be achieved between aesthetic representations of an object digitally, and the physical presence of an object that can be picked up and handled. However, David Prytherch (Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, University of Central England), eager to dismiss the hierarchy between *real* and *not real*, focussed instead on the complimentary nature of haptic technology; rather than being a replacement, it can and should work alongside museum collections in a time where the public are increasingly living in a multimedia and technological world (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.278-9). It can be argued that this principle of using alternative representation alongside the real object can be applied to the use of replicas. Whilst a discussion of replicas is not within the scope of this thesis, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge their usefulness within museums. Colleagues at Hampshire Museum Service commented that their experiences of replicas have been valuable in reaching an understanding of artefacts that cannot otherwise be handled, since having a

physical representation of an object, which in reality is in fragmentary form, provides the handler with a means of engaging with collections.

Prytherch argues that museums need to stay relevant by making themselves familiar with the language of haptic technologies (Prytherch cited in Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.278). While there is a potential for haptics, many participants argue it does not offer the same experience as handling, for example, a 3000 year old Roman object, since the handler does not encounter the same emotion or feeling through which they make a connection to the past. Objects which have signs of previous handling often have a way of gaining the interest of people, especially children. The patina on objects, particularly if there are cracks, if it is stained, if there are thumb or fingerprints of the maker evident, displays 'a resonant history' by which a person becomes attached to the owner or inspired by the story of the object (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.284). While these experiences cannot be replicated virtually, haptic technology can provide opportunities for experiences where handling would not be possible. Despite reservations, this is a developing area of research with much potential; haptic technology can create collection catalogues enabling access to textures and patterns of material surfaces, as well as creating virtual collections of objects that would not traditionally be displayed together, in locations that would not normally be conceivable (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.279). Prytherch described the haptic and virtual potential to create a sensory experience out of smaller sensory parts as 'embroider[ing] this wonderful rich reality out of these small bits of stuff' (Prytherch in Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.280).

We have already touched on the concept of reminiscence; however this is a valuable topic for our discussion of object handling, since far from being a primitive sense, being able to answer questions about objects involves a 'complex tactile memory system' (Gallace and Spence 2008, p.163). While a great deal of research has been carried out on the neurological processes of memory, much of this has been in conjunction with vision and audition, with very little concentrated on the study of tactile memory, and indeed this is a research area with much potential (Gallace and Spence 2008, p.163). Object handling and memory are, as ever, a valuable means of accessing collections, and Clarke (2007) suggests that reminiscence does not have to be carried out only with older people, but that it is something we all do since objects spark dialogue and conversation in all of us. In order to explain this to the workshop delegates, Clarke's presentation began by handing out a set of objects for handling, asking for memories from the group. The exercise demonstrated the power of objects not only to get a discussion started, but also showed that handling breaks down barriers – something which is incredibly important for museums today.

Since 2001 the British Museum has offered object handling on supervised handling desks located within the galleries. In addition the British Museum has carried out several reminiscence projects, many using handling collections from the coins and medals department. Phillips (2008, p.199) states that using handling collections as a stimulus for group discussions ‘revealed how valuable objects were for stimulating participants, encouraging their input and enabling access to collections, both intellectually and physically’. The main project discussed, involved a group of older adults from the local community, who, over an eight week period, were encouraged to explore the numismatics collection. As well as noting the positive power of objects through handling sessions, Phillips notes that objects can produce painful memories for participants, and as a result recommends that while reminiscence is a valuable activity, it is important to be sensitive to the group you are working with by advising them beforehand of which objects will be available for handling. The objects, Phillips (2008, p.204) states, ‘promoted learning, creative thought, skills development and greater confidence in participants’ demonstrating the power of reminiscence projects such as this.

The use of objects in therapeutic settings for individuals facing difficult challenges, including use with hospital patients, women facing gynaecological cancer diagnosis, and the elderly in care homes and hospitals, is an increasing area of research (see Ander et al 2012). The development of a nostalgia room at Newham University Hospital, offering a ‘unique and dedicated facility for patients, relatives, carers and clinical staff ... to encourage social interaction, distraction and relaxation away from the pressures of hospital life’ (O’Sullivan 2008, p.224) again demonstrates the power of object handling and reminiscence in therapeutic contexts. O’Sullivan (2008, p.224-5) notes that after several tea-party events in a small room at the hospital, transformed with a 1940s/50s theme, a breakthrough occurred; on one particular occasion a timid and quiet patient recognised the music of Ann Shelton playing in the background, prompting a sing-song session, during which another patient being treated for malnourishment ‘ate two huge pieces of cake followed by two cups of tea, all rounded off with a rendition of the song *Sweet Molly Malone*’. Following this experience the health of both patients improved quickly, resulting in their discharge from hospital. O’Sullivan (2008, p.230) comments, that through the success of the nostalgia room project and similar projects carried out by other institutions there is potential for partnerships between hospitals and heritage.

Under-represented and disadvantaged groups are increasingly being targeted for many projects involving access to museum collections. Samuels (2007), offers a series of projects carried out with three different groups; blind and partially sighted individuals, adults recovering from mental illness, and prisoners from Pentonville Prison. Although these three groups are very different, the common thread running through the projects is the power of touch and object

handling in overcoming hurdles. Samuels suggests, as does Clarke (2007), that handling and touch is essential to access since it breaks down barriers, inspires and excites people, is an essential tool for access and opens up opportunities (Samuels 2007). In addition, the Discrimination Act of 2005 has contributed to the increasing pressure placed on museums to provide services to all audiences, and in response the British Museum has looked for opportunities to carry out projects with disadvantaged, under-represented and socially excluded groups. Important to note is the fact that often in working with minority groups, projects are created for a specific target audience, and the assumption is made that these audiences are the only ones to benefit from the experience (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.280). Contrary to this common supposition, museums also benefit from the experience of working with under-represented groups, since they challenge the museum to think differently and innovatively about their collections.

For blind and partially sighted groups, Samuels (2007) highlights a curatorial led handling programme that was instigated, using a variety of different objects in discussion groups, alongside tactile resources placed throughout the museum's galleries, audio tours, and a series of sculpture touch tours. Visitors taking part in touch tours expressed joy and excitement at being able to handle and feel things they had only ever imagined through descriptions; however their responses to such opportunities highlights the necessity for sighted guides to describe what is being touched in order for a blind or visually impaired visitor to obtain a complete understanding. With regards to authenticity of objects, many participants agree that handling an original object provides the user with a more intimate experience, which is both powerful and emotional. However, one blind user argued that for him handling the 'real thing' is not always a fulfilling experience since handling artefacts which through time have either built up a patina, become fragmentary or indistinct (in the case of architectural stonework for example) are very difficult to 'read', whereas handling replicas can be more 'coherent and emotionally powerful' (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.281).

The second group the British Museum worked with consisted of adults recovering from mental illness. In partnership with St Mungo's Hospital and Barnet Further Education College, the British Museum led monthly curatorial sessions in which object handling was used as inspiration for learning, allowing the group to work towards a project which ultimately raised their confidence and self-esteem, helping them back into society post illness. Samuels (2007) emphasised the need for the project to involve students rather than talking at them; in order to create a sense of excitement and inspiration in participants, it is essential to work with them towards an end project rather than the experience being an isolated event.

The third group consisted of prisoners from Pentonville Prison in London, in an innovative project using two art installation pieces from the Museum collections; *Throne of Weapons* and *Cradle to Grave*. Samuels (2007) notes that both projects carried out with this target audience caused access problems in terms of collections care, however the results again demonstrate the power of objects to break down barriers.

*Throne of Weapons* is a piece of art created by the Mozambican artist Cristóvão Estevão Canhavato (perhaps best known as Kester) in 2001 from decommissioned firearms surrendered as part of the 'Transforming Arms into Tools' project initiated by Bishop Dinis Sengulane in 1995. The Bishop, who had been attending a peace and reconciliation conference in Mozambique at which the issue of the numerous weapons still in circulation in the country was discussed, turned to the prophesy of Isaiah 2:4 that says 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks' (Holden 2005, p.11). This verse was the inspiration for a project that has resulted in the surrender 600,000 weapons, after a lengthy and bitter civil war ended in 1992, in exchange for tools of production, such as sewing machines, ploughs and bicycles (MacGregor 2005, p.5). The throne consists of numerous firearms that were handed in as part of Bishop Sengulane's initiative, although Holden notes that none of the guns in the throne are from Mozambique – they are all relics from North Korea, Poland, Portugal, the old Soviet Union and former Czechoslovakia, some of which date to the Second World War (Holden 2005, p.11). The throne was bought by the British Museum in 2002 and sat in the Sainsbury African gallery alongside numerous African art pieces and artefacts commemorating the exchange of something destructive for something with a constructive and positive value (Samuels 2008, p.255). As part of 'Africa 05' in 2005 (a yearlong programme celebrating African culture) the throne toured the United Kingdom visiting a variety of different sites including schools, government premises, youth conventions, cathedrals, a shopping centre, an African-Caribbean community centre, a pop concert, a prison, ten museums and the Museums Association conference in 2006. MacGregor (2005, p.5) notes that whilst on this tour 'the Throne has accumulated layer upon layer of meaning created by audiences' and that the results demonstrate 'the importance of bringing museum objects to bear upon the lives of everyone, providing a rich store of imagery to be transmuted through the experience of individuals'.

The project at Pentonville prison lasted two weeks, with the Throne being displayed in the prison chapel and introduced to 400 prisoners attending the first Sunday services of the Throne's visit. Holden (2005, p.24) notes that the reaction of the group of men working on the project, all of whom were in prison for various serious offences, 'was rooted in reality not in the abstract' since violence was part of their lives. Many of the prisoners saw the Throne as a

symbol of power and the project explored it as a metaphor for both social and personal change through the prisoners' creativity, which Holden describes as being 'abundantly clear' despite the mental confinement of prison life (Holden 2005, p.24). Indeed Samuels (2008, p.255) comments that many of the prisoners who took part in the project would spend up to twenty-three hours in their cells, and that their approach to handling objects, the opportunity to express their thoughts and experiment with creative mediums 'was embraced with unreserved enthusiasm'. Through their creativity the prisoners, working along-side two practicing artists, an African collections curator and the museum's access manager, created a DVD sharing their personal stories alongside clips of gun crime in Hollywood (Samuels 2008, p.255). The project explored issues associated with personal change and transformation which lead to one prisoner commenting that 'the most powerful thing you can do is pick up a book and not a gun' (Holden 2005, p.26).

*Cradle to Grave* is an installation piece conceived and created in 2003 by 'Pharmacopeia'; a partnership of three individuals – textile artist Susie Freeman, film maker David Critchley and GP Liz Lee. An exploration of our approach to health in Britain today, it consists of a lifetime's supply of prescription drugs from the medical records of eight individuals - four men and four women – sewn into lengths of net laid in a case alongside photographs and objects marking typical events in a person's life (British Museum 2006, 2007). It is a poignant art piece in the way it traces the imaginary lives of a man who dies suddenly at 75, and a woman who at 82 is still alive, a length of fabric rolled up at the end of the display case ready for more pills to be added. The Pentonville project saw a smaller version created, telling the story of Mr A N Other's health and wellbeing over a period of twenty-eight years. Measuring 5m by 130cm, photographs and objects sit alongside 3120 pills taken by Mr Other for pain, acne, infection, malaria, asthma, impotency, depression and HIV (Samuels 2008, p.257). The selection of drugs and the abrupt end of the young man's story at twenty seven (we are left wondering whether this was due to the HIV developing into AIDS and therefore his premature death) helped break down barriers, and produce lively debate and discussion among the fourteen prisoners taking part in the project. Many prisoners associated with the installation through particular drugs on display, prompting discussions of their life experiences which were both 'unremarkable' and 'so heart-wrenching that it was unsurprising their lives had led them to prison' (Samuels 2008, p.258). Samuels notes that through creative performances the prisoners found an outlet for their talents, with many men retreating to their cells after one workshop and penning emotive poems before the next one the following day (Samuels 2008, p.258).

For both projects at Pentonville, touch and object handling was at the centre, consisting of three forms: firstly interaction with the installation piece *Throne of Weapons* and *Cradle to Grave*;

secondly handling artefacts from museum collections; thirdly using digital cameras, art equipment and computers to create a project outcome. Samuels argues that not only were these three elements of handling vital in keeping the prisoners' interest and involvement, but entrusting prisoners with objects and equipment of value produced a sense of respect (Samuels 2008, p.259). It enabled barriers between prisoners and staff to be broken down, increased morale and encouraged the development of trust. Jenny Thomas from the Learning and Skills Department at Pentonville, surprised by the prisoners' attendance and commitment to the project commented that 'any personal differences or problems were put aside in pursuit of their common goal' (Thomas in Samuels 2008, p.259) demonstrating the power a tactile engagement with objects have in creating community. The men taking part in both projects were seen to thrive and prosper, with enthusiastic participants telling the project team that it was a 'life changing experience' and the first time feeling 'like a human being' (Samuels 2008, p.259).

One participant at the final *Touch and the Value of Object Handling* workshop recalled an anecdote involving a mother and child in the gardens of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. The two visitors were exploring the gardens before entering the museum building, smelling and touching the flowers, when the mother told her child 'it's wonderful to be able to touch all this, make the most of it now, before we go inside' (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.275). The anecdote clearly demonstrates one of the many hurdles museum practitioners are required to overcome – touch hierarchies; the assumption by museum visitors that the museum space is one where touch is only permitted for certain individuals. Indeed, we have seen in chapter two, how the concept of the museum has undergone a shift from touch to do not touch, resulting in this assumption on the part of the visitor. Despite this perceived hierarchy, it is clear that emotional connections are made between people and objects, often resulting in 'an experience of intimacy that would likely be denied were the object placed behind glass out of reach', cementing the theoretical perception that touch is a valuable form of engagement (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.276). It is important, however, to highlight that the idea of touch eliciting emotions does not necessarily infer positive emotions; people experience wonder at one end and repulsion at the other. This leads to further discussions as to whether the intimacy experienced is a response to being entrusted with an object by an authority figure or with the object itself. In essence is the handler making a connection with the museum professional or the object? Arguably in the construction of a display or exhibition the museum decides how a visitor will view an object, whereas when an object is handled by the visitor directly, they have a say in how it is viewed and interpreted. In order for museums to be more accessible, this needs to be overcome.

In addition to the fields of research discussed above, the workshops drew attention to the increasing pressure placed on museums to measure outcomes from public engagement, and

how these measures inform the impact of object handling. Rather than adhering to traditional means of measuring the success of an object handling session (i.e. number of visitors) participants argued that objects ‘should be put into play to see what happens’ (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.282). It was noted that often, reactions to object handling may not be as expected or even hoped for; visitors may have been disturbed by an object but curious at the same time. Should we be concerned with predicting the reaction or response, or should we simply accept that people will have an individual response to an experience of touch? While many argued no, the issue remains that in terms of funding, museums will always be required to measure outcomes in order to secure money for future projects. Therefore the discussion moves toward how one can assess a visitor’s experience in an ethical and non-restrictive way. Many raised concerns about using the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) and Generic Social Outcomes (GSOs) as put forward by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council in the *Inspiring Learning for All* initiative (see chapter five). These apprehensions concentrated on the fact that very rarely during any daily activity is a person interrogated about their experience in terms of whether they liked it, if they got something from it, if it met their expectations and if they learned anything (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.283).

The importance of *Touch and the Value of Object Handling* is that it created a place for collaboration between a variety of researchers both within and outside the museum profession, and a chance to explore the dichotomy between a theoretical and concrete experience of object handling.

### Object Based Learning in Higher Education

As much research into object handling in education focusses on school age children, UCL offered a one day conference entitled *Object Based Learning in Higher Education* in order to highlight the potential of using museum collections with colleges and universities. Attended by seventy individuals from a variety of locations and backgrounds, including not only staff and students from UCL, but from a range of other higher education establishments and museums across the country, the conference explored the potential use of collections within higher education, considering object based teaching activities currently in practice and the way Object Based Learning (OBL) can enhance cross-disciplinary teaching and strengthen transferable skills (UCL 2009).

Dr Joe Cain (UCL Science and Technology Studies) boldly states that ‘teaching through objects is hard work. You need to understand the user’s need; see it from the user’s point of view’ (Cain 2009, 2010, p.197). While this may appear to be an obvious, common sense statement, it can often be overlooked when considering object handling. Many in the profession consider the

object before the user's need, and although this is important, Cain highlights it as an important aspect of object handling, since museum professionals often, in attempting to champion access to a collection, forget that access is essentially pointless unless considering how the objects are to be used and by whom. There are numerous barriers in OBL; however Cain suggests various ways in which museums can overcome these barriers in order to offer collections for use in higher education (HE). These barriers include: *competition* between different resources on offer to HE tutors; considering the *logistics of OBL*; the *relationship between objects and teaching styles*; *flexibility of museums, their staff and their collections*; *embedding OBL in tutor training*; and *engaging with users*. It is important to discuss this, as understanding these barriers allows us to consider how we can make collections accessible at a time of increased pressure to do so.

Where there is much *competition* in resources offered to HE tutors planning lectures, seminars or classes, museum collections are often perceived as a luxurious choice. In order for collections to be appealing, users must be made aware that objects will illustrate their desired message in a way no other resource can, as well as offering a system that allows for impulse (Cain 2010, p.197). Many HE tutors organise 80 to 100 lectures each academic year, meaning they cannot devote much time to preparing one single lecture; therefore decisions about using objects in lectures and seminars revolves around accessibility, simplicity and accommodation; for this to be successful museum practitioners should be knowledgeable of the content of their collections and able to connect users with the appropriate object (Cain 2010, p.198).

*The logistics of OBL* need to be considered in order for the process of using objects in HE to be a smooth and accessible one (Cain 2010, p. 198). Cain offers eleven main logistics that affect the way in which OBL is successful in a higher education environment:

- Setting – can the objects be delivered to the lecture theatre?
- Timing – can the activity be set up, explained, done, packed down, discussed, interpreted and contextualised in the lecture slot?
- Access – all students need time with the objects during the session
- Intellectual groundwork – what background knowledge do the students need, and does the lecturer need to do this preparation with them?
- People management – what will the other students do when not handling?
- Settling in – since experts handle very differently to beginners, how much briefing time will be required so that students will not be too distracted from the purpose of the session?
- Trust – as class time is valuable, OBL must be relevant to the course objectives, the class need to trust the lecturer that this is the case with OBL.
- Recording – what method of recording this experience needs to be employed?

- Shut off – once the session is complete the class needs to move on; therefore OBL needs to be easy to pack away.
- Follow up and back up – how can these objects be available for students that want more, or who were not present during the session?
- Co-ordination with other courses – will OBL be useful for students across their degree? Can different courses link up through OBL to avoid *doubling up*?

Tutors looking to use objects in their classes will invariably not be used to OBL and will not necessarily have the confidence to use objects, therefore museum professionals need to make themselves available to help with this (Cain 2009, 2010, p.198, p.200-01).

Of importance is acknowledging the *relationship between objects and teaching styles*. Learners have a variety of different learning styles (see chapter four); the advantage of object based learning is that it can meet the needs of this variety. However, many HE lecturers may not be familiar with adopting a different style of teaching in order to meet these needs. For many, the change from lecturer to facilitator can be a radical and stressful one (Cain 2010, p.198). Cain emphasises that OBL is a pair of ideas consisting of objects and teaching styles. It is important to remind lecturers that OBL can be helpful for students in a variety of ways: OBL breaks with routine, objects can speak for themselves making it easier to teach, object handling is a memorable experience, no previous knowledge or intelligence is required, objects can be used outside class time, and finally it promotes enjoyment as well as learning (Cain 2009).

One of the main obstacles which can put educators off using objects within their lectures, practical sessions and classes is the *flexibility of museums, their staff and their collections*. Being flexible with what can be made available within particular time constraints is very attractive to a potential user (Cain 2009). By offering suggestions about how to use objects alongside exhibitions and events which students can incorporate into their schedule, OBL becomes a realistic option to a lecturer having to deliver a session with no knowledge of what is available to him/her.

If tutors do not know what is on offer to them in terms of collections and individual objects, they also may not be aware of ways in which objects can be used in higher education, therefore *embedding OBL in tutor training* increases the confidence of tutors in using objects (Cain 2009, 2010, p.199). However it is not just important to train tutors in using objects, it is also useful to offer them case studies from other users, which can be done by *engaging with users*. Cain identifies a lack of communication between the provider and the user as a hurdle toward successful OBL. If there is no discourse between the two, then problems experienced by either party will not be

brought to light and cannot be resolved. It is not only about the objects themselves, but how they are being used that needs consideration.

In overcoming these barriers we must first consider that it is not simply a case of advertising collections, it is important to be proactive about getting collections used in higher education in an accessible way. Secondly, we must focus on the needs of the user, understanding the barriers tutors may see, and making ourselves flexible. Thirdly, barriers are not just linked to the objects but learning styles and training, and finally users should be supported throughout the experience (Cain 2009, 2010, p.199).

Sparks (2010, p.191) writes that in archaeology education, object based learning has been a core element for some time and more recently seen as fundamental to how it should be taught. Despite acknowledging the power of object handling in tertiary education, and particularly in archaeology, most lecturers have little in the way of guidance for successful teaching strategies using objects, resulting in many developing their own individual styles through trial and error (Sparks 2010, p.191). Sparks proposes a three pronged strategy to aid staff wishing to use OBL in the classroom. Firstly, as one would expect, preparation is key to achieving successful OBL, not simply in terms of the resources to be used, but in ensuring object handling is seen as integral to the course rather than extra-curricular and therefore less important. Echoing Cain's earlier assertions, Sparks (2012, p.191) notes that handling sessions should be relevant to the course, which means sourcing suitable material for the class, either from personal handling collections, objects borrowed from colleagues, or from museum collections. Additionally it is important to gather supporting equipment for use with the objects to ensure a safe handling environment as well as a constructive session.

Secondly the successful implementation of a handling session depends on good delivery; therefore staff will need to employ good teaching strategies to ensure this takes place, of which Sparks suggests object demonstrations and activity workstations to be most effective (2010, p.193-4). Object demonstrations, most similar to lecturing, entails the lecturer explaining each object before passing it round the group; a successful strategy for those with a set of material to be covered in the session, but perhaps not so in that it does not allow for student exploration and interpretation of the objects. An alternate, and perhaps better, option would be that of activity workstations, which involves students exploring artefacts for themselves through a set task, usually in small peer led groups (Sparks 2010, p.193-4).

The final stage of the strategy is to consolidate OBL through a formalised assessment which can be done in number of ways, ranging from essays to reflexive logs. This allows students to see

OBL in the wider context, and embeds the learning which has taken place, demonstrating to students that ‘their participation will have a tangible outcome’ (Sparks 2010, p.194). Sparks acknowledges that while this may seem to involve a large investment of time on the part of the facilitator, ‘the rewards can be considerable. As students become more engaged with their own learning the quality of their work should improve, while classes should become easier to run and more enjoyable to teach’ (Sparks 2010, p.194).

An example of OBL in practise in higher education can be seen in the UCL Key Skills/OBL project, whereby an object based session was used to develop key/transferrable skills in university education. Based on the idea that students require, for example listening, interpersonal, communication and teamwork skills in their academic life, many universities run systems prompting students to complete self-assessments to determine which skills need developing. UCL Students suggested that a workshop would be a better way of helping them to reflect on this, resulting in the UCL Key Skills/OBL project which aimed to demonstrate to students the way key/transferable skills are used in an activity (Marie 2010, p.188). The project developed two loans boxes with five activities for students to complete: mystery object handling prompting investigative and enquiry skills; describing and drawing objects developing communication skills; contentious issues asking groups to debate an issue related to a set of objects again promoting communication skills; creating a questionnaire which developed planning and organisation skills; and writing and drawing a story improving skills of processing and analysing information. Of those who took part in the pilot scheme, the consensus was that this was a good way of developing transferable skills, since the activities were fun and enjoyable as well as a useful means of demonstrating what the different key skills are (Marie 2010, p.189). Using objects in this context demonstrates their cross disciplinary nature, providing HE providers and their students with a rewarding and engaging experience.

## Heritage, Health and Well-being

There is a wealth of evidence to demonstrate the power of object handling in promoting and reinforcing learning; however a growing field is now emerging, focussing on the health and well-being benefits of tactile engagement with museum collections. Well-being is becoming increasingly important in government agenda, and heritage has an important role to play in this (Chatterjee 2011). Here we explore the origins of this and how object handling offers opportunities for addressing the increased importance placed on the health and wellbeing of society.

### Five Ways to Wellbeing

One of the main difficulties researchers have needed to address is the meaning of *well-being*; much confusion surrounds a term which can be seen as both objective and subjective, individual or social, relative or absolute (Ander et al 2011, p.243). The New Economic Foundation (NEF) defines well-being as being ‘the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going through their circumstances, activities and psychological resources or *mental capital*’ (NEF 2009, p.3) and in 2008, embarked on a UK government commissioned project to identify a set of actions to improve wellbeing that could be incorporated into the everyday lives of the population. Known as the *Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project* it aimed ‘to analyse the most important drivers of mental capital and well-being to develop a long term vision for maximising mental capital and well-being in the UK for the benefits of society and the individual’ (Aked et al 2008, p.1). Of importance was the necessity that the set of actions be evidence-based, however researchers acknowledged a lack of epidemiological evidence available which examines and measures determinants of wellbeing, and the literature available does not analyse wellbeing as a longitudinal study (Aked et al 2008, p.3). Through their research, nef highlighted a need for variety in the set of actions for wellbeing, and from research into positive psychology, noted that sustainable actions need to overcome a number of obstacles (for example a tendency toward hedonic adaptation, stagnancy through repetition, and a sense of duty) in order for them to be achievable by the public. As a result the *five ways to wellbeing* are distinct in order that ‘people can try different approaches to promoting their wellbeing without feeling that their efforts are stagnating’ (Aked et al 2008, p.4). As with the development in understanding that people learn in different ways (see chapter four), the range of approaches will suit different people, since ‘with the UK population as the target audience, variety is one approach to capturing the interest of a diverse population and engaging with as many people as possible’ (Aked et al 2008, p.4). The original list of actions created was extensive, but could be grouped into five key areas; social relationships, physical activity, awareness, learning and giving. These five areas were then developed into key actions; Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give.

#### *Connect...*

Evidence from the *Foresight Challenge Reports* suggest that social relationships are crucial for providing protection against poor mental health; although difficult to determine the cause, evidence shows individuals with good social networks of family and friends are more likely to be happy (Aked et al 2008, p.6). Therefore the first key action, *Connect...* urges us to connect with the people in our lives, investing time in developing these connections as they provide support, encouragement, meaning and self-worth.

*Be Active...*

Similar to research into social relationships, the link between physical activity and mental wellbeing is not yet fully understood. Many studies demonstrate the physiological benefits of being physically active, however a growing body of evidence reveals that physical activity can protect against cognitive decline later in life and the symptoms of depression and anxiety (Aked et al 2008, p.7, Kirkwood et al 2008, p.20-21). Being physically active can increase perceptions of self-worth, a sense of skill, an ability to cope, detracting from negative thoughts, as well as providing opportunity for developing social relationships (Aked et al 2008, p.7). Therefore, the action *Be Active...*, in all its forms, suggests finding a physical activity you enjoy, suiting your level of mobility and fitness.

*Take Notice...*

Research demonstrates that being trained to be aware of thoughts, sensations and feelings for eight to twelve weeks enhances wellbeing for several years (Huppert 2008 cited in Aked et al 2008, p.8). This state of mindfulness creates a positive mental state, heightened self-knowledge and self-regulated behaviour, which are 'valuable in choosing behaviours that are consistent with one's needs, values and interests' (Ryan, R.M. & Deci E.L., 2000 cited in Aked et al 2008, p.8). Aked et al (2008, p.8) argue that behavioural changes which are long lasting are only achievable if the individual has a sense of ownership; by taking notice of the world around them, people increase their self-awareness which itself enhances the process of behavioural change and therefore wellbeing.

*Keep Learning...*

It is an already established fact that learning, particularly for children, plays a key role in the development of social and cognitive skills. Taking this further into adulthood, continual learning and development increases self-esteem, encourages social interactions and an active life and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that older people who take part in educational activities see a reduction in depression (Kirkwood et al cited in Aked 2008, p.9). Additionally, setting oneself a goal, particularly related to adult learning, is linked with high levels of wellbeing as this creates a sense of satisfaction, progress and attainment; essentially a sense of achievement. Aked et al (2008, p.10) are keen to highlight this applies to both formal and informal learning activities which do not necessarily have a goal in terms of career progression, for example, but simply for the pleasure of learning.

*Give...*

For the action *Give...* the emphasis is not on monetary giving, but on giving of oneself. Much of our behaviour can be attributed to our concept of rewards and punishment (Kirkwood cited

in Aked et al 2008, p.10). Social co-operation, it appears, is rewarding, and therefore when someone is able to gain a sense of purpose in society and contribute to their community their wellbeing is enhanced. This is particularly evident in volunteers who give their time and energy freely for the benefit of an organisation, charity or group. Research has demonstrated that actively giving of oneself creates meaning in life (Greenfield et al 2004 cited in Aked et al 2008, p.10) and reduces mortality rates (Huppert cited in Aked et al 2008, p.10).

Aked et al (2008, p.11) state that it is ‘important to highlight the connection between an individual’s wellbeing and the wellbeing of the wider community’. Inward-looking actions are less likely to promote wellbeing in the same way as actions that look outwards to the wider community. Therefore much of what is suggested is focussed on rewards for those being helped through the individual giving of themselves, as well as a sense of reward and connection for the individual doing the giving.

### **The Happy Museum**

Inspired by the nef *Five Ways to Wellbeing* discussed above, The Museum of East Anglian Life (MEAL) redefined the purpose of their site as a social enterprise as they ‘felt its strength lay not just in its collections or historic buildings but the social networks built between visitors, volunteers and people who work there.’ (Tony Butler in Thompson & Aked 2011, p.2). As a result MEAL asked nef to write a paper to begin a conversation on how the UK museum sector can influence people to lead ‘meaningful and happy lives’ (Tony Butler in Thompson & Aked 2011, p.2). The report entitled *The Happy Museum: A tale of how it could turn out all right* sets out the potential for museums to be places providing a conduit for mental wellbeing as well as thinking forward into a more sustainable future.

The report argues that museums are well placed to have an impact on the wellbeing of the population. For a number of reasons including the impact of the recession on the desire for free leisure services, we have seen an increase in adults in England visiting a museum from 42% in 2005 to 47% in 2009 (DCMS 2010). Across the country exists a network of around 2,500 museums ranging from small community run co-operatives, to larger international institutions like the British Museum (Thompson & Aked 2010, p.4). The report outlined characteristics of museums that make them an ideal setting for ushering in a happier and more sustainable society. Museums can be a place for healing through object handling workshops, keepers of collective memory through their collections, and a channel for raising difficult and challenging issues through trust and value placed in them by society (Thompson & Aked 2010, p.5).

Alongside these positive and strong potentialities, Museums also have weaknesses; their perceived neutrality means that raising those difficult and challenging issues is a risk in terms of losing their reputation and therefore there is hesitancy, and often an unwillingness, to take those risks, the result being exhibitions with the potential to shake up traditional thoughts and interpretations becoming rather one dimensional. Thompson and Aked (2010, p.5) argue that an ‘over emphasis on the collection as the starting point, and an unduly limited sense of social purpose, can lead to museums missing opportunities’. Traditionally museums see themselves as didactic; the knowledgeable expert educating the ignorant masses, and as a result of years of practice, museums have developed a number of engaging ways of passing this knowledge on. Interestingly Thompson and Aked (2010, p.5) note that this pursuit of educating the hard to reach audiences has been detrimental to the mainstream visitor. With such emphasis placed on creating space and resources to pull in the reluctant visitor, the general museum going public do not receive the same opportunities. They argue this mistaken focus means opportunities for dialogue between visitors and the museum are being missed, which could ultimately lead towards ‘lasting change in both visitor and the museum itself’ (Thompson & Aked 2010, p.5). This two way dialogue, if done with all visitors demonstrates to the public that their words have value and impacts on their self-worth showing they matter in the world.

Perhaps the most debilitating weakness comes from the measures of success imposed on museums by funding bodies. In order for museums to survive in the current climate, they are increasingly reliant on funding whether from government initiatives such as Renaissance in the Regions, or private sponsorship, and therefore are required to prove that this monetary investment is producing the right kind of success. Museums are judged against very short-term targets such as visitor figures and demographics rather than what matters most; providing their audience with ‘experiences ... that are enjoyable, educational and can lead to transformative change’ (Thompson & Aked 2010, p.6).

The report demonstrated that the unique quality of museums offers opportunities to make people happier through the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. The social spaces offered by museums, for example the large atrium at the British Museum, provide visitors with a place within which to *connect* with friends, families and strangers from different generations, cultures and communities, which can enhance wellbeing by ‘breaking down prejudices against other groups which may lead to conflict or social damage’ (Thompson & Aked 2010, p.7). Museums can also encourage their visitors to *take notice* of the world around them through multi-sensory exhibitions and displays, experiencing the aesthetic qualities of the material displayed in the museum which in turn are not only enjoyable but help to improve psychological wellbeing. Additionally, through volunteer opportunities, visitors are able to *give* back and achieve a sense of wellbeing through a

relationship between visitor and museum, where the visitor's knowledge and interpretation is valued in the same way as the museum expert. People who are encouraged to participate are often more motivated to involve themselves in the life of their local community, benefiting society as well as the individual (Thompson & Aked 2010, p.7). Museums have a unique opportunity to pave the way towards a society where mental wellbeing is considered as well as the body and where the health of society is not based on the individual but on the wider public as a whole, and physically engaging with our collections is the cornerstone of this opportunity.

### **Heritage and Health**

Perhaps one of the more inspiring and innovative areas of research is *Heritage in Hospitals*, a partnership between UCL Museums & Collections, Oxford University Museums, the British Museum and Reading Museum, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Aimed at answering questions about handling in terms of the effects on wellbeing and recovery, whether patients in healthcare environments are an appropriate audience for museums, and if the impact of handling on patient wellbeing can be measured, the project initially began as a pilot project for the Special Study Module (SSM) undertaken by medical students at UCL in the winter and spring terms of 2006-7. During this early stage, SSM students investigated the 'therapeutic or enrichment potential of taking museum loan boxes to patient bedsides' (Chatterjee 2009, p.39). SSMs, a compulsory part of a medical student's training and degree, give first and second year undergraduates an opportunity to carry out a research project from biomedical sciences. Chatterjee (2009, p.39) states that UCL Museums and Collections created and developed this research opportunity as a means of involving 'museum objects in teaching and research in an innovative way to demonstrate the unique, interdisciplinary, role collections can play in university life'. As well as raising the profile of UCL's collections, the project gave medical students an opportunity to develop essential skills such as patient communication, methods of assessing wellbeing and research techniques. In addition, the project provided University College Hospital patients with a new and interesting activity, making UCL's collections accessible to an audience that would previously have been excluded.

This research has been developed further through an eighteen month project carried out between 2009 and 2011, investigating the effects of object handling on patients' wellbeing in UCL Hospitals, including patients' families, staff members as well as the patients themselves. Using both quantitative and qualitative research tools, the project researchers hoped to produce evidence to support the claim that object handling increases wellbeing as well as demonstrating how wellbeing, engagement and handling are connected, and producing a set of outcomes that can be used and developed by healthcare sectors and the museum sector in the future (UCL 2011, Ander et al 2012). Arts in health projects have already demonstrated positive results

including a reduction in stress, anxiety and depression in patients, lowering blood pressure, reducing the need for medication, a reduction in the intensity of pain and a decrease in in-patient stay in hospitals (Chatterjee 2009, p.39, see also Staricoff 2004). The Heritage in Hospitals project sought to demonstrate how heritage and in particular object handling could produce similar outcomes, arguing that ‘improving the quality of the hospital environment and enriching patient’s lives whilst in hospital can have a positive effect for patients and staff’ (Chaterjee 2009, p.39).

Using objects from across UCL’s three museums and extensive collections, a series of boxes were produced which were taken to the patients’ bedside. Each box contained six objects, including artworks, archaeological artefacts, geology samples, and natural history specimens (UCL 2011). Prior to handling, participants were asked to assess their wellbeing and happiness using visual analogue scales (VAS) and Positive Affect Negative Affect Scales (PANAS). For PANAS, participants rated ten positive and ten negative mood adjectives on a 1 to 5 Likert-type scale (1 being not at all and 5 being extremely) and for VAS, participants rated their health as well to unwell and happiness as happy to unhappy on a scale of 0 to 100 – 0 being the worst imaginable health state and extremely dissatisfied with life and 100 being the best imaginable health state and extremely satisfied with life. Once self-assessment was completed, and hands washed, participants were invited to pick up each item from the handling box in turn, explaining their choice for the order chosen. Patients were then asked open questions, allowing for personal interpretations as well as exploring the sensory nature and factual features of the objects (UCL 2009, Thomson 2011, UCL 2011). After the session ended, participants were invited to once again assess their wellbeing and happiness using the same scales as prior to handling the objects.

The first stage of the project (2006-7), in which 21 patients at University College Hospital were interviewed, demonstrated an overall improvement in patients’ perception of their health and wellbeing. Analysis of pre- and post-session VAS scores revealed 57% of patients showed a difference in wellbeing before and after the handling sessions compared to 43% showing no difference. In terms of health 38% of patients stated they felt a difference in health before and after their handling session with 62% stating no difference (Chatterjee 2009, p.41). In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative information reveals the experience of object handling had been positive in providing a distraction from life on the ward, as well as impacting relationships between staff and patients (Chatterjee 2009, p. 41). Results from research carried out between 2009 and 2011, which involved 250 consenting patients across a range of healthcare environments; reveal a similar outcome to that of the 2006-7 research. Happiness and wellbeing improved post session; there was a significant increase in post-session positive PANAS scores

along with a significant decrease in post-session negative PANAS scores (Chatterjee 2011, Thomson 2011). In addition to the clear quantitative outcomes, qualitative findings show a deeper emotional wellbeing through handling museum objects; patients gained new perspectives and inspiration, a sense of identity and worth, energy and enthusiasm, and a valuable social experience (Chatterjee 2011, Ander et al 2012). The project highlights new ways in which collections can not only engage with hard to reach audiences, but demonstrates ‘the transitional and transformational role heritage could play in healthcare and wellbeing’ (Chatterjee, Vreeland & Noble 2009, p.175).

Health and well-being in conjunction with heritage is not only limited to working with hospitalised patients; tactile engagement with objects can be used in a number of different contexts as both Laura Bedford, Education Officer Access and Public Programmes at the Geffrye Museum, and Elanor Cowland, Keeper of Community history at St Albans Museum reveal. Both use objects during reminiscence sessions with a variety of different individuals suffering from a range of different mental health issues (including dementia and Alzheimer’s) and those recovering from a stroke. While the projects have been immensely successful they have highlighted a number of difficulties museums are required to overcome in order to realise the potential of using museum collections with audiences who are often hard to reach (Bedford 2011, Cowland 2011). As with reminiscence sessions carried out with the elderly, using objects with individuals with mental health issues requires sensitivity, since memories surfacing may not always be happy. Cowland (2011) highlights the importance of not ‘digging for memories’ but using a selection of artefacts from both within and outside participants’ living memory to generate discussion with others in the group, bringing together not only the participants, but staff from the care centre and museum. This makes for an enriched and worthwhile activity which can be enjoyed by all. It is not simply a one way process whereby museum staff provide participants with information about objects, but one where dialogue takes place and layers of information are added to collections, creating a rich and interesting history about the people involved as well as making them feel a valued part of the experience (Bedford 2011).

### **Psychological benefits of touch**

As a species, humans have been collecting and engaging with material culture for thousands of years and it is clear that this engagement has significance in our development (Camic 2010, p.81, Camic 2008, p.288). Objects are incredibly important as they are intrinsically motivating, acting as a starting point for social interaction; they stimulate curiosity and interest, invite discussion and reflection, arouse memories, and encourage the sharing of personal stories (Piscitelli and Weier 2002, p. 128). Social scientists have, for many years, attempted to theorise this significance in terms of the relationships between people and objects, but it is only more

recently that psychologists have begun to investigate this relationship revealing the importance of material objects on human development which is very relevant to the work presented in this thesis.

Camic's (2010, p.81-92) *Found Object Project* provides a fascinating insight into the way in which we interact with objects, particularly in terms of aesthetic, cognitive, emotive, mnemonic, ecological and creative factors in the process of seeking, discovering and using found objects. In this research the concept of value is discussed since on discovery of an object Camic (2010, p.82-3) argues that a 'junk object becomes transformed into the valued found object'; in addition on removal from its found location and placement in a new context the value increases further becoming a 'valued aesthetic object'. This journey from junk to aesthetic object involves psychological mechanisms including motivation, cognitive arousal and emotion, which sees the finder uncovering significance in and creating new reality for the found object. Whilst the concept *found objects* has its origins in the art world (and perhaps most widely associated with the artist Duchamp, who is known for his piece *The Fountain*, a white urinal removed from its original context and displayed in the artist's studio), it is relevant to our discussion of museum collections, as the material culture collected has been removed from its found context and displayed in an entirely new one, obtaining a new, higher value, as part of a museum collection, with which museum visitors engage and interact.

Integral to this interaction with an object is the concept that objects play a role in self-development in that they enable the 'differentiation of the self from others and the integration of the self with others' (Gentry, Baker and Kraft 1995). In addition to this, Schiffer (1999) argues that we live in a world of objects with which we engage through direct, indirect and fantasised contact, impacting our human development as much as our social relationships with other people. Objects impact the way in which we engage on different levels which Schiffer (1999, p. 23-5) suggests relates to three categories of objects around us; platial, personal and situational. Our interactions with these different types of objects influence our performance because they act as signifiers for communication.

A person-object relationship not only impacts the way in which we perform and communicate, but is a conscious and unconscious process of symbolic discovery (particularly in terms found objects). Cross-cultural studies (see for example Wallendorf and Arnould 1988, Mehta and Belk 1991) investigating how people form attachments with objects, have demonstrated that physical attributes and monetary value are not necessarily what means most, instead a person-object relationship stems from the decomodification of an object to something which enables memories and associations. As a result 'objects take on important symbolic significance and are therefore more psychologically valued' (Camic 2010, p.84). In addition these studies have shown that the psychological importance of symbolic objects contributes to creating social links;

instead of objects replacing social attachments, they work alongside them, and in many instances it was found that where people had a strong attachment to objects they also had positive attachments to others (Camic 2010, p.84). These connections are not necessarily on a small scale, indeed studies (see for example Friedman, Vanden Abeele, and DeVos 1993) have shown that a psychological sense of community can be seen not only in the geographical location of individuals, but in a ‘commonality of consumer consumption behaviour shared with others, which helped form and support a sense of identity’ (Camic 2010, p.84). In this sense a shared investment in objects helps create a sense of community identity.

Multiple activities can be constructed around a given object resulting in multiple meanings (Rowe 2002, p.29) but meaning making is distributed in another way; we rely on cultural tools in order to solve problems and reach shared knowledge. These cultural tools – such as language, word processors, calculators etc. – can also include museum exhibitions and the collections they display. The way in which we engage with objects can be understood in a similar way to which texts are read. In the process of reading, an individual will link their own knowledge or personal experiences to the ideas presented, meaning that not only does a person actively read a text, but they make sense of it ‘by bringing information to the text’ in the form of ‘personal knowledge gained from one’s life and one’s direct and indirect experiences in the world’ (Van Kraayenoord and Paris 2002, p.218). Understanding objects as texts is not necessarily a new concept; indeed anthropologists, psychologists and museum professionals have acknowledged the similarity between collections of objects to that of collections of texts in a library, meaning objects are available to be browsed, read, understood and interpreted by visitors (Van Kraayenoord and Paris 2002, p.223). What is important to note is that the meaning constructed about objects is not as simple one, rather it is very complex; the purpose behind the object’s construction, its selection for display, the context in which it is displayed, the way the visitor interprets it, and the discourse resulting from engaging with it all contribute to the creating of meaning.

Much research has been carried out to understand the role of material possessions in the creation of identity, which contributes to an understanding of the way individuals engage with material culture generally. Gentry, Baker and Kraft (1995, p.413-18) suggest that at the different stages of our life course – which they term youth, mainstream and elderly – objects are used ‘to enhance or maintain a positive identity over time’ and that the meaning of objects differs depending at which point in their life an individual finds themselves. The young appear to associate and be more interested in possessions (objects) which, for them, represent the potential power and privileges which they see adults as holding, whereas mainstream (adults) use objects to show who they are and their abilities/roles, with the elderly focussing on objects as a source of comfort, in addition to acting as memorials for a life lived.

Beyond a functional purpose, it is clear that objects have a symbolic meaning which ‘imbues them with a value far in excess of what might be assessed from a utilitarian perspective’ (Gentry, Baker & Kraft 1995, p.418). In terms of museum collections, acknowledging that objects have symbolic meanings which can vary between individuals and their different life stages opens up a world of opportunity for interpretation. Object handling allows that physical connection with which those symbolic meanings are stimulated, providing museums with a starting point for fascinating engagement with the public. Indeed psychologists are beginning to suggest that since the arts have been ‘an essential part of the cultural and social evolution of human beings’, understanding our emotional development will aid our understanding of how the arts ‘stimulate psychological mechanisms’ and how this could contribute to enhancing our health (Camic 2008, p289).

An excellent example of this can be seen in the use of object as a therapeutic tool with women facing gynaecological cancer (Lanceley et al 2011, p. 809-20, Thomson et al 2012, p.731-740). During this project ten women took part in handling sessions using objects from UCL Museums and Collections including natural history specimens, archaeological artefacts and art works, whereby they were invited to choose one object which would be the focus of the session in which a nurse would enable them to reflect on the reasons for their choice through non-directive questioning. Researchers found that during handling sessions the women were able to express their feelings both to themselves and others through the objects handled, which ‘paved the way for psychological work conducive to patient’s sense of active well-being’ (Lanceley et al 2011, p.816). In addition the objects acted as a bridge between the two worlds in which Meltzer (1981 cited in Lanceley et al 2011, p.818) states we live – ‘an internal world which is as real a place to live as the outside world’. Many patients expressed a desire to keep the object chosen during their session with the nurse; Lanceley et al (2011, p.818) suggest the heritage object acted as a transitional object, bridging the gap between their internalised phantasies and experience, and the external world. This

When we take this evidence into account, it is clear that the psychological impact of interactions with objects has a part to play in the way we view and engage with museum collections. In the context of this thesis, one can argue that the connections people make with objects and with each other can be enhanced through a tactile engagement with museum collection. The memories and associations produced through a person-object relationship can, I suggest, take place within the context of the museum; objects can be seen almost as social tools and the active nature of object handling seen as a mechanism by which social interaction takes place, encouraging the creation of a sense of self/identity, enabling a sense of community, offering a bridge between internalised phantasies and experience, as well as offering opportunities for expressing feelings both to oneself and others. This is particularly important when considering

the use of objects in therapeutic settings, but need not be confined to this only as the benefits of a hands-on engagement with collections in terms of creating and sustaining identity are relevant and valuable to all. Indeed when we consider the vast number of museums throughout the UK – the Museums Association in 2010 state that England alone has 2000 museums (MA 2010) – in addition to the fact that museums are places where people are encouraged to learn about not only themselves, but their culture, society and the world around them (Camic and Chatterjee 2013, p.67), there is huge potential for working with healthcare professionals to further explore the psychological benefits of working with museum collections.

### **So why touch?**

The research presented above has begun a valuable and deeply important discussion about the role touch and object handling can play in understanding museum collections. Where increasing pressure is placed on museums to prove their worth and value through opening up access to their collections, I believe touch is an integral part of that process. As we have seen, not only does object handling add layers of information and create opportunities of working with audiences for whom the concept of a museum is a dusty, inaccessible storehouse filled with irrelevant *stuff*, but object handling heals; touching museum objects breaks down barriers thereby bringing people together. It provides a sense of worth and value in the individual, and is an enjoyable experience which can be linked with improvement of health and wellbeing. Looking forward, what we must now consider is how tactile engagement with collections can become an integral and valuable part of what we do in the museum.



