

MLA Renaissance
North West

Revealing Collections

Regionally dispersed collections in the North West



Foreword

Dr Nick Merriman, Director, Manchester Museum

Over the past three years a number of collections reviews have been undertaken in the North West. These have helped individual museums discover more about their collections, leading to the disposal of unwanted items and the improved use and care of the remaining objects.

2010 saw a range of museums working together to look at their collections. This is the result of a recognition that what we hold in museums is part of a distributed national collection. It is only by working in partnership that we can gain a sense of the significance of our collective holdings and thus be able to make strategic decisions about their future. It is important that museums are not working and making decisions on disposal in isolation but instead are communicating freely with each other about the processes they are undertaking and the decisions they are making. In so doing we are ensuring that the unique collections in the North West are safeguarded for future generations.

"A better understanding of the collection gives you the confidence to make more informed decisions on its future whether that is exhibitions, storage, re-interpretation and even disposal. A thoroughly rewarding experience."
Peter Ogilvie,
Salford Museum & Art Gallery

24 museums have been involved in 36 collections reviews

In excess of 150,000 objects have been reviewed

100% of museums say that their knowledge of their collection has increased as a result of their review,
83% say it has increased a lot or considerably



Introduction

“The Reviews have been a great way of providing a new wave of information and optimism about some of the collections we hold.”

Vinai Solanki, Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery

Sarah Cooper, Accreditation, Standards & Review Officer, Renaissance North West

Since 2007 Renaissance North West has supported 36 collection reviews at 24 museums across the region. The aim of this work has been to:

- ★ gain a greater understanding of the region’s rich cultural assets
- ★ join up regionally dispersed collections
- ★ broker relationships between museums

The collection reviews carried out to date have:

- ★ enabled greater access to museum collections
- ★ improved resources for schools and learning programmes
- ★ enhanced permanent displays
- ★ developed new exhibitions.

Over the last 18 months, Renaissance has brokered partnerships between museums that wanted to review similar collections that are found in many museums, such as Egyptology, archaeology, natural science and furniture. Forming relationships between curators and working with subject specialists has enabled the museums to interrogate their collections not just within the context of their own museum but as a regional resource.

We are already seeing a culture change in curator’s approach to collections review and their attitudes towards rationalisation and disposal. Working collaboratively on collection reviews has given colleagues renewed confidence and opened up dialogue to debate key issues around storage, access, funding and conservation. It has also facilitated the exchange of skills and knowledge among staff and enabled them to use collections to tell richer stories that stretch beyond their own museum’s walls and across geographical boundaries.

This publication is comprised of five collection review partnership projects and outlines the key tasks, achievements and ambitions for the future of the reviews. Each partnership project has been selected because the collection group that was reviewed has historic issues that come up again and again for museums and staff, such as:

The collections manager, grappling with a bulky furniture collection because it requires substantial storage space.

The scholar-curator, trying to account for a regionally dispersed collection to understand the social and historical context for its dispersal.

The generalist curator, responsible for the entire museum collection but without subject specialism in all areas – wanting to maximise use of the collections where they lack expertise.

The historic house curator-manager, yearning to interpret the site in a way that makes sense of the building, its contents and grounds that span different eras.



Case Study 1

Cheshire Medieval Archaeology Review



Grosvenor Museum in Chester, Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse in Northwich, Nantwich Museum and Norton Priory in Halton all hold medieval remains from their local area and have also had some major medieval acquisitions/finds over recent years. However, insufficient levels of documentation and the geographical separation of the sites have made an overarching view of the collections difficult in the past.

The aim of the review was to jointly investigate the archaeological remains at site and to engage local communities by revealing a wider story about life in medieval Cheshire.

On a fundamental level, the review was undertaken to improve and exchange knowledge about the medieval collections across the museums.

The methodology

The museums commissioned Dr Andrew White, a specialist in medieval artefacts, to review their medieval objects and produce three reports that would explore curatorial issues, the significance of the collections and their potential future use.

