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Abstract


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This study explores changing approaches to curatorial practice and curatorial knowledge in UK museums from 1960 to 2001. It makes an original contribution to the history of museums, exploring an under-researched period and part of the sector, and to the museum studies literature more broadly by providing insight into how change in museums has been generated and negotiated.

The study considers how changes in museum provision and practice over the previous forty years gave rise to ongoing concerns about the adequacy of curatorial provision, even while museums expanded and their resourcing improved. It demonstrates that change in museums was driven by a complex combination of factors, with changing political and economic circumstances shaping change alongside an expanding range of professional support mechanisms. It demonstrates how individual curators shaped change through influencing broader developments and through their professional relationships. The study considers the changing relationship between curators and audiences and explores how changing understandings of the nature of expertise and of the communication process began to be manifest in museums’ exhibitions and displays.

The study examines staffing levels in a group of major regional museums, demonstrating the increasingly complex nature of museums as institutions, with growing numbers of other staff coming to work alongside curators, who lost their overall numerical dominance during the period under review. It identifies a very significant expansion in staff numbers between 1960 and the mid-1990s, followed by some loss of provision towards the turn of the millennium. The study concludes that attempts to address this decline must be rooted in a fuller understanding of how change has been generated in museums.
Acknowledgements

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Because this study grew out of fifteen years work in the museum sector, it owes much to present and former colleagues. The people I worked alongside in museums, and the much wider group of people I was fortunate enough to meet through my work for the Museums Association, shaped this study before it even began through their practice and ideas. Once it was underway, many busy people gave their time to be interviewed formally. They are listed in Appendix 1, but I must record my thanks here. Cindy Howells, Georgie Stagg, Mark Taylor, and the late Philip Doughty helped with ideas, contacts and archives. I also benefitted from dozens of informal discussions at conferences and over coffee, and owe much to the generosity of all the individuals who indulged my habit of turning every museum-related conversation towards the recent past. I must particularly thank Caitlin Griffiths, Lucy Shaw and Maurice Davies, exceptionally thoughtful and generous colleagues.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAM</td>
<td>American Association of Museums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIM</td>
<td>Association of Independent Museums</td>
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<td>AMA</td>
<td>Associateship of the Museums Association</td>
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<td>AMC</td>
<td>Area Museum Council</td>
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<td>AMSEE</td>
<td>Area Museum Council for South Eastern England</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCT</td>
<td>Compulsory Competitive Tendering</td>
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<tr>
<td>CoPUS</td>
<td>Committee for the Public Understanding of Science</td>
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<td>CUKT</td>
<td>Carnegie United Kingdom Trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCG</td>
<td>Geological Curators’ Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCTSM</td>
<td>Group for Costumes and Textiles in Museums</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLLAM</td>
<td>Group for Larger Local Authority Museums</td>
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<tr>
<td>GRSM</td>
<td>Group for Regional Studies in Museums (later SHCG)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HLF</td>
<td>Heritage Lottery Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRGMA</td>
<td>Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (also used for the early documentation system the group developed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCP</td>
<td>Job Creation Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Museums Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAG</td>
<td>Museum Assistants’ Group (later MPG)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDA</td>
<td>Museums Documentation Association (later The Collections Trust)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGC</td>
<td>Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC replaced SCMG, and would itself be superseded by Resource, later MLA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLA</td>
<td>Museums, Libraries and Archives Council</td>
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<td>MPG</td>
<td>Museum Professionals’ Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSC</td>
<td>Manpower Services Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTI</td>
<td>Museum Training Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>NHM</td>
<td>Natural History Museum, London</td>
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<td>NMAS</td>
<td>Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVQ</td>
<td>National Vocational Qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCMG</td>
<td>Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries (replaced by MGC in 1981)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SHCG</td>
<td>Social History Curators’ Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHIC</td>
<td>Social History and Industrial Classification</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMA</td>
<td>Society of Museum Archaeologists</td>
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<tr>
<td>V&amp;A</td>
<td>Victoria and Albert Museum</td>
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<td>WMRC</td>
<td>West Midlands Regional Museums Council</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Forty years of concern

In 2001, a government-appointed taskforce produced a major report on the state of English regional museums, *Renaissance in the Regions: a new vision for England’s Museums*. The report successfully made a case for additional funding, based on the arguments that there was a significant ‘lack of capacity’ in local authority funded regional museums, that staff numbers were falling and that there was a particular decline in the number of ‘specialist curatorial posts’.

Concern about the state of regional museums and levels of curatorial provision was not new. In 1960, the government commissioned a review of local museums and galleries, in response to perceptions that they were ‘the part of the arts field where criticisms can most rightly be made’ and ‘the “Cinderella Group” in the family of arts’. The resulting report argued that too many museums lacked a full-time curator or were managed jointly with a local library service, that there was a shortage of suitable candidates to fill vacant curatorial posts and that salaries were too low to attract and retain good staff.

This study considers the changing nature of museums and of curatorial practice during the period bracketed by these reports. During these four decades, people who worked in museums organised and campaigned to bring about substantial change, but the sense that curatorial provision was inadequate persisted in spite of this. In 1973, a

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5 The report, formally titled, *Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries*, was informally known as the Rosse Report and is discussed at more length in Chapter 3.
government-commissioned report on the future of regional museums concluded that museums needed at least one third more curators than they currently had to meet their current commitments and twice as many if they were to ‘carry out developments already approved and those considered to be desirable’.\(^6\) In a report on the state of museum geology published in 1981, Philip Doughty argued that a lack of investment in the discipline had left it facing:

> A situation of disorder, neglect, mismanagement and decay on an unsuspected scale, with a mere handful of curators lacking any formal professional cohesion, struggling, generally ineffectually, in the face of impossible odds. \(^7\)

These specific concerns about the state of curatorship in regional museums related to a perception that collections and curatorial work were undervalued in museums more broadly. In 1989, Nicholas Penny, now Director of the National Gallery and then a curator there, argued:

> To attract support today, a great museum, whether of art, archaeology, ethnography or natural history, would be ill advised to draw attention to its extensive collection of specimens…They have to present themselves as exciting places to shop, with didactic but fun videos, and glamorous displays of popular masterpieces (preferably on temporary loan). They are being forced to regard themselves as a part of the entertainment industry. \(^8\)

An editorial in *Museum Management and Curatorship* in 1993 saw the problems of curatorship as common to the UK, the USA and Europe, and arising from museums’ shifting orientation towards their visitors:

> There has been a marked decline in the numbers of scholar-curators in whom is vested the vital role of understanding collections in context and of interpreting


them accordingly. The choices being made recently in order to allocate resources intended to increase visitor numbers and to place a greater emphasis on education and visitor services have led to a progressive loss of curatorial posts as research and museum-based scholarship was being down-graded.9

Within this broader concern for the status of collections and of curatorship, there was a particular strand of anxiety about curatorial knowledge and expertise. Research commissioned by the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) in 1998 found ‘a widespread perception that research and scholarship as museum activities are under threat.’10 The authors’ literature review identified more than 130 articles or reports on museum research and scholarship published between 1978 and 1998.11 MGC had reported on the state of national museums in 1988 and concluded that that scholarship was ‘under threat’ in these museums.12 It reviewed local authority museums in 1991 and argued that expertise in these museums was a subject of ‘legitimate concern’.13 In a well-known polemic, published in 1987, Robert Hewison had argued that museums were devaluing academic expertise, and that a lack of intellectual rigour in museums stemmed from the new commercial imperatives which forced them to emphasise pleasure and profit so that ‘as the marketing managers of the heritage industry get into full swing, the goods that we are being offered become more and more spurious.’14

Why was the status of collections, of curatorship and of curatorial knowledge in museums so often the subject of concern in this period? And why did those concerns persist even as the sector underwent radical change? This study aims to answer these questions, by exploring the way that change in museum practice was negotiated.

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11 *Lifting the Veil*, p.10.
1.2 The origins of the study

This study was motivated and shaped by my previous work in the museum sector. Between 2001 and 2009, I worked for the UK Museums Association (MA) and was involved in projects which sought to shape future approaches to collections and collections knowledge. I initiated and wrote the MA’s 2005 report, *Collections for the Future*, which aimed to ‘ensure that more people have more opportunities to engage with museum collections’\(^{15}\) and emphasised the need to invest in collections and in curatorial provision. I was involved in developing and running the Monument Fellowships, a programme run by the MA and funded by the Monument Trust which promoted knowledge-sharing by recently retired collections specialists, and wrote a guide to sharing collections knowledge for the MA.\(^{16}\) While I was working on these initiatives, I heard again and again from curators and other people who worked in museums a concern that curatorial expertise was under threat and was no longer sufficiently valued. A common anecdotal account suggested that there had once been much better curatorial provision in the UK’s museums but that changing priorities and reduced funding had meant that there were many fewer curators working in museums and that those curators who remained in post had fewer opportunities to develop and share real expertise about the collections in their care. The experience of working with the Monument Fellows seemed to bear out a sense that curatorial provision was declining: the Fellows were in most cases curators who had been in their posts for many years, but had been rarely been directly replaced on retirement. The germ of the idea for this study was a desire to interrogate that anecdotal account, to determine whether curatorial provision was being drastically scaled back, and to investigate how approaches to museum practice and staffing had changed more broadly in the sector.


1.3 Defining the research questions

This study, then, began life in an aspiration to investigate the veracity of a folk memory: the notion that curatorship and curatorial expertise had fallen from a golden age and were being devalued in museums at the end of the last millennium. As my research progressed, its focus broadened so that the final study is concerned not so much with the veracity of that memory as with the broader processes of change, the backdrop against which those memories emerged, and which they may have helped to shape.

Thus my primary research aim in this study has been to investigate what forces drove change in the UK regional museum sector between 1960 and 2001 and to consider the nature of the change that they produced. I set out to understand how changing currents in museums’ professional, political and social and intellectual contexts have moulded the work of curators and to interrogate the way that individuals have both effected and responded to change. The origins of my interest in this topic have found an echo in the finished version of my study, in that a subsidiary aim of my research has been to build an understanding of the way in which the anecdotal narrative of decline related to these processes of change and to understand how a sense of crisis and loss played a part in this process.

A further important subsidiary question concerns the nature of knowledge and authority in museums. The study explores how people have thought about knowledge, what different kinds of knowledge have been valued and how that knowledge has been produced and shared in museums. It seeks to explore how museum practice changed in response to changing understandings of the nature of learning, teaching, authority and expertise.

In conclusion, the thesis offers some reflections on the future direction of the museum sector, following a period of severe cuts and funding pressure. How can the changing nature of curatorship between 1960 and 2001, and the way that change was effected, inform our understanding of the future direction of the sector?

1.4 Scope of the study

This study offers a series of small-scale histories of particular movements, developments and working lives which help to illuminate the nature of change in museums and in the work of curators. It is informed by social constructionism, in that it
seeks to understand museums, disciplines and knowledge within museums as phenomena shaped by the agency of individuals.\textsuperscript{17} 

The study has been constructed using focused histories of particular parts of the UK museum sector between 1960 and 2001. However, both date and geographical range are subject to some qualification and explanation, and the key terms ‘curator’ and ‘museum’ require definition.

This study formally starts in 1960, with the commissioning of the \textit{Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries} (known as the Rosse Report), fifteen years after the end of World War II. In many ways it is a post-war study: the war was still casting a shadow over museums in the early years of the study. Physical rebuilding was far from complete: the Rosse Report noted that there were plans for building and reorganisation in more than a hundred museums, often in response to war damage, and that some of the most important of these still had no starting date.\textsuperscript{18} War damage was still seen as an impediment to development in the mid-1960s\textsuperscript{19} and collections which had been hastily evacuated were still being unpacked and catalogued.\textsuperscript{20} Thus, the expansion in the museums sector, and in the museum workforce, that began in the 1960s needs to be understood as part of an ongoing process of post-war renewal.

I chose to end this study in 2001 because this marks a watershed for English regional museums. The work which led to the publication of the \textit{Renaissance in the Regions} report began in 2000 and the report was published in 2001. This report, the latest in a

\begin{enumerate}
\item[18] \textit{Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries}, p.45.
\item[19] See for example, SCMG, \textit{Seventh Report of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, 1961-1964} (London: HMSO: 1964). The report noted that the national museums still had war damage to repair and a considerable pre-war building backlog: ‘all this must be cleared before the institutions can develop as they should’. (p.2).
\end{enumerate}
long line of attempts to reform the regional museum sector, succeeded more substantially than its predecessors in generating significant additional funds for non-national museums. It is too soon to make an informed assessment of the long-term impact of the Renaissance programme and so it makes sense to end the period of the study with the publication of *Renaissance in the Regions*. The policies of the Labour Government, which came to power in 1997 with an appetite for a more interventionist and instrumentalist approach to the arts and culture, were only just beginning to be felt in the broader museum sector by 2001 and although the study takes some account of these emerging policy directions, a full assessment of their impact is also outside the scope of the study.

For the most part this study considers the whole of the UK, but policy affecting museums has not always had UK-wide applicability, a situation further complicated by devolution of some powers to administrations in Scotland and Wales in 1998. Some of the developments this study considers, such as the changes brought about by local government reform in 1974 and the recommendations of *Renaissance in the Regions*, were specific to England. The study does not take account of policy developments which affected only Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. But throughout this period, many aspects of museum development and professionalisation applied across the UK. The study’s boundaries are necessarily flexible, looking at the UK where appropriate and England only where necessary. It also draws on international writing about museum practice, particularly in the USA, where it can be shown to have had a direct influence on the development of UK practice.

The meaning of the term ‘curator’ is context-specific. At the start of the period under review, in most smaller museums, the curator was simply the person responsible for running the museum. In larger museums, and increasingly in mid-size museums as the museum workforce became more specialised, a ‘curator’ was someone with particular responsibility for collections. In national museums, curators were seen as regarding themselves as ‘part of the university-orientated academic tradition’ and asserting ‘the paramountcy of the academic over the professional interest’. This would be reinforced with the introduction of complementary ‘collections managers’ in some national museums. The establishment of a large number of voluntary-sector, ‘independent’

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museums during the period under review complicated the picture still further; run by a
diverse group of entrepreneurs and amateur enthusiasts, as well as professional curators,
independent museums would come to challenge a professional hegemony centred on the
concerns of those working in larger, publicly-funded museums.

In the sense of someone who cares for collections, ‘curator’ has had various synonyms
or close synonyms: ‘keeper’\textsuperscript{22} and ‘collections officer’, for example. ‘Museum
Assistants’ sometimes did the same work as ‘Assistant Curators’ although the
terminology implies a slightly lower status. In the immediate post-war period, ‘curators’
in charge of running museums with more than one ‘professional’ staff member were
often retitled ‘director’\textsuperscript{23} but these directors often retained substantial curatorial
responsibility alongside the managerial responsibility reflected in their job title. This
study aims to pay due regard to these complexities of nomenclature.

This study aims to isolate the factors behind the fears of decline which animated
\textit{Renaissance in the Regions}, rather than attempt a historical overview of the sector.
Accordingly it focuses on the museums which were the subject of that report: the larger
local authority and larger independent museums. However, it also considers some
particular episodes in national museums, which illuminate changing expectations of
curatorial practice and which are relevant to understanding the processes of change in
the sector as a whole. To understand the processes of change and the emergence of the
narrative of decline, I have focused on two contrasting disciplines whose practitioners
were active in debating the state of curatorship and in negotiating change: geology and
social history. That is not to say that practitioners in other disciplines were not also
engaged in the process of change, but much change was discipline-specific and it was

\textsuperscript{22} Confusingly, in some museums those who focused on collections were ‘keepers’ and the ‘curator’ was
the Director. The term ‘keeper’ was also used as a mark of status for senior, non-curatorial posts. For
example, the Manchester Museum appointed a Keeper of Conservation and a Keeper of Display in the
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p.142. Morgan notes that ‘curator’ has recently been
used in the same way at the redeveloped Kelvingrove: ‘curator of visitor services’, etc. Jennie Morgan,
\textit{Change and Everyday Practice at the Museum: an Ethnographic Study} (University of Manchester, Phd

\textsuperscript{23} D.A Allan, D.E Owen and F.S. Wallis, \textit{Administration. Handbook for Museum Curators, Part A, Section1}
necessary to limit the study’s focus. The two disciplines also provide a helpful contrast: social history was a new discipline, being forged in the museum sector, whereas geology was a much older discipline and had better established links to universities and other external bodies.

The processes of professionalisation are an important element in the developments which this study aims to document. From the late nineteenth century onwards, there has been a debate about whether museum work is, in fact, a profession.\(^{24}\) Chapter 2 situates this debate in the context of sociological studies of professions and professionalism. However, both those who are comfortable with the notion of museum work or curatorship as professions and those who reject it would acknowledge that there has been an aspiration towards professionalisation in museums, and that this has had a significant impact on their work. Julia Evetts has argued that while ‘definitional precision’ was especially characteristic of writing on the professions from the 1950s and 1960s, it was a ‘timewasting diversion’.\(^ {25}\) For Evetts, a more important task is to seek to understand the ‘appeal of the discourse of professionalism in all occupations’:\(^ {26}\) what matters is not so much what a profession, a professional or professionalism is, but understanding why so many people aspire to professional status and professional behaviour. Everett Hughes wrote of his seminal study of real estate agents:

I started the study with the idea of finding out an answer to this familiar question, ‘Are these men professionals?’ It was a false question, for the concept

\(^{24}\) For an overview of the debate from the 1980s, see Neil Cossons, ‘A New Professionalism’ Museums Journal Vol.82, Conference Proceedings Supplement, 1-2. Dismantling any monolithic understanding of a museum profession has been an active policy of the Museums Association for at least fifteen years (as exemplified by the changes to the AMA, discussed further in Chapter 5): the Museums Association’s antipathy towards this narrow notion of professionalism has stemmed from a desire to acknowledge the professionalism of people working in many other roles within museums, and to bring a wide range of staff into membership. Mark O’Neill is among those who express distaste for the notion of a museum ‘profession’ seeing it as unnecessarily narrow and limiting. (Interview with the author, 2 July 2012).


\(^ {26}\) Ibid.
‘profession’ in our society is not so much a descriptive term as one of value and prestige.\textsuperscript{27}

Hughes describes how his research came to focus on the question of ‘the circumstances in which the people in an occupation attempt to turn it into a profession and themselves into professional people.’\textsuperscript{28} Following Hughes and Evetts, I am interested not so much in whether museum work is a profession, but why professionalisation mattered to people who worked in museums. Where it avoids clumsy circumlocution, I use the term ‘museum profession’ but it is intended as a descriptive term, free from associations of ‘prestige’. It is also sometimes helpful to be able to refer to a museum’s ‘professional staff’ as distinct from people involved in cleaning, security and building maintenance, for example, but this should not be seen as discounting their contribution to the work of a museum.

\textbf{1.5 Methods}

This study is based on archival research and oral history interviews. Documentary sources included contemporary reports, professional journals and newsletters, and early museum studies literature (which I treated as a primary source).\textsuperscript{29} I also reviewed a large collection of more informal, ‘grey’ literature produced by museums and museum-sector organisations during the period under review.\textsuperscript{30} I used the archives of the Association of Independent Museums and the Geological Curators’ Group, and was also given informal access to primary source material by a number of my interviewees, who still held personal files of contemporary documents.

\textsuperscript{27} Everett Hughes, \textit{Men and Their Work} (London: Collier Macmillan, 1964; first published 1958), p.44.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p.45.
\textsuperscript{29} In my interviews with practitioners, I asked interviewees to identify books which were particularly influential on their work and used these to better understand the intellectual climate of the period. Museum studies texts included Donald Horne, \textit{The Great Museum: the Re-presentation of History} (London: Pluto Press, 1984) and Thomas Schlereth (ed.) \textit{Material Culture Studies in America} (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).
\textsuperscript{30} In terms of archive material, I have made extensive use of the Museum Documentation Collection (MDC) in the University of Leicester Library. This is made up of material collected by the School of Museum Studies, primarily in the 1960s -1980s and consists of publications and grey literature supplied to the school by museums and museum services. This material has been little used by researchers. It has offered insights into the plans and priorities of museums in the period under review.
I conducted 18 interviews with people who were influential in the museum sector in different ways in the period under review and whose experience serves to illuminate the themes of the study. The interviews served to enrich and complicate the picture which emerged from my documentary research. A full list of interviewees and interview dates is given in Appendix 1. I selected potential interviewees from three categories. In the first category were individuals whose working lives could illuminate the broad processes of change in the sector, because of their association with a particular organisation or significant development. Some of these interviewees also had a particular interest in the processes of change and professionalisation and had written about this area themselves. The other two categories were discipline-specific and focused on people associated with developments in geology and social history. There was some overlap between the first category and the discipline-specific categories: some of the geologists and social historians would also have found a place on the list of people who had been involved in broader developments in the sector.

My interviews followed an oral history paradigm, with interviewees selected for their personal experience and insight.\textsuperscript{31} Lummis cautions that such interviews always lack the ‘random quality required for formal statistical validity’ and that experiences recounted should never be assumed to be typical or representative.\textsuperscript{32} I treat their accounts as ‘life histories’, constructed narratives which nevertheless enrich and expand evidence from documentary sources.\textsuperscript{33} My interviewees were deliberately chosen as significant actors in the sector, as agents of change or people with specific insight into change. Seldon and Pappworth provide helpful guidance on the ways in which oral history interviews with those who have shaped events can be used to build historical accounts.\textsuperscript{34} They argue that, while interviews have to be treated with caution in building an accounts of events, the information gleaned from them being susceptible to

\textsuperscript{32} Lummis, ‘Structure and validity’, p.273.
\textsuperscript{33} For a full discussion of the applicability of this approach to museum history, see Jonathan Paquette ‘Storytelling, organizations, and the coherent self: The chronotope of childhood in professional life histories’, \textit{Culture and Organization}, vol. 19, no. 2, (2013), 146-161.
\textsuperscript{34} Anthony Seldon and Joanna Pappworth, \textit{By Word of Mouth: ‘Elite’ oral history}, (Methuen, London and New York, 1983).
distortion by the unreliability of memory and various problems of perspective and bias, interviews do offer valuable insight into personalities and relationships, as well as the opportunity to explore the processes through which decisions were taken. They conclude that the opportunity to interview people ‘about whom one is writing is often challenging and deeply engaging, always stretching, and it is hoped, will result in a more responsible, vivid and truthful account.’ My interviews did indeed shed light on personalities, relationships and the processes of change; sometimes that insight emerged because of, rather than in spite of, the way in which interviewees’ accounts differed depending on individuals’ perspectives.

My interviews were unstructured and lasted between one and three hours. They were based on an individually tailored list of questions, which I showed to the interviewees in advance, if requested. The interviews were inevitably shaped and coloured by my position and background, my role in the museum sector and by my previous work on this subject area. I knew the majority of my interviewees personally, some well and some less well; others knew of me from my work at the MA. While I deliberately chose not to interview formally anyone who had been a close colleague, my previous relationships with my interviewees and my own professional biography inevitably complicated and coloured the experience and content of the interviews, giving my study something of the character of ‘insider research’. Although insider research typically refers to a situation in which researchers are carrying out research in an institution where they are also employees, the concept is also pertinent to my study of a sector in which I had worked.

Mercer offers a useful review of the literature on the difficulties and advantages of this kind of research. She observes that insider/outsider are not binary positions when researchers are working on topics related to their own professional field, but instead are situated on a continuum. They are also fluid. Researchers may move more ‘inside’ or more ‘outside’ during the course of an interview depending on the topic under review. This was certainly the case in my interviews. The same interview might cover projects or developments towards the end of the period, with which I had been personally

37 Ibid.
involved, cover other events which I had read about but in which I had no direct involvement, and describe events and processes with which I was totally unfamiliar. Discussion of the role of the MA was inevitably shaped by the interviewees’ knowledge that I had worked there. My position as a researcher working within the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester (and a former student on its postgraduate training programme) may also have had an impact on the interviews since the School itself attracts divergent opinion.

The interviews were further complicated by the fact that the interviewees all had personal opinions about the subject of my research, as well as professional stakes in it. Mercer discusses the difficulty of determining how much of one’s own views and experience the interviewer should reveal in asking questions during the interview. If the interviewer reveals emerging hypotheses, interviewees may shape their answers to attempt to be ‘helpful’ and confirm those hypotheses.38 Seldon and Pappworth note the difficulty – and the importance – of asking questions which do not invite a particular answer: ‘it is very easy to come away from an interview having learnt just what one expected to hear’.39 However, as Platt notes, it is much harder to withhold hypotheses and personal views when interviewing professional peers, particularly if the interviewer has a prior relationship with the interviewee.40 In practice, many of my interviews included elements of conversation and debate as well as more formal questions and responses. In addition, many of the interviewees were experienced oral historians or had carried out similar research interviews themselves, which undoubtedly complicated the nature of the exchange.

Professional peers share assumptions and norms and it is not possible to unpack and explore all of these in a single interview. This can make it harder to cultivate the sense of ‘anthropological strangeness’ which can give richness to investigations of cultural phenomena.41 On the other hand, because I shared knowledge of the sector and a

38 Ibid.

39 Seldon and Pappworth By Word of Mouth, p.27.


professional ‘language’ with my interviewees, I benefitted from the advantage of being able to cover more ground more quickly than would have been the case if greater exposition had been required.42

Platt observes that where interviewee and interviewer have a pre-existing relationship, then the roles of interviewer and interviewee are not the only roles at work in their exchange.43 In conducting my interviews I played other roles including that of guest, former colleague and former student. All of these alternate and interwoven identities helped shape the character of our discussions. I conducted interviews in offices, homes and cafés and these venues may also have had an impact on the character of the exchange: it may be harder to be candid in a café, and harder to probe or challenge when you are a guest in someone’s home.

I took the decision not to attempt to anonymise my interviews. Because my interviewees were chosen for their specific experience, not as representatives of a particular class of experience, anonymous data would have been less valuable.44 This may also have led to some interviewees moderating opinions but this disadvantage is outweighed by the richness of the biographical possibilities it opens up. A few people I would have liked to have interviewed declined my request or interviews proved impossible to schedule: as Seldon and Pappworth observe, any account of events which draws on oral history is inevitably shaped by the availability of interviewees and the historian needs to pay heed to the impact of this.45

My own professional museum experience undoubtedly also influenced my approach to the study. I started my career in junior curatorial roles in large museums. I spent two years at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television,46 working as a research assistant on a partnership project with the Manchester Metropolitan University. In 1997 I moved to the Victoria and Albert Museum where I worked for a total of five

42 Seldon and Pappworth, By word of mouth, p.34.
43 Platt, ‘On Interviewing One’s Peers’.
44 An attempt to anonymise also ran the risk of being unsuccessful. Museums are a small world and there are other anonymised studies in which I have been able to guess at the identity of unnamed individuals.
45 Seldon and Pappworth, By word of mouth.
46 Now the National Media Museum.
years, first as a curatorial trainee, moving around departments to gain wide but shallow experience of different specialist areas, then as a Documentation Officer, before moving out of collections-based work into a role in planning and performance management. In all of these roles, I worked alongside people who had spent years developing deep knowledge of collections, and who had the traditional curatorial skills of being able to identify and analyse objects, and tell stories about them. All of my roles were relatively novel, representing various new modes of work in the museum sector: temporary contracts, partnership projects, structured training programmes, performance management. I found myself caring for collections, answering enquiries, documenting collections, occasionally contributing to interpretation and publications, but all without a foundation of specialist expertise.

My experience of being a non-expert in the company of experts has undoubtedly shaped my attitude to curatorial knowledge. In developing this study, I have tried to be aware of the dangers of sentimentalising expertise or of succumbing to its mystique. The model of curatorial expertise traditionally developed in national museums initially shaped my expectations of what is meant by curatorial knowledge but has never been universally applicable. In this study, I have been at pains to expand my conception of what people mean when they talk about scholarship and expertise beyond my own experiences of it but the echo of those experiences can undoubtedly still be heard.

1.6 Structure of the study

The next chapter offers a literature review. It surveys existing studies of the museum sector to demonstrate how my work makes an original contribution and provides the theoretical underpinnings for my approach, reviewing some relevant work on the professions and professionalism.

The remaining chapters explore the processes of change and the forces which drove them, adopting a progressively narrowing focus from the broad political and social context to the agency of individuals. Each chapter also looks at a particular set of relationships. Chapter 3 considers how change at a national political and economic level shaped the policy context for museums and assesses the impact of this changing context on the work of museums. Its focus is on the relationship between people who worked in museums and national and local politicians and opinion-formers. Chapter 4 narrows the focus to look inside institutions and to consider how the changing shape of museums as
institutions and of the museum workforce affected the work of curators in particular. Its focus is on the relationship between curators and their museum colleagues. Chapter 5 moves from an institutional frame to a professional one, considering how the institutions and initiatives which made up the scaffolding of support for museums and the people who worked in them developed during this period, and assessing their role in driving change. It examines the relationship between people who worked in museums and those with a responsibility for overseeing or supporting them. Chapter 6 looks at the relationship between professionals, considering the professional groups which became prominent during this period and in particular how they used dissent and dissatisfaction as tools to create change. Finally, Chapter 7 looks at the relationship between curator and audience and considers how this changed and what it can tell us about how and why approaches to curatorial expertise were renegotiated. In conclusion, Chapter 8 takes an overview of the processes of change, re-examines the question of the perceived crisis in curatorial knowledge and considers what the study’s findings have to suggest about the future direction of the UK museum sector.

The five central chapters can to some extent be seen as a series of concentric circles, starting with the broadest political context and narrowing in to focus on specific manifestations of curatorial practice. But this, of course, is too neat an image of the way that a number of factors combine to drive change. It is not always clear where in this structure a particular organisation or initiative might fit: I have, for example, considered the impact of the Registration/Accreditation scheme in Chapter 5, at the level of the support structures for museums, but it can also be seen as a working out of a particular vision of professionalism and might have been considered in the context of professional peer relationships instead. Nor do I intend to imply that the drivers for change were unidirectional, with pressure always working its way in from the outside of my circles to the inside. On the contrary, government policy often responded to the possibilities demonstrated by innovative practice within the sector; and the drive and commitment of individuals was often instrumental in the kind of ‘official’ initiatives considered in Chapter 5. This study aims to do justice to the complexity of change while compartmentalising different factors sufficiently to provide a legible analysis.
Chapter 2: History, professionalism and change: placing this study in context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides contexts for my study, firstly explaining how it relates to other histories of changing practice in museums, and secondly exploring the broader literature which has provided the theoretical underpinning for my own work. Finally, it explores different theoretical approaches to professions, professionalism and professionalisation in order to understand how these phenomena have been manifest in the museum context.

With its emphasis on relationships between individuals and between individuals and institutions, my study can be situated in a broader tradition of inquiry which Jenkins has labelled ‘generic sociology’. It specifically draws on the sociology of the professions, of knowledge and of science and on work which considers organisational change. The approach to the sociology of science pioneered by Bruno Latour, whose writing examined the way in which knowledge is constructed through the activities of individuals, provides an inspiring starting point:

> When we go from ‘daily life’ to scientific activity, from the man in the street to the men in the laboratory, from politics to expert opinion, we do not go from noise to quiet, from passion to reason, from heat to cold. We go from controversies to fiercer controversies…it is like moving from a law book to Parliament when the law is still a bill. More noise, indeed, not less.  

My study of the development of the museum profession will be an attempt to hear the ‘noise’ of the construction of the profession and its conventions. Abbott has argued that a limitation of some work on professions is a tendency to focus on structures at the expense of practice: ‘Sociological work on professions...pays little attention to the actual work that is done and the expertise used to do it...Historical study, by contrast,

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has emphasized the actual work performed.\textsuperscript{49} My study aims to synthesise these historical and sociological approaches, to look at the course of professionalisation and consider the nature of professionalism but to see this as a starting point for thinking about the nature of museum work, how people who worked in museums went about their daily work. It is in this study of actual work that a more nuanced picture of the motivations of professionals and of the impact of their work can emerge.

2.2 Histories of change in museums

In terms of museum history, this study’s original contribution stems from its approach, period and scope. Although, museum history is a growing field, there is still a relatively small body of work which looks critically at the development of museum practice in any era. In particular, there are still few works which focus on the later twentieth century or which pay serious attention to the practice and culture of regional museums. It is in these areas that this study aims to make a contribution.

The earlier history of museums and the history of national museums are much better served by the literature. The largest strand of museum history literature is a substantial body of work which takes a narrative approach to the development of collections and institutions. In the UK, full-length studies are dominated by single-museum histories, mostly dealing with national museums.\textsuperscript{50}

A significant limitation of many of these studies is the extent to which they are implicated in the museum’s own narrative: many are published by the museum’s own press or authored by present or former members of staff.\textsuperscript{51} Though the best of these are


\textsuperscript{51} Some examples of such insider narratives include: Burton, \textit{Vision and accident} , written by a former curator at the time a researcher employed by the museum; Stearn, \textit{The Natural History Museum}, whose
by no means straightforward celebrations, where they are written by insiders, funded by the museum or commissioned to mark a significant anniversary, they inevitably lack some critical distance. Such accounts are often shaped by political and personal considerations: a desire to improve the organisation’s credibility and standing, a delicacy around recounting personal achievements or seeming to criticise former colleagues. In his history of the British Museum,\(^{52}\) for example, David Wilson acknowledges the difficulty in writing about the period during which he led the museum although this, of course, does not negate its usefulness.

Traditional accounts of institutional development tend to lack theoretical ambitions: in his history of the Natural History Museum, Stearn notes the difficulty of identifying patterns in the development of different departments within a complex institution: ‘regretfully unable to impose a pattern upon these accidents of chronology, I have simply chronicled them as they have come’\(^{53}\). Chronicling ‘accidents of chronology’ as they come is a characteristic approach of traditional museum histories and they tend to focus on major developments rather than routine work. They typically offer a largely front-of-house version of museum history with the development of museums measured out in a progression of extensions, acquisitions and new galleries. They largely focus on the work and influence of the most senior staff and rarely capture the texture of working lives in institutions. While such narrative accounts have been useful sources of information in developing this study, this study has different ambitions. I aim to analyse the processes of change where studies like these are mostly concerned with the results of change. I also aim to capture more of the experience of those involved in museum work.

However, insider accounts are enriched by their depth of understanding of the organisation and have access to material and oral history accounts which might not

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\(^{52}\) Wilson, *British Museum*.

otherwise be available. ‘Official’ histories are not necessarily sanitised: Burton, for example, states his ambition to avoid a ‘bland, complacent, celebratory’ account and give place to ‘scandal and absurdity’.\(^5^4\) Some do offer thick descriptions of internal rivalries, conflicts and disappointments: Littlewood and Butler’s 1998 history of the National Maritime Museum, for example, written by freelance writers but commissioned by the museum, offers vivid insight into the troubled relations between trustees and senior staff at crucial periods in the museum’s history.\(^5^5\) Moreover, it would be misleading to draw too sharp a distinction between insider histories and more critical works written by external researchers. All authors of institutional histories owe some debt of gratitude to the organisations they research, at the very least relying on the goodwill and generosity of the organisation and of individuals to provide access to archives. More recently, some organisations have taken a more critical and self-reflexive approach to developing organisational histories: the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum all have oral history programmes recording the experience of present and former staff\(^5^6\) and the Science Museum’s recent institutional history invites a range of internal and external perspectives.\(^5^7\)

There is also a substantial body of work which explores museum history in a theoretical context. Hooper-Greenhill and Bennett were early exponents of this approach, in historical works\(^5^8\) which remain influential: Eckersley’s recent study of nineteenth-

\(^5^4\) Burton, *Vision and Accident*, p.7.

\(^5^5\) Littlewood and Butler *Of Ships and Stars*.


\(^5^7\) Morris *Science for the nation*.

\(^5^8\) Bennett’s earliest substantial discussion of the ideological role and function of museums appeared in: Bennett, ‘The Exhibitionary Complex’, *new formations*, Volume 4, Spring 1988, pp.73-102. His arguments about the relationship between nineteenth century museums and social control were later fully worked out in *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London : Routledge, 1995). In the meantime,

59 Susannah Eckersley, ‘Opening the doors to hold the fort: museums and instrumental cultural policy in 19th century Britain and Germany’. *Museum History Journal* 2012, Volume 5, Number 1, 77-104, p. 84.

60 For example, in the *Birth of the Museum*, Bennett makes a brief reference to the Victoria and Albert Museum as an example of a class of institutions whose ‘central message was to materialize the power of the ruling classes’ (p.109). In contrast, historians concerned with the specific history of the V&A have drawn attention to the process by which the museum’s priorities were contested by individuals involved in the development of the institution. The picture which emerges is one of so much internal disagreement and so many shifts over time that there can hardly be said to have been a ‘central message’. See for example: R. Cardoso Denis. ‘Teaching by example: Education and the formation of South Kensington’s museums’. In M. Baker & B. Richardson (eds.), *A grand design: The art of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, pp. 107–116 (London: V&A Publications, 1997).


highlighting the complexity of museums as institutions whose meanings are social, intellectual, cultural and political and drawing attention to the extent to which their approach to knowledge is both shaped by a broader context and has broader social implications.

The body of work most directly pertinent to my approach to museum history is a smaller group of museum histories which have successfully combined empirical and analytical elements. These offer critical and theoretical rigour but coupled with fine-grained accounts of the lives of individuals and institutions, looking behind the scenes as well as at the public face of institutional development. In his study of the Manchester Museum, for example, Alberti notes that traditional histories of collections are ‘only part of the story’ and that, the ‘history of museums is also the history of people, the history of relationships and a history of practice’. Works which focus on the relationships between individual actors and institutions, which explore changing practice and the ways in which that change was negotiated, have provided a toolkit of approaches for my own study.

Works in this genre tend to take a more inclusive view of the people responsible for shaping an institution, echoing Hughes who recommends that the study of a field of work should include ‘all the kinds of people involved in it, whether their position be high or low, whether they are at the center or near the periphery of the system.’ Alberti’s account is one of a number of recent studies which attempt to write back into museum history the role played by ‘subaltern’ practitioners: technical and support staff and other disregarded contributors whose work shaped museum collections


65 Hughes, *Men at Work*, p.77.
and the lives of objects once they came into museums. Gosden, Larson and Petch’s exploration of the history of the Pitt Rivers Museum also emphasises the role of multiple actors in shaping the institution and its collections. While my own focus is on the work of curators rather than these other, marginalised groups, these approaches have nevertheless informed my work, in offering the salutary reminder that institutional change is never the result of the work of a single, heroic figure. I am also interested in the way that curators’ work has been shaped by their engagement with other practitioners, in particular in the complex relationship between emergent curatorial professionalism and other roles in museums, some of which were themselves re-imagined as professional roles during the period under review. In a recent work, Kate Hill commends the biographical approach to museum histories in which ‘the very figure of the curator is being unpicked’ and which seeks to understand ‘the construction of professional identity’. My study aims to contribute to this unpicking and to explore curatorial work in context and to examine its construction, including the influence of other practitioners.

Arnold’s 2006 study, exploring the creation of knowledge in early English museums has also suggested approaches for my work. It is notable for the way it combines high-resolution case studies of practice in particular institutional contexts with analysis of broader intellectual trends shaping English museums. Arnold suggests that there have been three major phases in the approach to the production of knowledge in English museums: the narrative, the functional and the taxonomic. He reflects on a growing sense of the inadequacy of the taxonomic approach and argues for the rediscovery of a sense of ‘wonder’ (in its Renaissance sense) in museums. His insight into the limitations of the prevalent modes of knowledge production in museums and the problems arising from the fact that traditional curators’ ‘disciplinary training encourages them to know a

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66 Ibid., p.127. Jennie Morgan’s recent PhD also makes a contribution in this area: Jennie Morgan, Change and Everyday Practice at the Museum: an Ethnographic Study (University of Manchester, PhD thesis, 2011).


68 Arnold, Cabinets for the Curious.
lot about something at the expense of knowing something about a lot has proved very illuminating in the preparation of this study.

MacLeod’s recent study of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool has also offered useful signposts towards the kind of history I attempt to produce in this study. It offers a close-up view of particular episodes in the history of a building and, like Arnold’s work, demonstrates how detailed study of the particular can be combined with broader analysis of larger-scale shifts in museum practice. Arnold insists that the processes by which collections came to be in museums – the most common focus for museum histories – are no more important or interesting than what happened to them once they were there. In a similar vein, MacLeod convincingly argues that buildings are made not just by their architects but by the people who inhabit and use them. These perspectives offer helpful insights for my study which is also an attempt to understand lives lived in museums, and the texture of individual professional experience. MacLeod’s use of biographical approaches to institutional history exemplifies Hill’s insight that biographical approaches ‘can help us to conceptualise an understanding of museums, not as producers of knowledge about a knowable world which is simply transmitted to an audience, but as arenas where relationships produce narratives of various sorts’.

As well as understanding the networks of relationships between people, and between people and objects within museums, my study is concerned with museums in their broader social and political context. Some recent works offer pointers here. Mason’s account of the development of the national museums of Wales is a notable attempt to situate organisational development in a (very specific) political context and Crooke’s study of the National Museum of Ireland is also concerned with the relationship between the ideological and political context and the development of professional practice. Adams’ work on the V&A offers insight into the internal politics of a large

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69 Ibid., p.254.

70 MacLeod, Museum Architecture.

71 Hill, Museums and Biographies, p.3.

institution, as well as helpful reflections on the way that museums both seek to shape, and are shaped by, the external political climate.\textsuperscript{73}

Some of these studies aim to present a fuller picture of the museum sector, turning their attention away from the most high-profile national museums. MacLeod’s study of the architectural biography of the Walker Art Gallery deliberately seeks to write a regional museum which would be ‘otherwise discounted’ into museum history.\textsuperscript{74} Gray’s biographical study of Sydney Pavière, curator of the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, from 1926 to 1959, has been useful both as a study of an influential figure in a regional context and a cautionary tale of the extent to which curators, often high-profile figures in their locality, have sought to create and control their own professional image.\textsuperscript{75}

What these diverse works have in common, and what they have to offer this study, is that their authors find ways of encompassing the complexity of museums as institutions while still providing a useful account of the processes of change: all do more than chronicle ‘accidents of chronology’.\textsuperscript{76} While these accounts have varied priorities, they share elements including a broad understanding of museums as organisations shaped by the relationships between people, their political and intellectual context, places and things. Gosden, Larson and Petch write about the challenge of trying to ‘complicate our view of the structure of the Museum’ and to see museums not as texts, which can simply be read but as complex and multi-faceted bodies, a ‘shifting set of people and things’.\textsuperscript{77} My study aims to understand the museum sector in the last four decades of the twentieth century as a ‘shifting set’ of people, ideas and ideals, with its actors engaged in renegotiating their relationship to things and to the audiences they serve.


\textsuperscript{74} MacLeod, \textit{Museum Architecture}, p.34.


\textsuperscript{76} Stearn, \textit{Natural History Museum}, p.xiv.

\textsuperscript{77} Gosden, Larson and Petch, \textit{Knowing Things}, p.32 and p.11.
The works discussed above deal with the histories of museums as institutions. A smaller strand of work deals with the narrower focus of my study: the processes of professionalisation in museums and the changing nature of work across the museum sector, illuminated by the professional life histories of individuals and by specific institutional developments.

The processes of professionalisation in museums taking place in the late nineteenth century, around the time of the foundation of the MA, and in the first half of the twentieth century have been extensively investigated, notably by Lynne Teather in the first PhD thesis completed in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. The inter-war period saw some significant movements towards professionalisation although, in the main, these had not progressed far before the radical disruptions of World War II: this period has also been the subject of a PhD thesis, by Catherine Pearson. Kate Hill’s 2005 study considers the nature of professionalism as part of her project of exploring class relationships in museums. Although writing about the nineteenth century, Hill’s study is a useful reminder of the constructed nature of curatorship: curators were not born with museums but laboriously constructed their own status and professionalism within developing institutions. Chris Whitehead’s study of the formation of museum disciplines is also helpful in his emphasis on the need to understand the complicated and messy processes by which individuals shaped disciplinary approaches and to be alert to the different motivations at play.

A small number of studies have, like mine, used oral history as a way of understanding change in the recent past of museums. Paine and Davies’ study, which they identify as the first to use oral history to a significant extent in understanding the history of museums, was based on interviews with 20 senior museum figures, conducted in

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80 Hill, *Culture and Class*.

2003. Crispin Paine was kind enough to share their notes from the interviews with me. The research was commissioned by Resource for public policy rather than academic purposes and the interviews ranged widely which meant that they offered little detailed focus on any area in particular. Paine and Davies themselves suggest that future projects might benefit from being more narrowly focused, and Jonathan Paquette and Max Ross have both responded to this, using oral history interviews to explore particular aspects of the experience of people who work in museums.

2.3 Related histories of change

Given the relative scarcity of histories of practice in museums, I have drawn on histories of related fields to contextualise my account of change in museums and to suggest approaches.

The history of science literature offers useful models for dealing with the development of ideas and working practices within a specific intellectual or professional community. As Arnold notes in his history of early English museums, a history of science approach to museum history can be useful because of its emphasis on the context of scientific practice and its emphasis on ‘not only what scientists discovered, but also how and where they worked’.

