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It's my heritage too: Developing participatory methods for promoting access to heritage sites

Jonathan Rix with The Heritage Forum

The Heritage Forum

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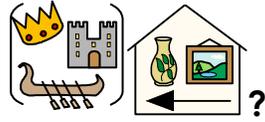
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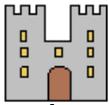
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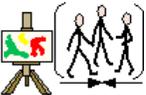
The following sites were visited around Liverpool and Merseyside: The World Museum; The Walker Art Gallery; The Maritime Museum; The National Wildflower Centre; Speke Hall; The Williamson tunnels; Metropolitan Cathedral; The Anglican Cathedral; The Conservation centre; Lady Lever; Staircase House, Stockport; St George's Hall; The Tate Gallery.

What are Heritage sites?



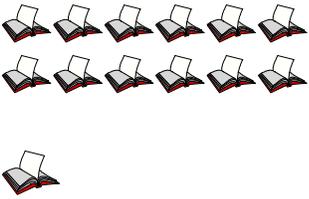
- Castles 
- Galleries 
- Museums 
- Old Ships 
- Churches 
- Palaces 
- Old Houses 

Some Heritage sites have:

- Special tours 
- Audio tours 
- Art Projects 
- Photography Projects 
- Personal history projects 
- Accessible signs 

But there is very little advice



<p>Museum Libraries and Archives Inclusive Information</p>	<p>Sensory Impairments - 12 pages Learning Difficulties - 1/2 a page</p>	
<p>National Endowment For Arts Design For Accessibility</p>	<p>Sensory Impairments – 12 pages Learning Difficulties - 1 page</p>	

Introduction

Over recent years there has been a growing appreciation that people with learning difficulties should be involved in assessing heritage site provision (Rayner, 1998; Economou, 1999; Ruiz, 2004; Rix, 2005). It has also been recognised that such sites can be a valued resource for these individuals, who face barriers in relation to structuring thought, remembering and communicating, and for the practitioners who work alongside them (Hooper-Greenhill et al, 2002). Despite this recognition there is still a lack of resources to make it easier for this diverse audience to visit heritage sites and express their views on the experience.

The Access to Heritage Project, which began in autumn 2005, hoped to fill this gap. It had three clear aims

- To assist and encourage people with learning difficulties to access Merseyside's culture and heritage sites – as is their right.
- To enable heritage sites to learn from people with learning difficulties about how to best make themselves accessible to people with learning difficulties and therefore benefit everyone.
- To create intellectual access guidance that can be used in heritage sites everywhere.

The members of the project's Forum have identified a range of issues that had previously been spread across a number of research documents. They have shown that the need to

involve people with learning difficulties in assessing provision within heritage sites can be met effectively if it is built upon a relationship across an extended period of time. They have highlighted the need for improved signage (Deputy Prime Minister, 2006; Lines et al, 2004; Rayner, 1998), emphasised the importance of the senses (Blewitt, 2004) and demonstrated the role food plays in effective social activities (Bohata et al, 2002)... even in a research project! The Forum have identified that sites need to produce accessible information, including marketing, pre-visit information and on-site interpretation, and that they should challenge and enhance the personal attitudes and awareness of their staff (Goodall et al, 2003; MENCAP, 2003; Rix, 2005; Whitaker et al, 2005). Perhaps most importantly of all, the Forum has provided guidance about the process of consultation. Their work demonstrates the comparative ease of an inclusive approach and its manageable outcomes. It underlines that a decision to supply resources equitably within the mainstream provision (Goodall et al, 2003; Whitaker et al, 2005) should be greeted as a reasonable, affordable and valuable opportunity that can be to the advantage of all users. Upon reading their work, heritage sites should feel encouraged to provide access to their sites through a diversity of communication channels.

Working with the Forum has also underlined for all involved that the individuality of people with learning difficulties is far greater than their label might lead heritage sites to believe. If the views of this diverse population are to be effectively captured then a wide range of individuals who have this label applied to them need to be canvassed to get a fuller picture of access challenges and opportunities. However, the research process which has been undergone also provides evidence that heritage sites can work with these

users in ways with which they will feel comfortable, because they involve approaches with which they are already familiar. For example, as part of their work, the Forum has supported the development of provision at St George's Hall, Liverpool, making eighteen visits to the hall, and advising site designers on signage and other presentation issues. The Forum also raised additional funds to develop a temporary multi sensory exhibition for the hall in conjunction with artists, and to employ a film maker to record their work both in carrying out access audits and creating the exhibition.