## Chapter Four

# Learning Theory and the Museum

*‘There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience ‘*

*(Archibald McLeish: American Poet 1892 - 1982)*

As we have discovered, the modern museum can to a certain extent be characterised by a move toward a more interactive one in which the visitor is invited and encouraged to be part of the experience, taking responsibility for their learning through the use of different display techniques. In this chapter we explore how learning styles and learning theory have contributed to the way in which museums approach display and interactive elements of their exhibitions, as well as tools for evaluating visitor experiences. As we shall see through this chapter, while there may be different methods and learning theories, often these overlap offering a more rounded means of understanding one’s own preferred learning style and abilities.

It is important to note the use of the term *learning* instead of *education*; the Museums Libraries and Archives Council have made clear the term *education* has a certain amount of baggage attached to it as it invariably comes in the form of a ‘formal, didactic, curriculum-based, teacher-led process’ rather than *learning* which is a ‘process of active engagement with experience’ (MLA 2001, p.5). Learning theories and styles offer a means to understand ourselves, however, it is important to remember that ‘the production of knowledge is embedded in the process of communication’ (Witcomb 2008, p.357) and that process is two-way rather than a simple didactic way in which the learner receives information without questioning it to gain a deeper understanding. When viewed in this light the difference is clear. But what does this mean for museums? Do we continue along the path of knowledge transfer in the form of curator to visitor, or do we give visitors the opportunity to draw their own conclusions by learning through active engagement?

For Hein (1998) the ideal means for learning in the museum can be found somewhere between a *realist* view where knowledge is understood and gained through observing and experiencing the world, and that of a *constructivist* view in which knowledge gained is dependent on social and cultural factors. Essentially, something incorporating a didactic learning model of teacher to learner transmitted knowledge, and a constructivist model whereby ‘learning is conceptualized as a process of experiencing the world and making sense of it in one’s own mind within the

context of one's cultural background' (Witcomb 2008, p.356). This can also be seen as a phenomenological approach; in the same way that a person experiences the world by being in it, a person learns by experiencing something for themselves.

Black (2005) observes that the differences between two main theories of knowledge have had a profound effect on the way museums construct their exhibitions. Hein (1998, p.16-21) describes how *Realism* is knowledge which exists independently from the individual, that people's perceptions of the world are 'poor imitations of the real ideas', and that reason and dialogue brings people closer to an understanding of true ideas. During the Enlightenment this realistic approach was combined with organising knowledge by rational categories, disciplines, structures and so on. In direct contrast with this *Idealism* offers a view that knowledge exists only in the minds of people who construct it and draw meaning from it. In terms of exhibition display the realistic approach with its structured approach has perhaps been the easiest for museums to take hold of (Black 2005, p.129-30). Indeed Hein argues that in a *realist* exhibition, artefact and information arrangement is guided by the nature of the subject being presented, whereas an *idealist* exhibition does not conform to a traditional arrangement. Instead the curator 'believes that the meaning of an object or entire exhibition derives not from some external reality but arises from the interpretation it is given either by the curator or the viewer' (Hein 1998, p.21). Therefore for the most part exhibitions have centred on a didactic approach involving the transmission of knowledge from curator to visitor through the arrangement of facts and artefacts in a *realistic* display technique.

In contrast the constructivist theory presents learning as a continual and active process whereby the learner actively participates in their acquisition of knowledge through constructing new ideas or concepts based on their current and past knowledge. As a result teachers cease to be the means by which a learner gains knowledge through transfer of information, rather the teacher becomes a facilitator, an aide to learning rather than being at the centre of it (Black 2005, p.140). This idealist approach has become influential to the development of museum learning in recent years, and it could be argued, has been the catalyst for numerous interactives being utilised by museums in an effort to provide a space for a constructivist type of learning by museum-goers. Constructivism, therefore, means that the role of the curator has become one where their development of exhibitions is a means to provide visitors with an opportunity to construct their own meaning from the objects on display, thus requiring the curator to create displays which offer visitors information in a format they can engage with and create meaning from. However, as with many other learning theories, constructivism relies on the participation of the visitor by not only choosing to visit an exhibition or display, but by bringing with them interest and motivation to engage, a certain amount of prior knowledge and experience which can aid them

in production of meaning, and the required skills and initiative to actively participate in the construction of meaning and understanding.

As we explore this approach further we see that this didactic approach is not necessarily a result of an inherited *traditional museum*, rather it is a result of the educational career of both the curator and visitor. The way in which museums have presented knowledge and information is much the same way that a teacher presents information: the text panel next to the object acts as the teacher, providing the expert knowledge to be transmitted to the onlooker – the pupil (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998 cited in Black 2005, p.132). What Black notes is that for most of us this form of knowledge transfer is not only familiar, but comfortable and one which we recognise. The information is broken down into chunks and presented following prescribed structures and fields of knowledge. While this form of museum presentation, didacticism, is familiar, it is perhaps not as universal as we might hope. Black argues that in an age where pressures to be accessible, not only in terms of collections, but to different groups within society are growing, it should be acknowledge that other approaches must be considered to represent the different ways in which their audiences learn and engage. I would add that using the idealistic approach discussed above opens up possibilities for the different learning styles wider audiences possess through object handling. This form of access gives the visitor an entirely different experience from one where objects are presented in glass cases with nuggets of information to digest and later forget. Particularly for Kinaesthetic learners (discussed further, below) this form of engagement with collections allows for experiential learning – learning by doing. It no longer is simply the acquisition of knowledge but the development of understanding (Black 2005, p.132).

When we consider learning in terms of object handling it makes sense to take the *idealistic* approach whereby objects are offered for the visitor to make their own meaning and knowledge. Indeed it is only through handling that certain elements of knowledge about an object can be obtained; texture, weight, shape, temperature, smell, and so on. Without touching something how do we reach a full conclusion about the object in front of us?

## Learning Theory

Having discussed the need for museums to consider a move away from the traditional didactic approach of knowledge transfer, we now enter the world of learning theory. The most important thing to note is that a wealth of different theories exists. These need not be considered independently; rather they overlap, supporting each other. Here we explore a selection I believe most relevant to museums today.

We learn on a daily basis; a simple fact, but one that we sometimes fail to recognise. We are born learners, it is natural and a process that takes place throughout our life with the basic outcome being meaning (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.45). Surprisingly most of our learning is not in structured educational settings, but through our everyday experiences, which we reflect upon, learn from and then apply in similar settings. This can be seen as a simple experiential learning cycle (figure 1).

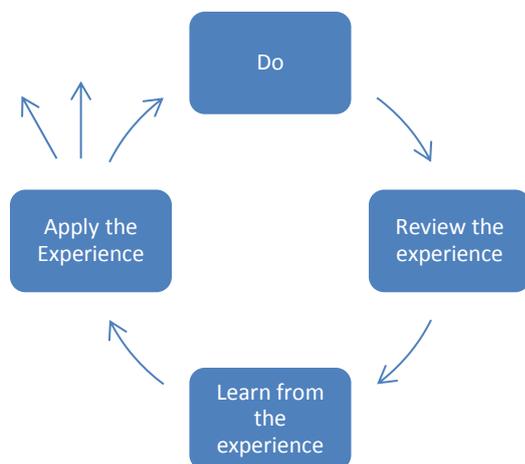


Figure 1. The Learning Cycle (Dennison and Kirk 1990, p.4). Here the experience of *doing* impacts the way we learn, and apply learning to different circumstances.

In Dennison and Kirk's (1990, p.4) diagram (figure 1.) we see that not only do we learn from our experiences but that we will apply this learning to our everyday lives and the situations we find ourselves in. The multiple arrows appearing from *apply the experience* demonstrate that our learnt experience is relevant in different situations. This cycle provides an opportunity to explore further adaptations which are relevant to the museum and the way in which it displays and exhibits information.

Much learning theory in the museum depends on the premise that 'effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more' (MLA 2001 cited in Black 2005, p.132). Black (2005, p.133) argues that for museums the struggle is offering space in which visitors can learn from their experience resulting in a cycle by which they apply this learning, and come back for more. He notes that activities offered by museums are guided, with suggestions, rather than being unstructured activities with no meaning or relevance to the visitor. It is important that a visitor feels a connection to the exhibition, or that the objects on display are related to his or her life.

Dennison and Kirk (1990, p.17) outlined the difference between what they term the *virtuous cycle* and the *vicious cycle* (Figure 2). The virtuous cycle is based on the premise that the visitor begins with an interest in a subject field leading to recognition of a perceived relevance of the displays

on offer to their own lives. This recognition leads to the application of learning acting as an immediate reward to entering the exhibition space, and therefore creating an enthusiasm for more learning, bringing back to the starting point where their enthusiasm for learning and interest in a subject leads them into another exhibition or display. Black (2005, p.134) notes that for museum curators and interpreters, if an exhibition has the effect of providing visitors with a *Eureka* moment in which their knowledge has been extended or a deeper understanding reached, the visitor feels encouraged to explore the collections further since there has been ‘immediate application and reward’. However is this all we should be striving for in the museum? Or should we aim for long term impact in the visitor’s life? Admittedly it is difficult to evaluate these experiences in a longitudinal study and track which specific museum experience contributed to which life situation, nevertheless I believe that what is offered should not only look to the immediate but the long term future for visitors.

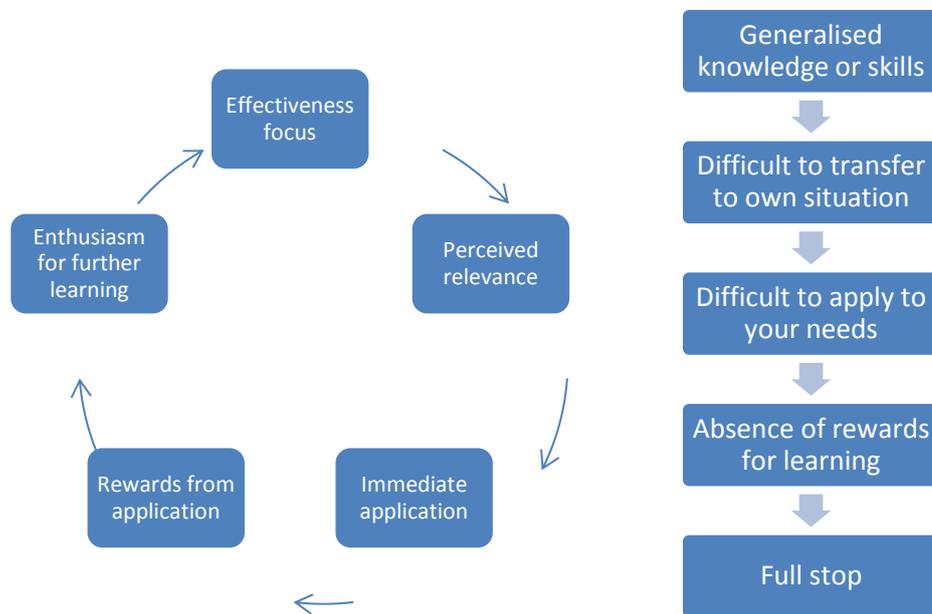


Figure 2. Left: Virtuous cycle in which the visitor experiences learning through displays relevant to their own life, leading to application, reward and enthusiasm for future learning. Right: Vicious Cycle where the visitor does not relate to the display

In contrast to this positive *virtuous cycle* Dennison and Kirk (1990, p.17) identified the other end of the scale – the *vicious cycle* – in which a visitor is unable to relate to the displays, does not relate the information and objects to their own life situations, gains no reward for their experience and sees no need for further learning. This typically leads to the visitor leaving an exhibition having lost interest in the display no longer wishing to engage.

As well as understanding the process of learning – being that of (hopefully) a cycle – it is important to acknowledge that people learn in different ways. This can be seen in the different learning theories which emerged in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most notable is Howard

Garner's theory of multiple intelligences (discussed below) which broke the mould of the traditional understanding that there was only one form of intelligence, an academic one, in favour of recognising the variety and diversity of individuals and the means by which they understand and engage with the world.

### Kolb's Learning Styles 1984

In 1984 Kolb defined a theory of learning styles upon which many learning cycles like the ones discussed above were modelled. Kolb's theory viewed learning as a series of experiences with cognitive additions instead of being seen as a series of pure cognitive processes (Honey and Mumford 1986, p.4). The process was described originally as an integrated one, where all stages of learning needed to be completed (figure 3), however Kolb stated, later, that individuals were rarely fully effective in all the stages of learning.

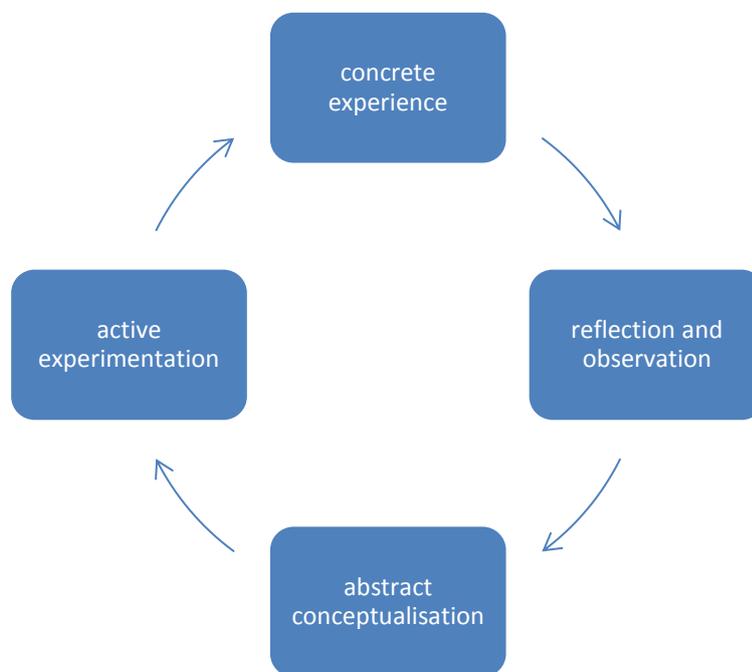


Figure 3. Kolb's learning cycle (Honey and Mumford 1986).

In the case of these previously discussed learning cycles Kolb's definitions can be placed as follows: *concrete experience* is the 'do', *reflective observation* is the 'review', *abstract conceptualisation* is the 'learn' and *active experimentation* is the 'apply' in Dennison and Kirk's learning cycle (figure 1). However not only does this learning model differ in terms of terminology, but also in that it acknowledges that different people learn in different ways and as such the four stages in the cycle themselves become a different style. Concrete experience can be explained as being involved in an experience and dealing with situations we encounter. Reflective Observation 'focuses on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them' (Black 2005, p.134). Abstract conceptualisation uses logic, ideas and

concepts in opposition to feelings. Finally Active experimentation (the application stage of the cycle) actively influences people and changes the situations they face through the practical application of learnt knowledge rather than reflecting on what has been learnt.

In this cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation Kolb identified four types of learners who utilise the different stages of the learning process to match their style; divergers, assimilators, convergers and accommodators. Divergers use a combination of doing (concrete experience) and thinking through the results (reflective observation) to discover *why*; Assimilators combine reading and thinking (reflective observation) with further reflection (abstract conceptualisation) to understand *what* there is to know; in order to understand the *how* Convergers use reading and thinking (abstract conceptualisation) and process the new information by doing (active experimentation); and finally Accomodators, concerned with the question *what would happen if I did this*, do (active experimentation) and the test their findings in the same way (concrete experience) (Black 2005, p.135). Broken down in this way, one can spot their own preferential learning style, however again we must remind ourselves of the fact that testing these theories shows most individuals have a mixture of different styles. I certainly struggle to pin point the main style I use when learning, as I find I gain a deeper understanding of something by doing, particularly when it comes to assembling something or handling an artefact to gain information, however I also need to read and investigate further by thinking, which places me somewhere between being a diverger and converger.

### Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles

Similar to Kolb's model, Honey and Mumford (1992) offer different terminology to represent their four learning styles. Honey and Mumford's learning styles manual emerged from a need from within the management training arena for effective learning to take place. They noticed the problem that although there were many common factors between employees in business, one person could learn from a particular experience whereas another would gain nothing (Honey and Mumford 1986, p.1). They state that the reason for this difference in learning outcomes lies in the 'differing reaction of individuals, explicable by their different needs for the way in which learning is offered' and argue that by paying attention to the individual learning styles of people, effective learning can take place (Honey and Mumford 1986, p.1).

They acknowledge that their manual of learning styles published originally in 1986, developed to a great extent from Kolb's work, however for their purpose (managerial training and development) they needed to develop a system that reflected the observations they made in the world of business, that would be recognised by managers, so they could credibly develop ways

of providing guidance on individual learning styles and associated learning behaviour (Honey and Mumford 1986, p.1-4). The only distinguishable difference between Kolb's model and Honey and Mumford's is the terminology used for the different style; divergers become reflectors who contemplate and observe experiences from different perspectives; assimilators become theorists who take their observations, adapting and incorporating them into complex and logical theories; convergers become pragmatists, testing ideas, theories and techniques to see how they work in practice; and accommodators become activists, throwing themselves into new experiences to see what happens. Honey and Mumford were able to use their model of learning styles to train managers in promoting learning for their employees based on the different learning styles and appropriate learning activities. Not only this, but Honey and Mumford offer ways in which individuals can develop all the learning styles in order to achieve the optimum level of learning from every experience (Honey and Mumford 1986, p.43-50), acknowledging that learners do not simply have a preference for one learning style, but have all four, each to a different extent.

Again we see how these theories overlap in recognising the different stages of learning as well as the different styles. Black (2005, p.135) notes that this understanding of preferences for different learning styles has an impact on the museum world. Since we are aware of these differences, how do we reflect this in the museum environment? Surely a variety of means by which the visitor can interact with the collections, rather than a pure presentation of the objects and their facts, provides the optimum environment for these learning styles to be utilised and provided for? For Black (2005, p.137) 'learning styles will be only one of a wide range of influences on what is learned or not learned by the individual'. As well as what the museum can offer in terms of displays, exhibition space, a good learning environment and so on, there are numerous other factors influencing a visitor on any given day, including the personal interests of the visitor and their motivations for visiting, their existing knowledge, the time available to them on the day of their visit, who they have come with and the attitude of this group and previous learning experiences – the list goes on. Museums cannot prepare for every outside influencing factor, they can however have a part to play in the internal museum influences such as the information available to the visitor, museum staff on hand to answer questions, and varied accessible activities to name a few. The visitor cannot achieve the virtuous cycle discussed above on their own, curators and interpreters still have a part to play in providing a structured experience and in order to provide visitors with a well-rounded experience, museums need to provide a variety of opportunities for learning based on the different ways their audience learns (Black 2005, p.137).

## Discovery Learning

Having considered learning theory and the different learning styles, we come to the concept of discovery learning, something which, as has been mentioned above, is an aspect of our daily lives. Black (2005, p.138) describes the discovery learning as the ‘aha!’ moment when information moves from being acquired to understood, being used most often, due to its experiential nature, in ‘problem-solving, enquiry-based and hands-on environments’. He argues that in order for discovery learning to have an impact in the long term, the hands-on needs to be turned into a mind-on, so that it is not simply a physical process, but rather one by which knowledge and understanding takes place. Hein (1998, p.30-31) notes that learning, being an active process, changes as the learner learns through interaction with material and absorption of information gained. The mind-on element comes into play when the individual is required to think during hands-on activity. Hein states that ‘since museums, unlike schools, value objects and learning from objects, discovery learning seems a natural approach’ (1998, p.31). So why is this not taking place to a greater extent?

## Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligence

Gardner’s work in the early 1980’s was seen as a radical departure from previous perceptions of intelligence. Prior to Gardner’s theory, intelligence had been judged by academic means through intelligence tests; a development of Alfred Binet’s work in the early 1900s to create a means by which school children’s aptitude could be determined where previously intelligence had been judged intuitively. As a result of Binet’s work, the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of an individual was mathematically calculated by taking their mental age, dividing this by the chronological age, and multiplying that number by one hundred. Intelligence had become quantifiable leading to what Gardner terms a ‘uniform view’ in terms of education, whereby schooling and teaching were aimed at a particular kind of intelligence ascertained through numerical means (Gardner 2006, p.3-5). Schools used this to create a core curriculum of facts they believed every student should learn and know, with every student treated in the same way. However, Gardner believing the exact opposite, found this to be entirely unfair; uniform schools targeted a very particular mind; that of the IQ mind (Gardner 2006, p.5).

In his 1983 work *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* Gardner outlined his revolutionary theoretical framework, in which he stated the existence of more than one kind of intelligence to the traditional IQ. He asked his readers to

‘... suspend for a moment the usual judgement of what constitutes intelligence, and let your thoughts run freely over the capabilities of human beings ... your mind may turn to the brilliant chess player, the world-class violinist, and the champion athlete; certainly, such outstanding performers deserve special consideration. Are the chess player,

violinist, and athlete ‘intelligent’ in these pursuits? If they are, then why do our tests of ‘intelligence’ fail to identify them? If they are not intelligent, what allows them to achieve such astounding feats? In general, why does the contemporary construct of intelligence fail to take into account large areas of human endeavour? (Gardner 2006, p.5-6).

Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) asserts that human cognitive aptitude is better described in terms of a set of abilities, talents, or mental skills (Gardner 2006, p.6). According to theory, an individual possesses each of the intelligences to a certain extent, differing in the degree and combination of these skills. His work, he claimed, would have an impact on education, being a more humane and veridical way of seeing intelligence. In addition, I would also add that it is a more inclusive means of viewing intelligence, which is particularly relevant in society today where social cohesion is championed.

Traditionally the classic psychometric view defined intelligence as being an ability to answer a set of questions on a test aimed at ascertaining intelligence. This view saw intelligence as something you are born with, which does not change with age or through training and experience. You are essentially born intelligent, or not. In complete contrast Gardner explains intelligence as ‘a computational capacity to process a certain kind of information’ entailing ‘the ability to solve problems or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular cultural setting’ (Gardner 2006, p.6). Drawing upon various sources of evidence for his theory, including differences in development between *normal* and *gifted* individuals, neuroscience evidence of the breakdown of cognitive skills from brain damage, the evidence from exceptional individuals and populations, the evolution of cognition through time, cross cultural accounts of cognition, psychometric studies and psychological training, Gardner found that the previous view of intelligence as inborn and never changing to be entirely unfounded and untrue.

Through his research Gardner identified seven intelligences in total (later identifying an additional two, bringing the total to nine intelligences). These intelligences are Musical, Bodily Kinaesthetic, Logical Mathematical, Linguistic, Spatial, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Naturalist and Existential. Gardner makes the point that each intelligence must have an identifiable core operation or a set of operations and is triggered by internal or external information presented, susceptible to a symbolic system which may be culturally contrived and which conveys important forms of information (Gardner 2006, p.7-8). It is also important to note, as has been previously stated, that although the intelligences can be seen as being independent of each other – in that having a high level of ability in one intelligence is not dependent on having a high level in another intelligence – all the intelligences work in concert, so that nearly all cultural roles will

require a combination and a calling upon of more than one intelligence. Therefore individuals should be seen as a collection of abilities rather than having one problem solving capability that can be measured through testing (Gardner 2006, p.22). Multiple Intelligence theory states that we all have the full range of intelligences; no two individuals have the same intellectual profile because we all have different experiences; and having a strong intelligence in one area does not mean one acts intelligently (Gardner 2006, p.23).

## Sensory Preferences

The sensory preferences model of learning style was developed in the late 1970s by computer programmer Richard Bandler, and linguist John Grinder, who argued that everyone has a dominant sense which they instinctively use to absorb and process information presented to them (Ginnis 2002, p.39). These senses are Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic (often referred to as VAK), and although everyone uses all three senses to a certain extent, each individual will subconsciously prefer one more than the others. Individuals with a Visual preference respond in particular to words, graphics, presentations, videos, posters, diagrams, photos or drawings in a text book; essentially most forms of visual presentation will stimulate visual individuals to engage and learn most effectively. Research carried out by Specific Diagnostic Studies of Rockville, Maryland, found that 29% of students had a Visual sensory preference (Ginnis 2002, p.38). Those with an Auditory preference (34%) learn most easily from sound in a variety of formats, whether that be from a teacher, their peers, or other forms of commentaries. The largest group (37%) have a Kinaesthetic preference, meaning they respond best to physical activity, usually through doing and active experimentations. Research found that kinaesthetic students are most likely to find the formal school environment difficult (Ginnis 2002, p.39). It is interesting that despite the larger proportion of the public being kinaesthetic, our current model of museums caters more to the visual. Surely this demonstrates the need to think creatively about engaging with collections through touch?

## Adults learn differently from children

Having discussed the different learning theory models, it is important to consider the fact that adults learn differently from children. Black (2005, p.143) observes how many museums assume that providing learning experiences for children is sufficient, and in some cases more important than offering adult learning opportunities, or that adults can and will contentedly use the same learning resources for children. Is this the case? It could well be argued that adults bringing their family to the museum may well happily use the children's activities on offer however does this mean that this is enough? With the current emphasis on museums to provide greater access to collections should we be offering learning for all rather than focussing on the familiar; children and school groups?

In a paper presented at the Australian Museum Seminar 'Why Learning?' John Cross states that for adults a variety of factors contribute to their learning experiences:

'Life experiences, considerable practice in cognitive methods coupled with capacity for empathy and spirituality, means that adults are capable of participating in modes of learning that go far beyond the didactic provision of 'closed' information, of 'facts' and figures' (Cross 2002, p.2)

Cross suggests that in order to address the differences between adult and children learning, museums need to provide their adult visitors with opportunities for 'deep thinking', problem solving, using their prior knowledge and their experiences, and providing a space in which these activities can be shared with other adults (Cross 2002, p.2).

It may appear an obvious statement to make – that adults learn differently than children – however on considering the motivations for learning the difference is even more apparent. Adults invariably bring an element of baggage with them to a learning environment or experience that is entirely different to that of a child. Adults bring their life-experiences, interest in a topic, prior knowledge, expertise, skills, motivation, ability for independent thought and emotions (Cross 2002, p.2, Black 2005, p.143). As well as these positive aspects, adults can also bring a stubbornness due to their practice in making decisions and choices, and ego which can lead to an avoidance of particular situations or topics, particularly if they feel their lack of knowledge will result in them being made to feel inferior by museum professionals 'talking down' to them.

Despite the differences discussed above, there are similarities between adult and child learning in terms of the process. Cross (2002, p.2) reminds us that learning is not confined to a finite timescale; rather it is an on-going activity, consisting not only of acquiring knowledge but of adaptation and reflection. Therefore attempting to restrict learning to one visit to an exhibition or one guided tour of a heritage site is naïve. Cross suggests the learning process consists of three parts; stimulation, adaptation and application. Firstly an adult must encounter a stimulus which captures their attention and imagination; a new idea, skill or piece of information previously unknown. Secondly the learner uses the acquired information, testing what they have found out in terms of their previous knowledge and understanding adopting the new ideas or skills obtained, which then become part of the person. Finally this learning is applied to the adult's life as, in Cross' words, 'I do not believe that we can claim learning to have occurred unless what has been learnt is used' (Cross 2002, p.3)

In response to this recognition of difference, Adult Learning Australia suggest that the optimum learning opportunity for adults occur when their previous knowledge is appreciated, the subject/topic presented is relevant, there is a positive and encouraging learning environment promoting discussion and interaction, mistakes are not negative but valuable learning opportunities and the subject matter is presented in a variety of different ways (Beddie 2002 cited in Black 2005, p.144). But is this something we frequently see in museums? Or are the most creative and active ways reserved for specialist groups, entirely disregarding all the work that has been carried out to expose the variety of ways the public learn about and engage with a topic? Cross (2002, p.7) highlights examples where there is a clear distinction between learning opportunities offered to children and adults, visibly ignoring the fact that although adults and children learn in very different ways, their learning styles need to be recognised and provided for. He notes that for many adults, learning experiences are passive ones where they are invited to look, listen, read, watch, and move through gallery spaces on a predetermined route rather than taking part, discussing, investigating and handling artefacts. His example of the National Museum demonstrates this common occurrence perfectly.

During October 2002 Jeanette Rowe, celebrated author and illustrator, ran children and adult activities as part of the Museum's programme. Cross's examination of the description of these activities draws out key words, which represent the nature of learning opportunities on offer; adults are invited to '*visit* writer and illustrator Jeanette Rowe in her studio where she will demonstrate how she illustrates her many books. Copies of Jeanette's books will be available for purchase in the Museum shop' whereas children are invited to

*'join* children's book writer and illustrator as she reads from her books and provides *hands-on* opportunities for young children ... you will learn how to *create* your own cartoon and how to *develop* a story using your character' (Cross 2002, p.6-7, Italics my emphasis).

For Cross, the most notable difference between the two opportunities is the language used in their promotion; adults are invited to *visit* whereas children are encouraged to *join*. When the meanings of these two words are considered, the message presented to the museum going public is very different;

To visit 'is transient and superficial, while the latter (join) implies a more profound and lasting connection ... visit implies all sorts of obligations to behave with politeness and with deference to the 'hosts' ... while joining something also implies obligations, it suggests a greater capacity to steer the group collectively – being a part of, rather than being subservient to' (Cross 2002, p.6).

Looking beyond terminology, which is as important in the promotion of an activity as well as the activity itself, the difference between what adults and children experience as part of the National Museum of Australia's programme is again very clear. Jeanette Rowe will demonstrate her work for the adults, suggesting no participation on the part of the adults other than watching, whereas the children will experience hands-on activities allowing them to create something. The only activity on offer for the adults is the opportunity to purchase some of Jeanette's work from the museum shop – although whether that purchase is for the adult or their child remains to be seen.

As further evidence for this difference between adult and children activity in museums in Australia, Cross highlights another example, this time citing volunteer guides at the National Gallery of Australia. Here guides undergo a year-long training process using traditional pedagogical methods such as lectures, workshops, tutorials and so on where the guides amass information about the works displayed in the galleries ready to pass this on to the visiting public through another traditional means; gallery tours. Interestingly, art being an organic and expressive subject, the method used to convey information about the artworks and their creators does not lend itself to 'higher order' thinking, despite the classic phrase 'art is in the eye of the beholder', allowing individuals to draw their own meanings from the art on display. However in contrast to these standard tours offered, the National Gallery highlights the role of children's tours (also entitled *Discovery Tours*) as ones which 'guides particularly enjoy' and that 'guides are trained to interact with the children and to ask them questions that link the artwork to their own experience' (Cross 2002, p.8).

Again the question why adult provision should be so different from that offered for children is asked. And although these examples are from Australia, the situation is similar in the United Kingdom. A visit to the British Museum website in search of learning opportunities reveals this difference; adults are offered study days and workshops in which they can 'take a closer look at select subjects with expert guidance and tuition' (British Museum 2009) whereas for children there are a variety of activities on offer daily including family trails around the galleries, puzzles, games and activities in the galleries, and object handling with museum volunteers. Cross (2002, p.9) observes that:

'museums seem to want to 'sell' adults packages of 'facts', to provide definite answers, and, in doing so seem to limit the potential for adults who enjoy higher order thinking, active conversation, experimentation and debate'.

Museums at present appear to offer learning experiences for adults which are almost entirely passive; perhaps assuming this is the best way for adults to learn – as passive recipients of

information – and although for some this may be true, for a large percentage of the population this simply is not the case, as can be seen from the numerous learning theories and models discussed earlier in this chapter.

From the discussion presented above, it is clear that not all visitors are the same in the way they engage with and learn from their environment. Once acknowledged, this leads to a freeing realisation that through opening up access to collections, museums possess the potential to engage with their visitors in ways that have previously not been fully explored. It is important to remember that learning forms only one part of the visitor's experience and that whilst learning may not be explicit in the sense of predetermined and expected outcomes when engaging with objects, we should acknowledge that 'even if the impact is not about learning, the exchange that happens is a valuable one' (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.282).



## Chapter Five

### Methodology: a three part approach

To this point we have explored the development of the museum from its beginnings as an engaging collection of curiosities, to a place where engagement is predominantly achieved through visual means. It is clear that currently there is a desire for museums to be places of meaning where people are connecting with each other and with collections (see chapter two), but in order to reach a point whereby physical engagement with museum objects can become a regular part of a museum experience it is important firstly to explore what the current situation is. Here I present the three part methodology employed to investigate current practice of object handling, reflecting the three different components of museums; collections, museum professionals and the public. It is important to address these three aspects of the museum world in order to reach a framework for making collections accessible through touch (presented in chapter nine). To begin, I present an investigation into current use of objects in museums through a survey of Hampshire County Museum Service collections and their use/potential use for handling. Secondly, through in depth interviews with Hampshire County Museum Service staff I explore attitudes and opinions of museum professionals toward object handling. Finally, using questionnaires, feedback forms and participant observation, I evaluate the responses of the public's experience of object handling.

For the purpose of this thesis, Hampshire has been chosen a case study. Focussing in particular on Hampshire County Council Museum service offers a valuable means of reaching an understanding of how object handling takes place within the setting of a varied and engaging service which, I argue, can be seen as a microcosm of the museum world. At the commencement of this research, Hampshire Museum Service consisted of over 150 staff with roles ranging from Head of the Museum Service to museum assistants, spread across fifteen community museums and sites, containing vast and varied collections held in trust for and representing the people of Hampshire. It should be noted that this study began prior to a two phase restructure which took place between 2010 and 2012, resulting in a streamlined service and a considerable reduction in frontline personnel. Before explaining the methodology employed in this research, let me first introduce Hampshire County Council Museum Service and where it stands at present.

#### **A brief history of Hampshire Museum Service**

Prior to a reorganisation of local government in 1974, Hampshire Museum Service existed as a group of small local museums which fell under the charge of Hampshire County Council (HCC). These museums, located in Alton, Basingstoke and Christchurch, included the Curtis Museum

in Alton which had been collecting and acquiring a variety of rural and domestic objects linked to the area since the 1850s. In addition, the museum also contained a small Natural History collection, consisting mainly of curiosities collected by William Curtis in the 1840s; some of these specimens can be traced back to the middle part of the 1700s. Following on from these early collections, local societies and a number of individuals built up collections in Basingstoke and Christchurch from the early 20th Century.

It was not until specialist curators were appointed in the 1950s that a systematic collection policy was introduced for all of the disciplines represented in the service, which included Decorative Art, Local History, Archaeology and Natural Science – these collection disciplines still exist today and are joined by Dress and Textiles, Ceramics and Childhood collections. The collection policies have enabled museum staff to build up county and regionally relevant collections that represent a changing and developing county as well as the diversity of its inhabitants. Not only are the collections relevant to residents of Hampshire, but they are of national and international importance, being consulted regularly by members of international academic communities.

At the time of writing, Hampshire Museum Service had just undergone significant change through a two phase restructure. Having faced, what many local authority museum services have faced throughout the UK, HCC have created a streamlined service with an increased focus on engagement. Phase one of the restructure reshaped the Museum Service to fit with budgetary and strategic requirements for managing key heritage assets within Hampshire County Council as a whole. As a result of the reorganisation, not only was the staffing level scrutinised and reduced, but a number of museums and sites within the network reviewed with a view either to closure or management through volunteer groups, or borough and trust partnerships. Phase one came into place in July 2011 where the workforce was significantly reduced and job roles became more interdisciplinary. For example where previously there were a number of keepers and conservators, these roles have been amalgamated to form collections officer posts, with a responsibility for the care and interpretation of Hampshire's collections for use in exhibitions and educational settings. Phase two of the restructure, incorporating both arts and museums, came into effect in July 2012. This second phase aimed to offer a more effective and collaborative service between arts and museums, as well as looking to create working partnerships with other museum services through a Fully Integrated Merger between Hampshire County Council Arts and Museums, Southampton City Council Arts and Heritage, and Winchester City Council Museums.

The Museum Service at present manages a total of fifteen community museums and historic sites throughout the county; ten of this number consists of a partnership between Hampshire County Council and eight district councils. In addition to this number of individual museums

and sites, the Museum service provides support and advice to independent museums across the county. The service also includes venues such as SEARCH in Gosport (a hands-on centre for history and science), Milestones (a living history museum), and Basing House in Basingstoke (Hampshire County Council 2012).

At the Museum Headquarters site in Winchester, the majority of the service's collections are housed and cared for by specialist staff covering disciplines such as archives, archaeology, history, transport and technology, natural science and the arts. The collections consist of over 1.5 million artefacts (HCCMAS 2010), including large objects such as HMS Monitor M33, a First World War Navy Ship located in Portsmouth Naval Dockyard, objects linked to famous figures, for example Jane Austen's quilt, objects millions of years old including a Fossil brachiopod, dated to 490-543 million years old, and modern objects such as an iPod used in the exhibition *Dressed to Express*. These collections are used primarily for display in both permanent and touring exhibitions, national and international academic and personal research, and for access by the public through various means such as exhibitions, online searchable collections, and handling sessions for schools and specialist groups (e.g. reminiscence, The University of the Third Age (U3A), Women's Institute) within one of the seven community museums or through outreach.

In addition, Hampshire Museums Service was the lead partner in the South East Museum's Hub, formed as part of the Renaissance in the Regions programme, a government funded initiative to revitalise regional museums. Following the Renaissance in the Regions report (Resource 2001) written by the Regional Museum's Task Force, the government agreed to invest £70 million into regional museums to enable them to build their capacity and develop new ways of working (Renaissance South East 2006, p.4). Hampshire Museums Service worked alongside Chatham Historic Dockyard, Oxford University Museums, The Royal Pavilion, Brighton and Hove and MLA South-East in the South East Museums Hub. Renaissance funded projects enabled Hampshire Museum Service to increase access to collections through the improvement of cataloguing and management of the artefacts in their care. This was largely achieved through offering digital exhibitions on the museum service website, which can be found at <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/museum/collections.htm>, allowing visitors virtual access to a variety of collections based at the headquarters site, including ceramic, textile, and topographical collections. This digitisation of the collections continues, and new searchable databases are being added to the Museum Service website on a regular basis.

Hampshire County Council Museums and Archives service have recognised their role as a service not only offering leisure venues and activities, but as a means of providing the public with a deeper more engaging experience. As one of the lead services in the country, Hampshire Museums are addressing the potential of their collections and realise their responsibility not

only to care for these collections but to also make them readily available to be viewed and handled by the people of Hampshire and further afield.

### Methodology Part One: The Collections Survey

It would be naïve to consider an investigation into the benefits of object handling without first understanding current practice. Therefore the initial stage in our examination of object handling begins with an in depth study of Hampshire Museum Service frontline collections and how they are currently being used with the public.

In 2008 Stephen Lowy, (former Community Museums Manager), acknowledged that:

‘we are now involved in the social and political need to address our multicultural society and help define it’ and that ‘museums have more of a service role than in the past and our role as custodian of the collections of the people of, for example, Hampshire is shifting as our visitors/potential visitors recognise that we are holding their collections’ (Lowy 2008 pers. comm.).

Having identified this responsibility as custodians of the people’s collections, the museum service embarked on a lengthy re-grading process of their collections, beginning in 2008, involving assessing the grading process itself as well as re-grading objects in store. This project aimed to provide staff with knowledge about not only the condition of the objects in the stores at the service’s headquarters in Winchester as well as its fifteen museums and sites across the county, but also to highlight ways in which the objects could be used beyond the glass case with the public, whether in Hampshire, the United Kingdom or throughout the world. It was through this grading process that a need for in depth study into the current use of objects for handling was realised, resulting in the requirement to carry out a frontline handling collections survey, which I was asked to perform and has formed the basis of the first part of the methodology for this thesis.

#### **Preliminary research carried out by Hampshire Museum Service**

The collections survey was preceded by a preliminary questionnaire entitled *Thinking about handling* to ascertain current understanding of why museums might want to use collections for handling, the benefits of this, and what use can be made of handling collections. It prompted staff to consider handling on a basic level as well as encouraging them to think about their own collections in terms of handling. During a strategic collections grading meeting in 2008 a group of approximately twenty museum service staff (including keepers, curators, conservators and members of the learning and community engagement team) were asked to work in small groups, answering just two questions; ‘think about why we want to use objects for handling’ and ‘what uses, including current and potential, can be made of handling collections?’ This activity

provided a framework by which the collections survey could take place, since it revealed how museum service staff regarded handling in relation to their collections.

The first task was to contemplate why museums would want to use objects for handling. Responses to this were varied, however most identified children's education as one of the main reasons why museums offer handling, supporting the common and frequent viewpoint that object handling is a beneficial activity solely for use with school groups, perhaps disregarding the possibilities for use with wider audiences. Despite this observation, however, staff also noted the potential objects have to unlock the interpretative skills of the public through a tangible and tactile experience with museum collections. Many commented that handling is powerful since it 'creates an experience that can't be replicated in school' and that it 'creates a more tangible experience. [It] brings things to life'. There appears to be a common consensus between staff that handling provides a positive experience, leading to a deeper understanding of the object and the culture from which it has come, as well as being an encounter especially useful for individuals with a kinaesthetic style of learning, but not simply for these individuals alone. One staff member commented that object handling 'allows recognition of [the] reason for museums' which is perhaps an important aspect to draw out at a time where, as we have previously discussed, museums are under increasing pressure to prove their value and worth.

Secondly, staff were asked to discuss what use can be made of handling collections, including current and potential uses of collections within the museum service. Many identified typical uses, currently carried out by the museum service, such as schools sessions, reminiscence, talks for local groups, displays, family activities, self-led visits and so on. However a small number highlighted other possibilities, including promoting social interaction between different people groups, development of skills such as problem solving and creativity, and partnering with other institutions like the National Trust and English Heritage.

The result of this preliminary activity demonstrated the need for further discussion, a forum or regular workshops in which to discuss collection access issues as well as to provide an opportunity for collections staff to offer a range of solutions and/or services for colleagues within the Museum Service as well as the wider Culture, Communities and Business Services department of Hampshire County Council.

### **The Collections Survey**

Along with recognising the need for discussions, forums and workshops, the Museum Service also identified a need to conduct a collections survey to understand current practice of object handling within the service, which would in turn be used to develop a grading system by which objects could be made more accessible and available for different purposes outside of storage. Therefore the answers from the preliminary activity discussed above, were used as a means to

inform the collections survey which followed, as they offered a view of the current situation and demonstrated that a deeper understanding needed to be reached in order to understand how objects were being used at the time and the potential for using other collections. Due to a rapid growth of the Museum Service and its collections in the 1980s and 90s as well as the stagnation of collections in storage, it was felt that this survey could have a great impact on using the collections currently sitting in storage at the Museum Service headquarters.

As an employee of the Museum Service, and having previously carried out investigative work on projects involving object handling through outreach activities, I was invited to lead this investigation and given permission to use this as the case study for my thesis. During an initial meeting with Stephen Lowy (former Community Museums Manager) and Chris Elmer (former Learning and Community Engagement Manager) the results from the preliminary activity discussed above were introduced and used to create a list of questions which would allow thorough investigation into frontline handling collections. Based on both the preliminary research activity and an initial questionnaire produced by another member of staff previously contracted to carry out the collections survey, Lowy and Elmer outlined particular questions they wished to include and I offered my own suggestions. Following this meeting a questionnaire template was created, and further developed in a subsequent meeting. During this second meeting a list of keepers/collections officers and members of the Learning and Community Engagement team (at the time the Learning, Access and Interpretation team) was produced to receive the questionnaire. Finally, an email was constructed to explain the purpose of the collections survey (see appendix 1).

The questions were carefully and collaboratively chosen to elicit the essential information required by the museum service to demonstrate examples of current good practice as well as highlighting areas where improvement could be made, in order to make more of Hampshire's collections accessible to the public. As with any questionnaire produced, it is important to consider how it will be used with participants. In this example the questionnaire was to be emailed to a select group of staff responsible for care and use of collections, and therefore the format needed to be straightforward and simple to complete without taking much of the staff member's time. Careful phrasing of questions was central to the success of the questionnaire, however on receipt of the completed questionnaires it became clear that some of the terminology used had caused some confusion, as well as raising an additional set of questions to be addressed in further investigations. Both open and closed questions were used rather than one or the other, intending to produce a combination of personal comments as well as facts from participants about their collections.

The aim of this stage of the investigation of current practice was to gain an understanding of how collections at the Museum Service were being used with the public in a handling context.

Hampshire in particular offers a particularly good snapshot of museum structures across the country, comprising, as it does, of a variety of different disciplines and approaches, and having staff representing a variety of roles including collections officers, keepers, conservators, curators, learning and community engagement officers, and exhibitions officers.

The results were used to produce a report for the Museum Service which could then be used to inform collections staff of the best use of objects within their care and to identify collections that could be used for handling with the public as well as identifying gaps within Hampshire's collections that needed to be filled. In the following chapter, the results of this survey are discussed in the context of the research question, addressing ways in which collections are currently being used with the public, and highlighting the potential for other handling opportunities.

### Methodology Part Two: Interviews with Hampshire Museum Service

Having established the current use of Hampshire's handling collections, the second part of the methodology involves an investigation into the perspectives of Hampshire Museum Service staff. This consisted of in-depth interviews with selected staff that completed a questionnaire during the first stage, as well as a responsibility for working with collections. The report produced from the results of the questionnaire highlighted a number of issues that had not been discussed in preliminary consultations prior to the distribution of the survey to Museums staff. One of the main aspects to arise was the need to clarify terminology when discussing object handling in particular, as well as soliciting individual responses regarding the use of collections in handling contexts across the county.

Using the staff list put forward for the initial questionnaire, I produced a list of individuals to interview, representing the different roles mentioned above. The aim was to answer some of the questions arising from the first stage, including: what was actually meant by the term *object handling*; the individual's relationship with the objects in their care or used in their role; what they considered the reasons for, the benefits, and disadvantages of object handling; and how, in an ideal world, they would carry out object handling effectively in the museum environment.

Participants selected represented those whose role consisted of direct contact with objects, including two conservators, four education staff, three keepers, one collections manager, the head of collections, the head of community museums and an exhibitions curator.

This stage of the investigation was conducted over a period of twelve months in the form of interviews approximately one hour in length. Participants were invited to take part via email or in person, and informed that the conversation would be recorded so that it could be later

transcribed to avoid miss-quoting. They were informed that at any point they could pull out of the interview and their responses would not be incorporated into this thesis. The structure of the interview process is discussed in chapter seven, where an analysis of the responses of participants are also discussed, compared and contrasted.

### Methodology Part Three: Object handling sessions observed and evaluated

The third part of this research consists of analysing the results of using objects with the public through a series of handling workshops and sessions with three different groups in Hampshire; staff and students from the archaeology department at the University of Southampton, members of Southampton Young Archaeologist club, and key stage two children from Hampshire Schools. The object handling sessions ranged from seminars and lectures, to practical extra-curricular activities and school workshops. A variety of methods of evaluation have been used to analyse the data and reach an understanding of the effects of object handling on participants.

Evaluation is both a useful and invaluable tool, and as such deserves our attention before introducing the object handling opportunities provided in the case studies. Evaluation is not new. However, that does not mean it is not an important tool for understanding visitor experiences. Over the past two decades, museum educators have increasingly realised the importance of evaluation in their work (Allard 1995, Hein 1995, Dean 1996, McNutt 2000, White 2000), resulting in this being both an essential tool and expected practice at the culmination of an exhibition or project. Of note is that traditionally evaluation has focussed on ascertaining the success of an exhibition or project based on three factors: firstly the number of visitors through the door, secondly whether the visitor successfully receives the message of an exhibition, and thirdly whether that visitor enjoyed their experience. While the first factor can be useful in determining success in terms of quantitative data, this is dangerous territory, for it encourages museums to focus solely on producing something that will draw in the crowds rather than providing a meaningful experience (Dean 1996:92). The second and third factors rely more on qualitative data and are perhaps a little more difficult to establish, requiring museums to think creatively about how they tease out the information to prove visitors both understand and enjoy their experience. Continuous evaluation enables museums to critically examine the way in which they work, helping to improve the impact of an exhibit or workshop as well as revealing what visitors want. Therefore it is important that evaluation be regarded as a dynamic and on-going tool and not an obligatory end of project/exhibition practice.

Methods of evaluation, formal and informal, are wide ranging, including comments boards, written questionnaires, open-ended discussions, formal interviews, cognitive and affective tests, and unobtrusive observation. However it is important to note that simply to employ only one of these methods alone does not provide the in-depth detail required to make an evaluation worthwhile. Consequently, the evaluation methods used in this stage of the methodology are varied in order to elicit a range of responses from participants. Informal evaluations can produce valuable information, by adopting formative and summative, cognitive and affective methods, since the evaluator discovers concrete information gained as well as the visitor's attitude toward or appreciation of their experience (Dean 1996:100). In contrast formal evaluation produces quantifiable data which can perhaps be more easily reported and assimilated; particularly useful for institutions required by funding bodies, to demonstrate their value and legitimate claim for financial support. This pressure is most evident in the way museums increasingly rely on this outside support in order to survive for use by the public, they must justify this level of funding and as a result experience demands from above in terms of performance, delivery and effectiveness (Black 2005, p.150, Weil 2003).