Harriet Ritvo’s account of classificatory practices in nineteenth century biology describes an ‘elaborate polyphony’ in which many different kinds of practitioners, specialist and amateur, contribute to the discourse of classification. Her work problematizes the notion of the expert, showing how the science of biology found it

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84 Arnold, Cabinets for the Curious, p.1.

impossible to maintain a ‘dichotomy’ between ‘expert and lay knowledge’ and how expertise was challenged by a whole range of external pressures. This is very pertinent for my study. Simon Knell’s study of the development of geology in the first half of the nineteenth century includes important reflections on what is essentially the pre-history of the museum profession. Like Ritvo, Knell offer a history of practice within a scientific community which shows how individual actors shape practice through their collaborations, disputes, mistakes and rivalries, as well as exploring how individual actions are shaped by intellectual, economic and cultural contexts, approaches which I aspire to apply in this study.

Work on the history of academic disciplines has also been useful. Fuller has criticised the tendency to paint a ‘panglossian picture of the discipline’s development’ and ‘to impute to historical personages foreknowledge of the role that their actions ultimately played in the formation of the discipline’. This caveat has informed my approach to writing the history of changing approaches to curatorial knowledge in museums, reinforcing the need to bear in mind that what lies behind established practice is debate and controversy.

2.4 Contemporary museum studies: practice and change

Although this study is primarily historical in its methodology, I have found other approaches to the study of museum practice helpful. In particular, studies using ethnographic techniques chime with my study’s emphasis on the relationships between individuals and my attempt to capture something of the texture of the life of organisations. Gosden, Larson and Petch describe their study of the Pitt Rivers as an ethnography and others have adopted specifically ethnographic approaches to the study of museums as institutions. Sharon Macdonald’s 2002 study of changing approaches to exhibition-making practice at the Science Museum is based on a period as a participant observer and combines insight from daily life at the museum with a

86 Ibid., p.50.
89 Gosden, Larson and Petch, Knowing Things.
theoretical understanding of the intellectual context within which expertise is generated and communicated.\(^{90}\) Jennie Morgan’s recent PhD thesis on the redevelopment of Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery used ethnography to map the processes of change in an institution.\(^{91}\) Robert Janes’ account of the process of restructuring the Glenbow Museum has also proved illuminating as a detailed insider account of the thinking, processes and human emotions behind a particular programme of change, drawing on approaches from the field of organisational studies.\(^{92}\)

The development of the field of museum studies is itself part of the history of change which this study aims to delineate and the relevant contemporary literature is discussed in the chapters which follow. In some instances, the relationship between theory and practice in the UK has been close, with practitioners contributing to the literature, and the theory directly shaping practice. This was particularly the case in the 1990s, when an extensive museum studies literature, which was increasingly transatlantic in character, began to examine and advocate a reorientation of museums. Writing in 1998, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett characterised this reorientation in this way:

> Museums were once defined by their relationship to objects: curators were ‘keepers’ and their greatest asset was their collections. Today, they are defined more than ever by their relationship to visitors.\(^ {93}\)

The relationship between theory and practice in this perceived reorientation from object to audience is discussed at more length in Chapter 7. An emerging orthodoxy within museums about the need to serve a wider audience led some to conclude that scholarship in museums was being disregarded; Frank Furedi, for example, has criticised museums’ attempts to ensure that visitors do not feel ‘overwhelmed or

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\(^{91}\) Jennie Morgan, *Change and Everyday Practice*.


daunted by their experience’ as part of an anti-intellectual cultural trend, arguing that this ethic stands in the way of visitors’ opportunities for genuine discovery. But the dichotomy is a false one: an argument for improved access is not an argument against knowledge or scholarship. Mark O’Neill reflects on the hostile reaction to the provision of non-traditional interpretation of Glasgow’s art collections: ‘how’, he asks, ‘can it be superficial to provide more information?’ The debate about the relative importance of the intellectual work of the museum and visitors’ needs is often highly polarised; my study aims to avoid taking sides and to paint a more nuanced picture of change than one which construes the traditional curator as anti-democratic or the contemporary curator as anti-intellectual. In this, I follow Andrea Witcomb who has written about the tendency to exaggerate and simplify past and present trends as a tool in driving change. I discuss Witcomb’s work at more length in Chapter 6.

An account of the processes of change within museums has to take sufficient account of the changing nature of society and the broader context for museums. As Christina Kreps has observed, ‘Museums and museological work do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of larger sociocultural systems that influence how and why curatorial work is carried out.’ This study aims to show how change in museums has been, at least in part, driven by change in the broader ‘sociocultural context’ of which they are a part. Kreps’ later work on ‘appropriate museology’, the notion that curatorial practice has to respond to particular local contexts, both cultural and socioeconomic, is helpful here. Kreps is writing in the context of anthropology and is particularly interested in the way that museums can negotiate between the expectations of Western museum practice and indigenous approaches. However, I wish to suggest that this idea of ‘appropriate museology’ can usefully be applied taking a historical perspective. The forms of curatorship which were appropriate for one set of social and cultural circumstances may

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not be appropriate for another. To recognise the importance of the changing context for museums is of course not to argue that all change is responsive and benign: it is important both to avoid mourning for the passing of forms of practice which may not be appropriate to a new set of circumstances and to evaluate critically the appropriateness of emerging practices.

2.5 Understanding professionalism and professionalisation

Having surveyed the museum-specific literature which has informed my study, this section turns its attention to the understanding of professionalism which underpins my work. In the decades following World War II, the notion of professionalism gained a wider currency in the UK, with museums being part of a ‘swelling chorus of … emergent and expanding occupations which shared in common the goal of professionalization’. 99 Professionalisation was linked to the expansion of higher education in the 1960s: existing professions increased their numbers and people in new areas of work claimed professional status for themselves, often partly as a consequence of their experience of higher education. 100 Redcliffe-Maud’s 1976 survey of the arts sector noted that there had been a post-war ‘flowering of professionalism’ in the arts more broadly in the UK. 101 Although this study is concerned with practice in the UK, it is worth noting that the professionalisation of museums was seen as an international phenomenon at around this time. Writing in 1981, Raymond Singleton, then Director of the Museum Studies course at the University of Leicester, noted that in his extensive international travel he saw the ‘amateur spirit’ which had previously characterised museums being replaced by an ‘emergent professionalism’. 102

The meanings of ‘professional’ and ‘professionalism’ were changing during this period, a shift exemplified in an extract from a centenary publication by Paisley Museum in 1970. This celebratory brochure asserted that improvements in the quality of service offered by the museum had been made possible by the increasing professionalism of its staff. This extract demonstrates three different understandings of what it meant to be ‘professional’ (my emphasis):

No longer are these posts for retired service or professional men or for the local novice who will collect and preserve his own particular material to the exclusion of everything else. The museum staff of today are trained professionals, specialists in the field, who can bring expert academic knowledge and the necessary technical skills to bear on any problem that might present itself…The museum can now offer a comprehensive and professional service to its public. 103

The first use of ‘professional’ refers to the word’s earlier, narrower sense: museum work used to be a second occupation for those leaving a career in one of the established ‘professions’. These museum workers may have been ‘professionals’ in another field but the sense here is that they were not ‘professional’ in their approach to their work in museums. This is contrasted with the work of contemporary staff who have museum-specific training, making them ‘professionals’ in the new sense, specialists with particular knowledge and skills, who are thus able to offer a ‘professional’ (competent, high quality) service to the public.

This study is concerned with a particular period in the expansion of professionalism, but this particular manifestation of professionalisation does need to be briefly situated in a longer historical context. Although some would situate the emergence of professionalism much earlier, 104 the beginnings of a more widespread aspiration towards professional status can be seen from around the middle of the nineteenth century through the establishment of significant numbers of new associations which

104 David Sciulli, for example, has argued that the work of academies of painting and sculpture in the sixteenth and seventeenth century can be understood as an ‘unambiguous case of a sustained professionalism project’. David Sciulli, ‘Professions before Professionalism’, European Journal of Sociology, Volume 48, Issue 1, 2007, pp. 121 – 147, p.122.
aimed to raise the status or improve the conduct of a number of areas of work: architects, accountants, chemists, surveyors and a whole range of engineering specialists formed new groups in the middle or later nineteenth century. Perkin locates the major impact of this movement as starting around 1880, defining the period from 1880 onwards as being characterised by the ‘rise of professional society’. In each of the decades between 1880 and 1910, around a dozen new associations representing areas of work and offering professional qualifications were established. Among them was the Museums Association in 1889: evidence that some people who worked in museums had participated in this first significant wave of self-conscious professionalisation.

The professions in the UK continued to expand in the first half of the twentieth century and, again, the museum profession was part of this. Between the wars, professions began increasingly to seek state regulation: in the decade following World War I, at least one bill was introduced in each parliamentary session providing for state regulation for a previously unregulated profession. Regulation of this kind was way beyond the ambitions of the museum sector during the interwar period but the MA introduced its Diploma programme in 1938, thus keeping museums in step with other professions which were increasingly introducing formal programmes of training and qualifying examinations in the decades between the wars.

As this sketch of major developments shows, the expansion of the professions was not an isolated post-war phenomenon but could be traced back at least eighty years; some of the building blocks of professionalisation in museums had been laid well before World

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107 Millerson, Qualifying Associations, p.183.
110 For an account of the introduction of the Diploma, see Geoffrey Lewis, For Instruction and Recreation: a Centenary History of the Museums Association (London: Quiller Press, 1989). The Diploma and later training are considered at more length in Chapter 5.
Nevertheless, professionalisation in museums in the period of this study was significantly different in ways that bear exploration. The next section seeks to locate what the precise character of postwar professionalisation was and how professionalisation in museums in this period contributed to change in the sector.

This analysis specifically focuses on the overt processes of professionalisation. Paquette suggests that professionalisation is superficial and perhaps somewhat self-serving: it is about status, more than about ideals or integrity. He criticises museum studies approaches for favouring the superficialities of the ‘quest for professionalism’ over subtler analyses of professional identity. Acknowledging this caveat, this section nevertheless provides context for the ‘quest for professionalism’ in museums. However, this study will attempt to demonstrate that this quest was not purely superficial but had real implications for the ways in which people understood their work and for the kinds of museums which visitors experienced.

2.6 Understanding professionalism: professional integrity and the state

Museum professionalism was professionalism in a public sector context. Freidson argues that the essence of professionalism is that a profession determines its own conditions of work, rather than having them dictated by managers or clients. But from the 1960s onwards, a growing proportion of people who regarded themselves as professionals worked in bureaucracies and drew salaries, rather than operating as independent practitioners. In his 1964 study of the professions, Millerson suggested that this might produce a conflict of interest for salaried professionals, between the values of the profession and the values of the employer and that, without public recognition for their work, professionals working within bureaucracies might experience ‘status ambiguity’.

Understanding the complex combination of pressures shaping public sector professionalism is essential to the analysis of the processes of professionalisation in museums.

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114 Millerson, Qualifying Associations, p.9.
Weber’s influential essays on public and intellectual life, developed in the years immediately following World War One, and offered as his contribution to the debate about the future of Germany are an important starting point for the study of public sector professionalism.\textsuperscript{115} Weber identifies professionalism as an approach to work which is grounded in specialist knowledge combined with a particular mode of personal behaviour. In his essay on politics (by which he meant the administration and leadership of a state or organisation more broadly rather than party politics in its narrow sense), Weber explored the question of how states maintain authority and legitimacy and traced the emergence of modern bureaucracy through a process in which ‘expert officialdom’\textsuperscript{116} was becoming the basis of contemporary power. In Weber’s analysis, people in positions of authority in a modern state acquired legitimacy through specialist knowledge rather than as a result of the patronage of a head of state. Weber argued that public servants had to combine this specialist knowledge with impartiality and commitment to the impersonal discharge of a role; the ‘genuine official’\textsuperscript{117} would subordinate personal opinion and ambition to the discharge of duty. In his essay on academic life,\textsuperscript{118} Weber argued again for the importance of ‘inner devotion to the task’, not being distracted by questions of popularity and personality.\textsuperscript{119}

Following their translation into English, Weber’s essays inspired a large body of sociological thought and his work remains subject to debate and reinterpretation. Recently, for example, Paul du Gay has used Weber’s perspective in ‘Politik als Beruf’

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., p.95.
\textsuperscript{118} Weber, ‘Science as a Vocation’. Although ‘Wissenschaft’ in the Weber’s title is translated by Gerth and Mills as ‘science’, Weber considers knowledge and learning more broadly than this might be seen to imply.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.,p.137.
as the basis for a consideration of contemporary professional identity in public life. Here du Gay argues that the understanding of the role of the public official in Weber’s seminal essay had underpinned the development of the professions in public life for much of the twentieth century. From the 1920s to the 1970s, the behaviour of professionals in public life was expected to be based on the separation of the person and the office: the professional administrator needed lengthy training, a sense of vocation and a commitment to ethics which were not the same as personal principles. In this mode of bureaucratic behaviour, personal values and beliefs were subordinated to professional standards. This provides important context for understanding the growing significance of professional ethics during this period of development of museums.

However, du Gay identifies a collapse in the belief in the notion of the disinterested public servant, arising from market-driven ideologies of the 1980s and leading to a loss of trust in public officials and a shift in the relationships between politicians, public servants and the public they both serve. This shifting relationship and in particular the question of the basis on which public servants can be trusted and how they might be held accountable will also be important in understanding the changing nature of curatorship in the last two decades of the study in particular.

2.7 Understanding professionalism: knowledge, status and the public

Professional knowledge defines a profession in ways that look outward as well as inward. Special knowledge can draw boundaries around a profession, separating those inside a professional circle from those on the outside. This sorting or separating is perhaps particularly significant in knowledge-based professions. Writing about academic disciplines, Lenoir has argued that part of the function of a discipline is to define who fits where in a hierarchy of expertise: ‘[disciplines are] instruments for distributing status; by grounding expertise and skill, discipline sets boundaries and


\[121\] Abbott takes a different view, identifying the growing importance of knowledge as a source of power and authority in society as part of a longer process, taking place throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and characterising this process as the gradual ‘replacement of gentlemanliness by scientism, efficiency and accountability’. See Abbott, System of Professions, p. 144.
demarcates hierarchies of experts and amateurs.' Alberti has argued that this ‘sorting’ has operated particularly powerfully in museums: ‘to professionalise is to construct boundaries, and define certain practitioners working on the same objects as “amateurs”.’ However, the possession of knowledge does not convey status and authority on professionals in an uncomplicated way. Both the history of science and social studies of science explore the relationship between experts, political decision-makers and the public. While public scepticism of experts is conventionally seen as originating in the cultural relativism that emerged from the 1960s onwards, Graeme Gooday has demonstrated that public distrust of professional expertise has a long history, identifying such scepticism in public attitudes towards electricity – and the experts who promoted its use – in the 1880s.

Public scepticism towards professional expertise may tip into hostility. George Bernard Shaw’s famous aphorism that all professions are ‘conspiracies against the laity’ comes from the preface to his 1906 play, The Doctor’s Dilemma. Shaw’s hostility to the medical profession in particular, and to other professions in general, had two foundations. Firstly, he argued that the basic conflict arising from professionals’ ‘pecuniary interest’ in the service they provide prevented them from acting in a disinterested manner. Secondly, he argued that all professions had an interest in keeping

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125 See for example, Frank Furedi, Where have all the intellectuals gone?


mistakes or malpractice quiet so as not to undermine the profession as a whole. It is in this particular sense that Shaw saw professions as a ‘conspiracy’.\footnote{Shaw’s aphorism had gained enough currency by the 1930s to be cited (although not attributed to Shaw by name) by Carr Saunders and Wilson in 1933 as evidence of divergent opinions about the nature of the professions and of the need for a thorough survey.}

The notion of a conspiracy is an echo – conscious or unconscious – of Adam Smith’s assertion that, ‘people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.’\footnote{Quoted in Freidson, Professionalism, p.197.} In this context, Smith was discussing the effect groups of tradespeople could have on distorting the operation of the market, but the sense of the damage caused to the public interest by the special interests of particular groups had resonance in this period, especially under the Thatcher governments of 1979-1990. Freidson discusses the relationship between Smith’s famous observation and ideologically-driven loss of public confidence in professionals that emerged in the late twentieth century, giving rise to an ‘atmosphere of distrust’.\footnote{Freidson, Professionalism, p.197.} But scepticism about professionals’ motivations finds an echo in many studies of the professions and is not limited to commentators on the right. Hughes for example, notes that ‘in the hearts of many laymen there burns a certain aggressive suspicion of all professionals, whether plumers or physicians’ and argues that this suspicion arises when clients believe they are the victims of either incompetence or exploitation.\footnote{Hughes, Men and their Work, p.82.} However, he also notes that professions tend to generate a ‘charisma of skill’. That is, professionals’ skills are necessarily ‘esoteric’ so that the people who use their services cannot judge their competence: ‘the profession sets up institutions which make clients’ judgments of secondary importance and colleagues’ judgments paramount.’\footnote{Ibid., p.91.}

More recent sociological studies, particularly in the fields of education and academia, have sought to acknowledge the force of arguments which link professionalism with self-interest, but to balance these by taking the ethical and public service elements of professionalism seriously and insisting ‘that the idea of inner dedication is more than a...
self-serving myth’. In the period under review, concern for status was one of the ways in which burgeoning curatorial professionalism was manifest; and this study will explore questions of salary, recognition and relationships with other professions within the local authority context. However, my starting point in exploring museum professionals’ anxieties about status is that a concern with improving the standing of a profession can co-exist with a genuine belief in the need for high moral and ethical principles and a desire to serve the public interest as effectively as possible, expressed through a commitment to professional standards. The co-existence of these impulses does, however, give rise to tensions and these have animated debate in the museum sector.

2.8 Understanding professionalism: knowledge and relationships

If professional knowledge inscribes boundaries, within those boundaries knowledge has a special role in building relationships. Howard Becker has argued that ‘most occupations… operate on the premise that the people who work in them all know certain procedures and certain ways of thinking about and responding to typical situations and problems.’ Professional and occupational groups do not simply hold knowledge in common: they build relationships through the way that knowledge is shared.

The best-known theory of shared knowledge and learning is the notion of the ‘community of practice’, which is most widely associated with the work of Etienne Wenger, and which originates in a 1991 work by Wenger and Jean Lave. Although

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135 In a surprisingly engaging account of the way photocopy repair technicians build relationships by sharing stories and memories, Orr has demonstrated that the phenomenon of shared knowledge as a means to build relationships is not limited to obviously knowledge-based professions: Julian Orr, ‘Sharing Knowledge, celebrating identity: community memory in a service culture’, in David Middleton and Derek Edwards (eds.) Collective Remembering, (London: Sage Publications, 1990) pp.169-189.

136 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, Situated learning : legitimate peripheral participation, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991). Wenger offered developments of the notion in Etienne Wenger,
not without its critics, the notion of the community of practice is a useful tool for exploring relationships among those who work in museums, not least because it has been extensively adopted in business and training manuals and has recently become a familiar concept to many people who work in museums.

The idea of the community of practice draws on theory of social learning and so is highly relevant to a consideration of curatorship, where knowledge is central to practice and identity. Social learning theory emphasises that, because of its relationship with status and identity:

Learning is never simply a matter of the “transmission” of knowledge or the “acquisition” of skill; identity in relation with practice, and hence knowledge and skill and their significance to the subject and the community, are never unproblematic.


Wenger himself has provided an overview of some of the main criticisms of his work in his paper ‘Communities of practice and social learning systems: the career of a concept’, in Chris Blackmore, (ed.) Social Learning Systems and communities of practice. (London: Springer Verlag and the Open University, 2010), pp.179-198. He suggests that many of these arise from the concept’s progress from being ‘an analytical concept to an instrumental one’ (p.192). This does seem to be the source of the frustration expressed by many of the contributors to an edited volume by Barton and Tusting, which offers several different critiques of the community of practice idea. For example, Gee’s chapter suggests that the idea of a community of practice may have suffered from too wide an application to too many diverse groups and situations: James Paul Gee, ‘Semiotic social spaces and affinity spaces: from The Age of Mythology to today’s schools’ in David Barton and Karin Tusting, (eds.) Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power and Social Context, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 214-232. In their introduction, the editors argue that the usefulness of the concept has been compromised as the original ideas have been ‘taken over by the certainty and oversimplifications of management training’ (David Barton and Karin Tusting, ‘Introduction’, op. cit, pp. 1-13. p.6).

Its use is widespread in museum training and in crops up in museum-related blogs and other social media. For example: Mairin Kerr, ‘#drinkingaboutmuseums and other communities of practice’, http://www.edgital.org/2013/01/13/drinkingaboutmuseums-and-other-communities-of-practice/ (last accessed 23rd September 2013).

Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning, p. 116.
Lave and Wenger stress the social character of knowledge:

Knowing is inherent in the growth and transformation of identities and it is located in relations among practitioners, their practice, the artifacts of that practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice.\textsuperscript{140}

This understanding of the social character of the knowledge and of the close relationship between learning, status and identity offers important insights for the study of changing approaches to curatorial practice.

Wenger’s work emphasises that the idea of a community does not imply harmony: ‘disagreement, challenges and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity’.\textsuperscript{141} I return to this notion that a high level of discord may be indicative of a strong and active community, with participants highly committed to a shared but disputed enterprise in Chapter 6.

Wenger’s notion of what constitutes a community of practice is flexible, although not all-encompassing. He is clear that one individual might be part of a number of communities of practice, which may overlap. For a group to be a community of practice, its members have to work together and share knowledge in some way. For people in museums, the community of practice might be the staff of their museum, or some subset – their department or peer group. For many working in museums in the period under review, a specialist group or other small network acted as a community of practice. Individuals participating in these were likely also to be part of other communities of practice, within their workplace, or within the MA. These groups were likely to be fluid in membership and in the way they operated: Wenger notes that practice is not stable, but is shaped by learning and a community of practice is ‘an emergent structure that persists by being both perturbable and resilient’.\textsuperscript{142} He also argues for the importance of unwritten and unspoken conventions in shaping

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., p. 122.
\textsuperscript{141} Wenger Communities of Practice, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., p.93.
communities of practice, which he describes as being marked by ‘a regime of mutual accountability’. These insights have also helped to shape the analysis in Chapter 6.

2.9 Understanding professionalism: a contemporary view

By 1964, there had been sufficient academic debate over the appropriate definition of a profession for the British sociologist, Geoffrey Millerson, to draw up a table analysing which characteristics were included in definitions in 21 other academic works on the professions. He concluded that the six most important of these were: ‘a skill based on theoretical knowledge’, the ‘training and education’ required to attain that skill, ‘competence’ demonstrated by passing a ‘test’, ‘integrity…maintained by adherence to a code of conduct’, contribution to the ‘public good’ and that the profession was ‘organized’. These six characteristics can all be traced as the subject of debate and a focus for change in museums during this period. Millerson went on to argue that emergent professions were characterised by a professional self-consciousness, typically expressed through a number of attitudes and activities. Again, Millenson’s list is remarkably congruent with the processes of professionalisation in museums from the 1960s onwards:

Growth of self-awareness probably constitutes the most important element contributing to professionalization. This display of self-consciousness is demonstrated in various ways, for example:

(a) by dissatisfaction with available training and education for the occupation

(b) by attempts to standardize practice and to introduce theoretical analysis of work.

(c) by concern with low standards, bad workmanship, indifferent handling of clients

(d) by attempts to establish co-ordination and co-operation between practitioners,

(e) by protests about lack of recognition for the occupation,

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143 Ibid., p.81.
144 Millerson, Qualifying Associations, p.5.
(f) by belief in the emergence of a new and different discipline with wide applications.¹⁴⁵

The elements of Millerson’s list will all be discussed at more length in subsequent chapters. Training, the emergence of significant theoretical perspectives on museums, disparagement of poor practice (and practical means for combatting it), the establishment of new forms of professional groups and collaboration and a concern with status all shaped museum professionalisation during the period under review, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. The whole period in museums could be said to be the working out of the ‘belief in the emergence of a new and different discipline’. The following chapters trace this ‘emergence’ and the forces that shaped it, beginning with those originating in the political and economic context for museums.

2.10 Conclusion to Chapter 2

This chapter has set out the thinking behind my research and its ambitions. It has outlined the theoretical approaches which inform my study and, in particular, has engaged with the literature on professions and professionalisation. The museum profession can be seen to share some characteristics with other professions, the pattern of its development following that of other professions in some respects. What is crucial to an understanding of museum professionalism was that it was being worked out in a public sector context, with all the conflicting pressures and ‘status ambiguity’ that that implied. The next chapter considers the developing political and economic context for museums, and this sense of tension and ambiguity is essential to understanding how the changing local government context in particular shaped museums during this period.

¹⁴⁵ Millerson, Qualifying Associations, p.12.
Chapter 3: Museums in a changing public sector

3.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the extent to which change in museums was driven by political and economic shifts which affected public life in the UK in the last four decades of the twentieth century. It briefly considers certain elements of government policy towards the national museums, where it is relevant to understanding the processes of change in the sector as a whole, but its emphasis is on regional museums, in particular those run by local authorities.

Any attempt to account for political and economic drivers of change in museums must begin with an understanding of the diversity of the sector. Much of this chapter is concerned with attempts to bring coherence and stability to a highly-fragmented non-national museum sector, but these attempts never succeeded in welding the many components of the sector into a coherent framework. Individual museums continued to be shaped by the circumstances of their establishment, their subsequent history, sympathies within their governing local authority at any given time, and the energy and enthusiasm of their staff. These factors combined to make the ecosystem for local museums both complex and fragile.

3.2 Reforming regional museums

Attempts to reform non-national museums between 1960 and 2001 built on earlier, unrealised plans. In the interwar years, there had been a Royal Commission on museums which reported in 1929, as well as two major reviews of the non-national museums museum sector commissioned by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (CUKT): *A report on the public museums of the British Isles*, led by Sir Henry Miers and published in 1928, and *A report on the museums and art galleries of the British Isles*, led by Frank Markham and published in 1938.\(^{146}\) The Royal Commission

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recommended more extensive collaboration between the national and non-national museums and its proposals led to the establishment of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries (SCMG), whose remit included strengthening such links. Both the Miers and Markham Reports made recommendations about how the CUKT itself might make improvements to museums but went beyond this, calling for government action to bring coherence to the sector, to provide additional funding and bring about improvements to staffing levels, training and to standards of professional practice and of display. Pearson provides a full account of how museum practice changed during World War II and in its aftermath and while she convincingly challenges the conventional view that the war years and those immediately following were a simple hiatus in the development of museums,\(^\text{147}\) it is fair to say that the wider ambitions of Miers and Markham for sector-wide development remained almost entirely unrealised and that nothing was done at a national level to change the pattern of local museum provision or to improve the support available for smaller museums.

In the first part of the period under review, there were three major reviews which attempted significant reform of the non-national museum sector, in the tradition of the Miers and Markham Reports: the Survey of provincial museums and galleries (known as the Rosse Report, and published in 1963), Provincial Museums and Galleries, (known as the Wright Report and published in 1973) and Framework for a System of Museums (known as the Drew Report and published in 1978).\(^\text{148}\) Like Miers and Markham, these reports all sought to alter the funding context for museums, to reshape the sector through new funding patterns and different approaches to cooperation as well as to reform the practice of curatorship in various ways. Some significant improvements did result from these initiatives, and the reports were also influential in shaping opinion in the sector: students for the MA Diploma and undertaking the Leicester museum

\(^\text{147}\) Pearson, Curators, culture and conflict.

studies course were required to study the reports, so their recommendations helped to shape the thinking of a new generation of museum professionals. However, the reports’ more substantial ambitions for large-scale reform and restructuring remained unfulfilled. Any grand vision for new investment was out of tune with the political mood under the Conservative governments in power after 1979 but became a possibility again with the election of a Labour government in 1997. The publication of the *Renaissance in the Regions* report in 2001 represents a kind of conclusion to the narrative of attempted reform going back at least as far as 1928 in that it did succeed in securing substantial additional funding for non-national museums and in significantly rearranging the regional museum landscape, for a time at least.

### 3.3 Expansion and diversification: the changing shape of the museum sector

The Rosse Report, which forms the starting point for my study, was based on a survey of all the non-national museums then in existence in the UK, with information about staffing levels, funding and visitor figures. The report offers a useful baseline for exploring change in the shape of the sector and this section draws on Adrian Babbidge’s comprehensive comparison of the shape of the sector as described in the Rosse Report and at the end of the century.

The Rosse Report lists 876 non-national museums, using data from 1959/60. Babbidge attempts a like-for-like comparison with the shape of the sector in 2000 by excluding some of the Rosse Report list (such as those museums which were only at the planning stage) and using estimates for the broader museum sector in 2000, rather than the more definitive but narrower list of Registered museums. His approach suggests a total of 822 non-national museums in the UK in 1960, compared to 2366 in 2000. While the exact figures are open to challenge, what is irrefutable is that there was a massive expansion of the non-national museum sector in the period under review. There was also a major shift in terms of the types of museums making up the sector. Babbidge estimates that in 1960, local authority museums made up 50% of the total museum sector in the UK, compared to 32% in 2000. By contrast, independent museums made up only 20% of the sector in 1960, compared to 50% in 2000. This shift meant that there were more

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149 Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.
150 Davies, *Renaissance in the Regions*.
independent museums than any other single category of museum in the UK by 2000, although of course many of these independent museums were very small.\textsuperscript{152}

These changes in the nature of the sector had two important implications in terms of changing approaches to curatorship in these forty years. Firstly, the expansion of the sector meant that there was much more scope for the growth of new ideas, more opportunity for curators to meet other curators and to move around during their careers, and more scope for diversity and plurality: more and different institutions demanded more and different curators. (Within existing museums, curatorial numbers also increased, and this is discussed further in Chapter 4.) Secondly, the growth of independent museums, whose business model suggested different imperatives to those driving public-sector museums and which often used new ways of communicating with audiences, changed the nature of the sector. The role of independent museums in driving change is discussed further in later chapters.

In 1960, local government museums were almost wholly reliant on funding from their governing authority,\textsuperscript{153} with the CUKT the only significant external source of support.\textsuperscript{154} This funding pattern changed significantly over the next four decades as funding opportunities and support structures for museums diversified, bringing with them new sources of advice and influence. This diversification of funding meant that a much more diverse range of funding priorities combined to influence museum practice;

\textsuperscript{152} Limiting the sample to Registered museums gives a slightly different picture. In 2001, there were 1432 non-national Registered museums in England, of which 37\% were managed by local authorities and 39\% by independent trusts. (Source: Renaissance in the Regions. Figures are England-only.) The discrepancy is explained by the fact that a significant number of smaller independent museums were not Registered.

\textsuperscript{153} Local authority budgets were comprised of a combination of locally- and centrally-raised revenue. For a history of the shifting balance between these two sources of income, see Tony Travers and Lorena Esposito The Decline and Fall of Local Democracy: a history of local government finance, (London: Policy Exchange, 2003). In general, the trend throughout the twentieth century was for a growing proportion of local government funding to come from central government budgets, rather than being raised locally. The implication of this pattern of revenue generation was that local authorities had limited power to increase spending, powers further constrained by the Thatcher government’s reforms of local government finance.

\textsuperscript{154} For an account of the CUKT’s approach to funding see William Robertson, Welfare in trust : a history of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1913-1963 ( Dunfermline: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1964)
new opportunities (and new pressure) to generate revenue encouraged museums to be more entrepreneurial. In addition, funding from both central and local government became much more ‘strategic’, with museums being expected to deliver specific outcomes in return for the funding they received.\textsuperscript{155} Specific developments are discussed below but the overall trend in terms of funding was one of increasing opportunity, combined with increasing external pressure on museums to deliver on external agendas.

3.4 The Rosse Report and developments of the 1960s

In 1960, the Harold Macmillan’s Conservative Government announced that it would sponsor a review of non-national museums. Although this was a national policy review, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury\textsuperscript{156} stressed that the instigation of the inquiry should not be seen to undermine the principle that local museums were the responsibility of local authorities, not of central government:

\begin{quote}
The capital and maintenance costs of such local museums and galleries are a local responsibility, and the present Government have always maintained, and continue to maintain, that this is right and proper.\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

Having determined ‘what these provincial museums contain; which of them are live institutions, needing help and encouragement; what are their essential needs’, the review was to inform local authorities and to ‘encourage a more lively enterprise in the discharge of their responsibilities in this matter’. The review was charged with identifying how museums ‘can best be encouraged to help themselves’, with the emerging regional bodies which were later to become the Area Museum Councils (AMCs) identified as a likely model to follow.

\textsuperscript{155} Babbidge characterises this as a shift from funding as ‘largesse’ to funding as ‘investment’. ‘Forty Years On’, p.26.
\textsuperscript{156} Until 1965 and again for some of the 1970s, the government minister responsible for the arts was one of the Treasury ministers. This meant that the arts did not have an independent minister arguing their case for funding to the Treasury: their potential advocate was also one of the holders of the purse strings, which undoubtedly impacted on their ability to secure additional funding.
\textsuperscript{157} Financial Secretary, Speech to the House of Commons, 26\textsuperscript{th} February, 1960, quoted in SCMG, \textit{Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries}, pp.77 – 79, extracts from p.78.
The government was keen to direct the report’s attention towards local authority funding and self-help and to dampen down any expectations of substantial national funding or national help for local museums in advance, precisely because securing national funding had been a long-held ambition in the museum sector. The Miers and Markham reports had both seen central government as a major part of the solution to the problems of local museums. During World War Two, the MA consulted on a policy for the reconstruction of museums, eventually published in 1945 under the title *Museums and Art Galleries, a National Service: a post-war policy.* Pearson has demonstrated how these proposals for national support were repeatedly snubbed by the Treasury during the 1950s. The Financial Secretary’s speech served as a warning that, in the 1960s, a ‘national service’ of museums was definitely not on the cards. If museums were to improve it would be through self-help and co-operation and through better support from local authorities: central government was not to be seen as the solution.

The review was carried out by the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries (SCMG). Although SCMG’s remit included improving relationships between national and non-national museums, its membership had been exclusively made up of national museum nominees until 1958 and its attention remained heavily weighted towards the national museums. The review was its first serious attempt to consider non-national museums. The resulting report was popularly known as the Rosse Report after the SCMG Chairman who led the inquiry, the Earl of Rosse. It accepted the Treasury’s constraints only in part, emphasising the need for cooperation, self-help and for local authorities to take a greater interest in their museums, but also calling for significant additional investment by central government.

The report’s major recommendations were for a series of reviews of museum provision in every local authority area, the extension of the system of AMCs and a series of capital grants in a system of match funding for improvements to buildings and displays. The latter two recommendations both depended on significant additional government investment. The report also recommended that museums should have their own full time member of staff, separate from those running the library service, addressing a long-

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159 Pearson, *Curators, culture and conflict.*

standing grievance of many people who worked in museums, who felt that museums were the poor relation compared to libraries.\textsuperscript{161} Local authorities and other employing authorities were recommended to improve salary levels for curators and to ensure that appointees were adequately qualified. Recommendations in terms of training included training posts at the national and larger provincial museums and government support for the MA’s training programmes, which were then run entirely by the voluntary effort of senior museum professionals. Other recommendations included government funding for the establishment of a Circulation Department for the Science Museum, to provide touring exhibitions to regional museums and to complement that already provided by the V&A, and a very substantial increase in the V&A’s Purchase Grant Fund for local museums.

In total the report recommended an annual additional central government expenditure of £450,000 which it claimed was ‘very modest’.\textsuperscript{162} The government’s initial response was very modest indeed, providing only £10,000 which was earmarked as funding for the AMCs, against a recommendation under that heading of £150,000. The government also changed the landscape for museums by bringing forward the Public Libraries and Museums Act, 1964. This repealed all previous legislation relating to local authorities and museums and established new, distinct, conditions for the management of both kinds of service. It did not compel authorities providing both museums and libraries to manage them separately and while local government was given the duty to provide ‘a comprehensive and efficient library service’\textsuperscript{163}, the legislation regarding museums was only permissive, establishing that local authorities ‘may provide and maintain museums

\textsuperscript{161} The concern about the subordination of museums to libraries dates at least as far back as a report prepared for the conference of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1887, whose authors worried that ‘where the museum is in connection with a free library...the museum is not conducted with the necessary vigour and often falls into disrepute.’ British Association of Science, ‘Report of the Committee consisting of Professor Valentine Ball, Mr H.G.Fordham, Professor Haddon, Professor Hillhouse, Mr John Hopkinson, Dr Macfarlane, Professor Milnes Marshall, Mr F.T. Mott (secretary), Dr Traquair and Dr H Woodward, appointed for the purposes of preparing a report on the Provincial Museums of the United Kingdom’ in \textit{Report of the fifty seventh meeting of the British Association of the Advancement of Science held at Manchester in August and September 1887} (London, John Murray, 1888), pp.97-129 (p.119). This concern recurs in both the Miers and Markham reports.

\textsuperscript{162} SCMG, \textit{Survey}, p.75

and art galleries’, leaving museums in a relatively weaker position as a non-statutory service. However, the Act did confirm that local authorities were able to fund advisory services for museums and to provide funding for independent museums, even if the beneficiaries were outside their immediate area. Over time, this had a significant impact on the museum sector, enabling the growth of both the independent museum sector and the AMCs, which were to prove significant in driving change in the broader museum sector, although they had to wait for a new government to receive substantial funding. Their impact is discussed in Chapter 5.

In October 1964, a Labour Government came to power under Harold Wilson. Wilson appointed the first minister with dedicated responsibility for the arts, Jennie Lee and the government published a White Paper on the Arts in February 1965, the first ever major government policy document to consider the whole of the arts sector in this way. Lee’s appointment and the publication of the White Paper raised expectations but then disappointed many in the museum sector. The Paper associated ‘old-fashioned gloom and undue solemnity’ with many established venues for the arts and contrasted this with the ‘agreeable environment’ of new arts centres. It asserted that some museums and art galleries had ‘failed to move with the times’ and had a ‘cheerless and unwelcoming air that alienates all but the specialist and the dedicated’.

Jennie Lee addressed the 1966 MA conference. Speaking before Lee in his Presidential Address, Sir Frank Francis deplored the ‘nonsensical division between what are called the living arts – the drama, music, painting, dancing – and the dead arts – which include the collection and display of antiquities and works of art.’ He reported that many MA members had responded to the publication of the White Paper with ‘dismay and despondency – not to say also considerable irritation’. In fact the White Paper’s implied criticism was not limited to museums in particular, but was rather directed at

164 Ibid., para. 12.1 (my emphasis).
165 Initially a Treasury Minister, the post of Arts Minister moved to the Department for Education and Science in 1965, signalling a new approach to funding the arts.
167 Ibid., p.5.
168 Ibid., p.5.
170 Ibid.
established arts provision in general. But if a sense of being singled out for criticism was unfounded, the museum community did have cause to be disappointed with the relative paucity of attention given to museums by the new government. While the White paper noted that the Rosse Report had ‘commented unfavourably on the small amounts of money spent’ on many non-national museums, its proposals did not include redress. The government signalled a seriousness of purpose in its approach to the arts in general by moving responsibility for the Arts from the Treasury to the Department of Education and Science, and by increasing the grant to the Arts Council very substantially, but proposals concerning museums were limited to a doubling of the V&A’s Purchase Grant Fund to £108,000 in 1965-6 and a promise to review the basis on which Exchequer grants to the AMCs were made.

Lee had noted in her speech to the MA conference that her aspiration to draw up a ten-year plan for museums could not be taken forward because of economic difficulties. This must have sounded somewhat hollow to people who worked in museums when the arts were seeing such substantial increases. In her speech to the conference, Jennie Lee denied that she thought that museums were ‘all full of stuffed birds’ and insisted that she recognised their potential but argued strongly that ‘museums are now functioning in a changing world and that we must do our best to make people see that they belong’. This emphasis on broadening museum audiences, and being more responsive to their needs, was yet to find a substantial echo in the sector: Lee’s intervention demonstrates that policy directions suggested by government do not always elicit a response. It was not backed by financial incentives, and, perhaps more significantly, did not capture the mood of the sector. The Labour governments of 1964 to 1970 did oversee significant expansion in central government funding for local museums, through the AMCs and the V&A’s Purchase Grant Fund. But this investment did not amount to a coordinated ‘plan’ and regional museums were still very much dependent on local circumstances. These were about to be significantly reshaped through the process of local government reform.

171 A Policy for the Arts, p.7.
173 Ibid., p.96.
174 Ibid., p.97.
3.5 Local government reform and the changing status of museums

The Wilson government initiated the process of local government reform, with inquiries commissioned in 1964. However, the reforms finally came into effect a decade later, under a Conservative government, on 1st April 1974. In 1964, local government in England was still a complicated and inconsistent patchwork of authorities with differing remits. Reform was intended to establish a uniform and consistent approach, which reflected contemporary patterns of population distribution. In the intervening ten years there was significant political disagreement over the appropriate approach. The Labour government favoured a system of unitary authorities covering the whole country, the approach recommended by a Royal Commission chaired by Lord Redcliffe-Maud, which reported in 1969.\footnote{Great Britain, Royal Commission on Local Government in England, Report 1966-1969 (London: HMSO, 1969, Cmnd.4040).} The Conservative opposition favoured a two-tier system, with responsibilities divided between County and District Councils in all but the largest urban areas.

The Museums Association feared the implications of reform. The report of a Committee chaired by George Mallaby on possible staffing structures, published in 1967, had recommended that there be a maximum of six Chief Officers in any local authority.\footnote{Great Britain, Committee on the Staffing of Local Government. Staffing of local government: report of the committee (London: HMSO, 1967). Known as the Mallaby Report.} If implemented, this was likely to mean that the museum director was not a chief officer but rather reported to one. In a policy document published in 1968 the MA argued, that while matters of policy should always be referred to the appropriate committee, ‘most other matters of importance arising in museums and galleries require a specialized academic and technical background. It would be wrong that such decisions should be subject to the approval or veto of any official unqualified professionally for museum work.’\footnote{Museums Association, Statement of Policy by the Museums Association Council on Local Government Reform, (London: Museums Association, n.d. but interleaved with Museums Bulletin vol. 8, no.2, May 1968), para. 2.} The subordination of ‘professional’ museum staff to the management of others who were not museum professionals continued to cause concern in museums for the next two decades, and was a significant policy focus for the MA. The MA was to prove entirely ineffective in defending museums’ interests in this respect and museums moved...
further and further from the centre of power in most authorities. Its 1968 policy statement hints at some reasons why the MA’s intervention may have been ineffective in the face of changes in local government: its focus was on protecting professional status rather than finding ways for museums to flourish within the new arrangements.

The Mallaby Report also signalled what was to be the beginning of a shift of power within local authorities and the broader public sector. It argued that local authorities needed a Clerk who should be seen as the leader of the organisation (effectively a proto-Chief Executive) and that this leader could be from any one of the professions, arguing that specialist knowledge was in this role of less consequence than ‘distinctive gifts of personality and leadership.’\(^{178}\) A contemporary editorial in *Public Administration* questioned this, suggesting that this attitude showed a ‘lack of confidence in professional knowledge and training’ and was out of step with the current ‘writing up of “specialists”’.\(^{179}\) This comment highlights two opposing developments within the public sector during this period: the phenomenon of specialisation and professionalisation, clashing head on with an emerging belief in the efficacy of generic management approaches. Local government did move in the direction of generic management in the decades after reform and this tension between the imperatives of specialisation and the demands of management was significant in shaping change in the museum sector. Over time, local authorities became a context less receptive to the influence of specialist professional groups and specialist opinion, including that of museum curators. People who worked in museums were driven to seek other ways to ensure that their professional standards carried weight in a broader context; this was arguably a factor in the establishment of both the Code of Ethics and the Registration scheme, discussed in Chapter 5. The implications of the rise of generic management approaches within museums are discussed at more length in Chapter 4.


\(^{179}\) ‘Reflections on Maud and Mallaby’, p.240.
3.6 Reform enacted

Anticipating local government reform, the MA established a committee chaired by Francis Cheetham, then Director of Norwich Castle Museum, to consider ways of reforming the provision of museum services. But before it reported, the Conservatives won the 1970 general election, committed to introducing a two-tier system of districts and counties for local government. In his Presidential Address to the MA conference that year, Trevor Walden anticipated that a two-tier system would have damaging consequences for the museum sector and that while some services would get larger, ‘many smaller museums will find themselves fossilized with inadequate finances and diminishing status’. The new government commissioned a review to look at how responsibilities should be split between the two new levels of local government. While the committee’s report (informally known as the Bains report) allocated most services to either county or district level, museums were among a small group of services identified as belonging in either tier of local government, and the provision of museum services was made a ‘concurrent’ power in the Local Government Act of 1972. This meant that in every part of the country, decisions had to be made about which of the two tiers of government would run the museum service and whether there would be cooperation between different authorities in any one area. The consequences of these decisions helped to shape the landscape for local authority museums in the subsequent three decades.

181 Six of the counties, all in heavily built-up areas of England, were designated as Metropolitan County Councils, subdivided into Metropolitan Districts. There were special arrangements for the division of responsibilities within these councils which were to be abolished in 1986 (see below). For a simple overview of the structure which pertained in 1974 see the guide produced by the Office for National Statistics, *Local Government Restructuring*, [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/beginner-s-guide/administrative/our-changing-geography/local-government-restructuring/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/beginner-s-guide/administrative/our-changing-geography/local-government-restructuring/index.html) (last accessed 18 November 2013).
3.7 The Wright Report: reshaping the landscape for museums?