Using information from the review reports, the partner museums have been able to develop an action plan that will help them create an effective collective resource of objects and information on life in medieval Cheshire for visitors to each site. Dr White also identified links between the four collections that will be distilled into a collective resource for all four partners.

Next steps and resources

In 2011, a series of eight small exhibitions using objects from all four collections will tour around the Grosvenor Museum, Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse and Norton Priory, and a larger show is being considered for Nantwich Museum.

The exhibitions will be accompanied by a booklet and object and learning resource boxes. They will also feature information from external partners that were approached over the course of the review including the local record offices, Chester Cathedral and local churches. The booklet and the box will have a legacy beyond the touring exhibition as useful shared resources.

One of the key outcomes of the review is that it supported the development of curatorial knowledge of the staff responsible for the medieval collections. They were able to identify clear links between the collections and share information across sites to benefit other members of staff, researchers and visitors.

The medieval collections are being rationalised and rearranged in storage so that the most significant and most used parts are stored close to hand, whilst important, but less well used remains are stored in off-site stores. This has freed-up space in the stores for new archives to be shelved, and eased access for researchers to work on collections.

Working together on this review project has encouraged curators to forge strong partnership links with other museums and organisations in the region and it will surely be the stepping stone for future collaborative work.

Elizabeth Royles, Keeper of Early History, Grosvenor Museum

“This review was invaluable in ‘getting to know’ our medieval collections and how to make the most from them. We’re excited about the possibilities of working in partnership on a number of projects over the next couple of years and to make our material much more accessible to the public.”

Matt Wheeler,
Weaver Hall Museum



“The expertise provided by Dr Andrew White has enhanced our knowledge of the medieval items in our collection. Working in partnership with the other museums to produce touring exhibitions and a publication means that public access to the collections is greatly improved and the artefacts can be interpreted in new and exciting ways.”

Ann Wheeler, Nantwich Museum



Case Study 2

Garstang Egyptology Review



Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery – Claire Wood

“Collaborating with the School of Egyptology at Liverpool allowed for the academic skills and knowledge of the university students and staff, and the practical museum skills of the curators to be used together. The documentation work, and subsequent exhibition would not be the quality it is without the two working in partnership.”

Vinai Solanki,
Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery

The North West region is one of the richest in Britain for collections of ancient Egyptian material in public museums. Some of these collections are of international importance and have specialist Egyptological curatorial staff. However other collections, of national significance, do not have specialist staff. This is not to say that these museums have a reluctance to use their collections, as there is a real enthusiasm from staff at regional museums to develop the use of their Egyptological collections.

Who was Garstang?

One of the key aims of the Garstang Review was to establish sustainable links of knowledge transfer between the Egyptological expertise at Liverpool University and regional Egyptology collections in the North West. Liverpool University is particularly relevant because a significant portion of Egyptian material in the North West comes from the excavations of John Garstang who excavated for Liverpool University in Egypt and the Sudan from 1900 until the First World War. The dispersal of this material included significant gifts to local museums, although usually with little documentation. Fortunately Garstang’s original excavation records (including an important photographic archive) are housed at the Garstang Museum of Archaeology in Liverpool University.

For the Garstang review, Blackburn Museum, Kendal Museum and Towneley Hall Museum Burnley were identified because they were known to hold Egyptology collections derived from Garstang’s excavations.

The methodology

Three postgraduate Egyptology students each worked with a museum to go through the collection and reconcile the objects and records with the documentation at the Garstang Museum. In addition, the students were able to make further identifications of significant Egyptian objects held in each museum.

Each of the postgraduates had existing personal connections with the three towns. This provided an additional emphasis to an important aspect of the review, which was to reveal the local histories of the acquisition of these collections, especially given their links to significant local figures and industries from the early 20th century.

Touring exhibition

In addition to the improved documentation of these collections, and current plans for enhanced permanent displays and educational projects, the public outcome of this review will be a touring exhibition of material from each of the four participating museums. The exhibition will focus on the links between the museums, Garstang’s fieldwork and Egyptological themes. It will tour across the four museums in 2011-2012, after which it will be made available to other museums as a means of income generation for the museums.