One of the problems of this performance based evaluation is the fact that much work carried out in the museum focuses on the short term; analysing the visitor's experience within a particular exhibition or workshop, and using this information to inform future projects or exhibitions, as well as answering the funding body requirements to demonstrate footfall. Very little has been done to evaluate visitor experiences in a longitudinal study. It could be argued that this is in part due to the difficulties in pin-pointing which museum related experiences have an impact on a visitor and can be recalled ten, twenty, thirty years later in an entirely different context. This lack of longitudinal evaluation does not mean that the practice is a worthless activity. Indeed evaluation is vital in the short term to ascertain how the museum profession can work towards providing a place for learning and enjoyment for all groups of society to use.

Much evaluation work has developed alongside the development of education in museums, and as a result there has been a surge in organisations and academics seeking to produce a means by which learning can be evaluated in the museum environment (Black 2005, p.150, Pontin 2006, p.117). It is important in employing evaluation methods, to understand why we evaluate in the first place. I have already highlighted the pressure museums are under, to demonstrate they fulfil the requirements of government agenda and funding bodies, but this should not be the only reason evaluation is undertaken. This need to prove can often be seen as those bodies controlling what, why and how we evaluate, often making others critical of its value.

For my own research I mainly use qualitative means of evaluation and attempt to present this as statistical data in the following chapter. Qualitative evaluation concerns itself with experience, based on constructivist epistemologies, attempting to offer meaning, and the methods employed

will vary depending on the focus and agenda of the evaluator and to whom they report their findings (Pontin 2006, p.118). My research attempts to understand how object handling impacts individuals in order to demonstrate that it is a valuable activity that should be more readily available in the museum environment.

Working with archaeology staff and students consisted of a lunchtime seminar and a series of interactive lectures, held at the University of Southampton, in which the concept of object handling was discussed, accompanied by handling museum artefacts from Southampton City Museum Service. During this session participants were invited to think creatively and personally, considering how objects made them feel and what memories and experiences they linked to them, as well as thinking interpretively about the owner and use of the objects. They were asked to discuss with the group and write down their responses and experiences in a small four page booklet, which was then collected and analysed. The session worked on theoretical principles discussed in chapter two whereby objects have agency and life biographies, as well as drawing on the concept that touch is a social action. Analysis of the data collected looked for trends in the way participants expressed negative and positive responses to handling/not handling objects as well as looking for ways in which the objects became metaphors for ideas, concepts and memories.

Two meetings of the Southampton branch of the Young Archaeologists' Club, held at the University of Southampton, involved handling the university collections and using geophysical survey equipment to explore an area of Southampton common. The children's responses to their experiences were collected through feedback forms in which they could either draw or write their response to two questions; *what do you remember most about your experience* and *what did you enjoy most about your experience*. In the same way, the schools workshops have been evaluated using the same method, in addition to employing methods of meaning mapping, questionnaires and participant observation. These different elements were then analysed using the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) framework pioneered by the MLA and University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museum Studies (RCMG).

Pontin (2006, p.119) notes that funding from various sources including the Department for Education and Skills (DFES), Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to increase the education content of museums over the past decade has resulted in evaluation being important practice. One of the benefits of this has been the *Inspiring Learning for All* project, a partnership between MLA and the University of Leicester's RCMG. This project provides museums, libraries and archives with information about how they can develop 'a more professional approach to education and learning, and enable them to do so' (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.20).

Where previously museums' attempts to understand learning focussed on what people learnt as a result of visiting a museum exhibition (Faulk and Dierking 2000, p.11), Hooper-Greenhill (2007, p.39) observes learning is not as straight forward, often 'taking the form of the reinforcement or reiteration of that which is already familiar'. She argues learning is more subtle and as such an approach was needed that acknowledged these subtleties rather than focussing solely on the major changes. As a result of this recognition a conceptual framework was produced which represented generic categories of learning taking place in cultural institutions. The process of producing these outcomes was by no means a simple one, with many discussions taking place between researchers and a pilot project involving fifteen museums, libraries and archives carried out to test the GLOs in the context of their own research projects (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.48, pp.57-60). Narrowed down to five categories, the GLOs are a valuable tool for assessing and evaluating visitor experiences by identifying areas of progression in people's learning experience; Knowledge and Understanding, Skills, Attitudes and Values, Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity, and Activity, Behaviour and Progressions (figure 4).



Figure 4. The Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) framework. Source: [www.inspiringlearningforall.org](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.org)

*Knowledge and Understanding* are inextricably linked; knowledge on its own does not result in understanding, it is when the learner links their experience to what he or she already knows that understanding takes place. This category includes: knowing 'what' or knowing 'about' something; learning facts and information; making sense of something; deepening understanding; knowing how museums, libraries and archives operate; and making links and relationships between things.

Hooper-Greenhill (2007, p.53) comments that knowledge can be acquired in a variety of ways, for example through reading, listening, talking, looking and trying things out. Of note is that she explains the power of objects exposing ‘conventional distinctions’, leading to ‘new perspectives on knowing and learning’. Taking this further, I suggest that not only coming into contact with objects by sight in the museum, but by physically engaging with them through handling provides opportunities for knowledge to be obtained and understanding deepened.

*Skills*, Hooper-Greenhill (2007, p. 54) explains, are intellectual, social, emotional and physical. Where we might only consider ‘key skills’ such as numeracy, communication, use of IT and learning how to learn, research revealed a variety of other skills, of as much importance and those key ones identified, often overlapping, and which can be built upon as part of a learning experience in museums. Defining the skills category, experiences can be evaluated in terms of: knowing how to do something; being able to do new things; intellectual skills; information management skills; social skills; communication skills; and physical skills.

Each of these identified skills can be further broken down to include, for example, writing, speaking, listening, and presenting, for communication skills. Researchers noted that museum visits frequently promote the development of social and emotional skills, since the nature of exhibitions require visitors to engage with concepts and ideas which can often be provocative or difficult to grasp. I suggest, again, that object handling provides a perfect opportunity for a variety of these skills to be developed, since by their nature they compel the handler to use intellectual skills to make sense of what they have in front of them, social and communication skills in order to work together to create meaning, physical skills to ensure objects are handled carefully and emotional skills to make links between the complex history of a provocative object.

*Attitudes and Values* are ‘developed by learners as an integral part of their learning in both formal and informal environments’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.54). Information acquired informs the way attitudes develop, resulting in values being formed and impacting the decisions an individual makes about their self. These include: feelings; perceptions; opinions about ourselves (e.g. self-esteem); opinions or attitudes toward other people; increased capacity for tolerance; empathy; increased motivation; attitudes towards an organisation; and positive and negative attitudes in relation to an experience.

By their nature, museums are places where individuals’ perceptions are challenged, intentionally or not. This is particularly true of children who are still forming opinions about their self and the world around them. *Attitudes and values* can be both positive and negative; a good experience will result in a positive attitude toward an organisation, such as a museum, similarly a bad experience will result in a negative attitude. Object handling enables this development of attitudes and values as they challenge our perception of the world and our place in it, as well as

our attitude toward the museums that care for and protect artefacts for the future. Particularly provocative objects, such as those linked with difficult topics like slavery, can cause people to change the way they see both themselves and others.

Hooper-Greenhill (2007, p.49) remarks that very early on it was decided that enjoyment be an outcome since this was frequently referred to as significant when people discussed their cultural experiences, with the pilot project revealing the importance of enjoyment and inspiration for teachers and their pupils visiting museums. *Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity* includes: having fun; being surprised; innovative thoughts; creativity; exploration, experimentation and making; and being inspired.

Put quite simply, when an experience is enjoyable, the learner is more likely to want to return to learn more. Enjoyable experiences are easier to understand and engage with. Much in the same way museums have been described as ‘open-ended learning environments’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p. 56), object handling provides the same element of open-ended learning. It is an activity that requires the individual to explore and experiment, often being inspired by the object in front of them to go out and learn more or be creative.

Finally, *Activity, Behaviour and Progression* is based on action – what people do as the result of a learning experience. This category includes: what people do; what people intend to do; what people have done; reported or observed actions; and change in the way people manage their lives.

Quite a broad category by nature, *Activity, Behaviour and Progression* is not limited by a single experience or to the confines of a museum, library or archive site; instead it can translate into many areas of a person’s life including work, study, home and family. Actions can change as a result of engaging with material culture, and particularly when this is a tactile encounter. It may be as simple as deciding to return to the museum, buying a book on a particular topic, or a change in the way that person interacts with material culture in the future.

It is important to note that the GLOs are not a target to aim for, they are an interpretive framework, based on constructivist and socio-cultural learning theory, by which research questions can be developed, research tools designed, and findings can be analysed and interpreted (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.60). The methods an evaluator employs to understand a visitor’s learning experience will vary, but the GLOs provide a means to understand the data collected and present the information in a way that will inform those reading an evaluation report. In chapter eight, where I present my case studies of object handling in practice, the GLOs have been an invaluable tool to assess the type of learning taking place in a way which clearly demonstrates the benefits of a hands-on approach to engaging with material culture.

Pontin (2006, p.117) notes that although at present there is much good practice in evaluation, there is still a deal to be done on evaluation techniques, how we use the data obtained and understanding this in museums. She argues that in order to progress, we need to improve current and trial new methods. Writing in 2006, she commented it was too early to assess the effectiveness of the GLO's in improving museum best practice, remarking that the 'results can minimize the data and much may be lost or not visible to the reader' (Pontin 2006, p.120). This again can be attributed the nature of much evaluation work focussing on the short term, rather than the long term. She asks whether short term evaluation represents the change in someone who previously felt their life was not going anywhere and now volunteers at a museum and at the beginning of a training course. Indeed her question is entirely valid and identifies one of the limitations of the current practice of evaluation.

During the *Touch and the Value of Object Handling* Workshops in 2006-2007, participants discussed the methods used to evaluate the experiences of different groups of people handling museum objects. Concerns about what they see as the almost interrogation like method of the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) prompted consideration of other means of ascertaining the learning that had taken place. One participant explained that during an object handling session with a group of six year old children, instead of using a traditional questionnaire, children were asked to reconstruct, using felt, the objects they had previously handled. The results of this activity demonstrated how effective the handling session was in terms of learning through the pupils' felt reproductions of the objects. It was observed that for certain groups and particularly children, verbally engaging in a discourse about what they learned and experienced at the museum is not entirely effective, whereas creating an image of their experience not only expresses this but is 'durational' (Romanek and Lynch 2008, p.284). Based on these findings, children's responses in the case studies I present, have been collected through their drawings as well as written and verbal discourse.

Witcomb (2008, p.360) states that museums must be aware that interactivity is not simply limited to the provision of high-tech interactives, but involves placing the audience at the forefront. Museums need 'a willingness to recognize differences in values and claims to knowledge, and a desire to develop partnerships between the museum as an institution and the audiences which use it' (Witcomb 2008, p. 360) Tactile engagement with museum collections are an integral part of this process of developing partnerships between museums and their visitors, and the case studies presented in chapter eight explore this concept, highlighting the potential of objects as a means of connecting people not only to the past, but to each other.

## Chapter Six

### Analysis of the Collections Survey

We have already seen in chapter three, that pioneering work is being carried out which reveals the power of tactile engagement with objects; however this represents only a snapshot of ground-breaking research and not the everyday museum experience. It would be naïve to begin a discussion extolling the benefits of increasing hands-on access to museum collections without first understanding current practice, therefore this chapter presents a picture of how collections are being used. The results of the Hampshire County Museum Service collections survey provide us with a clear view of the way people engage with Hampshire's collections, and demonstrate the positive attitude this organisation has towards handling.

My initial assessment when asked to conduct the collections survey, was that this would be a straightforward investigation, offering uncomplicated answers to questions such as 'how are your handling collections used' and 'which groups most frequently use your handling collections'. One of the outcomes of this investigation was the realisation that terminology is important when discussing the use of objects for handling. For ease of understanding I, perhaps short-sightedly, chose the term *handling collection* in order to refer to objects used with the public in any form, but I had not foreseen the reaction my choice would cause. For many *handling* is accompanied with an enormous amount of baggage, and negative baggage at that. My positive experiences as a child means that for me this term does not carry negative associations as it was through object handling I decided to become an archaeologist, and is why I now work hard to offer the public the same experiences I had. However, through discussion with colleagues at Hampshire Museum service, it became clear that a number of different meanings exist for the term *handling*; meanings which are not necessarily positive in their outlook. For example one survey participant wrote of many situations where handling had gone wrong;

'My experience over twenty-five years leads me to urge extreme caution in handling original objects ... many materials in the decorative arts are incredibly fragile ... I witnessed a pot with a lid being turned upside down by a colleague in another institution without the lid being held tight and it smashed irreparably.'

Understandably this negative experience of handling caused this participant to be cautious about loaning objects for specific handling purposes with the public. And this was not the only example; many others wrote of their concern for the objects in their collections based purely on their own negative experiences. We need to overcome this association between handling and miss-handling, as I believe this is the route of why many museum professionals are reluctant to champion tactile engagement with collection.

As a result of the collections survey, and subsequent report submitted to HCCMS, the term *Frontline Collections* has now been introduced as a replacement for *Handling Collections* in order that all levels of interaction with objects are considered.

### Collecting the data

As introduced in chapter five, prior to conducting the collections survey, discussions took place to ascertain who should be asked to participate. At the time of the collections survey in 2008, Hampshire Museum Service staff numbered over 150 covering a wide variety of roles ranging from those who largely worked front of house in museums across the service to those working solely with collections. As this large workforce included such a variety of roles, many of which did not involve direct contact with collections, it was agreed that only staff with a remit for actively working with collections be contacted and asked to complete the collection survey questionnaire, since this would provide the most accurate information about how collections were being used in handling contexts. To that end a total of 35 individuals, distributed across the county, were contacted including fifteen keepers, eight curators, seven education officers, three museum managers, one conservator and one collections registrar. Of those 35 questionnaires emailed to staff, 22 were returned with one keeper choosing instead to return a four page document in response to the questions posed; a total of 23 responses altogether, a 65% response rate. The 23 responses include five education officers (now Learning and Community Engagement officers), four museum/site managers, seven curators and seven collections keepers (Archaeology, Transport and Technology, Childhood collections, Dress and Textiles, Decorative Art, Natural Sciences, and the Local Studies collections). In addition twelve museums across the service were represented;

- Westbury Manor Museum, Fareham
- Milestones, Basingstoke
- Basing House, Basingstoke
- Bursledon Windmill
- Aldershot Military Museum
- SEARCH, Gosport
- Andover Museum and Museum of the Iron Age
- The Willis Museum, Basingstoke
- Eastleigh Museum
- The Curtis Museum, Alton
- The Allen Gallery, Alton
- St Barbe Museum and Art Gallery, Lymington

### The Questionnaire Results

The results from the questionnaire revealed a variety of viewpoints and certainly raised a few concerns about frontline collections. Unlike many surveys that use questionnaires, this survey

was successful in the number of returns; eleven of the service's nineteen community museums and sites responded, as well as six sections at HQ and a large number of the Learning and Community Engagement (LCE) team. The questionnaire (see appendix 1.2) was emailed to specific members of staff across the whole service including those at the museum headquarters site in Winchester, and in community museums and sites across the county with direct responsibility for objects. Consisting of twelve questions, it aimed to understand not only what types of objects are in the handling collections but also how they are used by the public. The specific questions chosen, were produced through consultation between Stephen Lowy (former Community Museums Manager), Chris Elmer (former Learning and Community Engagement Manager) and myself, and consisted of the following:

1. Approximately how many objects do you currently have in your handling collection?
2. Are these objects real or replica?
3. Could you identify what percentage of the objects in your collections is accessioned/un-accessioned?
4. How many members of staff (including education staff) at your museum/site use these handling collections?
5. Which groups of people are these collections used with? (e.g. Schools and colleges, reminiscence groups, clubs and societies, individuals)
6. How are these collections used? (e.g. demonstrations, presentations/talks, hands-on displays, family activity days, outreach, research)
7. Are these collections used in supervised or non-supervised situations?
8. Where are the handling collections used? (e.g. in the museum, in schools, outreach other than in schools)
9. Have you received any requests from groups or individuals for objects/artefacts which are not currently in your handling collections? What are these?
10. Are there any artefacts/groups of objects you would like in your collections? Are there any gaps you would like to fill?
11. Do you use, or have you used, loan objects from sources outside Hampshire Museum Service?
12. Do you have any additional comments to make about your handling collections?

Since many of the questions posed required factual responses, much of the data analysis took the form of grouping the data into categories for coding, and looking for the frequency of occurrence of each answer. For example in response to question one, which aimed to ascertain the number of objects in handling collections, responses were grouped numerically with categories increasing in values of fifty (i.e. less than 50, 51-100, 101-150 etc.). Where some questions required words rather than numbers, the data was grouped into categories identified from the participants responses with answers coded against these different categories; for

example in response to question five – which groups of people are these collections used with – six categories were identified for data to be coded against: schools; reminiscence groups; clubs and societies; individuals; families; and training course delegates. The final question posed, inviting staff to put forward addition comments regarding their handling collections, called for a more thematic approach as many respondents highlighted concerns as well as stressing the value of object handling. Where this was the case, analysis of the data draws out some of the key themes discussed by those taking part in the survey.

The answers to each question provide an important understanding of the current practice of object handling within Hampshire County Museum Service, and to that end I present the results below.

**Question one: Approximately how many objects do you currently have in your handling collections?**

The answers to this varied considerably, which I attribute the confusion surrounding the term *handling collection*. Whilst many took this question at face value and answered simply with an approximate number, some answered with a comment such as:

‘[It is] difficult to differentiate handling from set dressing from open display. A lot of Milestones display is not cased and can be touched/handled by visitors’ (Manager, Milestones Museum)

‘...I’m not sure what really constitutes the actual [handling] collection’ (Education Officer, Milestones Museum)

‘A childhood collections handling collection doesn’t exist as such. In the past accessioned objects have been used for access/handling projects. This practise was discontinued a few years ago’ (Keeper, Childhood Collections)

‘[I] can’t answer this question at the moment – we have no dedicated handling collection but are identifying suitable items for handling as we conduct a grading exercise and recording the information on modes’ (Keeper, Dress and Textiles)

In terms of collecting quantitative data for analysis, these answers may appear to be problematic, however they demonstrate the main issue which prompted an investigation into how the term *handling collection* should be addressed. If staff at the museum service, whose job it is to handle objects on a daily basis, are unclear about the parameters of the term, then how can a handling service be offered to visitors?

Figure 5 below illustrates the quantitative data collected, however we must delve deeper to reveal how the figures reflect the bigger picture of the number of handling collections held by the museum service.

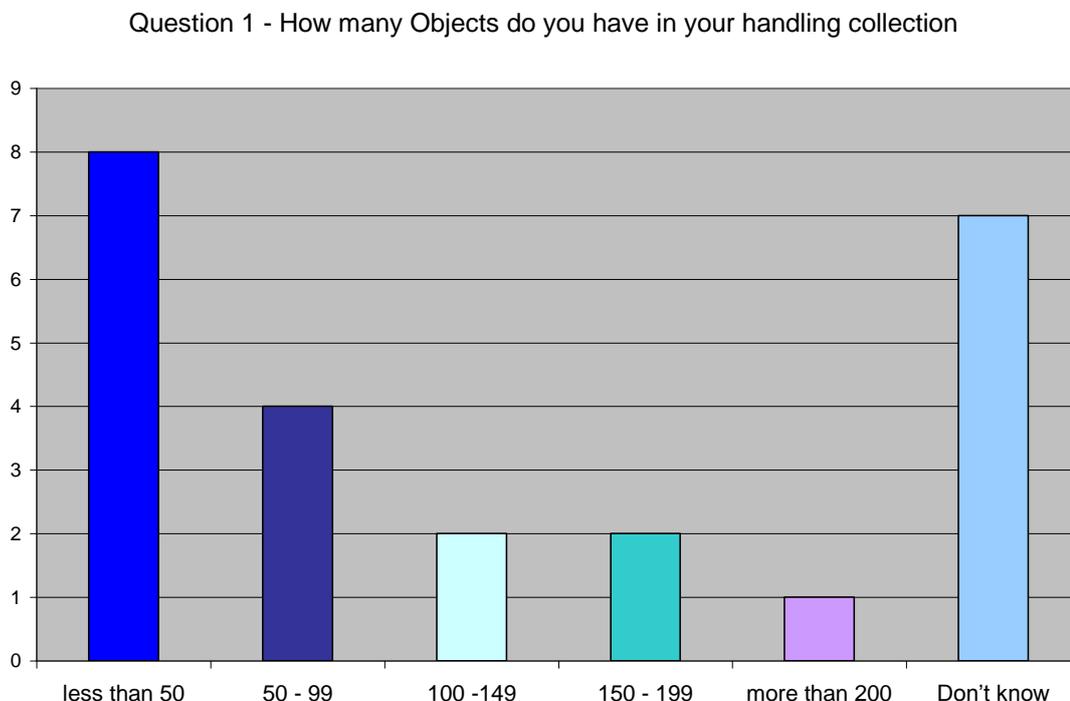


Figure 5. Chart illustrating the approximate number of objects in handling collections across Hampshire Museum Service.

Many respondents at the museums headquarters (herein Chilcomb HQ) stated they did not have a handling collection at all, when in fact their responses to questions later in the questionnaire suggest that they offer their collections for handling by individuals outside the museum service, albeit for research purposes by other professionals or students. Nevertheless in the context of this question Chilcomb HQ sections without designated handling collections include; Decorative arts (ceramics etc), Childhood collections, Dress and Textiles and Biology/Natural Sciences. A handful of keepership staff stated they were in the process of compiling handling material specifically for the public to handle, however it was unclear whether the objects within this would be de-accessioned items deemed not necessary as part of the core collections.

In addition to Chilcomb HQ sections, many smaller community museums and sites in the service do not have designated handling collections; Gosport Gallery, the Museum on the Mezzanine in the Gosport Discovery Centre, and Havant Museum (now The Spring Arts and Heritage Centre) do not offer any objects for the public to handle, either on open display or

through outreach. When handling material is used at these sites it is generally brought to the site by a Learning and Community Engagement (LCE) officer or interpreter-demonstrator for use in led school sessions.

In contrast to this, several sites have such a large number of objects designated for public handling that it is difficult to give an approximate number of individual items. SEARCH and Milestones Museum are the main sites where this is the case; SEARCH having several thousand objects for handling, hardly surprising in that it is a museum whose tagline is 'Hands-on Centre for History and Natural Science'. Milestones too, as a living history museum, have a large number of objects that are not only used with school groups but with visitors to the museum on a daily basis.

Other sites with larger collections of handling material include; Eastleigh Museum, The Willis Museum, Andover Museum and the Museum of the Iron Age, Aldershot Military Museum and Westbury Manor Museum (all community museums). At these sites, the number of objects available for handling is one-hundred and over. It is important, however, to note that these sites with larger handling collections have a high number of visits from schools groups for led sessions with LCE officers or interpreter-demonstrators. These sessions not only investigate history through permanent and temporary exhibitions and displays, but also use objects from the collections to deepen an understanding of a particular history curriculum topic. In the context of this thesis, this confirms the traditional viewpoint that handling takes place with specific groups, since the larger handling collections exist mainly at sites with a high schools provision.

The remaining museums and sites in the service offer smaller collections of objects for handling. Included in this are the Curtis Museum and St. Barbe Museum and Art Gallery, both having fewer than fifty objects designated for handling by the public. Basing House and Bursledon Windmill (both outdoor sites) have even smaller collections consisting of six and seven main objects respectively, although at the time of writing this thesis, Bursledon Windmill were awaiting twenty additional objects from Chilcomb HQ, to become part of their display at the site and which visitors will be able to interact with.

At Chilcomb HQ, the Archaeology section stated they have access to thirty objects in their extensive collections of finds, which can be used for handling. However many of these items exist in multiple examples; for example a group of flint hand-axes are classed as one object. The archaeology section piloted a handling scheme for Visually Impaired groups in the county, where groups were offered an archaeology talk from one of the Museum Service's

archaeologists, using objects in the collection, and were invited to handle objects highlighted in the talk. These handling opportunities proved to be very successful in terms of visitor enjoyment (Hampshire Museum Service Staff pers. comm.).

Beyond the Chilcomb HQ sections, Community Museums and Sites, LCE officers who responded to the questionnaire stated that they also have collections of objects which they use in hands-on sessions with the public. Many of these collections are kept at the LCE officer's work-base and transported to sites where required. These include outreach sessions at schools in Hampshire as well as schools sessions across various museums and sites. The fact that these LCE officers are required to build up their own collections highlights an issue, discussed further in chapter seven, where many education staff reveal the problem in obtaining objects from main collections for use with visiting groups.

Question two: Are these objects real or replica?

During discussions with Lowy and Elmer prior to constructing and distributing the collections survey questionnaire to staff, the decision was made to ascertain the numbers of genuine and replica used in handling collections. In Hampshire replica material is generally used where a particular object in a collection is deemed unsuitable for handling due to its rarity or condition, but is considered important in understanding more about a particular individual or event in the past. An example of this would be Tudor replicas used during schools handling sessions, as the Museum service have few items from that period in the collections. In addition to this, replicas are often used where gaps in the collections are present, for example Egyptian artefacts.

The main objective of this question was to determine whether staff tended to use more replica objects in their frontline collections rather than using the 'real thing' when engaging the public through handling, thereby revealing their views on the concept of object handling.

Question 2 - What percentage of your handling collection is Real?

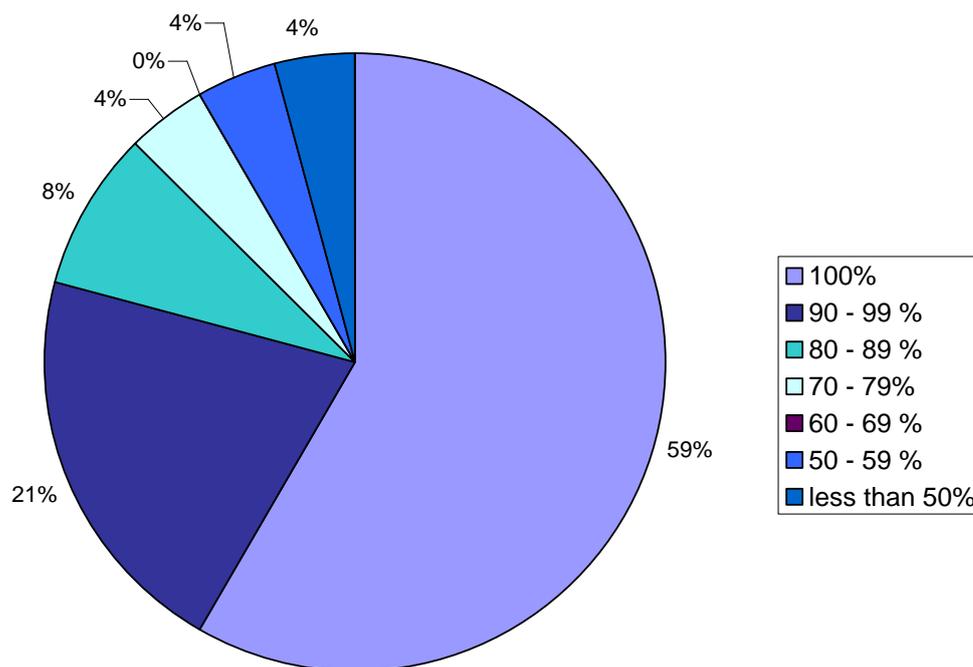


Figure 6. Chart illustrating participants' responses when asked what percentage of their collections consist of real objects. The key represents what percentage of collections are real artefacts instead of replicas.

Figure 6 reveals that over 50% of Hampshire Museum Service collections consist entirely of real objects. Only one returned questionnaire revealed that the staff member's collection contained less than 50% real objects. Contrary to what might be expected, due to the large size of the archaeology collection, 25% of this consists of replica artefacts.

Two LCE officers stated their collection contain replica items, although both said this consisted of less than 20% of the overall handling collection they use with their groups. Sites where a higher percentage of the collection consists of replica objects were mainly community museums such as St. Barbe. It is interesting to highlight the connection between the number of replicas used in collection and sites where school sessions take place. The connection seems to suggest that due to the nature of handling sessions, replicas are required in order to protect the main collections from damage.

**Question three: what percentage of the objects in your handling collections are accessioned/non-accessioned?**

Similar to question two, this question aimed to understand how staff members view their handling collections in terms of accessioned and non-accessioned material; when using objects

with the public, are non-accessioned items preferred? Do their handling collections contain objects the museum service deem not worthy of being in the main collections and therefore suitable for handling by the public?

### Question 3 - What percentage of your handling collection is accessioned?

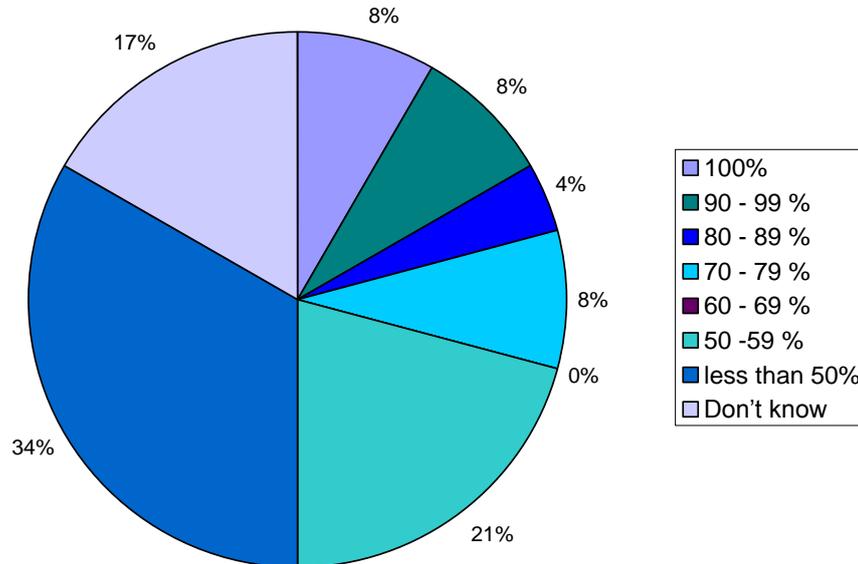


Figure 7. Chart illustrating the percentage of collections consisting of objects accessioned into Hampshire Museum Service collections. The Key represents the percentage of a collection that is accessioned.

Answers to this question were varied indeed (figure 7). Responses revealed that only 8% of handling collections are 100% accessioned: that of Andover Museum and Museum of the Iron Age and the Dress and Textiles section at Chilcomb HQ. Most handling collections consist of non-accessioned items; with some staff uncertain how many of their handling objects are accessioned or non-accessioned. For example one LCE officer stated:

‘without knowing what actually constitutes the handling collection, it’s difficult to say what proportion is accessioned, but if a vague answer will do, it’s definitely less than 50%’.

Another problem facing museum staff is what constitutes accessioned objects; staff at SEARCH in Gosport use mostly accessioned artefacts, but of these accessioned collections 75% have a separate number corresponding to a database outside the Modes Collection Management System<sup>1</sup> used for the main bulk of the museum service collections.

<sup>1</sup> Hampshire County Museum Service uses the Modes Collection Management system to record objects in the collections. It is a flexible database system, enabling museums to keep searchable structured catalogue records. More information can be found at [www.modes.org.uk](http://www.modes.org.uk)

Instances where collections largely consist of non-accessioned objects are generally those used by LCE officers, who source objects either from de-accessioned collections, archaeological digs, charity shops or from reproduction companies specialising in historical and archaeological artefacts. There emerges a link between the number of non-accessioned object used in handling contexts and the difficulty in obtaining objects for use with the public, which appears to be perpetuated by the misunderstanding of how objects are used during handling session. This issue is discussed further in the following chapter.

**Question four: How many members of staff (including LCE staff) at your museum/site use these handling collections?**

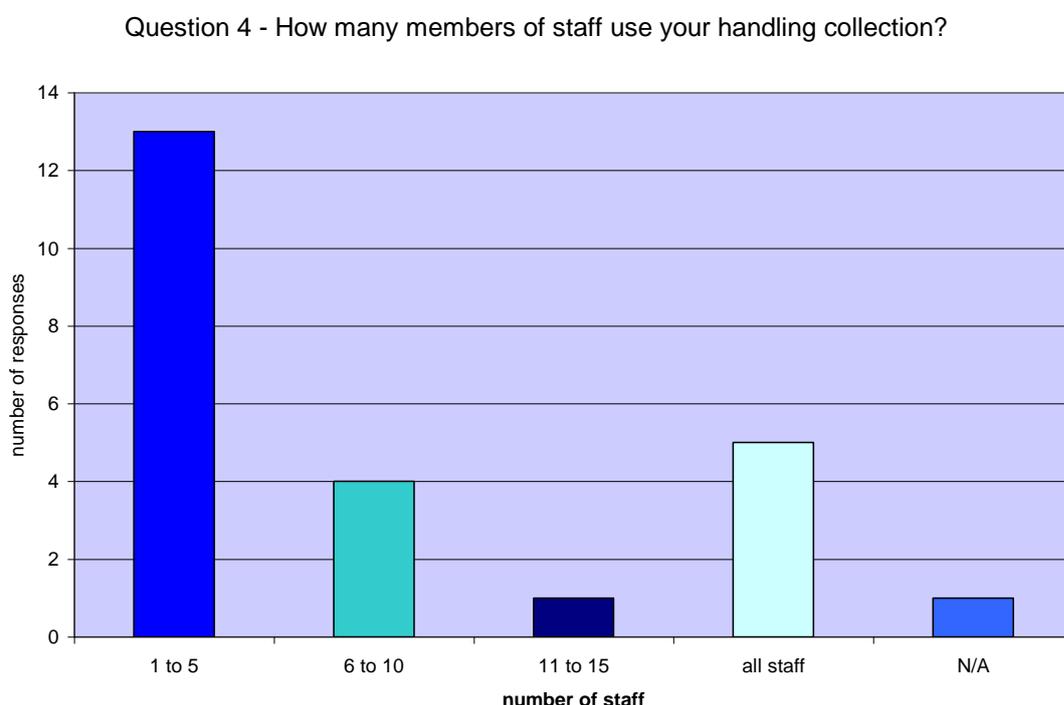


Figure 8. Chart illustrating the number of staff members using Hampshire Museum Service handling collections.

This question aimed to understand the staffing structure in relation to how frontline collections are used by members of the museum service staff. As with previous questions, the answers to question four were wide-ranging. The majority of frontline collections are used with a small number of staff between one and five individuals (54%), which mainly consist of LCE officers and interpreter-demonstrators. Where collections are used with more than eleven members of staff (25%) these tend to be the larger sites, such as Milestones Museum in Basingstoke, where a large team of costumed interpreters use artefacts in their schools sessions, and in activities with the general public. In addition keepers of collections at Chilcomb HQ commented that their handling collections are available to be used by all staff in the museum service; however to what extent this actually takes place is unclear. The trend that smaller numbers of staff using

collections being LCE officers and their team of interpreter-demonstrators is interesting, as it is the collections used by LCE staff, which contains higher numbers of non-accessioned objects.

**Question five: which groups of people are these collections used with?**

Not only was it important to understand what handling collections are available, but to ascertain which groups of people engage with them. Prior to the survey, it was unclear which groups used frontline collections, since most hands-on opportunities promoted through the museum service are typically aimed at schools. Responses to this question demonstrate the varied groups and individuals benefiting from using the collections in a handling context (figure 9).

As expected, the main group using frontline collections are schools and colleges; out of twenty-four responses, nineteen stated their collections are used with this particular group (79%). Had all the distributed questionnaires been returned, this percentage may well have been higher as a number of individuals from some community museums did not respond.

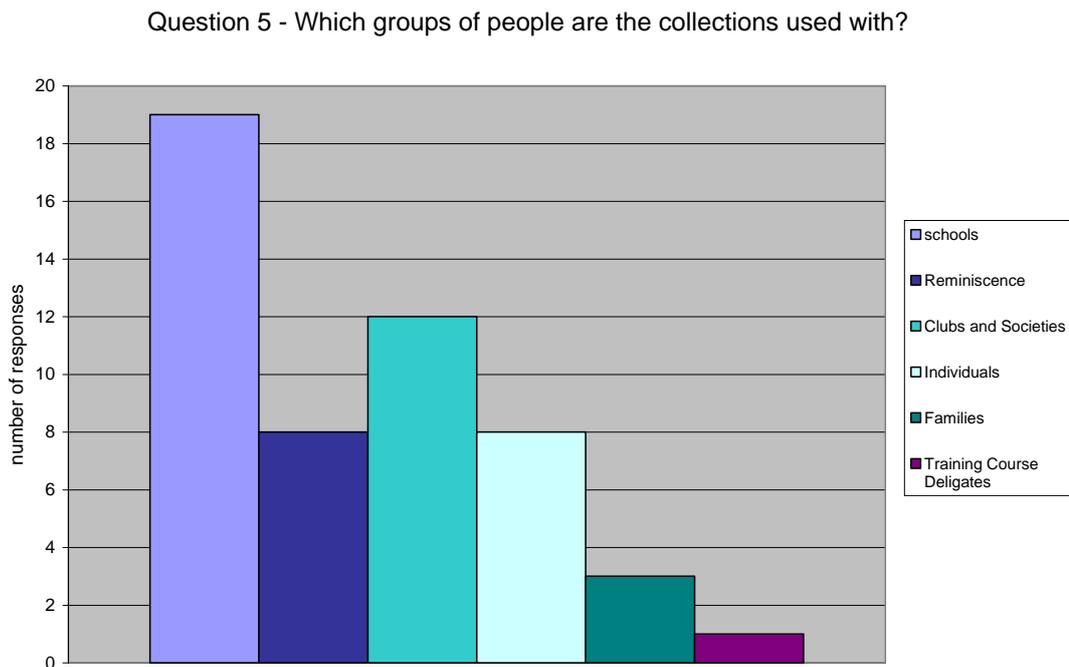


Figure 9. Chart illustrating the types of groups Hampshire Museum Service collections are used with.

Following this, a large percentage of collections were found to be used with clubs and societies (50%); including Scout and Girl Guide groups, local history and community groups at various locations in the county. Further investigation revealed many of these groups are known by particular members of staff who are frequently invited to give talks on topics specified by the group in question; this relationship between museum professional and interested group results

in a more bespoke resource being offered than that officially advertised by the Museum Service (i.e. school sessions).

In addition to schools groups, clubs and societies, a number of frontline collections are used for specific Reminiscence groups, often day care centres in the county. Eighteen out of Twenty Four questionnaires returned revealed that their collections are used with this particular type of groups (33%).

Other staff indicated that their collections are used by individuals as well as groups. For example, Hampshire Museum Service has a reputation for some of the best collections in the United Kingdom and as such attracts researchers from Universities from all over the world as well as individuals interested in particular sets of objects for private study. 33% of the collections are used by individuals for this purpose. More often than not these individuals visit the Museum Service Headquarters (Chilcomb) in Winchester, in particular focussing their studies in the Library, Decorative Arts, Dress and Textiles, and Natural Science collections. However researchers also use collections based at some of the smaller community museums such as Andover Museum and The Museum of the Iron Age.

Perhaps surprisingly, only 12.5% of collections are used with family groups; this usually takes place on family activity days which take place at selected locations across the county, and include events such as the New Forest Show. One site revealed that they use their collections for training (SEARCH in Gosport) and primarily for in-house training courses such as Reminiscence and a course aimed at equipping learning and community engagement staff with skills for using objects with public groups.

### **Question Six – How are the collections used?**

Similar to question five, responses to this question revealed that learning is still at the heart of the museum Service's frontline collections (figure 10). 54% of these collections are used for education sessions with school groups and 37% are used with schools in outreach settings (including Assemblies and in-school workshops). This is perhaps unsurprising, when considering the number of schools sessions offered at SEARCH, Milestones and community museums, as well as the consistent yearly visitor figure targets. The Museum service has had a longstanding reputation for offering high-quality provision for schools throughout the county, and part of this reputation is based on the hands-on nature of these sessions.

## Question 6 - How are the collections used?

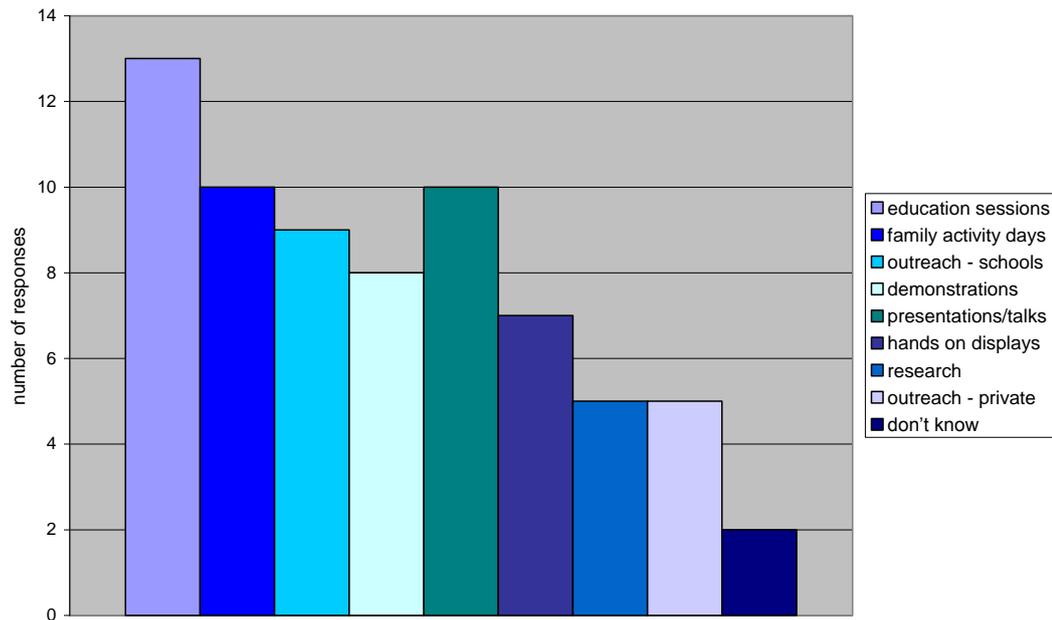


Figure 10. Chart illustrating how Hampshire Museum Service collections are used with the public.

Responses from individuals other than the LCE team reveal that this is not the only use for the Museum Service's collections. Family Activity days and presentations/talks are also popular uses, with 41% of collections being used for these two purposes and 33% of collections used for demonstrations purposes.

Only 29% of collections are used for hands-on displays and a smaller percentage used for research (21%). There is no indication as to whether this is due to public unawareness of the opportunity to use collections for research, or if there simply is not the demand for it.

Two respondents stated that they were not aware how the collections are used as they simply pass items in their care onto other members of staff in the service for use in a variety of settings. In many cases these collections are handed on to LCE staff, for use in school sessions. Since carrying out the collections survey, the remit of the LCE team has been widened to include communities, and there have been many examples of successful projects engaging groups other than school in object handling. These projects, known as *Mini Museums*, have revealed ways in which objects can be used in different contexts, engaging different audience groups, and highlight the benefits of increasing access to stored collections.

### Question Seven – Are these collections used in supervised or non-supervised situations?

On analysing responses to this question, it became clear that the term *supervised* needed clarification. From the responses two possible meanings for *supervised* present; either 100%

museum led supervision or supervision by a person assigned with temporary responsibility for the objects available for handling. The first usually takes place during handling opportunities with communities and specialist groups, whereas the second definition is characteristic of school sessions, whereby a member of the LCE team oversees the whole class, but during smaller group work, group leaders are encouraged to take responsibility for the care of the objects being used by the children. It is for this reason that teachers are required to provide enough adult helpers for a visit to a community museum or site, to ensure pupils are supervised when handling museum artefacts during smaller group work. For the purpose of this questionnaire the term *supervised* has been interpreted as including adult helpers in a supervisory role.

Figure 11 reveals that 58% of handling takes place in an entirely supervised situation; most of these are educational sessions, demonstrations, presentations, talks, and outreach. 8% of collections are supervised a minimum of 50% of the time and tend to be during family activity days and hands-on displays, where large number of visitors make it difficult for 100% supervision to be the case.

Question 7 - Are your handling collections used in supervised or non supervised situations?

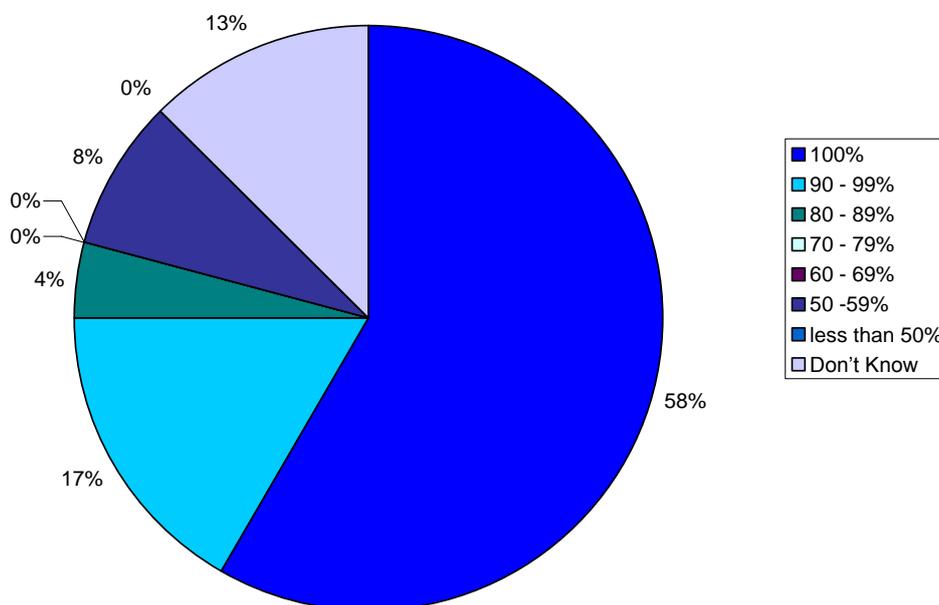


Figure 11. Chart illustrating the types of situations in which Hampshire Museum Service collections are used (Supervised or non supervised). Percentages in this chart represent supervised situations, therefore 100% implies collections are only used in entirely supervised conditions.

13% revealed they did not know under what level of supervision their collections are handled. This percentage is represented by departments based at the Museum Headquarters (Chilcomb) who previously stated that they simply provide objects for use by other members of staff within the service.

**Question Eight – Where are the handling collections used?**

Unsurprisingly, 92% of respondents stated their handling collections are used in Hampshire museums; out of twenty-four responses, only two stated their dedicated handling collections are not used in the museum. 50% said their collections are used in schools as part of outreach projects and sessions, and 33% for outreach other than in schools.

This question revealed an interesting variety of situations where frontline collections are utilised; fairs and fetes (8%), community centres (8%), Clubs (8%) and Day Centres/Sheltered Accommodation (4%). While these locations represent only a small percentage of the overall use of the collections, it is still important to note that Hampshire Museums Service is looking outside the museum to provide hands-on experiences for their visitors in a variety of different contexts.