Setting up the Forum

Research, particularly academic research, tends to exclude people with learning difficulties through complex texts and theorised debate (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003). The project aimed to avoid this exclusionary outcome by practicing three core principals of inclusive research:

- that research must address issues which really matter to people with learning difficulties, and which ultimately leads to improved lives for them;
- that it must access and represent their views and experience; and
- that people with learning difficulties need to be treated with respect by the research community (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003, p16).

On-going reflection has been key to ensuring that the project stuck to its inclusive principles. For example, the project was initiated in 2004 after a number of failed attempts to raise the interest of funders elsewhere in the UK. A project steering group raised initial funds to employ the project co-ordinator and establish the Forum. A small number of people with learning difficulties initially attended the steering group, but it

soon became obvious that these meetings were dominated by others. Once the Forum was firmly established, therefore, the steering group disbanded and its members joined Forum meetings when required.

The twenty-five members of the Forum come from five key community groups operating out of day-service resource centres and a school. The project focussed on identifying and recording their experiences so that the people with learning difficulties have control over them, and have access to the results. As much as possible, decisions were made at meetings of the Heritage Forum, which were held at different venues throughout the Liverpool and Merseyside area so as to make it easier for its members to attend.

The project recognised the need to provide administrative support to facilitate the work of the Forum. A volunteer project leader, Alan Griffiths, identified and managed links within the local administrative network and created funding partnerships with a range of funding bodies. A funded project co-ordinator, Ticky Lowe, facilitated meetings and visits as well as communications between participants, and helped maintain a momentum for the project and the Forum. Some gatekeeper personnel from heritage sites and local organisations also attended Forum meetings at different times, as did the first author of this chapter. A monthly update was circulated to keep everyone informed. From the outset it was recognised that trust and respect had to be established between all participants. With this in mind, the first few meetings encouraged people to find out about each other and their individual interests. Forum members created a personal profile,

in which they outlined things that they liked and disliked, noted their hobbies and interests, and identified which senses they found the most effective for communicating.

It soon became evident to the Forum that the majority of the members had minimal experience of heritage sites. Hardly surprisingly this meant that they were not sure what they could expect to find at sites and what they should do when they got there. It was important, therefore, that people made some visits to a number of sites so that they could familiarise themselves with heritage experiences before making final decisions about the form of the project.

Originally, the project was proposed by the lead author as an access to heritage project, however, after a number of funding setbacks some of the gatekeeper personnel in particular were eager for the Forum to focus on other outputs. It was recognised that the views of the project supporters should not direct the outcome of the decision, however, so there were a number of meetings at different venues at which the Forum considered whether they would like to be involved in an arts based project, an access project or an as yet undefined alternative. Forum members were in strong agreement that they wished to continue with an evaluative access project.

The Forum decided that they wanted to examine the whole visitor experience at the heritage sites they visited. They wished to consider:

- how they found out about a venue;
- how they got there;

- what happens when they got there;
- whether they felt welcome;
- how they found their way around;
- whether they could understand what it was all about;
- whether it was aimed at them;
- whether it held their interest.

The Arrangement of Visits

The Forum made over 50 visits to 13 venues across Liverpool and Merseyside. The majority of these were unaccompanied, but the Forum also chose to attend some specific activities offered by heritage sites. They joined a hands-on workshop led by museum education staff, accompanied guided tours at several venues, and used audio tours that were on offer.

Having decided to visit a particular site, the project co-ordinator made contact with the venue on behalf of the Forum. This allowed the sites to show that they were interested in the Forum and its aims, and for the Forum to respond to any questions the site might have about their research methods. During this initial contact, the Forum would invite a member of staff to meet with the group during the visit, and would offer to share insights that came out of the visits.

Generally, about four people with learning difficulties went on each visit, involving one or two of the groups who make up the Forum. On these visits they followed their

favoured routine. They arrived at 11 o'clock, usually travelling by taxi, spent an hour going around the site (or often, part of the site), and then went to the site Café to discuss the experience. If requested they would either feed back their findings straight away or record them in an accessible written report.