While the Bains Committee was considering its recommendations, the minister with responsibility for the arts, Lord Eccles, commissioned an inquiry to look into the ways in which museums might respond to local government reorganisation. The inquiry was undertaken by a directly-appointed committee, chaired by Claud Wright, the senior civil servant with responsibility for the arts, who was also a serious amateur geologist, palaeontologist and archaeologist. The committee included members of SCMG but also leading directors from both national and non-national museums. This was seen as giving the subsequent report more authority than the Rosse Report, which had been carried out by SCMG alone. However, there was some frustration in the sector about the committee’s approach, with ‘strong disappointment’ when Wright, speaking at the MA conference in 1972, avoided giving any indication of the committee’s likely conclusions. Its report was published in February 1973.

By the time the Wright Report was published, the legislation enabling local government reform had already been enacted and the committee had to work with the constraint that both County and District Councils would be running museum services after reorganisation. Its report urged cooperation and joint working between groups of districts and between districts and the counties within which they were situated to avoid a period of ‘reorganisation blight’ in museums and to provide a more comprehensive service to the public. The report recommended that effective cooperation be achieved by ‘establishing a limited number of centres of excellence’, either single museums or groups of museums, which would receive central government funding. Funding would

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184 The Conservative Government returned responsibility for the arts to the Treasury, and Eccles was Paymaster General, a Treasury Minister.
186 Rosse himself, writing in 1975, argued that the Wright Report had been more authoritative than the report he chaired, as a ‘direct ministerial initiative’. Rt Hon the Earl of Rosse, ‘Interaction between national and regional museums’, Museums Journal vol.75, no.3, 1975, 108-9, p.108.
188 Provincial Museums, p.52.
189 Ibid., p.49.
be channelled via a new network of provincial museum councils, which would do the work of the existing AMCs but also take on an oversight and leadership role. The report also recommended the establishment of a stronger central body for museums which would take on an advisory role to government and also be responsible for channelling funding to the provincial councils.

The report also reiterated many of the recommendations of the Rosse Report, and its pre-war predecessors: greater investment in buildings and training, autonomy from librarians and an improvement in salaries and career structures in museums. There were some new areas of concern, reflecting emerging trends in the museum sector. The report placed more emphasis than its predecessors on the importance of good communication, recommending that larger museums should either have their own display staff or use qualified external designers and that the larger museums should assist the smaller museums in display. It also gave new emphasis to the importance of ‘proper conservation’ of collections, arguing that while the dangers of inadequate approaches had long been understood, new techniques were changing the nature of conservation, with an increasing need for specialist staff. Again, the report saw the need for cooperation between museums to share specialist staff. The report also recommended that the idea of an accreditation scheme for museums be taken forward as a means to raise standards.

Almost as soon as the report was published, the government rejected one of its central recommendations: the provision of central government funding for museum buildings. Lord Eccles did, however, indicate that he was prepared to increase funding to the AMCs and to consider increasing their remit in line with the report’s proposals for provincial councils. Lord Eccles resigned his post in 1973, to be replaced by Norman St John Stevas. In 1974, the Conservatives lost power and a new Labour government under James Callaghan came to power, with Hugh Jenkins as arts minister. These rapid changes of minister meant that there was little progress on the Wright recommendations and momentum was lost. The problem of ministerial change was exacerbated by the relative weakness of SCMG, which was short staffed and lacked

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190 Ibid., p.61.
capacity to take the initiative. After some delay, SCMG and the MA appointed a number of expert working groups to consider which museums might merit designation as centres of excellence on the basis of the strength of their collections and the Commission set up a working party, under the chairmanship of Sir Arthur Drew, to consider how the Wright recommendations might be taken forward more broadly. However both processes were far too slow to influence the shape of provision: the final report (discussed below) was not published until 1978, by which time the shape of services following the reorganisation of 1974 was already well established.

Consequently, there was a piecemeal approach to provision and, in some areas, duplication, with both county and district authorities running parallel museum services. In 1979, Francis Cheetham, by then Director of Norfolk Museums Service and President of the MA, made the assessment that the effects of reorganisation had been ‘completely uneven’, observing that while some curators and museums had been ‘totally submerged beneath a recreation/leisure department and [had] lost what influence and prestige they ever had’, other stronger museums had been able to improve their position as a result of reorganisation. Cheetham’s own service was one of those which had emerged stronger. Norfolk, along with Tyne and Wear was one of the new County Councils which had established a relatively well-funded county-wide service, achieved through a joint management committee of County and District Councils. Leicestershire and Oxfordshire County Councils established museums services on their own account, with some cooperation with District Councils. In other counties there was awkward duplication. In Shropshire for example, while the County Council considered establishing a county-wide service, some districts opted to ‘go it alone’ and run their own small services, rather than become part of the county service, which was then very small. In Hampshire, a more substantial County service emerged by bringing together some of the smaller services including museums in Basingstoke and Alton, but the larger cities such as Southampton and Portsmouth retained their own services.

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192 Rosse, ‘Interaction between national and regional museums’.
193 Sir Arthur Drew was a retired civil servant and national museum trustee who would become Chairman of the Standing Commission in 1978.
In most district authorities, museums were held to have done badly out of the changes, with museums moved further from the seats of power and influence in local authorities. These difficulties were exacerbated by the difficult funding climate. The recession and the oil crisis of the mid-1970s and the IMF loan in 1976 placed significant pressure on public spending. In 1975, Tony Crosland, Secretary of State for the Environment, had famously warned ‘the party is over’ for local government spending. Detailing the results of this financial restraint for museums in 1977, Patrick Boylan, then a member of the MA’s Council and Director of museums in Exeter, commented ‘the great majority of museum staff can fairly reply: “What party? We’ve never seen the invitation.”’. Boylan asserted that the cuts in local authority spending on museums that year were the ‘most savage’ that had ever been seen, even as the sector was attempting to implement the recommendations of the Wright Report.

While the whole of local government faced significant cuts, museums were made particularly vulnerable by the effects of reorganisation. As museums became parts of larger departments – whether education or leisure and recreation – the people who ran them mostly lost their direct access to elected members through the local authority committee system, as the MA had feared they might when it anticipated reform in 1968. The sense that the new structure threatened professionalism was strong. Again the concern related to the inability of those running museums to have their professional standards and professional opinions taken seriously. For example, Max Hebditch, then Director of London’s Guildhall Museum, argued that the position of museums in the new district authorities threatened the ‘integrity of museums as academic and educational institutions and the professional integrity of the staff who serve in them’.

The MA’s newsletter, the Museums Bulletin, published complaints from museum curators who were no longer allowed to sign their own correspondence, so that even a reply to a public enquiry about the collection had to be signed by the Director of Leisure. One curator argued that this reflected ‘the loss of autonomy, the decision-making process and the academic principles on which the whole service has been built.

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196 C. Warman, ‘Councils are told to curb rise in spending’. The Times, 10th May, 1975, p. 1.
198 Ibid.
over the last century or so’. In these comments, professionalism is again seen to be inherent in ‘autonomy’, rather than the opportunity to contribute to a community through participation in a larger service. This sense of being subsumed in departments which did not understand or respect the special nature of museums or their work, and this at a time of funding constraint, shaped the nature of curatorial professionalisation in this period.

The tensions inherent in public sector professionalism were exacerbated for people who worked in museums by these changes in local government following the 1974 reorganisation. Low salaries aggravated the problem. Perkin identifies a clear hierarchy in the relative standing of different professions, indicated by relative salary levels. His analysis suggests that in 1970, lawyers and doctors were the highest status professionals, reflected in their rates of remuneration. They were followed by top civil servants and academics (earning upwards of £58 a week), then architects, accountants and engineers, followed by school teachers, clerks and people in similar roles, with salaries around £30 a week, then manual and routine office workers with salaries in the £20-£30 a week bracket.

Job advertisements in *Museums Bulletin* from April to June 1970 provide an indication of where museums would fit in Perkin’s hierarchy. The post of Director of Bristol City Museum was advertised in that period at a salary with a weekly equivalent of £58-65, putting the holder of that post in the same bracket as higher civil servants and academics. There were seventeen Keeper or Assistant Keeper posts in local authority museums advertised during that period, with weekly equivalent salaries ranging from £17 to £44. In general, larger museums offered higher salaries: only Liverpool Museum offered a Keeper post on the top salary quoted above. The great majority of the salaries offered were in the range of £22 – 30 a week, suggesting that all but the more senior curators or those working in the largest local authority museums were likely to earn slightly less than school teachers or clerks, putting them firmly towards the bottom of Perkin’s hierarchy of professionals. The Rosse Report had noted that some curators responsible for running local authority museums and almost all ‘subordinate’ local authority museum staff were paid ‘salaries at which a man with a family cannot travel,

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and an antiquarian of ability must refuse election to the Society of Antiquaries because he cannot afford the subscription." 202 Moreover, local government museum employees were paid much less than people with equivalent responsibilities in national museums: the Wright report estimated that local government salaries were around two thirds the level of those in national museums. 203 For some in local authority museums, low salaries exacerbated a sense of being professionally beleaguered.

During the 1970s, then, the processes of professionalisation in museums were shaped by a twin emphasis on status and standards. These concerns were given urgency by the results of local government reorganisation and continuing low pay. The professional developments of the 1970s discussed in later chapters need to be understood in the context of these organisational upheavals and the perceived threat to the status of specialist expertise.

3.8 The Drew Report: still attempting change

When the committee appointed to identify potential centres of excellence reported in 1978, its report, known in the sector as the Drew Report after its Chairman, had the official title Framework for a System of Museums. 204 Although the report came too late to influence the processes of reorganisation, the title reflected an aspiration to rationalise the museum sector and bring coherence to its disparate elements. The proposed ‘framework’ had six elements: the centres of excellence themselves, which would be supported by ongoing grant aid, capital grants for other major collections, occasional capital grants for major projects, a network of County-wide bodies which would ensure cooperation and joint working between museums in their area, strengthened AMCs with doubled funding and a central body for museums. It also reiterated the recommendation in the Wright report that the MA Accreditation scheme should be extended to improve standards across the museum sector, and that this should be the responsibility of the central body.

The Drew Report was published in November 1978, six months before the general election which brought Thatcher’s Conservative government to power. Its substantial contributions to the future shape of the museum sector were the impetus it gave to the

203 DES, Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.22.
work on improving standards, and the creation of a stronger, central body for museums. Some of the work of the new body, the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC), is discussed in Chapter 5. The report’s broader vision for a consistent framework for museums was decisively out of step with the political mood. There were very significant policy developments under the Conservative governments of the next 18 years, but they did not emerge as the direct result of the kind of large scale government intervention in the museum sector envisaged by the Drew report, but from a new public sector funding culture.

3.9 Thatcher, museums and the new economy

The Conservative government which came to power in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher was wedded to a monetarist solution to the economic turmoil of the 1970s. Its rhetoric emphasised the need to shrink the public sector, which it saw as part of the problem not the solution, and Thatcher was personally antipathetic to the arts and media. However, her government did see arts, heritage and the broader tourism sector as having a role to play in regeneration and in rebalancing the economy away from manufacturing. A green paper on tourism from 1985 explained that the government’s interest in tourism stemmed from ‘the industry’s great potential for growth, job creation and enterprise’. The cultural sector’s perceived potential role in regeneration brought funding opportunities, as did the government’s attempt to create jobs and training opportunities in response to the growing crisis of unemployment. These new sources of funding helped to reshape the museum sector during the 1970s and 1980s.

Many museums secured funding from government funding for schemes to improve the tourism infrastructure, distributed via the Regional Tourist Boards. Although the funding could not be used for curatorial and conservation work, many museums nevertheless successfully applied for funding for projects including new and improved public displays, as well as better visitor facilities such as cafés and toilets. Some museums also made use of various regeneration funding schemes targeted at areas of

industrial decline. Babbidge estimates total investment from tourism and regeneration funding was worth around £5m a year to the sector during the 1980s (at 2005 prices). As a comparison, funding for the AMCs was worth an equivalent of £3.4m, so these new funding streams were a significant opportunity for museums.

The opportunity presented by job creation schemes was even more significant for museums. The schemes were not a creation of the Thatcher government, but continued to have a significant impact for much of her administration. From late 1976 to the end of the 1980s, museums made extensive use of trainees funded by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The MSC was established by the Heath government in 1973 with responsibility for adult training, including a number of schemes for unemployed people, involving on-the-job training through temporary work. The MSC paid the salaries of the trainees and made a small contribution to the costs of the projects they worked on. The MSC’s first training programme, the Job Creation Programme (JCP), which ran from 1976 until 1978, had a very broad remit: any organisation could apply for trainees to work on almost any project that could be shown to have community benefit. Reviewing the JCP as it came towards its end in 1978, Frank Atkinson, Director of Beamish, argued that it had ‘left an indelible record in the recent history of museum work in this country…many museum departments and collections are now better catalogued, conserved or housed than they were, and indeed better than they otherwise could have been for many a year.’

Later MSC programmes were also used by museums including the Special Temporary Employment Programme, the Urban Programme and, in particular, the Community Programme. These had a somewhat narrower remit and MSC auditors visited some participating museums in 1984 and required changes to Community Programme schemes which they felt were not operating under the rules of the scheme. But

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208 Babbidge, ‘Forty Years On’.
211 Tony Hirst ‘The Community Programme’ AIM Bulletin vol.8, no.5, October 1985, p.4. The Museums Bulletin in March 1984 reprinted a letter to Frank Atkinson, Director of Beamish, from Peter Morrison at the Department of Employment explaining that the Department’s concerns were that some projects were being used to ‘substitute for normal business’ or the ‘day to day running of museums’, rather than
museums continued to find ways to make the schemes work for them. Many museums used trainees, who were often graduates in a relevant discipline, to inventory their collections and the implications of this incursion into the traditional boundaries of professional practice are discussed further below. Other museums used MSC trainees as unskilled labour and in particular many open-air and other historic site museums relied heavily on MSC labour for building projects and to establish their sites.212 A survey by the newsletter for the body which represented independent museums in 1988 estimated that 40 museums relied on MSC funding for 95% of their income and reported that even some larger museums were heavily dependent on MSC resources, with the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port receiving 40% of its funding from the MSC.213

Babbidge has attempted to quantify the extent of MSC funding on the museum sector. He estimates that, in the late 1980s, MSC funding was worth an equivalent of £24.2m a year (at 2005 prices). This dwarfs the annual funding for the AMCs (worth an equivalent of £3.4m at the time, as noted above).214 This finding is highly significant to understanding the nature of change in the museum sector during this period. The AMCs came about as a result of a long battle to secure national support for non-national museums. They were the public face of a professionalism based on shared values and improving standards. Museums’ use of MSC funding was, by contrast, unplanned, ad hoc and opportunistic. But, if Babbidge’s estimate is reasonable, the MSC contributed up to seven times as much funding a year to regional museums as the AMCs. The availability of tourism, regeneration and job creation funding schemes was significant not just for the resources they brought to museums but because the use of these schemes represented a substantial culture change. In accessing this funding, museums were beginning to adapt to be more opportunistic, to balance professionalism and pragmatism, to take funding where it was available, and to work on a project basis, all

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212 Perhaps not all of these ‘trainees’ were very committed to the task. A joking footnote to a circular to AIM Committee members in 1986 reads: ‘Quote of the week: we employ 130 MSC people here at Beamish which equals approximately 10 ordinary hard-working blokes.’ (Neil Cossons, Circular dated 11 October 1986, AIM Archive, University of Leicester, File BM/8)


approaches that would help to reshape the nature of museums’ work over the coming decades.

Inevitably, given the nature of the cultural change represented by these funding approaches, there was ambivalence in contemporary attitudes towards the MSC trainees in the museum sector. In his presidential address to the MA conference in 1980, Dennis Farr argued that the injection of additional resources had ‘cosmetic effects’ masking underlying underfunding.\(^{215}\) There was also concern about the impact of the trainees’ work on the standards of museum work. On the one hand, as Atkinson’s comment above suggests, people who worked in museums were delighted to have additional resources to enable them to implement programmes which would not otherwise have been feasible. On the other hand, there was anxiety about work not being completed to appropriate standards, or professionalism being undermined. The heyday of the MSC schemes coincided with the early days of the drive to improve standards in museum documentation, through the approach known as IRGMA, after the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association, which initiated the programme.\(^{216}\) In a comment piece in \textit{Museums Bulletin} in 1976, Philip Doughty – a leading geology curator and a prominent advocate of new approaches to practice – had argued for continuing funding for IRGMA, asserting that its withdrawal would be a blow to ‘the hopes of a generation of museum workers’ who had invested energy in IRGMA, seeing it as ‘the dawning of museum professionalism’.\(^{217}\) Many documentation projects in museums using the IRGMA system relied on MSC trainees to enter data and, writing the following year, another curator, Elspeth King, quoted Doughty, querying: ‘[if] IRGMA is indeed meant to herald “the dawning of museum professionalism” why are we employing amateurs to work the system?’\(^{218}\) King went on to answer her own question, noting that under-funding left most museums with no choice but to make use of the availability of unskilled trainees who were like ‘manna from heaven’ to under-resourced museums.\(^{219}\)

\(^{219}\) \textit{Ibid}. 

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This exchange encapsulates the paradox of MSC projects in museums. They enabled museums to implement more ambitious programmes and, in the case of IRGMA, to adopt approaches which were time-consuming and more ‘professional’ than previous approaches. But such approaches were only possible because of the availability of these trainees. The use of unskilled trainees may also have compromised the quality of some of the data and may have encouraged a culture which focused on gathering data without giving serious consideration to how it might be used or how audiences might engage with it.\(^{220}\) Economic difficulty and government antipathy meant that improvements in professional practice could only be implemented through this kind of compromise.

### 3.10 Local government in the 1980s

With the government seeking to control all public spending, in his Presidential address to the MA conference in 1980, Dennis Farr spoke of ‘fierce pressure’ to constrain spending in local authorities, asserting that times were harder for museums even than in the recession of the mid-1970s.\(^{221}\) There was a growing disparity between local government and national museums in the early 1980s. Analysing the projected levels of government funding for museums included in the 1981 budget (directly to national museums, and indirectly to local authority museums, via the government’s support to local authorities) for 1981-2 to 1983-4, Patrick Boylan observed that the national museums looked likely to fare much better than local authority museums. In 1981-2, their funding was projected to be 22.7% above the level of funding in 1975-6 in real terms, whereas local authority funding for 1981-2 would be 18.8% below the 1975-6 level again in real terms.\(^{222}\)

Alongside funding constraint, another significant change in the context for local authority museums in the 1980s came in a white paper in 1983, when the government proposed the abolition of the Greater London Council and the six metropolitan county councils established in 1974. This was presented as a ‘practical’ attempt to improve

\(^{220}\) In an interview for this study, Diane Lees, herself a one-time MSC trainee and later a documentation specialist with the Museum Documentation Association observed, ‘All this data seemed to exist, but whether it was actually useful is hard to say.’ Interview with the author, 21 March 2012.

\(^{221}\) Farr, ‘Presidential Address’, p.131.

efficiency  but was widely seen as being in part politically motivated, since the county councils all had Labour administrations by the early 1980s and were sites of vocal opposition to Thatcherism. The proposed abolition forced a change of governance on those museums which were managed by the abolished councils. The government’s initial proposal had recognised that some of the museums and galleries affected could be said to be of ‘national significance’ and that, rather than being transferred to the existing lower tier authorities which would take on the abolished counties’ functions, these should receive some national funding and be managed as branches of existing national museums. In Liverpool, it had been proposed that the Walker Art Gallery should become a branch of the Tate, and the other Merseyside museums should revert to local political control. This was met with considerable local resistance. Suzanne MacLeod provides a vivid account of the clandestine political manoeuvrings of senior managers in Liverpool. (Clandestine because the Merseyside County Council’s official policy was that it would not communicate or cooperate with the government in any matter to do with the restructuring). Their covert negotiations and the overt campaigning of some high-profile supporters were successful and the Merseyside Museums were nationalised, becoming the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside on 1st April 1986. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 4, the Liverpool museums became much better staffed as a result, their relative strength coming to provide powerful illustration of underfunding in other regional museums fifteen years later in the *Renaissance in Regions* report.

People working in local authority museums in the 1980s recall a combative atmosphere, arising from the combination of financial stringency and the new structures placing museums within larger departments. Sam Mullins, Director of St Albans Museums from 1987 described the tactics necessary to succeed within the Leisure Department, which was managed by a ‘gung ho’ Director whose background was as a Woolworths store

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225 *Streamlining the Cities*, p.8.

manager. Mullins recalled consciously adopting a ‘Leisure Department persona’ to be effective in management meetings in the wider department: recalling that an approach based on ‘defensive museum stuff would just have been laughed out of court’. The Director had told Mullins that his predecessor had described his work as a ‘vocation’, clearly considering this a ludicrous assertion.\(^{227}\) His comment neatly illustrates the changing culture within local authority museums: an approach based on traditional, professional values (‘defensive museum stuff’) was being confronted by a new corporate culture. In their study of change in the museum sector, drawing on a series of oral history interviews with senior museum curators, Paine and Davies identify a conflict of loyalties as a ‘significant trend’ particularly from the 1980s onwards and that ‘some of the senior figures felt that they were increasingly pressured to choose between loyalty to the values of their profession and loyalty to the values of their employers.’\(^{228}\) Chapter 4 reflects further on the changing management culture within museums. Meanwhile, the climate for national museums in the late 1980s was characterised by an increasingly polarised debate between moderniser and traditionalists, between scholarship and audiences, and is explored further in Chapter 7.

### 3.11 Local government in the 1990s

The twin pressures on museums in local government in the 1980s were the need to demonstrate value for money and, for many, the consequences of operating within a non-specialist department, which might be unsympathetic to museums and their aims. These were exacerbated and continued to shape the nature of curatorial work in these museums during the 1990s. In 1991, a report by the MGC on local authority museums identified a difficult funding environment and unsatisfactory governance arrangements resulting from the 1974 reorganisation. The report found that over half of all museum directors in local authority museums were at or below the fourth tier in their departmental hierarchy, leading to difficulties in drawing attention to the needs of museums. These problems were exacerbated by the extension of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) from 1988 onwards, with local authority providers obliged to compete with external suppliers for the provision of services.\(^{229}\)

\(^{227}\) Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.


\(^{229}\) For an overview of the background to the 1988 act, and a contemporary discussion of the anticipated impact of CCT, see Patrick Boylan, ‘The Privatisation of Museum Services: the professional implications’,
museum provision was not subject to compulsory tendering but, as related services such as leisure centres were put out to tender in the early 1990s, museums were left as part of a small ‘rump’ in some authorities, which further undermined their status. In Nottingham, for example, a leisure department of over 800 staff shrank to a staff of only 70 in the years immediately following the introduction of CCT. This marginalisation was exacerbated by a further round of local government reorganisation in 1996, which resulted in the setting up of more unitary authorities, leading to extensive departmental restructuring in the authorities affected. Ian Lawley, who was working as a local authority museum director during this period, argued that the climate for museums in local authorities in the late 1990s was one of frequent restructuring, often leaving museums in uncongenial homes:

There is a movement towards fewer, larger departments within local authorities, and museum services find themselves located within a bewildering variety of configurations. These range from Environmental Services through Lifelong Learning to Community Information Services.

Managers with lower status within an authority lost the opportunity to influence policy and funding decisions which good access to a sympathetic elected member could offer, if they could demonstrate their importance in the right terms. Hull was one of the few local authorities where the head of museums was still a chief officer in the late 1980s and early 1990s. David Fleming, who worked there in the late 1980s, recalled that the service was getting annual grant increases, in spite of a difficult financial climate, and when other local authority museum services were being cut. He attributed this to Hull’s success in growing audiences and presenting a positive impression to local politicians,


230 Hilary McGowan. Interview with the author, 26 April 2012.


noting that the then Director knew that his staff were achieving things ‘he could sell to the councillors’, had personal credibility and could operate in a hostile, cut-throat environment. The Council was Labour-run and the Leader, Patrick Doyle, was a college lecturer and historian. Fleming recalled that Doyle ‘loved it when he began to see the museums having an impact on the big council estates in Hull’. Mick Stanley, who was a later director of museums in Hull, from 1993 to 1999, recalled that he lobbied Patrick Doyle directly to persuade him that the local authority should have a website and that the museum should have pages on it, at a time when the Council IT department was reluctant to make information publicly available in this way. Stanley took Doyle to an internet café to demonstrate the potential importance of the internet, an intervention which was ‘well out of protocol’ and for which he was ‘never forgiven’ by other senior managers in the local authority. Stanley argued that this episode illustrates the importance of ‘benign politicians, who understand.’

It certainly demonstrates the extent to which museums’ success in these new circumstances depended on having access to politicians, being able to demonstrate results that were in tune with their political priorities of local politicians and on managers’ personal effectiveness in an environment where competition for resources was intense.

The MGC’s 1991 report on local authority museums identified a new sense of potential for museums’ social impact, but was also sympathetic towards the concerns of traditional curatorship, advocating investment in research, for example, as being ‘by no means esoteric’ but ‘essential to the proper documentation and understanding of the collections’.

Another 1991 report was more bullish in tone. The report from the Audit Commission, The Road to Wigan Pier?, envisaged a new kind of relationship between local authority museums and local government, in which museums’ purposes were much more firmly linked to broader corporate objectives, arguing that local authorities needed to be clear why they were supporting museums and set them objectives accordingly. They envisaged that a different kind of curatorial practice would be needed to make this happen. The authors were not dismissive of collections care and research but these were seen as subordinate to the needs of visitors:

233 David Fleming, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.
234 Mick Stanley. Interview with the author, 30 November 2012.
235 MGC, Local Authority Museums, p.19
Conservation and documentation of collections, and research on them, are essential activities. But in some local authorities too little attention has been paid to attracting the public to the museum. Curators have sometimes concentrated on professional issues related to the collection rather than managerial ones such as marketing. As a result some local authority museums are worthy but dull.236

The language here is revealing: the report’s authors construed collections-based concerns as ‘professional’, but attracting audiences as a ‘managerial’ matter. This speaks to a failure within museums to consistently embrace the need to serve wide audiences and to articulate the view that marketing the service was just as much of a ‘professional’ concern as conserving the collection. The report argued that ‘a business or development plan for the service… should give proper weight to the need for conservation, scholarship and research but be firmly customer orientated.’237 This sentiment, and the climate within local authorities which it reflected, signalled that an inward-looking form of curatorship which focused on developing knowledge and collections management would find it harder to have a place within local authorities.

Some traditional curators found this pressure intolerable. One, Peter Brears, has been quoted as saying that he left his job at Leeds Museums, ‘after a clear-out of everyone with any knowledge… they wanted managers instead.’238 Others disagreed, seeing the imperative to contribute to mainstream corporate priorities as a working out of local democracy. Steph Mastoris, for example, argued: ‘I don’t see any problem with [the pressure to contribute to broader local authority agendas]: if we’re funded by the community, we should be doing what the community wants, so long as we’re not contravening ethical [standards].’239 As the period under review came to an end, new pressures emerged, with CCT succeeded by Best Value, a new process for improving ‘value for money’ within local authorities, which demanded the review of all council

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237 Ibid., p.6.
239 Steph Mastoris, Interview with the author, 9 March 2012.
services. At the same time, the introduction of Cabinet Government, following the Local Government Act of 2000, resulted in decisions being taken by a much smaller number of executive cabinet members, rather than by committee, leaving museums with even less contact with elected members.\footnote{Lawley ‘Local Authority Museums’.

The changes within local authorities during the 1980s and 1990s, then, demanded new skills from those running museums: the emphasis on measuring performance, and demonstrating impact within new, broader departments meant that managerial skills assumed much more importance. The shifting balance of skillsets within museums is discussed at more length in the next chapter.

\section*{3.12 Project funding in the 1990s: Designation and the National Lottery}

The context for museum work in the 1990s was also shaped by the availability of new sources of project funding. In 1996, the Conservative government published a policy document, \textit{Treasures in Trust},\footnote{Great Britain, Department of National Heritage, \textit{Treasures in trust: a review of museum policy}, (London: Department of National Heritage, 1996).} which went some way towards offering national recognition to important regional collections, in the way envisaged by the Drew Report nearly twenty years earlier, although it was much more modest in scope. It led to the launch of the Designation scheme for nationally important collections held in regional museums early in 1997, just before the change of government in May of that year. From 1998, under the new Labour government, Designated collections were eligible to apply to the Designation Challenge Fund, which provided £5m of grant funding a year for collections-related projects in Designated museums. Many of these projects involved digitising collections or improving their care, and they encouraged a project-based approach to curatorial work. Like the MSC schemes before them, these projects have been criticised for being driven by curatorial imperatives rather than audience need. Mark O’Neill, who reviewed applications, noted that most applications were ‘unimaginative’ not focused on public value, but rather on the mechanics of managing collections, suggesting that a typical starting point might be ‘we have 10,000 sea shells, we will photograph them all and put them on the web’, rather than a vision for why people might want to use them.\footnote{Mark O’Neill, Interview with the author, 2 July 2012.} As with the MSC schemes, under-resourced
museums were taking funding where it was available, rather than pursuing a long-term vision for the development of their collections.

At the same time, the advent of National Lottery funding was also bringing project-working to museums on a much larger scale. John Major’s government enacted the legislation to set up a National Lottery to fund projects in sport, the arts and heritage, and major projects designed to celebrate the Millennium. The first draw took place in 1994 and the first grants were awarded in 1995. The Act which established the National Lottery limited the Heritage Lottery Fund’s support to capital projects and acquisitions, fuelling a building boom in major museums and galleries, and a working culture in the museums affected which was much more focused on delivering projects. Projects were often grand and ambitious, capitalising on the sudden availability of large amounts of project funding, and initially were rarely driven by issues of sustainability and renewability.243 The culture of Lottery funding changed when the National Heritage Act 1997, passed by the Labour Government, enabled the fund to support non-capital projects, such as improving access, skills and understanding. The new government issued policy directions to the fund which were more concerned with social impact and the HLF began to fund projects specifically focused on attracting new audiences and improving access.244 The implication of the change of policy direction was that all projects, even those driven by major acquisitions, had to take questions of access and audiences seriously.

3.13 Museums and New Labour: investment and instrumentalism

The Labour Government which came to power in 1997 was willing to invest in culture, driven by the conviction that the arts and cultural sector could deliver specific public benefits. Policy guidance issued by the government in 2000 saw museums as ‘centres for social change’245, emphasising their role not just in broadening audiences, but in making a positive difference to the lives of their communities. This direction was

245 Department for Culture Media and Sport, Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All, (London: DCMS, May 2000).
endorsed in a report backed by the major local authority museums later the same year, which argued that ‘museums are natural engines for social inclusion work as long as we choose to adopt this role’.  

The museum sector saw the congruence between the emerging sector consensus around socially responsive museum work and the government’s imperatives as the opportunity to secure the kind of additional support for museums which had been sought since before World War II. Published at the end of the period under review, Renaissance in the Regions successfully argued that the non-national museum sector in England was under-resourced and required funding from central government to reach its full potential, securing substantial new public funding for regional museums, with new structures to channel support to the sector.

Designed to appeal to a government with an instrumentalist approach to culture, the report was founded on the argument that museums could deliver a much wider range of public benefits than they were currently able to do, but that this would require considerable additional funding. This instrumentalism shaped the character of the funding that came from the report, as will be discussed in Chapter 8.

3.14 Conclusion to Chapter 3

Whereas Jennie Lee’s plea for museums to make audiences feel that they belonged had not generated an enthusiastic response from museums in 1966, the ambitions of government and of museums were much more closely aligned in 2001. Although Renaissance in the Regions echoed some of the concerns of the Rosse Report, particularly with regard to under-resourcing, the sector had changed almost beyond recognition in the intervening four decades. It was much larger and, contrary to a widespread perception of decline, much better funded. Babbidge demonstrates that spending on all local authority museums in England and Scotland in 1999/2000 was £159.7 million, compared to a figure for 1963 of £68.3 million (at 2000 prices), an increase of 133%.  

Because of the growth in the sector, this funding was spread across

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246 David Fleming, ‘Foreword’ in Group for Larger Local Authority Museums, Museums and Social Inclusion, (Leicester: Research Centre for Museum and Galleries, October 2000), p.5.

247 Babbidge, Forty Years On, p.11. Although analysing overall local authority expenditure is challenging, it is relatively easy to assess spending levels in national museums and Babbidge’s analysis demonstrates that national museum funding increased dramatically in real terms during the period under review:
many more museums, but Babbidge also compares a constant sample of 88 local authority museums and looks at their levels of funding in 1963 and 2000. This group of museums experienced an average increase in funding of 54% in real terms, although there was a marked difference in the situation in different regions, with the 10 museums in the sample in the Eastern region experiencing growth of 123%, compared to only 14% in the West Midlands. The next chapter will demonstrate that funding growth was accompanied by staffing growth in a sample of local authority museums.

If overall funding levels grew during this forty year period, why did it not feel like that? Why did so many people who worked in museums feel beleaguered? Firstly, growth had not been consistent. Individual authorities had seen periods of growth and other periods of ‘massive cuts’. A single decade could see dramatically changing fortunes in funding patterns. For example, looking at average funding levels for English local authority museums in the 1990s, Babbidge demonstrates that funding lagged behind inflation in the early 1990s, was slightly ahead of inflation in the mid-1990s, and then fell sharply behind again in the late 1990s. Moreover, there was much regional variation. Comparing funding levels for local authority museums in 1994/5 and 1998/9 by region, Babbidge finds growth of 19% and 13% in the North East and North West respectively, modest growth in the East Midlands, the West Midlands and the South East and decline in Yorkshire and the South West. The implication of this is that, even at times of growth in some areas, the sector as a whole never felt its status was secure.

Another possible reason for the strong perception of decline has perhaps been the squeeze on particular areas of museum budgets. Looking at the later 1990s, in a smaller analysis of a group of nine local authority museums, Babbidge demonstrates a trend to maintain staffing and premises budgets while squeezing activity budgets. The shortage of what Babbidge calls ‘doing money’, funding for exhibitions, displays,

annual government expenditure on the national museums more than doubled in real terms between 1963 and 2000, increasing at four times the rate of overall growth in government expenditure.

This observation came from Patrick Boylan, reflecting on the funding pattern in Leicester/Leicestershire. Interview with the author, 19 December 2012.


Ibid.

Ibid., p.21.
marketing and all forms of collections care, inevitably places staff under pressure and, as the museum’s public offer suffers, increases public perception of decline.

Most significantly, over this forty year period, the sector changed the services it provided beyond all recognition. The museums of 2001 were bigger and better displayed than their counterparts of 1960. They were more socially engaged offered more sophisticated education services, more ambitious events and aimed to reach more diverse audiences. The diversification of museum work was one of the sector’s success stories in the later years of the twentieth century, but perhaps also one cause of a perception of constantly inadequate funding and ongoing crisis. Perhaps a useful analogy is the NHS whose funding has consistently run ahead of inflation, but whose budget has never been perceived as ‘sufficient’ and which is often portrayed in the media, and experienced both by those who work in it and use its services as being under great financial pressure. In museums, as in healthcare, successive innovations raise public expectations. There is always more that could be done and never enough money to do it all. Funding levels can increase without denting an ever-present sense of crisis and insufficiency.

Future chapters will explore the changing relationship between museums and their audiences, and the construction of a scaffolding of professionalism to shore up museums in this new, more hostile context. The next chapter looks at the changing nature of museums as institutions and considers how this shaped changing approaches to curatorship.

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers how the work of curators in this period was shaped by the changing nature of museums as work places: their changing staff profile, the shifting demographics of the museum workforce, the management culture of museums and the growth of the independent museum sector. The previous chapter mapped some of the major changes in local government and considered in broad terms how these affected museums; the focus here is more specifically on the changing character of the institutions themselves.

4.2 Staffing numbers: expansion and turbulence

In 1960, the Museums Association published a handbook on museum administration, authored by three senior museum directors. They assumed a state of growth in collections, audience expectations and, consequently, in staffing levels:

Bigger and better collections will inevitably attract more and more authoritative inquirers, who will expect ever more detailed and more accurate information, demanding opportunities to meet experts with whom they can talk on equal terms…So with growing collections and increasing funds, the staff tends to grow and with it the activities and responsibilities of the museum.\(^{253}\)

While these directors seemed to see growth as inevitable and almost spontaneous, museum annual reports in the 1960s and 1970s constantly argued for an expansion of staffing, suggesting that a series of local battles lay behind this tendency to growth. Arguments for expansion were sometimes based on a comparison with other services, with the Director of Nottingham Museums and Art Galleries arguing in 1960, for example, that in spite of the appointment of a third member of curatorial staff: ‘we still have the smallest professional staff of any museum of our size in the country’.\(^{254}\)


\(^{254}\) Nottingham Museums and Art Gallery Committee, *Annual report of the Art Galleries and Museums Committee of the City of Nottingham, 1960-61*, (Nottingham, 1961).
museum services attempted to argue for increased staffing on the basis of the needs of the collection. In 1973 the curator of Hastings Museum and Art Gallery argued:

At least half a dozen specialist assistants will eventually be required if the collections are ever to receive the care which they really deserve and if the museum is to fulfil all the other functions which ought to be undertaken.\(^{255}\)

External groups also argued for more specialists in museums: a 1974 report for the Antiquarian Horological Society attempted a survey of horology collections in regional museums and concluded that there was an ‘almost universal lack of horological knowledge’, leaving curators unable to answer questions about their holdings.\(^{256}\)

But while a sense of insufficiency in curatorial numbers persisted, there was, as the MA handbook suggested, a very significant growth in the number of people working in regional museums over the four decades of this study. Babbidge’s study found that there were 2,322 people working in regional museums in 1960, compared to 7,323 in 2000, an increase of 215\%, and suggested that this growth was the result both of increasing numbers of museums, and the expansion of staff numbers within some existing museums.\(^{257}\) How do Babbidge’s conclusions square with the findings of Renaissance in the Regions? That report argued that there was a general ‘lack of capacity’ in regional museums, and that, ‘many even lack[ed] the conservation, scholarship and research staff who can ensure that collections are accessible and capable of being used to support people’s learning and leisure requirements’.\(^{258}\) The report deployed a specific comparison between staffing levels in local authority run Bristol museums and the national museums in Liverpool which sought to demonstrate ‘a real underfunding of the

\(^{255}\) D.C. Devenish, Report on the State of Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. Unpublished report, MDC collection, University of Leicester. The report was written in the context of the retirement of the previous curator, J. Manwaring Baines, who had been in post since 1935.


\(^{257}\) Babbidge, ‘Forty Years On’.

\(^{258}\) Davies, Renaissance in the Regions, p.75.
regional institution [i.e. Bristol] that only drastic action will remedy. It identified a particular problem with curatorial provision in local authority museums, arguing that:

There has been a loss in curatorial expertise: Bristol City Museums and Galleries, for example, had its curatorial base reduced by half in two phases between 1993 and 1997, leaving 8.5 curators responsible for the core, documentation, research and interpretation of 1.7 million objects, specimens and works of art.

To provide more context for these claims, this chapter examines changing staffing levels in six of the museums which were to be partners in regional museum hubs in the Renaissance programme: Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester/Leicestershire, Norwich/Norfolk, Nottingham and Sheffield. It also considers two comparator museum services: Glasgow and Liverpool/Merseyside. At the start of the period, all of these eight were substantial local authority run services, in major regional cities, with broadly similar numbers of staff. Glasgow offers a useful comparator as a local authority outside the English context, and because of the city’s well known commitment to investment in its cultural services. Liverpool presents a contrast to the other six English services because of its shift to national status in 1986 (detailed in Chapter 3). While Liverpool was subject to the same pressures as the other museums before 1986, after 1986 it represents a special case.

To compile this analysis, I extracted staffing records for each of the eight museums from the Museums Association’s Yearbook for each year between 1960 and 2000, a substantial undertaking involving over 14,000 individual staff entries. The Yearbook is not unproblematic as a source but offers the best and most consistent longitudinal sample. The method used to produce this analysis is explained in more detail in Appendix 2, including the steps taken to ensure reasonable consistency and

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259 Ibid., p.82.
260 Ibid., p.83.
261 Leicester, Norfolk and Liverpool were affected by local government reorganisation in 1974, becoming county services. Leicestershire then split into two services, run by county and city, in 1997. For more details about the selection of the services, see Appendix 2. I refer to these six services as the Renaissance partner museums for the sake of brevity.
comparability over time and between different museum services. I then used job
advertisements and news articles in *Museums Bulletin* and individual museum reports to
contextualise the raw data and to explain the patterns which emerged.

This analysis considers a group of larger local authority museums and it is important to
note at the outset that the situation was very different in smaller local authority
museums, many of which had only relatively recently acquired a full-time curator. Pre-
war surveys of the state of regional museums had found a dearth of curatorial provision.
In 1928, the Miers Report found that only 14% of all museums in the British Isles had a
full-time paid curator (or about 74 museums out of his total of 530 non-national
museums) and a further 200 who combined another paid role such as librarian, art
director or teacher with that of museum curator. Ten years later in 1938, the
Markham Report argued that too many museums were run by honorary or librarian
curators, some of whom ‘scandalously neglect’ their museums, with the result that too
many poor quality small museums ‘reflect the curatorship they get!’ In 1963, the
Rosse Report found that there were more than 30 local authority museums still run by
an honorary curator, and 140 where the museum service was either run as a subsection
of the library service, or managed jointly with it.

In the museums included in this survey, curators were increasingly able to focus on
particular areas of the collection as staff numbers expanded. But where a single curator
was expected to look after a large, mixed collection, there was no possibility of their
having expert knowledge in all the museum’s subject areas. In a guide to folk life
collecting published by the MA in 1963, J.W.Y Higgs argued:

> If, to his knowledge of the local archaeological sites and local birds and plants,
the local curator can add a knowledge of local trades, customs, farming methods
and eccentricities, it should be possible to create a first rate collection.

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265 Higgs was Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading and his work is discussed further in
Chapter 6.
Higgs’ prescription for the range of a local curator’s knowledge is daunting. Moreover, in many small museums throughout the period, the curator was a sole member of professional staff, with no education, conservation or display support, and expected to cover these areas as well as the full range of the museum’s collections. Even in the 1990s, their duties might include those of ‘curator, conservator, teacher, academic, designer, shopkeeper, public relations officer, accountant, lawyer, caterer, impresario – and sometimes even drudge and bouncer’. While this chapter paints a picture of growing staff numbers and increased specialisation, it is important to stress that this experience was not universal.

In 1960, the six Renaissance partner services in the sample had a total of 65 staff included in their Yearbook listings. By 2000, they had 286. Liverpool’s staff numbers increased from 18 to 267 and Glasgow’s from 12 to 110. These forty years saw significant expansion in both central and local government expenditure, but Babbidge has demonstrated that investment in museums by both central and local government increased significantly ahead of the rate of growth in general government expenditure. The rate at which staff numbers increased in these museums reflects substantial additional investment.


268 Babbidge, ‘Forty Years On’. Babbidge finds that central government investment in national museums increased at four times the rate of general government expenditure between 1960 and 2000. Comprehensive figures for local authority museums are not available but Babbidge examines a sample of twenty larger local authority museums. Out of these, only five experienced funding growth of less than the overall rate of increase in net English local authority expenditure for the period.
Figure 1: Total number of staff in a sample of six Renaissance hub regional museums, in Liverpool and in Glasgow, 1960 – 2000

Figure 1 demonstrates, however, that the pattern of growth was uneven. The greatest growth in staff numbers came at the start of the period: there was a steady increase in the total number of posts in these museums throughout the 1960s and most of the 1970s; by 1977, the total number of staff listed in the six Renaissance partner services under review already stood at 244, an increase of 181 posts. Staff numbers in what had become the Merseyside County Museum Service had increased from 18 to 77 and in Glasgow from 12 to 81. During this period, individual museums were successfully making the case for increased staffing resources. SCMG noted in 1973 that staff numbers were increasing in major provincial museums and that ‘many local authorities appear to give sympathetic attention to well-argued staff needs.’

Many of the new posts in the late 1960s and early 1970s were associated with the establishment of new branch museums. A number of services established industrial museums: Leicester advertised for a Keeper of Technology for its new industrial museum in November 1967 and Nottingham for its own new industrial museum in April 1970. Museums were also taking on the care and interpretation of historic buildings. In

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July 1971, Liverpool advertised for a new Assistant Keeper in July 1971 to work at Speke Hall which had ‘recently come under the control of the Museum’. Three of the services in the sample, Leicester, Nottingham and Glasgow, opened costume museums in the 1970s and recruited new staff to curate them.

Other new posts were linked to redevelopments in existing museums. The staff expansion at Liverpool in the late 1960s and early 1970s was required to enable the museum service to carry out a large scale redevelopment of the museum building, with six large new galleries and a new Planetarium, with ‘several new posts created to strengthen the professional staff to deal with the greatly expanded activities of the Museum that will follow the completion of building work in the near future’. This was a period of extensive reorganization in the museum services under review and Museums Bulletin regularly carried advertisements from museum services for four or five new posts at a time, resulting from staffing reviews or development plans. For example, in December 1972, Leicester Museums and Art Gallery advertised three new senior posts as a result of the ‘major re-examination of the policy, organization and management’ of the museum service. Expansion was running ahead of the availability of staff. The 1973 SCMG report also noted that ‘skills shortages’ were hampering expansion plans: ‘in particular the growing need for staff for research, education and conservation still requires attention’.