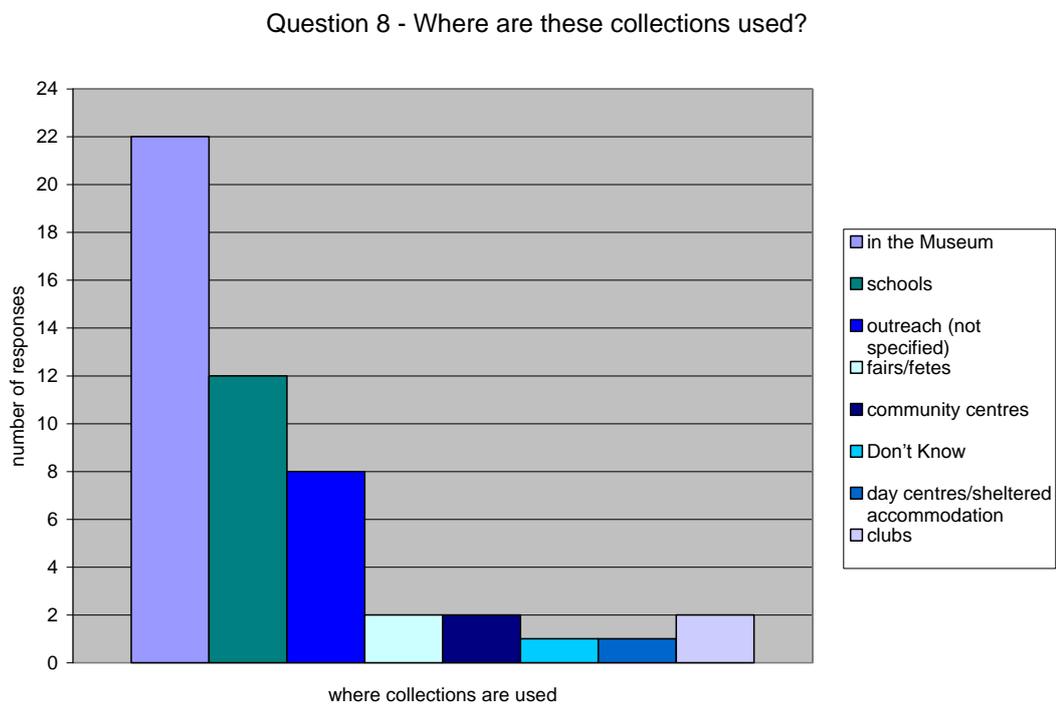


Figure 12. Chart illustrating the environments in which Hampshire Museum Service collections are used.

In addition, it is encouraging to see the variety of sites where objects are used, as this suggests an awareness of the need to take objects out of the museum environment, bringing them to

members of the public who perhaps are unable to physically access one of Hampshire's museums. Most frequently, these outside locations are community centres, nursing homes and day care centres, often where reminiscence sessions are conducted.

**Question nine – Have you received any requests from groups or individuals for objects/artefacts, which are not currently in your handling collections? What are these?**

This question aimed to understand the types of objects the public request and where their interests lie. In response, staff revealed a variety of different requests they received from their visitors, not just in terms of the specific objects or groups of objects requested, but the purpose of the request. Perhaps of most interest is that visitors mainly asked for items available at other museums or sites run by the Museum Service, and were directed toward those other locations. However this is important in demonstrating a need to make the public more aware of what Hampshire's collections consist of; whilst this is being done to great effect through the production of online galleries on the Museum Service website, there is potential to achieve this in a variety of ways (for example through social media).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the LCE team have, on the whole, been asked for objects relating to specific National Curriculum topics, including Egyptians, Tudors, Saxons, Vikings, Romans and so on; these requests mainly arise from primary school teachers. In addition to requests for curriculum based objects, teachers in Havant ask for objects relating to the history of the area in the 1930s and 1950s of which there are little or no examples of at present in handling collections. This interest for local history items has also been noted by Archaeology, who is often asked for objects relating to a variety of locations across the county.

Interestingly, the Willis Museum, Basingstoke, has been asked for objects to be loaned as part of theatrical sets by many local Amateur Dramatic societies and groups from the surrounding area.

Biology has received a number of requests for specific specimens, the most curious being for two particularly large specimens which the service does not possess; a horse and an elephant.

SEARCH noted that many of the requests they receive for individual and groups of objects, are ones that are repeated on a regular basis. During family activity days and open days, visitors to SEARCH are asked to provide feedback on their experiences of the day and what, if anything, they would like to see in future. One of the frequent requests is for Egyptian material of which there is only a small selection in Hampshire Museum Service's collections. Egyptian artefacts are, however, available from Winchester City Museums, who have a sizeable collection. Many

Community museums and sites are asked for more original material and more archaeological artefacts on a regular basis.

**Question ten – Are there any artefacts/groups of objects you would like in your collections?**

This question provided respondents with an opportunity to state the types of objects they may have on their wish list for their Community museum, site or section. Of interest is that many members of staff wished for objects similar to those requested by their visitors. Is this simply coincidence, or because they would like to offer these types of objects to visitors to Hampshire Museums?

Not only did staff request particular types of object, but also raised the issue of quality of objects. Respondents providing resources for schools asked for better quality objects for use in their sessions, many stating their frontline collections are made up of objects which, they believe, are no longer deemed important enough to be part of the main collections. Individuals who felt this way expressed themselves in such a way as to suggest this is quite personal; that keepers and curators do not consider LCE staff and the sessions they facilitate to provide a safe and stable environment for objects to be handled and therefore it would be too risky for main collections to be available for frequent use by school groups and other visitors who are thought to be careless when it comes to object handling. Indeed one member of staff stated that they 'would like better quality objects and not just the general old tat no-one else wants'. Many observed that often items marked for disposal are offered to the LCE team, which may reaffirm the impression that good quality objects are only suitable for handling by the public once they are no longer essential to core collections, and have essentially lost their value and importance. This issue is discussed further in chapter seven.

Evidence exists that some museum visitors are not as careful as they perhaps should be; several museum staff re-counted horror stories whereby objects have been thrown across rooms and held carelessly by weak spots such as handles. This problem can, I argue, be remedied if visitors are given a sense of responsibility to respect and care for their past, by providing them with supervised handling opportunities; not because they cannot be trusted, but by having an expert available to explain the object being handled, individuals understand the object's value. During school sessions at community museums led by LCE officers and interpreter-demonstrators, children are taught the importance of careful object handling and are encouraged to set themselves rules to ensure they protect the objects while they are in use.

On a different note, as well as wanting items requested by their visitors, many respondents expressed a wish for handling material for a specific purpose. For example toys for education sessions and large motor vehicles for the public to climb on and sit in at Milestones Living History Museum, Basingstoke, rather than allowing visitors to touch the display pieces. This however does suggest an element of misunderstanding about how handling takes place, as staff request items as substitute to core collections.

In contrast to this, a number of individuals stated that there were objects they require for display or to complete collections for stores at Chilcomb Museum Headquarters rather than specifically for handling purposes. An example of this was a request for complete objects such as pottery to be used alongside fragmentary evidence, for the purpose of demonstrations and research (mainly in archaeology).

### **Question eleven – Do you use, or have you used, loan objects from sources outside Hampshire Museum Service?**

Following on from discussing gaps in collections, participants were asked whether they use objects from sources outside the museum service in order to meet demand from their visitors. 50% said they have used other sources for objects where gaps in the collections have been identified for a specific purpose, for example a family activity day or a schools session in one of the community museums. Figure 13 (overleaf) shows the different sources used by staff to obtain additional objects.

The most popular sources are other museums across the country, not just the county. Museums mentioned were: Portsmouth Museums; The British Commercial Vehicle Museum; Dinosaur Isle; Salisbury Museum and Winchester City Museum. In addition, the British Library has been used as a source for handling objects; mainly documents and texts for use in research at Chilcomb Headquarters. 33% of staff stated they have used Hampshire Wardrobe<sup>2</sup> as a source for costume for a variety of purposes from costumed interpreters at Milestones Living History Museum and for schools sessions at community museums across the county.

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<sup>2</sup> Hampshire Wardrobe provides theatrical and historical costume hire, and is part of Hampshire County Museum Service. As well as replica costume, the collection boasts a number of original vintage items from the Victorian period to the late twentieth century.

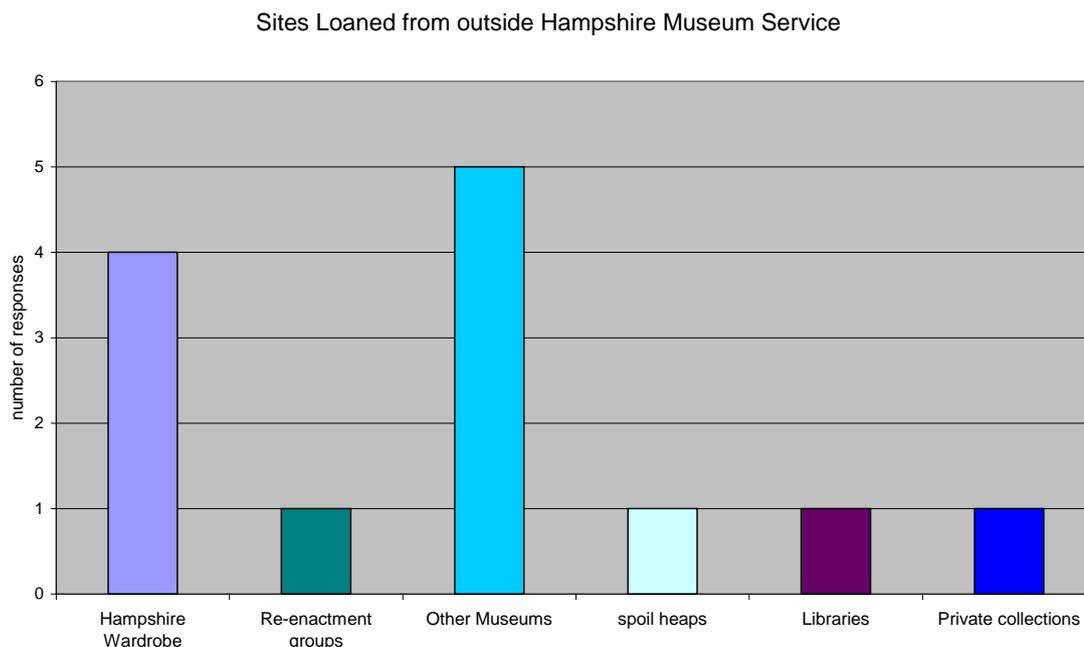


Figure 13. Chart illustrating sources outside Hampshire Museum Service used for loans of objects.

A small percentage of additional objects have been obtained from personal private collections belonging to individual members of staff for use in talks and demonstrations. One staff member commented that on occasion he has acquired objects from spoil heaps at archaeological digs for use with school groups in outreach and in community museums; providing evidence for the view that using core collections is not an option when working with the public.

### **Question twelve – Do you have any additional comments to make about your handling collections?**

On analysis of the varied responses to this question, one aspect which stood out was the definite split between staff stressing the importance and value of handling collections, and others with deep concerns about collections being used for handling by the public. Whilst the number of positive comments outweighed the negative, the negative ones are important and should be addressed. Some respondents raised concerns about *how* the public would handle objects, and particularly if collections would be unsupervised. Other members of staff expressed a fear of collections being broken up and down-graded (suggesting devaluation) simply for the purpose of making them more accessible to the public. From these responses, we see a misunderstanding about what is meant by handling collections, which needs to be clarified. As mentioned above, the comment made by a member of the LCE team regarding their handling collection consisting of the ‘tat no-one else wants’, affirms the misconception that handling objects are usually items seen to be not important or not essential to the main collections. I ask

what this viewpoint communicates to the public for whom it can be argued Hampshire Museum Service collections are cared for. Providing low quality objects for tactile engagement does not represent the high quality collections held in store for the public.

However, not every comment came from a negative standpoint. Some staff acknowledged that handling collections are a 'very important part of the service', 'used regularly and ... a very popular part of the museum's outreach'. In view of this popularity for handling collections, many individuals are updating and creating new collections with the help of keepers based at Chilcomb. Several keepers expressed an interest in developing handling collections within their own sections, some explaining that their collections are at an 'embryonic stage'. However, they state 'management of such a collection is problematic, as staff time is already tied up with managing the main collection', a comment which again could be taken to imply that handling collections are not as important as main collections.

In addition to positive comments regarding existing frontline collections and the development of new ones, a small percentage of staff provided suggestions for the future of handling collections, for example 'graded collections located in a cross collections store for use in handling', and also offered to provide members of staff with help and advice in acquiring objects for handling.

### Summary of findings

The information presented above demonstrates the diversity of Hampshire Museum Service in terms of its collections and how they are used. It would be naïve to simply consider the findings from each individual question as separate and independent data. By addressing how the data links, we gain a bigger picture and deeper understanding of how the collections are currently used for hands-on purposes. Therefore what follows is a summary of findings put in context of the questionnaire as a whole.

It is not so much the number of objects in collections that appears to have an impact of the nature of frontline handling collections, so much as the type of user. For example several of the larger collections, such as dress and textiles, decorative arts, archaeology and childhood collections, either have no current designated handling collection or are in very early stages of putting one together, which may be attributed the fact that these collections are largely used for research purposes or displays. In contrast to this, sites where a large numbers of schools visit, either for self-led or demonstrator led sessions have large collections that are in constant use and demand. In some instances it is almost impossible to give an exact number of objects in these large collections; SEARCH, for example, has several thousand objects in its stores.

Curiously, some smaller community museums have no handling collection, whereas others do. What is very clear is that there is no hard and fast rule for the size of a site and the number of objects in its collections. It is very much dependant on how visitors use these sites and museums as to how handling collections are utilised.

When asked whether their collections were real or replica, many staff stated their collections mostly contained real artefacts; only a small percentage of collections contain less than 50% real objects. When examined further we see that sites where handling collections are frequently used for schools sessions (for example at SEARCH), 90-100% of that collection consists of real objects. In addition, question three offers evidence for current thought that most frontline handling collections consist of un-accessioned or de-accessioned objects, whereas research collections are all accessioned. Therefore sites that do not have specific handling collections but which frequently deliver school sessions led by an interpreter-demonstrator, use collections put together by the area LCE officer and consist mainly of non-accessioned objects. 34% of collections are made up of less than 50% accessioned items, whereas only 8% of collections are entirely accessioned.

The number of staff using handling collections varies considerably also. As one would expect, smaller community museums have smaller numbers of staff using the collections whereas larger sites have a higher number of staff. What should be noted is the fact that some collections are available to all staff, which accounts for the number of 'don't know' responses on returned questionnaires (mainly from HQ sections).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most frontline collections are used with school groups; however other groups included families, individuals, reminiscence groups and clubs/societies. Following from this, most collections are used for education sessions. Questions five and six are inextricably linked, and if we look at the answers in relation to each-other it is clear that most collections at present are used for a specific purpose with a specific target audience: Schools sessions. Most other groups using handling collections are used for demonstrations, presentations and research. It would appear that at present the main focus for handling is school visits and school outreach, however work is being done to reach other audiences, and many reminiscence sessions take place as in-reach and outreach across the county. Again, these results may differ if the survey is carried out again in the post-restructure environment where the remit has been widened to include working with community groups. As one may predict, over 90% of respondents confirmed their collections are used in the museum environment, however handling collections are increasingly being used for outreach in a variety of different locations,

including day care centres, community centres, schools, fairs/fetes, sheltered accommodation and clubs/societies.

#### The next stage

The collections survey findings were presented at a grading and frontline collections workshop on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2008, where the results were discussed in connection with the grading structure which, it was hoped, would open up possibilities for more stored collections to be made available for use with the public, particularly through object handling. The workshop produced some strategies for the future as well as highlighting areas for further research and investigation. Participants stressed a need for further discussion and a communication forum or regular workshops in which collection access issues could be discussed in depth between staff whose duty it is to care for collections and those with a remit to engage with the public. It was also agreed that a programme for the Chilcomb HQ site needed to be developed in relation to collections access, and that this should be linked to the long term service plan. Staff also suggested that opportunities should be provided for collections staff to offer a range of solutions or services for colleagues not just within the department, but beyond, which would act almost as a type of consultancy service.

As well as highlighting positive steps for the future, the workshop also raised several questions that need addressing. The consensus was that the work of the collections survey should be deepened, particularly in relation to definitions of terminology, since many questioned what is meant by the terms *handling*, *frontline collections* and *supervised*? Museum Service staff were also interested to understand why different disciplines approached collections use in varied ways, how the different roles within the museum service used handling collections, and how the proposed grading system<sup>3</sup> could be rolled out into all disciplines. Further investigation was needed to answer these questions as well as understanding on a deeper level how collections were being used, since the questionnaire only offered a broad view. It was agreed that ideally this would be achieved through face-to-face interviews, however due to time and budgetary constraints, interviews as part of the collections survey did not take place. Nevertheless, recognising the value of interviewing as a means of obtaining more in-depth responses to some of the issues raised throughout the collections survey, I carried out a series of interviews with staff to build on the information presented in this chapter and delve deeper to ascertain why handling is such an important part of engaging with museum collections.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing this thesis, the grading system had not been implemented across all sections of Hampshire Museum Service. Whilst Dress and Textiles found the matrix useful, Social History required a more simplified version.

## Chapter Seven

### Perspectives from the Profession: Interviews

*'If I had a superpower, it would be the ability to touch objects and to see exactly who had used them, and who had worked with them, and where they'd been' (Museum LCE Officer)*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the planned second stage of the collections survey was to conduct interviews with staff at Hampshire Museum Service, responsible for the care and use of collections in various different settings, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of frontline handling collections. Despite budgetary and time constraints meaning this could not take place as part of the survey investigation, for the purpose of my own research I conducted a series of interviews with thirteen Hampshire Museum Service staff members over the course of twelve months between April 2010 and March 2011. The thirteen participants chosen because their roles involve engaging with collections, include four members of the Learning and Community Engagement (LCE) team, two conservators, three keepers, one specialist collections manager, one head of collections, one exhibitions officer and one head of community museums. The interviews proved invaluable in gaining honest perspectives of staff that had previously not been asked their opinion of object handling, and are important in understanding the professional standpoint of tactile engagement with museum collections.

As was highlighted in the previous chapter, the collections survey questionnaire only provided a snapshot of how collections were being used for handling, whereas conducting face-to-face interviews held many benefits that the questionnaire simply could not offer; the ability to answer respondents' queries relating to paper survey questions, clarify misunderstandings or confusing terminology, and to encourage participants to expand their answers to open questions (De Vaus 2002, p.122, Spradley 1979, p.67-68). Simply put, interviewing is 'one of the most common and powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings' (Fontana & Frey 1998, p.47). It is important to acknowledge that whilst interviews are a valuable tool in data collection, it is not a 'neutral tool, for the interviewer creates the reality of the interview situation' (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p. 36), however a paper questionnaire simply cannot produce the in-depth response that a conversation with a person can achieve. Before presenting an analysis of participants' responses, I offer an explanation of how the interview questions and participants were chosen as well as discussing problems encountered during the interview process.

### **Setting and structure**

Interviews were carried out in an informal setting, most taking place in the interviewee's office at the Museum Headquarters site in Winchester; with two conducted at the participant's museum work base (Fareham and Gosport). This intended to allow for the interviewee to feel at ease, enabling them to concentrate and answer questions openly and honestly, all of which De Vaus (2002, p.133) argues are vital to successful interviews. Interviewees were invited to respond to the questions from their personal standpoint rather than their understanding of Hampshire Museums Service policy. The structure of each interview, based on eight questions, covered the main aspects for developing an understanding of the handling collections based on findings from the collections survey. More often than not, the interviewee commented on their personal experiences of object handling, as well as their career route, which in some cases was quite revealing in terms of understanding their perspective on object handling.

One can argue that the type of interview conducted falls somewhere between structured and unstructured according to Fontana and Frey's (1998) classifications. Structured interviews, involve the interviewer asking each respondent the same series of questions in the same order which have a limited set of response categories and a predefined means of coding, whereas unstructured interviews enables one to understand complex behaviours of a society or culture by using open ended questions, building a rapport beyond the cool and reserved one structured interviews call for, allowing respondents to ask questions of the interviewer. In short it is a more informal method than that of a structured interviewing (Fontana & Frey 1998, p.52-6). An element of the structured interview was important in the interviews conducted for this thesis to ensure each respondent answered the same basic questions, in order that these answers could be analysed alongside each other and present a variety of views from different professionals within the museum sector. However I felt it important to secure a rapport with my participants and therefore an element of the unstructured interview was carried out in which conversation flowed freely and participants also asked questions of the interviewer.

It should be noted that at the time of conducting many of these interviews a strategic review of the museum service took place, with a view to restructure in two phases. Consequently many of the roles of individuals have subsequently been re-evaluated and changed to fit in with phase one implemented in July 2011, and phase two implemented in April 2012. Although often only a change of job title, some of the roles changed considerably in their responsibilities and duties, therefore I make the reader aware that the remits of posts explained by individuals, whilst correct at the time of the interview process, may not be the case today.

### **Interview ethics**

As with any ethnographic study (of which it can be argued this stage of data collection can be termed) ethical issues arise, particularly when recording and recounting information given through face to face interviews, therefore it is important to explore some of the ethical issues encountered during interviews. Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p.62) state problems that arise are generally because of the complexities of researching the private and placing it in the public, and therefore ethical issues should be considered from start to finish of a research project. As part of the process of designing questions, choosing participants, recording interview conversations, interpreting data and presenting it in written form, ethical issues will arise that need addressing. Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p. 63, p.102) put forward seven stages of an interview enquiry including: *thematizing* where the purpose of the interview and conception of themes should be set out before the method is put forward; *designing* a plan of the study with regard to obtaining intended knowledge and the moral implications of the study as well as obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring confidentiality; *interviewing* based on an interview guide which considers the consequences of stress and change on participants; *transcribing* interviews verbatim and protecting the confidentiality of those taking part; *analysing* data collected considering how in depth this should be and whether participants should have a say in this process; *verifying* the data for validity, reliability and generalizability of the findings; and *reporting* the findings in a readable product whilst considering the confidentiality of the information and acknowledging the consequences of publishing a report on those who have taken part.

The issues of informed consent, confidentiality and consequences are of particular importance and need to be addressed further. Informed consent requires that the participant is aware of the purpose of the research, any risks that might result from taking part and indeed any benefits also, and that they are free to withdraw from participation at any point without the data collected being published (Kvale & Brinkman 2009, p.70). In addition participation should always be voluntary and never obligatory. For my research, participants were invited to take part via email and were advised that the interview would be recorded for the purpose of presenting a true and accurate account of the conversation. If for any reason they felt uncomfortable with this, the recording would be terminated and written notes taken instead. Before commencing, the participant was notified of the research purpose and format of the interview, and at conclusion, the project aims were again reiterated and permission once again sought to use the data collected as part of this thesis.

Deciding whether or not to publish the names of the individuals interviewed for this research was a difficult issue. Confidentiality of the data disclosed by participants is of utmost importance, especially in situations where sensitive material is collected. Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p.72-73) suggest that any private data that could identify a participant should not be

disclosed. Add to this the potential for the interview environment to be deceptively comfortable, participants may say something they may later regret, therefore anonymity offers necessary protection. However, whilst offering protection, anonymity also denies participants a voice which may well have been the original aim of the research project (Parker 2005 cited in Kvale & Brinkman 2009, p.73). Although Kvale and Brinkman advocate protection and anonymity I felt that allowing my subjects the opportunity to have their voice heard was important, since many expressed their personal and professional opinions, advocating tactile access to collections. Nevertheless we must consider the consequences of this voice, both beneficial and harmful, as the 'sum of potential benefits to the participant and the importance of the knowledge gained should outweigh the risk of harm' (Kvale & Brinkman 2009, p.73). In my own study, colleagues at the Museum Service were never asked to comment on specific situations; rather they were encouraged to think generally about their views and opinions of object handling. Despite this, some specific experiences or opinions surfaced, which could be seen as the result of creating a comfortable environment in which to converse, a sense of trust in me as the interviewer and good rapport (discussed below). Indeed, a number of participants reflecting on their responses to my questions asked that certain details be removed or names changed in order to avoid difficult professional relationships within the Museum Service; where this was the case, identifying data has been anonymised. The information these examples offered are useful, however, in demonstrating the contention between different attitudes to collections access in the museum world, and are important to our discussion of tactile engagement. Taking all of this into consideration, I decided to anonymise my participants, therefore in the analysis discussed below, they are identified by the letter R for respondent and the interview number, i.e. the first person interviewed is known as R1. It was important to be able to give participants a voice, however more important was being able to use the data collected to present a current view of professional viewpoints.

### **Building rapport and devising appropriate questions**

When designing the interview questions, I became aware I did not want to dominate and direct the conversation beyond the core information I wished to acquire. I intended to elicit open and honest personal opinions from the individuals being interviewed rather than guiding them in the direction I wanted in order to prove my hypothesis. This meant a more qualitative style was appropriate rather than conducting a survey interview; the distinction being that the first offers an open and more flexible approach, wherein the participant is invited to express their personal opinions and the researcher uses this as basis for further questioning, and the latter being a scripted set of questions based on 'set procedures with fixed wordings and sequences of questions as well as quantification of answers' (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, p.9). I did not want participants to feel they were simply part of a process of collecting quantifiable data and that

their opinions and beliefs did not hold any value, therefore the qualitative interview seemed the best course of enquiry with my subjects.

In addition Spradley (1979, p.78) notes that ethnographic interviewing consists of two processes which are both distinct and complementary; developing a rapport with the participant thereby encouraging them to talk about their culture freely and comfortably, and eliciting information needed for the ethnographer's research. Rapport can be achieved through a variety of simple techniques to ensure participants feel comfortable and their responses are valued, eye contact being perhaps one of the simplest (De Vaus 2002, p. 133). Rapport can be seen as a four stage process which fluctuates over time, beginning with apprehension and a sense of uncertainty while the participant does not know what to expect of the interview, followed by an exploration of the interview topic once apprehension has given way. During this second stage Spradley (1979, p.81) highlights three important aspects to building rapport; firstly that it is important to make repeated explanations about the purpose of the interview and research; secondly to restate what the participant has shared which subtly communicates the message that the interviewer has understood, learned from and valued what the participant has shared; and finally to ask for use rather than meaning of the participant's information. Following on from exploration and a sense of relaxation which accompanies it, the next stage sees the co-operation of the participant, often to the point that they 'may spontaneously correct the ethnographer' (Spradley 1979, p.82), something I experienced personally whilst conducting interviews. The final stage of the process is that of participation – the participant takes on and accepts their role as teaching the ethnographer about their culture, consequently becoming more assertive in their behaviour and responses to questioning. I was fortunate in that my participants were colleagues at Hampshire Museum Service, and although they may not have been fully aware of my research and how the interview contributed to my data collection, we already had an established rapport, meaning the initial stage of apprehension very quickly gave way to exploration following an explanation of my reasons for interviewing.

Spradley (1979, p.59) suggests there are three important elements to the ethnographic interview; explicit purpose, ethnographic explanations and ethnographic questions. Although the interviews I carried out may not be considered as ethnographic, in the pursuit of understanding the culture of object handling in museums, they follow a similar format to that of the ethnographic; therefore Spradley's observations are important in understanding how to structure the interview and what type of questions to pose. Spradley argues there are three main types of ethnographic questions which each have different functions (Spradley 1979, p.60). These include descriptive questions by which the participant is asked 'could you tell me...', enabling them to speak in their own language; structural questions which allow the interviewer

to discover specific information through questions such as ‘what are...’ and ‘can you think of...’; and finally contrast questions which encourage the participant to explain terminology used in conversation. It is important to remember that throughout the interview process questions imply answers and statements imply questions, and therefore both questions and answers need to be discovered from participants (Spradley 1979, p.83).

Within the typology of descriptive questions a further five sub-types exist, which aim to elicit from the participant as much information as possible. These consist of *Grand Tour* questions encouraging participants to walk the interviewer through their culture in terms of typical/general, specific, guided and task-related information; *Mini Tour* questions asking for information about smaller aspects of the participant’s experience; *Experience* questions which invite information regarding personal experiences in specific settings; *Example* questions which give example scenarios for participants to respond to; and finally *Native Language* questions that allow for terminology to be used and explained to the interviewer (Spradley 1979, p.86-90). These types of questions were used throughout interviews with Hampshire Museum staff and proved invaluable in gaining the context in which the participant worked as well as understanding personal experiences which could be used to look for patterns in attitudes toward object handling.

In addition to those described above, and as suggested by Spradley (1979, p.120-22), structural questions were employed alongside descriptive ones as the former often require an explanation which can be encouraged through the latter. Similar to descriptive, there are five sub-types of structural questions (Spradley 1979, p.126-131); *Verification* questions asking for confirmation or disconfirmation of a hypothesis (i.e. requiring a yes or no answer); *Cover Term* questions asking participants to explain different types of terms used; *Included Term* questions which aim to further reveal terminology that appear under a cover term; *Substitute Frame* questions ask participants to substitute a word for terminology used in their culture; and *Card Sorting* questions which offer participants a visual means of explaining their culture.

Contrast questions allow the interviewer/researcher to further understand the culture they are researching by asking for meaning of symbols and terminology. As with structural questions it is important to use contrast questions alongside both structural and descriptive questions as the combination of all three types will allow for a deeper understanding of a culture (Spradley 1979, p.161). Contrast questions can be further broken down into seven sub-types (Spradley 1979, p.162-171); *Contrast Verification* questions encouraging participants to explain or confirm the differences between terminology used during the interview; *Directed Contrast* questions which require the participant to explain how terms differ when presented as a collection/set of

terminology; *Dyadic Contrast* questions present information to the participant without any highlighted differences, simply asking them to identify differences they see between different terminology; *Triadic Contrast* questions present the participant with three terms and asks which are alike and which are different, which makes explicit that differences will always imply similarities; *Contrast Set Sorting* questions are similar to card sorting questions used in structural questions, whereby participants are asked to sort terminology into piles demonstrating their similarities or differences; *Twenty Questions Game* requires the participant to ask yes or no questions of the ethnographer to ascertain which term the ethnographer is thinking about, which is useful in highlighting hidden contrasts not yet discovered through other questioning; *Rating* questions which seek to discover values placed on sets of symbols and/or terminology.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p.130) suggest that the interviewer should have a guide rather than a script to structure the course of the interview, which could simply be a list of topics to be discussed or a set of questions to work to. They suggest that two interview guides can often be useful, one containing the project's thematic research questions and may consist of theoretical language, and a second with a set of interview questions to be posed in everyday language. In contrast to Spradley's types and subtypes of questions, Kvale and Brinkman suggest nine types of questions, which are perhaps less technical and slightly more useful to a study which is not based on understanding an ethnographic culture. These include introductory, follow up, probing, specifying, direct, indirect, structuring, silence and interpreting questions (Kvale & Brinkman 2009, p.135-6). Introductory questions often ask participants to provide descriptions of their own experiences which form the main aspect of the investigation, and are typically extended by follow up questions which require the participant to elaborate on what has just been said, either through direct questioning on the part of the interviewer or through nodding, pausing or acknowledging with a sound such as 'mm'. Probing questions are similar to follow up questions in that they ask the participant to expand on their previous answer, but without outlining the boundaries the answer should fall in, whereas specifying questions will ask for precise descriptions. Direct questioning allows the interviewer to draw out specific information relating to the phenomena being studied and is often more suitable posed in the later part of an interview, whereas indirect questioning can be used throughout and is useful for obtaining information about someone's opinions and experiences without directly asking for this information. Structuring can be useful in the interview process as it allows the interviewer an opportunity to directly and politely interject and end a long and irrelevant answer by summarising the participant's statement and introduce a new topic. Interestingly, silence can be a useful technique in interviewing as rather than it becoming a process of questions and answers, pausing provides subjects with time to reflect on their own answers and break the silence with new and perhaps significant information. Finally interpretive questions involve re-

phrasing the participant's answer or an attempt at clarification asking the participant to clarify the meaning of their statement (Kvale & Brinkman 2009, p.135-6). Both the question types presented by Spradley and by Kvale & Brinkman have been useful in producing a question guide for my interviews; through a combination of different types of questions (both scripted and spontaneous during the course of each interview) the responses of participants makes interesting data for interpretation.

Based on the information presented above, the structure I applied to my interviews was a set of eight simple questions to frame the overall discussion of object handling, and allow scope to extend the conversation, depending on where the interviewee wished to take the topic. In most cases, further questioning was often repeated in other interviews, in order to maintain uniformity and continuity, and in order to provide a means to analyse the data collected. This may appear to contradict my earlier statement of wishing to conduct a qualitative interview process, however in order to understand all the participants' responses together, an element of similarity between interviews was necessary. Had each interview been entirely different in questions posed, follow up questioning, and indeed in content, it would prove difficult to analyse the results and present any findings.

The eight core questions combined a number of different styles highlighted above, acting as a guide for conversation with participants;

- Can you briefly describe your role within the organisation and who you work with?
- What sort of tasks do you perform as part of your role?
- How would you describe your relationship with objects (i.e. how important are objects in your role?)
- What do you understand by the term object handling?
- What purpose do you think object handling serves and why do you think it is important?
- What do you think are the advantages in object handling?
- What do you think are the problems with object handling?
- How do you think object handling can be incorporated into the museum environment effectively?

The selection of questions above aimed to follow on from those of the questionnaire circulated in 2008, allowing for a deeper understanding of the data collected during the first stage of the collections survey, as well as utilising the different types of questions discussed above – descriptive, structural and contrast (see appendix 2.1 for the interview notation form). Open-ended questions, particularly of judgemental type, were selected in order to elicit personal

answers. I was particularly interested in understanding each individual's own views and opinions on object handling, and how their responses sat within my hypothesis as well as with my own views. My aim was to gain a rounded view of both positive and negative attitudes and prejudices toward object handling and hands-on access to museum collections, in order to put forward a means by which any misunderstandings could be addressed and overcome, allowing for increased access without museum professionals needing to be fearful in terms of conservation issues.

Before commencing the interview, a simple introduction to my research topic was offered, in order to provide the interviewee an insight into the purpose of our conservation. Spradley (1979, p.59) states it is important to make clear the purpose of the interview to the participant, and while this introductory prologue outlined why I was interested in talking with each participant, I intentionally did not present my personal opinions and the value I place on object handling so as to avoid any influence over the participant's responses. Throughout the interviews, I deliberately held back from offering personal viewpoints unless asked specifically by the interviewee.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked for their name and role title, and the date, time and location of the interview was noted on the interviewer's questionnaire. After a brief introduction to the research topic in which the structure of the interview was explained (i.e. that this was not simply an inquiry into their job, but to elicit the personal opinions of those whose job it is to handle, care for and interpret objects), the first question posed, asked participants to briefly describe their role within Hampshire Museum Service and who they worked with. This question aimed to establish where the participant fit within the museum service structure in terms of both their role and their position within the staff organisation, as well as whom the main target audience of their role was. While the interviewer was aware of the role of each participant, the extent of their duties was not known, therefore this first question allowed for a deeper understanding as well as providing a starting point for further questioning.

Secondly, participants were asked to describe the type of daily tasks their role demanded. This was in order to establish to what extent objects and object handling featured in their day to day work. In the first interview this question was phrased '*Can you tell me about your average working day?*' which was immediately answered with '*well, there is no average working day because every day is different*'. While this response was no surprise to the interviewer, the phrasing of this question was promptly altered for subsequent interviews in order to swiftly achieve an understanding of the tasks and duties performed by each member of the museum service staff, thus avoiding the above answer from all thirteen interviewees. On many occasions, this question was followed by

an unscripted enquiry into what aspect of the job or the regularly performed tasks the interviewee enjoyed. The answers to this question varied considerably, but were important in creating a space in which the interviewee felt comfortable answering questions about their role. Essentially, this follow up question allowed for interviewees to open up and feel they could answer honestly about their own experiences.

The third scripted question, asked interviewees to explain how they saw their personal relationship with objects in relation to their role. In asking this question I hoped to gain an understanding of how the staff member connected with objects, how important they personally felt objects are to their role, and to observe any passion or excitement for working with objects. This question was purposely left somewhat ambiguous; the only clarification offered was in order to discover how important the participant felt objects are to their role. If I am honest, my hope was that each member of staff would echo my own passion for objects; however this was not always the case. Most interviewees expressed a similar interest and love, explaining that without objects they would not have a job, whereas others simply stated that objects were important to their role, but they were not themselves excited or passionate about handling objects from the past. This did somewhat surprise me, as I expected that anyone working in the museum environment, which would not exist without museum collections, would express the same level of awe and passion for artefacts as myself. Perhaps this can be explained as my own naivety on the subject, however on further questioning, this lack of excitement could often be explained once the participant was asked their route into the museum world. Those that had memories of early experiences with objects were invariably the ones for whom their job would not exist without artefacts, whereas those who had arrived at the museum service through a different route, and entering later in their working career, did not have that same enthusiasm for the collections in their care.

The fourth scripted question aimed to establish the interviewee's understanding of the term object handling. It had been previously established in the first phase of this project (the collections survey) that terminology was a contentious issue, fundamental to understanding how individuals perceived the physical act of picking up an object and using it to investigate the past. This question aimed to discover what each participant interpreted the term 'object handling' to mean. This question was met with various responses from individuals, ranging from long discourse explaining the importance of a tactile encounter with artefacts, to simple, literal explanations such as *'to me object handling is literally picking up an object'* and *'it's the object you get a version of, that you're allowed to touch'*.

Following on from this terminology enquiry, the subsequent three questions aimed to gaining an insight into the value each individual placed on object handling; purpose, advantages and disadvantages. Once again, the answers provided were both expected and unexpected. While as the interviewer, I had my own conclusions about what I identified as the purpose, advantages and disadvantages of a tactile engagement with objects, I hoped to elicit different viewpoints influenced by the role of the individual being interviewed. For example I expected conservators to express their concerns about objects being damaged through handling as their role focussed on preserving artefacts for the future, whereas members of the LCE team would offer a number of advantages based on their own experiences leading educational sessions with groups of the public.

The final scripted question asked each individual to explain how, in an ideal world, they would incorporate object handling into the museum environment. My intention was to encourage participants to use their imagination to express their personal preferences for handling museum artefacts. Generally individuals' answers matched their level of passion and excitement for objects overall. For example if they had said objects were the reason their role existed and were central to everything they did, invariably they were keen to propose a creative way of incorporating object handling effectively within the museum environment. This ranged from discussing ideas of designated handling staff on standby within exhibition spaces to enable visitors to experience objects through tactile means, to a designated touch museum in which every item in trust of the museum could be accessed and handled.

The deliberate decision to ask eight core questions, meant that a variety of questions were interspersed with the scripted ones, which attempted to draw out information to provide an insight into the individual's interest in museum collections. Many additional questions were a response to something the interviewee may have said, for example, in the first interview the word 'plunder' was used to describe a situation whereby the individual felt collections were being raided in order to obtain artefacts for use in handling session. This prompted a discussion about the value of objects and who has the right to use them. Other questions asked participants to describe instances where they had used objects with the public in handling opportunities, and whether they felt this was something that ultimately should be facilitated.

I was very aware, when conducting the interviews, of the importance of creating and maintaining a good relationship with the subjects being interviewed. As Spradley (1979, p.45) comments, this ethnographer-informant relationship is 'fraught with difficulties'. The ethnographer (in this case the interviewer; myself) must be aware of their role within the interview; their part is not to present their understandings and beliefs about the topic discussed,

but rather to elicit from the subject, their knowledge, opinions and observations. It can be all too tempting to present your own ideals when conducting a conversation with someone, however it is vital to develop skills of careful listening, which some may already have, others may find easy to pick up and for others can be a long process of learning and practising.

The practice of careful listening was something I felt I could already do, however once in the interview environment I soon became aware of a desire to put forward my own views on the topic being discussed. For myself it became the task of simply sitting back and listening to the information presented to me by the interviewee, which as the first interview progressed I found easier with each passing minute. I would argue that having a Dictaphone to record what was said during each interview meant the pressure to take careful notes of what the participant said was reduced. Instead the eight scripted questions acted as a prompt to remind myself of the essential information I wished to draw out, and provided space to note down additional questions that came out of what was said during the interview. Fontana and Frey (1998, p.60) discuss the difficulties of note taking during ethnographic fieldwork which is useful for understanding the value of voice recording and De Vaus (2002, p.34) advises that one should not rely solely on memory; instead 'answers should be recorded as they are given'.

As previously stated, the interviews conducted in this research study fall between structured and un-structured, and therefore techniques and methods from both styles were employed in order to collect the required data from participants. Whilst the structured style calls for careful recording of participants answers, unstructured interviewing often in ethnographic settings see this more as a luxury and therefore ethnographers are reliant upon the notes they are able to take at appropriate moments. Fontana and Frey's advice is for interviewers to regularly take notes as inconspicuously as possible, to write everything down no matter how insignificant it may appear at the time, and analyse your notes frequently (Fontana & Frey 1998, p.60). I was fortunate that all my participants agreed to the use of a voice recorder during their interview and therefore I was able to make notes which would allow me to highlight aspects I wished to discuss further without the participant feeling they were not being listened to.

The most important point I learned from this experience of interviewing was not to be afraid of silence; quite simply silence, if handled correctly, can be an effective means of drawing more information out of the subject. I was careful, during each interview, to maintain eye contact with my respondents, to offer interest in what was spoken through both verbal and non-verbal means and to simply wait through silence, not allowing myself to feel any discomfort. More often than not, as a result of waiting through the silence, interviewees expanded their previous comments, offering insights which I believe may not have surfaced had I been impatient to

move on to the next question. This has been a valuable experience which I believe will stay with me throughout my career in archaeology and museums.

### **Choosing Participants**

Spradley (1979, p.46-54) outlines five ways of choosing suitable participants to take part in an ethnographic interview; in order to conduct a successful interview the participant should be considered in terms of thorough enculturation, their current involvement in that culture, the ethnographer being in an unfamiliar cultural scene, having adequate time to conduct interviews, and participants being non-analytic in their answers (Spradley 1979, p.46). It is important for participants to know their culture so well that their behaviours and thought patterns are automatic through years of experience and knowledge. Spradley (1979, p.48) suggests that for a participant to be *thoroughly encultured*, the minimum amount of time they should have been in that culture is one year. For the purpose of my interviews, I chose a variety of participants from the Museum Service who had been in role for at least one year. Spradley (1979, p.49) also suggests that as well as choosing participants who have been in a particular culture for a minimum of a year, it is important to consider how they are currently involved in said culture since individuals who live and work in close proximity often believe they share the same way of viewing the world, whereas in reality they may not. Whilst this was useful in considering which staff members could be asked to participate in interviews, I feel that choosing people who worked in the same environment but with different levels of involvement in object handling provided me with an interesting snapshot of attitudes toward hands-on access to museum collections. Therefore I chose individuals with roles covering conservators, keepers, curators, exhibition officers and education officers.

For a productive relationship between ethnographer and participant, and therefore a productive interview, Spradley (1979, p.50) states that the ethnographer should not be too close to the culture of their informant. Our knowledge of a culture is often tacit, taken for granted and outside our awareness, therefore if an ethnographer is too close to the participant's culture one of two things might occur; firstly the ethnographer may attempt to press their views on the participant and secondly the participant may feel that they are being tested in some way by the ethnographer. While I had a degree of understanding of object handling opportunities in Hampshire Museum Service through my experiences facilitating school sessions at several museums in the service, I had no experience of conservation or keepership roles, and as such I feel participants were able to converse with me without fear of feeling tested.

The success of an interview is not only dependent on the participant chosen, their assimilation in the culture being studied, and the language used, but is dependent on the talent of the

interviewer. Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p.166) describe the interviewer as a 'craftsman' who exhibits various skills which will encourage a fruitful discourse. The interviewer should be someone who has an understanding and knowledge of the topic studied and which aspects to pursue, able to structure the conversation offering a clear explanation of purpose, outlining the procedures of the process and able to round off the interview clearly and succinctly. In addition they must be both clear, avoiding jargon and offering simple, easy and short questions, and gentle in their approach to questioning, allowing the participant to finish their answer, tolerate pauses, encourage opinion and understand emotional issues. They must also be empathetic and sensitive to the participant's need and what is being said. Being open to new opinions and information presented by the interviewee is important, as well as being able to steer the participant should the conversation veer off topic. They must be critical of what is said in the interview, prepared to ask follow up and interpretive questions pushing the participant to explain their answers where there may be a misunderstanding. They must be able to retain the information provided by the participant throughout the interview, recall this at different stages of the conversation and provide interpretations of statements as well as asking the participant to extend their meaning. In summary the interviewer must be able to juggle a variety of listening and questioning skills throughout the course of an interview – something which may seem simple enough on paper but in practice can be quite difficult. For myself, I have found the use of a digital recording device to be invaluable in the process of interviewing, as this enables the interviewer to sit, listen and process the participant's answers without worrying about getting everything down on paper.

### **Transcription**

Each interview was recorded to enable a true and accurate presentation of each participant's comments and opinions and to avoid miss-quoting in publication, as well as allowing the interviewer to give their full attention to each interview ensuring active listening took place. Perhaps one of the most arduous tasks as a result of recording is the transcription process which follows. Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p.177) note that rather than transcription simply being a 'clerical task' it is part of the interpretive process giving rise to various issues in presenting aspects of oral speech in a written form. One of the difficulties I encountered, having never transcribed interviews before, was how to represent the various nuances of my conversations with participants in order that on reflection and interpretation I would be able to analyse the information collected, as well as offering an understandable presentation for the reader. Having consulted various texts and academic websites which offer a variety of methods of transcription (including conventions demonstrating pitch, volume, pauses, overlaps and meaning condensation) I decided to transcribe each interview in full rather than using conventions to shorten the length of my participants' utterances. Kvale and Brinkman (2009,

p.180) argue there is no basic rule used in transcription, instead one should ensure that the report identifies the transcriber – in this thesis all transcriptions were carried out by the author, taking approximately three hours per interview, each of which were roughly one hour in length (see Appendix 2.2).

### **Analysing the data**

In total thirteen Hampshire Museum Service staff agreed to be interviewed for this thesis; each having been contacted individually, either by email or in person. The participants invited to take part were selected because using collections was at the heart of their role therefore the responses would provide valuable insight into object handling. While the participants interviewed for this research were part of the same organisation, and some with the same job title, the tasks they are asked to perform are in most instances very different. As has been mentioned previously, Hampshire County Museum Service can be seen very much as a microcosm of the museum world as a whole since the range of roles reflects those of museum professionals nationally and internationally. While it can be argued that no two museums are the same, and as a consequence perhaps no two museum jobs are the same, the types of duties performed by Hampshire staff are similar to those throughout the world.

When working with a large body of data one might consider using Discourse Analysis or Content Analysis as a means of highlighting patterns, frequencies and trends in both written and verbal communication. Whilst both Discourse and Content Analysis are valuable tools for presenting qualitative data in a statistical way, for the purposes of this research where a small sample of participants took part in face-to-face interviews, I have chosen to systematically interrogate each interview question by question to draw out similarities between each participant thematically. Employing a qualitative approach to analysing this data has revealed fascinating and insightful responses to the scripted questions, enabling participants' responses to be placed into conceptual categories related to object handling in museums. Using a thematic method contributed greatly to the production of the framework presented in chapter nine, as one can identify several key themes in relation to how museums can make more of their collections accessible through handling.

The analysis began during the process of transcription as key themes seemed to regularly appear, however it was on reading the response to each scripted question one-by-one for all thirteen participants that these themes became more apparent. This became particularly important in analysing participants responses to question three onwards, as both questions one and two functioned to demonstrate the diversity of roles, tasks and interactions of Hampshire Museum Service staff.

In terms of coding the data, several key phrases for each question were highlighted and each participant's response was noted against each theme. For example in response to question five, seven categories of response were noted; learning new information and understanding the past, access and process information, make connections with the past, enjoyment, make collections accessible, reminiscence and therapy, and finally research and skills. Once these categories were noted, each transcribed interview was interrogated with key sentences and phrases highlighted which provide evidence for each category. This process was repeated for each question. Of importance to note is that on analysis of the data, particular trends appeared in the types of responses given which were not limited to each question, but became threads throughout all the interviews.

These observations (discussed below) have been very useful in understanding the perspectives of those within the museum profession and I feel provide a starting point for further research, whereby a larger set of data might be obtained and analysed using more statistical methods.

#### **Question 1 – Role description, colleagues and audience**

This question aimed to understand how each participant fit within the museum service, their network of colleagues and the audiences they work with. It was important to discuss object handling not only with LCE officers but with a variety of other museum professionals in order to avoid presenting a biased view of object handling. Vital to this thesis, is that the problems and limitations of object handling as seen from the profession are considered, to ensure the proposed framework for tactile access to museum collections (chapter nine) is grounded in reality.

R2, R3, R4 and R10 represent the LCE team, consisting of the head of LCE, one LCE officer and two LCE assistants with different remits. R4, the head of LCE manages a large team of officers and casual interpreter-demonstrators, working at sites across the county. R4 describes his role as inspiring people with museum collections and sites through learning and interpretation. Both R2 and R10 (officer and assistant respectively) work with the LCE team and are responsible for learning and engagement at a number of sites which fall within their region, in contrast R3 has a more specific role as science officer for one site in Gosport. All respondents in this group work with a variety of people within the museum service as well as the public, however most of their work involves school groups, particularly of primary age, through topic specific handling sessions at museums throughout the county.