Recording the Experience

At all Forum sessions, visual images played a key communication role. Symbols, photographs and drawings were used alongside the written and spoken word to facilitate the sharing and recording of ideas. The project co-ordinator supported this process by supplying a wide range of images, objects and materials at meetings. A variety of tools were trialled by the Forum to assist in the visit debrief sessions too. Video footage was taken of some visits, but examining and using the material proved to be challenging. Additional expertise was sought to produce an accessible record of the Forum's findings, but it was not available during the initial evaluative process. There was also a trial of disposable and digital cameras. These provided a useful record of the experience, but the images from the disposable cameras were not available soon enough to help discuss visits, and though the digital cameras offered the opportunity of immediate images their value relied upon the availability of equipment and technical knowledge. Postcards of artefacts were used on occasion, too, and though they limited discussion to predetermined items, they were of some positive value.

The Forum also created a post-tour questionnaire that allowed them to record experiences, the ways they had used different senses, and what they had found enjoyable

and not enjoyable. This was a useful discussion tool, allowing people to express their views through text and/or imagery alongside their peers and supporters. The Forum recognised too, that the supporters had insights through their experience as advocates and as observers of the experience. They also recognised that supporters might feel a need to incorporate these views into those of people with learning difficulties if they did not have their own questionnaire. The supporters were therefore provided with separate questionnaires. These often raised issues which the Forum had not initially identified but went on to discuss.

The views of the project co-ordinator were also taken into consideration. As the only individual who attended all the visits, Ticky felt that she gained an insight into the perspectives of Forum members in a broader sense. She also reflected on the experience with members of the Forum, the project leader and the academic researcher. She used this insight to help the Forum compare and contrast perspectives during discussions. In addition her observations, recorded as a participant-observer, reflected her involvement in site visits in which she noted and responded to the actions and interests of the Forum members while trying to avoid directing their focus. As a result of these observations she raised questions with the Forum during the debrief session.

The Forum used an ongoing, informal process of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to evaluate their data and generate their recommendations. They recorded findings in a particular category until they recognised that no new relationships, properties or dimensions were emerging and that they were repeating themselves. As the Forum would

say, “We’ve said that quite a few times now”. In addition, issues which lacked clarity were used as the basis for discussions and questions on subsequent visits. Individual members of the Forum and their supporters would also explore and discuss materials and experiences beyond the formal Forum meetings and would feed back their views at subsequent sessions. The Forum took the opportunity, as well, to assess how effective some of their ideas would be in practice. They arranged one workshop to explore their view that notes on exhibits need to contain key information only and that simplified text and symbols could help with access to written descriptions of artefacts.

The Forum, relationships and ways of working

The Forum and its supporters’ experience was that they needed up to ten visits to develop heritage site literacy, and that they would have been helped with pre-visit information. Given that they were not aware of what was available to them, either free of charge or as part of the mainstream and programme specific provision, it was evident that sites are not making links with people with learning difficulties and their service providers, and are not actively marketing what is already on offer.

This hesitancy to engage was not surprising to the Forum, as they realised that many people working in heritage sites have minimal experience of people with learning difficulties and feel uncertain about what might be expected of them. Having to overcome these barriers is time consuming and de-motivating however. For example, up to four hours was regularly spent on initially identifying an appropriate staff member to speak to at a site, and then there was often hesitancy and uncertainty about working with the

Forum. It was often only after discussions with the project co-ordinator that site staff were enthusiastic about upcoming visits, but this enthusiasm rarely spread through the rest of the workforce, so that when Forum members arrived at sites they generally did not feel welcomed. This lack of engagement was also evident in the small number of sites that sent staff to discuss the Forum's experience of a visit. Only three sites asked for feedback. Worse still, it was commonplace for site staff to say they would meet up with the Forum but not turn up.

The Forum recognised that first hand experience is the only way for people to learn that they have to do very little that is different or difficult when meeting people with learning difficulties. For this reason, the Forum recommended that Disability Awareness training, which involves people with learning difficulties, should be undertaken at all sites. This would allow heritage sites to establish a network of staff with experience of involvement with this part of the community. A key finding that underlines the importance of a positive human response is the Forum's recognition that access to a site is best supported neither by technology nor facilities, but by a tour guide who engages with people and builds on their current knowledge and experience. It is also important that a number of supporters, when reflecting on their involvement with the Forum, recognised that the people with learning difficulties had had a transformative effect, both on their own views of effective practice, and on their own enthusiasm and ability to engage with them as individuals.