Two of the services in the sample, Leicester and Norwich, became County services following Local Government Reorganization in England in 1974, as did Liverpool. All expanded their staffing significantly at the time of reorganization, as Figure 2 illustrates. Norfolk Museums Service advertised five new curatorial and education posts in April 1974, with the aim of extending the quality of service offered in Norwich ‘to the county as a whole’. Merseyside County Museums Services advertised nine new posts together in July 1974, as a direct result of taking on responsibility for delivering a county-wide service. Glasgow also benefitted from large numbers of additional staff in the late 1970s, in part as a result of Local Government Reorganization in Scotland after

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272 Job Advertisement, Museums Bulletin, vol.12, no.9, December 1972, p.120.
1975, when its education service started to be provided by Strathclyde Regional Council.

From 1978 onwards, the pattern of growth was somewhat slower. The highest total level of staffing for the six Renaissance partner museums in the sample came in 1994 when together they recorded 394 posts. This was an increase of 131 posts in the 17 years since 1977, compared to the increase of 198 posts between 1960 and 1977. Growth was also more sporadic in this later period: the financial crises of the late 1970s led to cuts, especially between 1977 and 1978 when 39 posts, or 15% of the total, were lost. However, by 1980, numbers had recovered to their 1977 level, and the cuts of the 1980s did not impact in the way that might have been expected on staff numbers. Overall growth continued from 1980 to 1993 when there were successive years of declining numbers, with a recovery in the very last year of the survey. As well as overall volatility, Figure 2 demonstrates that the total figures mask significant variation in the experience of individual services, within these broad trends. These findings confirm the picture, suggested by Chapter 3, of a museum sector marked by significant local variation under a broad umbrella of shared experience. Figures 1 and 2 also demonstrate that numbers of staff in most of the six Renaissance partner museums fell sharply in the mid-1990s at a time when Liverpool enjoyed sustained growth, confirming the picture presented by Renaissance in the Regions.275

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275 The apparent sudden drop in Leicester/Leicestershire in 1997/8 was due to ongoing reorganisation, with staff not yet confirmed in their new posts following the creation of new unitary authorities.
Figure 2: Number of staff in a sample of six Renaissance partner museums, 1960 – 2000

4.3 A crisis in curatorship?

Figure 3 shows the number of curators in each of the museums in the sample. Although there was considerable local variation, all had substantially more curators in post in 2000 than in 1960 and, in total, 36 curators were listed in the six Renaissance partner museums in the sample in 1960, compared to 112 curators in 2000, an increase of over 210%.

In Norwich (later the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, NMAS) and Leicester (later Leicestershire Museums, Art Galleries and Records Service) substantial growth in curatorial numbers was clearly linked to the establishment of the County Service following Local Government Reorganisation. Many of the posts created in new branch museums were curatorial. Museums also created more junior curatorial posts to work alongside existing Keepers, or defined areas of specialism more narrowly. The department of Natural History at Birmingham had a Keeper and Assistant Keeper in 1966, but a Keeper, Deputy Keeper and two Assistant Keepers by 1978. In 1966, there was one Keeper and two Assistant Keepers in the Art Department in Glasgow. By 1976, the art department had been separated into two departments, of Fine Art and Decorative
Art. The Fine Art Department included a Keeper, a Depute Keeper, two Assistant Keepers and a curatorial trainee, while the Decorative Art Department had a Keeper, a Depute Keeper and three Assistant Keepers: three posts had expanded to ten in the space of ten years.

Figure 3: Numbers of curators in a sample of six Renaissance partner museums, 1960 – 2000

At the start of the period, local history was generally under the umbrella of a department of antiquities in these larger regional museums. Birmingham had an Assistant Keeper of Birmingham history and folklore within its Archaeology and Ethnography department. Of the museums in the sample, only Norwich City Museums used the term ‘social history’ to describe this department at the start of the period. The other museums in the survey all established or renamed departments of social or local history during the period under review. All the museum services in the survey also established departments or separate museums of industry and/or technology, except for the Norfolk county service, NMAS, which appointed specialists in rural history at Gressenhall.

Curatorial provision can be seen to have broadened and deepened in the museums in the survey, in terms of staff numbers at least, during the first 30 years of the period under

276 ‘Depute’ is a common Scottish variant spelling of ‘deputy’.
review. However, there was a significant loss of curatorial posts in museums in the sample towards the end of the millennium: although there were 112 curatorial posts in the six Renaissance partner museums in the sample in 2000, this compared to 140 in 1994, a decline of 20% in the intervening six years, confirming the view that there had been a significant and relatively sudden loss of curatorial strength in the years before the publication of *Renaissance in the Regions*.

*Renaissance in the Regions* compared staffing levels in Bristol and Liverpool. Figure 4 aims to put this comparison into a longer historical context, comparing total and curatorial staffing levels in the two services over the 40 years of the study.

**Figure 4: Comparison of total staff numbers and curatorial numbers in Bristol and Liverpool, 1960 – 2000**

At the start of the period, the two services’ staffing levels were similar. But the small gap between them grew steadily until 1974, when Liverpool’s staff increased markedly following Local Government Reorganisation. The gap continued to widen especially as Bristol’s staff levels actually fell in the late 1970s at a time of funding constraint in local government, and was further increased by the substantial boost in staff numbers in Liverpool after it became a national museum body in 1986. Although Liverpool’s curatorial numbers fell sharply in 1988-1989, due to the eventual implementation of a protracted staffing review following the change of status in 1986, which recommended
significant cuts, they recovered strongly from 1991 onwards as the service expanded its range of sites and services. The analysis in *Renaissance in the Regions* suggests that there were 12.5 curatorial and collections staff in Bristol in 2001, compared to 129 in Liverpool. My analysis focuses on curatorial posts specifically, giving different figures. Nevertheless, it confirms that there was a growing gap between the two services: using my data, in 1960, Bristol had five curators and Liverpool 11 but by 2000 Bristol had 11 compared to Liverpool’s 56. However, what was not made clear in *Renaissance in the Regions* is that the scale of the disparity had been exaggerated by relatively recent cuts: in 1993, for example, Bristol had had 20 curators, compared to Liverpool’s 53.

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278 Although the categorisation of ‘collections’ posts in *Renaissance in the Regions* is not explained, it is clear from my analysis that the totals used in that report must include conservators, documentation staff and technicians as well as curators.
4.4 Curators and their colleagues

Curators remained the single largest professional group within museums throughout the period under review. However, they did lose their overall dominance. As Figure 5 illustrates, at the start of the period, curators made up nearly 60% of all staff listed for the six Renaissance partner museums in the sample, but just under 40% at the end, meaning that the proportions of curatorial and non-curatorial staff reversed during this forty-year period, among the pool of staff seen to have sufficient influence and status to be included in the Yearbook. Who were these new, non-curatorial staff?

Figure 5: Total curatorial and non-curatorial staff numbers in a sample of six regional Renaissance partner museums, 1960 – 2000
In 1979, Richard Foster had observed that ‘teachers, designers and interpreters … breezed in on the once-lonely curator during the 1960s’ and were then being joined by ‘business managers, trading managers and general managers’. Was his analysis accurate, and how did the pattern change in the 1980s and 1990s? Figure 6 compares numbers of staff in different categories of non-curatorial staff in the six Renaissance partner museums.

Figure 6: Numbers of staff in non-curatorial roles in six Renaissance partner regional museums, 1960 – 2000

By the late 1990s, the importance of museums as learning institutions was increasingly recognised. It is surprising to find, then, that education staff numbers in the sample increased in absolute terms, but declined in relative terms. There were 9 education staff in the sample at the start of the period, representing 14% of the total number of staff listed and 19 at the end, representing only 7% of the total. There was a dramatic reduction in education posts in the later 1990s: there had been 40 education staff in the sample in 1994, representing 12% of the total.

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There was substantial growth in the early years of the period in posts supporting curators in the care and display of collections: designers, conservators and technicians. At the start of the period, design and conservation were not seen as distinct specialisms and people with responsibility for conservation, restoration, storage and display were often described as technicians. However, even as design and conservation became separate professions, the numbers of technicians, who typically had more ‘hands on’ skills in building displays, and took on the less specialised aspects of collections care, continued to grow. In the museums in the sample, the pattern in the number of technicians broadly mirrors the pattern in curatorial numbers, reflecting an approach to curatorship in which curators were given increasing support and relieved of some of the routine, manual aspects of collections care and display.

In 1960, there were no posts listed with a particular responsibility for design or interpretation. In 2000, there were 24 design and interpretation posts, representing 9% of the total, down from a high of 32 posts (also 9% of the total) in 1994. Of the 24 design and interpretation posts in 2000, 11 were design posts, and 13 exhibitions and interpretation.

The first member of staff in a local authority museum with a particular remit to work on displays is thought to have been a Technical Assistant (Design) appointed to Leicester Museum in 1951. A more widespread growth in design staff began in the late 1960s: by 1968 there were 10 design posts in the sample. Norwich Museums for example, appointed their first designer in 1966, arguing that an era in which ‘the question of display had been no one’s particular responsibility’ could not be allowed to continue. A broader survey of design support in museums found that by 1970, 23 museums had specialist designers on their staff, and four of the AMCs provided design support. The

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281 As discussed below, other sources suggest that there was at least one design post in the museums in the sample by 1960, a design technician at Leicester. This post is not included in the Yearbook listing, presumably an indication of the relative low status of such posts.


283 Norwich Museums, City of Norwich, Museums Committee, Report to the City Council for the years 1961-64, (Norwich: City of Norwich, 1965).

need for design support became particularly apparent with many museums planning major redisplay. Glasgow Museums Service was typical in advertising two posts in 1972 in a new ‘Design and Display section to be responsible for a major programme of gallery reorganization.’ In 1974 the MA recognised the contribution of designers to museum practice, by including a design specialism in the Diploma for the first time and the Group of Designers and Interpreters in Museums was established in 1976. By 1980, it was estimated that there were 175 design staff working in museums in the British Isles in total, but 65% of museums still had no design support: the larger museums included in this sample had more access to design support than was typical in the broader sector. Posts specifically dedicated to exhibitions or interpretation emerged somewhat later, with a gradual increase from the mid-1970s onwards. The emergence of design and interpretation as discrete specialisms, and the challenge this presented to curatorial practice and identity, is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Conservation was being invented as a profession during the period of this study. Museum services established new conservation departments to bring new approaches to collections care to their museums. In 1971, Birmingham advertised for a Keeper of Conservation, a ‘new post’ with a brief to establish a department, recruit specialist staff and ‘advise the Director and the Libraries and Museums Committee on modern methods of environmental control for the Museum and Art Gallery and the branch museums’. That department expanded steadily, with one conservator in 1970 and 10 in 1979. There may be some under-recording of conservation posts in the Museums Yearbook: Leicestershire Museums, for example, advertised four appointments in its Arts Conservation Unit in November 1974 to join 11 existing conservation staff in its Human History and Natural History departments, suggesting a stronger complement of technicians and conservators than is recorded in the Yearbook. Nevertheless, in the sample as a whole, the number of conservation staff increased from 2 posts in 1960 (3% of the total), to 18 in 2000 (6% of the total). Again, numbers had been much higher in the early 1990s: there were 38 conservation posts in 1993 (12% of the total).

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287 Ibid.
This analysis demonstrates that the internal ecosystems of museums became increasingly complex during the period under review, with new specialisms growing in strength throughout most of this period, and providing both support for curatorial work and a challenge to curatorial dominance. However, it also demonstrates that curators were not singled out for cuts during the 1990s, but that these other specialisms also experienced a decline in these museums in the final years of the millennium.

4.5 Managers, administrators and the changing culture of museums

Was Richard Foster right to anticipate a growth in managerial posts in the late 1970s as part of the ‘changing philosophy of museums’? There was growth in the number of management and marketing posts in the sample throughout the period but, perhaps surprisingly, not relative growth in terms of overall staffing levels: there were eight management and marketing posts in 1960, or 13% of the total, and 29 posts at the end, or 10% of the total. However, the managerial culture within museums changed significantly during this period.

In the 1960 MA Handbook on Administration, the authors argued that ‘the efficient running’ of a museum required a Director to develop new skills, moving on from what they assume would be a curatorial starting point:

[The Director] may have begun with abundant enthusiasm, a good knowledge of one subject and a row of little volumes on how to name birds, coins or arrowheads; he has to end up with a considerable experience of building, engineering, accountancy, local government and other acts and general business administration.291

This comment recognises the complexity of the task of administering a museum, but the handbook also reflects the fact that management as a discipline was in its infancy, urging Directors to ensure that ‘all functions are adequately…carried out’, 292 but

290 I have aimed to classify staff with strategic responsibility for parts of the institution and its development as ‘managers’ and staff with more clerical or routine administrative responsibilities as ‘administrators’ (included in the graphs as ‘others’). Inevitably, however, there is some blurring of the two categories in practice. See Appendix 2 for more on my approach to classification.

291 Allan, Owen and Wallis, Administration, p.38.

292 Ibid., p.21
offering no substantive advice on how this might be done. Comparing the handbook with later publications reveals the extent of the change in the theory and practice of management during the forty years of the survey: its authors assumed that managers would have been curators first and, perhaps, that they were most likely to be men.\textsuperscript{293} This curatorial dominance would be challenged and there would be some shift in the gender balance. Programmatic approaches to management would become widespread in the sector. Even the title of the handbook would appear outmoded by the end of the period under review, with ‘administration’ largely superseded by ‘management’: by 1990, it could be argued that management was the ‘flavour of the month’ in museums.\textsuperscript{294}

The introduction of management techniques to the public sector is conventionally attributed to Thatcherite ideology, which framed the public sector as unproductive and a drain on resources, leading to increased pressure on the public sector to be seen to be delivering value for money.\textsuperscript{295} Certainly, some people who worked in museums felt that Thatcherism had brought new management approaches into museums, with one national museum curator commenting in 1990, for example, that ‘macho management’ in museums was a ‘hall-mark of present-day Thatcherite Britain.’\textsuperscript{296} However the shift from a somewhat passive approach to ‘administration’ to ‘macho management’ began before the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{293} It is unwise to read too much into the use of non-inclusive language in the 1960s when the convention of using male pronouns for men and women was not widely challenged. There were high-profile female directors in 1960, notably Mary Woodall in Birmingham.


\textsuperscript{295} For an account of the pressure on the public sector to be more enterprising, with the result that the public sector could ‘no longer afford to provide sinecures ... for the unenterprising’, see Paul Heelas and Paul Morris, ‘Enterprise Culture: its values and value’, in Heelas and Morris (eds.) \textit{The Values of the Enterprise Culture}, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-25, p.7

\textsuperscript{296} Klaus Sattler, question to Neil Cossons at the Scholarship in Museums conference and reported in the conference proceedings: Scholarship in Museums: An International Conference organized by and held at the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Art, Manufacture and Commerce, sponsored by FIAT, London, 2 October 1990, \textit{Museum Management and Curatorship} 9, 1990 341-409, p.360. For more on the conference and the context for the debate see Chapter 7.
In Chapter 3, I demonstrated that local government reform in the 1970s was accompanied by a culture change in which local authorities came increasingly to value the judgement of generic managers over that of specialists. Many museum professionals found themselves reporting to a manager in an education or leisure department following the 1974 local government reorganisation, and managers from outside the museum sector started to be appointed to senior roles within a few museum services in the 1970s, although this remained highly contentious. Clarke and Newman suggest that the rise of managerialism in the public sector should be seen as originating in the 1970s. They argue that the ‘the symbolic moment of a Labour government cutting back public spending at the behest of the IMF [in 1976] marked the exhaustion of bi-partisan political consensus on the desirability of the welfare state’, leaving elements of the public sector open to greater scrutiny and challenge.

In 1977, Basil Greenhill, Director of the National Maritime Museum was asked to speak on museum management at the MA conference and acknowledged: ‘the very idea of using the words ‘museum’ and ‘management’ together is rather a new one.’ But by 1979, Geoff Lewis described the approach to management training of the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester as being based on ‘the philosophy of management of objectives’ and argued that this was an essential part of museum training because:

The majority of museums in this country in which Leicester graduates find employment are in the public sector or closely related to it. Modern management

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297 In 1978, both Bristol City Museum and Ironbridge Gorge Museum appointed a ‘controller’, with responsibility for financial and operational management. The appointment at Ironbridge was relatively uncontroversial because the controller was to report to the Director, but the appointment at Bristol caused much disquiet because the Director was to report to the new appointee who would thus be supervising the ‘creative, professional people’. (AIM, Untitled news report, AIM Bulletin, no.1, p.2 April 1978.)


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techniques are being used here increasingly, and there is a clear need for a basic understanding of the philosophy and practices involved amongst curators.\textsuperscript{301}

The rise of the non-specialist manager, the pressure to demonstrate value for money, within local authorities and the use of generic managerial techniques such as objective setting, forward planning and performance measurement did not originate with Thatcher’s government. However, the pressure to adopt these approaches did grow more intense.\textsuperscript{302} In central government, the introduction of the Financial Management Initiative by the Thatcher government in 1982 required all spending departments to identify objectives, and set targets, enshrining an ‘audit culture’ which would dominate public sector management for the remainder of the century.\textsuperscript{303} Its impacts were most immediate in the national museums; in 1982, the Science Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum were subject to a ‘Rayner Scrutiny’, one of a series of reviews of parts of the civil service.\textsuperscript{304} The review, which recommended that both museums should cease to be part of the civil service, embodied the management-by-objectives culture of its time, a key recommendation being:

\begin{quote}
Arrangements should be instituted at both Museums for the setting of the timed and costed objectives necessary to achieve the agreed aims of the Museums and for the regular review of these objectives…\textsuperscript{305}
\end{quote}

What were the public manifestations of this change in management culture? In 1989 Sandra Brown, then Assistant Secretary at the Office of Arts and Libraries argued:

\begin{quote}
Our society, our communities, our visitors, our sponsors, including Parliament, are entitled to expect all museums to be managed well. At the same time as we become more management orientated, we become more people orientated.\textsuperscript{306}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{301} Ibid., p.15.
\textsuperscript{302} These approaches are sometimes summarised as ‘New Public Management’. See Christopher Hood, ‘Public Management for all Seasons?’ Public Administration, Vol. 69 Issue 1, 1991, p.3-19.
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., p.80
Was a more audience-focused approach in museums really driven by a shift in management culture? Did ‘more management orientated’ museums really mean more ‘people orientated’ museums?

On the one hand, a consumerist approach did emphasise visitors’ needs. In a 1988 lecture, Roy Strong, who had then recently stood down as Director of the V&A, made a robust – if cynical – argument in favour of treating the visiting public as customers whose desires should be satisfied:

Our audience is tourist, wanting pleasure as well as profit, and our daily visitors are members of the new share-owning democracy, created by the Thatcher years…People who come to museums … are largely those with disposable income – our new job is to attract them to part with it.  

Strong identified museums’ failure to serve their visitors well as being manifest in part in the quality of the visitor experience, citing ‘filthy galleries’ and ‘surly warders’ but he also argued that the power of curators would have to be challenged to meet the needs of audiences, arguing that ‘the new and reasonable demands of our public come … as something of a shock, above all to the curators.’ In Strong’s view, it was the public’s status as tax payers which definitively challenged the power of curators, claiming ‘our public maintains us…through taxation. They should get, within reason, what they want and not what a select band of art historian curators think that they should have.’

Sharon Macdonald has also noted an increased tendency in national museums during the 1980s to consider public funding ‘tax-payers money’, with a resulting emphasis on offering a high quality experience to consumers.

While this discourse identified visitors as consumers, an alternative, more progressive discourse also promoted visitors’ needs, and suggested the need for new management approaches. Clarke and Newman argue that a narrative which interprets challenges to the working methods of public sector professionals as being driven by ‘a “consumerist”

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308 Ibid., p.16.
309 Ibid., p.17.
310 Macdonald, Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum, p.32.
critique … does a profound disservice to the diversity of popular disenchantment’ with
the public sector.311 In their analysis, the pressures on the public sector to justify its
expenditure and to be more accountable to the public and to politicians were driven in
part by consumerist dissatisfaction with a lack of choice and poor service. But they were
also driven by ‘arguments about access, power, rights, levels of benefits and
services…questions of structural bias and inequality, as well as the forms of service
delivery’.312 In museums, the pressure to serve visitors better and be more accountable
for expenditure can also be seen as being motivated by this concern with ‘rights’ and
‘inequality’. In 1988, for example, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill urged museums to re-
evaluate their approaches in order to attract new audiences: ‘the museum, which is after
all supported by the population in general, could perhaps be of use to the population in
general.’313 In his 1991 study of museum visitors, Nick Merriman argued that museums
had a special responsibility to widen their audiences because they were ‘one of the
principal means by which people can gain access to the past’ and ‘the past is something
that belongs to all, irrespective of the circumstances of their birth and upbringing.’314
Hooper-Greenhill and Merriman exemplify a more inclusive approach to changing the
priorities of museums, stressing the needs of ‘the population in general’ rather than the
expectations of the affluent and discerning. An explanation which does full credit to the
complexity of change in museums has to allow for both consumerist and rights-based
impulses to be at work; the elements of managerial culture associated with a
consumerist approach to museum visitors were only part of the story.315 Emerging work
in audience development is considered at more length in Chapter 7.

311 12
312 (12).
313 Eileen Hooper-Greenhill ‘Counting Visitors or Visitors who count’ in Robert Lumley (ed.) The Museum
314 Nick Merriman, Beyond the Glass Case: the past, the heritage and the public, (Leicester: Leicester
315 Stephen Deuchar suggests that, in art history, these two pressures - the public funding squeeze and
more populist approaches to display – combined in the early 1980s with a third pressure: the influence
of the new art history, then becoming the orthodoxy in universities. This was perhaps not so pertinent in
Visitor in Britain the 1980s and 1990s’, in C. Hauxthausen (ed.) The Two Art Histories: The Museum and
the University, (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2002), pp.3-13.
How did the priorities within museums shift during this period as the rhetoric around the need for better management strengthened? In 1989, Alf Hatton argued that the tradition of museum managers being drawn from curatorial ranks had had a distorting effect on museum priorities, leading to ‘the absolute dominance in museum thinking in the United Kingdom of collecting, as a single function of museums, where all else is subordinated to that function.’

In 1991 MGC sponsored the publication of a guide to forward planning which aimed to bring more systematic approaches to planning to smaller museums. However, a survey carried out in 1992 on the actual approach to strategic management in local authority museums found a limited understanding of the concept and some weakness in practice, leading its author, Stuart Davies, to suggest that a managerial culture had yet to supplant ‘the traditional values of a professional organization culture’. The shift away from traditional curatorial values which Hatton identified as necessary was clearly not fully realised. Other changes in the sector were, however, increasing pressure on those values, including the commercial drive of independent museums.

### 4.6 Customers, commercialisation, and independent museums

A significant factor driving both new approaches to management and new approaches to customer care in museums during this period was the growing size and influence of the independent museum sector. Most of the independent museums which opened during the period under review were relatively small scale but a few, including the National

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319 The nomenclature of ‘independent’ museums emerged only gradually, with the terms ‘trust museum’ and ‘private museum’ also used in the 1970s. For example, Patrick Greene argued for the use of ‘Trust museums’ rather than ‘independent museums’ to avoid the potentially ‘harmful’ identification with independent schools, and in recognition of the fact that ‘as quite a lot of trust museums do, in fact, receive part of their revenue from Local or National Government, they are not truly independent anyway.’ Letter from Patrick Greene to David Sekers, 12 July 1976, AIM Archive, University of Leicester, File C/DS1.
Motor Museum at Beaulieu, Ironbridge Gorge Museum and Beamish, received large numbers of visitors, achieved a high profile and pioneered new approaches to display and customer care, contributing to a shift in the nature of the relationship between curators and their visitors.\textsuperscript{320}

Many independent museums remained substantially dependent on local authority finance.\textsuperscript{321} Nevertheless, independent museums had, on the whole, a much greater reliance on self-generated income than the local authority sector.\textsuperscript{322} This encouraged them to take the visitor experience more seriously than some established museums. Kathy Gee recalled that in the 1970s the need to earn income made independent museums ‘infinitely more interested in the people who came than the local authority museum, which was paid whatever happened…whereas if I didn’t get enough people through the door, the caretaker had to go part-time.’\textsuperscript{323}

In the 1970s, the notion that commercial considerations had a place in the management of museums was treated with suspicion by much of the established sector. Sir Arthur Drew, addressed the Annual General Meeting of the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) in March 1979. He suggested it was not in the public interest for museums to be managed by ‘the man who knows about balance sheets and very little about objects’, arguing that ‘all decisions ought, in the last resort, to be aesthetic, scientific and scholarly’.\textsuperscript{324} Sam Mullins recalled that, during the 1980s, people who advocated the importance of marketing at the MA conference might be ‘hissed’.\textsuperscript{325}


\textsuperscript{321} In 1988 John Myerscough noted the ‘somewhat surprising’ reliance of independent museums on public funds, citing as an extreme example the Museum of East Anglian Life which had received 54% of its income from local authorities in the previous year: John Myerscough, \textit{The Economic Importance of the Arts in Great Britain}, (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1988) p.37.

\textsuperscript{322} Davies and Selwood demonstrate that between 1982 and 1992, self-generated income in local authority museums rose from making an average 5% contribution to their budgets to making 18% of their budgets but that there were no further increases through the 1990s (‘English Cultural Services’).

\textsuperscript{323} Kathy Gee, interview with the author, 30 May 2012.


\textsuperscript{325} Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
Against this background, independent museums contributed to a challenge to the pre-eminence of scholarly considerations in museum management. Malcolm Hawksworth was director of the Chatterley Whitfield Mining Museum, and had come into the sector after working as commercial manager of the National Garden Festival. Writing in 1986, he argued:

Museums founded on the premise that visitors will provide the funds to run the operation will have to ensure that the provision of the ‘product’ for the visitor takes precedence over all other objectives. At Chatterley Whitfield, the Curator or Keeper of Collections has a role to play equal to, but not greater than, the other professionals that comprise the Management Team. Curatorial integrity will be upheld but curatorial work that is not directly connected with the visitor experience is seen as a desirable by-product and not the main objective.\footnote{Malcolm Hawksworth, ‘Chatterley Whitfield after the watershed’ \textit{AIM Bulletin}, vol. 9, no 5, October 1986 p.4.}

For Hawksworth, curatorial work was subordinate to the ‘visitor experience’.

Hawksworth’s comments were echoed by Lesley Rayner, administrator of Ironbridge Gorge Museum, in 1987:

Of course [museum staff] must be knowledgeable and they must care about the objects in their collection, but they must also care whether their operations are cost-effective and – most important of all – whether their visitors are having a good time. Visitor friendliness is not an attribute we naturally associate with the average museum curator, but this situation must change if our museums are to survive in this new tougher climate in which we find ourselves.\footnote{Lesley Rayner, ‘Chameleon Museums will inherit the earth’ \textit{AIM Bulletin}, vol.10, no.5, October 1987, p.1.}

The rise of independent museums was one element in a shift in museums towards a greater concern with ‘visitor friendliness’ and the ‘visitor experience’ and an important driver of change in curatorial practice.

The best known and most extensive criticism of independent museums and the broader heritage sector came from Robert Hewison in \textit{The Heritage Industry}, published in 1987. Hewison’s criticisms were based on what he saw as the simplification and
commodification of history, condemning the heritage centre at Wigan Pier, for example, as ‘an emotional experience, a symbolic recovery of the way we were’. 328 Hewison was particularly concerned that industrial museums were replacing actual industry, and deplored the creation of Beamish on a green field site as a ‘historic invention’ 329 which diverted attention from the Thatcher government’s attack on traditional industry: ‘while this charming world was being created, the life of the North East was being destroyed.’ 330

The then Chairman of AIM, Chris Zeuner, rebutted Hewison’s criticisms, arguing that independent museums were able to combine historical rigour with enjoyment:

> What we don’t want to perpetuate is a nostalgic, unhistorical view of the past. If we are to be accused of this, then our response must be to establish and underline the nature of the museum, its purpose and the historical approach which it adopts. It is nothing for us to be ashamed of if, within this framework, visitors appear to be enjoying themselves. 331

Independent museums tried to ensure that visitors had more opportunities for ‘enjoying themselves’ by developing new approaches to interpretation, discussed at more length in Chapter 7. Independent museums also invested more effort than the typical local authority museum in visitor facilities such as shops and cafés. 332 A note to AIM committee members by Neil Cossons in 1984, spoke approvingly of the visitor experience he experienced on a family holiday to Disney World:

> I still believe that anybody that handles people in any quantity, whether they be museum curators or not should visit Disney World to see how they process and satisfy people in vast quantities, it is an absolute revelation. 333

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329 ibid., p.93.
330 ibid., p.95.
332 Middleton’s 1990 report on the future of the independent sector encourages museums to ensure their efforts are directed to things the visitors notice, ‘the general ambience and attractiveness of structures’ as well as good cafes and toilets: Middleton New Visions, p.48.
333 Neil Cossons, Circular to AIM Committee members, 5 November 1984, AIM Archive, University of Leicester, File BM 8.
This willing embrace of the techniques of commercial attractions was still profoundly dissonant with the values of many established museums.

The independent museum sector also challenged traditional practice through its use of volunteers, often in public-facing roles. Although national and local authority museums both had established approaches to working with volunteers, independent museums established a new kind of relationship with volunteers, with many independent museums either being volunteer-led or growing out of volunteer-led projects.334 The leaders of AIM saw their extensive use of volunteers as a strength, enabling them to offer, ‘a quality of service to their visitors which few publicly funded museums relying entirely on paid staff are able to match’335 Using volunteers, independent museum displays could be ‘peopled’, often by highly knowledgeable, enthusiastic individuals with personal experience of the site or its subject, in a way which contrasted with static traditional museum displays, still often staffed only by a warder in a formal uniform, who ‘jangled keys’.336 In all these respects, the independent sector challenged traditional museum practice by emphasising visitor enjoyment, commercial imperatives and through the enhanced status they offered to volunteers.

4.7 The changing nature of the museum workforce

As the museum workforce grew, it was also changing in character, with more women and people from more diverse social backgrounds starting to work in museums. As noted in Chapter 2, the expansion of higher education was a factor in the expansion of the professions. In 1960, only 3% of the relevant age group graduated from university but the increased numbers of universities and the introduction of maintenance grants was starting to widen access.337 As a more diverse group of students experienced

334 Patrick Greene refers to a preliminary survey of 120 AIM members which revealed that in the early 1980s, the museums in the sample had 1500 paid employees, and 3000 volunteers: Greene, ‘Independent and Working Museums in Britain’.
336 The comment comes from Hilary McGowan recalling her time in Exeter: interview with the author, 26 April 2012.
337 R.K Kelsall, A., Poole, and A., Kuhn, Graduates; the sociology of an elite, (London: Methuen, 1972).
university education, this started to be reflected in a more socially diverse museum workforce.  

During the period under review, more women also joined the museum workforce, although the gender balance remained unequal at the most senior levels throughout these four decades. Research from 1984 suggested that whereas in 1961, 20% of museum professionals were women and that this had increased to 41% by 1981. A 1993 workforce survey found that 47% of all local authority museums staff were women, including 51% of curators and managers and 46% of security and support staff. However, a 1987 survey by the Museums Association found that nearly 80% of museum directors were men, including over 90% of national museum directors, and the dominance of men in museum management was one of the motivations behind the establishment of the pressure group WHAM (Women, Heritage and Museums). These figures suggest that there was an increase in both the number and percentage of women working in museums during this period, but that women remained under-represented in the most senior roles.

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338 David Fleming, for example, strongly identifies as one of a number of new entrants to social history from a broader social background during the 1970s and 1980s (interview with the author, 4 July 2012). This is discussed further in Chapter 6.

339 This survey, by Jane Leggett, was based on a comparative analysis of the Museums Yearbook and is subject to the limitations of my own survey, in terms of the Yearbook's coverage. In addition, entries do not always reveal an individual's gender. See Jane Leggett, ‘Women in museums: past present and future’ WHAM conference report 1984, pp. 13-18.

340 Management Centre, Bradford University, Museum Sector Workforce Survey: an Analysis of the Workforce in the Museum, Gallery and Heritage Sector in the United Kingdom, (Bradford: MTI, 1993). It should be noted that these findings are markedly different to the findings of a large Museums Association survey of the whole sector in 1987 which found that only 13% of full time museum workers were women, the figures being very similar for independent, national and local authority museums: some of the difference may be explained by the fact that the MA survey only considered full-time work, whereas the MTI survey included part-time work. See David Prince and Bernadette Higgins-McLoughlin, Museums UK: the Findings of the Museums Data-Base Project, (London: Museums Association, 1987).

341 Prince and Higgins-McLoughlin, Museums UK.

342 Jane Leggett, ‘Women in museums’.

343 These changes in museums were in line with broader patterns of change in women’s employment: see Rosemary Crompton and Kate Sanderson, Gendered jobs and social change, (London: Unwin Hyman,
Although the museum workforce was more socially diverse and gender-balanced by the late 1980s than at the start of the period, it remained seriously unrepresentative in other ways. A 1987 MGC report on training recommended that museums should give more serious consideration to training provision for people from ethnic minorities; the 1993 MTI survey found that only 1% of curators and managers in local authority museums were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds and that less than 2% of total staff complement were disabled. The damaging impact of this imbalance would start to be addressed towards the end of the period under review when the Museums Association established its Diversify scheme aimed at training more people from ethnic minorities for work in museums in 1998, a scheme later extended to disabled people. A drive to make museums more equitable workplaces was underway, but its impact was far from complete by the turn of the millennium.

4.8 Conclusion to Chapter 4

This chapter has demonstrated that there were significant changes in the institutional context for museum work during this period, which helped to shape the nature of curatorial practice. In the larger museums which were the subject of Renaissance in the Regions, curators gradually came to be working in much more diverse, interdisciplinary environments, which shaped the nature of their practice. Overall staff numbers increased between 1960 and 2000, but were subject to a good deal of volatility from the mid-1970s onwards, and a sharp decline in the later 1990s, with funding instability shaping the nature of change.

1990). However, museums were not alone in remaining unequal at the most senior levels: in 1980, women made up 99% of all staff in the most junior typing grades of the Civil Service, with progressively declining presence at senior grades, accounting for only 3.8% of those at the most senior levels. See Meta Zimmeck, ‘We are all professionals now: professionalisation, education and gender in the Civil Service, 1873 – 1939’ in P. Summerfield, (ed.) Women, Education and the Professions (London: Higher Educational Society, Occasional Paper no.8, 1987).


Management Centre, Bradford University, Museum Sector Workforce Survey

For a history of concern about the demographics of the museum workforce and the success of attempts to address under-representation see Maurice Davies and Lucy Shaw, ‘Measuring the ethnic diversity of the museum workforce and the impact and cost of positive-action training, with particular reference to the Diversify scheme’, Cultural Trends, vol.19, no. 3, 2010, 147-179.
The rise to prominence of independent museums had also begun to change the broader culture in museums, at a time when the imperatives of the public sector were themselves shifting. Museums became more concerned with the experience of their visitors, driven in part by commercial considerations and in part by a rights-based agenda. A changing managerial culture which began to determine objectives for museum work and which challenged the pre-eminence of imperatives related to the preservation of collections also challenged the professional identity of their guardians, the curators.

From the changing culture of institutions, the next chapter shifts its focus to the less tangible elements of the sector’s infrastructure, considering how changes in the broader professional context drove change in practice.
Chapter 5: Supporting curatorship: the infrastructure of professionalism

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 explored the political and economic factors which shaped the environment for museums during the last four decades of the twentieth century and Chapter 4 the changes in the shape of individual museums which arose as a result. This chapter turns its attention to the increasingly complex network of support structures and institutions which influenced museum practice during this period. As Chapter 3 described, there were a series of attempts during these four decades to strengthen the supporting infrastructure for museums and to knit the sector more closely together in new ways. Although the grand visions of the Rosse, Wright and Drew Reports remained unrealised, individual initiatives did have a significant effect on the nature of the sector. This chapter explores the ways in which the framework within which museums and museum professionals operated was strengthened.

The improved support for museums which this chapter assesses was achieved through a combination of political and professional will. As discussed in Chapter 1, it is impossible to draw a clear-cut distinction between initiatives which shaped museums from the outside and those which shaped museums from within. In different ways the elements of the framework for museums discussed in this chapter sat at the point where ‘top-down’ met ‘bottom-up’. This chapter will seek to demonstrate how change was generated through grass roots activism meeting official support. Chapter 6 will focus more particularly on the agency of individual professionals but that agency was also significant in shaping the initiatives and organisations considered here.

5.2 The role of the Museums Association

As the only organisation to aspire to represent the whole UK museum sector, and the most significant museum organisation to survive extant through the whole period under review, the MA might be expected to be right at the centre of an account of change in museums. In practice, however, the MA made significant contributions to professional change in this period, but was never quite central to the narrative.
Pearson notes that the MA had been held in low esteem during the 1950s. The 1960s started positively for the Association with new premises and the expansion of its publications, and positive endorsement in the Rosse Report. The report’s authors regarded the MA’s publications as having ‘done much to unite and fortify the profession’ and saw the MA as having a central role in its plans for improved training. However, the government did not fund any of the elements of the Rosse recommendations relating to the MA and it was soon facing financial difficulties due to the gradual withdrawal of the funding from the CUKT which had supported the organisation’s work since 1931. In 1964, the Secretary-Editor, Philip James retired to ease the financial pressures on the organisation. Over the next three decades there were to be repeated financial crises: an attempt to secure Chartered status for the Association in the 1970s and early 1980s which was seen as having the potential to offer the Association greater ‘autonomy’, and which could have enhanced the status of the museum profession, was thwarted in part by the organisation’s financial weakness. Throughout this period, the MA had many detractors and was particularly weak at some key moments when its effective intervention might have made a real difference, notably during the aftermath of Local Government Reorganisation in the 1970s. Alternative groups grew up to represent parts of the museum sector and Chapter 6 discusses at more length how dissatisfaction with the MA spurred these alternative groups to action.

Given these failings, it is a curious paradox that the MA was central to some of the most significant professional developments discussed in this chapter, playing a crucial role in the development of the Code of Ethics, the Registration scheme and in training. Although the MA no longer provided grant funding for museums after the withdrawal of the CUKT support in the 1960s, it continued to provide some practical help to museums during this period, notably through its support for the IRGMA documentation.

347 Pearson, Curators, culture and conflict.
348 SCMG, Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.48.
349 Lewis, For Instruction and Recreation.
351 Patrick Boylan, interview with the author, 19 December 2012. The MA did go on to achieve greater financial stability in the 1990s.
scheme. It also coordinated the production in 1984 of the *Manual for Curatorship*,\(^{352}\) intended as a guide to museum practice and also seen as an important step towards professionalisation, in ‘promoting within the profession the idea of a common core of knowledge to which all members should aspire before attempting any subject specialisation’.\(^{353}\) Many respected and influential museum professionals served as its President and on its committees and Council, using the voice that this gave them to argue for change. Its annual conferences, though frequently criticised as too expensive or unrepresentative, nevertheless constituted the most substantial regular opportunity for members of sector to meet and share ideas. Although the MA was institutionally weak, it nevertheless provided an umbrella for a number of significant strands of activity.

The history of the MA for much of the period under review is recounted in Lewis’s centenary history, published in 1989.\(^{354}\) Lewis offers a largely uncritical narrative of developments, constrained by his close association with the organisation and the expectations of a celebratory volume. A full history of the organisation would need to disentangle the agency of specific members of staff, of individual Council members, committee members and Presidents and to understand how the development of influential initiatives such as the Code of Ethics sat within a pattern of recurring organisational weakness and occasional dysfunction.

### 5.3 New help for museums: the Area Museum Councils

One of the initiatives which had its origins in the MA’s work was the establishment of the Area Museum Councils (AMCs). The idea of a regional structure through which larger museums would provide specialist support to smaller museums had been discussed throughout the 1950s and had gained momentum after the MA developed a detailed proposal in 1957, with the first AMC established in the South West in 1959 on a pilot basis.\(^{355}\) The AMCs were not, initially, free-standing organisations; their small

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\(^{353}\) Ian Robertson, ‘Book Review: Manual of Curatorship’, *Museums Journal*, vol. 85, no. 1, 59-60, p.59. There was scepticism as to whether the Manual had achieved the objective of defining a core of knowledge with a GCG Committee meeting noting in 1985 ‘it had not achieved what it set out to do and is no more than a collection of essays, some of them good’. GCG Committee, minutes of meeting, 18 January 1985, para 85.4g. GCG Archive, National Museum, Cardiff.

\(^{354}\) Lewis, *For Instruction and Recreation*.

numbers of specialist staff were based in larger regional museums. The AMC in the South West had been funded by contributions from the CUKT and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, with local authorities paying subscriptions in return for access to services, with a particular early emphasis on conservation. There were political difficulties to overcome, with the convention that local authorities should not contribute to services outside their own boundaries discouraging some authorities from contributing. However the Association of Municipal Councils issued guidance in 1960 recommending that local authorities contribute in this way, and, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 was to remove any remaining doubt about the legitimacy of raising funding in this way. By 1963, AMCs were established in all the English regions, with Scotland following in 1964 and Wales in 1965. The Rosse Report saw the AMCs as an important means of supporting improvements in regional museums and recommended that the government should support the development of the AMCs with financial aid, and that they should be used to channel development grants to local museums.

The initial government funding for the AMCs was modest but, as noted in Chapter 3, Jennie Lee promised a review of the basis of their funding in 1966. The outcome of this review was a decision that the government would match fund the support the AMCs raised from contributing local authorities from 1966/7 onwards, thus providing 50% of their support. The principle of match funding was intended to ensure that central government grant was supporting local priorities, rather than initiating new activity and the AMCs were encouraged to cover some of their costs by charging for services, although this was always problematic. The government continued to provide modest

356 The Chancellor of the Exchequer quoted the memorandum in his speech announcing the commissioning of the Rosse Report. See SCMG, Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.78.
358 Richard Lucking, The Exchequer Grant to the Area Museum Councils in England: Report of a study into the Basis of Apportionment of the Grant Among the Seven English Councils, (London: MGC, 1982). The study noted that, because the origins of the government grant were in match funding, when the basis for funding changed in 1973/4, there were some anomalies with ceilings for funding being determined on the basis of previous match funding levels, rather than need.
359 Harrison, ‘The first seven years’. 
increases on a match-funding basis until 1973/4, by which time total annual funding to
the AMCs was just over £130,000. From 1974/5, on the recommendation of the Wright
Report, the government agreed to drop the requirement for match funding, which made
substantial increases possible and by 1978/9, annual funding was £1,325,000.\textsuperscript{360}
This shift from match funding also increased the autonomy of the AMCs and made it
possible for them to pursue their own priorities rather than support those of their
subscribing local authorities. Over time, all became independent of the museums which
had initially housed them and they took on more staff to provide services to museums.
They were run by independent boards and all had slightly different governance
structures; they also sought to respond to local need, with the result that the emphasis of
their work differed. Most offered design and display services, training and some
travelling exhibitions to local museums. Some were provided or facilitated a network of
Museum Development Officers to provide practical help to small museums.\textsuperscript{361} But in
the 1970s and earlier 1980s, their main levers for improving provision in museums were
their programmes of small improvement grants. These could have an impact beyond
their modest scale, according to Crispin Paine, director of the Area Museum Council for
South Eastern England (AMSEE) from 1979 to 1989:

\begin{quote}
We had absurdly little money to give out in grants. And grants were the only
carrot we could offer; we hadn’t got any sticks, really. All we could do was push
at open doors, and that was always what I tried to do ... If there was a new
curator in post, who was trying to wake things up, to develop a livelier service,
to influence his politicians, to get a new building, then as soon as we heard about
that – and on the whole we weren’t too bad at keeping our ears to the ground,
even though we did have 700 museums in membership – then we would say,
“look…put in for a grant and you will almost certainly get some support”. And
that had huge influence with local politicians, and with boards of
management.\textsuperscript{362}
\end{quote}

Here Paine describes an approach to the work of an AMC essentially based on
encouraging local effort, on identifying those with the potential to ‘wake things up’ and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{361} Crispin Paine, interview with the author, 25 April 2012.
\textsuperscript{362} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
supporting them both by using grants to secure direct improvements and also by influencing governing bodies. This approach enhanced grass-roots initiatives, rather than driving change from the centre.