Dr Stephen Snape, Senior Lecturer, Garstang Museum of Archaeology



Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery – Claire Wood

“The Egyptology review has allowed more knowledge to go into the school loan boxes programme, provide more information on the provenance of the objects and allow a re-interpretation and re-exhibit of the permanent gallery.”

Vinai Solanki, Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery



Case Study 3

Greater Manchester Museums Furniture Review

“Why not throw this out and buy a better example?’ was a common question from the reviewer. Another, especially with reference to sets of chairs was ‘why keep so many of these?’ This challenge to a traditional museum way of working was really useful and I think both parties learnt to appreciate the other’s motives!”

Sean Baggaley, Gallery Oldham



Astley Hall – Claire Wood

“The furniture review enabled us to tackle an area of the collection that we previously knew very little about. We discovered that we have some real gems in the collection, as well as some items that could realistically be disposed of which will create much needed storage space for other objects.”

Rachel Cornes,
Tameside Museums & Galleries

Furniture collections are an area that have a common set of issues – they take up a large amount of storage space and are cared for by staff with no specialist knowledge. The museums involved in the furniture review were Blackburn Museum and Turton Tower, Astley Hall, Gallery Oldham, Tameside Museums and Touchstones Rochdale. Initial aims for the review were that it would allow for recognition and increased knowledge of the “good stuff” which would lead to increased access and use. We also might gain advice about what to do with some items that could be described as the “bad stuff”.

Discussion and methodology

An initial furniture audit of the museums was carried out and the results were discussed openly at a meeting in December 2009. Each institution outlined their collection in terms of numbers and dates of items. We also discussed how each collection was documented and stored and how, if at all, it appeared in their collecting policies. On a pragmatic level, we discussed why some very everyday items were of interest to our boroughs if they were poorly made and low status items.

Oldham’s collection is fairly typical of a local authority museum collection. The collection had:

- ★ roughly 100 items in total, comprising mainly of chairs
- ★ a small number of ‘old favourites’ that had been used in several exhibitions
- ★ a majority of objects that had not been displayed in over five years
- ★ accessioned objects including the desk used by a local mill owner
- ★ unaccessioned items including furniture from a local chapel and a set of chairs from Oldham Town Hall
- ★ everything numbered either on our database or on a temporary inventory
- ★ no objects photographed
- ★ the items stored in two basement stores with less than perfect environmental conditions
- ★ one store that was very full, so several objects had to be moved to allow access to others.

The next stage in the process was a training day for curators in February 2010. This was run by the two experts who had been appointed to act as reviewers: Adam Bowett, a furniture historian and Simon Feingold, a furniture restorer. The training covered the identification of furniture construction methods and types of wood. It was a really illuminating day that certainly gave me more confidence in describing Oldham’s collections.

Simon and Adam made three visits to Oldham’s stores and made a thorough record of our furniture collection using a grading system to indicate the condition and importance of each item.

Next steps

Looking ahead, the next stage of the review will be to add the new information about these objects to the database records. Several inventoried items were identified during this process and re-united with their original number. Others, such as a carved African chair had previously been incorrectly identified.

We will also use the review to make final decisions about the retention of unaccessioned items in the stores. The partnership element of this review is crucial in this process as Oldham will be acting with full knowledge of what is held in neighbouring collections. The result for us should be a core collection about which we are better informed and therefore more likely to make use of in forthcoming displays.

Sean Baggaley, Curator of Social History, Gallery Oldham



Case Study 4

Historic Houses Review

“It gave us the opportunity to take a step back and begin asking questions as to where we start in terms of identifying new ways to display objects that are currently in closed storage in the period rooms and art gallery.”

Louise McCall, Astley Hall



Astley Hall – Claire Wood



Astley Hall – Claire Wood

This review was identified as part of a wider initiative across local authority managed historic houses in Lancashire and Greater Manchester to engage senior officers within the councils to make more of these historically significant, yet under-resourced assets. The two properties that participated in the review were Astley Hall in Chorley and Turton Tower near Bolton.