One of the key factors that the Forum identified for successful working related to

timescales. Partly this was as a result of being a collaborative and inclusive project, requiring the development of trust and strong social cohesion. Longer time schedules allowed this social element to be developed to the benefit of all. For example, time was allocated for a food break, providing not only a social opportunity but also a chance to refocus the group; as a result Café meetings became key debriefing points.

The Forum preferred to work in short bursts across a longer period of time too, as it supported flexible arrangement for members of the Forum. It also fitted in with the manner in which people with learning difficulties are often supported by the wider community; for example transport issues mean that starting before 11am excludes many, whilst finishing late can interfere with supporters wider working lives. Shorter activities across time also helped those who do not easily concentrate over extended periods and meant all involved could make sure that what had been communicated had been understood. It allowed people to provide information a number of times and in small chunks, and for the Forum to give a concentrated focus on individual aspects of a heritage site during each visit.

The desire for an ongoing relationship of regular visits across a period of several months, did not always match up with the approach adopted by sites. For example, when working with the designers at St George's Hall, funders and heritage staff had created time constraints that work against an inclusive approach; so, for example, suggestions could not be tested to see if they worked as the Forum intended.

It was recognised by the Forum that, on occasions, heritage sites preferred to communicate with an ‘access expert’, rather than directly with them. For example, the project co-ordinator was positioned as the sole representative invited to design meetings at St George’s Hall. The Forum recognised the role that the project co-ordinator and other independent individuals played in supporting their advocacy; however, they felt strongly that priorities should be set by the people with learning difficulties, and that those arranging finances, advising the group or wishing to discuss their findings should attend meetings with the people with learning difficulties.

The relationship between individuals as self-advocates and those advocating on their behalf is a complex one. The attendance of Forum members was even affected by this, as without consistent supporter presence and engagement few members could maintain involvement. At Forum meetings it was also clear that these supporters or other visitors could dominate proceedings with relative ease. A number of supporters highlighted the ongoing need to reflect on whether the people with learning difficulties were being encouraged to follow or lead.

There was a need for ongoing reflection in relation to project aims too. Without intending to, it is all too easy for supporters’ interests and priorities to come to the fore, partly because of the mix of enthusiasm and uncertainty felt by people with learning difficulties for new experiences and partly because of the pace at which they tend to work. Both the project co-ordinator and the academic advisor recognised that their own interests could have had an overly influential impact on the foci of the project. As described earlier it

was the academic advisor's original proposal that an access project should be undertaken, whilst the project co-ordinator was interested in the sorts of tactile art experiences which formed the basis for the Forum's multi-sensory art project at St George's Hall. Of course, the Forum clearly voiced their desire to carry out these projects, taking ownership of them, and both gaining and contributing a great deal in the process; however, questions of agency are still raised.

As the external academic advising the Forum the issue of agency was evident in three key areas. Firstly, many people with learning difficulties have a 'record of agentive encounters' (Bruner, 1996 p36) related to the past and the future which teaches them that their view will rarely be sought and/or their voice will be misheard. Secondly, the hesitancy of people to engage with individuals with learning difficulties means that they often require another individual to intercede on their behalf. Their agency is therefore frequently expressed through the agentive act of another. This too becomes part of their 'record of agentive encounters', and it can be all too easy to come to rely upon other's interventions, and for this to become an unchallenged part of one's identity. Thirdly, as supporters intervening on behalf of another, it is a constant challenge to assure that we do not easily accept our agentive acts as being the agency of another. Part of the identity of supporters must be questioning their own 'record of agentive encounters' so they can come to understand how their self 'extends outwards to the things and activities and places with which we become "ego-involved"' (Bruner 1996, p36), and imposes its agency upon others. This requires openness and honesty, but can never fully resolve the

dilemma. In supporting you may take control, in not supporting you may leave barriers in place.