As the 1980s progressed, the AMCs gradually shifted from being organisations which existed to provide services to museums to being sources of advice and leadership for the sector in their regions; indeed a review of the AMCs in 1984 reported some concern that they had achieved too much influence at the expense of the museums themselves.363

From 1988 onwards the AMCs played an important role in administering the Registration Scheme (discussed below), which for the first time gave them a real ‘stick’ to use to press for improvements. At the same time, some AMCs began to develop a more strategic approach. When Kathy Gee became Chief Executive of the West Midlands Regional Museums Council (WMRC) in 1990, she began to shift the focus of the organisation towards developing a vision for the sector in the West Midlands.364 WMRC undertook influential surveys of the shape and extent of museum provision in the West Midlands, initially prompted by the anticipation of substantial funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the desire to be able to make authoritative recommendations about the extent of the need. The surveys also enabled the Council to target grants in a more strategic manner: rather than simply reacting to requests, WMRC was able to be clearer about museums’ needs in its region.

This more strategic approach anticipated developments of the later 1990s. In 1998, the government announced its intention to create a cross-sectoral body for museums, libraries and archives and, as plans for the new agency progressed, it became inevitable that the AMCs should also become cross-sectoral organisations.365 Renaissance in the Regions recommended that the new bodies should be entirely strategic organisations, leaving service delivery to the regional museum hubs.366 The programme of mergers creating the new, strategic cross-sectoral bodies was completed between 1999 and 2003: the lifetime of the AMCs thus almost exactly coincides with the period of this study.

363 MGC, Review of the Area Museum Councils.
364 Kathy Gee, Interview with the author, 30 May 2012.
365 Babbidge, ‘Forty Years On’.
366 Davies Renaissance in the Regions, p.15.
Babbidge compares AMC funding levels in the 1960s and in 2000, adjusted for inflation and on a per-museum basis. He suggests that the 1966 grant was worth £1,150 per museum at 2000 prices, compared to £2500 per museum in 2000.^{367} Although the direct grants provided to museums by the AMCs were modest in scale compared to some other funding streams, the award of grants was closely linked to the development of professional standards. This and the advice and support the AMCs were able to provide made them a significant driver of change in the museum sector during this period. Their work was, in large part, an expression of a certain vision of professionalism: one based on raising standards. Initially, this was achieved through supporting grass roots effort and later, through Registration, by encouraging acceptance of a common approach. The AMCs also played a role, through their training courses and networking opportunities, in building a sense of a more cohesive museum sector. Their move towards a more strategic approach reflected newer understandings of the nature of professionalism towards the end of the twentieth century – one based not simply on doing things well, but rather on an attempt to match provision to need.

5.4 Improving training opportunities

The Rosse Report argued that the ‘need for qualified staff’ was the ‘most important of all’ aspects of improving museum practice and considered training at some length.^{368} The committee suggested that improved training opportunities since the 1930s had strengthened a sense that curatorship could be a ‘career’, thanks to the work of the MA and the CUKT, but identified the need for further investment. This section explores how changes to training from 1960 onwards both reflected and contributed to change in the sector.

The MA had begun to offer training for the first time in 1930, first offering a number of short courses based in museums and then in 1932 launching the Museums Diploma.^{369} From 1952, the holders of the Diploma were eligible for Associateship of the Museums Association (known as the AMA) and in 1954 the MA also initiated a certificate for

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^{367} Babbidge, ‘Forty Years On’, p.21.

^{368} SCMG, Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.41.

^{369} Lewis, For Instruction and Recreation.

technicians. These initiatives were relatively modest in their reach: by 1950, only 60 Diplomas had been awarded and by the time of the Rosse Report, there were 149 registered students for the Diploma and Technical Certificate. The MA was in the process of reviewing both qualifications as the Rosse review began and the committee considered the MA’s proposals, which included the ambition to extend the training offered for the Diploma, with various possible options for short courses and longer post-entry courses. The report noted that everyone who supported the MA’s training programme by teaching or examining students, or by overseeing the programme as part of the MA’s education committee, did so on a voluntary basis, with the result that the scheme placed ‘a considerable burden on many senior members of museum staffs’. It explored possible alternatives to this voluntary approach.

Among these alternatives were proposals emerging from the University of Leicester for postgraduate training in ‘the special knowledge and skills needed for curatorship – as comprised in the term “Museology”’. However, the committee members were cautious about the idea of university-based teaching, concerned that such courses would not offer sufficient hands-on experience. They saw the training need for museum curators as ‘essentially practical’:

The success of a year’s training of this kind would depend very much on the ready availability of good and comprehensive museums for demonstration throughout the course. Not all universities therefore would be suitable. Moreover, these courses, extending consecutively over a year would have to contain a high proportion of theoretical teaching in a course whose object is essentially practical, especially for students straight from the university, with no balancing experience. Although we are glad to learn of the experiment, therefore, it could not replace the post-entry training envisaged by the Museums Association.

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371 Teather, Museology and its Tradition.
372 SCMG, Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.41.
373 Ibid.
374 Ibid., p.42
375 Ibid.
These comments anticipate the two major fault lines in debate over appropriate approaches to training in the museum sector, which reappear in different guises throughout the whole of this period: was the appropriate training for museum work more practical, or more theoretical? And who should control approaches to training: did universities have a role, or should training be led by the museum sector itself?

The Rosse Report came down firmly on the side of practical training, led by the MA on behalf of the sector but its recommendations did not bear fruit. The government rejected the report’s call for government funding for a full-time Education Officer at the MA and a centre which would deliver museum training, arguing that a ‘monotechnic’ training centre would not be the best place in which to train.\(^{376}\) The government did, however, fund places on the course at the University of Leicester when it began in 1966.\(^{377}\) At around the same time, the MA drew up plans to recognise a number of museums as training centres, which would provide training posts and prepare students for the Diploma.\(^{378}\) Whereas, until the mid-1960s, the MA had a near-monopoly on formal training for museum work, the situation that emerged over the coming decades was more complex, with a number of different providers collaborating and, at times, competing. The tensions that arose were due in part to a struggle for control, but also to differing views on the appropriate balance between theoretical and practical training.

Professional training contributes to the emergence of a profession, in ways that go beyond the practical. Hughes argues that training has a socializing function as well as a practical one and that increasingly formalized training is ‘a campaign to separate the sheep from the goats, to set up categories of truly professional and less than professional people.’\(^{379}\) In his study of the professions, Abbott considers the example of university librarianship courses, arguing that the purpose of university training is more than merely utilitarian and that the presence of a body of associated academic knowledge, such as the theory of indexing systems serves to enhance to status of librarianship, legitimising it and increasing its cultural worth, so that ‘the true use of academic professional


\(^{379}\) Hughes *Men and Their Work*, p.135.
knowledge is less practical than symbolic. Freidson’s study of professions and professionalisation identifies potential for a conflict between academic and professional approaches, arising from the tension between the idealistic and the pragmatic:

[The university’s] protected circumstances also encourage it to create standards for work performance that emphasize the ideal and demean the improvisations required of colleagues who must adapt to the confusion and impurity of practical affairs where knowledge is incomplete and resources finite.

The training model which emerged during these forty years was a hybrid, combining theoretical and practical elements and the input of universities, of museums and of the MA. Many of the people who drove change in museums in this era were among the first to benefit from new forms of training in the 1960s and 1970s. Their training experiences enabled them to negotiate novel paths through the conflict between the ‘ideal’ and the ‘confusion and impurity of practical affairs’. Although there was recurring unease and debate about the proper balance between each of these elements, the infusion of new ideas and new intellectual perspectives through the intervention of universities, and the encouragement of critical thinking about museums was an important aspect of growing professionalisation and an important driver of change in the sector during these forty years.

At the time the Leicester course was established, there was no UK university department dedicated to museum training, although there were elements of curatorial training included in specialist archaeology and art history courses. Raymond Singleton, Director of Sheffield City Museum, was appointed to establish the new department, starting work in January 1966. The department accepted its first students in

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380 Abbott, System of the Professions, p.54.
381 Freidson, Professionalism, pp. 99 – 100.
382 Lorente suggests that the UK was an anomaly in not having a university museum training course, citing museology departments in central and Eastern Europe. However, as Lorente acknowledges, those involved in the Leicester course argued that their approach to ‘museum studies’ was distinct from the ‘museology’ taught in these departments. Jesús-Pedro Lorente, ‘The development of museum studies in universities: from technical training to critical museology’, Museum Management and Curatorship, 27:3, 2012, 237-252.
October of that year, on a one-year course leading to a Graduate Certificate in Museum Studies, supported initially with funding from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Students on its first intake had to specialise in either archaeology or geology, although it was always intended that it would expand its scope to other curatorial specialisms in later years: the training was entirely aimed at curators until the expansion of the department in 1980 enabled it to offer a museum education option. By 1968 it was accepting students who wished to specialise in archaeology, geology, natural history, local history, or the history of science. Singleton was keen to stress that the course was not an alternative to the MA’s Diploma but complementary. The Department of Museum Studies had a close relationship with the MA: it followed its Diploma syllabus, the seven-member Board of Studies with responsibility for oversight of the course included three members of the MA’s Education Committee (which had responsibility for the Diploma) and those who had completed the course were exempt from some elements of the MA Diploma examinations.

In 1971, a specialist course in Art Gallery and Museum Studies was established within the Department of the History of Art at the University of Manchester. The organisers of that course also negotiated exemptions from the MA Diploma examinations for its students, and places funded by the Department for Education. Leicester had briefly offered an art option but stopped when the Manchester course was established. Until an expansion of university museum studies courses in the 1980s and 1990s, Leicester and Manchester were the only post-graduate university courses training people to work in museums in the UK. Because the Leicester course served a wider range of disciplines it generated more debate in the professional literature and is the focus of my discussion here.

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384 Ibid. The Department began offering students the opportunity to extend their Graduate Certificate to a Master or Arts or Master of Science qualification by completing a dissertation in a second, part-time year, from 1975.
388 Lewis, Training of Museum Personnel.
389 Ibid.
Writing ahead of the start of the first year’s course in Leicester, Singleton stressed the ‘vocational’ and practical nature of the course, although acknowledging that it would also allow ‘the investigation of such basic questions as “Why do people visit museums?”’. The department had a close relationship with Leicester museums: students undertook practical work there and Trevor Walden, Director of Leicester Museums, was a member of the board of studies. Singleton noted that the Department of Museum Studies would avoid the lure of a more theoretical approach by relying heavily on visiting lecturers,

…instead of building up a permanent staff of university lecturers, who I am sure would, in time, inevitably drift away from the everyday practitioner’s approach to museum work toward something more academic.

Singleton’s views on the importance of theoretical understanding as part of museum training seem to have shifted somewhat by the time he wrote in 1969:

I suggest that the most vital thing which must be taught, and learnt, concerns the purpose of museum activities. .. If [a trainee curator] fully understands why he is displaying, conserving or storing something, he will need less instruction in how to do these things … We must, therefore, train our museum curators to think – to think about the purpose of museums, and their role in society – and then to think how best this purpose can be fulfilled.

Nevertheless the department retained its practical focus throughout the 1960s and 1970s, as students of that era recall. Sam Mullins who took the course in the 1970s noted that, when he began his career working unsupported in a very small museum, the Leicester course had prepared him practically:

The Leicester course in those days … was a ‘licence to drive a museum’. You know, you learnt how to do Letrasetting so you could build your own displays.

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391 Ibid, p.137.
You knew where to buy cork-lettering, where to buy hessian…it was good … very practical.³⁹³

Crispin Paine, another early student also recalled the strong practical element of the course, noting that some ‘odd’ skills were considered essential ‘I mean we learnt how to make to make wax models of flowers, all sorts of things like that.’ But Paine acknowledged nevertheless that a practical orientation was helpful then when most museum curators in regional museums had little or no support from technical display staff: ‘So if you wanted a diorama in your display, you built a diorama. You needed those skills.’³⁹⁴

While the question of the appropriate balance between theoretical and practical elements would become a matter of contention, it was never the intention that the course would help to develop students’ specialist curatorial knowledge. Students were expected to come to the course with a basic appropriate academic grounding in a museum subject but were not expected to be outstanding scholars. Writing of the first intake of students, Singleton noted, ‘it has been on the firmness of their vocational intentions that they have been selected, rather than the level of their academic attainment in geology or archaeology.’³⁹⁵ Students were then expected to develop museum-specific knowledge in their later work. This was in contrast to the MA Diploma, which continued to demand a high degree of a particular kind of specialist knowledge, as discussed below.

The museum studies courses quickly had an impact on the shape of the profession. By 1977, it was estimated that 15% of people working in ‘professional’ roles in museums had completed either the Leicester or Manchester course and that the courses had produced ‘about half of the entrants to the profession over the past four or five years.’³⁹⁶ They also quickly became over-subscribed. In 1983, Lewis reported that there had been 351 applications for that year’s course, with around 25 places available.³⁹⁷ Kathy Gee recalled that when she was offered places on two post-graduate courses in the early

³⁹³ Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
³⁹⁴ Crispin Paine, interview with the author, 25 April 2012.
³⁹⁵ Singleton, ‘The Leicester Course’, p.137.
³⁹⁶ Patrick Boylan, ‘Comment’, Museums Bulletin 17(5), 1977, p.60. The piece was an appreciation of the work of Raymond Singleton, who was then retiring as Director of the Leicester course.
1970s, her tutor advised her to accept the Leicester place even though she was really hoping for a career in field archaeology because ‘you don’t turn down the Leicester Museum Studies Course.’

While the Leicester and Manchester courses were growing in influence, the MA continued to develop and revise the requirements for its Diploma. From 1963, candidates for the Diploma were required to undertake more formal training, which included management training for the first time. These courses were still all delivered on a voluntary basis by senior museum staff and their colleagues, which represented a significant commitment of time and resources. The requirement to attend courses meant that students got to know one another well and to build strong informal networks. Patrick Boylan, for example, recalled that he was part of the first group of candidates for the revised Diploma and that this cohort built a strong network, sharing common concerns about the need to strengthen the profession and improve museum practice.

Throughout the 1960s, the range of subject options available for Diploma candidates expanded. An education option was introduced in 1967, although this had to be combined with an academic subject. By the 1970s, it was becoming increasingly expensive to maintain teaching and examination in such a wide range of subject options and the MA introduced streamlined regulations in 1971, with a smaller number of broader subject options. But increasing student numbers made it increasingly challenging for the MA to resource the compulsory courses.

The MA Education Committee, which oversaw the Diploma, consulted about proposed changes to the qualification in the mid-1970s. The status of the Diploma was a contentious matter, with a proposal to replace the qualifying examination for non-graduates with appropriate credits from the Open University, for example, eliciting accusations of the ‘devaluation’ of the Diploma in a letter to the *Museums Bulletin*. Reporting a meeting to debate the changes, the Museum Assistants Group (MAG) fixed on the idea that what made curators special (and distinct from analogous professions, such as librarians) was their responsibility to care for ‘stuff’ and in particular the

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398 Kathy Gee, interview with the author, 30 May 2012.
400 Patrick Boylan, interview with the author, 19 December 2012.
specific ethical dilemmas that that entailed.\textsuperscript{402} MAG also reported the view that people with expertise in other aspects of museums’ work who aspired to senior management should train as a curator first: ‘That a Director should always have had this professional training was considered essential if the integrity for preserving collections was to be upheld’.\textsuperscript{403} The notion of the museum as object-focused and curator-led, discussed in relation to changing management culture in Chapter 4, was evidently still strong in this era.

When the proposals for the new Diploma were published in 1978, the Geological Curators’ Group (GCG) was concerned that the guidelines emphasised interdisciplinary aspects of museum work at the expense of specialist elements. A letter from Mick Stanley reported that members of the group felt that ‘the [new] diploma pushes back museum curators to the pre-war state, i.e. jacks of all trades’\textsuperscript{404} Stanley saw interdisciplinarity as imposing an impossible burden on specialist curators who in any case found it ‘almost impossible to keep abreast of current thought in any one subject.’\textsuperscript{405} These comments point to tensions over the appropriate approach to curatorship: the model of curatorship which emerged through the 1960s and 1970s in larger regional museums was based on increased opportunity to specialise, to focus on a narrower area of museum work and this distanced a new generation of curators from their predecessors. This specialisation had been supported by an increasingly specialised Diploma. Although the Diploma continued to include subject specialist elements and the shift in emphasis should not be overstated, in placing more somewhat more emphasis on interdisciplinary skills, the MA was anticipating developments in curatorial practice of the 1980s and 1990s which were based less on deepening specialisation and more on a broader range of audience-facing skills. This is explored at more length in Chapter 7.

In 1980, the Department of Museum Studies at Leicester defined a series of learning goals, which were based on a review of all comparable syllabuses and were designed to


\textsuperscript{403} \textit{Ibid.}, p.12

\textsuperscript{404} Mick Stanley, Letter to Jim Bateman, 28 September 1978, GCG archive, National Museum, Cardiff.

\textsuperscript{405} \textit{Ibid.}
cover the skills ‘necessary for a curator at the beginning of his career.’\(^{406}\) In the same year, the Department took over responsibility for teaching the general MA Diploma courses (but not subject specialisms), an arrangement which continued until 1987. The MA was finding it increasingly difficult to resource Diploma teaching, and also hoped that the introduction of university-based teaching would encourage the Civil Service to recognise the qualification, in turn encouraging more national museum staff to take the Diploma.\(^{407}\) However, the arrangement gave rise to a number of areas of tension.

At the outset, there was considerable difficulty in reaching an agreement between the MA and the Department of Museum Studies over the arrangements for teaching the Diploma courses, with some animosity over contractual matters such as the Department’s exclusive right to teach the courses, and the appropriate notice period for both sides. A memo from Geoff Lewis, then head of the Department, complained that late changes made to the agreement by the MA’s solicitors, ‘typify the apparent loss of the co-operative spirit between the University and Association which existed at the original meeting at which the not inconsiderable expertise of the Department was put at the Association’s disposal’.\(^{408}\) In attempting to cast the MA as the beneficiary of the Department’s ‘expertise’, Lewis’ comment indicates an attempt decisively to rebalance the traditional relationship in which the MA was the arbiter of training needs for the profession.

Once the teaching started, there were complaints both about practical arrangements and resources, and about the scope of the teaching. A lengthy account of the first Diploma course in the Group for Regional Studies in Museums (GRSM) newsletter cited a long list of grievances. While some of these centred on simple poor organisation, more substantive criticism of the teaching included the ‘amateur nature’ of some resources, insufficient scope for sharing ideas, too much reliance on formal lectures and too little

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\(^{407}\) Dennis Farr, ‘Presidential thoughts for the 1980s’.

\(^{408}\) Geoffrey Lewis, Memo to Professor Martin, 29 July 1980, University of Leicester Archive, File on the agreement between the Department and the MA, p.2.
time devoted to specialist subjects. The article and an accompanying editorial apparently elicited the threat of legal action and Lewis contributed a substantial reply in GRSM’s next publication. He robustly defended the Graduate Certificate teaching from the criticism implied by the attack on the Diploma courses, arguing that the year-long course should be seen as entirely different to the Diploma teaching. He also distanced the Department from responsibility for the Diploma courses, arguing that the Department was merely the MA’s ‘agent’ in delivering these courses.

Lewis went on to argue that the Department had made the case to the MA that ‘two courses, each of three weeks’ duration, was inadequate for curatorial training in a complex profession like ours’. The first course covered the ‘museum context’: the history and development of museums, public participation, questions of organisation and governance, standards, codes of practice and collections management. The second course covered museum management: finance, personnel, buildings and sites and relationships with governing bodies. The booklets produced for students stress that these subjects were covered at a ‘foundation’ level, and that students were expected to build on their learning through their work and further study. Nevertheless, Lewis’ comments and the reaction of students point to the growing difficulty the MA faced in attempting to run a comprehensive training programme for its Diploma students. In addition to these difficulties, the Diploma was seen as lacking in relevance for independent museums which could rarely offer an equally ‘broad range of curatorial experience’ as local authority museums and whose special concerns tended to be overlooked by examination questions.

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410 Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
411 Geoffrey Lewis, ‘University of Leicester, Department of Museum Studies’, GRSM Journal 10, October 1982, p.3. (The Newsletter was renamed the Journal from this edition.)
412 These details are taken from papers relating to the Department’s teaching of the MA Diploma in the University of Leicester archive.
413 Letter from Kate Arnold-Forster, circulated with Circular to Committee members, Association of Independent Museums, 25 January 1984. AIM Archive, University of Leicester, File BM8. Arnold-Forster was then a museum assistant at the Museum and Library of the Order of St John and had been elected
As a training provider, the Department of Museum Studies faced a further difficulty in maintaining the credibility of its teaching. People with a substantial body of practical experience were sceptical of the credentials of academics, some of whom were relatively inexperienced in terms of their careers in the museum sector. This scepticism points to a continuing suspicion of theoretical approaches, with academic credentials being seen as counting for less than practical experience. Writing in 1991, Lynne Teather addressed the question of the difficulty of achieving a balance between theoretical and practical aspects of museum studies. She argued that universities failed to value museum-studies because they saw it as too practical, whereas professional colleagues demanded more ‘relevancy’, with the result that she and other museum studies academics were ‘involved in a delicate balancing act between the profession and academe and often fall off our high-wire’.

Gaynor Kavanagh, who was one of the new lecturers appointed with the expansion of the Department of Museum Studies in 1980 and taught there until 1999 recalled that she focused on trying to find a balance between theory and practice, and bring these elements together in a creative way: ‘It wasn’t completely either/or, but it was the plus/plus that was really important.’ She argued that the way that the course encouraged critical thinking was valued by practitioners, citing a call from a successful social history curator looking for an assistant who wanted someone who had taken the social history option at Leicester on the grounds that, ‘we can teach them how to do the job, but we can’t teach them how to think.’

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill was also appointed to the Department of Museum Studies in 1980 and developed the department’s teaching on education and visitor studies. She began to introduce a broader audience to some of the theoretical perspectives included in her teaching, with a Museums Journal article introducing basic sociological concepts

student representative on the joint committee of the University of Leicester and the Museums Association which oversaw the Diploma teaching.

414 This suggestion was made by a number of interviewees, who did not wish to be quoted directly.


416 Gaynor Kavanagh, interview with the author, 25 June 2012.

417 Ibid.
in 1982. Sue Pearce joined the Department as senior lecturer in 1984, from a curatorial post in Exeter. She was appointed to teach a new Material Culture course and also brought some of her course materials to a wider audience through a series of articles in *Museums Journal* on artefact study in 1986 and 1987. Pearce led the redevelopment of the Museum Studies course during the 1980s, with a new teaching programme, and a huge expansion in student numbers. The slim departmental staff complement gradually increased from three to six by the early 1990s.

The early Leicester course attempted to negotiate the balance between theoretical and practical training. The third element of curatorial training, the development of specialist collections-based expertise, had traditionally been largely unstructured and often based on a self-taught approach, with the Leicester course teaching the curatorial skills associated with particular specialisms, but not collections-based knowledge. This approach persisted, especially but not only in the national museums. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* from 1971 about curators at the British Museum may have overstated the case for its particular audience, but nevertheless conveyed a strong sense of a laissez faire, almost accidental approach to learning. Bryan Cranstone, Deputy Keeper in Ethnography was quoted as saying, ‘When I first joined the Museum, I was simply ignored. For ages. It sounds like an odd way to learn the business, but it seems to work.’ Douglass Barrett, Keeper of Oriental Department described the process in more detail:

> In the old days … you got a degree, came to the Museum and said you knew nothing about India. ‘Perfect’, they said, ‘You’re virgin material’. To be honest,

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I was bored and unhappy for a couple of years and I don’t really know how I learned the job. I suppose it sort of soaked in. I do remember that when I was working with Japanese prints I got tired of holding them upside down out of ignorance, so I learned Japanese.\textsuperscript{423}

This self-taught approach to developing specialist expertise was not limited to the national museums, and was especially relevant in subjects such as decorative arts which were not covered by university courses. Cathy Ross, who started her career as a decorative arts curator in Tyne and Wear Museums described the process by which she began to build specialist knowledge as ‘a little bit “in at the deep end, teach yourself.”’ She built on some knowledge of ceramics, which she had acquired through volunteering, and taught herself enough about glass and silver to be able to curate these collections, arguing: ‘the basic thing is just to be curious yourself. Why is this thing looking like it is? Why is that handle like this? And then just finding out for yourself, which is the best way of learning really.’ This self-directed, unhurried approach to learning was possible in museums which were less focused on delivering outputs to users and, crucially, where building knowledge was seen as being part of a curator’s role in and of itself. Ross summed up this attitude in terms of the culture at Tyne and Wear Museums: ‘there was an unspoken thing that you were there to catalogue the collections and to inform yourself about the collections and to keep the collections well-preserved.’\textsuperscript{424} This approach to the development of collections-based expertise tended to favour traditional, connoisseurship based approaches to the study of objects. Both the dominance of connoisseurship and the workplace culture which allowed for this approach to developing knowledge would be challenged during the 1980s and 1990s, and this will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

There was some more formal support for the development of subject specialist expertise within the MA Diploma programme. Candidates were assigned a volunteer tutor, although the quality of the teaching was very dependent on the individual concerned. The tutors helped the students prepare for a practical exam, which remained a part of the Diploma until the 1990s. The practical tested candidates’ ability to identify and answer questions on a range of objects and acquired near-mythical status in the

\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., p.41.

\textsuperscript{424} Cathy Ross, interview with the author, 23 March 2012.
profession. Writing in the newsletter of the archaeology specialist group, Malcolm Watkins commented that the practical seemed to ‘terrify more candidates than any other’ part of the Diploma.  

Steph Mastoris, who volunteered both as a tutor for candidates studying for the social history examination and as an examiner recalled:

> The practical was deeply frightening because it was an hour on your feet in a room, with three people watching you, and twenty groups of objects, most of which you’d never seen before. There was a series of questions, and you had to choose three and the examiners chose three. And [one particular candidate] said what was terrifying about that… what it forced you to do was to learn enough – not totally, but enough – about subjects that you knew probably you’d never, ever need again, unless you were in a very specialist museum. But as an intellectual exercise, it was extremely useful.

Mastoris noted that, although people dreaded the practical examination, the process of studying for it built a certain kind of knowledge and suggested that the MA was guilty of ‘compounding the problem’ of curatorial expertise in later dropping the requirement to be examined in this way.

However, by the late 1980s, the external climate for training was changing. The government had published a white paper in 1986, recommending an overhaul of the approach to vocational training. It was driven by a sense that the UK was lagging behind other economies in its investment in training: ‘our vocational education and training system is not – and never was – the envy of the world’. Among its recommendations was a new framework of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) which would take a new approach, based on recognising competence rather than knowledge, what people ‘can do, as well as what they know’. Future developments in museum training would seek to adapt to this policy climate, which was clearly better

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426 Steph Mastoris, interview with the author, 9 March 2012.


suited to recognising the importance of skills than the importance of collections-based expertise.

MGC sponsored a report into museum training in 1987, published as *Museum Professional Training and Career Structures* and known as the Hale Report.430 The report was highly critical of the MA’s Diploma syllabus and the training provided in Leicester, and proposed an alternative approach, including extensive detail on a suggested syllabus. It noted that, with only two museum studies courses in the UK, over half the entrants to the museum profession each year had no museum studies qualification and suggested the need for alternative approaches. As a result of the Hale Report and the changing external climate for training, in 1989, the government announced it would provide funding for five years ‘on a pump-priming basis’ for a Museum Training Institute (MTI).431 Simon Roodhouse was appointed as the first director of MTI, and the organisation had responsibility for developing the framework for the NVQs in museums. It invested considerable effort and funding in drawing up the qualifications but there were cultural barriers to be overcome with particular ‘resistance’ to the notion of demonstrating competence.432 Again the difficulties can be traced back to the long-standing tension inherent in museum training between the three imperatives of collections-based expertise, technical competence and theoretical understanding of the nature of museums. Roodhouse resigned as Director in 1993, after an apparent disagreement with some board members about the direction of the Institute. While Roodhouse’s own perception of the reasons for the breakdown was that his work was seen as too ‘progressive’, Peter Longman, then Director of the Museums and Galleries Commission was quoted as saying that ‘the MTI overstated the importance of the vocational training system and probably did not give enough attention to academic training.’433 Nevertheless, NVQs did come to be increasingly important in museum training, as would be evidenced by changes to the Museums Associations qualifications.

The 1990s saw a rapid growth in the number of university courses offering qualifications in museum and heritage courses and the MTI began developing plans to validate courses in an attempt to regulate what was perceived as an over-supply of training opportunities. Meanwhile, the Museums Association completely revised the routes to qualifying for the AMA abandoning the principle of an exam-based Diploma. Hilary McGowan led the review. She noted that the museum profession had been receptive to the need to change, because there was widespread recognition that the Diploma was a ‘dead duck’, its principles diluted and its training badly delivered.

There was much debate about the appropriate approach for the new qualification: should it have a core syllabus? How could it be made accessible to non-curators? Could universities deliver the new qualification? Concern over the gap between the increasingly theoretical nature of museum studies and the practical work of museums continued. For example, David Fleming recalled that he found some of the work of the Leicester Department of Museum Studies too ‘technical’ and ‘obtuse’ and that the Department temporarily ‘lost heart’ during this time. Hilary McGowan, also felt that the Leicester course was too ‘impractical’ in the early 1990s.

The new AMA offered range of new routes to the qualification, based on a combination of a self-directed programme of continuing professional development with the support of a mentor, NVQ or university museum studies qualifications, and qualifying periods of work experience. McGowan noted that she had had some concerns about the free-form nature of the new qualification: ‘initially I was concerned that there wasn’t enough meat about it because it was just based on what you were doing. So…there isn’t a core syllabus there.’ Instead of a syllabus, the new qualification was based around the shared principles of the Code of Ethics, discussed in the next section. This reveals the extent of the shift in museum training over the forty years of this study: from a starting

435 Hilary McGowan, interview with the author, 26 April 2012.
436 For evidence of an ongoing concern over the gap between museum practice and academic museum studies in more recent times, see Andrew McClellan, ‘Museum Studies Now’, *Art History*, Volume 30, Issue 4, 566–570, September 2007. McClellan argues, for example, that too few practitioners contribute to academic museum studies literature.
437 Hilary McGowan, interview with the author, 26 April 2012.
438 David Fleming, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.
where there was almost no formal training for museum work, museum training moved through a phase where training needs were tightly defined and highly programmatic, and delivered by a small number of providers, to a situation where there was a great diversity of providers and approaches, with the new standard of professionalism being based on a set of values, rather than a defined set of knowledge or skills.

5.5 Integrity in practice: towards a code of ethics

The development of formal codes of practice governing the behaviour of museum authorities and the people who worked in them emerged as an important expression of museum professionalism in the 1970s.

The initial impetus for a UK Code of Ethics for museums came from the Museums Assistants Group (MAG). This group had been formed in 1938 to represent people working in museums who were not directors or heads of service and had a particular constituency among people working towards the Museums Diploma. MAG began discussing the need for a code of ethics in 1970 and began drafting possible codes in 1972. Kay Staniland, a curator at the London Museum, led MAG’s work on this time and drafted the early versions of the codes. The first detailed discussion paper was published in MAG News in 1974 and MAG brought a working paper to the 1975 MA conference.  

At the time, MAG was beginning to build its influence within the MA: some MAG activists, including Kay Staniland, were on the MA Council when the paper was presented. But it is significant that the impetus for developing an ethical code came from staff working below the level of director in museums. There was a perception that some who worked in museums were being pressured to act by their managers against their personal or professional judgement. David Clarke, Curator at Colchester Museum, wrote to the Museums Bulletin in 1978 expressing concern at press reports that the Chief Executive of Hampshire County Council had ‘ordered the Director of the Museum service, against the latter’s advice, to provide the Deane cup, purchased with grant-aid, as table decoration for a civic luncheon.’ Clarke argued that there was


evidence that this was not an ‘isolated incident’ and that the context in which museums found themselves after Local Government Reorganisation had made their professional position weaker, underlining the need for a code of conduct.

The MA’s dual structure, with representatives of both museum staff and governing bodies, made it somewhat problematic for it to address this kind of conflict of interest and when the MA agreed to take on work on developing an ethical code, the MA Council decided that the Code should be in two parts: one for professional staff, and one for governing bodies. The MA set up working parties to develop both documents and they were presented to the 1976 MA conference. Patrick Boylan was appointed as the professional representative on the governing bodies working group and drafted the first version of that document. Kay Staniland led the work on the code for professional staff, taking a deliberately ‘discursive’ approach, and avoiding clear-cut pronouncements and prohibitions. There was general support for the code for governing bodies, but much disagreement about the need for a personal code, disquiet at some of its contents and some dislike of Staniland’s ‘philosophical’ approach, with the MA Council favouring a much briefer, definitive statement.

To complicate matters, the development of the Codes took place at a time when concerns about the conduct of standards of behaviour of those working in local and central government were high on the political agenda, after the corruption revealed by the trial and conviction of the architect and developer John Poulson in 1973. A Royal Commission conducted an inquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Salmon between 1974 and 1976 with the aim of making ‘recommendations as to the further safeguards which may be required to ensure the highest standards of probity in public life.’ Its recommendations covered personal conduct but also staffing and management

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442 In an interview for this study, Patrick Boylan recalled that Trevor Walden, Director of Glasgow Museums and a past President of the MA, had argued strongly against restrictions on collecting practice, for example.

443 Cruickshank ‘A Future Code’.

444 Patrick Boylan, interview with the author, 19 December 2012.

arrangements. The MA Council took the view that, if these recommendations were to be implemented, they would make much of what the professional code had to say about personal behaviour redundant: restrictions on accepting gifts and on personal collecting, for example, would all be covered by new conditions of employment. Although the MAG activists who had begun work on the codes were angry at the outcome, the 1977 MA conference adopted a full Code of Practice for governing bodies and a much shorter version of the personal code than had previously been discussed, intended as an interim document.⁴⁴⁶

In the event, successive governments failed to adopt the Salmon recommendations and MAG (by then renamed the Museum Professionals Group, MPG) returned to the issue in the early 1980s. Tristram Besterman was then MPG secretary and, frequently contacted by junior staff concerned about practice in their organisations, felt it was time to revisit the issue.⁴⁴⁷ Besterman organised a conference on ethics with invited speakers from the USA: Alan and Patricia Ullberg, who had worked together on the development of the 1978 version of the Code of Ethics for the American Association of Museums (AAM). This international perspective ‘injected a sense of purpose’⁴⁴⁸ and may have been a factor in encouraging the sector to take the issue seriously once more.

After the 1981 conference, Besterman was invited to join the MA Working Party on Ethics, which was chaired at that time by Tony Duggan and which had the task of reviewing the 1977 version of the Code, widely seen as unsatisfactory. The Codes of practice for professionals and for institutions were updated and revised several times throughout the 1980s and 1990s⁴⁴⁹, and from 1986, the MA had a permanent Ethics Committee, chaired during the period under review by Tony Duggan, then David Clarke, and then by Tristram Besterman.⁴⁵⁰ The committee considered a large volume

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⁴⁴⁶ Boylan ‘Museum ethics’.
⁴⁴⁷ Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.
⁴⁴⁸ Interview with the author
⁴⁵⁰ Chairs after 2001 were Vanessa Trevelyan and Nick Merriman.
of case work, often referred to it by concerned staff in museums, or by members of the public.\footnote{In an interview for this study, Besterman recalled instances where cases had been referred by members of the public.}

In 2001, the MA developed a new Code of Ethics covering both museums and the people who work in them. The 2001 Code represented a definitive break from the previous approach of rules and guidelines, establishing ten core principles of museum work and developing guidelines for practice under each of these principles: ethical behaviour was seen to stem from shared values, not from rules.

What difference did the Code of Ethics make in museums? Kay Staniland, although one of the main instigators of the work on the Code of Ethics in the 1970s, argued in 1981 that it was a distraction from the more important, broader issue of the poor standing of museums and the Museums Association.

> In retrospect, I feel that there was a strong urge in the late 1970s for the profession to own the status symbols of professions – a code of conduct, a royal charter, Ph.Ds in museum studies…Sadly these are …very superficial notions.\footnote{Her argument was echoed in in 1994 in a paper by Jonathan Ashley-Smith, who suggested that a code of ethics is a ‘status symbol’ for a ‘young and aspiring profession’; ‘The Ethics of Conservation’ in Simon Knell (ed.) Care of Collections (London: Routledge, 2004), 11-20, p.11.}

The notion of a code of ethics as a ‘status symbol’\footnote{My interest in the impact of Codes of Ethics here is historical. For contemporary reflections on the role of ethics in museum practice see Janet Marstine (ed.) New Directions in Museum Ethics, (London: Routledge, 2012).} underestimates the sense of urgency surrounding the development of the early codes and the need for something which could be used to show what behaviour was unacceptable and to prevent bad practice. But Staniland’s suggestion that ethics were one of the ‘superficial’ aspects of professionalism does raise an important question: did the development of successive Codes of Ethics change behaviour or did they rather reflect change that had already taken place and reveal the contemporary consensus of opinion?\footnote{In an interview for this study, Besterman recalled instances where cases had been referred by members of the public.}
The ideals expressed by successive versions of the codes consistently ran ahead of consensus in the sector and the codes did help to shape a sense of what behaviour was acceptable in museums. But they had only the power of persuasion and peer pressure. In some cases, the MA expressed concern about unethical behaviour to no effect, for example, failing to stop the sale of items from a museum collection by Derbyshire County Council in 1991, demonstrating only too clearly that the Code of Ethics had few teeth.455 While the development of ethical guidelines may have helped to shift opinion incrementally, it was only when the Code of Ethics was incorporated in the Registration guidelines that they had ‘some degree of enforceability’.456 Even then, their power was no stronger than the power of Registration, which impacted unevenly on museums in the sector, as I discuss further in the next section. Ethical codes were more than a status symbol, but their actual power was limited. The greatest significance of the emergence of the ethical codes may be that they reveal a shift in the nature of professionalism, which was starting to cohere around a set of shared values, rather than consistent practice.

5.6 The Museums and Galleries Commission and new standards for museums

As outlined in Chapter 3, the SCMG was renamed the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) in 1981 and given new responsibilities, the change reflecting an ambition to give more help to local museums and its new responsibility for funding AMCs directly.457 Among its new responsibilities was that of running a revised standards scheme for the sector, following the recommendations of the Wright and Drew Reports.

The MA had launched a voluntary Accreditation scheme for museums in 1974, which had been piloted with funding from the Department for Education and Science, on the recommendation of the Wright Report, and ‘borrowed heavily’ from the AAM’s proposals for a similar scheme.458 The scheme was intended to recognise high standards

456 Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.
457 Carlisle, History of the Commission.
in museum practice, but the process for applicants was onerous, including an inspection visit by an independent panel; the scheme was self-funding and costs for applicants were high. By 1982, only six museum services had achieved Accredited status.\textsuperscript{459} There was also concern from some elected members that it was not appropriate for a professional association to pass judgement on services provided by local government.\textsuperscript{460} Following the publication of the Drew Report, SCMG began work with the MA on its scheme,\textsuperscript{461} taking over full responsibility from 1982.

The new scheme was renamed the Museum Registration scheme\textsuperscript{462} and was constructed as a minimum standards scheme: the intention was that all museums, from the largest to the smallest, would be able to meet the standard required. This standard was based on the MA’s Code of Practice for Governing Bodies and focused on ensuring museums had an appropriate constitution and appropriate arrangements for safeguarding and developing their collection. This emphasis on the status and development of collections responded to an emerging concern that some museums were simply not a ‘capable repository’ for the collections they held.\textsuperscript{463} The scheme helped MGC and the AMCs understand their client base and helped the AMCs to determine eligibility for grants, having previously had no simple criteria to use to determine which museums at the margins of the sector (small, local museums and heritage centres and so on) should be included in their funding programmes. But although part of the impetus for the scheme came from this perceived need to ‘separate the sheep from the goats’\textsuperscript{464} among the smallest and more marginal museums, it also uncovered weaknesses in larger museums’ practice. At least one major city service was found to have no collecting or disposals policy, for example.\textsuperscript{465}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{460} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{461} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{462} From 2004, the scheme has been known once again as Accreditation.
\textsuperscript{463} Diane Lees, interview with the author, 21 March 2012.
\textsuperscript{464} Rosemary Ewles, interview with the author, 25 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{465} Adrian Babbidge, interview with the author, 25 May 2012.
\end{flushleft}
The Registration scheme was piloted in 1987, and the first phase was rolled out region-by-region between 1988 and 1993. By the end of the first phase an estimated 75% of the UK’s museums were participating in the scheme. A second phase, intended to give a broader overview of a museum’s activities, was implemented from 1995.

Registration encoded professional standards but at the same time challenged a narrow notion of professionalism. For museums to be Registered, they had to prove they had access to a suitable curatorial adviser, but this adviser did not have to be a paid member of staff. The Guidance notes stated: ‘the criteria are such that they may be met equally by a National Museum and by a village museum run by a voluntary society.’ Rosemary Ewles, who administered the scheme for MGC, credits the scheme with having fostered a sense of ‘professional community’ across the broader museum sector, even those museums which were not run by ‘professional people’:

It was about…making all kinds of museums feel that they were part of the same movement, had the same ethical approach to what they were doing and, that whatever their size, they shared responsibilities, ethics and aspirations.

Kathy Gee, then Chief Executive of WMRC recalled that, when it was launched the new scheme was ‘resisted’ by some museums, their objections resting on the idea that ‘there could conceivably be a standard which not only would the professionals in the museum world understand but also the volunteers could understand.’ These concerns reflect an ongoing anxiety about the status of the museum profession and a desire to protect it.

Some local authority museums successfully used Registration as a means of securing additional funding from their governing bodies for collections care, arguing that they would not achieve Registered status unless they tackled documentation backlogs. There was a noticeable increase in the number of documentation posts, for example, created in museums as Registration was being rolled out. Kathy Gee recalled that it was ‘amazing what a difference Registration made’ in terms of improving housekeeping and

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466 Adrian Babbidge, interview with the author, 25 May 2012.
468 Rosemary Ewles, interview with the author, 25 May 2012.
469 Kathy Gee, interview with the author, 30 May 2012.
collections management standards. Hilary McGowan was running museums in Exeter at the time Registration was introduced where the museum faced a ‘huge backlog’ of documentation problems. McGowan recalled that she prepared a report for the authority’s Leisure Committee which ‘frightened them to death about Registration’. She used the fact that external funding was dependent on Registration as an argument for additional Council support for collections-based projects and ring-fenced curatorial time each week for improving collections care. However, some in the museum sector are more sceptical about the impact of Registration. In the earliest days of the MA’s Accreditation scheme, Kenneth Hudson, for example, argued that a museum could be ‘dull and little-visited’ but meet the standard required because of its emphasis on professional rather than visitor-orientated standards. While Registration was always intended to focus on questions of stewardship rather than visitor services, some have expressed scepticism about how rigorous the assessment was. Gaby Porter, for example, has argued that she was aware of museums that had Registered status but did not really meet the basic standards because of a lack of direct monitoring.

Porter is undoubtedly right that Registration was not able to wipe out poor collections management practice, but it did contribute to its improvement. How instrumental was the Registration scheme in reshaping curatorial practice? It fostered an emphasis on good practice and accountability but it did not originate it. Registration built not only on the MA’s Accreditation scheme and its Code of Practice but on a sense of the need to improve standards and make practice more rigorous which had been growing since the 1960s. It followed the drive to improve documentation, led from 1967 by the IRGMA initiative, and later by the MDA, and through a series of local and discipline-specific initiatives. These initiatives share a similar impetus: Cathy Ross has described the development of a standard classification system for social history and industrial

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471 Kathy Gee, interview with the author, 30 May 2012.
472 Hilary McGowan, interview with the author, 26 April 2012.
474 Gaby Porter, interview with the author, 1 February 2012.
artefacts (SHIC), for example, as a manifestation of an emerging discipline, ‘trying to make itself respectable through systems.’

Registration, like these earlier attempts to improve practice, was in tune with the expectations of the graduates of the new university courses. It built on the improvements of a period of significant expansion and investment in the sector. The scheme’s importance as a driver of change should not be overstated: it was essentially a manifestation of change, an indication of the widespread, though not yet universal, acceptance of the need for high standards of practice. Registration encouraged museums to think more seriously about questions of public trust and accountability, but it was never intended to encourage root and branch reform of museum work, nor to reshape the experience of visitors. Other changes in the sector, and especially the availability of new forms of funding and the rise of independent museums, made more of an impact on the public face of the sector and arguably presented more significant challenges to the nature of curatorial practice.

5.7 Conclusion to Chapter 5

This chapter has summarised the major developments in the supporting infrastructure for museums and has considered the extent to which these succeeded in generating change in museum practice. Some of the institutions and initiatives considered here resulted in tangible change in museums in the last four decades of the twentieth century. In the main, these developments were an expression of a particular kind of professionalism, one based on perfecting practice and developing and applying standard protocols, on a drive for ‘respectability’. The urgency around improving standards was motivated by an awareness of past failings and the desire to make a clean break with the poor practice of the past. The extent to which dissatisfaction and the sense of being part of a new generation drove change in practice is the subject of the next chapter.

475 Cathy Ross, interview with the author, 23 March 2012. SHIC was described at its launch as ‘the Museum profession’s answer to Dewey’, a comment which underlines this aspiration to professional respectability. SHCG, ‘Social History and Industrial Classification’, SHCG News, 1, Winter 1982/3, p.2.
Chapter 6: Professional practice: dissent, dissatisfaction and development

6.1 Introduction

This chapter turns its attention from the ways in which the ‘official’ infrastructure of the museum sector supported change in practice, to the informal or voluntary networks which contributed to change. While there is no absolute division between the official and informal elements of the infrastructure of professionalism, the pertinent distinction here is that the agency of individuals was particularly significant in driving change in the organisations considered in this chapter.