R1 and R5 represent the conservation team; R1 is team manager and R5 a conservator of archaeology collections. Both work within a larger team of conservators covering the different disciplines represented in the collections. Both describe much of their work as being quite solitary, however on occasion they occasionally work with the public, either at special events such as the New Forest Show, through subject specific talks and training sessions, or with researchers with special collections requests.

The keepers and collections manager interviewed represent four discipline areas: Social History, Natural Science, Art and archaeology. R6, R9, R12 and R13 have very differing remits for their work covering a variety of object types. For the most part, they work with colleagues within the service; however they also work with a variety of different audiences including volunteers, researchers and the general public. R13 as Senior Keeper manages an art team working on the decorative arts, dress and textiles, childhood, and fine arts collections. In addition R8, the collections team manager, is responsible for the specialist keepers and conservation staff at the Museum Headquarters site in Winchester.

R7, an exhibitions curator, works within the exhibitions team, but with the sole responsibility of exhibitions within one gallery in Winchester, and does not interact with the public on a frequent basis. And finally, R11, as community museums team manager works particularly with staff at community museums across the county.

### **Question 2 – Tasks and activities**

The tasks carried out by all participants are, as one might expect, very varied. What became apparent during each interview was the extent to which participants are required to work as part of the larger Museum Service team on many interdisciplinary projects. For most, handling forms a large part of their role within the service, whether that is with the public or as part of their keepership or conservation roles. It is important to note that when asked about their daily tasks and activities, all said there was not an average working day and that each day was different with its own challenges.

Object handling with the public forms a substantial part of the LCE team's roles, but not all. R4 comments that much of his work is looking at central and local government strategies and procedures, and working out how these can be incorporated into Hampshire museums, as well as creating and maintaining partnerships between other Hampshire County Council departments. This is in contrast to his colleagues, who plan and provide education sessions for school groups linking the museum service collections to national curriculum topics. R10 notes that in order to create cross curricular links, she attempts to incorporate many different sensory

elements in her sessions. R3's remit is largely the science collections at SEARCH in Gosport, with her role including designing and teaching sessions as well as, to a certain extent, collections care and working with Science Links in Museum Education (SLIME) to promote museums linking their collections with science. Much of R2's work mirrors that of R10; however R2 works with other groups within the community, including reminiscence sessions, as well as working with the exhibitions team to write text panels for displays.

Like Learning and Community Engagement, the conservation team also stated that they do not have an average working day. Both R2 and R5 state that they do not spend all their time working on collections; R5 estimates that collections care takes 70% of her time, consisting of conservation, re-conservation and collections audits. Instead both are required to offer advice and answer conservation related enquiries from a variety of different sources, as well as writing reports and other administration tasks. R5 notes that part of her role involves working with the public to raise awareness of the importance of conservation, often taking the form of training sessions with a variety of audiences. Both will also work with the exhibitions team, advising on the relative humidity and temperature required for displaying collections.

Similar to the conservators above, the collections staff and keepers also find that their time is not solely dedicated to collections care, instead carrying out a variety of other tasks and working with other staff within, for example, exhibitions. R13 breaks down the keepership role into five distinct areas; acquisition, documentation, storage, display/exhibition, and interpretation. Whilst much of the work keepers carry out involves working directly with the objects, and therefore object handling, R5 states that they are also required to work with the public giving talks and creating activities for family open days, workshops and training sessions. R9 notes that much of her work (at the time of interview) is stores based, creating an audit of the collections and the way in which they are being stored. For R8, head of collections, object handling rarely takes place, instead much of his work involves managing staff, creating partnerships between different sites and attending numerous meetings as part of his role as a trustee on various heritage and cultural boards.

Both R7 and R11, like R8, handle objects infrequently. Both state that much of their work revolves around exhibitions work and short term projects in which they are required to work with other members of staff within the museum service and beyond. R11 notes that although he works with keepers and curators to address access collections through grading systems, object handling does not feature to a large extent in his role.

### **Question 3 – Relationship with objects**

Across all the interviews this question offered perhaps the most interesting responses. For some, objects are at the forefront of their role and participants demonstrated a clear passion for working with them, acknowledging their power and the role museums have in providing the public with access to collections. Personally, objects were my route into archaeology and museums, as it was through engagements with objects, and particularly through tactile experiences, that my interest was sparked and through the Young Archaeologists' Club that it was nurtured. Most respondents' experiences were similar to my own, usually at a young age, where they either came into contact with objects or the environment in which they are discovered, generating an interest in a period of history, a type of collection or a career such as conservation. What was observable, when answering this question, was the palpable excitement and passion staff had for objects and their relationship with them. For some it is a deep rooted love for a particular type of object or an embedded sense of responsibility for the collections in their care. Once this was established, many of the following responses came from that love or sense of responsibility. Interestingly those, for whom an early experience with the past involved an intimate interaction with an object, were more inclined to lean towards a more tactile engagement with collections in the present.

#### *Learning and Community Engagement Team*

The trend appearing from the responses of the LCE team is that of engagement. All four respondents stated that their relationship is rooted in the way that connections are made through objects, and when questioned about early experiences all stated that it was making a connection that interested them in working with collections.

R4 states his role in the team is about 'enabling inspirational learning experiences' and argues that part of that is through using the museum's unique selling point; its collections. Objects, heritage sites and spaces, are empowering and can help 'people make meaning that is meaningful to them'. As R4 described his relationship with objects, it became clear through his enthusiasm and the animated way in which he expressed his view, that this was a very personal thing for him. Further questioning revealed that a childhood friendship with a boy from a traveller community sparked his interest in working with objects. When the traveller camp near his home, relocated, R4 roamed the site looking at what was left behind; evidence of fires, remains of food such as chicken bones, and items of discarded rubbish. He describes himself as being 'totally intrigued by the fact there was another life going on there that was different from mine and I could see evidence of it in the objects'. He continued that it was that connection between objects and people that interested him, making him pursue a career in archaeology, before becoming a teacher and finally moving into the Museum Service in the LCE team. He

simply summarised his relationship with objects by saying ‘I enjoy working with objects. So in a really selfish way that’s why I do what I do’.

R10’s relationship with objects is rooted in her belief that ‘you can’t really understand something until you can get up close and personal with it’. As she expanded on this it became clear that her own personal feelings about wanting to touch and handle artefacts has transferred into her role in Hampshire Museum Service, particularly evident in one of the projects discussed in the interview. Working with a group from a Hampshire school on a curator course, she encouraged children to think about what a museum does, and in response to their answer that the museum ‘shows things’, handed out a collection of objects, encouraging the children to handle them and think of questions they would like to know the answer to, which in turn helped them to think about how they would present them in a museum. For R10, ‘it starts with the objects’; her school sessions are designed around the objects she has access to and can be handled. Her interest was ignited by numerous family excursions to museums, National Trust properties, and living history museums. R10 argues that history ‘should be a living thing that doesn’t just go away because all the people who used the objects are dead’. For R10 a key part of her engagement with objects is thinking about how they might have been used. In one of her Victorian sessions, she uses a stoneware hot water bottle. On numerous occasions children have asked how long it retains heat. In an experiment to determine the answer, she filled her Victorian hot water bottle with boiled water and timed how long the object stayed warm, finding that while not used in the same way as a modern rubber one, Victorian examples keep warm for longer; something that would not have been discovered unless through a tactile experience with the object<sup>4</sup>.

R3 talked enthusiastically about how the objects she encounters on a daily basis still excite and fascinate her despite being in post for three years (at the time of the interview). Although arguing the initial excitement may diminish after a period of time, she still feels privileged to be working with objects and to have the responsibility for caring for them. R3 talked at length about how the importance of the collections to her means she wants to care for them and ensure they are available for the enjoyment and pleasure of the many visitors to SEARCH each year. Her relationship with natural science specimens extended from her experience in her previous job at Marwell Zoo, Hampshire, where she worked with live specimens as well as customs confiscated objects. She noted that she

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that experiments like this are not a frequent occurrence, and would not be carried out with rare and significant objects – R10 used a designated handling and education object for her research.

‘really first got into working with objects ... [by] seeing people react to having real things put in front of them as opposed to using pictures or other images ... projected onto a screen’.

She commented that on commencing work at SEARCH in Gosport, the ‘wow-factor’ struck her, particularly the way handling collections are permanently displayed in the education rooms, describing it as ‘an exciting place to be’. She stated that ‘it just makes it even more exciting and just interesting to get your hands on things that you wouldn’t normally have a chance to do’. In addition to being excited and fascinated by the objects she works with, R3 expressed a feeling of privilege. She stated she feels:

‘Privileged to have daily access to some things that not everybody gets to access. So I think that makes it quite special’.

As she spoke about this feeling, I observed a noticeable shift in her expression, and shared my observations, to which she responded ‘Well, yeah! I love my job. I feel very lucky to be in a job where I find it exciting’. This was not something I only observed in R3, but in many other members of staff who, when asked about their jobs, the objects in their care or their route into the museum sector became animated and verbose.

R2 challenges our understanding of what an object is, admitting the only time she has felt the excitement others might feel when handling artefacts, has happened when handling documents. Talking about a time when handling 19<sup>th</sup> century estate ledgers at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland for her undergraduate dissertation research, she remembered ‘suddenly thinking ‘my god, somebody wrote this over a hundred years ago’ and thinking ‘oh my god’’. While R2 may see documents as different from museum artefacts, perhaps because documents provide us with written sources of evidence, we can argue they are essentially artefacts themselves that can be used in the same way as Roman pottery or Victorian industrial material; objects reveal stories about the past and can be used to generate meaning about the people that produced and used them. The difference with documents is that they offer another layer of meaning in the written language. R2 argued that objects are vitally important to her role and rather than using them as set dressing in an exhibition or to add depth to a school session, objects should be at the heart of what museum professionals do. She states:

‘I don’t believe you should think ... we’re going to do Victorians, what have we got that fits that? It’s the other way round in museums ... your first starting point as a museum educator should be what collections do we have? And how do those collections underpin what people might be learning?’

*Conservation*

R1 stated that objects are essential to her role, as

‘Everything we’re doing really is about providing the optimum conditions for the object to survive ... I think objects are critical to what we’re about because if we didn’t have the objects we wouldn’t be needed.’

She admits her desire to work with objects began after being accepted on to a Master’s degree in Dress and Textiles; R1 soon realised she did not want an academic career where she would simply research objects and not work with them. Like R3, R1 discussed a sense of privilege at being able to work with and handle objects, citing her experience with a quilt in the Museum Service collection connected to Jane Austen. A Canadian researcher producing a replica, frequently questioned R1 about the quilt via email and R1 regularly interacted with the object in order to provide the relevant information;

‘I did feel very humbled to be working on it, because I recognised what value [the Canadian researcher] was putting on it. And I was there and I was able to pass on that information because I was physically with it’.

R5, like R1, argues that objects are ‘absolutely uppermost in what I do, they’re the reason I’m here.’ Her route in to archaeological conservation is perhaps different from what one would expect; after completing a degree in ceramics and having difficulty pursuing a career as a ceramicist R5 took part in amateur archaeology, sorting and classifying pottery on site. She explains that she:

‘Was constantly thinking these things shouldn’t be in a Curver box ... sitting in the garage. And I could really see from the archaeologist’s end what real problems there were. They didn’t have conservators really in that area ... there was a local museum service, and the objects kind of got handed back and forth between the local museum and the archaeology unit and nobody really had a sense of what to do with these objects once they were dug up ... as I did more and more digs as an amateur ... if an object had been found I wanted to go with it’.

It was the site director who suggested R5 pursue conservation as a career, resulting in her doing a Masters in archaeological conservation at Lincoln University. R5 does note however that in wanting to see an object’s journey from excavation to display, she has perhaps ‘gone too far the other way’ and is one person and one stage in the story of an object, missing the thrill of discovery on site. Many of the items she conserves have either been in the collections stores for a number of years and in need of re-conservation, or have come from excavations but reach her perhaps a year after discovery once the excavators have drawn and interpreted the finds in the site report. She comments her previous perception that every excavated object is conserved and displayed has been quashed by her experience as a conservator;

‘You have this idealised notion that everything goes off and gets conserved and goes on display and it’s all wonderful and exciting. And it doesn’t work like that’.

*Keepers and Collections staff*

R6’s relationship with objects is quite personal: ‘there are some things I actually get quite attached to’. Once she delved into the collections and began researching the people who had created the taxidermy collections in her care, she found herself excited by her position; to be working with collections of some of the most eminent botanists and geologists of the Victorian era. Her love of natural history stems from an early experience seeing the blue whale at the Natural History Museum at the age of four. After completing a degree in marine biology at university, and spending three years in America (including working on plankton in Maryland), she returned to the UK to a part time job with Hampshire Museum Service. She notes she has been with the museum service for most of her working life in a variety of different roles, including assistant curator at Andover Museum and the Red House in Christchurch. Her experience with the Blue Whale has affected the way she works with visitors to the stores at Chilcomb;

‘I’ve never forgotten that [experience] ... when we do tours we always have a mystery object and it’s actually the dodo bone ... you pass it round, then you say well actually it’s a dodo bone and then suddenly ... people have to start passing it around again, so they can actually touch it knowing it’s a dodo bone’.

R8 and R9, repeat the statements of R1 and R5, stating:

‘Objects are fundamental to my role. They are fundamental to the museum service as a whole and I would suggest ... they’re what make us a museum’.

Having completed a biology degree and carrying out research for a PhD, R8 describes his route into museums as being unintentional, and like many natural scientists working in various contexts, describes himself as a natural scientist working in museums rather than a museum professional specialising in natural scientists. Whilst writing his PhD thesis, R8 worked at Portsmouth Natural History Museum cataloguing natural history specimens and notes that the objects as documentary evidence were what interested him; ‘it’s the stories they tell, it’s the information that those objects provide rather than the object ... in its own right’.

R9 suggests that objects need to be carefully selected, looked after and treated with respect. R9 steered the discussion away from her own personal relationship with objects, stating that they are an educational resource in terms of how objects can tell stories about the past. She explained that when she took on her role, she found the collections somewhat chaotic as a result of frantic collecting in the late 90s, which had led to little being known about the collection as a whole.

What was interesting here is that although R9 echoed the statements of others about the fundamental nature of objects, she was reluctant to enter into a discussion about her personal relationship with objects, preferring to discuss the collections in her care. Similar to R9, R12 states that objects are of key importance and that a love of collections is essential, but it is important to remember who the objects are there for; as much of the collection consists of Hampshire finds, they are in trust for the people of Hampshire.

R13 describes objects as being ‘what I’m about’ but also admits that they are ‘very special in their own right’. She talked animatedly about how the stories and contexts objects provide us with link to people, since objects would not exist without people. An early experience with textiles through her relationship with her dressmaker aunt resulted in, what could be argued, a lifelong interest and passion for historic textiles, and while R13 comments that she is by nature a very tactile individual, she admits that in a professional sense her relationship with objects (particularly textiles) is not so much a physical one.

#### *Exhibitions*

R7, who trained as an artist before moving into the world of exhibitions, admits her main ways of interacting with heritage is through sight and touch. Although she admits that sculpture is something she interacts with through touch, in museum exhibitions she:

‘always keep my hands in my pockets, but I do find myself, I’m not a reader you see, I’ve never really liked text, so my senses are looking and touching and that’s the way I like to enjoy something’.

#### *Community Museums*

When asked about his relationship with objects, R11 professed that he is ‘one of those people who [thinks] it would be great to touch everything’. Having completed a degree in History and volunteered at St Fagans National History Museum<sup>5</sup>, Wales, as a student, R11 was introduced to the idea of a museum career whilst completing a Master’s Degree in York. After more voluntary work with museums in the area, he was offered the opportunity to do some short term work on a Heritage Lottery Fund exhibition project, and several years later completed a Museums diploma. R11 argues that compared to studying history from books, he finds the material culture and the stories they provide, fascinating.

#### **Question 4 – The meaning of the term *object handling***

As discussed in the previous chapter, terminology was found to be an issue; many respondents stated that they did not understand what was meant by the term *object handling* and therefore

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<sup>5</sup> St. Fagans: National History Museum, located outside Cardiff, Wales.

were unable to provide information about what constituted their handling collections. During the interview stage, I felt it important to gain an understanding of how museum professionals interpret the term *object handling*, and I believe their varied responses represent that of the museum world as a whole as well as the museum going public. For many visitors the idea of object handling might be easy to understand and something they can relate to, or are excited by. On the other hand, the term could be very detached from what visitors understand museums to offer; that museums are dusty institutions housing relics of the past behind glass cases. Most respondents stated that object handling is the physical engagement with an object; i.e. holding an object in your hands. However many developed this further by saying that object handling is about interpreting objects through experiencing their tactile qualities.

What is interesting is the fact that the responses can be gathered into groups which reflect the different museum roles; the physical act of handling and a way of engaging with cultural heritage. LCE officers tend to describe object handling as a way that ‘people make their own connections and meanings through a multi-engagement experience’ or the ‘opportunity to explore something by having a good close up look’. Of particular interest for LCE officers is the idea that object handling facilitates the process of interpretation and involves all the senses. The four LCE staff interviewed, agree that object handling which takes place within museums is significantly different from that which we do every day and that there is a lot of variation in how this takes place and the purpose behind it. R2 argues that this is not simply variation, but inconsistency which results in museum staff not having the same interpretation of the term. This, it could be argued, might be why during the collections survey there was confusion and discrepancy about what constituted a handling collection.

Whilst one might expect conservators to have an entirely different understanding of the term, they agreed with LCE staff in the sense that object handling is a form of interpretation that helps visitors make sense of an object and the information it might provide, but tended to think of specific groups using objects for handling for a specific purpose, rather than the public as a whole. Both conservators acknowledged that object handling forms a large part of their roles; R1 states that object handling is crucial in gaining information from textiles as they are a very tactile type of object and that she feels privileged to be able to handle objects more than the public. R5 comments that object handling has many meanings and therefore considers access a more suitable term, since this term offers a wider experience for the public than being limited to a specific activity.

Those working with collections as either keepers or collections officers present an interesting interpretation of the term *object handling*. Although one would presume those whose role is to

care for collections to consider object handling to simply be a destructive physical act, the viewpoints within this group varied quite considerably, from the very basic idea that it is simply about feeling objects (R12) to a more general concept that it is something we all do on a daily basis (R13). All respondents agree that *object handling* means different things in different contexts, dependant on who is doing it and what their purpose is. Both R6 and R13 observe how museum objects are handled in a very different way from everyday items; R13 argues this is due to the status of an object changing once it enters a collection, and R6 states that handling collections by adults ‘tends to be a bit more reverent’, perhaps because this is not something they regularly take part in at the museum. R6 also notes that in contrast children are more tactile and therefore kinaesthetic which affects the way in which they handle objects. What is also interesting here is to note the reaction of individuals for whom object handling is a difficult prospect. R9, who appeared very protective of the collections she is responsible for veered away from an interpretation of the term object handling, instead arguing that all objects are accessible in one way or another, but not necessarily through touch (a viewpoint shared by R6 who is interested in increasing access to collections through a variety of different ways). R8 adds that object handling should be about using collections outside the confines of the museum building, and incorporating them into different contexts instead of just open display within an exhibition.

R7, an exhibition officer, describes object handling as being:

‘the objects you get a version of that you’re allowed to touch ... object handling for me means you getting the opportunity to touch’.

She argues that object handling is a very personal experience and varies from person to person, depending on where their interests lie. For R7 it is art, and in particular sculpture, that she feels most connected with and wishes to touch. Similar to R6, R7 argues that the hesitancy with which adults often approach object handling could be attributed to childhood museum experiences where touch was prohibited by a parent.

R11, when asked for his understanding acknowledged that the term *object handling* is fraught with baggage, and that although as a champion of a new grading system he is more open to increased access to collections through handling, he is also aware that most people would view the term to mean handling collections. However, simply put, R11 argues that object handling is simply that; objects coming into contact with people. Taking this further he suggests that object handling can exist in many formats, from objects being on open display to mediated sessions with museum staff. He notes that within the different disciplines at Hampshire Museum Service the level of object handling varies dramatically and therefore attempting to achieve an agreed term for the practice is incredibly difficult. For example, the transport collections are used in an entirely different way from the decorative arts; traction engines are often used and transported

to fairs across the country, whereas china in the ceramics collection would not be used for a cup of tea, neither would staff attend open day events wearing clothing linked to Jane Austen. This is where the problem lies, since objects are all different in terms of their purpose and their history. In contrast to R1, R11 is someone who believes in handling ‘unless there’s a good reason not to, rather than, well, only handle it unless there’s a good reason [to]’. He mentions an experience during a routine security check at one of the travelling exhibitions, where a sculpture perceived to be of possible danger to visits was highlighted. By touching the object R11 was able to make an assessment of the risk, but he also says that this is about:

‘getting under the skin of an object ... whether that’s touching or really getting up close and looking at it and trying to get ... and understanding of it’.

### **Question 5 – The purpose of object handling**

Having discussed the meaning of *object handling* we now aim to understand the purpose of the activity. As has previously been stated, object handling has formed part of many museum agendas over the past ten years, and while many institutions have attempted to justify why it takes place, there has been a distinct lack of research into its purpose beyond being an experience that schools and specialist groups are expected to take part in. In asking respondents to consider purpose, a wealth of suggestions were put forward which can be grouped into seven categories: learning and understanding new information; accessing and processing information; making a connection with the past; enjoyment; making collections accessible; therapy and reminiscence; contributes to skills development and research.

Of interest is R1’s initial response to this question, as this respondent felt that object handling should not take place simply for handling sake or to meet a target, but for a specific purpose. R1 argued it is important for people to understand what an object is and why they’re handling it, and of equal importance is that people understand why certain objects outside a glass case are available for handling, but not the ones inside display cabinets. R1 states that transparency and clear instruction of purpose should be stated at the outset in order for people to gain something from their handling experience.

It is important to note that many respondents, if not all, commented that answering this question was difficult and required a few moments to consider before making their response.

#### *Learning new information and understanding: the past, our world, ourselves*

By far the most common suggestion was that object handling fulfilled the purpose of providing people with an opportunity to learn new information and develop understanding. This included information about a particular historical period, culture, object or site from the past, the world

in which we live and information about society and ourselves. Interestingly, much of this learning and understanding was linked with school groups, which it could be argued comes from the high proportion of handling sessions that are run with groups of children and linked to the national curriculum. When we consider the number of schools sessions that are held in comparison with reminiscence and family activities, we see a higher number of children taking part in handling opportunities than adults and therefore this could contribute to the concept that the main purpose of object handling is for learning and understanding.

Continuing our discussion of handling as a learning experience for children, respondent two (R2) argued that what takes place in a schools session is entirely different from what takes place in the classroom. R2 stated:

‘I don’t believe that I’m a teacher, I think I facilitate a learning experience and I think what they do in handling those objects is about underpinning the learning that they have in school. It gives them another depth ... it gives them a different focus on the same subject somehow. You’re literally bringing something out of the past ... for them to connect with’.

Developing this idea further R5 added that not only does object handling fulfil the purpose of learning and understanding, but it allows for self-directed learning since handling offers the individual the opportunity to explore an object in a personal way; behind a glass case the learning experience is limited to that which the exhibition designer deems important, whereas being able to study something from all angles allows for a deeper understanding and an opportunity to create meaning from an encounter with objects. Taking this further still, R6 adds that self-directed learning through handling enables one to compare artefacts in order to understand the similarities and differences, both between artefacts in the past and with similar items today.

In addition to the stated purpose of learning and understanding, many respondents suggested that learning is not limited simply to the gathering of information about a specific topic, but object handling fulfils the purpose of learning to value heritage and the contribution it makes to society. From learning how to handle and respect artefacts as part of growth and development (particularly of children as R4 highlighted), handling offers an opportunity for growth and understanding of oneself and the world in which we live now as well as the world in the past, and enables us to engage with society.

Another aspect to consider within this bracket of learning and understanding is the fact that object handling addresses the issue of differing learning styles. In the chapter on learning and

museums, we explored the fact that much research has been carried out into understanding how one learns, and the different styles we use to engage in a learning experience. R9 highlighted the fact that object handling provides access to knowledge and information to individuals for whom the visual nature of museum exhibitions can be difficult to engage with.

*To access and process information*

Following on from learning and understanding, another key purpose of object handling is the way in which it enables one to access, process and build on known information. Both R3 and R6, discussing taxidermy specimens in their care, commented that handling provides one with an opportunity to build on previous knowledge about the animal world by coming into contact with real specimens. Whilst there is a wealth of information that can be learnt from books, the internet and documentaries, both of these respondents argued that close up investigation through touch gives physical access and helps one process this information on a deeper level; in discussing the concept of the silent flight of owls R6 stated ‘you don’t get an idea of how soft those feathers are until you actually touch them’ and R3 develops this further by saying ‘close up investigation can reveal the reasons why an animal has particular features and how it might survive in a particular environment’.

This is not only limited to natural science specimens, but to all objects held in museum collections. R1 argues that ‘touch allows us to access information that would not be available from sight alone’; handling artefacts allows one to process the inner workings of an object, meanings behind design and creation decisions, the fragility of objects, as well as reinforcing pre-existing knowledge in any of those areas. Taking this one step further, R7 argues that handling objects enables visitors to ‘interpret and understand what is going on in an exhibition’, which it can be argued is an important purpose since exhibitions can often be regarded as the information the museum wishes to present to the visiting public.

*To make connections with the past*

This purpose has already been touched on; however it is important to pull it out as a purpose in its own right, since museums can be seen as an interface between the past and the present. Swain (2007, p.4) draws our attention to the fact that the process of an object moving from excavation to museum results in its removal from an original context, making it difficult for visitors to understand their true meaning. Hampshire Museum service staff suggest that object handling provides visitors with the ability to make connections with the past which have been lost through this aforementioned journey from excavation to museum.

*For enjoyment*

Perhaps not often considered a high-brow purpose, many respondents named enjoyment as a key purpose for object handling. R3 commented that much of the work SEARCH does involves evaluating the experiences of visitors, and one of the questions asked refers to enjoyment. R3 states most visitors reveal that the hands-on element of the activities is one of the most enjoyable aspects of their visit, saying that:

‘You get told ... ‘don’t touch’ so often that it’s nice that you can come somewhere and touching is encouraged’.

Not only is object handling enjoyable, but equally it ‘demonstrates that the past is interesting and not stale’ (R12).

*To make collections accessible*

Accessibility features highly on many museum agendas and mission statements, with particular reference to disability, however much is being done to make museums accessible to underrepresented groups in the museum demographic; for example minority groups and the 16 to 24 age group. Many of my respondents argued that object handling contributes to this growing accessibility debate, since not only does it give physical access to objects for the purposes discussed above, but it makes the museum an inviting and interesting place for audiences that would not normally consider the museum a place to visit.

One of the main demographics highlighted by respondents was that of Visually Impaired groups (henceforth VIs). Respondents argued that touch and object handling is the main way in which VIs make meaning from museum collections, since this is their means of understanding and navigating their way through the world. Physical touch offers something that sight alone cannot achieve; one can experience many facets of an object such as the weight, texture, temperature and shape to name but a few.

However, access is not simply an issue of the types of people represented in the museum visitor demographic; it is also about access to stored collections (another aspect featuring in more recent museum agendas). Many respondents argued that object handling increases this physical access through engendering an idea of ownership and trust with the public. In discussing the concept of stored collections, R5 commented that:

‘We are keeping all of these items in trust for Hampshire. That’s all the museum’s job is: to keep object safe for the future ... so if [the public] can’t have access at whatever level that might be, and it does include handling, then there’s not perhaps that much point in us looking after everything. And why are we hanging on to it, if we are in a sense not going to use it?’

*Reminiscence and therapy*

Reminiscence, alongside learning and understanding, is a longstanding purpose of object handling. More recently research has been carried out to understand the therapeutic nature of object handling (see chapter three), investigating the way in which objects can be used with different groups of people and in different environments to aid health and wellbeing. This purpose was one highlighted by many respondents, who saw the purpose of object handling as being an important activity in therapeutic activities, such as reminiscence. R2 commented that objects stimulate both conversation and memory, drawing on her own experiences in encountering museum collections;

‘There’s a Fisher Price toy in the collection ... inside it there’s a sort of merry-go-round and everything sort of wobbles on the spot ... and we used to use it in sessions at Milestones and the first time I saw it I thought ‘yeah, I had one of those’... About three years later I was watching a child moving it and I had a real strong memory of a particular room at home that had been my bedroom ... So I had this real kind of flashback, which is what people have, you know, all the time’.

Not only do objects aid in recalling memories, but R2 goes on to raise the important purpose that it serves in contributing to therapy, since objects are able to take people ‘back into that time in their life where they were confident and were very conscious of what was going on around them’. This therapy aspect of object handling is very relevant at a time where health and wellbeing features highly on Government agenda for society as a whole; objects have the power to remind people of past experiences and create new ones through touch.

*Research and skills*

The final purpose raised was that of research and skills. Respondents suggested that object handling fulfils the needs of researchers of different levels, enabling those individuals to gain vital information in their academic investigations. Indeed Hampshire’s stored collections in Winchester are often used for this purpose. However taking this further than researchers simply gaining data, object handling also contributes to developing skillsets.

**Question 6 – Advantages of object handling**

What should be highlighted at the beginning of this summary of question six, is the fact that it is often hard to separate the purpose of object handling from its advantages. When asked, many respondents repeated their answers to the previous question, however there was some development of these ideas and new aspects were introduced. A number of respondents identified that the advantages were similar to the purposes of object handling, and therefore

where responses to question six echoed that of question five, the responses are built on in this section.

Eight categories of advantages were identified: meets different learning styles; aids understanding; allows for self-interpretation; brings down barriers; makes museums exciting; offers a unique experience; connects us with the past and present, and teaches respect for the past.

*Meets different learning styles*

As discussed above one of the purposes of object handling is learning and understanding. We discussed briefly the way in which object handling offers an opportunity for the different learning styles to be met. In response to this question about advantages, meeting different learning styles was highlighted as one of the main advantages. Two respondents in particular, who both interact frequently with the public through school visits and family activity days, suggest that object handling is especially advantageous for those who learn by doing; i.e. kinaesthetic learners. R2 and R10 both comment that object handling:

‘For people who learn in a kinaesthetic way ... helps them to think about the world around them and what on earth [an object] was used for’ (R2)

And

‘that physical aspect of being able to hold something, to physically feel something, not just to explore it with your eyes can be actually what engages some people, all depending on their learning style’. (R10)

In exploring this further, R2 stated that differing learning styles is not something that occurs only in children, but that a large proportion of the population learn kinaesthetically, and that by limiting physical access to collections, museums limit access to knowledge and information. R2 comments that ‘we don’t actually handle that much of our collections when you really think about it’ but argues that opening access to everything is not the solution to the problem of reaching audiences with different learning styles. It is important to reach a comfortable balance whereby handling is possible but not to the detriment of the museum collection as a whole.

*Aids understanding*

Again this purpose is repeated; however it is equally an advantage to the activity of object handling. Nearly all respondents commented that object handling provides the advantage of aiding and developing our understanding about the past and its material culture. Most LCE staff suggested that handling offers an opportunity to compare artefacts of the past with modern objects in order to understand what an object is and how it was used, as well as considering who

might have used it and making links to the past in that way. For example R10 talks about how certain objects indicate social divisions such as a copper kettle which would have been used by servants in a household rather than the upper echelon of society.

R1 and R13 both argued that touch provides an opportunity to access and understand an object, particularly in regard to the material from which something is made; one can identify what an object is made from through touch, for example distinguishing between jet and French jet which both have a different temperature, something which would not be as clear unless one has physical access. In addition handling provides us with an extra layer of information about an artefact. Many respondents stated that when working with the public, many visitors comment on how handling has revealed an object is heavier or lighter than expected.

Something which many respondents highlighted is the fact that handling allows one to understand the 'why' of something, bringing greater meaning to the object. For example through touch we discover the workings of an object, whether that is the moving parts that make an object function or as mentioned above how the feathers of a bird give it silent flight and the spines of a hedgehog offer it protection. The 'why' of things is something of equal importance as the 'what'; R5 argues that 'when something is behind glass it can look different than when it's in the open [and] that somehow impacts the object' and therefore deeper levels of meaning can be achieved than with eyes alone.

Finally, handling helps one learn information not only about an object or its context in the past, but about oneself; what knowledge and skills we already possess, which can contribute highly to our sense of self in the present.

*Allows for self-interpretation*

We have explored this idea to a certain extent in discussing the purpose of object handling above, however as well as being a purpose several respondents argued that it is also an advantage. This is firmly rooted in the fact that by handling objects the experience is entirely self-directed and therefore provides one with an opportunity for making your own meaning and interpretation of material culture. R3 describes this as the experience of 'getting your hands on something and ... exploring it yourself and thinking of your own ideas, and discovering things yourself'. This respondent expands this by commenting that it is

{just really worthwhile to be able to come and get up close to things that you might not normally have a chance to ... and to explore and find out things for yourself rather than being told the information that someone wants you to know about it on a panel}.

Indeed this is something that needs to be explored further in terms of access to collections, since it is not the museum profession that holds the only source of information about the objects in its care, the public contribute valuable meaning to objects and therefore tactile engagement allows a dialogue to take place in which meaning is co-created between museum professional and visiting public.

*Brings down barriers*

The concept that object handling brings down barriers is something that was high on the list of advantages for many respondents, and works in a number of different contexts from removing barriers to interpretation for individuals with disabilities, to uniting groups of people who would not traditionally work together. At a basic level R5 argues that by offering physical access to collections ‘people get the sense that they’re included and involved, with a sense of trust and privilege’, which in turn is important at a time where the heritage sector is increasingly required to maintain its perceived value within society.

For individuals with disabilities, such as visual impairment, handling objects offers the advantage of being able to access collections and make personal interpretations where the traditional visual nature of exhibitions relies on sight. R8 describes object handling as being ‘a valuable experience for people with sight difficulties’ and R12 in discussing a project carried out with visually impaired groups using the archaeology collections argued that the physical connection is the only way VIs are able to gain information and interpret to past.

Barriers are not simply related to disability, however. Barriers can simply be overcoming the notion that museums are places for a certain strata of society, rather than being a place where all are welcome to participate and make meaning from collections. Object handling is advantageous in ensuring no one is excluded; R3 shared a personal experience of an exhibition where a large amount of text was used to present information about the collections. This relied on visitors being literate as well as being interested enough to read all the text, and understand what was on display within the glass cases. R3 argues that the advantage of being able to touch and handle objects ‘means that nobody is excluded, it means there is something for everybody’ and that this form of access is something for all whether a visitor is young, old, has a disability, is literate and so on.

Another example of breaking down barriers is highlighted by R2, who argues that object handling gives people a bridge to their families that they might have lost as well as promoting ‘commonality between different groups of people where you don’t think you’re going to have common ground’.

*Makes museums enjoyable and exciting*

R3 suggests that not only does object handling offer an enjoyable experience, but ‘museums become more dynamic and exciting through touch’. Similar to breaking down barriers, this enjoyable experience can be beneficial in opening people up to the possibility that museums are not ‘old, boring, dusty and that you might simply visit to look at stuff’ (R3) since a visit ceases to be the traditional visual experience, but, as R2 explains, a social experience where groups come together through enjoyable and exciting activities involving close up, tactile access to collections.

*Offers a unique experience*

The familiar museum visit may well be to stroll around a gallery space, looking at objects within glass cases; what object handling does, according to most respondents, is offer a special and unique experience. Both R3 and R6, in discussing natural science collections and taxidermy specimens in particular, suggest that most visitors would not have an opportunity to see many of these animals in their natural habitat ‘let alone investigate them through touch’. R3 adds that providing these special opportunities can cultivate a respect in visitors for the world around them as they are exploring a ‘hidden world that is far more interesting than they might have imagined’. It could be argued that not only does this experience promote an interest, but can inspire individuals to pursue a hobby, academic course or career in the natural world.

This unique experience is not only limited to handling natural science specimens but also to all collections. Both R7 and R12 indicate that the experience is something entirely different from reading text panels and object labels and fulfils a natural desire to touch that most of us possess. R7 adds that ‘if it is a very important object ... you just feel very privileged to be able to be handling that’ suggesting that part of the unique experience is rooted in the emotional connection visitors make to the physical encounter of handling, rather than simply interpreting the object in their hands. This in turn, as R12 argues, adds quality to life.

*Connects us with the past and present*

This was perhaps the biggest advantage that all respondents highlighted. Many asserted that the physical connection with an object creates a connection with the past, including our own, and connects us with the present too. Interestingly this was often the point during our conversation where many respondents talked about their own experiences of object handling which had led them to connect with the past.

Whilst this might seem an obvious statement to make, the way in which objects connect us with the past is a valuable and beneficial aspect of tactile experiences with material culture. R10 recounted an experience during preparations for the *Ancient Greeks: Athletes, Warriors and Heroes* exhibition in Gosport Gallery in 2007, where she handled a replica sword based on archaeological material. During this experience R10 claimed her understanding of the lives of Ancient Greek soldiers was increased;

‘For me, it just made me think gosh! Actually that’s really heavy, and I would never have been able to do that unless I’d had lots of training. And having the uniform as well, it made me really think how hard life must have been, how long you must have had to train, just to wear the clothing, let alone fling the sword, spear, even lift the shield, which I can’t do without two hands. So I would have been pathetic as a Greek warrior. But ... that just really struck me, how wonderful that was’.

In addition R13 talked about a visit of the Jane Austen Society of North America to an exhibition in which a Jane Austen dress was on open display. One society member asked to borrow gloves in order to touch the fabric, which R13 believed

‘[The visitor] thought she was going to get some kind of, either inspiration or frisson of excitement from touching it even through the white gloves, which was extraordinary’.

Both these experiences can be seen as what R5 refers to as a sense of mystery whereby the visitor engages with the past by touching ‘something that’s perceived as rare and old and mystical’.

However, it is not simply a personal, and perhaps emotional, experience that we gain from handling. Several respondents agree that these connections allow a deeper understanding of how an object worked in the past, how it contributed to the culture in which it was produced and how people engaged with it, which in turn aids the retention of information and knowledge gained.

In addition to exploring the past of others, many respondents suggested that object handling provides the opportunity to engage with one’s own past, particularly through reminiscence which is a valuable form of therapy as well as an enjoyable activity for the people involved.

Not only does a tangible encounter with an object create a link between ourselves and people in the past, many respondents maintained that these encounters help us to connect with the present, and in particular the world around us. R4 repeatedly argued that object handling addresses the way in which we negotiate the world around us; through touch. He suggests that we ‘don’t exist in a bubble of nothing and communicate virtually with people, [we] exist in a

world of objects'. As we have previously explored, objects enable us to learn about past cultures, but they also help us learn about the world now, by investigating how technology has changed and affected society.

*Respect for the past*

Another advantage pulled out by several respondents was the concept that object handling promotes a sense of respect for the past and its material culture. Many spoke of the idea of trust and privilege that one feels in being permitted to handle rare and important objects, and that this unique and special experience in turn encourages visitors to feel part of the process of meaning making and therefore increases their understanding of the role of museums. In addition this idea of respect is also a way of 'not only discovering an object, but using alternatives for handling works as a deterrent against the more rare examples of object becoming damaged' (R7). By having respect for collections, we are able to better preserve what we have by using suitable examples for handling situations.

**Question 7 – Problems with object handling**

Whilst much research has been carried out to understand the value and benefits, the problems that arise from object handling can easily be ignored. Conservation issues are always uppermost when considering what objects to use in certain environments, whether that be in storage, display or tactile activities, and indeed this was one of the main issues to come out of this question. However this was not the only problem highlighted by respondents; others include the idea of ownership, how objects evoke memories both good and bad, and the possibility that frequent handling 'ruins the magic'.

*Collections care*

One of the main issues to arise from questioning participants about the problems associated with handling museum collections is that of conservation and preservation. The debate surrounding damage to objects is an interesting one since at the centre is a lack of communication between those whose main role is collections care versus those who engage with the public through object handling sessions. Conservators and keepers were particularly concerned about object welfare, many sharing horror stories of objects returning from handling situations in a poor condition, such as a collection of Egyptian artefacts which came into the care of R5, who argued that through rough handling and inadequate storage were in poor condition. On occasion poor handling results in objects having to be re-conserved and stored away due to excessive damage, however it is important to remember that damage occurred is not necessarily intentional; it is often accidental.

R5 states that during handling damage occurs no matter how careful one is; it is a destructive process even in the hands of careful conservators. The Egyptian artefacts that were part of the LCE team's handling collection used in schools sessions, consisted of real and replica items of pottery, metalwork, beads, and bandages, stored together in one box, each item wrapped in a small plastic bag. At the end of a session there is often insufficient time to carefully pack the items away in appropriate packaging, however this is something that must be addressed as it is possible to argue that much of the damage that occurred to these objects was the result of careless storage, rather than the result of rough handling by a school group. This no doubt contributed to the condition the objects are now in, as R5 explains:

‘Some of the bronze objects have begun to corrode, which may have happened anyway, but it may have been because they were sort of damp and in bags, and handled with sweaty hands, passed around, put back in the plastic bag, [and] sealed up’.

R5 argues that while this instance of handling resulted in damage to the objects, ‘they could all be used to be handled, as long as it was in the correct and appropriate way. There's nothing to say that they can't be’. One suggestion by conservators is that gloves be used to provide a barrier between the object and visitor, however, R10 suggests that if gloves were used the purpose of a school session in which pupils interact with objects would be defeated; being able to touch skin on object is a powerful tool giving the handler an opportunity to explore an object by feeling the texture, fabric and temperature of an object which simply is not possible when wearing gloves.

Despite the danger of damage to artefacts R10 argues that ‘the positives completely outweigh the negatives ... as long as you prepare for every eventuality’. Museum professionals need to be aware that rough handling is one of the main causes of damage to museum collections, particularly when handling objects with hinges or moving parts, or even artefacts that are familiar to the handler. One of the main ways in which this can be prevented is by offering handling techniques or rules, not just for children but for everyone, and ensuring enough museum staff are present, to offer guidance and knowledge about the collections. R3 and R6 both discussed a SEARCH open day, which saw more visitors than expected, and although open days are usually very well supervised, in this instance one of the taxidermy specimens was damaged. The main difference between an open day and a group visit is in the way in which handling instructions are delivered; at the beginning of a pre-booked group visit, the group as a whole is asked to put forward their suggestions for handling guidelines which are then confirmed or expanded by the museum staff leading the session. During a drop-in open day, handling guidelines are given to adults to read with their children, relying heavily on the adult taking responsibility for their family group. While in most circumstances, these instructions are

adhered to, R3 observed instances where they have not, resulting in the mistreatment of specimens on open display. She notes that this unintended mistreatment can be attributed to familiarity with the objects; in particular taxidermy specimens suffer since visitors may own a pet and presume the specimens can be treated in a similar way to stroking a dog or cat. R6 observes a conflict between the concept that taxidermy is simply stuffed animals whereas it has importance and value. The reality is that many of the taxidermy specimens at SEARCH are antiques and have been repeatedly touched by thousands of previous visitors, and as a result any rough treatment can result in birds' feathers falling out or bald patches appearing on mammals.

R1 comments that one of the main issues to consider in object handling is the life span of an object and how this will be affected by handling. She argues that part of the life span is to consider when an object from the collections enters a handling environment since this is the point at which it will begin to rapidly deteriorate, and its character will subsequently change, no matter how carefully it is handled. R1 points out that 'as a conservator ideally we would not want to touch or display any object – that's the best thing for it, for its long term survival', an opinion shared by R9. R1 was not the sole respondent to comment on this issue of deterioration, indeed R4 acknowledged that it is not only the risk to the objects themselves in terms of damage through mishandling, but risk in terms of the availability of objects in the future for research and meaningful study that must be recognised. R6 argues that some items in the collections have a higher scientific importance and significance than others. R2 states:

'The problems are what you've got in your collection – if there's things to handle from the collections point of view. How many do you have of that kind of thing, because when you're handling you are probably, depending on the type of object, handling to destruction ... it's about whether or not you can accept that damage ... whether or not the object can take the sustained handling.'

However this is a risk that R4 believes can be managed through carefully considering the use of collections where more than one of a particular object is stored. For example R2 suggests that objects could be handled for a short period of time, for a specific project and then returned back to the collection; Remembrance sessions at HCC museums throughout the county use objects requested for a particular period of time 'enabling us to have limited access to things so that we're not causing continual sustained damage to collections.' R6 comments it is also about considering whether collections were designed for handling, such as some of the early natural science specimens that have been mounted using pins and wires and therefore present a problem in terms of visitor health and safety. Object selection is key in putting together handling collections.

In addition to the damage aspect of collections care, R10 and R11 highlighted theft of objects as a very real threat to museums. In May 2010 a set of coins including nineteen Tudor, and two Iron Age Cheriton type examples were stolen from Fareham's Westbury Manor Museum during its opening hours. R11 argues that this is a possible risk unless open displays are monitored by staff.

### *Ownership*

Ownership and access to objects is another big issue to consider. R4 states:

'People say museums are neutral and they're not. They are massively biased. And there's [sic] big problems there with who has the authority and who allows access and how you allow access'.

Many respondents argued that it is important to offer handling opportunities as this increases interest and support from the public for who the Hampshire collections are preserved. R4 elaborates on this by suggesting that if objects are not cared for and preserved for future generations 'museums can be accused of not living up to their responsibility or duty to society'.

The ownership issue is not simply limited to physical access however; it is how artefacts are represented to the public through exhibitions and displays. Many would suggest that museums present information to the public in an objective way. However R4 argues that very rarely are museums truly objective, in fact he suggests they can be very biased, since the attitudes and values of people working in museums are brought into the ways that they are interpreted and presented to the public.

### *Handling for the sake of handling*

An interesting issue that R1 highlighted is the notion that museums are offering handling opportunities as this is something that is now expected by visitors. She asks:

'is it a band-wagon that we've just jumped on over the last few years? And handling is the new way that we allow visitors to experience the past?'

Her concern is that handling is not being facilitated in a way that achieves something and enables people to connect with an object. R1 believes that handling should have a reason and purpose as handling for the sake of it that causes damage to collections. Having a purpose is important as it ensures that handling is done in a way that reinforces a sense of awe and respect for artefacts 'as the handlers understand that they are handling precious, important and significant objects' (R3).

Following on from R1's observation that handling should have a purpose; many respondents suggest that too much handling can be detrimental to not only the object, but the handler as well. Both R5 and R12 argue that:

‘if you have too much access to objects then it can be taken for granted ... sometimes it might detract from that mysticism and that sort of sense of ‘wow’ and awe and wonder... you do end up taking it for granted and it would be a shame if that happened for people through excessive handling and just accepting they're allowed to touch and handle everything’.

#### *Provocative objects*

Whilst we have explored the advantage that objects have in provoking memories of those taking part in reminiscence, the flip side is that negative memories might surface. R4 notes that often we might be afraid to engage with objects as they can have an emotional impact or be controversial, raising issues that perhaps people would prefer are not addressed. R4 states ‘we need to be confident about engaging people's emotions. I don't think we are. I think we try and be quite objective and balanced.’ He believes we should not be afraid of emotional engagements with objects as this can be a therapeutic experience for those taking part, as much as it is when recalling happy memories. The most important thing is to be prepared and work sensitively with both the objects and visitors.

#### **Question 8 – Incorporating object handling into museums effectively**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the impetus behind the collections survey was to contribute to the grading system introduced in 2007. Although this grading system is not in place across all of the Museum Service collections, it has been useful in initiating an investigation into how collections are being used on the front line. R4 confessed he feels a grading system with a positive view of handling would be a useful foundation for thinking about how museums can make their collections more accessible. Part of the battle for museum professionals is about getting objects with significance and worth out for people to engage with. While some of the Museum Service collections are being used with different groups, for example archaeology collections used with visually impaired groups in Hampshire, and some taxidermy specimens from natural sciences used for special handling sessions, many of the other collections are seen as one of a kind, unique archives which would be under threat should they be used for handling. This fuels the continued debate of whether we should keep collections for the future or use them for the current generation of people – should we retain examples of artefacts for the future, or should we think carefully about what benefit objects can have for society now in health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and intergenerational work compared to

possible scientific advances in the future. Many respondents agree that a careful balance needs to be achieved between collections care, and collections use.

Respondents gave varied and interesting responses to the question about tactile access to museum collections. These responses can be grouped into seven different categories: purposeful handling; quality objects; communication; collections care; replicas and alternatives; raising awareness; and training.