The Forums views on accessible provision

Throughout their research the Forum were struck by how provision that enhances their access will benefit many different people. An example of this broader value was their suggestion that heritage site staff within each room have access to simplified materials to assist them in talking to lots of people about artefacts and the site. The Forum recognised too, that their desire for more seating at sites would be appreciated by plenty of other visitors.

The members were particularly struck by the inconsistent nature of symbols to support interpretation when sites use them and their general lack of use elsewhere. The complexity of this issue was not lost on the Forum however. For example, the group had a long discussion about whether their final reports should use Widgit symbols (as used on page 2), those supplied by MENCAP (as used on page 17) or those from a number of other providers. What was clear was that most sites have confusing way finding. Signs are often not clearly visible and do not obviously link to their intended artefacts. The Forum felt colour coding for directions would be useful, and that contrasting colours on floors and walls would help define a space; however too many colours and patterns would be counterproductive. The Forum found that clear, large, symbol-based signs were the most valuable. They were not happy with crowded signs, but liked fonts which were large and strongly contrasted. They valued simplified text which identified key

information and used supporting symbols/pictures. They also valued signs that explained what people could do in different spaces (e.g. what can be sat on and what can be touched).

The Forum was particularly keen when sites enabled them to use different senses. They valued the use of sound, including audio text at the press of a button, but recognised that it was problematic if there were too many sounds going on at once or if a sound was muffled. They identified strong contrast in colour and texture as making exhibits accessible, and that the use of people in costumes brought spaces to life, particularly if the people in the costumes responded positively to them. Similarly, the Forum responded positively to hands-on exhibits, but noted that opportunities to touch things were limited in most settings. A number of supporters were surprised by how much pleasure people got from rummaging through draws to explore the less 'fashionable' artefacts.

Technology was also recognised as a way to minimise reliance upon written text, and the Forum enjoyed interactive computer games and felt that music and video created an inviting sense of place.

Our advice about access to heritage sites

People with a learning difficulty:



- Have not usually visited many heritage sites
- Like short visits
- Like information in small chunks
- Want heritage sites to tell them what is going on



- Want to feel welcome
- Like staff who are trained by people with a learning difficulty



- Like signs with symbols
- Like signs with simple language
- Like signs that are easy to see and read



- Want clear directions
- Like to use all their senses
- Don't enjoy lots of things happening at the same time



- Enjoy videos, music and computers
- Want hands-on exhibits



- Enjoy the use of contrasting colours for directions
- Enjoy the use of contrasting colours for exhibits



- Like people to explain the site
- Enjoy costumes
- Want somewhere to sit down

Conclusion – Keeping it going...

The Forum believes that their research work has just begun. In settings across the UK and beyond there are numerous specific technical issues that are untested and which can only be answered by engaging with people with learning difficulties (Rix, 2005). The Forum firmly believe that a consultation process can fill this gap, and should be undertaken whenever new interpretation is designed and made for heritage sites. However, one group of twentyfive people cannot do it all. Heritage sites have to consider how they can best attract the attention of this population, and convince them that their views are valued.

Throughout this project the Forum expressed their satisfaction at having their work identified, showcased and appreciated. They recognised the importance of being involved in a process based on trust, respect and a commitment to produce high quality work. Given that the work of people with learning difficulties is so often sidelined, this is hardly surprising, but it would have a positive impact on any researcher's motivation. The Forum has also shown that this research process is one that can be replicated in many different settings with relative ease: views can be gathered through visual questionnaires, observation, discussion in the moment, discussion retrospectively, drawing pictures and writing labels. The research has demonstrated the value of brainstorming activities, taking photographs, recording with video, using postcards of artefacts and bringing artefacts to individuals. As researchers forum members have attended workshops, held regular meetings, participated in discussions and interviews and completed questionnaires with supporters. They have demonstrated that the approaches that heritage sites are familiar with work with them too.

The Heritage Forum in Liverpool and Merseyside wish to continue their work. Each site and each exhibition present new challenges and opportunities that can usefully be assessed by people with learning difficulties. The Forum wants other groups to follow their example too, and begin evaluating provision where they live. Hopefully this simple but effective process can gain the interest of heritage sites and funders across the country; if it does, then many more individuals from this vital part of our community will see a place for themselves within our heritage provision and will come to believe that it represents a vital part of themselves.

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