This chapter reflects on the importance of the specialist groups which emerged from the mid-1970s, applying insights from social learning theory and social psychology to reflect on the pattern of allegiances and conflicts which shaped their work. These were primarily knowledge-based communities and functioned as ‘communities of practice’, a concept explored in Chapter 2. Adrian Babidge, a participant in and observer of the work of the specialist groups in this period, has suggested that they can be understood as a ‘great collective learning exercise’.\(^{476}\) This chapter explores that character of that ‘learning exercise’ and seeks to understand the processes by which learning was translated into change. The work of the specialist groups shows that the impetus for improvement in museums in this period came not only from government and official initiatives and from institutional change, but also emerged from within communities of practice, through competition, inspiration, shared learning and as a new generation defined itself against the failings of its predecessors.

6.2 ‘Low standards and bad workmanship’: identifying failure

Millerson’s 1964 study of the professions identified ‘concern with low standards, bad workmanship, indifferent handling of clients’ as one of the characteristics of emergent professions.\(^{477}\) This ‘concern’ was much in evidence in the museum sector during this period. As museum services were given extra resources, new curators uncovered the legacy of low standards and under-resourcing. The annual report for Nottingham

\(^{476}\) Adrian Babidge, interview with the author, 25 May 2012.

\(^{477}\) Millerson The Qualifying Associations, p.12.
Museums for 1963-1964 includes an account of what a curator appointed to a newly-created archaeology post uncovered:

The collections were dispersed, in most cases inadequately stored and documented, and not fully representing human settlement in Nottingham itself, let alone in the county. Liaison in archaeological matters between the Museum and the local archaeologists, professional and amateur, was merely spasmodic, and the archaeology display in Room L had remained basically unchanged for twelve years.478

Curators interviewed for this study, recounting the early stages of their careers during this period, frequently described taking over from predecessors whose practice seemed to them lethargic or outmoded. Patrick Boylan summed up his aspirations on taking becoming Director of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter in 1968 at the age of 28:

I had a very clear idea that the museum needed to be the very opposite of what Churchill Blackie [his predecessor] had done. And I actually wanted to work…He used to turn up about half past ten in the morning, disappear for a very long lunch, go about four in the afternoon. People hardly ever saw him. That wasn’t unusual, actually: some of the nationals were like that.479

Boylan identified himself part of a generation of new entrants to the profession, who had started working towards the new Museums Association Diploma around the same time and who shared a concern for developing high professional standards and ethical approaches, coupled with a sense that ‘museums should be about serving people, and should break away from the ultra-elitist attitudes’.480 This new generation also enjoyed greater resources to implement its ideas: in Exeter, Boylan initiated work to replace old displays, some of which dated from a modernisation that had taken place in the 1880s, making Nottingham’s twelve-year-old displays seem positively up-to-the minute.

479 Patrick Boylan, Interview with the author, 19 December 2012.
Reflecting on the kinds of ‘traditional’ curators he encountered when entering the museum sector in the 1970s, Sam Mullins observed that these curators were often knowledgeable, but lacked a strong sense of needing to make that knowledge function in a public context:

I think often they had huge depths of knowledge but were very unaccountable to the people who funded them, or to the people who came to use the museum. Their accountability almost was only personal: “I’m a coins expert and I will occasionally write an interesting and abstruse article in the Numismatics Journal, and that’s what I spend a significant bit of my time doing as I run this museum.” That sort of paradigm, I think, was the way it felt.\textsuperscript{481}

Mullins recalled being interviewed for to replace a retiring curator, in the early 1980s:

We were ushered into his office. And there wasn’t a piece of paper to be seen anywhere. There was a desk, and it had a sort of old-fashioned telephone on it, and then surrounding him were Numismatic cabinets. And if you needed a… metaphor for what his job was about, you could see it [there]. And yet you could also tell from a tour round the museum: the place was falling apart, no one took any interest in it. It was a real cul-de-sac.\textsuperscript{482}

David Fleming recalled a similar lack of public focus in the museum service he joined in Leeds:

When I went to Leeds Museums in 1985, it was a complete shambles from every point of view you can imagine. It was badly managed, it had no strategy, it was politically inept, there was no public impact, nobody used to go to the museum. And you’d get individual members of staff just doing their own research as though they were stuck in Leeds University in a department that somebody had forgotten about 40 years before. It was a shambles.

These disorganised, unresponsive, unaccountable, unproductive curators populate accounts of change in museums during this period, though it is of course unclear whether they populated actual museums to quite the same extent. Charles Saumarez

\textsuperscript{481} Sam Mullins, Interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
\textsuperscript{482} Ibid.
Smith, for example, reflecting in 1993 on the changing nature of curatorship in the Victoria and Albert Museum suggested that similar accounts of the traditional curator paying scant regard ‘towards their public obligations’ had been ‘slightly mythologized.’\(^{483}\) Andrea Witcomb has suggested that a sense of ‘rupture’ is used as a strategy for generating change in museums, a process by which a sense of a static, conservative organisation is pitted against progressive new approaches.\(^{484}\)

Condemnations of past practice have to be read in part as a strategy in the process of change and the definition of a new professional identity.

Towards the end of the period, a newer generation of practitioners began to express dissatisfaction with the status quo in museums through the early museum studies literature. Robert Lumley’s 1988 edited volume *The Museum Time Machine* focused on the representation of history in museums.\(^{485}\) Lumley identified ‘a generational factor at work’, as ‘a new, highly educated generation has entered the museum in the past decade and questioned the status quo.’\(^{486}\) While it is questionable whether this generation was more ‘highly educated’ than its predecessors, they were differently educated, as I discussed in Chapter 4: from somewhat more diverse backgrounds, some educated in newer universities, in newer intellectual traditions. Lumley argued that the new wave of curators was seeking to define a new approach to expertise, rejecting the ‘attachment to concepts of “neutrality” and “objectivity” associated with an older and more conservative generation’.\(^{487}\) Reflecting on change in this period, Witcomb also identifies a generational shift from object-based curatorship, with its assumptions of objectivity, to an ideas-based curatorship, aware of the ‘ideological basis’ of museum work.\(^{488}\)

Brian Durrans’ contribution to Lumley’s volume considered why anthropology curators had been reluctant to involve users in building collections and creating exhibitions, suggesting it was because ‘curators have been scared to reveal that


\(^{484}\) Andrea Witcomb, *Reimagining the Museum*, p.3.


\(^{488}\) Witcomb, Reimagining the Museum, p.86.
they are not, after all, the omniscient experts of popular imagination. This shift from the ‘omniscient expert’ to a more open approach which gave a new status to users will be discussed at more length in Chapter 7.

Peter Vergo’s edited volume *The New Museology*, published in 1989, coined a phrase which is sometimes used as shorthand for the new approaches adopted by progressive museum professionals in this period. Vergo suggested that the core problem with the ‘old’ museology was a preoccupation with methods rather than purpose, and promoted a more critical approach to museum work. Topics covered included the nature of museums’ authority and intellectual approach and the characteristics of the museum audience and the visiting experience. The extent to which the debate between traditionalists and reformers was becoming polarised was reflected by the hostile review by Nicholas Penny quoted in the opening chapter. The difference between the ‘camps’ was in part intellectual: Saumarez Smith’s paper had criticised the traditional intellectual approach of museum research, focused narrowly on objects, as having ‘steadily drifted out of the mainstream of research in the humanities’, but Penny retorted that ‘if you are genuinely interested in when, for example, forks were first used, and who used them and what they feel like in the hand or mouth, you would be unwise to ignore the governor of the backwater.’

These deliberate constructions of a sense of rupture and the polarisation which was emerging as traditionalists reacted against the processes of change were a feature of change in museums in this period. Constructing narratives of disorder being transformed into professional practice, and painting a vivid picture of inadequacy and neglect was a strategy in the creation of personal and professional identities, as well as part of the process of change itself. The *expression* of dissatisfaction did not in itself

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490 Peter Vergo (ed.) *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion, 1989). Witcomb, for example, uses the phrase as a descriptor of practice.

491 See in particular the papers by Charles Saumarez Smith and Nick Merriman.


lead to change but change could be effected by people unhappy with the status quo and able to translate that concern into action.

6.3 An ‘organized profession’? The rise of professional groups

Millerson’s 1964 definition of a profession stipulated that it should be ‘organized’.\(^{495}\) The museum profession had been ‘organized’ in the sense of being represented by a professional body since the formation of the Museums Association in 1889, but many more representative groups were established during this period. During the 1970s, the museum sector was expanding and the Wright Report and process of local government reorganisation gave rise to urgent debate about the future. Against this backdrop, from 1974 to 1980, a clutch of new groups were established to represent different parts of the sector. These groups attempted to strengthen the position of the specialisms they represented and to improve practice. The expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo and the generation of a sense of crisis were weapons in their armoury.

The Museums Assistants Group (MAG) predated the establishment of these new groups. It had been established in 1938 to represent staff below the level of director, most often junior curators,\(^ {496}\) and until the 1970s it was the only significant alternative national forum to the MA. Since what its members had in common was their lack of power within their own institutions, it had a natural tendency towards challenging those who were in power. Members had a sense of being the ‘little Davids’ against the ‘Goliath’ of the museum establishment,\(^ {497}\) and there was a sense in the 1960s that the group’s impact was limited because its members were unfairly seen as primarily concerned with ‘the exchange of seditious views and expressions of dissatisfaction with salary scales, working conditions and so on.’\(^ {498}\) But there was more to MAG than this: the group organised annual seminars and published the transactions of these and also began publishing a more informal newsletter in 1965. By the early 1970s, the groups’ organisers were conscious of the difficulty of covering the diverse interests of all its

\(^{495}\) Millerson, *Qualifying Associations*, p.5.


\(^{497}\) Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.

mem
bers.499 Specialist groups of curators began to consider establishing subject-
specific groups.

The groups had diverse origins and different forms of governance. The Geological
Curators’ Group (GCG) affiliated to the Geological Society of London, and a condition
of this affiliation was that it should have the character of a learned society rather than a
professional pressure group, and be open to non-curators interested in collections. A
number of academics were actively involved in its work.500 The Group for Regional
Studies in Museums (renamed the Social History Curators’ Group, SHCG, in 1982) was
established by the Society for Folk Life Studies in 1974.501 Other curatorially-focused
groups included the Group for Costume and Textiles in Museums (GCTSM) established
in 1975, the Society of Museum Archaeologists (SMA) in 1976 and the Museum
Ethnographers Group in 1978. As other specialist, non-curatorial roles emerged in
museums, people working in these areas also established groups to represent their
interests, including the Group for Designers/Interpreters in Museums in 1979 and the
Group for Education in Museums in 1980. As the sector itself became more diverse,
leading figures in the independent museum movement established the Association of

The groups had different priorities. GCTSM, for example, was focused on offering
training and guidance, and encouraging ‘self-help’.502 Others had a more overtly
political dimension. SMA aimed to give museum archaeology a ‘political voice’ at a
time when archaeology in museums was coming under strain as a result of changes in
the practice of field archaeology.503 While GCG’s stated aims were to provide advice
and a code of practice for museum geology, and to maintain ‘surveillance’ of geology

499 Smart, ‘A Birthday for MAG’.


501 Steph Mastoris, ‘Folk Life at Fifty: People, Places, and Publications During the Society’s First Half-


development of rescue archaeology in this period, see Barri Jones, Past Imperfect: Story of Rescue
collections to ensure their ‘well-being’ these aims were underpinned by the less overtly stated ambition of improving the standing of the discipline within museums. John Martin, an early member of GCG and later a prominent museum geologist understood GCG’s ambition as being to be ‘respected by the people who had the money and the power’.

These smaller, specialist groups offered a more informal and accessible forum for debate and the exchange of ideas than the MA, which was widely seen as remote and out of touch. They offered informal learning opportunities, chance to meet colleagues at small, friendly conferences, peer support and publications which acted as a route for information exchange.

Druckman suggests that groups reward their members in three ways: emotionally (affective involvement); with practical solutions to problems (goal involvement); and with enhanced status (ego involvement). The ‘affective’ elements of the appeal of groups in the museum sector are clearly evident when considering the early part of this period. In the 1970s, before the regional infrastructure for museums was very strong, museum work could be lonely and isolating, especially for those working in small museums. Mick Stanley, who was a young geology curator in the 1970s, recalled the support he found in GCG. For him, it offered a sense of ‘belonging’, ‘emotional support and intellectual stimulus’. He described a feeling of ‘camaraderie’, with more experienced curators supporting newer entrants: ‘it was like being in a family, where you had friendly uncles who could tell you things’. Others emphasise the challenging aspect of their experience of membership of a specialist group. David Fleming, for example, recalled that SHCG attracted people who were opinionated and drawn to debate, providing ‘a stimulating intellectual environment’ with a lot of ‘peer pressure’ and ‘competition’.

For people working alone or in junior positions in services which were rather backward looking or lacked visionary leadership, specialist groups set the

504 Doughty, State and Status of Geology, p. 5.
505 John Martin, interview with the author, 21 November 2012.
507 Mark O’Neill, interview with the author, 2 July 2012.
508 Mick Stanley, interview the author, 30 November 2012.
509 David Fleming, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.
bar for standards of practice. Sam Mullins recalled that he ‘felt more accountability in some ways to my peer group in Social History Curators Group than …to almost anyone else’ because the group set the standard he aspired to.\footnote{510}

The ‘ego’ elements of the groups’ appeal can be seen in the way that active groups attracted ambitious and energetic people who were not fully stretched by their day jobs, offering rewarding opportunities. Tristram Besterman, for example, recalled being attracted to MPG initially not because of any ‘reforming zeal’ but because of a desire to do something to supplement an early-career job that did not fully satisfy his professional aspirations.\footnote{511} To describe this motivation as ‘ego involvement’ does not imply that it was self-serving: the search for work that was personally satisfying could combine with the ‘goal involvement’ of problems to be solved. The account of MPG’s contribution to the development of an ethical approach to museum work in Chapter 5 demonstrated that, while the group may have offered an outlet for ambition, it also got things done. Similarly, Besterman emphasised the ‘goal involvement’ of his early experience of GCG: ‘we had a job to do, which was to professionalise geological curatorship.’\footnote{512}

While the groups fostered shared learning and drove up standards through emulation, they also effected change through dissent. Adherence to one group may imply rejection of another group. Druckman reviews the origins of group loyalty and inter-group conflict, demonstrating that, ‘membership in a group appears to lead people to favor that group and see others as less worthy in comparison.’\footnote{513} Competing groups may be factions of a larger group: as Wenger argues (and as noted in Chapter 2), a high level of discord may be indicative of a strong community, with participants committed to a shared but disputed enterprise.\footnote{514} While the establishment of specialist groups was sometimes interpreted as a process of fragmentation,\footnote{515} it could alternatively be read as the sign of a strengthening museum sector.

\footnote{510} Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
\footnote{511} Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.
\footnote{512} ibid.
\footnote{513} Druckman, ‘Nationalism, Patriotism and Group Loyalty’, p.48.
\footnote{514} Wenger Communities of Practice, p. 79.
\footnote{515} See for example, James Bateman, Comment, Museums Bulletin, 14(12), 1975, p.125
6.4 New affiliations and old institutions

Concerned at the proliferation of alternative representative groups and at the potential erosion of its mandate, the MA sought to bring the specialist groups under its umbrella, seeing retaining ‘such groups within the framework of the Association’ as in keeping with its Memorandum of Association which listed as one of its aims the ambition to ‘unite all persons engaged or interested in Museum and Art Gallery work’. In 1976 it set up a Professional Services Committee, to bring together representatives of the groups. GCG debated whether to send a representative, since ‘the strength of [GCG] lay in its independence’. It did join the Committee, represented by Mick Stanley, but Stanley felt that it was not ‘any use at all’ and the relationship between the two organisations was not an easy one, with disagreement about the function of the Committee and GCG perceiving that the MA’s minutes failed to reflect accurately the level of dissent at the meetings. The MA later offered formal affiliation but the groups resisted this and by 1985 only 3 specialist groups were affiliated in this way.

The format of the annual conference was one source of dissatisfaction with the MA, with political disagreement between elected members attending as institutional representatives a particular cause for concern. In a report on the 1976 MA conference in MAG News, John Smart expressed dismay at the tone of the debate: ‘an innocent (to me anyway) motion on the need to establish more county-wide museum services caused a major row. I was shocked and disgusted by the bitterness of the debate...It is no wonder that the profession makes so little impact on outsiders when it is so profoundly divided within its own ranks’. This remained a problem in the 1980s: Geoff Tresise, a GCG committee member, commented in his notes for a Professional Services meeting in 1986, that ‘Political gerrymandering by caucus groups at recent AGMs have incensed many professional members.’

516 Ibid.
517 GCG Committee Minutes 19 November 1976, GCG archive, National Museum, Cardiff.
518 Mick Stanley, interview with the author, 30 November 2012.
522 Notes prepared by Geoff Tresise, undated but apparently prepared for meeting on 26 November 1986. GCG archive, National Museum, Cardiff.
The newer groups also saw the MA as politically ineffective. An editorial in *MAG News* for March 1971 was scathing about the MA’s work in anticipation of local government reorganisation and, writing in the same issue, the Chair of MAG, Elizabeth Johnston declared that MAG should focus more on politics to compensate for the MA’s failures: ‘it is time we dirtied our hands’. The reputation of the MA was at times so low that there was talk of establishing an alternative body. Tristram Besterman was approached by senior figures when he was chair of MPG in the early 1980s with the suggestion that MPG should take the place of the MA a representative body for the whole profession on the grounds that MPG, unlike the MA had a clear ‘mission’ and was ‘driving change for the better’. A note in the GCG archives, probably prepared by Philip Doughty in 1987, argued:

> Without notable exception the Administration of MA has little real experience of museums, its staff turnover is rapid – too rapid to allow real experience and professional contacts to develop and appears irrelevant to curatorial needs. Three Director Generals in ?5 years with no major achievement to show is little less than scandalous. To many curators, the Association is seen to be collapsing from the centre.

The allegation of irrelevance to ‘curatorial needs’ is telling. The MA was actively pursuing a policy of expanding its membership, with growing numbers of members coming from (according to the GCG note quoted above) ‘a strange mix of people from marketing, design, security, management and other backgrounds’. The GCG note suggests that an alternative to the MA might emerge in the ‘formation of an entirely separate grouping of professional curators’. This criticism points to an underlying tension over the identity of the museum sector and the museum profession. A professional identity which had once been synonymous with curatorship was becoming more diverse, reflected in the MA’s new ambitions for its membership. Meanwhile a

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524 Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.
525 Anon., ‘Aide Memoir for Specialist Groups Meeting’. Although the note is unsigned and undated, accompanying correspondence suggests it was prepared by Doughty for a meeting in 1987 and that the catalyst for the outburst of anger was the suggestion that groups such as GCG should pay to affiliate to the MA. GCG archive, National Museum, Cardiff.
sector which had once been dominated (outside the national museums) by local authorities was becoming more diverse and distanced from local authority politics. In the late 1970s, another challenger to the MA emerged in the shape of the Association of Independent Museums.

6.5 A new voice for new museums: the Association of Independent Museums

Chapter 4 demonstrated that people who worked in independent museums were often motivated by a sense that they were compensating for the failures of a moribund local authority sector and offering fresher, more enjoyable experiences. The establishment of a new body to represent the new museums was one means of distancing independent museums from the established sector, with the proposal for the new group emerging in 1976, in the context of the development of the Drew Report:

> It is our contention that the independent museums have a contribution to make in the coming debate on the future of our museums and in particular that the opportunity should be taken now to present a corporate view point on behalf of some of the leading independent museums in this country to the Standing Commission before they present their report.  

The key figures in the establishment of AIM were David Sekers and Neil Cossons. Sekers was the first director of the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Stoke on Trent (then an independent museum, although later taken over by the City Council) which had been founded in 1974 to preserve a working pottery. Cossons had begun his career as a curator in the local authority sector, first in Bristol then at Liverpool museums and was, by this time, the first director of Ironbridge Gorge Museum. He had a high personal profile, with colleagues recalling that he could ‘charm the birds out of the trees’ and that ‘there was a fascinating, populist cult about Neil. He was stylish, he was handsome, he wore nice suits. He was the first sort of “media” curator ...there were no flies on him’.

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528 Sam Mullins, Interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
529 Steph Mastoris, Interview with the author, 9 March 2012.
Sekers and Cossons took a politically astute approach to the development of AIM. They used the MA conference at Bristol in 1976 to sow the seeds of interest in the new group, with Cossons distributing ‘wholly anonymous’ leaflets in the halls of residence where conference attendees were staying, canvassing support which, Cossons hoped would elicit ‘some ripe comments for redistribution later’. At a time when the MA’s processes were highly formal, this kind of slightly mischievous plotting must have seemed refreshingly subversive and it secured the agreement of other leading independent directors to serve on the committee. Before launching the group publicly, Sekers and Cossons arranged meetings with sympathetic opinion-formers in the broader sector, seeking to build on dissatisfaction with the state of the broader museum sector, and with the MA in particular. Roy Strong, for example, Director of the V&A, was said to be sympathetic towards AIM as a result of his frustration at the MA and ‘contempt for the local authority museum record.’

During this development phase, criticism of the established sector and other museum organisations served as a means of forging a distinct mission and identity for AIM. In a letter to David Sekers, Cossons cited the private comments of the judges in the 1976 Museum of the Year Awards, who, he said, had been impressed by the ‘value for money’ offered by independent museums:

> There is no doubt that when one considers the available resources for Museums such as yours and mine the results as they appear on the ground are very impressive indeed and it grieves me to think what could be achieved with the vast resources of a Liverpool or a Leicester if they were only applied in a dynamic and entrepreneurial way. Unfortunately, talk in this way to our local

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531 At the Bristol conference, Chris Zeuner, then Director of the Weald and Downland Museum and Patrick Greene, then working on the development of Norton Priory Museum, both agreed to serve as committee members. Letter from David Sekers to Neil Cossons 13 July 1976, AIM archive, University of Leicester, File C/DS1.

532 Note from David Sekers to Neil Cossons, 3/8/76, AIM archive, University of Leicester, File C/DS1.
government colleagues is rather like explaining the delights of sight to a blind man.533

The *AIM Bulletin*, a newsletter aimed at members, also used combative rhetoric to help bind the emergent group together. A newsletter from 1982 contrasted the entrepreneurialism and dynamism of the independent sector with ‘publicly funded museums [which] actually resent having to do anything to help themselves’. 534 This prompted Patrick Boylan, director of Leicester Museums and later president of the Museums Association, to write to a response, criticising AIM’s ‘divisiveness’. Boylan also argued that some independent museums were not all that ‘independent’ because of their ongoing reliance on local authority funding: he estimated that in that financial year, local authorities in England and Wales were contributing £2.36m directly to running non local authority museums, not including investment from Development Corporations. 535 However a response to Boylan in the same edition of the newsletter argued that the receipt of public money did not compromise the ‘independence’ of independent museums because their defining characteristic was that they ‘operated outside the conventional framework of national or local government’. 536 This reveals an understanding of ‘independence’ defined not by funding source, but by freedom to be different, making criticism of the established museum sector a valuable tool in the creation of a new identity.

AIM did have public support from the MA with Max Hebditch, a member of MA Council, on its working party, and was at pains to record in working party minutes that it was not ‘in any way in competition with the Museums Association,’ whatever activists’ private views.537 Cossons tended to soften his combative rhetoric in public, arguing at the group’s first AGM, that the group’s aims were not ‘political’ but were rather ‘to help new museums to establish themselves as responsible organisations, with high professional standards’. 538 Implying here that the ‘professional’ was effectively

536 AIM, Editor’s note, *AIM Bulletin* no.18, April 1982, p.3.
537 Minutes of working party meeting 4/8/1977, paragraph 2. AIM Archive, University of Leicester, File C/DS1.
antithetical to the ‘political’, Cossons glossed over the complex politics of professions and professionalism: professionalism can be understood in terms of competence and efficiency but struggles for status and recognition are also important elements of professionalisation.

Sam Mullins, a later Chair of AIM noted that even when he joined AIM in the 1990s, the ‘echo of that barnstorming era was very strong’. He characterised AIM’s attitude from in its early years as being ‘us against the world’, especially focused on disparagement of local authority museum practice and the work of the MA. When he became Chair of AIM in 1999 he saw the need to be more ‘consensual’ and ‘engage’ more widely with local authority museums and the MA. At this later stage, independent museums were more widely accepted as part of the museum establishment and the differences between the working practice of independent museums and the local authority sector were narrowing, but in its early years, AIM fostered a sense of difference both to garner support and raise the status of its members.

6.6 Confronting neglect: the Geological Curators’ Group

GCG set out ‘to professionalise geological curatorship’, through approaches including practical support, campaigning and strategic intervention. The ‘rescue’ of neglected collections was a standing agenda item for its early committee meetings. The committee saw a 1976 project on the collections in Hull as a ‘trial run’ for a possible approach to rescue. It commissioned a preliminary report on their condition and attempting to secure funding from the Yorkshire Museums Council for further work. However, when funding was not forthcoming, further collections ‘rescue’ work was more modest in scale, with members of the group volunteering to act as ‘vigilantes’ for collections at risk in their own area. There was a considerable volume of work, with each quarterly committee meeting typically considering around half a dozen at-risk collections. The meeting in March 1978, for example, received a report on a visit to

539 Sam Mullins, Interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
540 Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 2 March 2013.
541 It acknowledged that the terminology might be tactless and suggested that ‘Advisory Committee might be a suitable euphemism’. GCG Committee Minutes 19 November 1976, paragraph 8. GCG archive.
542 Ibid.
Rawtenstall Museum by Alan Howell which noted ‘he discovered a large geological collection of good quality packed in crates in bad condition. Apparently last looked at in 1928.’

One of the stated aims of GCG was the ‘surveillance of geological specimens and information with a view to ensuring their well-being,’ and alongside this more piecemeal approach, the group was also undertaking a survey of geological collections in the UK and the resources available to care for them. The survey was initiated within a few months of the group’s inception in 1974 and was eventually published in 1981. It became widely known as the Doughty Report for its author, Philip Doughty, curator of geology at the Ulster Museum.

In his introduction, Doughty asserted that broader cultural and social attitudes towards science had made the status of science collections in museums particularly vulnerable. The notion that science was particularly beleaguered was a recurring theme for GCG: for example, after a meeting with Sir Arthur Drew, committee members deplored the fact that he ‘seemed to have little idea of the importance of scientific collections’. The survey found that many collections, including some of the most significant, were not cared for by a specialist curator. Many had inadequate documentation and were in poor condition: about a third of respondents had geology collections in a deteriorating physical state. The report made recommendations for minimum standards and a more secure framework for all museums nationally and also made specific recommendations for geology collections, centred on the ambition to secure more curatorial support. It achieved some limited success in this respect, with, for example, the AMCs for the South East and South West of England appointing geologists to support smaller museums as a result. However, geology continued to be

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544 GCG Committee Minutes, 29 March 1978, p.4, para.9. GCG archive, National Museum, Cardiff.
545 Doughty, State and Status, p.5
547 Doughty, State and Status.
548 Doughty, State and Status, p.1
549 GCG Committee Minutes, 20 February 1980, p.4, para.9. GCG archive, National Museum, Cardiff.
550 For an account of the South West initiative see, Philip Doughty, ‘The Next Ten Years’, The Geological Curator 4(1) 1984, 5-9. Crispin Paine noted that his ability to fund the post at AMSEE was a strategic
seen as a ‘Cinderella subject’ throughout the 1980s and 1990s\textsuperscript{551} and the rhetoric of the Doughty report may have done more to consolidate a sense of professionalism for geology curators than to effect actual change.

While the Doughty report focused on government failure to support geology properly, some geology curators were also driven by dissatisfaction with the standards of practice of members of their own community. GCG attempted to provide practical advice for non-specialists, supporting the production of a set of guidelines.\textsuperscript{552} John Martin, a prominent geology curator and GCG member was motivated, along with colleagues, by wanting to move on from what they saw as a legacy of dull displays and to shed the popular perception of an archetypal geology curator whose responsibilities amounted to little more than ‘dusting the fossils’:

\begin{quote}
We all were very conscious of the need to dispel that myth, actively. So there was a feeling that we were appointing people who weren’t like that, who were interested in communication, and not locking themselves in the stores …Geology curators in the past hadn’t been very good and weren’t making that connection with their audience. And everything else was also going wrong: they weren’t good at curating the collections, and they didn’t do any research.\textsuperscript{553}
\end{quote}

Martin encapsulates the sense of a new generation of curators, distancing themselves from the failings of their predecessors. The next section reflects more on this sense of rupture and considers in particular how museum social historians used the expression of dissatisfaction as a driver of change.

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\textsuperscript{551} Simon Knell, ‘Collecting, conservation and conservatism’, p.335.


\textsuperscript{553} John Martin, interview with the author, 21 November 2012.
6.7 The Young Turks and the Old Guard: inventing social history in museums

Change within an institution is often effected by a group of newer or younger entrants, gradually moving to positions of power. Within communities of practice, the rise to prominence of new practitioners implies ‘the replacement of old timers.’ Is the rebellion of a younger generation against an older generation an ongoing process? This was certainly the view of the editor of the MPG newsletter in 1971, who responded phlegmatically to suggestions that the organisation was losing its way:

I have heard it all before and I expect it because each generation of young lions has to roar to show it exists and each generation views its achievements through the rose coloured spectacles of nostalgia.

However, the contest between an older and a younger generation cannot be dismissed as merely cyclical. There was an agenda for change in the 1970s and 1980s which the sector had not ‘heard … before’. This section explores one instance of the challenge of a new generation, within the community of local and social history curators.

This was a rebellion focused on intellectual difference. Writing about the construction of academic disciplines, Belcher and Trowler argue that newer practitioners are more inclined to challenge the status quo because they have less invested in it and are so more open to innovation. They argue that the ‘contest of the Young Turks against the Old Guard’ can be understood as the innovation of ‘those who have as yet made no major intellectual commitments’ against those ‘who already have a substantial blue chip portfolio’ of intellectual investments. In social history, the new generation challenged the worth of the ‘blue chip portfolio’ of a previous generation and made its own intellectual investments. Lacking a ready-made intellectual alternative, the new generation used criticism of previous approaches to bring coherence to an emerging discipline.

554 Lave and Wenger *Situated learning*, p.57.
Social history was only just emerging as a discrete discipline during the 1970s and 1980s from a mixed ancestral bag of folk life, local history, decorative art, antiquarianism and the museum limbo known as ‘bygones’. Museums had collected some familiar, domestic objects of the kind which would later be classified as social history since the nineteenth century but for many municipal museums with mixed collections, history collections were a side line before World War II. A number of dedicated folk museums were established in the UK between the world wars and, in the post-war period, folk-life collecting became more widespread in museums. This did bring the material culture of (some) daily lives into prominence in museums. But the folk-life tradition in museum practice concentrated on pre-industrial rural life, leading to the relative neglect of more recent history, the urban and the industrial. It was often motivated by nostalgia and regret at the loss of traditional practices, given a sense of urgency by the huge and sudden changes in agriculture in the years following World War II. A brochure for Blaise Castle Folk Museum in Bristol, probably from the 1950s, encapsulated the emotional and intellectual impulses motivating the growth of folk museums:

The rapid disappearance of everyday objects used by our forebears, a process considerably hastened by two world wars, has led to the growing realization of the necessity for establishing regional folk museums to illustrate the way of life of our ancestors.

Many rural museums in the folk tradition were driven by a sense of loss, exemplified by the emotive imagery used in the following extract from a guidebook for children to the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, published in 1973:

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557 Gaynor Kavanagh, whose work as social history tutor at Leicester did much to shape the discipline, offers a history of the emergence of museum social history in her 1990 guide to practice, History Curatorship, (Leicester: Leicester University Press).


559 Bristol City Council, Blaise Castle House Folk Museum guidebook (undated, but likely to be from 1950s) MDC collection, University of Leicester.
[The collections of this museum] are houses and buildings that were once going to be destroyed. In so many villages and towns today lovely old buildings are being pulled down so that brand new buildings can be put up instead. …It is to save some of these fine old historic buildings from being smashed by the bulldozer that they are carefully taken to pieces and brought to the Museum for safety and for you to see.  

This account is heavily tinged by nostalgia, the past seen as ‘lovely’ and the modern world characterised by the smashing of the bulldozer. As well as idealising the past, the folk approach tended to de-emphasise processes of change in the countryside before urbanisation. A guide to the Museum of English Rural Life from 1955, for example, argued that ‘much of the equipment which is now disappearing has been used for centuries with little change’. A perceived emphasis on the rural, the unchanging and the beautiful meant a new generation of social history curators felt that much human experience was almost completely ignored by the only significant group of museums to focus on daily life.

In fact, there had been attempts to bring more critical and humane perspectives to the folk-life approach. In a handbook produced for the MA in the early 1960s, J.W.Y. Higgs, the first Keeper of the Museum of English Rural Life, anticipated some of the concerns of the new generation of social historians. He stressed the importance of considering human experience, arguing that the folk life museums should not be seen as ‘dealing primarily with objects [but] dealing with people and their lives.’ Higgs also deplored nostalgia for an unchanging past, arguing that folk museums should ‘mirror the changes in this culture, whether they are of the past or currently taking place’. Geraint Jenkins had also argued that folk life in museums should not be concerned with

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‘the mere collection of objects’ but needed to include ‘the social organization, the economy and the culture associated with those objects.’

Nevertheless, a new generation saw the folk-life tradition as reactionary, nostalgic, unsystematic and irrelevant to the audiences they wanted to attract. Their rejection of the folk life approach was symbolised by the reinvention of the group representing history museum curators in 1982 when the Group for Regional Studies in Museums was rebranded as the Social History Curators Group. GRSM had its roots firmly in the folk-life tradition, having been established by the Society for Folk Life Studies in 1974, at the suggestion of Geraint Jenkins of the Welsh Folk Museum and led by Peter Brears of Leeds City Museums. The group used the term ‘regional studies’ to characterise its area of interest, to reflect an intellectual approach shared with the emerging academic discipline of regional studies, which combined geographical and anthropological approaches to regional difference. It retained a strong interest in folk life, and its meetings often had a practical focus: in October 1980, for example, some members spent a weekend willow stripping in Lincoln.

The curators who engineered the change to SHCG were frustrated with the somewhat other-worldly character of GRSM, its tendency towards rural topics and what they perceived as its lack of impact. An activist group within GRSM felt the need for a group which was more campaigning, and had a harder, urban edge. At the 1982 Annual General Meeting of GRSM, Crispin Paine was elected as Chairman and John Shaw as Vice Chairman. They led the group in a new direction and changed its name to SHCG in November 1982. The newly-named group had new priorities: although it

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564 J. Geraint Jenkins, ‘Folk Life Studies and the Museum’, *Museums Journal*, vol.61, no.3, 1961, 186-190, p. 188.
565 Steph Mastoris, ‘Folk Life at Fifty’.
569 Crispin Paine was Chair of the group at the time of the change and includes an account in his paper ‘There’s a ghost at every feast’.
continued to be concerned with publications and organising an Annual Study Weekend, it also aspired to provide training and to campaign on behalf of social history museums. A later Chair, Stuart Davies characterised this as a shift from working towards ‘informal improvement’ to ‘formal progress.’

The new group defined itself by a desire to change established practice and to distance its members from earlier approaches. David Fleming, taking over as editor of the SHCG newsletter in summer 1984 wrote in an editorial that, since joining SHCG a year ago he had been impressed by ‘the genuine and powerful will to improve museums that exists, especially at the younger end of our profession’. Geoff Marsh, a history curator at the Museum of London, wrote an account for the group’s newsletter of a bitter debate at a conference on contemporary collecting about whether museums should aim to record society, or focus more narrowly – and traditionally – on collecting material culture, including the provocative suggestion that the main barrier to innovation may be ‘the quality of curators. Many have no interest in the present (or even the twentieth century) and their job provides the perfect excuse to escape from it.’

Rejecting folk life, the new generation brought together diverse intellectual influences. Reflecting on the emergence of social history, Crispin Paine (echoing Belcher and Trowler’s terminology unprompted), commented: ‘We saw ourselves as young Turks, much influenced by ‘history from below’’. History from below, a diffuse movement characterised by the desire to tell the story of the lives of ordinary people, and to combine this with political activism, was one of the movements shaping the intellectual climate in academic history departments in the 1960s and 1970s, influencing some museum historians as undergraduates. Gaby Porter began working in museum history in 1973, as a researcher on the development of the new Museum of Oxford. She had

573 Crispin Paine, interview with the author, 25 April 2012.
studied economic and social history at the University of Edinburgh with Bob Morris. Morris’ work was characterised by an interest in inequality and social conflict: historical themes seldom represented in museums. Porter was also influenced by the work of Raphael Samuel and the History Workshop, then active in Oxford and found that others shared her broad intellectual agenda if not these specific influences: ‘there definitely was a mood of the people who were coming through [in museums], and the work of E.P.Thomson [and other similar historians] which was creating a different kind of drive.’ Starting from this perspective, Porter wanted to ensure the museum reflected ‘some of the histories in Oxford that were … invisible’. She recalled wanting to develop a display showing a map of all the land that the Oxford colleges owned, both in Oxford and nationally. While the senior staff in Oxfordshire Museums Service did not want to pursue this idea for the displays in the new museum, issues like these seemed highly pertinent to Porter:

Basically if you were working class you lived on low-lying land, and you were much more likely to get cholera and whatever other diseases were going because of the ownership of the university of all the prime land in Oxford, [and that] seemed to me a really important part [of the history of Oxford].

Mark O’Neill started work as a social history curator in the 1980s. His approach to museum history was also shaped by what he saw as the ‘discrepancy’ between the history he read and the history he was seeing in museums. Although his academic training at the University of Cork in the 1970s had been a ‘very traditional political history’, his wider reading meant that he ‘did know enough Irish history to know that the more nostalgic versions were deeply flawed – to the point of being absolutely

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575 In his work on class and the industrial revolution, for example, Morris explored the industrial revolution through the lens of class conflict, at a time when industrial history in museums had a much more technological bias. See R. J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution 1780-1850* (London: Macmillan, 1979).


577 Gaby Porter, interview with the author, 1 February 2012.

578 Ibid.

579 Mark O’Neill, interview with the author, 2 July 2012.
dishonest. You know: happy peasants tilling the fields.’ By contrast, O’Neill recalled being profoundly influenced by an account of the consequences of the Irish famine, which shaped Irish society, leaving a legacy of high rates of emigration, mental illness, loneliness and alcoholism.\footnote{\textsuperscript{580} The work O’Neill cited here was Robert E. Kennedy, \textit{The Irish; Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility}, (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1973).} O’Neill was frustrated to find no trace of this history in museums: ‘you look around Irish folk life museums, and you think it’s all about baking scones, milking the cows, and everybody was so happy and they have such great values’. Although he recalled that he did not consciously feel part of a ‘new generation’, O’Neill’s approach exemplified a desire to do museum history differently.

Cathy Ross, who was active in SHCG in the 1980s and 1990s, moved into social history from decorative art, but had studied history as an undergraduate. There is a close relationship between decorative art and social history: costume or ceramics might be interpreted as either decorative art or social history, depending on the museum context (and perhaps on the wealth and class of the object’s original owner). As described in Chapter 5, Ross began to build her knowledge of collections through self-directed learning but she then had opportunity to study for a PhD on the history of Newcastle glass. While researching her PhD she realised that this industry had never been studied by ‘proper historians’ with the result that ‘connoisseurship had survived unscathed’.\footnote{\textsuperscript{581} The Leicester course notes from the 1980s quoted the following definition of connoisseurship: ‘The goal is to determine the date and place of manufacture; the author, if possible; and where within the range of its fellows the object stands in terms of condition, excellence of execution and success as a work of art.’ Charles F. Montgomery, ‘The Connoisseurship of Artifacts’ in Thomas J Schlereth (ed.) \textit{Material Culture Studies in America} Nashville: AASLH 1982. Quoted in Museum Studies Notes 2.1, Department of Museum Studies, 1984.} Previous studies had drawn incorrect conclusions not only about individual pieces, but also about wider social and economic phenomena. Ross felt compelled to challenge this:

If museums are about learning and teaching and about preserving things that we feel are important, surely we must know what we are preserving, rather than just preserving the assumptions of a body of – largely rich – collectors in the 1890s. So we had… almost a moral duty to be more rigorous with ourselves about our own knowledge and how our knowledge came…Maybe coming in as a historian, if I can call myself that, or being …trained in history, that was all still
quite important to me: that the knowledge in museums had to be robust, had to be historically robust, otherwise – you know, it’s madness.\textsuperscript{582}

Although coming from a somewhat different intellectual perspective, Ross’s account reiterates the need for rigour, the rejection of received wisdom and a distancing of new approaches from traditional ones. It is striking to see Ross constructing this as a ‘moral’ imperative, emphasising that the stakes were high for historians working in the public context of museums.

Another major influence on the emerging discipline of museum social history was the academic Local History tradition. The close association between museum social history and local history was fostered by the University of Leicester. When the Department of Museum Studies began offering a history option in 1971, its history students were taught in the Department of English Local History, which was founded by W.G. Hoskins in 1948.\textsuperscript{583} Hoskins published his most famous work, \textit{The Making of the English Landscape} in 1955 and, along with the near-contemporary \textit{Lost Villages of England} by Maurice Beresford,\textsuperscript{584} it galvanised the study of local history. Hoskins and Beresford pioneered a landscape history approach to local history, taking a long-term view of an area and looking at how settlement patterns and the use of resources such as woodland or pasture had changed over time, typically starting with the pre-historic past.\textsuperscript{585}

Although he retired in 1967, before museum studies students began working with the Department of English Local History, Hoskins’ reputation still attracted students. He had been a ‘great hero’ for Crispin Paine, for example, ever since Paine had read his work while at school. Similarly, Sam Mullins, found reading \textit{The Making of the English Landscape} a ‘seminal’ experience which ‘got [him] into history’.\textsuperscript{586} Mullins welcomed

\textsuperscript{582} Cathy Ross, Interview with the author, 23 March 2012.
\textsuperscript{586} Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
the opportunity to study in the local history department with ‘inspirational’ people, including Alan Everett, who had worked with Hoskins, Harold Fox and Charles Phythian-Adams, all ‘really good, rigorous local historians, in the kind of mode Hoskins suggested was necessary’. David Fleming, who completed a PhD in the Department of English Local History in the early 1980s suggested that the major influence of the department on museum history was that it was driven by ‘the idea of the total approach to community history. It involves knowing everything, and writing about a community, rather than just the stuff history books were full of.’

Some historians working in museums strongly identified their practice with the local history approach. For example, writing in 1981 about the new history gallery which he had helped to develop in Birmingham, Stuart Davies reflected:

The undoubted popularity of Birmingham’s new Local History Gallery proves that no museum service…can do without a substantial part of it given over to local history. And this is not only local history as opposed to international art but also local history as opposed to vague collections of ‘folk life’ or ‘social ephemera’ arranged to suit the convenience of a curatorial classification system rather than real history.

Davies here presented ‘local history’ as a gold standard of intellectual and historical integrity, embodying rigour and order. However, the local history approach was not entirely well-adapted to museums. Although Crispin Paine cited local history as a major intellectual influence, he had written in 1983 about its limitations in the museum context, arguing that the local history movement had ‘never really tackled … artefacts’ as a source or effectively found ways to use ‘the material culture of local society’ to tell stories in museums:

587 Ibid. For example Hoskins comments on identifying traces of Celtic settlements: ‘patient and minute topographical research – of the sort that is wrongly despised by most historians – will undoubtedly reveal to us in this time much more of this distant period still embedded in the landscape around us, if only we have eyes to see, the records to follow up the visual evidence, and the imagination to read the records aright’ W.G.Hoskins, The Making of the English Landscape (London: Penguin 1985, first published 1955), p.32.

588 David Fleming, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

As a result a whole generation of local historians developed a new understanding of their subject from which objects were left out. Objects remained, ‘bygones’, curios. This was even true of curators of local museums. For thirteen years students at the Department of Museum Studies at Leicester University attended most of the lectures of the Department of English Local History but none at all on material culture. Nor did the Museums Association Diploma syllabus really correct this imbalance. As a result there are throughout the country local museums opened in the 60s and 70s in which objects are treated as 3-D illustrations to a chronological story basically told in words, maps and pictures.\(^{590}\)

Similarly, Stuart Davies acknowledged the limitations of the local history approach in a survey of social history practice written in 1993. He noted that ‘numerous local history museums’ had displays which reflected Hoskins’ approach to the history of a community, beginning with the origin of the settlement using archaeological collections and tracing its development in a chronological way.\(^{591}\) Not only was this predictable, it too often resulted in ‘book on the wall’,\(^{592}\) a display which relied too heavily on text rather than using objects to tell a story.