The methodology was more complex from that of a straight forward collections review because a historic house is comprised of a collection, the building itself and the grounds in which it sits. However, this unique set of strengths flag up particular issues, such as:

- ★ the buildings were constructed and changed over time
- ★ the furnishings are from different periods and reflect the tastes of different inhabitants
- ★ the contents are not always contemporary with the building
- ★ some items in the collection do not have strong links to their associated families or story
- ★ both properties have constraints imposed on them by the nature of the buildings
- ★ telling a coherent story within the interpretation

Two reviewers were contracted to carry out the project. Sara Burdett, a freelance curator, examined the house and collections and James Riley, a landscape architect and historian, researched the grounds.

Report findings

Sara’s report provided an overview of the most significant collections in terms of quality, period and integrity within the context of the building. She also gave recommendations for display and storage, as well as room by room suggestions regarding interpretation and preventative conservation. Many of the recommendations are pragmatic, relatively small scale and therefore easy to implement. Astley Hall and Turton Tower also participated in the Greater Manchester furniture review which added depth to Sara’s report to help curators make informed decisions about how to use the collections to maximise their potential.

For the landscape element of the review, James carried out research into what the grounds would have looked like at various points in history. He provided short and long term recommendations on how to improve the gardens and the types of flowers and shrubs that should be planted.

What we learned

There were significant learning points that came out of this historic house review. For example, Astley Hall and Turton Tower are not contemporary properties which may limit the level of collaboration that can be undertaken. The review took place over the summer months which is high season for the properties and therefore added pressure to staff time and availability. Lastly, the report on the grounds and gardens may have benefited from being observed over a longer period so that the reviewer could see them in all seasons.

The main benefit of having done the review in partnership is that we were able to stretch relatively discreet funding across two sites. There is also the potential to apply for funding to work on the improvements together and potentially allow for a bigger project to take place. We were also able to share knowledge and understand the limitations and challenges that are specific to historic houses. Both properties are already showing signs of improvements and changes to their rooms and have plans in place to implement more of the review recommendations in 2011. Turton Tower has already been successful in applying for a grant from the Big Lottery Community Wildlife Fund to support some of the key gardening work that has been highlighted, and they are continuing to work with James to implement further recommendations.

Fiona Jenkins, Turton Tower



Case Study 5

Natural Science Review



Stockport Heritage Services – Claire Wood

The review of the natural history collections at the five museums is part of a wider strategy to improve the profile, use, and understanding of natural history collections across the North West. The Beacon in Whitehaven, Penrith and Eden Museum, Keswick Museum, Stockport Museum Service and Touchstones, Rochdale were chosen for the review because they have reasonably large collections, but no natural science curator.

The overall objective was to find ways that the museums could work together to increase understanding about the collections, and to give guidance on the storage, use, and scientific and cultural value of the material held. While responsible disposals would be recommended through the process where appropriate, this was not a project driven by a desire to rationalise collections.

The methodology

Two subject specialist reviewers were brought in, Lucy Muir looked at the biological collections and Steve Garland looked at the geological collections. The process identified numerous collections at all venues that were connected to local collectors and societies. This socio-cultural link between natural history collections



Stockport Heritage Services – Claire Wood

and communities is a key area for museums to explore because it allows for the increased use and interpretation of natural history material without the input of specialist scientific staff. The review process found much of interest, including a previously unknown species of fossil sponge at Keswick. This specimen is now on loan to a specialist researcher for future description and publication.

With the initial review completed, the institutions are now looking at implementing the recommendations. This work will be done with the aid of a Museums Association Effective Collections grant. It includes approaching local amateur societies, nature reserves,

and more national specialist groups to provide support to the collections through partnership working. Specialist curation is relatively expensive, but if productive relationships can be established with volunteers, then for a small amount of training the documentation of these collections can be improved significantly.