#### *Purposeful handling*

The majority of respondents agreed that at the forefront of effective handling should be purpose. Many stated that handling should not be for the sake of handling, but should link in with the interests of the visiting public or the National Curriculum for example, arguing that if we offer nothing more than the experience ‘what’s the point?’ (R2, R12).

R1 emphasised this aspect of effective handling since she believes, as others do (R5 and R9), that having a purpose for using collections with a given group of people at a set time is vital, as well as clearly setting handling guidelines to ensure the safety of the collections being used. This is especially important, she argues, for textile collections which people often assume they know how to handle. R1 asserts that a lack of knowledge, and indeed purpose, is when most damage occurs to objects. R6, R8 and R12 add that essential to this purpose is providing the handling session with expert and trained staff in order to facilitate purpose. In addition R7 argues that purposeful sessions mean that those with a genuine interest in a particular object type or collection attend and get the most out of handling, rather than attending because the offer is there. In this way the encounter is meaningful for the visitor.

R10 suggests one of the ideal ways in which objects can be used for handling is by addressing the passage of time. She argues that a selection of complete objects that can be presented as a timeline helps particularly younger children understand where each past culture sits in relation to each other.

Purpose does not, however, extend simply to why and how to handle objects, but to the types of objects chosen for handling. R5, R6, R8 and R9 suggest that at the forefront of handling sessions, is that objects chosen are handled in a managed environment to ensure their longevity and R8 specifically argues that having purposeful designated handling collections would reduce pressure on central collections.

*Good quality objects*

Several respondents agree that not only should objects be chosen to fit a purpose, but that these should be of good quality and not substandard condition as this does not offer the public a true representation of the main collections. Interestingly out of all the respondents, only one (R12) commented that handling collections should consist of lower grade objects, whereas R9 argued that there is no reason why all grades of collections should not be accessible. This issue is something that one LCE officer highlighted stating that ‘in my experience all the tat gets given to the education officers, because curators are notoriously protective of their things’. R5 believes, as do most respondents, that the value of objects should be uppermost. Interestingly, and this is explored further below, R8 suggests that the view of the LCE officer may not be wholly representative as he believes LCE staff often assume they will not be given the items they would like and therefore do not ask. For R8 communication is important in making quality collections accessible.

*Communication*

Again this is another issue highlighted by most respondents, who argue that the key to effective handling is communication. Perhaps this is best expressed by R4 who suggests that although an understanding of the importance of handling objects as part of learning and engagement exists, there is still a lack of understanding at a grading level, whereby keepers and curators are unaware of what this means in terms of the objects that are suitable for use in tactile engagement. This is echoed by R8’s observations that dialogue between keepership staff is good, but that a dialogue between the keepership staff and the LCE staff, who are the main facilitators of object handling sessions, is essential. As mentioned above R8 is concerned that often LCE staff might see something within the collections they believe would be useful to their public facing workshops but often do not ask, assuming the answer will be no. He says that for this to take place in an ideal world, discussion and negotiation needs to take place, and in instances where collections are not suitable for handling, alternatives are offered, which in turn maximise the potential of collections.

This issue of communication not only refers to staff but extends to the public also. Key to effective object handling is clearly stating the objectives of a session as well as outlining handling guidelines which ensure the safety of both handler and object. R5 states that she would encourage objects to be handled as though they are the only example, thus ensuring careful handling. R4 uses the example of the *Kids in Museums Manifesto*, whereby museums are encouraged to communicate clearly with their audience; the 2010 manifesto states that ‘Don’t touch is never enough’ suggesting that museums should ‘say why... teach respect by explaining why some things shouldn’t be touched. Direct to something nearby which can be’. Again in the

2012 manifesto the issue of touch is addressed by saying ‘please touch as often as you can ... direct kids to things that can be handled’ ([www.kidsinmuseums.org.uk/manifesto](http://www.kidsinmuseums.org.uk/manifesto)).

*Collections care – ensuring collections are protected whilst being handled*

We have already discussed to a certain extent that vital to effective handling are clearly stated handling guidelines, in order to ensure that collections are protected from unnecessary damage. Another aspect highlighted by R10 is the need for suitable collections storage. At present many smaller community museum handling collections, primarily used with visiting groups (for example schools), are stored away from the main collections, which it could be argued further cements the notion that handling collections are not seen as part of a museum’s main collection. R10 explained that in one instance, while collecting a box of objects for use with a school group, she had to go to an entirely different part of the museum building, carrying a heavy box down two flights of stairs before reaching the education room of Westbury Manor Museum. For R10, more suitable storage, closer to the education room in which school sessions take place, would be the initial step to be taken.

In ensuring collections care many respondents suggest that handling needs to be done in a controlled environment with small groups of people. R7 discussed an event which was part of the *Quilty Secrets* exhibition in 2009 where a group of visitors were invited to meet some of the textile artists as well as a conservator and keeper from the museum service. As part of this session the visitors, whilst wearing white gloves, were permitted to touch the quilts, one of which was a quilt attributed to Jane Austen. Visitors wrote to R7, following the event, expressing their joy and amazement at being able to have that kind of experience, and R7 argues that this environment provided an enjoyable experience for visitors as well as ensuring the safety of collections.

*Replicas and alternatives*

This is often an issue which causes much discussion and debate among museum professionals and the visiting public; whilst it is not within the scope of this thesis to enter into this debate, it is important to explore the viewpoint of several respondents who acknowledge the power of replicas in handling situations. Both R4 and R10 suggest that although it would not be suitable for rare and significant objects to become part of designated handling collections, simply saying no without exploring alternatives is unhelpful. Rather than admitting defeat if an alternative object that offers the same information as the rare object cannot be found, replicas are useful in offering an alternative experience. That is not to say that a replica should be falsely presented as the ‘real thing’, rather it is important to be honest that a replica has been used in a certain situation where the authentic object is not available in order to demonstrate the physical

properties and give the handler a sense of how the object feels and might have been used. It is interesting to observe visitor reactions to replica artefacts – during schools sessions R4 witnessed children's responses on discovering the object they have been handling is not real; although the initial reaction is that of disappointment, 'that *'ugb'* doesn't last long, and they've got a lot of value out of it and used it well'. Respondents who discussed replicas and alternatives agree that used alongside real artefacts and with clear explanation to ensure visitors are aware of authenticity, the experience of handling is still worthwhile.

#### *Raising awareness*

Two respondents highlighted the importance of raising awareness of collections in order to facilitate effective handling. R2 and R7 suggest the public be made aware of what museums can offer in order for them to be interested in visiting. R2 argues that

'the first part of conservation and caring for your collections is access to them, because if the public don't know about them ...why should they care if your collections are under threat and might be sold off?'

On a different standpoint, R7 suggests that increasing collections access for the public raises issues to do with fairness and equality. If we are attempting to increase access to collections, and indeed this is a pressure museums are facing from government and funding bodies, we need to address not only how collections are accessed but by whom. We should be offering a service that is equal and fair for all.

#### *Training*

Several respondents stressed the importance that training plays in meaningful and purposeful object handling. R5, R6, R7, R8 and R9 all suggest that being able to offer a good handling opportunity begins with ensuring all museum staff are comfortable and confident in handling. If we are to facilitate handling opportunities we need to lead by example, demonstrating both how to handle and how to draw out knowledge and information from collections. Most respondents argued that successful handling comes down to having *experts* on hand to encourage visitors to engage with collections; R7 states that many visitors respond well to the 'behind the scenes element' of handling opportunities, advocating the importance of the having museum staff present.

R11 argues that the ethos of museums is around access to collections and if most of the tactile interactions the public experience are through 'make and takes' this is not using the museum to its full possibility; 'you could do that in a library or you do that in an arts centre and the collections are irrelevant'. For R11 it is very much about collections at the heart of everything

that museums do and therefore through training all staff in handling and how to facilitate this with the public, the question of access is easier to answer.

### **Observations**

On analysing responses from the interviews, a few key things appear, concerning communication, language, passion and the value of collections, each of which are discussed below.

The most notable point to highlight is a common consensus between staff that communication is paramount in developing and using collections for handling purposes. R10 provides us with a clear example of this in practice when discussing how she obtains artefacts for her handling sessions. Her experiences with various different community museum curators have either been progressive (R10's terminology) in their approach to using collections for handling, or those who are not and simply say 'you can't have that' or 'have this – I don't know what it is'. R10 notes that her main reaction to this experience is to spend part of her budget purchasing objects through auction sites, such as eBay, in order to acquire suitable material for handling rather than 'random tat that doesn't link to local places'. However she also feels frustration that within the organisation there are two different approaches to access, due in large part to a lack of communication between staff and an understanding of how collections are used. There are examples of staff who communicate with LCE officers, appreciate the value of handling and are aware of the environment in which it takes place, and therefore allow LCE staff to use objects from the main collections, while in contrast there are staff who do not know how objects are used in handling sessions and allow this to inform their decision to prohibit the use of collections for handling. To further this discussion surrounding miscommunication and misunderstanding, R2 highlights an example from her own experience. When asked if she had ever been told by a conservator or collections officer she could not have certain objects, she said this had never happened outright, but that in one instance a senior collections officer identified objects that were no longer needed for research or display and offered them for use in handling sessions with children. R2 states:

'They sent them up to me saying 'would these be of any use to you?' and they were ... and I was really pleased to get them. But a conservator from a different collection are took them away saying they were too good for children?'

When asked how she felt about that experience the response was:

'Phenomenally angry, if only because the most damage I've seen is either caused by unsupervised family groups or by adults. Supervised handling really doesn't present an awful lot of problems?'

During school sessions, children and adult helpers are informed of handling guidelines, which at their most basic level encourage the group to consider every artefact in use during the session as precious and requiring careful considerate handling. R10 notes that she ‘can almost completely say I don’t think anyone has ever broken anything during any of those sessions’, as the handling guidelines are continually referred to. In addition R3 comments that by giving groups careful instructions at the beginning of their session, the amount of damage to artefacts can be limited. She adds that with school groups, praise is a powerful tool;

‘If I see a child who is ...stroking something really gently, I’ll make a point of saying ‘well done, you’re doing that really well and you’re helping to protect the animals for other children to look at as well’. And once one child hears someone being praised, they think ‘I’ll do that too’.

R8 develops this issue of communication further suggesting that it is crucial and one of the main ways to find a way forward in the challenge of making collections accessible through touch. He argues, as do I, that there needs to be more dialogue between collections staff and those using collections with the public. He discussed traineeship posts which he describes as providing a

‘bridge between the collections staff and the users, to help alleviate some of the problems, to provide some of the negotiation and develop skills’.

R5 adds to the communication discussion from the point of view of a conservator, with a particular remit to protect and care for objects in the museum service’s collections. She comments that:

‘There’s not enough discussion about the appropriateness of the object that’s chosen. And sometimes things go straight out and conservators aren’t aware of it. They don’t have a chance to condition check objects; they can’t say ... this one isn’t great, do we have another we can substitute?’

Using the example of the LCE handling collection of Egyptian artefacts, discussed above, R5 states that:

‘All sorts of mixed things [were] boxed together ... you can see from the state of the bags that these objects are very friable. They’ve come to us damaged and pieces have fallen off, labels have become separated, contexts have been lost. It’s nobody’s fault in particular, but it all comes down to a lack of communication at the outset.’

No one is entirely sure how the artefacts, some of which are over two thousand years old, came to be part of the LCE collection, but the condition in which they were kept led to damage that in many cases is beyond repair by one of the museum service conservators.

What R5 suggests, and I agree, is that the objects intended for use in handling need to be chosen and sourced appropriately; objects must fit an objective. This also fits with R1's argument that handling should not just be done for the sake of it, because people feel they have a right to handle artefacts, but because there is a purpose and meaning will be produced or an experience will be beneficial to the handler. That is not to suggest that enjoyment is any less of a desired outcome than deepening one's understanding of the past, but we should be aware that objects do not have an indefinite lifespan, handling does cause permanent damage and that we have a responsibility (all of us, not just museum professionals) to provide a safe environment for the objects within our care.

The use of language used by the different roles within the museum service further cements this issue surrounding a lack of communication between staff. For example R1 talked about the collection being 'plundered' for objects to be used within handling contexts, and the idea of 'allowing' visitors to engage with objects says much about her views as a conservator and her understanding of the handling sessions that take place throughout the county. Despite the use of negative, and one could also argue elitist language, used by some respondents, many described their role as one of privilege; R1 in particular discussed this further, stating that she often feels humbled by some of the individual items in the collections.

One of the interesting things to emerge from conducting these interviews with Hampshire Museum Service staff was witnessing the enthusiasm and passion many had for the collections they work with as well as their own personal memories of object handling experiences. This emerged in every interview; a common thread of interest in the past and how this is represented through the objects that are left behind. R7 mentioned a number of examples of this when talking about exhibitions installed at Winchester Discovery Centre. During the successful 2008 *Alfred the Great: Warfare, Wealth and Wisdom* R7 had the privilege to handle the Alfred jewel when a representative from the Ashmolean Museum came to replace it with a replica. In handling the jewel R7 described this as 'an amazing experience, quite special' saying:

'What a moment that was ... having handled this thing and thinking crikey it was made to be used... I got a feel for the weight in my hand and ... what it would have been like to have that as a guide on your manuscript ... that is an experience that everybody should have but they're not going to.'

She also talked about handling a seven barrelled knot gun during the installation of *Hampshire's Treasures* in 2009 describing it as an experience where she felt both proud and special. When her colleague handled a replica of the Abingdon Sword from the *Alfred* exhibition, she states 'it just made him smile like I've never seen'. It cannot be denied that these are very special experiences

and demonstrate that despite museum staff being in a position whereby they handle objects daily as part of their role, the connections made between themselves and the past are deeply enjoyable.

That passion can also be seen in the way staff wished to share the experiences they have had with the public; many wish to offer the public an opportunity to encounter the past in the same way they have as this has helped them interpret past cultures and peoples. For example R7, in discussing the Alfred Jewel loaned to the *Alfred* exhibition and a selection of 1920s dresses in a later exhibition, says that the handling experience is something ‘I would love to open ... up to other people, I really would; that behind the scenes thing is really important’.

As mentioned above when discussing the nature of objects offered for handling, much of this will be dependent on how important these are to the main collections, and this is a continual debate. Many respondents commented that often collections offered for handling are those with limited information, consist of multiple examples, do not fit with current collections policy, or are not in good enough condition to be retained in the main collections. R6 comments that in choosing specimens for her Table Top Safaris she will ‘choose things that haven’t got data to start with because then if they get damaged it doesn’t matter’. This is something which R10 above has described as being somewhat of an issue for her; using poor quality objects gives visitors the impression that they are not valued in the same way that the collections are. However this is something which R6 is aware of and states:

‘If I’m passing them on for other people to use it will always be the ones with the least data, but also of as good a quality as I can. I think it’s just not fair on people if it’s a tatty specimen ... to have a poor quality [specimen] is doing a disservice to people.’

This is also echoed by R7 who notes that:

‘Often people get the dull stuff as a result [of grading] because, you know, you don’t want to be handing out valuable stuff for, potentially, people to break. So ... they often don’t get the best stuff to handle which is a bit of a shame’.

R13 adds to this argument and makes clear the importance of having objects in handling collections that add value; where the temptation may be to off-load the reject objects that are no longer required in the main collections, for whatever reason, there must be some value in the objects that are chosen. She recounts a story where a blouse used in a reminiscence session which is presented as parachute silk, sparked an interesting memory by one of the participants who had been asked to pack parachutes during the Second World War. Although the blouse was not silk, rather it was nylon, R13 observed that this did not detract from the way in which the object aided the participant’s memory; she turned down the job of packing parachutes as

she did not want to the responsibility, fearing that she might not pack one correctly and it fail to open. R13 comments:

‘That was a lovely trigger of a memory passing...I made a note of it because to me that’s a fascinating historical piece of evidence inspired by an object’.

R7 raises an interesting discussion regarding the purpose of objects. Objects were created to be used, whether for single or repeated daily use, they were created for people and by people. R7 offers a good example of this when discussing items from two different exhibitions staged at the Winchester Discovery Centre; the Alfred Jewel in the *Alfred the Great: Warfare, Wealth and Wisdom* exhibition in 2008 and a Kenwood mixer from the *Hampshire’s Treasures* exhibition in 2009. R7 states:

‘that is what’s so baffling about this whole don’t touch scenario because, you know, especially things like the Kenwood mixer ... was made because somebody needed it and it was a practical tool. And now it’s in a showcase and hidden and pristine and no one is going to touch it again’.

Her observations are very relevant in our discussion about object handling, as this is an issue that appears to recur for many people; the question as to why objects should be stored out of sight and out of touch with people when they were created to be handled and used for a specific purpose.

Not only does this dichotomy exist between the value of objects and their use in handling contexts, but R8 highlights the issue of the value of the handling experience; something which appeared in many interviews. When discussing the use of a dodo bone in handling (as discussed above by R6), R8 asks if it is important to consider whether we should simply make decisions about handling based on the object rather than the experience it can offer, and indeed this is something I agree with. While it is important to protect collections where we have very few examples, it is possible to provide partial access in a way that limits the amount of destruction to an object. So for example in the case of the dodo skeleton, the decision was made to make one of the more robust bones available for handling, keeping the remaining bones in the collections stores, since as R8 points out:

‘To have that opportunity is incredibly valuable ... over many years it may no longer exist, it might be [handled] to destruction, but the value that that’s given over that period of time is huge. And equally there might be a fire next week and we could lose it anyway, so why not get value out of it, but protecting the main, using them for displays and other things? ... I think often the concerns are far greater than the reality.’

## **Conclusion**

The process of conducting interviews and using a qualitative method of analysis has been extremely useful in highlighting some key areas surrounding the use of museum collections for handling. The results of the collections survey discussed in the previous chapter demonstrated to a certain extent how museum collections are currently being used in handling contexts but simply presented factual data; integral to an understanding of how object handling can be taken forward is an in-depth investigation into the perspectives of those working with museum collections on a daily basis. Conducting face-to-face interviews proved to be a valuable means of obtaining this information, and the results presented above clearly highlight positive viewpoints as well as raising concerns for the protection of material culture through the process of object handling.

Participants are unanimous in suggesting that the debate surrounding tactile access to museum collections is relevant and important, and the information presented above offers an insight into the professional stance on object handling. What is clear is that Hampshire Museum Service staff see benefits in object handling, and many are interested in exploring ways of creating more opportunities for physical engagement with collections beyond the traditional targeted groups of people currently participating in this kind of activity.

The opinions of Hampshire Museum Service staff have been invaluable in reaching an understanding of how to approach making collections more accessible to touch. This will be explored in chapter nine, where I present the framework of values to consider when opening up collections; however in summary I wish to highlight a few aspects raised by those interviewed.

Whilst most participants agree that at the heart of using collections for handling is a consideration of collections care, there appears to be a consensus that this should not limit the use of objects in tactile engagement, because when assessing the risk to objects against the value of the experience of handling, the benefits far outweigh the concerns. In addition a concern about the ownership of collections, which could be taken to mean a concern over who has the authority to interpret the past – museums or their visitors – is negated by the fact that several respondents asserted the value of visitors making connections, meaning and interpreting collections for themselves.

Of interest is the fact that when discussing the purpose and the advantages of object handling, many participants found it difficult to distinguish between the two. This was evident in several of the responses being repeated for both questions; making connections with the past was viewed as both a purpose and a benefit, as was enjoyment and self-interpretation. What this

demonstrates is that purpose and advantages are inextricably linked, and that to consider only the purpose or advantages of object handling is short sighted and does not reveal the whole picture.

When asked how they would incorporate object handling into the museum environment, respondents were able to draw on earlier discussions of the purpose, advantages and problems of object handling, to offer key aspects for consideration. The most important of these was the fact that at the heart of object handling should be purpose. Handling should not take place for the sake of it; the experience of handling is not enough on its own. Rather it should be meaningful and with purpose so that the visitor engages and takes something away from their experience. Several individuals highlighted the importance of using objects which offer a good representation of the Museum Service, and agree that using low grade or low quality objects to protect the main collections, does not give a good impression of how the museum service cares for its collections and the value it places on its visiting public. But perhaps most importantly to discuss before we move on to consider how the public engage with collections through handling, is one aspect repeatedly discussed by those interviewed: communication. A vital thing to consider, in my opinion, is the value of communication. This is not limited to communication between museum and visitor, but between staff in different roles. Dialogue is essential if handling is to be purposeful and meaningful to those taking part.

Throughout the thirteen interviews, the value of object handling has been asserted by all participants. The task museum professionals are left with now, is how make more collections accessible through touch. Chapter nine looks forward to how this can be achieved, but first it is important to understand how the public engage with collections, which is presented in the following chapter.

## Chapter Eight

### Putting it into Practice: Analysing handling experiences

Having discussed theory and research behind object handling, in this chapter I present evidence demonstrating the beneficial nature of object handling through case studies where tactile engagement has been key to a museum experience. I have, in my capacity as an employee of Hampshire Museum service, been fortunate to observe a variety of object handling sessions and have discussed these opportunities with those taking part. As stated previously, it is important to remember that one of the main problems with this type of research is that much of the evidence is anecdotal. It is difficult to provide detailed scientific statistics as would be possible for more quantifiable data.

The case studies presented in this chapter represent the experiences of a variety of different groups of people, and as a result the methods of capturing data for analysis vary accordingly. While this can be seen as a limitation I feel the multi-method approach employed to collect data has been incredibly useful in offering insight into the responses of those taking part in object handling. It is difficult to gather data in the same format for each different type of person and situation; where children respond well to thought bubbles in which they are asked to draw or write about an experience, this is not something an adult may feel comfortable doing. Similarly adults respond well to questionnaires whereas children can find these confusing and complicated to complete. The methods used to collect data from each individual handling scenario presented below, were carefully chosen to draw out information required for analysis. The difficulty in using a multi-method approach lies in the analysis of the data; comparisons between the written word and illustrations are not easy to achieve. However this does not infer that the results are any less useful or valuable; value it can be argued is subjective, just as our responses to tactile engagement are. Through the case studies discussed below, I demonstrate the way in which a tactile engagement with material culture enables deeper interpretation as well as self-reflection and enjoyment.

#### Lunchtime Seminar and Museums Lectures

On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2007, early in my research, I led a seminar for staff and students of the University of Southampton. This seminar offered an opportunity to introduce my research and gave my audience a chance to consider object handling in a different light. The aim of the session was to challenge the perception of object handling and the perspective of the general

public's experience of the past, and I felt that by doing this with participants from the archaeology department would provide an interesting dialogue as I believe we are privileged to regularly handle objects. Twelve people attended the seminar, consisting of seven members of staff and five postgraduate students, each of whom were provided with a four page booklet in which to write their responses to their experiences during the course of the seminar.

Before the seminar participants arrived I set up a display of objects with an obvious divide; in one half of the seminar room I placed a table over which I draped a piece of fabric and using objects borrowed from Southampton City Museums' handling collections, I arranged a group of seemingly random selected objects on top accompanied by *Do Not Touch* signs. The aim was to create a mini-exhibition in order to see what effect placing these objects in a formal way would have on individuals in the seminar. In the other half of the room another group of objects, each with an individual *Please Touch* label, were placed on tables in front of the participants. Although the collection of objects used for the session varied, the way they were placed around the room was quite deliberate. By using different types of objects including archaeology, ceramics, ephemera and textiles alongside each other, choosing to place robust and delicate items both in the *don't touch* exhibition, and directly in front of those permitted to handle, I wanted to challenge the perception that only robust objects should be available for handling and delicate artefacts protected from being touched.

The method of capturing data for analysis was through a small four page A6 booklet, given to each participant, on which each page was given an instruction to write something; a word to describe how they felt about the objects, a memory gained from a chosen object, who they thought their chosen object would be used by and what for, and a word to describe the object. None of these instructions required previous knowledge about the objects on display; rather they gave participants an opportunity to freely express their own thoughts, opinions and interpretations on not only the objects but the experience of handling. Following the session, participants were asked to write on the reverse of their booklet whether they had been part of the group engaged with tactile handling or the group prohibited touch. Participants' responses were analysed in terms of the choice of word used in answer to instructions one and four; whether they had used positive, negative or neutral words. Each participant's booklet was interrogated and coded to one of these three categories alongside whether they were in the *please touch* or *do not touch* group, in order to ascertain whether the act of handling elicited more positive descriptive words than where handling was not permitted. Instructions two and three, which required one sentence answers, were analysed more thematically; in particular for instruction two which asked for a memory inspired by the object, the criteria for coding was whether the response was personal or general, and for instruction three responses were coded

by whether participants provided a vague or detailed interpretation of the object they had chosen.

Twelve individuals took part in the lunchtime seminar, consisting of both staff and students of the archaeology department. As the participants entered the room I observed some interesting behavioural responses to the objects on display. Most individuals chose to sit at a table with an object they were allowed to touch, whereas few chose to sit in front of the *mini-exhibition*. However, despite the encouraging *please touch* labels accompanying the handling objects, participants were hesitant to engage with the objects, most asking if they were indeed permitted to touch the objects before picking them up and handling them. Once those who had sat on the side with the *do not touch* table realised handling objects were available, they rose from their seats to look at the objects on the *do not touch* table. Only one person asked whether they were allowed to handle these objects, and when informed they were for display only, a number of individuals appeared confused, suggesting they did not understand the difference between the two groups of objects in the room, which meant one could be handled but the other not. What I found most interesting was observing the behaviour of participants. Those viewing the *mini-exhibition* adopted an entirely different posture from those engaging with the handling collection; most physically held their hands behind their backs, bending over the table to gain a better view of the objects, almost as if holding their hands would prevent them from the temptation of touch.

Once all participants were seated, I introduced the purpose of my research and briefly outlined the structure of the seminar. While this took place, a slideshow of images illustrating the different types of *do not touch* signs one might see in a museum or heritage site appeared on a screen behind me; some of these were deliberately provocative whilst others more humorous, and aimed to demonstrate the frequency of which these labels accompany exhibitions and displays. After this simple introduction I invited the group to interact with the objects with the clear instruction that if they were sat in the *no touch* half they were not permitted to touch any objects, and those sat in the *please touch* half could only handle objects with the *please touch* signs. The *no touch* side of the room had to physically get out of their seats to approach the object table in the centre of the seminar room, whereas the *please touch* half could sit comfortably and handle the objects in front of them as well as passing them between each other.

After approximately five minutes of interaction with the objects, participants were asked to choose one object and fill in the first page of their booklet; write one word to describe how you feel about the object. By requesting one word from the participants, I hoped for an instinctive reaction to their experience thus far. For some this was an easy task, whereas others took a few moments to decide upon the right adjective to explain their reaction. My anticipation was that

there would be a clear difference between the words chosen by the *please touch* half of the room and those in the *don't touch* half; this was indeed the case. As expected those who handled objects chose positive adjectives, while those in the *don't touch* group wrote negative adjectives. For those handling the objects the words used included; warm, interested, excited, animated, curious, puzzled, intrigued and great. Only one person in the touch group wrote a negative word; uncertain. In the non-touch group the words chosen were; indifferent, frustrated, disengaged and inferior. Again only one person in this group wrote a positive word; interested. The responses from participants at this point confirmed my expectation that those for whom tactile engagement was prohibited, the experience would be a negative one compared to those that handled. This I believe is due to two factors: firstly that they were not able to engage on the same level as the handlers, and secondly because for archaeologists used to handling artefacts for research, not being able to touch would mean their level of understanding about the objects on display limited and their perceived status within the group lowered.

Following feedback from the group, I explained that during the course of the seminar I wanted to explore how object handling makes people feel, and could this challenge the way objects are displayed in museums? Stating that my research originally focused the way objects can evoke memories in people, I explained that during handling, individuals subconsciously make analogies between the item in their hand and something they have previously engaged with in order to interpret and comprehend its meaning and significance. As each participant engaged with an object, their interpretation was informed by a previous interaction, essentially their memories, with a similar object. At this point, the participants were invited to choose a single object and write a memory that this object evoked. The memories varied quite considerably;

- Panelled hallway of a house where I lived when I was 5 years old
- Going to church at Easter and Christmas as a child
- Victorian chimney sweeps
- Aldwell 86, Portsmouth
- Grandmother's nighties
- Home when I was little
- Teaching adult education students this past spring
- Past societies
- Dolls shoes – my Aunt knitting a full outfit for my doll when I was about 3. It included knitted shoes.
- The very small but exquisitely made shoes made me think of Chinese foot binding practices – I kept trying to imagine a woman wearing them
- Partial clay pipe found while walking on the edge of the river Thames

- Stuffy, dead, uninspiring museums

What is interesting to highlight here, is that memories inspired by objects can be both personal and general; in this case we see both represented in participants' responses. Some objects evoked very specific personal memories whilst other simply alluded to general ideas (as in the example of 'past societies' and 'Victorian chimney sweeps'). I expected those who were not permitted to handle objects to present very general memories, but this simply was not the case. One participant not permitted to touch, who wrote that their feeling about the objects was 'interested but disengaging' alluded to a specific childhood memory, whereas one participant able to touch and who described their feeling as 'intrigued', wrote a general memory. What can be argued here is that the power of objects to conjure memories can transcend touch, but that touch still plays an important role in our exploration of an object and our ability to delve into deeper memories.

After asking the group to feed back their memories, discussion turned to what the objects may have been used for and by whom. It may seem unusual to have not asked the group what the object they chose actually was by this point. However, this was deliberately done to encourage participants to think beyond simply what an object is and to consider the people linked with the object. I explained there were no right or wrong answers in response to this question as I wanted to demonstrate that multiple layers meanings can be discovered from a personal experience with an object. Again, only the half of the room with the *please touch* signs could pick up and handle the objects in front of them. Some of the suggested uses for the objects were very interesting and in some instances quite imaginative. I believe these imaginative responses were the direct result of not focussing simply on what the objects were but thinking about how the object-handler felt about the object and what it initially reminded them. I would argue that this could be a useful tool in using objects with groups of people within museums.

To demonstrate this ability of handling to produce layers of meaning, we turn to a few examples of participants' responses. On the *don't touch* table were a selection of handmade Victorian decoupage cards made by cutting and pasting scraps of patterned and illustrated paper onto card. Two members of the *don't touch* group chose these as their object and wrote that they were used by 'women to send to family, friends and lovers' and 'I imagine [them] being made by a girl – making them for a special relative, like a grandparent'. Another individual commented on a very small pair of Victorian baby shoes saying that they were 'Sunday best for [a] small girl for church by [a] Victorian family worried about [their] standing in the community'. Whilst offering different meanings for the objects, participants made connections which contributed to their understanding of the function of an object and its owner.

On the *please touch* table a fragment of a wooden carving from Southampton City Museums' Titanic loans box was the chosen object of three of the participants. Each conveyed a different interpretation of the carving; '[for the] decoration of a room, an expression of power and links to earlier Jacobite Royal rooms', 'Decoration on the ship – for First Class Passengers' and 'pure decoration creating an environment of comfort'. These three interpretations clearly demonstrate the power of objects to elicit different meanings from individuals.

Also on the *please touch* table a china cup with the Union Castle Line stamp was chosen by two participants who agreed on its use but differed on whom it was used by; 'passengers on Transatlantic Liners, possibly second or third class, for coffee consumption after a meal' and 'elegant passengers on the Titanic'. The response two participants had to Samian ware pottery sherds that on the *please touch* table further illustrate my point. One individual claimed that it was a 'high status pot used by posh Romans to eat/present food' while another member of the group simply stated that it was a 'container for food/display and cooking'. Interestingly only one member of the group commented on the black & white and sepia photographs suggesting that they exemplified the 'early history of photography' representing a 'social reform campaign'.

What these above examples provide, is evidence that meaning and interpretation is an individual act and that the power of objects lies in their ability to encourage those who interact with them to produce their own knowledge and understanding. While we may see trends in interpretations based on participants' having had similar education and coming from the same background (i.e. archaeology), what cannot be denied is the uniqueness of objects and the people who engage with them.

The final task was to write a word to describe the object they had chosen. Having spent time in the lead up to this task thinking about the objects from a different perspective than the usual practical one archaeologists often use to interpret artefacts I anticipated seeing a change in the types of word chosen, from the beginning of the session. Where there had been a clear divide between those who used positive words on the *please touch* side of the room and those on the *don't touch* side using negative words, I expected to find far more positive than negative adjectives being used. The two charts below (figure 14) demonstrate the change in the use of positive, negative and indifferent words when thinking about the objects available for handling. The percentage of participants using positive adjectives rose by 16% and the number of negative responses fell by 25%.

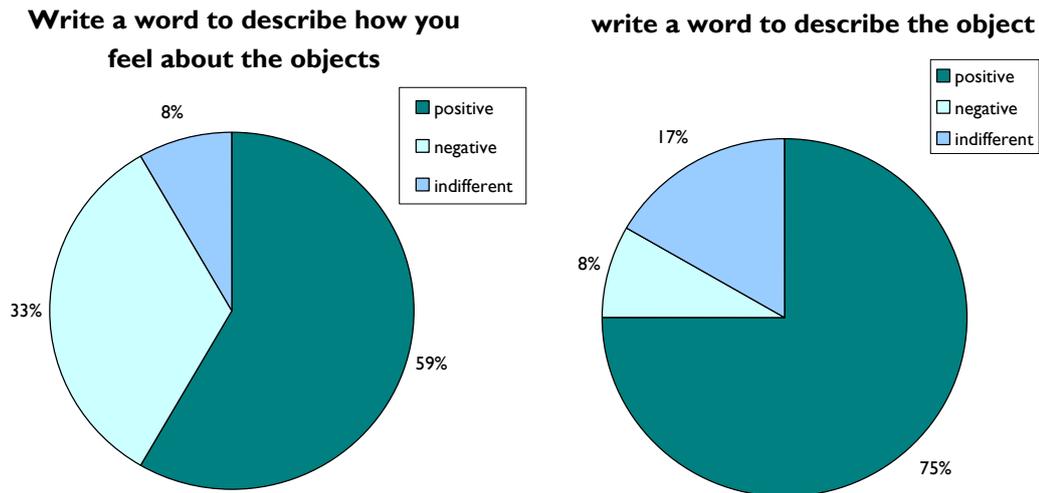


Figure 14. Charts illustrating positive and negative responses to engaging with objects during the lunchtime seminar. Left: the percentage of participants using positive, negative or indifferent words to describe their feelings toward the objects at the beginning of the seminar. Right: the percentage of positive, negative and indifferent words used to describe the same group of objects at the end of the seminar.

Many *don't touch* participants wrote far more positive adjectives than at the beginning of the session. For example one participant who had previously written that they felt inferior, chose 'connection' to describe their object, and another who had said the objects made them feel frustrated described her object as 'exquisite', and finally one participant who said they felt indifferent wrote 'home' as their descriptive word for their chosen object. Perhaps the most interesting point about this change is that through a personal, feeling driven exploration of the objects, we witness a shift from words expressing detachment to words imbued with ideas of connection and belonging.

Since the objects used during this seminar were part of Southampton City Museums' handling collections, participants were invited to handle all the artefacts on display before the seminar drew to a close, including those I had marked with the *don't touch* labels. It was interesting to observe again the behaviour of participants as they engaged with all the objects in the room. In contrast to the beginning of the seminar, now participants thoughtfully and carefully studied the artefacts, taking their time to explore all aspects of the item in their hands.

Building on this seminar, I used a similar format with undergraduate archaeology students at the University of Southampton during a third year module entitled Archaeology and Museums lecture on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2009. The aim of the session was not only to confirm my findings from the previous seminar but to obtain a larger sample of data as the third year undergraduate class contained twenty-six students whereas the lunchtime seminar consisted of only twelve participants. An additional aim, linked to the module's content, was to encourage the students, whose main project for the module was to create a museum exhibition proposal, to consider the

potential of objects to be used not only as evidence of past societies but to inspire and excite museum visitors. What should be noted is that since access to the same objects used in the previous seminar were unavailable, a selection of both real and replica objects from Hampshire Museum Service handling collections were used instead, covering a variety of different time periods from ancient Egypt to post-war Britain.

The space available was different to the seminar room used in 2007; therefore the layout of objects was altered accordingly. Since this session took place halfway through the semester, the students had become accustomed to sitting in a particular area of the room; therefore I did not want to split the room in half. Instead I opted to distribute the *please touch* and *don't touch* sections through the whole room, utilising the same *please touch* and *do not touch* labels and fabric to create mini-displays once again.

In contrast to the lunchtime seminar, students were asked to choose one particular object for all four tasks, which this time were in a different order; write a word to describe how you feel about the objects, write a word to describe the object, write who you think would use the object and what for; and write a memory you gained from the object. This alternate order was chosen to reflect the purpose of the session; emphasising the importance of objects, rather than new technologies and techniques used within museum exhibitions. As with the lunchtime seminar, students were asked to write their responses to each instruction in a four page A6 booklet, which were then coded in the same way: responses to instructions one and two were coded to three categories depending on whether the response was positive, negative or neutral; instruction three responses were coded as either vague or detailed; and finally responses to instruction four coded as either personal or general.

I anticipated an even split between negative and positive responses to the objects since I witnessed a number of students voice their frustration at not being permitted to handle the objects as they entered the lecture room. Instead 70% used positive words to describe their feelings about the objects using words including *excited*, *interested*, *intrigued*, *privileged*, *connected*, *transported*, *special*, *child-like* and *curious*. 15% used negative words including *annoyed*, *frustrated*, *confused* and *totally unmoved*, and 15% used words expressing their indifference to objects stating that they felt *indifferent* and *uninterested*. Despite this unexpected result, there was an observable relationship between positive words and students who permitted to handle objects from the outset. Though most students placed themselves adjacent to a *please touch* label, the results demonstrate that students permitted to handle the objects used positive adjectives to describe their feelings, whereas those who were unable to handle objects wrote negative words (figure 15).

### Correlation between positive and negative adjectives and object handling

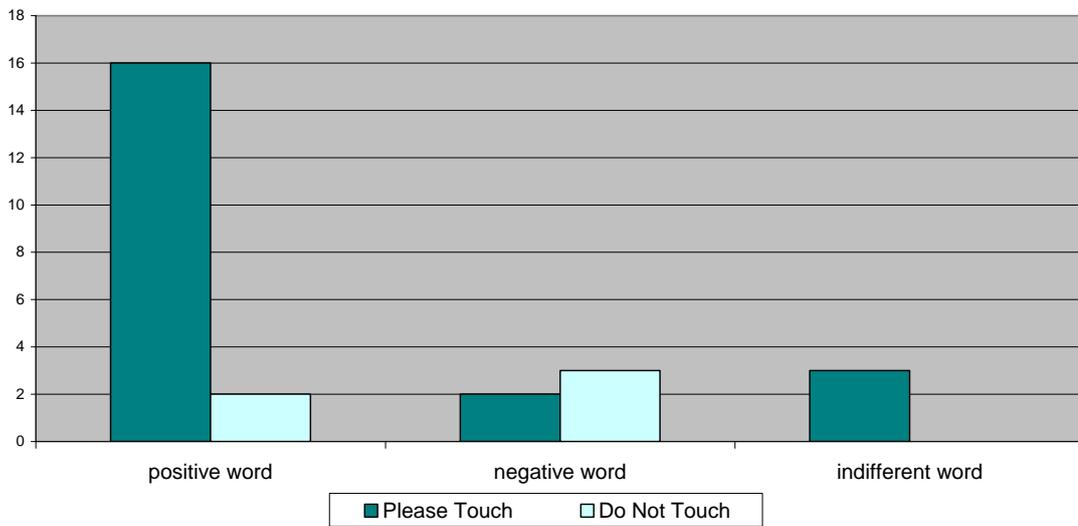


Figure 15. Chart illustrating the difference between attitudes of participants permitted to touch the objects, compared to those denied touch.

A couple of anomalies presented, where two individuals permitted to handle objects wrote negative adjectives; one student commenting they felt totally *unmoved* by a loom weight which was placed in front of them and another stating they felt *confused* in response to a clay vessel. In addition, contrary to my expectation that all students not permitted to handle objects would use negative adjectives, two students used positive adjectives in response to the objects in front of them; one stating they were *interested* in a pair of kid gloves and wanted to know more about it and another feeling *connected*.

The second task required students to use one word to describe the object itself; these varied considerably, from words simply describing a physical attribute, to more profound observations. In the *don't touch* section two students wrote descriptive words pertaining to their feelings toward the object – *detached* (a Victorian dolly peg) and *average/nothing special* (a pair of kid gloves). One wrote that their object was *interesting* (kid gloves), and two others chose words describing the object's physical attributes – *stone* (a replica Egyptian Shabti) and *transparent* (a 1950s baby feeding bottle made of glass). What is perhaps interesting to highlight is that the two students who chose negative descriptive words were handling objects similar to everyday items we use today, whereas two students who used practical descriptive word were handling unfamiliar objects. Equally interesting, the student using *interesting* referred to an object that another *don't touch* student described as *average/nothing special*; this I believe represents the diversity of interpretations made by visitors to museums. While it may be possible to provide a descriptive label within an exhibition stating what an object is and how it was used, what is

difficult to convey is the plethora of reactions and interpretations society may make about that particular object.

Of the descriptive words used by the *please touch* participants, thirteen students used adjectives denoting a physical attribute, four students used words stating the object's function, and four used qualitative words. These qualitative words included *history* (small candles from the 1940s), *dull* (a loom weight, which interestingly the handler said they felt totally unmoved by), *unknown* (clay vessel), and *informative* (1960s newspaper about the Moon Landings, about which the handler had previously expressed excitement). Four students using words denoting the function of their chosen object described them as '[a] working tool' (an early carpenters plane – possibly from 1600s), '[a] candle holder' (1940s enamel ware), '[a] toaster' (a 1950s electric toaster), and 'thread' (a Victorian lace bobbin with thread still attached). What surprised me most about the variety of words used by students able to handle objects, is that none of them used words that they could only have used on closer inspection of the objects. I had anticipated the words they chose to have differed considerably from those used by the *don't touch* participants, since they could only make observations from a distance whereas the handling section could look deeper, feeling for temperature, texture and so-on – attributes that simply looking could not detect. However most *please touch* students used words including *decorative* and *tattered* (referring to a book entitled 'All in the Garden'), *broken* (a wooden darning mushroom), *old* (referring to a lace bobbin and a replica Egyptian bead necklace), *shiny* (Gees Linctus throat pastilles tin), *Egyptian* (a replica scarab beetle), 'black and white and read all over' (a newspaper), 'beetley [sic] and blue' (a replica scarab beetle), *dinky* (a Victorian inkpot), 'pinchy [sic]' (glove stretchers), *black* (a Victorian flat iron), and *faded* (a Victorian seaside postcard). It could be argued the unexpected outcome is due to the type of person handling; archaeology students are perhaps more accustomed to working with objects and possess the ability to identify objects through sight, whereas the average museum visitor may have a different experience.

Up to this point the students had not yet been asked to identify their chosen object; the next task required them to write down who they believed used their chosen object and what its purpose was. There were, again, some interesting interpretations of the objects, a selection of which are listed below;

- Two different students commenting on the kid gloves, stated they belonged to 'Ladies – kinda[sic] self-explanatory ... i.e. it's a glove!' and for the purpose of 'covering her arms'.
- The small 1940s candles were said to be used by 'people – during a black out in the blitz'.

- Two students commenting on a Victorian book entitled ‘All in a Garden’ agreed it belonged to a child, however their interpretations of its use differed; one stating it was ‘for entertainment purposes’ and the other that it was used in the process of ‘learning to read’.
- The Gees Linctus Throat Pastilles were described as being for ‘Someone who has a stubborn and irritating cough’.
- A number of Egyptian artefacts were discussed, the first being a replica clay bead necklace that the student handling it claimed was worn by ‘Egyptian women – not every day wear but [for] special (she feels great when she wears it)’. The replica faience Shabti was described as a ‘Dead slave, a funerary artefact’. And two students commenting on the small replica faience scarab beetle, agreed on its owner but differed on its use, one claiming it to be ‘an ornament’ the other offering two possible uses; ‘for luck? For Protection?’
- Two students handling a Moon Landing Newspaper suggested it would be used by ‘Joe Blogs – to find out about current affairs’ and ‘to know what happened around the world’.
- The small Victorian ink pot was said to be used by ‘A school child – for learning’
- Interestingly, one student who miss-identified the glove stretcher, suggested it may be used by a doctor, but neglected to suggest how.

Finally the students were asked to consider a memory their chosen object evoked. Some students shared interesting and personal memories in response to this task. Below is a selection of those memories;

- ‘I feel transported to the 1960s because I can read what happened then. When I was about 10 years old I saw a video about Churchill at school; [it reminds me of] studying history when I was a child’ (Moon Landing Newspaper)
- ‘Third world items, the colourful ones like worry puppets’ (lace bobbin)
- ‘My own holidays to the seaside with family’ (Victorian Seaside postcard)
- ‘Burning my fingertips’ (flat iron)
- ‘Mum sewing when I was small’ (lace bobbin)
- ‘[It] reminded me of honey – the shape of the object’ (ceramic vessel)
- ‘Leicester Newwalk museum; buying a pencil from the gift shop’ (scarab beetle)
- ‘Sitting in the pub when Obama was inaugurated – changing presidents; everyone was quiet’ (Moon Landing newspaper)
- ‘An exchange student who gave me an Egyptian pencil case’ (scarab beetle)

- ‘My granddad smoking a pipe with his kipper breakfast, coughing relentlessly’ (Gees Linctus pastilles tin)
- ‘When I used to make necklaces with colourful beads. [It] Reminds me of one necklace I made when I was 13 that I love. Was made of raspberry coloured beads with black wooden beads. [I] Wore it at school’ (Egyptian clay bead necklace)
- ‘Reminds me of a wooden ball and cup toy I had when I was little’ (darning mushroom)
- ‘Being read to by Gran and mum’ (all in a garden-book)
- ‘Black out in childhood, lit candles and family playing monopoly’ (night light candles)
- ‘My mother standing in the garden, thunder, oppression. Is it raining yet mumbled through a mouthful of pegs’ (dolly peg)
- ‘Gloves at school, always wearing a long glove on left hand’ (kid glove)

Interestingly out of the five students not permitted to touch, only two shared their memories in response to their chosen objects. Both students previously used positive adjectives to describe their feelings; the student studying the Kid gloves expressed interest in finding out about the object, shared a memory from her schooldays where she used to wear gloves, and in particular a longer glove on her left hand. The student handling the dolly pegs felt connected, sharing a memory connected to an experience of her mother collecting laundry from the clothes line before rain began to fall. The other students who had written negative adjectives all related their objects to impersonal memories; the student who felt uninterested linked a Victorian boot to ‘riding’, the student who felt annoyed related their object, a 1950s feeding bottle, to an apocalyptic blow-horn, and the student that was frustrated said their object reminded them of the film *The Mummy* and The Cairo Museum.

When we compare these responses to a selection of those from the *Please touch* participants, we observe that being able to handle objects enabled a deeper connection to their memories. Three students chose the word ‘nostalgic’ to describe their feelings linked to their chosen object, recalling memories from their own past; one linking their object (the book *All in a Garden*) to a memory of ‘reading books as a child/having books read to me’, another handling the Gees Linctus throat pastilles was reminded of his Grandfather ‘coughing relentlessly’, and the third stating their object ‘reminds me of a wooden ball and cup toy I had when I was little’. A different *please touch* student chose three positive descriptive words; privileged, connected and transported. The memory she shared was extremely detailed, expressing the fondness she felt for an object similar to the one she handled (a replica Egyptian Clay Bead necklace) which she revealed reminded her of making necklaces as a young girl and one particular necklace which she wore at every day at school.

As mentioned above, we also see a link between individuals who used negative adjectives to describe their feelings toward the objects and vague memories they recalled. One student permitted to handle objects throughout the lecture was ‘totally unmoved’ by a loom weight, describing the object as ‘dull’; his memory simply ‘[a] lecture on prehistoric textiles’. No evidence of a personal connection with the object is present in this memory, rather the student has linked it with a past event which may have impacted him since handling the loom weight enabled him to recall it, however this impact may be limited since he did not provide details of the lecture’s content and whether it was enjoyable. This can also be seen in a memory evoked by the enamel ware candle holder; the student who felt indifferent to their object described it as exactly that, stating it reminded him of the nursery rhyme *Wee Willy Winkie*.

Again another interesting connection between how an object made the individual feel and the memory it brought forward, is evident in one student’s response to the Moon Landing Newspaper, which she claimed evoked a feeling of privilege. She describes where she was when Barak Obama was inaugurated as the first black president, an atmosphere in which she realised she was part of a generation witnessing great change. This link can also be seen in another student’s response to the same object, who said it excited her, since she could be ‘transported to the 1960s because I can read what happened then’, relating this excitement to watching a video about Winston Churchill at School.