In 1980, teaching for museum history in Leicester was brought in to the Department of Museum Studies, with Gaynor Kavanagh appointed to teach the course. Mullins, Paine and Fleming all argued in interviews for this study that the decision to teach the social history museum studies option within the Department of Museum Studies was a mistake, depriving students of the opportunity to work within the local history context. But Kavanagh saw her project as being to develop a museum-specific approach to history. In the preface to her textbook on history curatorship published in 1990, she defined the lacuna in this way:


\(^{592}\) *Ibid.*
Museum development in Britain…has not been supported either by a body of theoretical argument or, until 1980, a formal means of training curators in the ideas and skills relevant to history in museums.\(^{593}\)

Kavanagh consciously distanced her teaching from the English Local History option which she saw as not ‘relevant to the sort of work we did in museums’:

> I had done the English Local History course as part of my Diploma, and had not enjoyed it on a personal level. It didn’t help that I’m Welsh and it was an English course – and it seemed to be very much centred in a very English, middle class view of the past – about which I had a pretty strong reaction. I didn’t identify with the way they were teaching and didn’t find their teaching helpful.\(^{594}\)

Kavanagh wanted to improve the intellectual standing of museum history, arguing that colleagues in other museum disciplines did not perceive that ‘history… as a discipline within museum practice had any great value, or any significant intellectual or professional requirement. And that was something I really, really wanted to address.’\(^{595}\)

Kavanagh attempted to forge a new approach to history curatorship, drawing on some elements of the folk-life tradition but combined with an aspiration to greater rigour and international influences including the Swedish museum history tradition.\(^{596}\)

Whereas earlier approaches had focused narrowly on objects, the new generation tended to be more interested in broader historical themes and to take a more narrative-driven approach. Sam Mullins, starting work at a small local museum in the 1970s, was

\(^{593}\) Kavanagh, *History Curatorship*, p.xii.

\(^{594}\) Gaynor Kavanagh, interview with the author, 25 June 2012. Interviewed for this study, David Fleming challenged Kavanagh’s implication that the department’s intellectual approach was inherently rural and conservative: ‘It wasn’t even fair to say it was rural, I mean I was part of a group of very radical, urban historians working out of the English Local History department... Charles Phythian-Adams, who was the mentor of many of us, was an urban historian.’

\(^{595}\) Gaynor Kavanagh, interview with the author, 25 June 2012.

\(^{596}\) Interviewed for this study, Kavanagh cited specific examples of Swedish display practice which she tried to encourage as an alternative to the ‘book on the wall’. Mark O’Neill recalled that Kavanagh’s enthusiasm for Swedish approaches when he was her student had influenced his own approach (interview with the author, 2 July 2012).
‘more… interested in being a story-telling curator than being an object-led curator.’ In this, he was distancing himself from an established approach in which narrative was seen as being ‘a bit second rate’ and which started from the notion that ‘we’ve got all these objects – that’s what the museum should be about’, producing displays which ‘didn’t deal with stories’ but ‘were very object fetishistic.’ Similarly, Kathy Gee, who trained as an archaeologist but began her career running a small independent history museum noted that her professional identity was shaped by an allegiance to narrative: ‘I’m storyteller basically; that’s what I do…I wasn’t a curator, I was a local historian who used objects.’\(^597\)

Crispin Paine suggested that, although a previous generation often had extensive object-related knowledge, this might not have been accompanied by a broader understanding:

> I suspect there’s an area of knowing that actually your traditional curators didn’t much have. And that’s the whole intellectual context, the social context… They may have known...about tenterhooks. But whether they knew how tentering fitted into the whole operation of the …cloth industry, and how that changed, and what its impact was on wider West Country society – you rather wonder.\(^598\)

Similarly, Rosemary Ewles identified a tendency for agricultural museums to focus on changes to farming equipment on a small scale, while failing to capture the ‘absolutely vast social changes that affected most people in the country’.\(^599\) In a 1992 paper, David Fleming encapsulated the shift in practice he saw as being needed:

> Social history curators have to learn the skills and techniques of the social scientist, which is a world away from learning about different types of police truncheons, the design of the kitchen cabinet, or being able to tell the difference between mahogany and teak.\(^600\)

Reflecting in 2012, Fleming acknowledged:

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\(^{597}\) Kathy Gee, interview with the author, 30 May 2012.

\(^{598}\) Crispin Paine, interview with the author, 25 April 2012.

\(^{599}\) Rosemary Ewles, interview with the author, 25 May 2012.

When I said those things … I was provoking… and it worked. It got me into trouble all over the place. And in retrospect, maybe I shouldn’t have done it because it gave people of the [opposing] faction the opportunity to say that I knew nothing, that people like me knew nothing… [I was seen as] a Marxist rabble-rouser who didn’t really know anything and had agendas that weren’t to do with what the truncheon was. ..So there became this oppositional approach – the old blokes with beards, socks and sandals who knew about truncheons and the new people, many of whom I have to say were women, who were younger, from a different social background and who were much more interested in broader social historical themes than how to recognise a truncheon.

Porter similarly recalled, ‘there was a real struggle between the …old, ethnology… artefact people, and the people who were interested in a whole diversity of sources and resources for telling different histories’.  

One manifestation of this concern with ‘different histories’ was an interest in the history of groups whose experience was seen as having been written out of museums. Women’s history, for example, was beginning to demand attention. But ‘telling different histories’ also involved allowing a range of voices to be heard in museum displays, and this enthusiasm for multi-vocality would become a faultline in the debate between reformers and traditionalists about how museums should relate to their audiences. As approaches to knowledge changed, history curators also came to value different ways of sharing knowledge. Whereas writing the ‘standard book’ on a topic was once seen as a core part of the history curator’s role, the new generation came to see catalogues almost as a metaphor for the unresponsive

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601 Gaby Porter, interview with the author, 1 February 2012.

602 Porter was one of those involved in establishing Women, Heritage and Museums (WHAM), a pressure group with a two-pronged approach. The group set out to improve opportunities for women to work in museums, and also to improve the representation of women’s lives and experiences in museums. Originally established as a subgroup of SHCG, its status caused some controversy, with some SHCG members resenting the support given to the group. For an account of the debate see Sam Mullins, ‘Annual Study Weekend’, SHCG Journal 12, 1984, n.p.n.

603 Interviewed for this study, for example, Crispin Paine cited the work of J. Manwaring Baines, a long-standing former curator of Hastings Museum, who produced a number of these ‘standard books’ on Hastings as well as on firebacks, and was a type of curator no longer found in museums. Interview with the author, 25 April 2012.
curator of the past who spent time ‘producing great thick tomes that no one ever wants to read’.

The new social history approach emerging in the 1980s, then, was not monolithic but brought together a range of intellectual perspectives, which had to be re-engineered for the museum context. David Fleming has argued that museum ‘social history sprang from a mating of academic Marxist economic history with academic local history. This might not sound too appealing to everyone, but it’s a fact.’

Reflecting on the changing intellectual paradigm for museum history in 1985, Stuart Davies suggested ‘the influence of Geraint Jenkins was perhaps replaced by W.G.Hoskins and then by Raphael Samuel’. Both accounts are too neatly aphoristic and, as the comments by Higgs and Jenkins above demonstrate, under-estimate the extent to which the pioneers of folk life in museums had shared some of the new social historian’s concerns. However, in the absence of a distinct intellectual foundation, reacting against the conventions and above all the perceived ideological and political biases of the folk life tradition became a defining aspect of museum social history. It was the opportunity offered by the chance to meet other social historians, to debate practice through publications and conferences, under the umbrella of SHCG, which enabled this generation to develop a new discipline through shared learning.

Although expressed in part through matters of tone and style, the generational shift was rooted in part on a changing perception of audiences’ needs, Fleming argued:

It was easy to ridicule – and feel a bit ashamed about that – the bearded socks and sandals brigade, because they were so eccentric. But in being so eccentric, they were completely out of step with normal society’s needs – and this is what the new breed of historians brought in.

Curators’ increasing determination to respond to ‘normal society’s needs’ is an important theme of the next chapter.

604 David Fleming, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.
6.8 Conclusion to Chapter 6

This chapter has explored some of the uses of dissent and dissatisfaction in shaping museum practice. It has shown that there was a conscious sense of innovation in museum practice from the 1960s onwards, and that curators used the rejection of earlier approaches as a strategy both for defining a personal professional identity and as a means of establishing new professional relationships. In its account of the creation of social history as a museum discipline, this chapter has begun to explore how different kinds of curatorial knowledge were in competition with one another. This is crucial for understanding the perceptions of a decline in curatorial expertise: what looks like a decline from one perspective may in fact be a strengthening of an alternative approach. This chapter has explored ways in which change in museums was driven by a sense of the new during the period under review. The next chapter looks at how that sense of newness was manifest in attitudes to audiences and, in particular, at the way in which the knowledge-based relationship between curator and audience shifted.
Chapter 7: Professionals and their audiences

7.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have explored the ways in which the work of curators was shaped by a range of political, economic and professional factors and by curators’ changing relationship with the government, with professional bodies, with employers and with each other. This chapter turns the focus towards curators’ relationship with the public. It explores the changing role of curators as public experts and considers how changing social attitudes to authority and learning reshaped the nature of curatorial work in this period.

This chapter is rather more concerned with practice in national museums than earlier chapters. Because of their larger budgets, innovations in design and interpretation practice tended to emerge in national museums but, as the examples in this chapter will demonstrate, these innovations were widely debated by the broader profession. So although some of the developments discussed here were situated in national museums, their impact was felt more broadly.

7.2 The curator as public expert

In the 1950s, the expertise of some museum curators had been brought directly to a wide audience for the first time through television. In particular, Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?, which ran on BBC television from 1952 to 1958, offered a paradigmatic display of curatorial virtuosity. In a quiz show format, a panel of experts displayed the ability to identify a wide range of museum objects, and pin-point their date and geographical origins. Members of the panel were often curators or former curators and, looking back from the perspective of the 1970s, Francis Cheetham argued that the programme had begun ‘for the first time, to involve the public at large in museum

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608 The panel members were not presented as entirely infallible: in a programme broadcast in October 1954, for example, they misidentify some of the objects selected from the Manchester Museum but without undermining a general impression of deep expertise. See BBC, Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?, Broadcast 28/10/1954, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p017gczz (last accessed 31 October 2013).
specialities.609 Tweed-clad, erudite and slightly remote, its contributors provided one resonant public image of the museum curator at the start of the period under review.610 Contemporary accounts describe an increase in the number of public enquiries to some museums during the 1950s, with visitors’ expectations perhaps shaped by this model. In 1956 Clement Pitman, director of Nottingham Art Gallery and Museum had observed:

> It would sometimes seem that a museum is regarded by the public (with somewhat excessive optimism) as a fount of all knowledge. During the year my Deputy and I have been required to pronounce or comment on a remarkable variety of objects, and have done so to the best of our ability.611

Providing object-based expertise in the form of identification and specialist advice to the public was seen as an important element of the curatorial role in the first half of the period under review. In 1965 Lincoln Museum and Art Gallery reported satisfaction at being able to provide ‘a specialised enquiry service in the realms of art, pottery, costume, sculpture, antiques, archaeology, arms and armour, natural history, coins and bygones’ in spite of having limited staff.612 Reports of increasing numbers of public enquiries can be found in other accounts of museums’ work in this period, although they have to be treated with some caution: demonstrating high public demand makes a case for additional resources. Nevertheless, the perceived importance of the enquiry service provides insight into contemporary understandings of museums’ role: curatorial expertise was seen as being in demand by the public, and a public good in itself. During the period under review, this assumption was widely challenged; curatorial expertise came to be seen as requiring packaging and mediation before it became a public good.

610 This curatorial archetype resonated sufficiently in the popular imagination for it to form the basis of a 1962 comic novel, The Venus of Samos by Rodney Quest (London: Hutchinson and Co.). Its main character is an intellectually and socially snobbish archaeology curator who is professionally and personally ruined after he is taken in by a spectacular forgery.
7.3 Curators and displays

Although it surveyed the collections of regional museums, the Rosse Report had nothing to say about the process of displaying those collections or about visitor experience. As Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrated, design and interpretation specialists were a rarity in regional museums of the 1960s and 1970s, with curators retaining much responsibility for the practical aspects of museum display. Recalling her work on archaeology displays in Exeter in the 1960s, Sue Pearce noted:

In those days you did everything, you designed it, you did the labels with press-on letters, you chatted up the electrician and said I want the light here, it was very hands on. It was the age of hessian, so I covered everything with the stuff.613

Some museums began to recognise the potential contribution of specialist designers in the 1960s. Bristol City Museum was one of the first regional museums to employ a designer and the gallery design procedure in use there in 1966 stipulated that curatorial and design staff were to work together ‘in full confidence’. However appreciation of the designer’s potential contribution was focused on visual effects and the curator retained overall control of the communication process.614 The curator would work ‘in conjunction with Department staff, Schools department and other interested bodies’, which might include adult education or university staff, to prepare an overview of the content of the proposed gallery. Once the plans were approved the designer’s role would be to manage the appearance of the gallery, while the curator ‘provides list of material’ and ‘prepares complete text of exhibition’.615

However, by the late 1960s, there was a growing awareness that museums might need to adopt new approaches to respond to a different set of audience expectations. Considering the decade ahead in a paper to the 1970 MA conference, Roy Strong, then Director of the National Portrait Gallery, noted that audience numbers had expanded greatly in the 1960s but that museums struggled to meet the expectations of new visitors:

614 City Museum Bristol, 20.1.66, Gallery Design Procedure, MDC Collection, University of Leicester, B File.
615 Ibid.
On the one hand is … the serious demand by an enlarged public for art, beauty, information, fun and gaiety. On the other there is the dead weight of archaic buildings, no staff or overworked drudges, diminishing purchase funds, and a threatened decline in knowledge.616

In 1973, the Wright Report in 1973 also identified a growing and more demanding audience, its expectations raised by better education and the effect of high-quality television productions which would together lead it to ‘demand higher standards in presentation’.617 In contrast to the silence of the Rosse Report on the subject of display, the Wright Report considered design an ‘important, but often neglected, aspect of a museum’s work’,618 recommending design support for smaller museums from the AMCs.

Museums were beginning to pay attention not just to improving the appearance of displays, but the way that they communicated. The Wright Report noted:

Display is the basic means by which a museum communicates with visitors, but display alone is not enough. Objects must also be interpreted; this implies more than a mere presentation of the object and its associated facts by clear and accurate labelling.619

Similarly, in his presidential address to the MA Conference in 1969, David Owen, Director of the Manchester Museum, had noted:

At present in this country, we expect ‘interpretation’ to be one of the many skills which may properly be demanded of the competent curator, but it is becoming a very specialized skill, and I think it may not be long before we regard it as a proper field of specialization in its own right.620

In 1970, the first UK conference on museum design attracted an audience of 60 people. Speakers emphasised the importance of interpretation as well as design, and an

617 DES, Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.6
618 Ibid.
619 DES, Provincial Museums and Galleries, p.35
expanded role for the designer: Robin Wade, an influential freelance designer, argued that the finished display should be the ‘result of an equal partnership between designer and [curatorial] specialist.’ Max Hebditch, giving a curator’s perspective on working with designers, noted that an attitude which saw the designer’s role as limited to ‘window dressing’ was beginning to change, with increasing acceptance that designers should be involved from the start of an exhibition project. Alan Warhurst, Director of the Ulster Museum (who had been Director of Bristol Museum at the time that procedure quoted above was drawn up) contrasted typical UK practice with that at the Smithsonian where specialist interpretation staff, included a ‘labels editor’ and a head of Exhibitions whose job was to act ‘as interpreter between pure scientists and non-scientists’. Wade suggested that a designer could take on something of this interpretation role, arguing that ‘designers are in many respects laymen, appreciating the general public’s point of view’.

The notions that objects needed interpretation, that specialists might find it particularly hard to communicate, and that curators might need others to help them communicate would come to reshape curatorship from the 1970s to the 1990s, as the curator’s exclusive responsibility for speaking with authority in the museum was reshaped, redistributed and reimagined.

Two books published in 1977 reflected on museums’ changing approach to exhibition-making. Kenneth Hudson an influential journalist and commentator again argued that museums’ audiences were becoming more demanding:

During the past twenty-five years especially, the museum-going public has changed a great deal and is still changing. Its range of interests has widened, it is far less reverent and respectful in its attitudes, it expects to find electronic and other modern technical facilities adequately used.

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624 Ibid.
625 Hudson’s book was recommended reading for Leicester Museum Studies students in the 1980s and Hudson was later described by Stephen Weil as ‘perhaps the museum community’s most astute observer’: Stephen Weil, ‘From Being About Something to being for Somebody’, p.232.
Hudson praised the new Greek and Roman galleries at the British Museum and the museum at Fishbourne Roman Palace, both designed by Robin Wade, as examples of displays which served this more demanding audience well. He approved of their deliberate ‘popularisation’ and contrasted their approach with the Museum of Mankind, produced by the British Museum’s ethnography department, using in-house designers, where visitor numbers were low and the galleries seemed ‘dead’. For Hudson, the Museum of Mankind failed because, ‘the administrators and curators are more interested in scholars than the general public and … they have not set out to produce a museum which is visually exciting or which communicates easily with the kind of people who grasp easily what Fishbourne has to offer’. The question of whether a museum should communicate to a wide audience or to specialists was, as discussed below, a contentious one.

While Hudson stressed the importance of good design, Ian Finlay, recently retired as director of the Royal Scottish Museum, argued in another 1977 book for a new starting point for museum displays: ‘the plan must be dictated by the man with the ideas. The first postulate is not: what have we got to house? It is: what do we want to say?’ Finlay characterised collections as a ‘millstone’ crushing museums, a comment which must have appeared startling in an era when the notion that museums might tell stories which were not rooted in their collections was not yet widely accepted, as evidenced by the controversy around a gallery opening in the same year as the publication of Finlay’s and Hudson’s books.

7.4 New thinking in practice: the Hall of Human Biology

The desire to communicate more effectively and to a wider public, and the trend away from object-based displays, were reflected in the Hall of Human Biology at the Natural History Museum in London, which opened in 1977. The gallery generated an

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627 Ibid., p.84.
628 Ibid.
629 Ibid.
631 Ibid., p. 16.
632 The Natural History Museum was administratively part of the British Museum until 1963 and was formally known as the British Museum (Natural History) until 1992, but I have used the term Natural History Museum here as it was in common informal use by the 1970s.
unprecedented amount of comment, including a contentious debate at the 1978 Museums Association conference.\textsuperscript{633} Although this was a national museum display and regional museums lacked the resources to replicate its approaches directly, it merits consideration here because of this broader debate. The controversy it generated highlights the changing relationship between curators and their audience and uncertainty over the appropriate role of the curator.

The Hall of Human Biology was the first gallery to be completed as part of a planned (although uncompleted) major reconceptualisation of the Natural History Museum. As Finlay advocated, this was a gallery which started with ideas, not objects (or specimens). This was motivated by the belief that the museum’s traditional, specimen-based approach to display left it unable to present twentieth-century scientific advances, particularly post-war developments in biology. The Natural History Museum’s established approach to display had been based on the understanding that ‘natural laws and processes’ could not be exhibited in a museum, so displays should concentrate on specimens which were the results of those processes.\textsuperscript{634} Recent scientific developments had left the museum’s displays increasingly out of step with contemporary science, so that it was ‘less and less the display of modern biology it is intended to be and once was’.\textsuperscript{635} Those responsible for the new approach argued that in order to display contemporary biology adequately, the museum needed to change its display

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The new gallery included, for example, displays on homeostasis, perception and hormones, none of which could be primarily explained using objects or specimens. In fact, the gallery contained only one actual specimen: a preserved human brain.

Moving away from a display paradigm based on specimens, the gallery made use of interactive exhibits and audio visual presentation to an extent which was unprecedented at that time in the UK. It looked dramatically different to the rest of the Natural History Museum and to other traditional museums: ‘in the Hall of Human Biology, the old, formal rows of dusty cases have been banished, replaced by an exciting series of environments.’ The gallery’s startling visual impact, as well as the lack of specimens, was one of the grounds on which it was criticised, with Sir Arthur Drew, Chairman of SCMG, describing it as all ‘lath, plaster and twinkling lights’. The team creating the new gallery defined itself by a sense of newness, a commitment to rethinking established practice and working in ways that deliberately rejected older approaches: ‘Biology is a new kind of hall, completely different from all that has gone before. The museum is consciously taking a new approach to the visiting public.’

The Hall of Human Biology’s approach echoed trends in natural history museums in the USA. The Department of Living Invertebrates at the American Museum of Natural History opened a ‘conceptual teaching hall’ on invertebrates in 1971. Like the Hall of Human Biology, it attempted to explain complex biological concepts, though it made more use of models and dioramas, and rather less use of interactive exhibits.

Bob Salpeter, a commercial exhibition designer, described an exhibition he produced on human variation at the American Museum of Natural History in 1975. The gallery used only one object, a space suit, and mostly communicated using photographs, illustrations

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636 Even with the development of the Hall of Human Biology, the gallery’s creators were aware that the NHM’s displays still lagged behind contemporary scientific developments: ‘It is, for example, a particular regret that more than 25 years after Watson and Crick’s revolutionary paper on the structure of DNA there is still no exhibit on molecular biology.’ (Clarke and Miles, ‘The Natural History Museum’, p.83.)

637 Miles and Tout ‘Human Biology’, p. 41.


639 Ibid., p. 37.

and a film. Salpeter explained, ‘in many situations the display of artifacts can make a solid point. But here we wanted to explain or elaborate a theme in which concepts, rather than artifacts are most important.’ The Hall of Human Biology was the first large-scale gallery in a British museum which was so strongly based on ‘concepts’ rather than objects or specimens and presented a challenge to a traditional display paradigm.

The gallery team situated their work within the science centre tradition:

The new Museum will be less a repository for objects – though these will have their place – and more of a “science center” (Kimche 1978) where visitors can come to learn about modern biology.

Science centres had originated in North America, with the Ontario Science Centre and the Exploratorium in San Francisco. Both opened in 1969, and pioneered a hands-on approach to learning, characterised by the use of interactive exhibits and a strong emphasis on fun. The science centre approach alienated some in the North American museums community, with Duncan Cameron describing the Ontario Science Centre as ‘a claustrophobic maze of non-communication.’

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644 For an overview of the origins of the science centre, see Melanie Quin, ‘Aims, Strengths and Weaknesses of the European Science Centre Movement’, in Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala (eds.) *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 39-55. Scott Anthony has argued that the Science Museum’s 1951 Festival of Britain exhibition anticipated some of the approaches of the later science centre movement and was also driven by the view that expert curators are not best placed to communicate with audiences but that its approach was exceptional, not reflected in the museum’s mainstream displays at the time. See Scott Anthony, ‘Ambition and Anxiety: The Science Museum, 1950–1983’ in Peter J T Morris (ed.), *Science for the Nation*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 90-110.
The presence of a gallery which drew so heavily on science centre approaches in a national museum caused disquiet in the UK, with national museums in particular still expected to emphasise research and scholarship. Patrick Boylan queried ‘should what is still one of the top three research centres for taxonomy in the world be devoting so much space, effort and money to what many regard as the job of a ‘Science Centre’?’

Boylan’s emphasis on the research role of the Natural History Museum, points to the struggle to negotiate an appropriate balance between research and communication, between objects and ideas, and between specialist and general audiences in the new understanding of the role of the museum. Tony Duggan, reviewing the gallery for the Museums Journal, was broadly positive about some of its approaches but disturbed by its significant cost and the fact that it had diverted resources from ‘purposes more in keeping with the museum’s long tradition of academic excellence’. These concerns were echoed by some of the response to the gallery in the mainstream press. The Economist condemned the planned new display scheme for the museum:

An inquiry should probe deeper, into the trustees’ disastrous decision in 1971 that the century-old displays are outmoded and should be replace by push-button “learn and enjoy” exhibits appropriate to the age of television.

Writing in the New Statesman, Leo Plendello acknowledged that the Natural History Museum was expected to cater for children, but asserted, ‘the NHM’s disregard for past wisdom in favour of the vogue for superficial display is becoming so cavalier that its intentions amount now practically to vandalism’.

These hostile comments can be traced to opposition to the Hall of Human Biology’s aim of making complex scientific concepts accessible to a general audience. The


648 Anon., ‘Don’t disturb the dinosaurs’, Economist, 20th May 1978, 19. The comment is made in a hostile opinion piece opposing plans to ‘infill’ a space in the north east corner of the museum and replace some of the nineteenth-century galleries with a modern building. These plans aroused much controversy, conflated to some extent with dislike of the new gallery.

development team believed that museums had traditionally provided poor learning experiences, which could be improved:

The displays may be full of interest for a minority audience of scholars who already know the subject, but their meaning and significance tend to be lost on the uninformed visitor. This person simply wanders round in a comparative state of bemusement so that at the end of the day very little has been learned.  

The emphasis on helping the ‘uninformed visitor’ led some to be concerned that the effects of the new display were to move visitors’ experience further away from the museum’s scientific work. Writing in *Nature*, in a debate with Roger Miles, Beverly Halstead, a palaeontologist at the University of Reading, who had been a researcher at the Natural History Museum in the early 1960s, asserted that the museum ‘must ensure the survival of the museum’s reputation for scholarship in its public galleries’.  

Halstead asserted that attempting ‘to communicate ideas and concepts’ rather than ‘to provide mere displays of the material housed’ aimed at serious students amounted to ‘social engineering’. In Halstead’s argument, interpretation was seen as an unnecessary and unwelcome intrusion, distracting from the museum’s core function of housing specimens.

Similarly, in an influential paper from 1981, architecture academics, John Peponis and Jenny Heddin analysed the relationships between architectural space and knowledge in the Hall of Human Biology, comparing it to older galleries, and argued that the new approach to display was taking scholarship out of the galleries and enacting a physical separation between the academic work of the museums’ scientists and the public displays. A key thesis was that ‘the new exhibitions introduce a new social asymmetry between the public and its educators’. In the older displays, ‘the untrained spectator and the expert engaged in the same act of seeing’ because the displays embodied the classificatory principles which were the foundation of natural history.

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653 John Peponis and Jenny Heddin, ‘The layout of theories in the Natural History Museum’ *9H*, vol.2, no.3, 1981, 21-25. The paper was for some time recommended reading for Eilean Hooper Greenhill’s students on the University of Leicester Museum Studies course, giving it a wider readership.
knowledge. But in the new gallery ‘the knowledge transmitted to the public will never be in the form known to the experts.’\textsuperscript{654} In this analysis, the attempt to explain complex biological processes to a non-specialist audience was seen as separating the expert and the ordinary visitor by confining the visitor to a more limited ‘act of seeing’ no longer shared with the experts’ view. Peponis and Heddin share Halstead’s assumption that the traditional museum mode of display was based on a notion of parity between expert and visitor, with both engaged in the same intellectual project. While there had never been a simple consensus on this essentialist view of a museum’s purpose,\textsuperscript{655} both commentaries belong to a discourse which can be traced through the remainder of the period under review, which polarised scholarship and the public, knowledge and communication. This discourse would be used repeatedly as a bulwark against changes in museum practice designed to make museums more meaningful to wider audiences by implying that broadening audiences was being achieved at the expense of a diminution of core purposes and a dilution of research and scholarship.

The Hall of Human Biology not only displaced specimens in favour of interactive displays; it also displaced curators from their traditional role in the production of display. It was the product of a new approach to gallery development, and one which shifted the balance of power within the Natural History Museum in terms over the control over displays. The museum had established a new Department of Public Services in January 1975, which was responsible for all gallery development. It was led by Roger Miles, a palaeontologist by training who had started his career as a curator and research scientist, first at the Royal Scottish Museum, moving to the Natural History Museum in 1968.\textsuperscript{656} He developed a reputation for innovative displays and was asked by the museum’s director, Gordon Claringbull, to join a panel exploring possible new display approaches, moving to work in the museum’s Directorate in 1973, before being selected to lead the new Department of Public Services in 1975. Although Miles was a

\textsuperscript{654}Ibid., p.24.

\textsuperscript{655}For a range of views on the tensions between instrumentalism and intrinsic purposes in museums’ development see the papers in the special issue of \textit{Cultural Trends}, 17 (4), 2008.

\textsuperscript{656}Biographical information on Miles and other Natural History Museum staff is taken from the NHM online catalogue. Natural History Museum, Catalogue entry, \url{http://www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/archives/catalogue/DServe.exe?dsqServer=placid&dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Archive&dsqDb=Persons&dsqSearch=Code='PX1926'&dsqCmd=Show.tcl} (last accessed 20 January 2014)
scientist and had begun his career as a curator, the creation of the new department placed him outside the museum’s curatorial structures. Curators were seconded to the department on a temporary basis while other specialists made up its permanent staff complement.657 The Hall of Human Biology was developed by ‘scientists, exhibit and graphic designers, educational technologists, writers and others working together as a team’.658 This kind of cross-disciplinary team working was then novel in museums and displaced curators from their previously central role in leading communication at the Natural History Museum.

This new approach to exhibition-making reflected the emergent view, noted above, that not only might specialists need help to communicate, but that depth of knowledge might actually be an impediment to effective communication. In a textbook on gallery design based on the principles underpinning the Hall of Human Biology, Miles noted ‘the inability to empathise [with learners] is particularly likely to afflict specialists who tangle with the problems of how to educate the general public’.659 Miles’ assumption that curators were unlikely to be able to communicate may reflect in part the particular culture of the NHM at the time, where curators were promoted on the strength of their publication record, rather than because of their public work.660 Nevertheless, this perception that experts made poor communicators had a significant impact, continuing to shape museum practice in the 1980s and 1990s.661

One of the gallery team’s innovations was identifying a particular audience and planning appropriate strategies for communicating with them, borrowing an approach

657 Roger Miles ‘The Public’s Right to Know’, Nature, 275, 1978, 682. This approach was later modified, with a group of scientists moving to work in the department on a permanent basis, to allow them to build up expertise in display and to avoid any clash of loyalties. See Roger Miles, Letter to the Editor, Museums Journal vol. 80, no.4, 1981, 220-1.

658 Miles and Tout, ‘Human Biology’, p. 44.

659 Miles, Design of Educational Exhibits, p. 27. Emphasis in original.


661 Its persistence is evidenced by Sharon Macdonald’s account of the making of a major gallery at the Science Museum from 1988 to 1989, which explores the dynamics of the relationship between managers, communicators, specialists and the public. The members of the gallery team, Macdonald notes, were not experts and this lack of expertise was ‘positively construed...Lack of expertise was equated with a greater capacity for being able to identify and communicate with lay people’. Macdonald, Behind the Scenes, p.112.
from education practice. Visitors were expected actively to find answers to questions, and the team behind the gallery drew a parallel with the ‘discovery method’ of teaching, then gaining currency in schools: ‘the emphasis in education and training has shifted, by and large, from teachers teaching to learners learning’. In his review in *Museums Journal*, Tony Duggan recognised the significance of the gallery as an attempt to test out new approaches to communication in museums and concluded:

> From the professional point of view, the Hall is mandatory viewing for all curators. The role of the educationist in museums has been one of the great debating points of the last ten years. This Hall, with so many unusual exhibits, presented with a philosophy which differs radically from traditional curatorship, reveals something of what the educationists have been trying to tell us (and sell us) for a long time.

This adoption of a didactic mode, with the museum as teacher and the visitor as learner was one of the controversial aspects of the new gallery. Philip Doughty, responding to Duggan’s review, condemned the gallery as ‘a project which escaped curatorial control and fell into the hands of pure, tasteless communicators’. A rhetoric placing curatorship and communication in opposition sheds light on the tensions underpinning the changes to curatorial practice in this period.

The next two editions of *Museums Journal*, in March and June 1979, carried letters defending the new gallery: Alison Whyman, an education officer at the Hunterian Museum described herself as ‘astonished by the negative reactions’ to the displays. Her colleague, Ian Rolfe, Assistant Keeper in Geology noted that he had been ‘instinctively opposed’ to the idea of the gallery, on the grounds that it was not based on specimens, but that his views had changed after spending time in the gallery and that he

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662 Miles and Tout ‘Human Biology’, p.46  
663 *Ibid.*, p.43  
664 *Ibid.*, p.48. Their rhetoric may have over-stated the extent to which visitors are active learners in the gallery. A few exhibits offered genuine opportunity for participation and discovery, but most did little more than provide an answer to a pre-determined question.  
665 Duggan ‘Review’, p.6  
‘came away convinced that the methodology of this new scheme was of profound importance for museums wishing to educate as well as entertain’. 668 A letter by Peter Raven, director of a botanical garden in the USA, also addressed the tension between the display of objects and broader communication, arguing that the Natural History Museum’s charter made it clear that its prime purpose of its exhibitions was ‘to educate the public about the extremely important concepts that are being developed in its own research departments and about the whole field of concepts which go together to make up the biological and geological sciences’ and that it would be ‘totally irresponsible’ to preserve the Museum as a ‘relic’, maintaining its traditional specimen-based displays. 669

Determined to communicate well, the gallery team made use of visitor research to an extent which was unprecedented in the UK. Visitor research was still in its infancy: what is thought to have been the UK’s earliest visitor survey was carried out in 1968 at the Ulster Museum, which also undertook out the first published research with non-visitors in 1970. 670 But by 1977, many major museums had still not undertaken any visitor research at all. 671 According to John Martin, then a geology curator in Leicester:

We did it all by the seat of our pants back then in the 70s. We just assumed that we knew what people wanted, and never really asked, or at least we assumed that if we put on a new exhibition and thousands of people came, we must have been doing something right. 672

671 Hudson *Museums for the 1980s*.
672 John Martin, interview with the author, 21 November 2012.
Tristram Besterman similarly recalled that displays were based on an approach which would be ‘unthinkable’ today and that they were informed by a curatorial vision but no sense of investigating ‘is this what the public wants, or will they understand it?’

The Hall of Human Biology took a very different approach and the gallery development team included psychologists, recruited to work on planning and refining the displays. They saw themselves as pioneers: Susan Griggs, one of the psychologists, noted that few visitor studies had been written up, most that had suffered from poor methodologies, and that interrogating the success of museum exhibits was a new phenomenon, ‘since most exhibition developers have believed, rather arrogantly, that they knew best and that whatever they came up with was bound to succeed.’

In its approach to evaluation, the gallery team was heavily influenced by the contemporary approach of evaluators in the North America, particularly the work of H.H. Shettel and C.G. Screven, both academic psychologists with extensive practice in museums. Screven was based for some time at the Smithsonian Institute and wrote extensively about his work on developing and testing displays there. One paper assessed how a gallery had met its ‘instructional’ objectives, by testing how well visitors recalled facts from different parts of the gallery using different interpretative techniques.

Although some of the psychologists on the Human Biology gallery team expressed some reservations about the narrow conception of the visitor experience which underpinned these approaches, nevertheless, the team did adopt a highly programmatic approach to visitor learning. In formative evaluation, the team used mock ups of the finished exhibits, showed them to visitors and asked them to attempt to retell

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673 Tristram Besterman, interview with the author, 3 March 2013.
675 For example an account of the formative evaluation used to trial and revise interactive exhibits (Miles and Tout ‘Human Biology’) cites L.P. Eason and M.C. Linn, ‘Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Participatory Exhibits’, Curator, vol.19, no.1, 1976, 45-62.
677 For example, Michael Alt and Susan Morris argued that Screven’s approaches were ‘depressing’ because they seemed to compromise the pleasure and informality of museum learning: see (Alt and Morris ‘Human Biology’ p. 276).
the story. Their accounts were recorded and transcribed to enable the team to analyse how well the concepts in the exhibit were communicated.678

The gallery development team also revised displays after the gallery opened in response to visitors’ reactions, and professional critiques.679 To facilitate evaluation, the Hall was fitted with a network of CCTV cameras, to allow evaluators to observe visitors using the gallery. This extraordinary level of provision for evaluation made the gallery a test bed for some of the pioneers of museum evaluation. For example, John Falk made use of the CCTV cameras in the early 1980s to undertake a study which showed that the way visitors behaved in the gallery could accurately predict how much they learnt.680 Miles has been credited as having ‘made great inroads in getting British Museums to understand the value of evaluation.’681 Although the Hall of Human Biology remained an outlier in terms of the amount of resources devoted to evaluation, it did signal the start of a much greater interest in how visitors behave in galleries.

The techniques used in the Hall of Human Biology and the debate they engendered point to a changing relationship between museum and audience, with museums placing much greater emphasis on communication and on visitors’ needs. This was to change the nature of curatorial practice during the 1980s, presenting a series of challenges to curators, which would be embraced by some and resisted by others.

7.5 Curators and audiences in the 1980s

One sign of the growing interest in effective communication and meeting the needs of the visitor was a lengthy paper in "Museums Journal" in 1980 by Brian Lewis, Professor of Applied Educational Sciences at the Open University, in which he argued that,

678 Griggs ‘Formative Evaluation’.
679 For example, there were critical editorials in the psychology journal *Perception* on some aspects of the way that perception was explained in the gallery and the displays were revised soon after opening as a result. (See Alt and Morris ‘Human Biology’).
although museums had the potential to mount ‘significant educational exhibitions’, this potential was too rarely realised. Lewis returned to the question of whether museums should aim to serve specialists or a broader audience, identifying the problem as being that museums too often had little to offer to the ‘general uninformed lay visitor’ who was left to ‘wander around museums in a state of comparative bemusement’. He argued that, to a professional educator, museums seemed marked by their ‘communicative incompetence’. He cited poor layout, poorly written text and again invoked the notion, which underpinned the rationale for the Natural History Museum’s new approach to displays, that specialists were unable to communicate with a non-specialist public: ‘subject matter experts can be extraordinarily insensitive to the difficulties that beginners are likely to have.’

While the question of the extent to which museums should seek to educate their audience remained open to debate (a letter in response to Lewis’ article suggested that perhaps museums were best geared towards stimulating a sense of ‘wonder’), the idea that museums needed to communicate more effectively was becoming widely accepted. In 1981 a new building for the City Museum and Art Gallery opened in Stoke-on-Trent. The new museum won the Museum of the Year Award in 1982 but was the subject of a critical review in *Museums Journal* by Val Bott. One of her criticisms was the inconsistency of the approach in the different galleries, with some appearing to address a specialist audience, and some a more general audience, her comments indicating acceptance of the notion that museums might identify and target particular audiences. Bott’s review was accompanied by a paper by the museum’s designer, Colin Milnes. During the 1980s, *Museums Journal* often coupled a review of a new museum or gallery with an account by someone involved in the development, but it was very unusual for the writer to be anyone other than a curator, and the choice may say something about

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683 Ibid.
684 Ibid., p.151-2.
shifting power in museums at the time.\(^{688}\) Milnes was frank about the difficulties he encountered in his work on the project, confirming that there were ‘disagreements’ about the appropriate target audiences and about the responsibility for copywriting text.\(^{689}\) He commented acerbically that the five different galleries were effectively five separate projects, demonstrating the extent to which the creation of successful displays depended on curatorial attitudes to designers.\(^{690}\) Milnes offered some insight into the range of curatorial attitudes towards both designers and the public at the time:

> It is always difficult for experts to edit their own knowledge sufficiently to produce succinct statements comprehensible to the layman. All Keepers provided us with information which was too long or too advance technically; often both. Some Keepers were happy to allow us to reduce the copy and let them check it for technical accuracy. Others refused to let us tamper with their prose.\(^{691}\)

As well as rehearsing the notion that specialists cannot communicate, Milnes’ comments suggest a battle for control over the public face of the museum. The question of which audiences to target clearly remained controversial, with Milnes commenting: ‘we never managed to persuade the Ceramics Department that their displays should be aimed at the 90 per cent general public rather than the 10 per cent specialist visitors.’\(^{692}\)

Other contemporary museum developments deliberately set out to appeal to broader audiences. The London Transport Museum, for example, was developed to attract a different audience to the majority of science and technology museums which were seen as to ‘cater almost exclusively for the specialist and the academic’.\(^{693}\)

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\(^{688}\) John Martin wrote in praise of the candour of Milnes’ article, describing it as ‘unlike any I have seen before in the Journal’. However, Martin was more appreciative of the Stoke project than Bott and Milnes, suggesting that in spite of the problems evident in the galleries they were still ‘surely the best produced in provincial museums for years’. John Martin, Letter to the Editor, *Museums Journal*, vol.82, no.2, 1982, 121.

\(^{689}\) Colin Milnes, ‘A Designer’s Aspect’, p.45.

\(^{690}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{691}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{692}\) *Ibid.*, p.46

more effectively with the ‘90 per cent’ was seen to require different display strategies. Those writing labels, for example, were being encouraged to consider the readability of text, through the new approach of measuring reading age.\textsuperscript{694} And the notion that collections needed more interpretation continued to gain traction. John Last, Chairman of Merseyside County Council’s Arts and Culture Committee, argued in a speech in 1979 that directors must do more to widen access to their collections and accused those who were reluctant to do so of arrogance.\textsuperscript{695} Reflecting the following year, he noted that the speech had attracted ‘considerable interest and a great deal of support in local government circles’ and suggested that local authorities ‘must be very careful to be seen to be constantly monitoring the public acceptability of our institutions and the work that they are doing’.\textsuperscript{696} Last’s comments suggest that pressure to increase accessibility was starting to come from governing bodies within local government as well as from the sector itself.

The question of what kind of interpretation was most appropriate was perhaps most contentious in fine and decorative art, where the traditional approach to interpretation was limited to the shortest of labels. In February 1980, the National Galleries of Scotland and the Art Galleries Association organised a conference attempting to encourage art galleries to consider alternative approaches. Christopher Johnstone, Assistant Keeper of Education and Information at the National Galleries reported that, in preparation for the conference, he had written without success to the major art museums in the UK asking for details of their approach to interpretation in their permanent galleries. For Johnstone, the lack of response implied that many curators simply had not thought about what interpretation might be appropriate, or thought that it was unnecessary: ‘I begin from the position that not everyone can understand a painting, for example, just because it can be seen, as many curators still appear to believe.’\textsuperscript{697}


\textsuperscript{695} For an account of his speech and the reaction to it, see John Last, ‘Municipal Support for the Arts’, \textit{Museums Journal} vol.80, no.2, 1980, 98-99.

\textsuperscript{696} \textit{Ibid.}, p.99.

\textsuperscript{697} Christopher Johnstone, ‘Art Museums in the Communication Age: a summary’, \textit{Museums Journal} vol.80, no.2, 1980, 72-77, p.76
Questions of appropriate design and interpretation techniques were also debated in archaeology. In 1982, Tim Schadla-Hall wrote a joint article with a designer, Jamie Davidson, on the design of archaeology galleries, in which they commented on the lack of ‘museological paradigms’ for a livelier approach and the general ‘aridity of museum-based archaeology’.\(^698\) This ‘aridity’ was decisively challenged when the Jorvik Viking Centre opened in York in 1984, generating enormous publicity and attracting huge crowds.\(^699\) (A similar ride-through-history experience, Wheels, opened at the National Motor Museum in 1985.\(^700\)) Jorvik set out to appeal to a non-specialist audience, communicating with much more flair and drama than typical museum displays.

However, the centre did not offer new paradigms for the display of archaeological material, so much as deflect attention from artefacts to reconstruction: Schadla-Hall’s review of the Jorvik Viking centre for *Museums Journal* noted that there was a mismatch between resources devoted to the ‘experience’ part of the centre, where visitors travelled backwards through history to a recreation of the Viking settlement in Coppergate, and the presentation of the finds from the excavation in the second part of the display, which was poorly planned, with ‘too many artefacts, and virtually no explanation of their nature or importance’ as well as excessively lengthy text panels.\(^701\) Schadla-Hall concluded that, while the centre was popular and entertaining it ‘neither educates or informs’.\(^702\)

The debate over Jorvik rehearsed some of the same arguments as that over the Hall of Human Biology: should displays be based on objects, or ideas? However, there was a different context: Jorvik was a paying attraction, competing in the growing leisure market, and the key issue at stake in the debate was the question of whether education could be combined with entertainment. In Chapter 4, I suggested that the commercial

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\(^699\) Michael Ware, ‘Jorvik Viking Centre Opens’, *AIM Bulletin*27, July 1984 p.5. Ware reported that the governing body, the York Archaeological Trust was surprised by the queues for admission and the level of interest it generated.

\(^700\) Reviewing Wheels, Kenneth Hudson expressed his dislike for the approach, although conceding that he was ‘very, very conservative’ in his taste. *AIM Bulletin* 8(4), August 1985, p.3.


imperatives of independent museums served to draw attention to visitor care across the museum sector. They also drove change in museums’ approach to interpretation. Independent museums largely pioneered the idea of the ‘working’ museum, where machinery might be seen in operation and visitors might ride on historic trains and trams.\(^\text{703}\) While the recreated streets of Beamish and Blists Hill borrowed some of the techniques of the street scenes developed earlier in the century, notably by John Kirk at the Castle Museum in York,\(^\text{704}\) the opportunity to buy a pint in the pub or fish and chips from the chip shop was novel. These innovations in display challenged the broader museum sector to think more seriously about how to entertain their visitors. Cathy Ross, who was working as a history curator in Tyne and Wear Museums in the late 1980s, noted that an imperative driving her work there was ‘the idea that museum displays could have a sense of fun and playfulness,’ and that this replaced the idea of the museum as a kind of ‘sacred space’.\(^\text{705}\) The idea that visitors might have fun in museums was, in part, driven by the commercial imperatives of independent museums.