The benefits of collaboration

By conducting this review in partnership, with two distinct regional sub-groups (Cumbria, and Greater Manchester), common ground in the collections is more easily identified and joint ways of working can be pursued. For example, joint events, exhibitions, and on-line displays are being discussed. The museums are also interested in using and interpreting these collections to engage visitors with environmental issues. It is hoped that a renewed focus on local ecology will be attractive to local authorities, as it meets numerous council agendas.

One advantage through joint working is a saving on the costs of interpretative materials, and the possibility of uniting disparate collections that may have historic connections. This approach also means if one museum's collection has limited highlights, you can expand on the range of material in a display through loans within the partnership.

The educational potential of natural history material is extensive, and the five partners are looking to bring in a specialist educator to help develop learning resources for all the venues. By taking a partnership approach, the overall workload is reduced, and the costs to each venue come down.

We can see that by taking this partnership approach as opposed to disparate reviews, the institutions gain many benefits. It is a model that other venues can look to in the future.

“The review has brought about interesting ideas regarding displays and exhibitions. Looking at the collection in a different angle.”

Charlotte Stead,
The Beacon, Whitehaven

David Craven,
Development Officer: Natural Science Renaissance North West

Conclusion

There is high demand from regional museums to undertake more collection reviews. As pressure on the expense and limited space of museum stores increases and resources decrease, it is more important than ever for museums to be open to new ways of working and to have a regional approach to collections.

This publication is a snap shot of the progress so far on some of the regional collection reviews initiated with the support of Renaissance North West. Collection review is a detailed and thorough process with no quick wins and the work is on-going for all these projects.

With many museums adopting a more pragmatic approach to sustainable collections management, the notion of disposal is becoming increasingly accepted. Curators now recognise the need to be rational, yet critical, in assessing collections and responsible disposal is therefore becoming a more realistic proposal.

Though this Renaissance programme of collection review has come to an end, it is envisaged that museums will start to come together to share practice, lessons learned and discuss not only their holdings but potential transfers. It is hoped that this programme will have laid the foundations for crucial partnerships and reviews. It is also hoped that these reviews will ensure that key collections are safeguarded for future generations and continued research and investment in the collections knowledge of regional museums is prioritised.

“What would happen if several museums are trying to dispose of similar objects? [...] More collaborative collection reviews would be useful [...] That way, a good overview of collections in the region could be obtained, identifying the strengths and weaknesses in various museums. This would make it easier to understand how the regions collections related to each other and facilitate decisions regarding disposal, and actually taking action.”