What these two different sessions demonstrate is the power of a tactile engagement with objects in providing one with a means of connecting with the past and being excited by it. Throughout the second session students who were not permitted to touch became increasingly frustrated seeing their colleagues delight at handling the artefacts and making connections. As with the lunchtime seminar, before the end of the session I invited all the students to move around the room and touch all the objects on display, at which point the atmosphere changed dramatically; Students who were quiet throughout the session suddenly animatedly discussed the objects they had in their hands with me and with other students.

Reflecting on both sessions, were I to carry out this experiment again, I would attempt to ensure an even split between participants permitted to handle and those who are not, and also invite non-archaeologists to take part. With a small sample of *don’t touch* participants, it is difficult to gain a clear picture of the impact a lack of tactile engagement has on the individual, whereas the larger *please touch* sample demonstrates the way handling enables connections between objects and the stories they tell.

## Southampton Young Archaeologists' Club

We now turn to our second set of case studies; hands-on archaeology with Southampton Young Archaeologists' Club (YAC). As an introduction and to place the group within the context of this thesis, I offer a brief history of YAC.

Created in 1972 by Kate Pretty (currently Principal at Homerton College, University of Cambridge) and Mike Corbishley (Principal Consultant for Archaeology and Education, Centre for Applied Archaeology, University College London), the Young Archaeologists' Club was originally known as Young Rescue, a junior branch of RESCUE, the British Archaeological trust ([www.yac-uk.org](http://www.yac-uk.org)). Pretty and Corbishley established their own local branches, giving young people between the age of eight and sixteen an opportunity for hands-on practical experience of archaeology, as well as 'to empower them to help shape its future' ([www.yac-uk.org](http://www.yac-uk.org)). Membership to these clubs steadily increased, resulting in the necessity to hand the leadership over to a larger organisation; firstly The York Archaeological Trust, before settling with the Council for British Archaeology (CBA). By the time CBA took control, the club was no longer called Young Rescue, having been re-branded as the Young Archaeologists' Club, with seven branches distributed throughout the UK. Today the organisation boasts over 70 local branches and 3000 young members.

My involvement with the Young Archaeologists' Club began 1995 when, as an excited eleven-year-old I joined the South East Wales branch, based at the Roman Legionary Museum, Caerleon. Having known from the age of eight that I wanted to be an archaeologist, this was my first real encounter with archaeology, and I believe the hands-on experiences I gained as a member played an important role in my archaeological career. Reaching the upper age limit at sixteen, I became a helper, and at eighteen became an official assistant leader, finally becoming co-leader after the main leader stepped down. Part of this role involved organising and facilitating meetings, including visits to historic sights and object handling sessions, and acting as site supervisor on our annual excavations across South East Wales. During my Master's degree I volunteered with the Southampton Branch, becoming an assistant leader in 2008 and leader in 2011. Again as part of this role I have organised and facilitated a number of meetings, promoting object handling and encouraging club members to consider the importance of objects and the stories they can tell.

This provided a perfect opportunity to collect data to establish the benefits of a hands-on approach to understanding the past. Although it may be argued that this group is not representative of the population of young people for two reasons - firstly the participants are mainly children between the ages of eight and sixteen, and secondly this is a specialist group

with an interest in the past and often deeper knowledge of history than the general public as a whole – I believe the results from these studies provide valuable insight into object handling. Here I discuss two examples of sessions run during 2009, in conjunction with the University of Southampton, where a hands-on approach was central to the aim of the meeting.

#### Young Archaeologists' Club Archaeological Materials meeting

The first meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2009, aimed to introduce the concept of archaeology at university level and the types of artefacts and techniques encountered as part of an archaeology degree. Twenty-five Young Archaeologists (YAs), 10 parents and six leaders attended this meeting. Following an introduction to the archaeology department, the club members separated into smaller groups to take part in lithics, bones, and ceramics workshops run by current Masters students before joining together at the end of the session to review their discoveries during the whole meeting and discussing what they enjoyed most (see appendix 3.2 for session plan). Prior to beginning the meeting, club members were asked to raise their hand if they were interested in studying archaeology or wanted to become an archaeologist. A small number of enthusiastic members raised their hands in response (less than half of the 25 members taking part). After the workshops the children were asked once again if they were considering study archaeology or becoming an archaeologist; every hand was raised. Offering the club members a chance to take part in hands on activities demonstrating the different skills archaeologists use, I believe, was a valuable experience, giving them a hands on experience enabling them to develop their skills, as well as increasing their understanding of archaeology and having fun at the same time.

Two days following the meeting, feedback forms were posted to the twenty-five YAs who attended; these forms consisted of two large thought bubbles asking firstly for each individual to say what they enjoyed doing most, and secondly what they remembered most about their visit to the Archaeology Department (see appendix 3.4). Club members were encouraged to write or draw their answers, and the responses received were a mixture of these two options. Of the twenty five forms sent out, twelve were returned (48%); a higher number of response than expected, providing a fascinating insight into the interests of some of the club members. Completed forms were analysed using the Generic Learning Outcomes introduced in chapter five. Both drawings and written responses were coded against the five Generic Learning Outcomes: knowledge and understanding; skills; attitudes and values; enjoyment, inspiration and creativity; and activity, behaviour and progression. Once the responses were coded, they could then be compared to ascertain which of the outcomes was more prevalent as result of a hands-on experience.

For reasons discussed in chapter seven, all names have been removed to protect anonymity; therefore no members will be directly named during analysis, instead being referred to as YA1, YA2 and YA3.

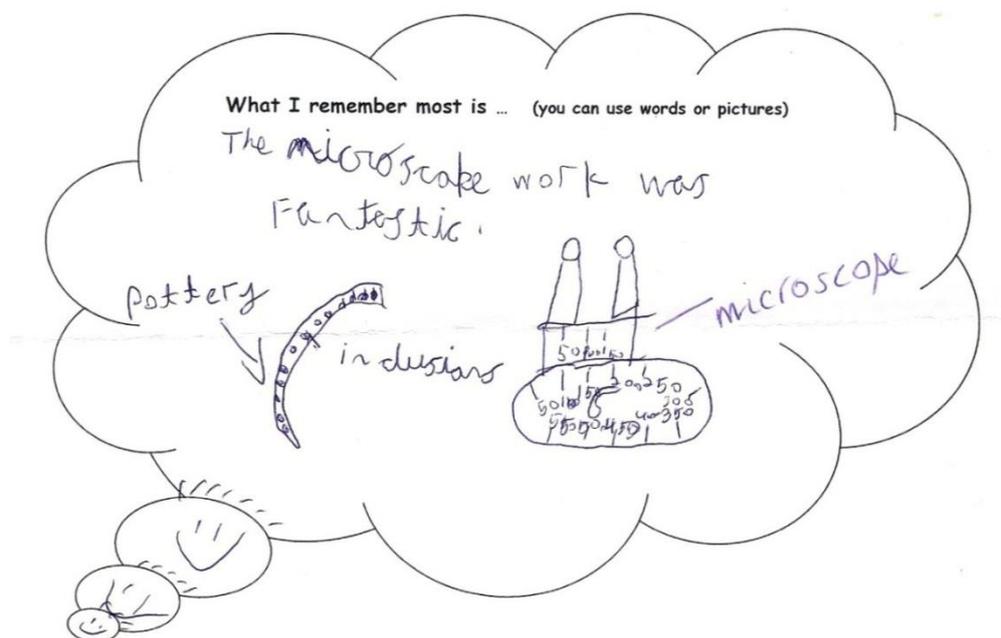


Figure 16. A Young Archaeologists' Club member's feedback form using illustrations to show what they enjoyed most about their visit. Not only does this show enjoyment, but the level of detail in the pottery sherd and microscope demonstrate knowledge and understanding.

What is interesting about the responses is the way that many members include specific details about what they learnt during the course of the meeting, with some incorporating diagrams of artefacts and equipment they used and handled, images cut out and pasted to their form, or small symbols such as smiley faces (figure 16). Members, and parents, were keen to express their thanks for an enjoyable meeting as well as stating they had learnt new information and gained new skills as a result of engaging with the objects and facilitators (staff and post-graduate students). Particular skills that respondents enjoyed or remembered most were those used during the lithics workshop, where they were shown how to identify worked flint and what these flint examples may have been used for. Many respondents also highlighted their enjoyment of handling animal bone specimens, seeing how skeletons are designed perfectly for their purpose.

**What I remember most is ...**

**What I enjoyed most was ...**

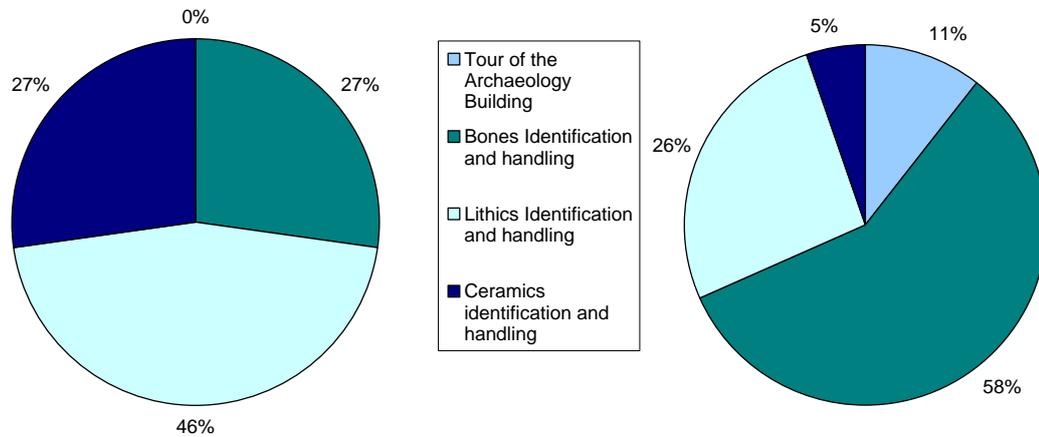


Figure 17. Charts illustrating enjoyable and memorable aspects of the Young Archaeologists' Club meeting at the University of Southampton (7<sup>th</sup> February 2009).

Figure 17 illustrates the difference between which sections of the meeting the members enjoyed and remembered most. We see that aspects which were enjoyed most do not directly match those which were most memorable. Where members stated the most enjoyable section was the identification of bones (58%), 48% found the lithics section most memorable. Enjoyment and memorability are not necessarily linked in the way we might expect; in the example of ceramics 5% stated that they enjoyed this most, but 27% state this was most memorable. We can argue that this may be a result of the types of activities within each section, since it appears that activities where club members learned new information and new skills were more memorable, whereas activities that were more hands on, such as bones identification and handling, were more enjoyable (bones particularly perhaps due to the gruesome nature of the specimens used during the session). While this may be confusing, what it demonstrates is the way that handling is both enjoyable and memorable, enabling members to cement their previous knowledge as well as learn new information.

As well as analysing the results in terms of what was enjoyed and remembered most, the GLOs discussed in chapter five are useful for understanding the different outcomes of the meeting as a whole. As can be seen from figure 18 below, the most prevalent GLO is *Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity*. This may not be surprising since the feedback form asked directly for aspects of the session enjoyed most. However responses clearly establish that club members also demonstrate evidence for a change in their *Knowledge and Understanding* as well as their *Attitudes and Values* as a result of the activities encountered during the meeting.

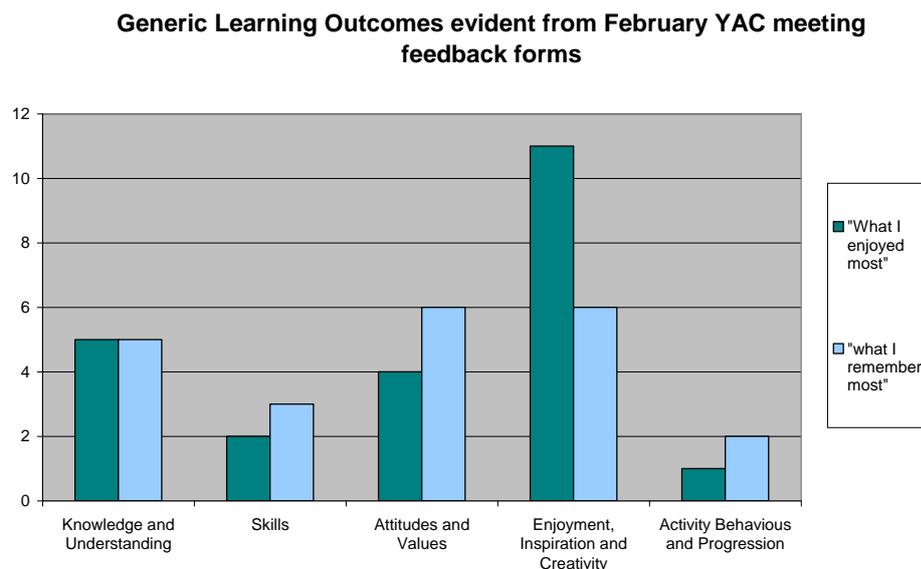


Figure 18. Chart illustrating the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) represented in club members' feedback forms.

To demonstrate these changes we turn to three specific feedback forms in detail. Our first example belongs to YA1, one of our longest serving members, who in a letter to the National Young Archaeologists' Club magazine wrote that 'YAC has opened up a lot of opportunities for me...during a YAC meeting I met [staff] from the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology, who were running a project for teenagers. That project just about changed my life, and I would never have known about it had it not been for YAC'. As a result of his many experiences over the years, YA1's knowledge and understanding of archaeology has increased; not only has he learnt facts and information about the discipline but he now has a deeper understanding and can make links between the different types of career paths within archaeology that he is interested in. Additionally he has acquired skills which, when he attends university, will give him a solid grounding and understanding of the subject.

YA1's feedback form from contains a large amount of text to explain what he both enjoyed and remembered most about his experience. In contrast to other Young Archaeologists, YA1 states what he enjoyed most was the lithics workshop, however he does not simply state that he enjoyed it, instead he gives us reasons why this is the case, providing us with evidence for all five of the GLOs;

- Knowledge and understanding, and skills – 'I found it interesting that one can tell the status of people in the community by the quality of tools being used around them' – YA1 has gained not only knowledge of how one can identify status based on material culture, but learnt some of the skills required to do this.

- Attitudes and Values – ‘I found it fascinating the different stages of human development’ – YA1 recognised that humans have developed over time, reflecting a positive attitude to discovering this.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity – ‘I really enjoyed the lithics part of the visit’
- Activity, Behaviour and Progression – ‘... and how we can tell this from the standards of tools being used’ – YA1 acknowledges a level of progression in his thought progression, making links between ideas and concepts.

In addition, YA1’s response to what he remembered most provides further evidence for three of the five GLOs, explaining that he remembered a particular section of the day for a number of reasons.

- Knowledge and Understanding – ‘We learnt all about how to tell if a flint had been worked and also how to tell what the tool would be used for’ – illustrating a deeper understanding of the objects he handled as well as ideas surrounding the development of culture.
- Skills – ‘I recall how to tell the diameter of a pot’ – YA1 demonstrates a new skill in identifying concepts about size and shape of pottery from single sherds.
- Attitudes and Values – ‘... a very ‘hands-on’ activity!’ – YA1 recognises the nature of the activity he has taken part in.

YA1’s responses to the questions ‘what did you enjoy most’ and ‘what did you remember most’ provide us with direct evidence for the benefits of a hands-on approach to archaeology. Through his experiences, his knowledge and understanding about particular aspects of the discipline were broadened; he gained information regarding prehistory and in particular human evolution primarily due to the Lithics section of the meeting involving handling replica fossil skulls and real prehistoric tools. He learnt new skills helping him to identify the objects he was handling and place them in context. He also expressed his enjoyment and surprise in discovering new techniques and information about past societies, specifically that technology used by previous civilisations can be used to identify social status.

In our second example, YA2’s responses to both questions are again clear evidence for the benefits of a hands-on approach to archaeology as she enthusiastically expresses her enjoyment of taking part in the meeting. In this feedback form (figure 19), we see three of the GLOs quite clearly in response to the first question of what she enjoyed most;

- Knowledge and understanding – ‘... the human body which was very old and was beheaded twice (first time missed)’ – here YA2 has discovered information about the

skeleton she was handling, remembering that two attempts were made to behead the body.

- Attitudes and Values – ‘P. S. I loved it all’ –evidence of a positive attitude to her experience handling bones as part of the meeting.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity – ‘[what I enjoyed most was ...] Bones: because I liked the human body’ – YA2 expresses her enjoyment of handling the bones implying that she had fun whilst handling the bones.

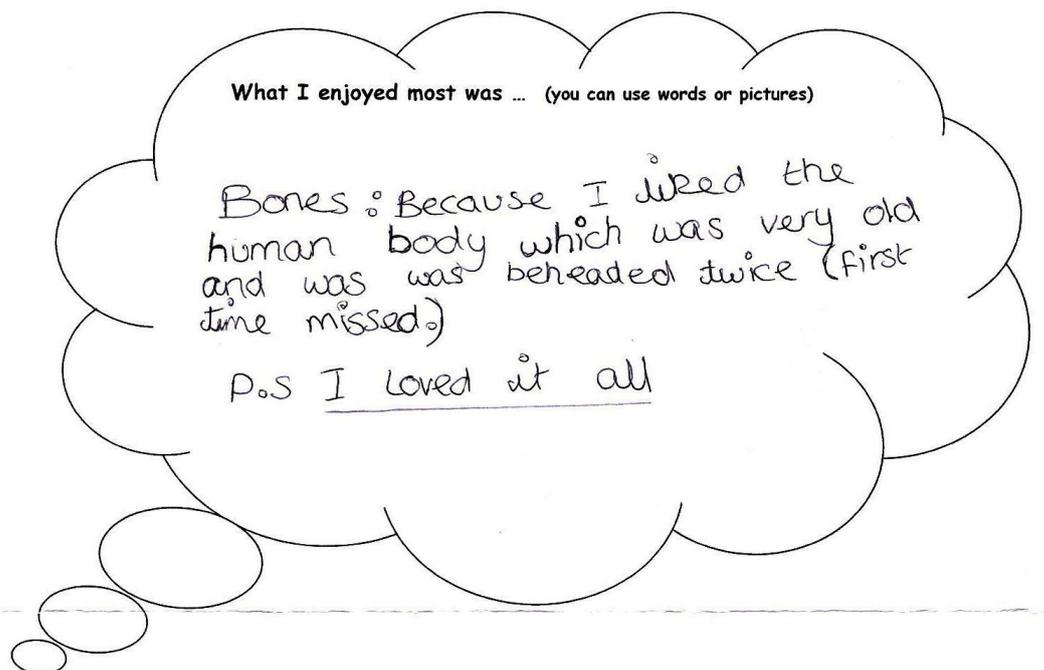


Figure 19. YA2's feedback form illustrating her positive attitude toward her experience at the University of Southampton .

In response to the question *what do you remember most?* YA2 again demonstrates three GLOs;

- Knowledge and understanding – ‘...also thanx [sic] for teaching me loads’ – here YA2 acknowledges that through her experience at the University of Southampton she learned facts and information.
- Attitudes and Values – ‘I had the most fantastic time!’ – YA2 expresses her feelings, as well as a positive attitude in relation to her experience.
- Activity, Behaviour and Progression – ‘Thank you for giving your time to us!’ – in this statement YA2 again acknowledges what people have done, in terms of giving up their free time to run hands-on workshops for the club.

Like YA1's feedback form, YA2's responses can be used to illustrate the importance and benefits of a hands-on approach to learning about the past, as through her experience she

discovered new facts that have increased her knowledge and understanding of skeletal remains. Additionally, she demonstrates that attitudes and values towards archaeology can be challenged through a hands-on experience as YA2 expressed her thanks to the students and staff at the University of Southampton for providing her with an experience entirely different from that which she would experience at school.

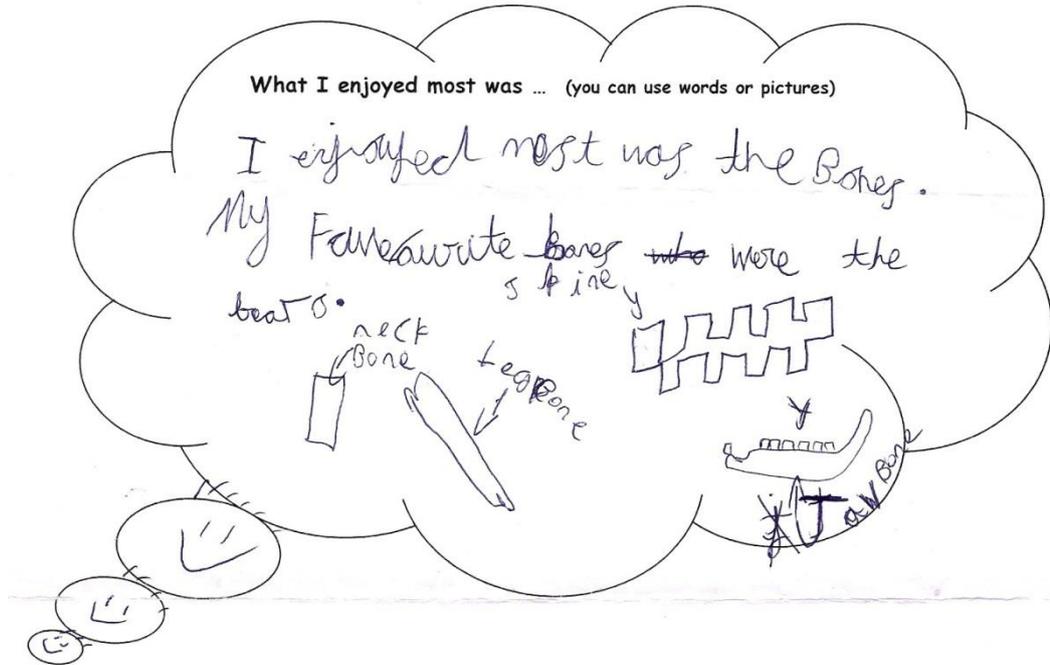


Figure 20. YA3's feedback form highlighting his newly acquired knowledge and understanding about the bones he handled during the Young Archaeologists' Club meeting.

In the final example, YA3 (figure 20), not only expresses his responses to the two questions using words, but also includes illustrations, which provide us with evidence for three of the generic learning outcomes.

- Knowledge and Understanding – YA3's drawings of the spine and jaw bone clearly demonstrate he learnt information about skeletal remains, since he was able to recall their appearance and recreate this on his feedback form, as well as clearly labelling them with the correct terminology. In addition to this statement that his favourite bones were the bear's, his drawings demonstrate that he has made a conscious link between the bear and its bones.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity – '[what] I enjoyed most was the bones' – here YA3 clearly conveys his enjoyment. Moreover this enjoyment is evident in the way that YA3 has turned the circles of the cloud bubble into smiley faces.

In response to being asked what he remembered most, YA3 demonstrates three GLOs;

- Knowledge and Understanding – again through his drawings YA3 exhibits a deeper understanding of information and facts encountered through the meeting. YA3's drawings include a sherd of pottery showing inclusions, clearly labelling both so that the reader understands his drawing (figure 16). Furthermore his representation of the microscope shows his ability to make links between ideas and concepts, since he placed the microscope, complete with magnification options, next to the pottery sherd showing inclusions.
- Attitudes and Values – 'The microscope work was fantastic' – Here YA3 expresses his positive attitude toward the experience of microscope work as well as his feelings and perceptions of this experience.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity – 'The microscope work was fantastic' – again this statement, along with the smiley faces, demonstrates YA3's enjoyment.

#### Young Archaeologists' Club Geophysical Survey meeting

Following on from the success of the first meeting held at the University of Southampton, a second meeting was organised with an entirely different focus. Although familiar with various archaeological techniques through television programmes including *Time Team*, none of the members had actively experienced geophysical survey. Therefore the second meeting in conjunction with the University of Southampton focussed on introducing members to the techniques of geophysical survey. This proved to be a popular choice of topic with twenty-six YAs taking part in the meeting. In addition twelve parents attended along with four leaders from the Southampton Young Archaeologists' Club.

On 9<sup>th</sup> May 2009, the club met on Southampton Common to survey an area thought to contain remains of Nissen huts, using equipment and the expertise of staff and students from the University of Southampton. These buildings erected during the Second World War provided American soldiers stationed in the city with accommodation prior to embarking of the D-Day Landings in Normandy. While the staff of the University of Southampton were aware of the location of these structures from contemporary maps of the common, no previous survey had been carried out on the site, therefore the work done by the Southampton Young Archaeologists' club would provide results previously unseen (see appendix 3.3 for the meeting plan).

Following a brief introduction to geophysical survey techniques, the bulk of the meeting was practical; using a variety of equipment (resistivity, magnetometry and total station) to survey an area, marked out by postgraduate students into four squares, twenty by twenty meters. A group of young archaeologists was assigned to each square, surveying the area with the aid of a

university lecturer and postgraduate student. Whilst some groups surveyed the area, a tour of historical features on the common was also offered. On return to the archaeology building following the practical element of the meeting, the collected data was downloaded and entered into the relevant computer programme, finally projected onto a screen in one of the archaeology laboratories for the young archaeologists to analyse. Although only one group finished surveying their square, the results proved the existence of structures on the site.

As with the previous meeting at the University, the same feedback forms were posted to the members, but with a lower response than before; out of twenty-six, only nine forms were returned (35%). Nevertheless, these nine responses provide evidence for the benefits of a hands-on approach to learning about the past. Feedback forms from this meeting were coded and analysed using the same method as the meeting discussed above; club members' responses were coded to the five categories of the GLOs, which could then be compared to draw out which of the outcomes was more dominant as a result of the experience. With a variety of different responses from the nine members we do see a common thread in enjoyment in that they enjoyed having the opportunity to use the equipment themselves rather than 'reading [it] out of a book'.

Figure 21 (overleaf) shows the four main elements of the meeting that the members discussed in their feedback forms. Note that three of these four elements mentioned relate directly to a hands-on experience; using the geophysics equipment, finding out what we had discovered, and doing 'real' archaeology. In total 91% of respondents claimed they enjoyed a tactile experience. In order to understand why this is the case, we must consider their reasons.

When analysing the results of what members remembered most (figure 21), we see a similar trend. 89% stated they remembered the hands-on tasks they were invited to take part in; carrying the equipment, having a go with the equipment, and seeing the results on the screen. This is perhaps not surprising, since the Young Archaeologists' Club is a group for children with an active interest in archaeology, having joined in order to have an opportunity to take part in 'real archaeology'.

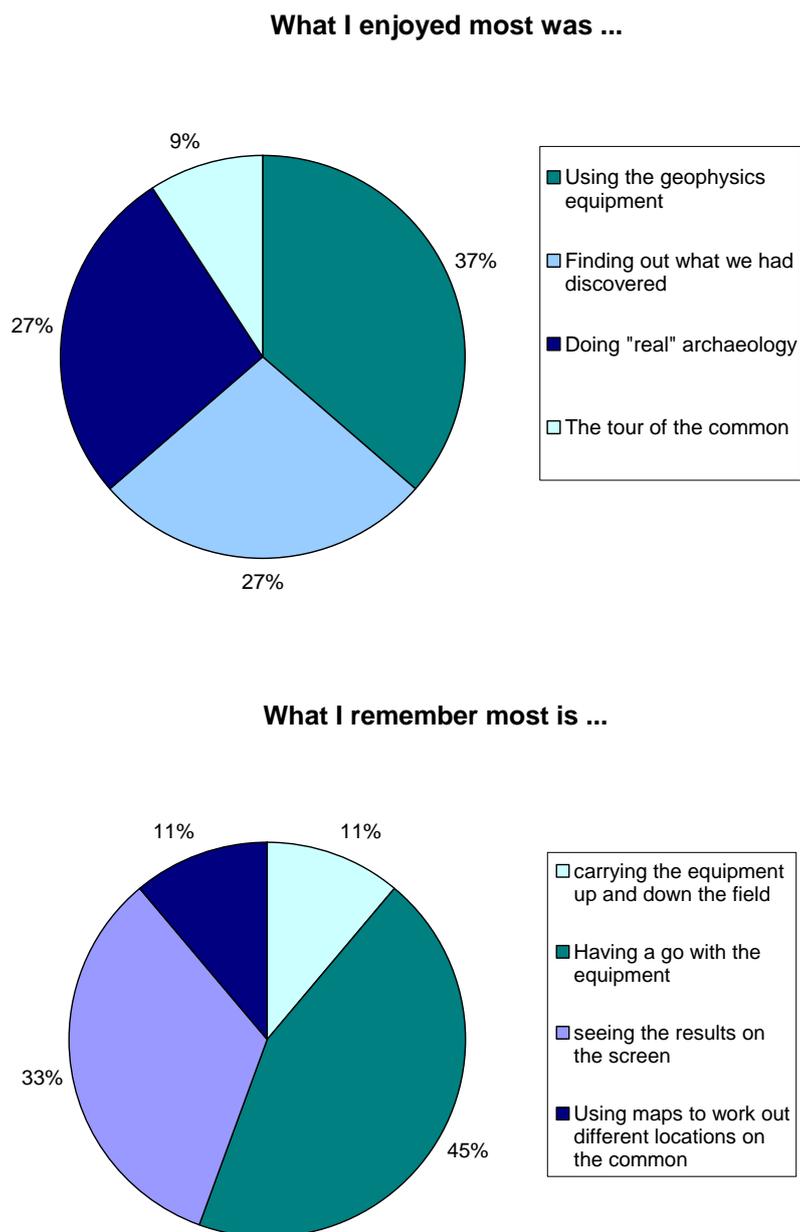


Figure 21. Two charts illustrating enjoyable (top) and memorable (bottom) aspects of the Young Archaeologists' Club visit to the University of Southampton, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

When we consider the responses in terms of the GLO's, we again notice the highest scoring category for both what the members enjoyed and remembered most is *Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity*, closely followed by *Attitudes and Values*, and *Knowledge and Understanding* (figure 22). In order to demonstrate these outcomes, I present an analysis of three of the nine feedback forms.

### Generic Learning Outcomes evident from May YAC feedback forms

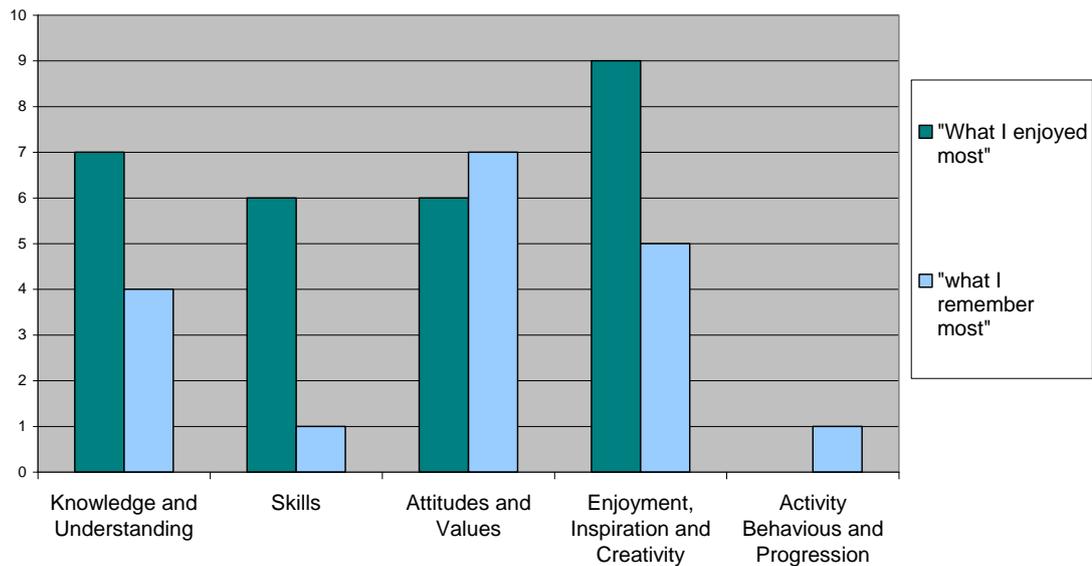


Figure 22. Chart illustrating the Generic Learning Outcomes represented in club members' feedback forms for 9th May 2009.

Our first respondent, YA4 (figure 23), was given the opportunity as one of the oldest in the group to use the Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment to map the exact location of the site surveyed on Southampton Common. On his feedback form, YA4 explains the element of the meeting that he enjoyed most was 'holding the GPS', explaining 'it was exciting to see how the equipment was seeing the object under the ground'. In his response YA4 demonstrates three of the five generic learning outcomes;

- Knowledge and understanding – '...it made it easier to imagine how the archaeological findings might have looked like in the common in the war' – here YA4 draws upon his experience using the GPS equipment and resistivity meters to make a link between the images produced by the survey, and the potential appearance of the Nissen huts during the early 1940s.
- Attitudes and Values – 'I liked holding the GPS it was exciting to see how the equipment was seeing the objects under the ground' – YA4 demonstrates a positive attitude toward his experience, using the equipment.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and creativity – 'it made it easier to imagine...' – YA4 expresses his surprise that GPS equipment and resistivity meters provide us with images of archaeology under the ground, and that this helped him to picture this in his mind.

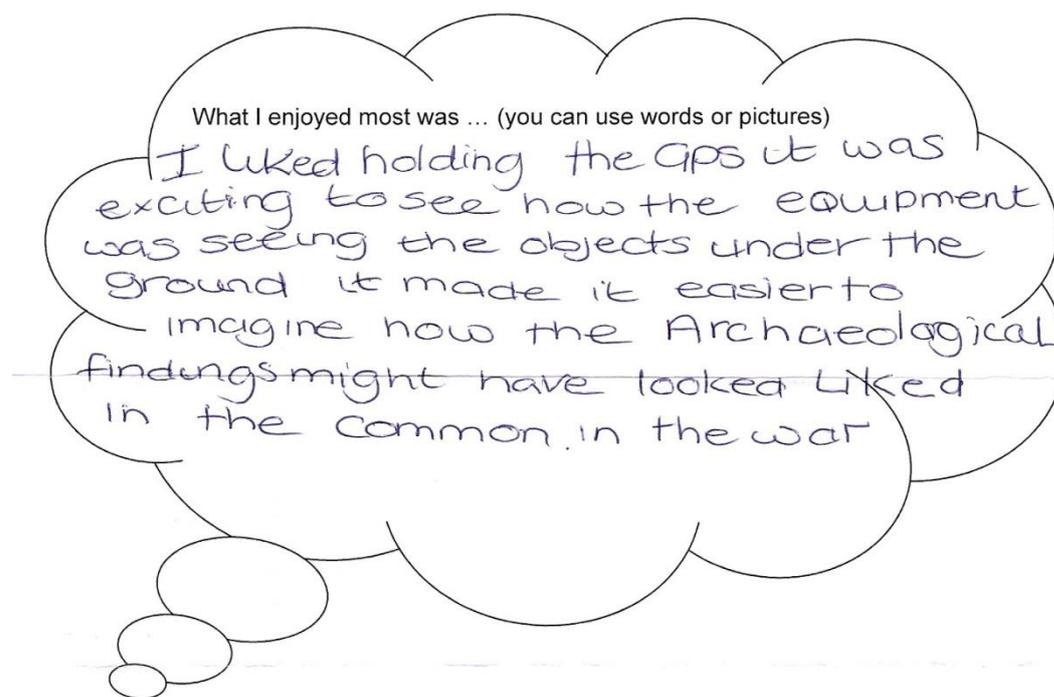


Figure 23. YA4's feedback form where he articulates his excitement about the survey equipment used and results produced during the geophysics meeting.

In his response to *what I remember most* YA4 explains it was 'seeing the results on a screen of the shapes underground', providing us with evidence for two of the generic learning outcomes.

- Attitudes and Values – expressing his positive attitude toward the experience of viewing the results of the geophysical survey
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity – expressing his enjoyment at seeing the results of the survey.

Our second feedback form by one of the youngest members included drawings in response to what he enjoyed and remembered most, as well as providing reasons for his comments. In answering what he enjoyed most YA5 displays four of the five generic learning outcomes;

- Knowledge and Understanding – YA5's drawing of the resistivity meter, (figure 24), illustrates he not only understood how the equipment is used, but made links between archaeology and the equipment used to survey it.
- Skills – 'it was ... fun to do a real historical thing' – YA5 demonstrates he appreciated the opportunity to do a new thing i.e. using the survey equipment.
- Attitudes and Values – '...it was really exciting...' – Here YA5 expresses his positive attitude toward his experience at the meeting.
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and creativity – 'I loved geophys [sic]' – YA5 tells us quite clearly he has had fun during the meeting.

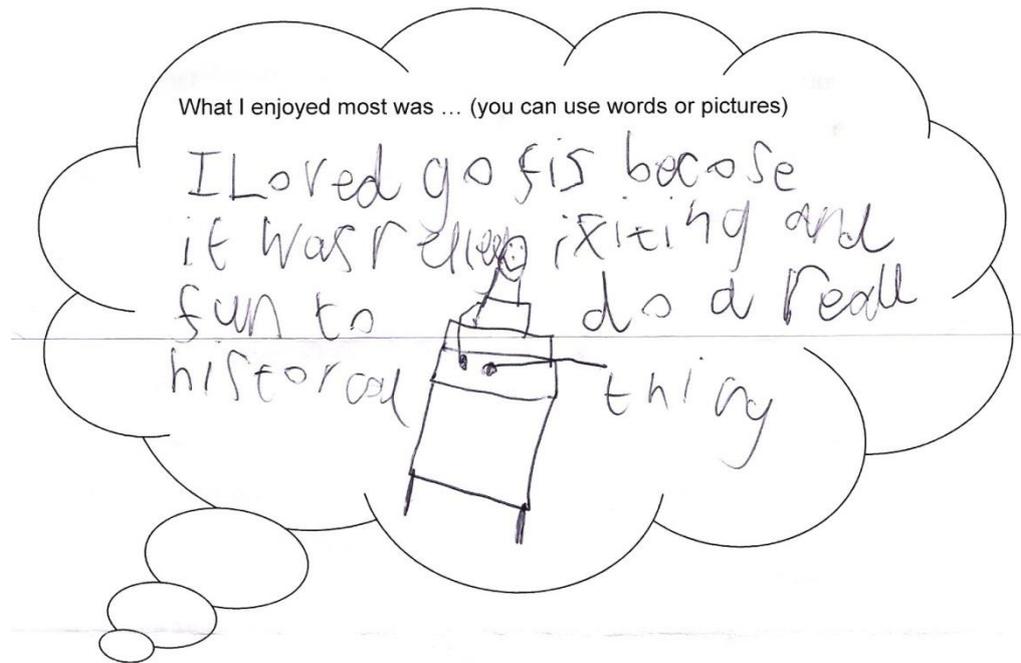


Figure 24. Increased knowledge and understanding demonstrated in YA5's drawing of himself using the resistivity meter during the geophysics meeting run by the University of Southampton.

In response to what he remembered most, YA5 states 'watching the results come up on the big screen' because 'it was really interesting'. His statement shows two of the five GLO's; Attitudes and Values as YA5 demonstrates his positive attitude toward an experience as well as his feelings about seeing the results; and Enjoyment, Inspiration and creativity since YA5 indicates being inspired and having fun at seeing the results from the survey. In addition, YA5's drawing of a member of university staff explaining the features appearing on the projector screen, demonstrates a deepening of his understanding of geophysics, making a link between collecting the data and seeing the results.

Our final example is again from one of the younger members of the group, who like YA5 used pictures to tell us what he enjoyed most and what he remembered most. We can see from YA6's drawings and words, four of the five GLO's in answer to what he enjoyed most;

- Knowledge and Understanding – 'the bit that I enjoyed most was finding out where they hang[ed] people' – YA6 demonstrates he learned information about the history of Southampton Common, and his drawings of the gallows show a connection between the information gained and information he already knew about hangings, revealing a deeper understanding of the topic.
- Skills – 'I enjoyed doing the geophysics' – YA6 explains he enjoyed being able to do a new thing; that he enjoyed learning a new skill.

- Attitudes and Values – ‘I enjoyed doing the geophysics instead of reading out of a book’ – YA6 expresses a positive attitude toward his experience of geophysical survey, explaining this is because he enjoyed a hands-on experience.
- Enjoyment Inspiration and Creativity – The attention YA6 gave to his drawings demonstrates his creativity. Additionally, by highlighting two aspects of the meeting he enjoyed, shows he had fun and was surprised by the information he gained about Southampton Common (the gallows).

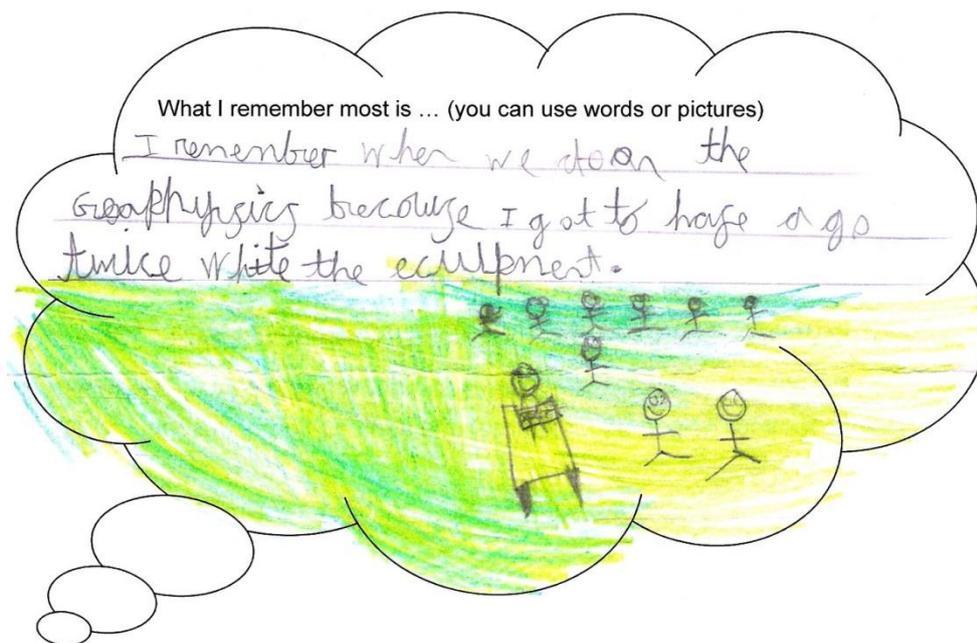


Figure 25. An illustrated response from YA6 showing himself using the survey equipment and expressing his excitement at using the equipment twice.

In response to what he remembered most YA6 again demonstrates four GLO's;

- Knowledge and Understanding – YA6's drawings show an understanding of how the survey equipment is used.
- Skills – Again, YA6's drawings demonstrate he learned how to do something. By drawing himself using the equipment, YA6 places himself within the activity, showing not only that he learnt a new skill, but that he remembered the techniques to use it.
- Attitudes and Values – ‘...because I got to have a go twice with the equipment’ – This statement highlights YA6's positive reaction/attitude towards the meeting, since he was given the opportunity to use the equipment more than once (figure 25).
- Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity – ‘I remember most when we [did] the geophysics’ – this statement, along with his drawings, shows YA6 had fun, and was surprised by his experience.

What these above three examples demonstrate is the way in which physically interacting with archaeology was not only an enjoyable experience, but one in which their understanding of archaeological techniques has deepened, their knowledge of local history broadened and new skills acquired. This was confirmed at the December meeting in 2009, where the young archaeologists were encouraged to complete an evaluation form (following the same format as the February and May forms) to ascertain which meetings they enjoyed most that year. 18% claimed they enjoyed the first University meeting, and 25% the geophysical survey meeting.

## **Hampshire County Museum Service projects**

### **Dunkirt barn roman villa**

For our next examples we turn to two projects run by Hampshire Museum Service. The first formed part of the wider Danebury Environs II project, a series of excavations carried out on Roman sites in Hampshire. Dunkirt Barn Roman Villa, near Abbots Ann in West Hampshire, was excavated over two seasons (2005 and 2006) lead by Barry Cunliffe and a team from the University of Oxford. Dunkirt Barn, like several other sites in the region, had previously been excavated; however most of this work was carried out over one hundred years ago with very limited information recorded about the site. Therefore Cunliffe and his team decided to re-visit these sites to put the previous discoveries in a new context aiming to understand the nature of villa societies as well as the development of farming in the area (Cunliffe 2003, p.344). Excavations have revealed a villa, described as a multiphase development, yielding a number of artefacts including mosaic floors (some of which hang in the British Museum), coins of various emperors, pottery, beads, amulets, knives, various iron implements, a candlestick and marbles (Cunliffe 2006).

Hampshire County Council's (HCC) involvement in the site began in 2005 as a result of shared sources of funding, consisting of a £22,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (Chris Elmer 2006 pers. comm.), half of which was awarded to Cunliffe and his excavation team, the other half set aside for a community archaeology project run by HCC. The community project, run by David Allen and Chris Elmer on behalf of Hampshire Museum Service, comprised of two phases over two years, with two main aims: firstly to provide local residents with an opportunity to take part in the excavation itself, and secondly for children of the surrounding area to visit the site and take part in activities at Andover Museum and in their classrooms (David Allen and Chris Elmer 2006 pers. comm.). It is the schools element that we shall focus on for the purpose of this thesis.

The first stage of the schools project (2005) consisted of children visiting the site, guided by either David Allen or Chris Elmer who introduced archaeological concepts and explained the

visible remains revealed through excavation. Rather than offering a dry tour in which the guide informs the visitor, the structure of the ninety minute visit entailed continual questioning to encourage pupils to discover the archaeology for themselves and use their interpretation skills. At the conclusion of the tour, children took part in an object handling session whereby each small group chose an object, excavated from the site, to investigate and interpret, entering their conclusions on a finds record sheet. Following on from the site visit, either David Allen or Chris Elmer visited schools to present a school assembly about the site, with the aid of pupils who had visited explaining their experiences to their classmates. Schools who took part in this first stage were each presented with an object handling box containing artefacts recovered from the site, which could be used in the classroom alongside specially produced teachers' notes. Finally schools were invited to take part in an exhibition at Andover Museum, where pupils' work throughout the project would be displayed along with dig-diaries produced by the community volunteering on during the excavation, and finds uncovered by Cunliffe's team.

During 2006, the second phase of the schools element took place. Similar to the structure of the previous year's project, schools were invited once again to take part in a site visit, including a guided tour. During the second season of excavations new structures and finds were discovered; which was a useful demonstration of the nature of archaeological investigation, for those who visited in the previous year. Following the site visit, pupils visited Andover Museum for an object handling session in which they engaged with artefacts excavated on site, drawing on the knowledge gained during their earlier visit to Dunkirt Barn. Using a record sheet, pupils were asked to answer questions designed to encourage a tactile interaction with the objects.

Evaluating this project demonstrated the power of active engagement, and in particular, tactile engagement with archaeology, since pupils demonstrated not only an increase in their knowledge and understanding of Roman Britain, but gained new skills of interpretation and were inspired to explore the past further. Several methods were employed in evaluating the two stages of the schools project; participant observation, questionnaires to teachers, children's activity sheets, and meaning mapping (Walker 2006a, Walker 2006b).

#### *Participant observation*

During the second stage of the project (2006) I observed three separate school visits, one of which, visiting on 19<sup>th</sup> September, chose only to visit the site as they had studied Roman Britain during the previous summer term. As a result this school did not take part in an organised handling session at Andover Museum, but were given the opportunity to handle artefacts at the excavation site. The class teacher of one of the schools visiting the site, revealed her interest in archaeology and that where possible she incorporated it into her lessons; this was evident in the

way her pupils responded not only to the site as a whole but focussed questions about the Romans and the evidence seen in the trenches. It was observably clear that all three classes visiting the site demonstrated an excited energy being surrounded by ‘real’ archaeology. As the tour progressed, the children’s confidence increased along with their ability to interpret the evidence before them, making comparisons between the landscape in the present and how it might have appeared almost two thousand years ago.

The two schools visiting Andover Museum demonstrated the same level of enthusiasm and excitement as at the excavation site. The format of the session being that of object handling in small groups was an ideal environment in which pupils drew upon knowledge gained both at school and on site during their morning visit. It was clear that their attitude to museum artefacts developed, since in discussion with the Museum Education Officer about the age of some Samian ware pottery sherds, pupils that were initially convinced these fragments to be replica, later revealed they learnt that because something appears in good condition does not mean it is new or not real. Not only did this observable change in understanding take place, but the result on their attitude toward the experience meant that the group handling this particular object (Samian ware) declared with pride that they had held real Roman pottery.