Yvonne Webb, Museum of Wigan Life

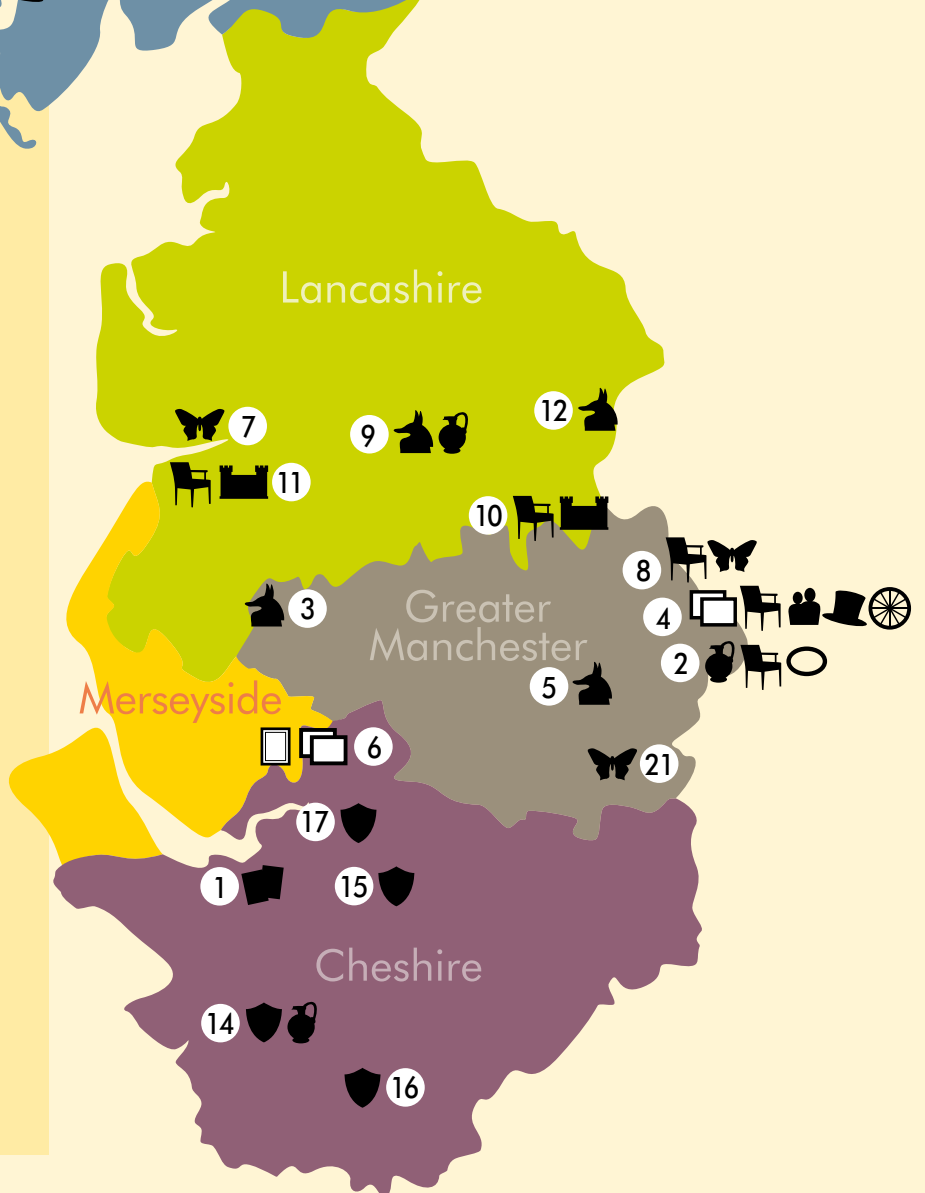


Collection reviews in North West

KEY

-  Archives
-  Costume
-  Egyptian
-  Fine Art
-  Furniture
-  Historic Houses
-  Medieval Archaeology
-  Memorial plaques
-  Natural Science
-  Prints
-  Roman archaeology
-  Social History
-  Textile Machinery

- 1 National Waterways Museum, Ellesmere Port
- 2 Tameside Museum Service
- 3 Museum of Wigan Life
- 4 Gallery Oldham
- 5 Salford Museum & Art Gallery
- 6 Warrington Museum & Art Gallery
- 7 Lancashire County Museums Service
- 8 Touchstones, Rochdale
- 9 Blackburn Museum & Art Gallery
- 10 Turton Tower, near Bolton
- 11 Astley Hall, Chorley
- 12 Towneley Hall, Burnley
- 13 Kendal Museum
- 14 Grosvenor Museum, Chester
- 15 Weaver Hall Museum, Northwich
- 16 Nantwich Museum
- 17 Norton Priory, Runcorn
- 18 The Beacon, Whitehaven
- 19 Penrith & Eden Museum
- 20 Keswick Museum
- 21 Stockport Heritage Services
- 22 Senhouse Roman Museum, Maryport
- 23 Millom Folk Museum



Acknowledgements

Renaissance North West would like to thank all the, curators, museums and specialist reviewers that have been involved in the collections reviews over the last four years.

Further information

For more information about collection reviews visit:

www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice

www.collectionslink.org.uk

www.renaissancenw.org.uk

Renaissance North West also produced a methodology for collection review in a publication called What's in Store?

For a copy please contact 0161 235 8825

Museums for changing lives

Renaissance in the Regions is the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's (MLA) national £300 million programme to transform England's regional museums. For the first time ever, investment from central government is helping regional museums across the country to raise their standards and deliver real results in support of education, learning, community development and economic regeneration. Renaissance is helping museums to meet people's needs and to change people's lives.

www.mla.gov.uk

Published by Renaissance North West 2011