Not only did I witness pupils learning new information and a change in attitude, their social interaction skills improved during the course of the handling session. Initially quite tentative about sharing their interpretations of the artefacts in front of them, some of the more quiet individuals were encouraged by their classmates to take part in the discussion; clear evidence that objects have the power to facilitate conversation and bring down barriers.

#### *Teacher questionnaires*

Joining the Dunkirt Barn outreach project halfway through, evaluating the experience of teachers from 2005 took place approximately ten months later. Despite a poor return of 35% – seven completed questionnaires were returned from twenty posted – teachers’ comments were positive and encouraging. Three of those seven had taken place during the 2005 phase, agreed that the site visit, and in particular the tour provided by an expert, was important in helping the children understand the context of Roman Britain. Teachers commented that having handling material available on site and given to each school post visit was incredibly useful. They remarked that the objects had increased their pupils’ interest in history and aided their understanding of the topic studied at school, stating that the accompanying notes and the experience during handling session meant they felt confident to, and definitely would use objects in the classroom again. Teachers also commented that where the site visit appeared within their study of the topic did not matter, since it was a valuable means of either introducing

the topic, reinforcing learning currently taking place in school, or reaffirming information learnt earlier in the school term.

During the 2006 phase of the project, seven schools chose to participate. Following their participation each school was sent a teacher questionnaire to obtain their views of the project. Of the seven schools contacted, four returned completed questionnaires (a return of 57%). Teacher responses from 2006 demonstrate similar outcomes as those discussed above. Once again the site visit was highlighted as an important aspect of the project since it showed children the 'realness' of archaeology and demonstrated the way history is a continuous process rather than one event. Some teachers revealed that through their experience on site and during the museum handling session, pupils introduced terminology including artefact, excavate and archaeologist 'with understanding and confidence' into their vocabulary, while others developed an interest in searching out archaeological references for their class work, others producing a class museum. All teachers agreed that using real artefacts was important in explaining the past to children as it encourages all levels of ability to focus on the evidence presented to them, once again agreeing that they would incorporate objects into their classroom teaching as a result of their experience in the project.

#### *Children's activities sheets*

Similar to the feedback forms given to Young Archaeologists attending the University of Southampton led meetings, the activity sheets given to schools taking part in the 2006 stage of the Dunkirt Barn project involved two thought bubbles requiring pupils to state what they enjoyed and remembered most about their visit using words and pictures, which were then coded against the five GLOs. The seven schools which participated in 2006 were sent a copy of the feedback form to photocopy and distribute to their pupils; of these seven schools, three schools local to the Abbots Ann area responded (a 42% return). A total of seventy-six forms, were received from three schools; Knights Enham Junior School (18 forms), Andover Church of England Primary School (27 forms) and St. Mary Bourne Primary School (31 forms), representing the responses of children ranging in age from seven to nine. One school, Knights Enham Primary, had in the course of the autumn term visited another Roman site (Rockborne), their teacher commenting that some of her pupils may have become confused between the two visits, but wrote 'bearing in mind they're seven or eight and we did this in September, the fact that there's still so much in their minds, when they're really set for Christmas, is fantastic'. Her response summarises the result beautifully, since so many of the pupils recalled information gained from the site.

From all three schools, pupils demonstrated an increase in their knowledge and understanding of both Roman Britain and Dunkirt Barn. Many children commented on information they had acquired during the course of their visit which altered their perception of the past. For example one child stated she 'didn't know that the Romans ate oysters' (figure 26), as well as the preservation of artefacts in the ground, one child demonstrating the distinction in his drawing between artefacts discovered on site and that 'wood and leather rot'.

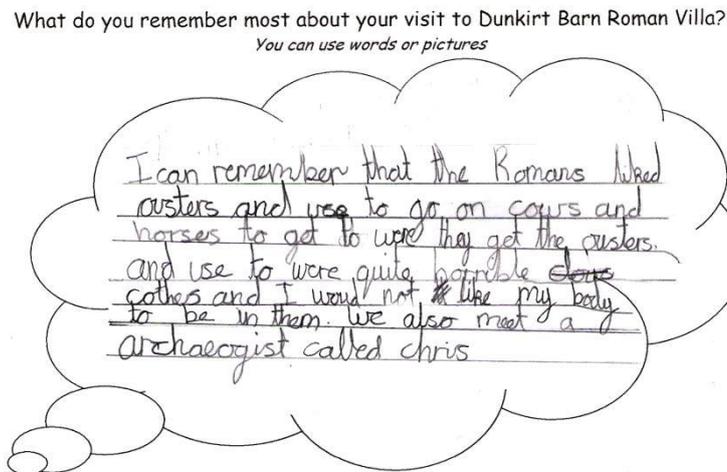
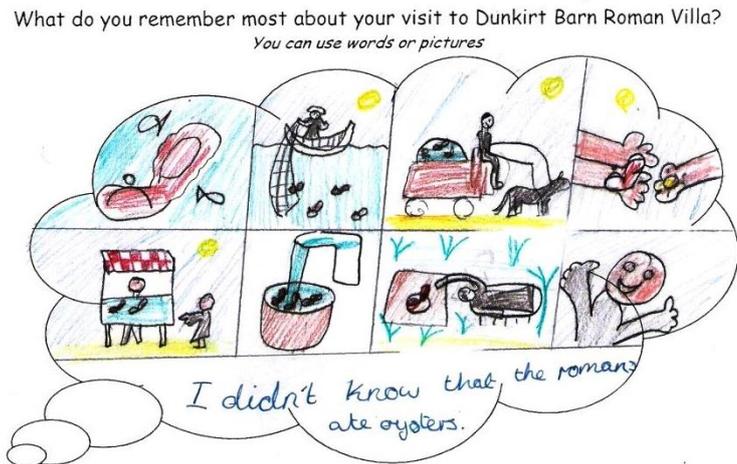


Figure 26. Pupils remember learning about oysters at Dunkirt Barn, both demonstrate a level of knowledge and understanding acquired through their experience.

Almost all pupils agreed that the interactive element of their visit was what they enjoyed most; looking at and handling artefacts, being on a real excavation, and meeting a 'real archaeologist' featured highly in their responses.

*Meaning Mapping with Kimpton, Thruxton and Fyfield Primary School*

In order to achieve a more in-depth, qualitative understanding of the effects of a hands-on experience of archaeology on the knowledge and understanding of pupils, a meaning mapping session was carried out with five children from Kimpton, Thruxton and Fyfield Primary School.

The activity, a two-part process, involved meeting with the group one day prior to their site and museum visit, and meeting the same group again two weeks later. Prior to my initial visit the class teacher chose five pupils to take part, explaining what would take place during the activity, and on arrival I introduced myself as the person facilitating the activity. The simple process entailed a discussion about Roman Britain, with pupils telling me what they knew about the topic, writing these down on an A2 piece of white card using a blue pen, surrounding the heading 'Life in Roman Britain'. One of the main issues associated with this activity was that pupils were confused between life in Roman Britain and the broader Roman topic. In addition, this school were at the beginning of their Roman topic, having just studied Iron Age Britain and as a result one child commented that Romans lived in tribes in mud huts. Key topics discussed by the group included where the Romans came from, why they invaded Britain, who they fought, how long ago they lived, what their buildings were like, what their daily activities consisted of, farming and agriculture, their diet and leisure pursuits.

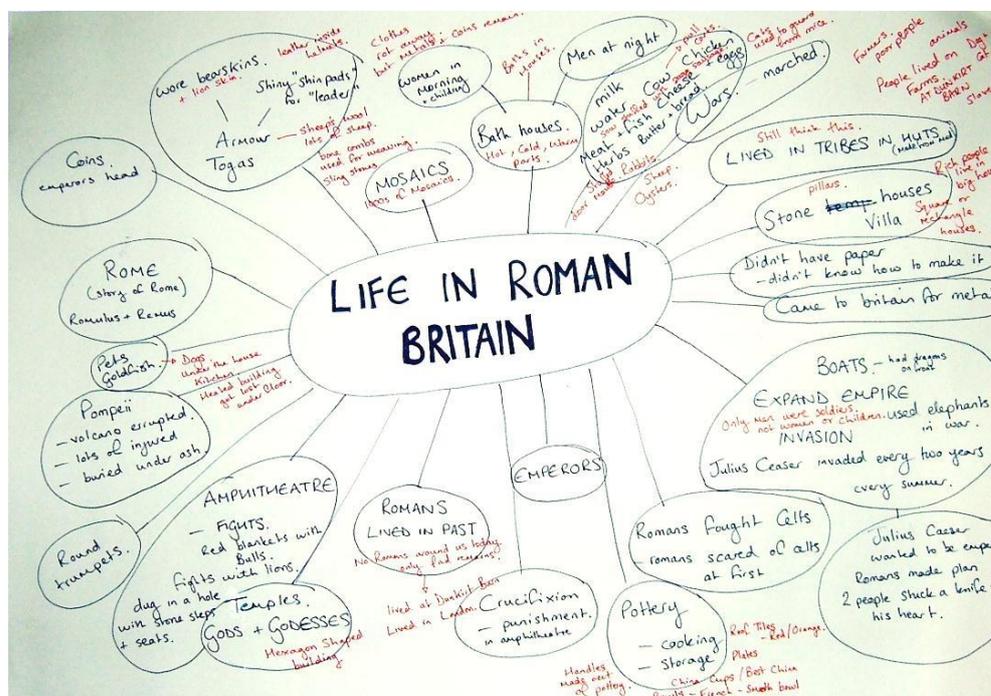


Figure 27. The meaning map produced with children from Kimpton, Thrupton and Fyfield Primary School, Hampshire. The writing in red represents knowledge and understanding acquired as a result of their visit to Dunkirt Barn.

Two weeks following their site visit, I met with the group to ascertain what new information they had gained and if any of their perceptions of life in Roman Britain had changed. The A2 card on which the pupils' initial observations were written was produced and placed in front of the group. The children were asked if any of their ideas had changed now they had visited a Roman villa site. This prompted much discussion about their enjoyment of the visit and what they could remember before addressing some of the aspects of their understanding that had changed, as well as discussing new information gained from their visit. Each new piece of

information was noted on the A2 card in a red pen, in order to distinguish it from their previous observations (figure 27). The topics which all five pupils saw an increase in knowledge and understanding related to the physical evidence they encountered on site; each time we discussed an aspect of their understanding they referred back to what they had seen on site as evidence for why their opinion changed. Not only were some of their opinions altered, but aspects they were unsure about prior to the site visit, were confirmed and expanded upon. For example the group initially stated that the Romans lived in the past; following their visit they elaborated stating that they no longer live today, and we use their remains to find out what their lives were like. When asked, the whole group commented that they felt they knew more about the Romans in Britain as a result of their visit to Dunkirt Barn, and indeed the evidence from the meaning map demonstrates this clearly.

### *Summary*

The results of the Dunkirt Barn project presented above provide us with evidence for the power of a tactile engagement with the past in offering pupils an opportunity to increase their knowledge and understanding of a particular topic or theme. Teachers commented that the site visits allowed their pupils ‘to build on their knowledge gained from topic work in year three’, stating that the visit reinforced their previous learning, meaning they were able to ‘recognise and understand what was being explained’ (Andover C E Primary School). However this is not the only benefit we have seen, and not simply for the pupils involved in the project. Teachers stated that their pupils’ skills of research developed as a result of their visit, making links between books, IT resources and primary evidence, and attitudes to these sources of primary evidence changed as pupils now ‘recognise a need to protect these areas’. The enthusiasm of pupils and teachers was palpable, a result I believe of the tactile nature of the experience; that they visited an archaeological site and handled finds from the excavation is important in creating a connection between what is studied in the classroom and the culture or society from the past.

### **Wicor primary school excavation**

The second case study from Hampshire Museum Service is a school grounds excavation project carried out at Wicor Primary school, near Fareham. The aim of the project was to create an understanding of an archaeologist’s work through a variety of activities centred on practical archaeological techniques. Wicor Primary school aims to provide pupils with a ‘range of experiences that we hope will inspire, motivate and engage each and every child’; they encourage pupils to be inquisitive, questioning their experiences, empowering them to meet the challenges of learning something new or different ([Wicor Primary School](#)). The one day bespoke project, carried out on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2007, was designed to meet the school aims by providing a variety of activities, taking place both in the classroom and on the school fields, enabling pupils to engage

with and question new learning. These activities consisted of group discussions about archaeology and archaeologists, object handling, finds identification, mapping, test pit excavation, finds washing and recording. Taking part in the project was a class of thirty year six pupils, aged ten or eleven.

Two methods of data collection were employed for this project: a short quiz asking pupils five questions about archaeology (what does an archaeologist do? What is an excavation? What do archaeologists find? Where do the finds end up? Where did you find out about archaeologists?), and a post excavation feedback form, following the same format as those mentioned above. The questionnaire was designed to assess pupils' prior knowledge and understanding of archaeology in order determine whether, through the activities carried out during the project, this knowledge and understanding increased, deepened or changed. The feedback forms, similar to that of those used for the YAC meetings and Dunkirt Barn project, aimed to ascertain which of the GLOs were most prevalent as a result of the activities as well as what elements of the excavation project pupils' enjoyed and engaged with most.

Analysis of the pre-excavation quiz took a thematic approach, whereby pupils responses were grouped into categories of most frequently occurring phrases. For example for question one (What does an archaeologist do?) five types of response were identified; digs in the ground, looks for/finds objects, finds out about the past, researches/investigates/experiments on finds, and travels to dig. Once identified, pupils' responses were coded against each category in the form of a tally, which were then analysed for frequency of occurrence. So for question one, the most frequent response from pupils (24 out of 30, 80%) was that archaeologists dig in the ground.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect to highlight, from the pre-excavation quiz, is that 78% of pupils had no understanding of what an excavation is; one might argue that for a year six class, this was an unfamiliar term, and had 'dig' been used instead there may have been a different outcome. In contrast all pupils knew what an archaeologist does, offering a variety of responses including digging in the ground, looking for artefacts, making discoveries about the past, investigating finds and carrying out research. Whilst these answers are representative of the discipline, it is a limited view, focussing on the activities of field archaeologists, suggesting perhaps that pupils are more familiar with this area of archaeology and unaware of the variety of other archaeological roles.

In addition pupils had an understanding of the types of artefacts recovered by archaeologists through excavation, suggesting bone, pottery, coins and remains of buildings. Interestingly a

small number of pupils (10%) claimed that sometimes archaeologists find nothing, whilst other pupils suggest 'things from the past' (40%) that 'tell us about people and places in the past' (10%). In answer to where the finds end up, 90% agreed on the museum, 13% suggested scientists and 6% private homes. One child suggested the black market. Comparing the results of this question with the first question posed, those who suggested finds end up with scientists were the ones with a deeper understanding of the role of archaeologists. The final question prompted a variety of answers ranging from resources including books and the internet to media representations in film and television. In addition a sizeable number claimed they found out about archaeology from family, one pupil commenting that his father had completed an evening class in archaeology, and another pupil from his experience in the Young Archaeologists' Club.

The pre-excavation quiz results are quite revealing in that they provide evidence of pupils' knowledge and understanding of a particular area of archaeology, but also demonstrate the potential of the project, through hands-on activities and encounters with 'real' archaeology, to increase this breadth of knowledge. Indeed this change is observable in the results from the feedback forms completed two weeks after the project.

Post-excavation, the feedback forms offer an insight into the results of taking part in a hands-on project. Whilst thirty pupils took part in the project and completed the pre-excavation quiz, only twenty-seven post-excavation feedback forms were received from the school two weeks later (a response rate of 90%). Analysis of the feedback forms also took a thematic approach, identifying key phrases used by pupils to express which activities they remembered and enjoyed most, resulting in eleven categories for the former and ten for the latter. Once these categories were identified, pupils' responses could then be coded against them and analysed for their frequency of occurrence. In addition, several GLOs were identified from pupils' responses; knowledge and understanding; attitudes and values; and enjoyment, inspiration and creativity.

In response to being asked what they remembered most, 59% stated 'digging' and 51% 'finding objects'. Many pupils claimed their reasons being that through excavation they gained an understanding of the past by looking at the objects left behind. One pupil remarked that the most memorable aspect for them was 'that there was a field and a dwelling where our school was and also the people that lived in the dwelling scattered pottery', having made a connection between the activity of excavation and their knowledge and understanding of the history of the landscape prior to the existence of their school building. As well as an increase in their knowledge and understanding, many pupils displayed evidence of a positive attitude and demonstrated the value of this hands-on experience; one pupil claimed they remembered

digging most 'because it's an opportunity I will probably not get again' and another expressing pride at discovering a fragment of roof tile. It was also clear from the forms received that the children all enjoyed their experience, many commenting that they enjoyed the whole day; one girl claimed 'I struggle to pick one specific memory because it was all good' (figure 28).



Figure 28. Aspects of the day remembered most by children, demonstrating their positive attitude toward the experience.

In response to the question what they enjoyed most, more than half (55%) claimed they enjoyed the physical experience of excavation, suggesting a variety of reasons including 'because you don't know what you are about to find', 'having the experience of doing an archaeological dig' and 'the fact that I was the one doing the dig'. Again, many pupils stated they enjoyed the whole experience, one pupil remarking 'because it was like we were archaeologist[s]', demonstrating a positive attitude toward the opportunity to take part in 'real' archaeology (figure 29). Other aspects of the day which pupils enjoyed most included the finds washing because 'I got to [see] the objects clearly' and analysing maps of the area from different periods in history 'because you got to see w[h]ere things were and what was here before us'.

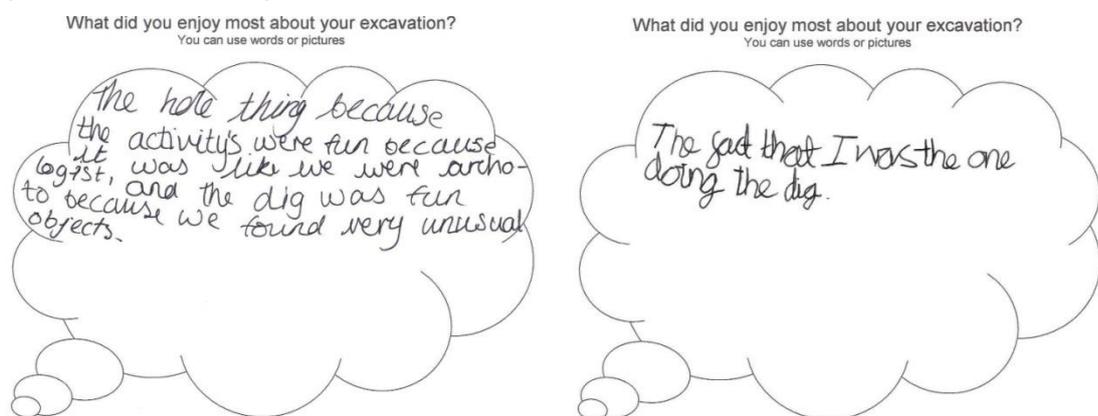


Figure 29. Two children's responses to engaging with archaeology at Wicor Primary School, Hampshire. Both highlight their enjoyment at being the ones carrying out archaeological practices at their school.

What is notable from this project is that of value to the pupils is the physical experience of encountering archaeology and the tactile engagement with the artefacts they recovered through

excavation. Indeed the interactive nature of the project enable them to explore the topic, broadening their knowledge and understanding as well as gaining new information and skills as a result of taking part. It cannot be denied that this type of experience, entirely different from traditional classroom work, is of great value. It would be interesting, now five years later, to ask the same pupils about this experience in order to ascertain the longitudinal value of the project.

### **Winchester Museum Service – *Out of Egypt***

Having discussed and analysed findings from tactile engagement outside the confines of the museum, our final case study focusses on the use of artefacts within the museum environment. During the winter of 2008 Winchester City Museums exhibited a collection of Egyptian artefacts in the Winchester Discovery Centre; in conjunction with this exhibition was an educational element consisting of school sessions for key stage two classes. These sessions were two hours in length, in which pupils explored the interactive exhibition space and took part in an object handling activity using genuine Egyptian artefacts. The teachers' notes highlight a number of objectives including finding out about Ancient Egyptians in life and death, examining, studying and interpreting primary sources of evidence from ancient Egypt, providing pupils with an opportunity to 'touch the past' through handling genuine artefacts, promoting problem solving skills, encouraging social learning skills outside the classroom, and providing an opportunity to reinforce classroom learning. Led by an interpreter-demonstrator the sessions aimed at providing pupils with a hands-on experience which would develop their understanding of Ancient Egypt by taking on the role of an Egyptologist.

During the object handling element, pupils were encouraged to assume the role of Egyptologist, and having just discovered Egyptian artefacts in the desert were to create a record of one object to add to a site report. Following a discussion about Egyptology and establishing rules for handling, pupils were invited to touch one of five genuine artefacts before completing their record sheet. The selected objects represented both life and death, the theme of the exhibition, including two faience shabtis dating from 400BC and 600-500BC, a wooden headrest, a faience scarab and a bronze mirror all of unknown date but approximately 2000 years old.

The handling element was of great importance in helping the children engage with the topic of Ancient Egypt, the importance being placed on the objects as the opportunity to handle artefacts of this kind is rare indeed. A collection of twenty-six letters written by pupils from Western Primary school to Winchester City Museums Education officer, aid our understanding of the effect of this experience on the pupils. The letters demonstrate the extent to which the pupils not only enjoyed the session, but how it contributed to their knowledge and

understanding of Ancient Egypt, through their references to new information discovered during the course of the session, and their beautiful illustrations.

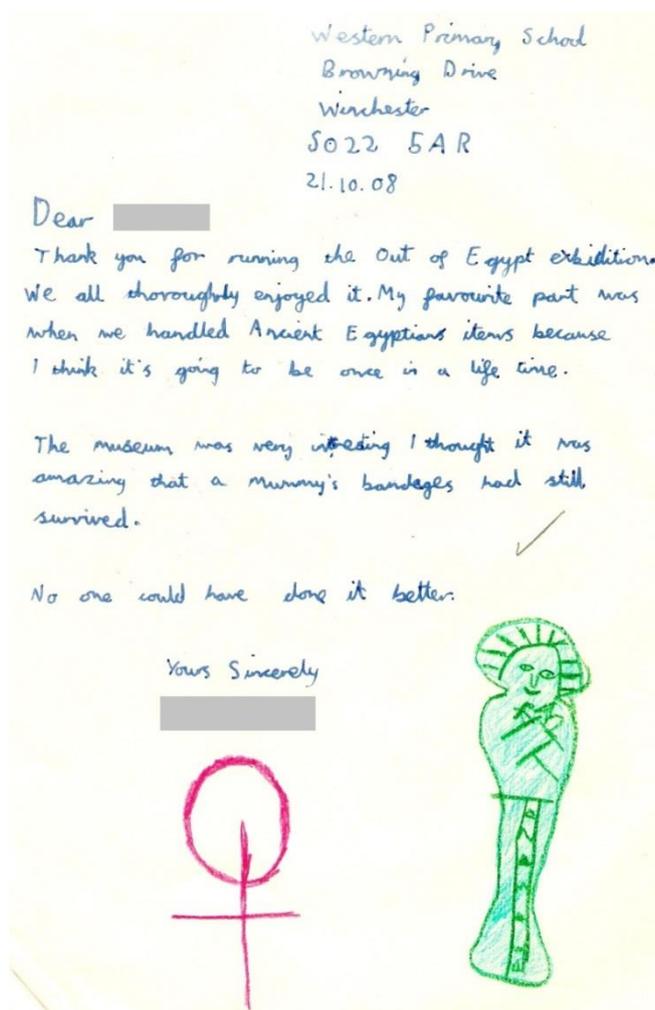


Figure 30. An example of a letter sent from a Western Primary School pupil to Winchester City Museums Education Officer. This pupil highlights their enjoyment of the Egyptian session.

What I find exciting from reading the children's letters is the joy they express at being permitted to handle ancient Egyptian artefacts; their exclamations such as 'it was really exciting to handle real ancient belongings from ancient Egypt', 'I thought holding the objects was really fun and exciting' and 'my favourite part was when we handled Ancient Egyptian items because I think it's going to be once in a lifetime' reveals a great deal about the power of objects to both excite and inspire individuals (figure 30). The pupils were able to recognise the value of their tactile engagement, expressing a wish to repeat the experience and commenting that 'every school that comes here would love the exhibition'. We also see recognition of value in terms of their respect for the artefacts. For example, those who handled the

bronze mirror were required to wear white gloves to protect the object from damage. Two pupils commenting on the mirror hint at the importance of wearing gloves by highlighting the fact, one stating 'I was lucky enough to hold the one that you have to use gloves', the other 'my favourite part room was ... where we got to touch a real mirror (with gloves on)'.

In addition to these examples of enjoyment and inspiration, there is clear evidence that the experience met the knowledge and understanding outcome; every child included a representation of Egypt in their letter, whether an image of themselves engaging with the objects, diagrams of the exhibition space and objects handled, or typical Egyptian iconography such as pyramids and hieroglyphs. By choosing to draw objects they encountered during the

session and representations of ideas learnt in school, and labelling them accordingly, pupils demonstrate a deeper understanding as well as their ability to make links between concepts and ideas; both a valuable and important outcome of engaging with museum collections.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence presented in this chapter is varied indeed, including examples from adults and children, professionals and amateurs, within the museum environment and outside. What this reveals is that object handling is an activity which people at all levels, abilities and ages can connect with.

This chapter has demonstrated the many levels on which people engage with collections and what effect this produces. The first case study working with staff and students at the University of Southampton highlighted the way in which the experience of being permitted to handle artefacts was very different to the experience of touch being prohibited; the responses of those handling artefacts, as seen through the memories inspired by the objects available to them, demonstrate that handling encourages connections between people and ‘things’. In contrast participants who were only permitted to look at the objects on display, did not exhibit the same level of connection, since many of their memories were of less personal nature. In addition, from observing the behaviour of participants in both the lunchtime seminar and undergraduate lecture, it became clear that a certain amount of frustration appeared amongst participants for whom touch was prohibited. It could be argued that since students and staff taking part in these sessions are accustomed to handle objects as part of their studies and career, the frustration may be more than that of the general public visiting museums, however I feel this important to highlight.

The results from the two Young Archaeologists’ Club sessions carried out at the University of Southampton, reveal the positive outcome of a hands-on experience using collections and specialist archaeological equipment. The words and illustrations club members included in their thought bubble feedback forms show that the practical elements of the two sessions were both memorable and enjoyable. In addition on analysis of their responses, using the GLOs discussed in chapter five, we see that *enjoyment, inspiration and creativity* was the most frequently occurring outcome of their experience. Club members were able to clearly show an increase in their understanding of archaeological techniques (including interpretation of objects in addition to using the geophysical survey equipment), as well as a deepening understanding of particular concepts of the past.

The HCC projects also discussed in this chapter reveal the positive outcomes of a hands-on approach, using museum collections as well as skills of interpretation, on school children. Both the Dunkirt Barn Roman Villa project and the Wicor Primary School excavation gave primary age pupils an opportunity to work outside their classroom environment on topics linked with their curriculum related projects. Feedback from teachers involved with the Dunkirt Barn project demonstrated that pupils benefited greatly from taking part in such a hands-on experience, as not only were pupils more engaged in the topic of Roman Britain, but by visiting a villa site and handling artefacts from the Roman period, they were able to place their school work in context and take the skills acquired back to school. Pupils' responses, as seen in their feedback forms, reveal similar outcomes to those noted by the teachers. Several were able to share their understanding of trade, for example (as seen in figure 26), through a tactile engagement with Roman oyster shells facilitated by a member of Hampshire Museum Service staff. The Wicor excavation also provides evidence for the benefits of children engaging with objects and the impact this has on their understanding of the past and the way in which archaeologists interpret the past through the physical remains left behind.

The thread running through all of these case studies, is the power of a tactile engagement with objects, which enable people make connections between the past as a concept and a material place. Taking this evidence into account, along with the results of the collections survey and the responses of Hampshire Museum Service staff to the concept of object handling, we are now presented with the challenge of considering how a tactile engagement can become commonplace within the heritage sector. In the following chapter we see how a framework consisting of five essential values can make this a reality.

## Chapter Nine

### The Future: Please Touch

*“Our hands are very much a part of ourselves; we say that seeing is believing, but handling often brings us still nearer to the truth” (Harrison, 1970, p. 32)*

Our journey thus far has highlighted the changing role of touch in the museum, from active in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, becoming prohibited during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to being tentatively offered to a select audience throughout the twentieth century. Now in the twenty-first century we are faced with pressure to increase access to museum collections at a time of economic difficulties where expectations are high and manpower dramatically reduced. We are aware of the many benefits of a hands-on approach in the museum: education and learning, health and wellbeing, breaking down barriers and bringing communities together. The wealth of current research taking place throughout the United Kingdom demonstrates the power and potential of objects beyond the glass case, and as we have seen from the theoretical concepts presented in chapter two, objects enable us to connect with not only the past, but our environment and the people in our lives, enabling us to make sense of the world in which we live.

Through my three stage methodology I have explored object handling in three distinct ways; how collections are used for handling, the views of museum professionals, and the response of the public. Taking Hampshire as a case study, this thesis focussed on the collections and staff of Hampshire County Council Museum Service. I acknowledge that this might appear a limited means of understanding how tactile engagement with museum collections takes place, however I also believe that the nature of Hampshire Museum Service consisting of such a rich diversity of job roles, types of museums, heritage sites, exhibitions, engagement projects and collections – a microcosm of the museum world perhaps – offers a valuable body of data to aid in our understanding of current practice and attitudes toward object handling in museums.

The information presented in this thesis is intended to begin a discussion about how to increase access to collections through tactile engagement as well as offering an opportunity for further discussion and research. By limiting the focus of this research to Hampshire, it has resulted in an in-depth understanding of one museum service within the wider museum world; one way in which this research could be taken further would be to compare what takes place within Hampshire with other sites and services across the country and further afield. Carrying out a survey of museums and museum service collections use in handling throughout the UK would

be a starting place to gain an understanding of how British collections are currently being used with the museum going public. Whilst this has been explored to a certain extent by the work of the Museums Association through the Collections for the Future (Wilkinson 2005) and Effective Collections (Museums Association 2012a) campaigns, an in-depth study focussing on the use of collections specifically for handling would be fascinating.

Of particular interest would be to interview other museum professionals across the country to gain a wider perspective than the small sample of thirteen individuals interviewed for this research. This could be widened further by interviewing not only curators, keepers, conservators and education staff, but also front of house staff and volunteers, since at many museums these two groups of people are increasingly engaging with collections either through updating collections databases, conserving objects or facilitating handling opportunities with the public.

Where many of the case studies presented in this research have focussed on working with children and young people, further work could be carried out to reveal the effect of object handling with adults. The example presented in chapter eight, involved adults working in a specialist field of archaeology. Of interest would be to ascertain the impact of tactile engagement with objects on the general museum going public, and whilst many museums already conduct visitor research, much of this research focusses on obtaining quantitative data in relation to exhibitions visited, whereas a more qualitative study revealing the way in which the public engage with objects would be of great value.

The three elements of the research methodology combined have lead us to the point where we are now able to understand current practice in Hampshire and look to a more accessible future. The collections survey (chapter six) established that collections are being used for handling, but in a limited way with specialist groups. It also demonstrated that specific handling collections have been created in order to protect the core collections, but that there is inconsistency with the way in which these handling collections are produced, used and managed across Hampshire Museum Service. Despite this, the survey revealed an understanding, within the museum service staff, of the importance and power of handling for the public.

Through the detailed interviews with museum service staff (chapter seven) several viewpoints presented. Firstly a common consensus across the different museum roles that a distinct lack of communication and understanding affects the way in which objects are chosen for handling. Many participants suggested that knowledge is not being fully shared between different individuals, and that this in turn not only impacts how handling takes place but reduces confidence in the activity itself. Secondly, and arguably a result of limited communication,

hesitancy exists concerning the use of collections in handling; many participants were fearful of damaging collections through touch, despite acknowledging their own memories of handling experiences which had invariably led them to the museum profession. Thirdly and perhaps surprisingly since museum professions rely on touch when working with objects, there is a sense that handling is not considered highly valuable in terms of making collections more accessible.

Turning to the evidence from the Hampshire case studies presented in chapter eight it is clear that handling is highly valued by those who have been given the opportunity to engage with collections through touch. Not only this, but the case studies demonstrate a hunger for handling objects and the enjoyment experienced through this process. It is evident that it is not simply about handling to find out information, but it is the connection that handlers make with an object, its past and the people who created and used it, that is important. However it is not simply one level of connection with the past – objects bring down barriers and enable people to connect with each other. In addition evidence demonstrates that when given the opportunity to explore objects, and understand how to handle correctly, the experience takes another form; it builds confidence as well as affirming and revealing the identity of the handler.

With this in mind, an important question still remains: How can object handling become a realistic strategy for engaging with museum collections? Through my research, I conclude that it can be achieved by following a structure I term *Five values to Achieve Accessible Collections*; value your collections, value communication, value purpose, value your people, and value your audience. What I present is a strategy for museums to address their concerns and increase their confidence in using collections with all groups of society.

### ***Five Values to Achieve Accessible Collections***

#### **One - Value Your Collections**

One thing is clear: collections are important. They are the unique selling point of museums, providing us with a tangible link with people in the past. Therefore when considering increasing access to museum collections the value of the object is uppermost. Those with whom I discussed handling at Hampshire Museum Service agreed that objects should be central to increasing access, since this is the material evidence supporting whatever story museums wish to tell. For me personally, this extends to handling collections being seen as part of the main collections and therefore stored, used and conserved likewise. They should not be considered of less value simply due to their designation for handling. Holden (2005) remarks that objects are changed by their context - once an object enters the sphere of the museum we can argue it acquires almost relic like qualities. Add to this the responsibility museums hold to care for and

preserve objects for prosperity, one can easily be consumed by a desire to place collections on a pedestal far away from the museum going public. Equally once an object goes through a grading process whereby it is marked for handling for any number of reasons, in the eyes of many it suddenly sheds its esteemed value and therefore does not need to be treated in the same way as the main collection.

The first challenge, therefore, focusses on valuing collections: all collections. This means caring for handling collections in the same way as main collections, carrying out frequent condition checks to find out not only the life-span of an object, but whether it is in a fit state to add value to the experience of a visitor. Whilst I feel it important to offer handling opportunities for all, I am vehemently opposed to having objects of poor quality available to be handled. This not only tells the visitor that they are not valued, but that museums do not care about the objects in their care.

### **Two - Value Communication**

I cannot express enough, the importance of communication in increasing access to museum collections. Communication is vital at two distinct levels: firstly between those responsible for the care of objects and those using them with the public, and secondly between museums and the visiting public.

Again, through the in-depth conversations discussed in chapter seven, the value of communication is evident. What became clear was that museum professionals often do not communicate with each other enough. This needs to end. A dialogue between different museum professions must take place in order that those who facilitate public engagement in museums are aware of how collections can be used, and those for whom care and preservation is key comprehend how objects are used with the public. Time and again during interviews with Hampshire Museum Service staff, a lack of understanding surfaced; those with a responsibility for collections care did not fully understand how objects are used with the public in handling sessions, and those working with the public were equally unaware of the work involved in caring for collections. One means of achieving this dialogue would be for different museum professions to work together on engagement projects. Rather than an education officer asking for objects why not ask a keeper, conservator or curator to join a project accompanied with objects and their interpretations?

Addressing the second level of this value, communication between the museum and visiting public is imperative. Be clear and transparent about what can and cannot be handled. People need to understand the reasons behind our decisions and choices; museums cannot assume the

public will appreciate why one object is behind a glass case and another on open display completely unsupervised, unless we explicitly say why.

Added to this aspect of communication is the importance of raising awareness of collections. Many museums are a local government service, funded through taxes paid by the public, therefore not only do museums have a duty to the public, but they rely on the public for support. A lack of communication results in two main questions: why would people be interested in handling collections if they are not aware of their existence, and why should people care if collections are under threat? Museums must think creatively about how to engage with the public in order that they should care about and be interested in the wealth of information stored in our museums.

### **Three - Value Purpose**

Often it appears that handling takes place for the sake of handling, almost joining the trend or 'band-wagon', as described by one conservator from Hampshire Museum Service. Museums may be aware of the value of a tactile engagement but do they consider what this adds to the experience of the visitor? It is important when attempting to increase physical access to collections that there is a clearly defined purpose, as this will then inform how objects are chosen and subsequently treated during handling sessions.

The process of defining purpose involves continual questioning and on-going evaluation. Important questions to ask are: What is the aim of your activity/project? How will objects add value to this aim? Which object will suit the aim of the activity/project? What needs to be put in place to ensure the object is protected during handling? How have visitors responded to object handling? How can this feedback aid the development of activities/projects and help in choosing appropriate objects to handle? These are all vital questions to consider and should be at the forefront of creating handling opportunities.

Once purpose has been defined it is imperative to select appropriate objects, which will not only fit the objective but engage visitors. Consider how objects will be used and therefore the types of objects that can be handled. Be sensible. Increasing access does not mean simply opening the store room doors and giving free reign, rather it is a meaningful engagement with the material remains of the past as the result of a carefully planned, purposeful opportunity.

### **Four – Value your people**

Museums are not simply about objects. They are about people; those in the past, present and future. Objects without people are essentially meaningless. As we have seen in previous

chapters, it is the engagement people have with objects that creates meaning. At the heart of museums there are two types of people: staff and visitors. During this current climate museum professionals are under increasing pressure to meet targets and deliver high standards to their audience. It is a tough time to be in the heritage sector. This was a recurring theme in all the interviews I carried out with Hampshire Museum Staff. Therefore I suggest the fourth way to accessible collections is to value your people.

But what does valuing your people mean in terms of making collections accessible? It means recognising the knowledge and enthusiasm of museum staff and using that knowledge to your advantage: learn from and train each other. Museums cannot expect visitors to confidently engage with collections if staff are not confident in handling. Meaningful handling comes from the facilitator knowing the objects they work with and being able to encourage participants to explore and release latent knowledge. Objects, where possible, should always be accompanied by staff, not simply because unsupervised handling can increase the risk of damage, but because I believe without an enthusiastic, knowledgeable 'expert' it is a meaningless experience. Confidence in how to lead by example is at the forefront. When a facilitator is confident handling collections, they model good handling behaviour which encourages participants to do the same. If museums are to facilitate meaningful handling they must be able to demonstrate both how to handle and how to enable visitors to draw out knowledge and understanding from collections.

### **Five – Value your audience**

I cannot stress this final value enough. As previously stated museums are about people and that second group represented is visitors. Of high priority when making collections accessible, should be valuing your audience. This can be achieved in a number of ways; firstly by acknowledging that without visitors, museums would simply be storehouses of unseen objects. Secondly, recognising that museum professionals are not the sole creators of knowledge; visitors bring new interpretations to collections, providing a rich assemblage of stories and memories that add depth and understanding to material culture. Depending on our experiences, we interpret objects in different ways. While museum professionals may extract what they consider essential information and present that within the context of an exhibition, on handling and exploring an object through touch, visitors' interpretations contribute additional layers of understanding. This is incredibly valuable, should be encouraged, and can be achieved in a number of different ways; community exhibitions where visitors are the curators, providing opportunities within exhibitions for visitors to add their interpretation to display panels and object labels, taking collections outside the four walls of the museum and placing them within a

community context. There are endless possibilities. Museums are not the sole creators of knowledge, the public can and do offer insights that professionals may miss.

Thirdly, valuing your audience means eradicating an elitist attitude to collections. By separating collections into *core* and *handling*, museums often give the impression that objects used for tactile engagement are not as important as the main collections. I ask what message this conveys to visitors. I believe it is one which suggests museum professionals are more intelligent, trustworthy, important, and valued than the visiting public, and this needs to stop. I do not suggest that we do away with designated handling collections, indeed museum loan boxes services are an invaluable resource, used with much success by school groups and in reminiscence sessions for example. However I believe museums no longer need to be limited by what can be designated not essential to core collections, package these up in a box and send out unaccompanied save for information cards and handling instructions. Instead by carefully considering how main collections can be incorporated into a handling context, endless possibilities emerge and visitors are valued.

Finally, value your audience by guiding them through the process of handling. The activity of handling museum objects is different from handling objects in daily life, but not all visitors will know the difference which can result in a variety of attitudes to engaging with collections. Hampshire Museum staff described situations where visitors were either too anxious about handling and therefore required encouragement to do so, or at the other extreme were unable to distinguish an object as precious due to a sense of familiarity and therefore handled objects roughly, causing irreparable damage. It is essential that in any handling situation, museum staff guide visitors through their experience, explaining the importance of correct handling through which objects can be explored.

This may not sound revolutionary. It does not need to be. My intention is not that we turn our world upside-down, pawing through collections for the sake of it; instead I argue that by valuing these five aspects – collections, communication, purpose, people and audience – we can creatively and successfully approach the increasing pressures to become accessible. My hope is that through the strategy presented above, the opportunities I have been privileged to experience will not simply be a result of being a member of a club, or because I did a degree in archaeology, or that I am a museum professional, but simply because museums have placed touch at the core of engaging with their visitors.

The past is ours. Let us take hold of it.



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<http://www.britishmuseum.org/>

[www.inspiringlearningforall.org](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.org)

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/research/touch/wellbeing>

<http://moodle.org/>

## References

## Appendix One

### 1.1 Email invitation to participate in the Collections Survey

Dear All

I am following up the initial survey of the frontline handling collections on behalf of the museums service, which Dawn Owen started last year. This survey is being carried out in order to; understand what the handling collections across the service contain; ascertain which target groups the collections are being used with, and identify any potential gaps in these collections.

This Survey will also mean that best use can be made of the objects graded as being suitable for handling, which are currently in storage. The results from this are important in that the information generated should help to ensure that our collections will be made as accessible as possible to both staff and the public.

The replies, which Dawn received, were very informative but we now need to obtain more detail about how your available handling material is being used. I would be grateful if you could fill in the attached questionnaire, with as much information as possible, including the presence of schools in your answers – Curators: you may need to talk to your area education officer to obtain this information.

Please email your answers to [Alexandra.Walker@hants.gov.uk](mailto:Alexandra.Walker@hants.gov.uk) by July 14<sup>th</sup>. If you have any queries or suggestions about this survey, do get in contact with me by email.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Many Thanks  
Alexandra Walker

## 1.2 Collections survey questionnaire

### Frontline Handling Collections Questionnaire

Name of Museum/Site:

Your Name:

Your Job Title:

Approximately how many objects do you currently have in your handling collections?

Are these objects real or replica, or both? (if both please give an approximate percentage of real and replica objects)

Could you indicate what percentage of the objects in your handling collections are accessioned/un-accessioned?

How many members of staff (including education staff) at your museum/site use these handling collections?

Which groups of people are these collections used with? (e.g. schools and colleges, reminiscence groups, clubs and societies, individuals)

How are these collections used? (e.g. demonstrations, presentations/talks, hands-on displays, family activity days, outreach, research)

Are these collections used in supervised or non-supervised situations? (if both please give an approximate percentage for both)

<p>Where are the handling collections used? (e.g. in the museum, in schools, outreach other than in schools)</p>
<p>Have you received any requests from groups or individuals for objects/artefacts, which are not currently in your handling collections? What are these?</p>
<p>Are there any artefacts/groups of objects you would like in your collections? (Are there any gaps you would like to fill?)</p>
<p>Do you use, or have you used, loan objects from other sources outside Hampshire Museum Service?</p>
<p>Do you have any additional comments to make about your handling collections?</p>

Thank you

Please return this questionnaire to Alex Walker  
Alexandra.Walker@hants.gov.uk





## Appendix Two

5. What purpose do you think object handling serves? Why is it important?

6. What do you think are the advantages in object handling?

7. What do you think are the problems with object handling?

8. How do you think object handling can be incorporated into the museum environment effectively?

## 2.2 Interview transcripts (see attached disc).

Interview transcripts can be found on [ePrints Soton](#)



## Appendix Three

### 3.1 Lunch time seminar and Archaeology & Museums Lecture booklet

<p>Write a word to describe how you feel about your chosen object</p>	<p>Who do you think used this object and what did they use it for?</p>
<p>Write a word to describe the object</p>	<p>Write a memory you got from the object</p>

## 3.2 Young Archaeologist Club Meeting Plan (07.02.2009)

### Notes for Meeting – 7/02/09 – Archaeology at University of Southampton

**Registration & Introduction** – by Matt at Avenue Campus, University of Southampton

**Venues** – Avenue Campus, University of Southampton

**Health & Safety** – procedures for emergencies, lost procedure, evacuation, muster station, toilets, washing facilities, drinking water, etc – by Matt

**Phones** – M's mobile – xxxxx xxxxxx. A's mobile – xxxxx xxxxxx. Emergency UK YAC contact at weekends – xxxxx xxxxxx (MH CBA Director). Mission Hall – xxxx xxxx & xxxx xxxx, GHT – xxxx xxxx & xxxx xxxx

**People** – M (SCC Staff & Leader), A (SCC staff & Assistant Leader), ZP and Alex Walker (volunteer Assistant Leaders), GI & TT (helpers). Leaders and helpers will have Risk Assessment, notes, and register. Briefing for all staff and helpers at 12:50 inside Archaeology Building, Avenue Campus.

#### **Activities**

See timetable

**Toilets** Inside Archaeology Building.

#### **Timetable**

<b>TIME</b>	<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>DURATION</b>
<b>12:50</b>	Brief for helpers/staff in Archaeology Building	
<b>1:00</b>	Meet YAs at Archaeology Building, introduction & register	15
<b>1:15</b>	Talk on studying archaeology (LR)	15
<b>1.30</b>	Tour of Archaeology Building	20
<b>1.50</b>	Activity 1 (lead by Masters/PhD Students)	30
<b>2.20</b>	Break (either in café or atrium)	20
<b>2.40</b>	Activity 2 (lead by Masters/PhD Students)	30
<b>3.10</b>	Activity 3 (lead by Masters/PhD Students)	30
<b>3.40</b>	Look at Collections (LR)	20
<b>4:00</b>	Book out YAs in Archaeology Building	
<b>4:15</b>	Staff/helpers leave	

### 3.3 Young Archaeologist Club Meeting Plan (09.05.2009)

#### Notes for Meeting – 9/5/09 – Geophysical Survey

**Registration & Introduction** – by Alex at University of Southampton, Avenue Campus

**Venues** – Avenue Campus, University of Southampton and Southampton Common

**Health & Safety** – procedures for emergencies, lost procedure, evacuation, muster station, toilets, washing facilities, drinking water, etc – by Alex at University of Southampton, Avenue Campus

**Phones** – M's mobile – xxxxx xxxxxx. Alex's Mobile – xxxxx xxxxxx Emergency UK YAC contact at weekends – xxxxx xxxxxx (Mike Heyworth CBA Director).

**People** – M (SCC Staff & Leader) A (SCC Staff and Leader), Alex (Assistant Leader) GI, AI, CH, TT, ZP

#### **Activities**

Geophysical Survey Talk

Resistivity on Southampton Common

Analyze results from geophysical survey

Questions and Answers with Staff and Post Graduate Students

#### **Toilets**

In Archaeology Building (Uni of Southampton) – two leaders/helpers to accompany YAs

NOTE: No Public toilets on the common

#### **Timetable**

<b>TIME</b>	<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>DURATION</b>
<b>12:50</b>	Brief for leaders/helpers at Avenue Campus	
<b>1:00</b>	Meet YAs at Avenue Campus, introduction & register (Alex/M)	10
<b>1:10</b>	Introduction to Geophysics – TS (Nick Brad Lab)	20
<b>1:30</b>	Walk to survey site on Southampton Common	15
<b>1:45</b>	Resistivity Survey on Southampton Common	60
<b>2:45</b>	Walk back to Avenue campus	15
<b>3:00</b>	Break in Archaeology Building	20
<b>3:20</b>	Download resistivity data and analyse	30
<b>3:50</b>	Questions and Answers (Alex to Chair)	10
<b>4:00</b>	Book out YAs at Mission Hall	
<b>4:15</b>	Staff/helpers leave	

### 3.4 Response forms for Young Archaeologist Club (YAC) members

My name .....

My age .....

**What I enjoyed most was ... (you can use words or pictures)**

**What I remember most is ... (you can use words or pictures)**