Science museums in the 1980s also embraced the idea of fun (the Science Museum’s interactive gallery, Launchpad was opened in 1986, for example).\(^\text{706}\) But communication in science was also influenced by the approaches of Public Understanding of Science movement. This movement – some of the principles of which can already be seen influencing the approaches of the Hall of Human Biology in the 1970s – was given shape and impetus in the UK by a 1985 Royal Society report.\(^\text{707}\) On the recommendations of the report, the Committee for the Public Understanding of Science (CoPUS) was established to encourage scientists to communicate more effectively with non-specialist audiences and the Science Museum collaborated

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\(^{703}\) Patrick Greene argued that although ‘some of the more adventurous publicly funded museums’ offered working machinery and demonstrations, these approaches were rare before the growth of the independent sector: ‘Independent and Working Museums in Britain’, *Museums Journal*, vol.83, no.1, 1983, 25-28, p.25.

\(^{704}\) Kavanagh, *History Curatorship*.

\(^{705}\) Cathy Ross, interview with the author, 23 March 2012.

\(^{706}\) Peter Morris, *Science for the Nation*.

\(^{707}\) Royal Society, *The Public Understanding of Science* (London: Royal Society, 1985), known as the Bodmer Report, after the chair of the working group, Sir Walter Bodmer. For an account of the movement, see Steve Miller, ‘Public understanding of science at the crossroads’, *Public Understanding of Science*, 2001; 10; 115- 120.
particularly closely with CoPUS.\textsuperscript{708} The public understanding of science movement has been criticised more recently for an approach essentially based on a ‘deficit model’ of communication.\textsuperscript{709} That is, the scientist (or institution) is assumed to hold a monopoly on knowledge and to be passing this on to a passive and inexpert audience. Simon Knell has argued that the public understanding of science mode of communication (and curatorship) was ‘wedded to a notion of cultural orthodoxy sustained by science’.\textsuperscript{710} As Macdonald has noted, most science centres deliberately avoided controversial issues and presented scientific truths as ‘decontextualised’.\textsuperscript{711} The basis of the communication process in the public understanding of science model has been criticised by Ken Arnold as ‘spoon-feeding those who crossed a museum’s threshold with digestible scraps of concrete knowledge’.\textsuperscript{712}

Clearly, approaches to communication based on a transfer of knowledge from expert to audience persisted in the 1980s. However, as I noted in Chapter 5, academic museum studies began to encourage more critical approaches to the way museums constructed and shared knowledge at this time. While their influence was not pervasive, some new, experimental approaches to curatorship were beginning to disrupt this didactic and asymmetrical relationship between expert and audience.

\textbf{7.6 Curators and audiences: pioneering new approaches}

During the 1980s, questions about how to communicate more effectively and how to increase audience numbers became increasingly prominent, the imperative to increase audiences partly driven by funding pressures. At the same time, some museums began to explore new ways of working with their audiences which would radically disrupt understandings of museums’ authority. Although initially modest in scale and reach,

\textsuperscript{708} See John Durrant (ed.) \textit{Museums and the Public Understanding of Science}, (London : Science Museum in association with the Committee on the Public Understanding of Science, 1992), for papers from a conference organised jointly by the museum and CoPUS.

\textsuperscript{709} Miller, ‘Public Understanding of Science’, p.115.


\textsuperscript{711} Sharon Macdonald, ‘Exhibitions and the Public Understanding of Science Paradox’.

\textsuperscript{712} Arnold, \textit{Cabinets for the Curious}, p.254.
these pioneering initiatives introduced ways of working which would become common elements of socially responsive museum practice in later decades.

In 1983, Glasgow City Council secured Urban Programme funding for a new museum in Springburn, an area of multiple deprivation, which had undergone huge change. The museum focused on telling the story of the local community and Mark O’Neill, who was then very new to museum work, had ‘the amazing opportunity to set up a museum from scratch’. O’Neill developed an approach to exhibition development in which he worked with different community groups to gather material and tell their own stories. O’Neill was consciously influenced by the approaches of the Anacostia Community Museum which had pioneered community involvement in both governance and programming since the 1960s and in particular its practice of combining celebration of a community’s past with a focus on difficult contemporary issues. Birmingham City Museum also launched a recording project funded with regeneration money and involving local oral historians in recording in the city. Although community involvement in exhibition-making was not entirely new, approaches such as the projects in Birmingham and Springburn were on a larger scale than anything which had been attempted before. Government regeneration funding also made possible the first museum posts with a specific focus on working with minority communities, beginning with an education officer appointed to Leicestershire museums in 1984. It was followed by similar posts in Bradford, Birmingham and Ipswich and these posts anticipated a more concerted approach to working with non-traditional museum audiences prevalent from the later 1990s.

713 Mark O’Neill, Interview with the author, 2 July 2012.
715 For an account of the programme, see Stuart Davies, Change in the Inner City, Social History Curators Group Journal vol.11, 1982, n.p.n.
716 Pearson, for example, describes a ‘delegation’ of curatorial responsibility, with American troops being given opportunity to curate wartime exhibitions at Colchester Museum. Pearson Curators, Culture and Conflict, p.147
717 Patrick Boylan drew my attention to these posts, which are also confirmed by Museums Yearbook records.
During the mid-1980s, some history curators began to experiment with reminiscence work, using objects to spark conversations with groups of usually elderly people. According to Steph Mastoris, one of the pioneers of this approach, reminiscence work started to challenge established curatorial notions of value. Sharing objects with communities in this way enabled curators to ‘build up a picture of what is important to [their] community.’ Mastoris commented that this was a ‘fascinating inversion’ of value: something like a dolly peg, seen by curators as largely worthless because there were so many of them in museums without documented records of their use, might come to seem important in a reminiscence context if it proved a powerful prompt to conversation. Like community involvement in exhibition making, reminiscence work disrupted traditional curatorial approaches by giving weight to alternative sources of judgement about value.

The debate over the appropriate role of curators in the 1980s was played out most publicly when, in 1989, the Director of the V&A, Elizabeth Esteve-Coll, generated huge controversy by restructuring the museum’s curatorial staff, in a way that seemed to diminish the power of the curatorial body and de-emphasise scholarship, and making a small number of senior staff redundant. The affair is well-documented and the details of the changes were mostly of internal significance, but the public debate about the changes is of some broader significance in understanding changing attitudes to curatorship. A major conference organised by the Royal Society for the Arts in 1990, in response to the V&A controversy, attempted to offer new directions for curatorship in museums but much of the debate was bitter. Neil MacGregor, then Director of the National Gallery, attempted a rapprochement, using his presentation to argue that ‘polarity is non-existent’ between scholarship and popularity and that investment in

718 Steph Mastoris, Interview with the author, 9 March 2012.
719 Gaynor Kavanagh later explored and theorised museums’ role in reminiscence and memory in Dream Spaces, (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), but in the 1980s the approach was still novel.
720 See for example, Ruth Adams, ‘The new girl in the old boy network’.
721 The key note papers from the conference were published in the RSA Journal and full proceedings (although some contributors declined to have theirs published) in ‘Scholarship in Museums: An International Conference organized by and held at the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Art, Manufacture and Commerce, sponsored by FIAT, London, 2 October 1990’, Museum Management and Curatorship 9, 1990 p.341-409
research was an essential underpinning to enable museums ‘to serve the ever larger public we expect in the next few years’. Patrick Boylan, speaking in a panel discussion, shed some light on the intense media interest in the debate, commenting that he had had a call from a BBC researcher ‘trying to persuade me to have a punch-up with Neil Chalmers on the Today programme. I would just repeat publicly what I insisted to her: I do not see that there is a conflict between scholarship on the one hand and education and popularization on the other.’ But while Boylan and MacGregor sought to reconcile scholarship and popular appeal, there were dissenting voices, with one curator complaining from the floor that scholarship must be separated from communication: ‘[scholarship] is not communicating. That is the next stage on. It is actually telling the truth about an object.’ While painstaking attempts to negotiate a new approach to curatorial practice which balanced scholarship and communication, collections care and access were less newsworthy than a ‘punch up’, the public debate about the changes at the V&A pointed to unresolved tensions about the future.

7.7 Curators and ‘The People’ in the 1990s

A significant early manifestation of the new concern with building audiences and giving users a voice within museums was the People’s Show movement. In 1990, staff at Walsall Museum experimented with a new approach to exhibition-making, which attempted to challenge the usual processes of museums by offering members of the public the opportunity to show their own collections in the museum. The museum advertised for potential participants through local media, generating a great deal of interest, with the final participants chosen by committee. The People’s Show exhibition, which ran from May to June 1990, included 63 collections, and around 16,000 objects, mostly the kind of mass-produced, low-status object which did not have a traditional place in a museum, including mugs, novelty kitchenware, tea towels and celebrity

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724 Chalmers was then Director of the Natural History Museum and was also seen as opposed to traditional curatorial values. Patrick Boylan, contribution to panel discussion, op.cit, p.381.
725 Natalie Rothstein, contribution to panel discussion, op.cit, p.371-2.
memorabilia. The collections were presented in a highly personalised way, with collectors given space to explain their significance to them.\footnote{For an account of the project, see Cathy Mullen, ‘The People’s Show’ in Susan Pearce (ed.) \textit{Interpreting Objects and Collections}, (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.287-290.}

The exhibition achieved high visitor numbers and caught the imagination of other museum professionals and, for a time in the 1990s, the People’s Show approach became a trend copied by many local museums.\footnote{In 1994, 48 museums took part in the People’s Show. See Jo Digger, ‘The People’s Show: One Strategy Towards the Democratic Museum’, \textit{Social History in Museums: the Journal of the Social History Curators’ Group}, vol.21, 1994, 40-43.} It was interpreted as an exercise in ‘cultural pluralism’, moving museums on from a ‘homegenized representation of “working class culture” to acts that celebrate diverse cultural practices.’\footnote{Mullen, ‘The People’s Show’, p.289} The People’s Show approach subverted many aspects of museums’ traditional authority: the participants determined what was worthy of display, and had literal ownership of the objects on display. By giving members of the public opportunity to show material which was important to them, on their terms, not the museums’, these exhibitions signalled a growing professional recognition that the power relationships between museum and audience, and in particular between curator and visitor, might be ripe for realignment. They contributed to an emerging discussion about ‘cultural rights’\footnote{Robin Francis, ‘The People’s Show: a Critical Analysis’, \textit{Social History in Museums: the Journal of the Social History Curators’ Group}, vol.21, 1994, 44-48.} and explicitly engaged with contemporary academic museum studies, reflecting Sue Pearce’s work on popular collecting. The success of the People’s Show phenomenon can be read as an indication of changing attitudes towards traditional curatorial approaches and notions of expertise.

While the People’s Show’s subversion of modes of authority stemmed from a desire to democratise museum practice, this co-existed with a growing intellectual challenge to the notion of expertise. Anthony Burton has argued that, by the end of the twentieth century, confidence in expert authority ‘was no longer at a premium’ and that curators were operating in an intellectual climate, where their only ‘respectable position’ was that objects had multiple meanings, and interpretation had to encompass ‘complexity
and contradiction’. 730 While Burton may overstate the extent of the acceptance of this postmodernist understanding of intellectual complexity, the authority of public institutions, including museums, was increasingly subject to challenge. 731

Meanwhile, a new orthodoxy was beginning to emerge in the early 1990s in social history practice that museum visitors should be able to identify with the displays: ‘social history curators believe in working towards exhibitions in which everyone can “see themselves” in the displays’. 732 The Great City display at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle, which opened in 1992, attempted both to give space for individual voices to be heard as an alternative to the ‘curatorial voice’, within a broader historical narrative, and, through a People’s Gallery, to offer opportunities for communities to tell their own stories. 733 The Peopling of London exhibition at the Museum of London in 1993-4 explicitly set out to challenge a myth of a homogenous pre-war white culture by looking at the history of settlement in London, and built extensive contacts with community groups. 734 Although both these displays used approaches which had been pioneered elsewhere on a smaller scale, their adoption for projects with substantial budgets and in large museums indicated a growing acceptance of the democratising approaches they represented. They embodied a significant change in the relationship between curator

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731 Writing about public attitudes to archaeology, for example, Roger Thomas has argued that the late 1990s were characterised by a ‘rejection of the official or “authorised” view of the world’. See Roger Thomas, ‘Archaeology and Authority in the Twenty-First Century’ in Nick Merriman (ed.), Public Archaeology (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 191-201.


and audience, which would come to shape much museum practice in the new millennium.\footnote{735}

**7.8 Conclusion to Chapter 7**

In this chapter I have argued that, in the 1950s and 1960s, curatorial expertise was seen as a public resource in and of itself but that, by the 1990s, this perception had radically shifted.

New approaches to display which emerged during from 1970s onwards were concerned with communicating more effectively. Although controversial then, the provision of better interpretation was to become the norm over the next twenty years, so that Witcomb could observe in 2004 that ‘not to interpret has come to be seen as elitist and anti-democratic’.\footnote{736} From the provision of better interpretation, the focus for innovative practice in the 1980s and 1990s moved towards establishing a new relationship between museum and public, reimagining curators’ didactic role. Although critics of socially responsive museum practice have tended to associate its emergence with the advent of the New Labour Government in 1997,\footnote{737} this chapter has demonstrated that more equitable approaches to audiences have much deeper roots than this criticism implies. Moreover, the change in the relationship between curator and audience described here further complicates the notion of curatorial decline: by the 1990s, curators were driven by a different set of imperatives to those which had animated the ‘Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?’ generation.

\footnote{735}{For an example of the way in which community involvement in museum history making became more widely accepted after 2001, see Sheila Watson, ‘History museums, community identities and a sense of place: Rewriting histories’ in Simon Knell, Suzanne MacLeod and Sheila Watson (eds.) Museum Revolutions: how museums change and are changed (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp.160-172.}

\footnote{736}{Witcomb Reimagining the museum, p.86.}

\footnote{737}{See for example, Josie Appleton (ed.) Museums for ‘the people’? (London: Academy of Ideas, 2001).}
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This study has considered some of the forces which drove change in UK museums from 1960 to 2001, stimulated in part by the picture of decline presented by Renaissance in the Regions and by a desire to build a more nuanced understanding of the way that the museum landscape had been shaped in the previous forty years. It has analysed a process of increasing professionalisation, taking place against a backdrop of significant political, economic, social and intellectual shifts which reshaped the context for museum work. It has interrogated some of the changes in museums’ approaches to knowledge and authority and has investigated the ways in which these changed and changing understandings have been manifest in museums’ engagement with the public. It has explored the persistence of unease and dissatisfaction with the state of curatorial practice and knowledge, and considered the relationship between the processes of change and the sense of crisis which sometimes accompanied them. It has sought to demonstrate that individual professionals, informal groups, the formal structures of the profession, institutional frameworks, governing bodies and those holding political power have all influenced the shape of the museum sector, through a complex series of relationships, sometimes supportive, sometimes antagonistic, sometimes even unintentional.

The period under review was notable for a series of attempts to bring order and coherence to the regional museum sector and to shape it into a more consistent and legible framework. But the sector has not proved susceptible to these approaches and a more appropriate metaphor for the nature of the museum sector of any given period might be that of a tapestry: woven on a shared foundational warp, many different strands combine to produce a picture which is never wholly legible to those involved in its construction and which can only be fully apprehended when the construction is over, and by standing a long way back. A complete overview of the whole sector which might fully encompass its complexity is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless this concluding chapter aims to take some steps backwards, to consider some of the threads I have been working with on a larger scale and to describe some of the broader patterns which emerge. Based on the patterns I identify in changing practice during the
period under review, the concluding sections of the chapter consider the implications of the study’s findings for the future. How might a better understanding of the processes which drove change in museums in these four decades inform the museums of the future?

8.2 How did the political and economic climate change museums?

This study has demonstrated that the ecology of change in museums during this period was extremely complex. Although I have looked at change through a series of different frames, segregating the political and professional, for example, to bring coherence to the narrative of change, the drivers of change seen in each frame did not operate separately. In particular, there was no simple division between internal and external drivers of change in museums in this period. On the contrary, an important theme to emerge from this study is that change in museums has been particularly dynamic when the ‘top down’ has met the ‘bottom up’, when political will and funding opportunities have been in line with the aspirations of influential professionals or groups of professionals. In particular, change was enabled by the availability, or otherwise, of funding. Many different initiatives and individuals sowed the seeds of change in museums during this period, but these were only able to flourish when funding allowed. While the funding environment was frequently experienced as hostile and restrictive at particular times and in particular places, seen in totality, it offered fertile ground for the increasing ambition of people who worked in museums.

Some increased investment was specifically targeted at museums: either individual museums or the broader sector. Some individual local museums successfully lobbied for additional funding from their governing bodies, and national museums also benefitted from significant additional resources during this period. This enabled the creation of many new museums and a substantial overall increase in staff numbers, as well as the development of more sophisticated programming and a more refined approach to display. Modest funding to the Area Museum Councils gave impetus to some of the processes of professionalisation and to tangible improvements in museum practice.

By contrast, an increasingly significant tranche of funding came from alternative sources, not primarily designed with museums in mind. It was in part the availability of funding from new sources which enabled some of the most significant transformations of museums seen in this period, both in their internal practice and in their offer to
visitors. While creators of the National Lottery in the 1990s at least envisaged museums as one category of potential recipients, earlier funding from the MSC schemes and regeneration budgets were never intended to be used on such a large scale by museums. In order to make full use of these novel funding opportunities, museums had to be more flexible and responsive in their approach. While there was often a strand of perfectionism in the process of professionalisation in museums, as the profession attempted to ‘make itself respectable through systems’, this was tempered in practice by the need to operate with the limitations of funding that was available. This encouraged a creative opportunism in museums, with change often born out of a compromise between idealism and pragmatism. The substantial injection of funding into the sector through the Renaissance programme in the years following the period under review represented a departure from the funding climate of the previous forty years, in that it was deliberately earmarked for museums and held out the promise of a more ordered and measured approach to change. I reflect more on the Renaissance programme below.

This study began by exploring the sequence of changes to the political and organisational environment within which regional museums operated, and has also touched on some of the complex pressures to which national museums have been subject. It has demonstrated that the policies and ideals of those in power in national and local government certainly drove change in museums during this period, but not in a simplistic or linear way. The limitations of political will were amply demonstrated during the 1960s as Jennie Lee’s ambition for museums which would ‘make people see that they belong’ did not find a response on a large scale. Later in the period, the investment of both central and local government in museums became more strategic, with a greater expectation that museums would contribute to particular political and corporate objectives, in return for their funding. While later generations of national and local politicians were more able to impose conditions on their investment, political will still did not lead directly and simply to changes to museum practice. The aspirations of politicians and funders were themselves subject to influence from the lobbying of ambitious professionals, as my discussion of the rise to prominence of the social

738 Cathy Ross, Interview with the author, 23 March 2012. The reference is to the development of the SHIC classification system, discussed in Chapter 5.

inclusion agenda demonstrated, so that the processes by which national and local government policies shaped museums were more cyclical than linear.

Moreover, just as some of the most significant funding opportunities for museums during this period were unintended, so some of the political changes to have the most significant impacts on the nature of museum practice came about without having been designed with museums in mind. Although profoundly affected by the changing nature of the public sector during this period, museums constituted such a small fragment of that broader public sector that they were often ‘below the radar’ of policy makers. In particular, the substantial changes in the shape and nature of local government have been one of the most significant factors shaping regional museums during this period. While sympathetic local politicians could make a significant difference to the well-being of particular museums, in terms of these larger changes to the nature of local government, museums for the most part experienced either collateral damage or somewhat accidental benefit. The startling extent of the growth of Liverpool’s museums following nationalisation, a change of status not intended by the original policy on that particular local government reform and only secured by concerted lobbying, provides an illustration of how museums have sometimes benefitted from these unintended consequences. The difficulties of countless small museums after the local government reorganisation of 1974 provide a counter-example, showing that some museums suffered during this period from being swept along by larger tides of change which paid little regard to the needs of museums.

The changing culture of local government was also a significant driver of change in this period, with museum work being shaped by a conflict between the increasing professionalisation and specialisation that characterised museum work and changing local government decision-making processes, which became less susceptible to the recommendations of specialists. In order to realise the ambitions of professionalisation, people who worked in museums had to learn to operate in an environment in which it was increasingly hard to make museums’ voice heard, and which demanded more tangible evidence of the public value of museums and their work. Selwood observed in her review of Renaissance that the programme took place at a time of ‘an unprecedented
degree of public accountability’. In a report for the thinktank Demos from 1994, Michael Power argued that the drive for greater accountability in government had been accompanied by an over-reliance on the techniques and culture of audit so that it seemed impossible to separate the notion of accountability from these ‘elaborately detailed policing mechanisms’. Power argued that it must be possible to achieve a high level of public accountability with less reliance on narrow forms of control, and a greater trust of public institutions. During the period under review, museums seem to have passed from a phase where they were to some degree unaccountable, with often minimal intervention in their day-to-day work from governing bodies, to one in which they were heavily ‘policed’. While the Registration scheme went some way towards making professional concerns carry weight in the new local authority context, and some museum professionals successfully adapted to the new environment and learnt to speak the language of their corporate context, in general the changing culture of local authorities presented substantial challenges to museums.

8.3 How did expanding professionalism change museums?

This study has documented the overt professionalisation which was a feature of this period in museums. This professionalism was driven in part by a struggle for status in the turbulent local authority context of the period. It was also driven by a sense that museums had not always been effective stewards of their collections in the past, and that this had been an abdication of their responsibility to the public. Many of these museums were also still suffering from the effects of World War II on their buildings and collections care. The vision of professionalism which emerged in response both to museum curators’ ‘status ambiguity’ and to the realisation of the extent of this disorder was centred on an ideal of perfected practice. Thoroughness, rigour and responsibility in the approach to museum practice were seen as essential both to


742 See Millerson, The Qualifying Associations, p.8-9, discussed in Chapter 2.
enhance the professional standing of people who worked in museums, and to demonstrate that museum’s public responsibility inhered in caring for their collections well.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, an increasingly robust infrastructure for the museum sector supported a vision of professionalism largely based on ‘doing things properly’: much of the campaigning work of the professional groups, the early Registration scheme, the early ethical codes and the early work of the AMCs were focused on encouraging rigour in the approach to practice. These processes of professionalisation gave rise to some tangible change in museums, in particular much better standards of documentation and collections care. Later, alternative manifestations of professionalisation began to emerge which supported more subtle changes, such as the shift in the way knowledge was valued within the social history community. Towards the end of the period under review, there was a discernible shift to a model of professionalism more concerned with responsive and thoughtful practice than an adherence to standards; this can be seen in changing approaches to training, discussed below, the development of a Code of Ethics based on shared values, and the changing emphasis of the work of the AMCs. These changes in the basis of professionalism can be read as signs of a maturing profession, moving away from a narrow adherence to shared standards, towards a broader sense of shared values. In a climate of diminishing resources, however, a less fixed notion of professionalism may prove harder to defend than one which is focused on clearly defined standards of stewardship, for all its greater richness.

Diversification and expansion of training opportunities were manifestations of the professionalisation of this period. Like other aspects of the professionalisation process, they grew out of professional ambition but were shaped by the political and funding climate, in this case by broader changes to government policy on higher education and vocational training and the increasing availability of funding for training in the first thirty years of this study. Increased training opportunities did much to foster a sense of shared professional endeavour, with cohorts of students often developing strong bonds and self-identifying as members of a new generation. But how significant was the impact of these greatly expanded training opportunities on the nature of museum practice and on the kinds of museums which visitors experienced?
Throughout this period, museum training sought to balance practical and theoretical elements, the need to produce students with a ‘licence to drive a museum’ weighing against the desire to produce students who could think critically about the museum’s practice and purpose. In many respects there was a perceptible trend towards training which valued critical thinking at least as highly as a defined set of skills or knowledge during the period under review: university Museum Studies courses and the AMA certainly appeared to move in this direction. However, the emergence of NVQs provided a counter weight, and the tension between practical and theoretical elements remained unresolved.

But while the question of maintaining an appropriate balance between these elements was perceived as problematic both by training providers and some in the broader sector, this tension was in fact central to the impact of training on the sector. Whereas Freidson argued that a tendency for university teaching to ‘emphasize the ideal’ made it ill-adapted to the training students to ‘the confusion and impurity of practical affairs’, the sometimes uneasy compromise which characterised museum training left students relatively well-equipped to deal with that confusion and impurity. The combination of practical and theoretical elements led to a more reflective approach to practice. A whole range of museum activities which were, in large part, taken for granted at the start of the period were, by 2001, seen as needing careful consideration, from practical matters such as the number of words on a text panel, to more subtle questions of epistemology and authority. The most significant reappraisals of museum practice were undoubtedly related to museums’ relationship to their audience, and better and more extensive training opportunities can be seen to have played a significant part in this shift.

8.4 Curators’ knowledge and its audiences

Popular accounts of a decline in curatorial expertise do not take proper account of the impact of changing approaches to practice, of the changing expectations of audiences and of the different values placed on different kinds of expertise. What looks like decline may be a different approach. This is an area which resists generalisation and the circumstances of each discipline are highly particular. Taking social history as a case study, this study has explored how ideals of curatorial knowledge were contested during this period, so that curatorial expertise was not merely waxing or waning but was being

743 Freidson, *Professionalism: the Third Logic*, pp. 99 – 100. This view was discussed in Chapter 5.
reinvented. A new generation of curators saw traditional forms of curatorial knowledge, caricatured in the images of identifying truncheons and knowing all about tenterhooks, as insufficient. Their criticisms echoed Arnold’s observation, that curators’ ‘disciplinary training encourages them to know a lot about something at the expense of knowing something about a lot.’ What some would interpret as a decline in curatorial knowledge may in fact have been a reasonable attempt to know ‘something about a lot.’

During the period under review, social historians began to move away from an approach to curatorial knowledge based on close knowledge of objects. Mark O’Neill has described museums’ approach to objects as rooted in the attempt to ‘tame’ them and ‘diminish their power’, arguing that museums too often disregard the spiritual and emotional power of objects, reducing such qualities to ‘the answers to crossword puzzle clues’. Gaynor Kavanagh similarly has drawn a distinction between the limited, object-specific knowledge which she called ‘naming’ and the broader ‘contextual understanding of a historian’. She suggested that museum historians need to learn to ask ‘what does this object mean and to whom does it mean things’ rather than, or as well as, ‘what is this object?’ Embracing the complexity of museum objects, and avoiding the easy seductions of the neat crossword puzzle answer, has presented new challenges to museum historians as they seek to know and share their knowledge of their collections in new ways.

While social history’s approaches to knowledge are particular to the discipline, they do have broader significance because of the discipline’s rise to prominence in the UK regional museum sector. In 1963, the Rosse Report did not recognise social or local history as a separate category of museums: museums with collections which might later be seen as coming under the heading of social history (‘personalia’, ‘folk material’ and ‘general museums of local interest’) merit very brief mentions. By the end of the period, there were many more museums expressly focused on social history: the majority of the new museums which opened during this period were history museums, and social history also had a higher status within longer-established urban museum

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744 Arnold, Cabinets for the Curious, p.254
746 Gaynor Kavanagh, interview with the author, 25 June 2012.
747 SCMG, Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries.
services. *Renaissance in the Regions* gave much greater prominence to social history; a large proportion of the projects cited to demonstrate museums’ potential to make a positive impact on their communities were social-history-based. Considering how museums might meet the expectations of their users, the report argued:

Users also have strong views about what they want from both museums and galleries … They want their museums to tell a story, and usually it is their story – the story of the locality told through the experiences of its people. 748

Telling the story of the community was thus seen as the core role of local museums. Users were depicted as more consistently interested in their own ‘story’ than any other sorts of collections and knowledge the museum might have to offer. This emphasis reflected both a broader shift in the relative prominence of different disciplines within museums and perhaps also the membership of the Task Force which oversaw the production of the report: out of nine members, four had worked as social history curators, two led art galleries, but none had a background in science in museums.

Prominent social historians interviewed for this study argued for the influence of social history on the broader practice of UK regional museums. Sam Mullins argued that, as the generation of social historians who came to prominence in SHCG in the 1980s began to achieve positions of ‘serious responsibility’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they began to create museums which were more accountable and audience-oriented, and which in turn influenced the broader sector. 749 David Fleming also linked the growing prominence of social history with an increasing emphasis on serving audiences well:

The way that social history has changed the sector is that through social history you get to the audiences a lot faster and more easily...In talking about people’s own stories, you engage them, the audiences build, and that is where I think it’s all changed. That is where the whole inclusion agenda has come from. It’s because social historians have been successful in impacting on society at large and it’s not easy for an entomologist to do that, and it’s not easy for an art historian…but it is easy for a motivated social historian to do that and that’s why

748 Davies, *Renaissance in the Regions*, p.87
749 Sam Mullins, interview with the author, 2 May 2012.
I think museums have become so much more significant in terms of their public impact over the last 25 to 30 years: it’s because it has been led by the nose by social history.\textsuperscript{750}

This assertion overstates the agency of social history in driving a concern with social impact in museums; the socially responsive museum has not been the sole creation of social historians, but social history practice has often been at the centre of attempts to rethink museums’ relationship with their audiences and social historians have achieved positions of influence within the sector. The rise to prominence of social history may also have given impetus to a shift in the relationship between curator and audience. I have demonstrated that social history practice has moved towards an intellectual position which overtly embraces subjectivity and intellectual diversity. It has also disrupted the notion of the expert\textsuperscript{751} as, when museums began to engage more closely with the recent history of a community, curators were forced to rethink the basis of their expert status. Writing in 1990, Kavanagh argued, without implying any disparagement of history curators’ museological skills, that their subject knowledge was outstripped by that of the communities whose stories they told:

The curator may be an expert in museum theory and practice, may have a broad and sometimes deep knowledge of sources, and may be very experienced in a range of museum-applicable techniques, including artefact analysis. But the experts are the ordinary people who make history and who create and shape it.\textsuperscript{752}

Towards the end of this period, the idea of the curator as expert, and the traditional relationship between curator and audience were increasingly subject to revision, and although my study has explored practice in social history, it is important to acknowledge that similar concerns have been important in other disciplines including

\textsuperscript{750} David Fleming, interview with the author, 4 July 2012.

\textsuperscript{751} It is important to acknowledge that audience-expert relationship has been subject to other, earlier revisions: for example, I referred earlier to Ritvo’s study demonstrating that nineteenth century biology found it impossible to maintain a ‘dichotomy’ between ‘expert and lay knowledge’, Harriet Ritvo, The Platypus and the Mermaid, p.50.

\textsuperscript{752} Gaynor Kavanagh, History Curatorship (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), p.82,
anthropology, with pioneering curators finding new, more equitable ways to work with source communities.\textsuperscript{753}

At the start of this study, I noted Arnold’s suggestion that a productive approach to knowledge for the future would be for museums to find ways to become sites of knowledge production.\textsuperscript{754} For this to happen effectively, museums need to find ways to bring different forms of expertise together. Museums never had, and do not aspire to, a monopoly on knowledge of their collections. There are many other categories of expert whose voice could be heard in museums, but museums need adequate knowledge resources of their own, and confidence in what they have to offer in order to engage with them effectively and to realise a new approach to knowledge in museums.

\textbf{8.5 Curatorial numbers – why the sense of crisis?}

My study suggests that there was indeed a significant decline in curatorial numbers towards the end of the millennium in some of the large regional museums which were the focus of concern in \textit{Renaissance in the Regions}. However, it also demonstrates that this has to be set against a very substantial increase in staffing provision in the thirty years from 1960. The strengthened curatorial provision which some museums enjoyed between 1960 and the early 1990s was the result of the successful lobbying for additional funding based on a particular vision for the work of museums, and of curatorial practice, one based on increasing specialisation.

\textsuperscript{753} For an overview of practice in this area see: Laura Peers and Alison K.Brown (eds.) \textit{Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader} (London and New York: Routledge, 2003). There is an interesting parallel in this respect in the National Health Service with the ‘expert patient’ initiative, emerging in 2001 as a result of a report authored by the then Chief Medical Officer, Liam Donaldson: Department of Health. \textit{The expert patient: a new approach to chronic disease management in the 21st century.} (London: Stationery Office, 2001). The initiative encouraged patients with chronic conditions to take an active part in the management of their treatment, acknowledging their superior insight into their condition. As in museums, some doctors saw this as an attack on their expertise, with one arguing that the idea of the expert patient was an example of New Labour seeking to advance ‘its “modernising” agenda by disparaging traditional professions.’ See: Mike Fitzpatrick, ‘Expert Patients?’ \textit{British Journal of General Practice,} 2004 May 1; 54(502): 405. I am indebted to Chris Wood for drawing my attention to this parallel.

\textsuperscript{754} Arnold, \textit{Cabinets for the Curious}
As curatorial provision increased, there was also an accompanying increase in the numbers of staff working in museums in education, design, interpretation and conservation, as well as in commercially-focused roles. During the period under review, those allied staff themselves became more skilled and professionalised. In 1960, curators largely controlled the public face of the museum, developing programmes and building displays themselves. By 2001, curators were just one type of professional within a multidisciplinary working environment and making only one contribution out of many to the public face of the museum. This study has traced the emergence of the notion that specialists cannot communicate and, especially in larger regional museums and national museums, curators often moved further from the public face of the museum, as new professional groups including designers, educators and interpretation staff were acknowledged as having particular skills in communication.

These allied professionals also suffered from declining numbers of posts in the museums in my sample during the 1990s: curators were far from being singled out for cuts. However, there was, overall, a shift in the balance of staffing provision in the museums in my sample during the period under review, with curators losing their numerical dominance. This loss of dominance and the requirement to share responsibility for the public face of the museum with others may have fuelled a sense of crisis in curatorship, and certainly put pressure on curators to redefine their role. The vision of curatorship based on increasing specialisation, which had dominated the first three decades of this study, was becoming untenable as curatorial provision was eroded: the final sections of this chapter consider whether it has been, or might be, replaced by a sustainable alternative model of curatorship.

8.6 A renaissance in the regions?

This study has surveyed the processes which drove change in curatorial practice and in the museum sector more broadly, in a forty-year period which ends with the publication of *Renaissance in the Regions*. That report identified a decline in curatorial capacity in regional museums: what did it do to address that decline? Did it offer a sustainable alternative model of curatorship and museum practice more broadly? While a full assessment of the impact of that report is outside the scope of this study, a brief sketch of developments in the period since its publication is needed to lay the ground for my concluding remarks about the future direction of the sector.
Following publication of the *Renaissance in the Regions*, the government committed funding to a programme broadly based on its recommendations, known as Renaissance. A total of £300m was made available between 2002 and 2011.\textsuperscript{755} The majority of this was allocated to groups of museums in each English region known as regional museum hubs, with some funding allocated to national programmes. An independent review of the programme was carried out in 2008,\textsuperscript{756} its findings, coupled with the implications of a change of government in 2010 and the change in the public-sector funding climate, led to a fundamental re-thinking of the Renaissance programme. A new group of Major Partner Museums, replacing the regional museum hubs, was announced in 2012; these museums are, at the time of writing, in the middle of a three year programme of funding worth approximately £20million a year, and there are also additional Renaissance funding streams for national programmes and smaller projects.

Both phases of the programme have been, as this study has demonstrated, unprecedented in the UK in offering very substantial central government funding, directly targeted at regional museums. However, their impact has not yet amounted to the transformation of regional museums on the scale envisaged in the original report. The review of Renaissance in 2008 identified a number of missed opportunities. Criticisms included a failure to ensure that the award of funding led to a change in governance at the funded museums, with the result that, for some museums, Renaissance funding was little more than a ‘top-up’ funding stream. Furthermore, a culture of ‘short-termism’, with an emphasis on ‘quick wins’,\textsuperscript{757} in the hope that tangible early results would secure further funding, was seen as having undermined the report’s vision for long term transformation of the sector. So, while *Renaissance in the Regions* secured much more funding than its predecessor reports of the 1960s and 1970s, it has not yet succeeded in fundamentally reshaping regional museums and it remains to be seen whether it will really effect lasting change or be merely transitory in its impact. Certainly the programme did not sweep away the problem, identified by the report, of a lack of capacity in museums nor did it put an end to fears of a crisis in curatorship, which persist: for example, the Collections Trust has recently engaged with this issue, launching an online ‘Campaign for Good Curatorship’ in November 2012, which has

\textsuperscript{755} Selwood, *Renaissance in the Regions: Realising the Vision*, p.21
\textsuperscript{756} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{757} Ibid., p.11
attempted to persuade policy-makers and funders to pay more attention to the importance of curatorship.\footnote{Collections Trust, Campaign for Good Curatorship, \url{http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/collaborate/my-groups/viewgroup/139-campaign-for-good-curatorship} (last accessed 20 January 2014)} In April 2013, the *Museums Journal* published findings from a small survey of 34 museums suggesting that there had been a sharp decline in the number of curators in museums in the sample over the previous 10 years: a 35% decrease in natural history curators, a 23% decrease in art curators and a 5% decrease in human history curators.\footnote{Deborah Mulhearn, ‘Facing Extinction’, *Museums Journal*, April 2013, 24-29. The survey was carried out by Jan Freedman, curator of natural history at Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery and editor for the journal of the Natural Sciences Collections Association (Natsca).}

Unlike the report that preceded it, the Renaissance programme was not driven by a clear vision of the role of museums for the future, and the staffing needs that implied. The programme might have served the sector better if it had been able to draw on a more thorough understanding of how regional museums had changed in the post-war period. There is a natural tendency for reviews such as *Renaissance in the Regions* to be shaped by the implicit assumption that past staff configurations are suitable for the future. What my research shows is that museums’ staffing resources are constantly adapting to internal and external pressures and that the patterns of the past would not necessarily serve the future.

### 8.7 Curators for the future?

This study has demonstrated that profound change in museums in the last four decades of the twentieth century was driven by a complicated combination of factors, but did not emerge as the result of an overarching vision. Change in museums has been the product of determined effort but has also been fragmentary and ad hoc. Perceptions of a crisis in curatorship in the final decades of the last millennium were not entirely unfounded, in as much as curatorial numbers were declining, but failed to do justice to the extent and complexity of change.

In an era when funding pressures seem certain to continue, what does this study have to tell us about how curators might re-imagine their role for the future? First and foremost, its lesson is that a sustainable model of curatorship for the future will not emerge from half-remembered visions of the past. Planning for the sector needs to be informed by a
better understanding of the processes which have driven change in the past, as well as a vision for the future role of museums.

The damaging notion that curators cannot communicate has sometimes served to sideline the curator. Contemporary mainstream and social media provide ample evidence than specialists can and do communicate well and that there is a special magic which comes from direct contact with someone with deep expertise. More museums need to demolish the divide, still perceived to exist, between the ability to know a subject deeply and the ability to communicate well, building a more integrated approach.

To return to Kreps’ notion of ‘appropriate museology’, this study has sought to demonstrate that the museology of 1960 was not appropriate for the museums of 2001, and will not be appropriate for the museums of the future. Nostalgia for a better resourced and less pressured past is actively standing in the way of realising the future potential of museums. At the same time, a tendency to dismiss a concern with scholarship and expertise as reactionary or anti-populist has had damaging consequences. Present resourcing constraints leave museums facing extremely difficult choices and these have been exacerbated by an entrenched and defensive mentality, which sees specialist knowledge and expertise as being threatened by an increased emphasis on audiences, rather than seeing how specialist knowledge can contribute to the new public face of museums. A sense of crisis in curatorship should not be allowed to stand in the way of effective change, paralysing museums with a sense of loss.

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Appendix 1: List of interviewees

Adrian Babidge, London, 25 May 2012
Tristram Besterman, Liskeard, 2 March 2013
Piotr Bienkowski, Leicester, 1 May 2013
Patrick Boylan, Leicester, 19 December 2012
David Fleming, Liverpool, 4 July 2012
Kathy Gee, Birmingham, 30 May 2012
Gaynor Kavanagh, Cardiff, 25 June 2012
Diane Lees, London, 21 March 2012
Hilary McGowan, London, 26 April 2012
Steph Mastoris, Leicester, 9 March 2013
John Martin, Leicester, 21 November 2012
Sam Mullins, London, 2 May 2012
Mark O’Neill, Glasgow, 2 June 2012
Gaby Porter, Manchester, 1 February 2012
Cathy Ross, London, 23 March 2012
Mick Stanley, York, 30 November 2012
Appendix 2: The analysis of staffing numbers

This Appendix explains in more detail the method that was used to compile the analysis of changing staffing patterns in Chapter 4 and the basis on which the services were selected.

The selection of the sample

I wanted to consider the patterns of staffing provision in a representative sample of the kind of larger, urban local authority museums which were the initial subject of concern of Renaissance in the Regions, and which benefitted most from funding from that report.

I aimed to achieve a reasonable regional spread, and my sample included museum services from five of the nine regions used in distributing Renaissance programme funding. I wanted to compare the experience of museums which became County Services following Local Government Reorganization in 1974 with those which remained the responsibility of district authorities so I included two, Norfolk and Leicester, which became County Services. All these services produced annual reports for at least part of the period under review, and which I was able to access; the availability of this contextual information allowed for a more informed analysis of the data. Finally, these services stayed recognisably the same shape, in spite of local government reorganisation, allowing for a useful longitudinal comparison. I excluded Newcastle/Tyne and Wear Museums, for example, which changed in scope and composition too extensively for a comparison to be feasible.

Data source

The analysis uses data extracted from the directory of UK museums and their staff published annually by the Museums Association from 1960 onwards. The titles and date ranges of the publication varied as followed:

1960 – 1975: the volume was published on a calendar year basis, and the title was Museums Calendar

1976 – 1986: the volume was published on a calendar year basis, and the title was the Museums Yearbook
1987-1988 to 1997-1998: the volume was published on a financial year basis, and the title was the *Museums Yearbook*.

1999-2000: the volume reverted to a calendar year basis and the title was the *Museums Yearbook*.

I have used the term ‘Yearbook’ as a short hand throughout the period. From the 1966 edition onwards, copies of the Yearbook are available in the David Wilson Library, University of Leicester. I obtained copies of earlier Yearbook entries from the Museums Association.

The Museums Association compiled the directory each year by asking services to submit details of their museums, collections, opening times and staff. Some editions of the directory also include other information such as exhibitions planned and catalogues available.

The Yearbook is not unproblematic as a source and I have highlighted some particular difficulties with the data below. However, it has the advantage of offering a stable sample over the whole of the period under review. I also explored other ways of collecting staffing data including reviewing museums’ annual reports. These reports, where available, have proved a useful source of contextual information, giving a richer picture than the bald lists in the Yearbook. However, few museums produced annual reports on a regular basis after the 1970s and I was unable to locate a complete sequence for any single museum for the whole of the period I wanted to examine. I explored the feasibility of accessing staffing data through records in County Record Offices, examining the records for Nottingham Museum and Art Gallery in the Nottinghamshire Archives, but this suggested that this approach was unlikely to bear fruit because the relevant files are restricted, because they are deemed to contain confidential personnel information.

**Limitations of the data**

The main problem with the Yearbook data is that staff lists are not fully comprehensive but that it is impossible to be sure what the omissions are.

There was a clear convention that services should include all curatorial, conservation, education, design, interpretation, management and senior administrative staff. Most
services did not include warding, security and other front of house staff in their listings, although staff in supervisory roles in these departments were sometimes included. Not all services listed junior administrative staff. The extent to which the Yearbook entries provide only a partial listing is indicated by a comparison with alternative sources. For example, the Museum of Science and Industry in Birmingham is described in a job advertisement as having a total staff of 70 in 1975, when its Yearbook listing includes only 6.\textsuperscript{761} Comparison with the Rosse Report\textsuperscript{762}, which includes a breakdown of staffing in each museum listed, and which includes all staff reveals that cleaning and security staff were routinely omitted from the Yearbook listing in 1960, and that junior administrative posts were sometimes omitted. However, in other respects the listings in the Rosse Report broadly confirm the listings in the Yearbook.

There are some obvious mistakes in the Yearbook entries, for example departments which are omitted one year but which reappear the following year. Where this is the case, I have made a sensible estimate of what the staff pattern in the year with mistakes was likely to have been and used that as the basis for my analysis.

More serious for our understanding of the nature of work in the sector is the omission of trainees and volunteers. Services did not always include staff working on temporary projects or those on MSC-funded training programmes: for example, the Natural History Department at Birmingham had a team of ten trainees working on cataloguing in 1979-80 whose presence is not reflected in the Yearbook.\textsuperscript{763} Almost no volunteers were listed, which means that the Yearbook records only offer a partial picture of the resource being deployed in any one museum. For example, in 1972, twelve volunteers worked in the social history department of Norwich Castle Museum, often undertaking ‘specialized tasks at a high standard’.\textsuperscript{764} Their omission from the Yearbook listing means that this form of analysis presents a somewhat partial picture of the number of people working on curatorial tasks within a given museum and under-represents the contribution of volunteers to the sector overall. The omissions from the Yearbook may appear invidious to a contemporary sensibility and, as I discuss in Chapter 2, recent

\textsuperscript{762} SCMG, \textit{Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries}.
\textsuperscript{763} Museums Association, ‘Around the Galleries’ \textit{Museums Bulletin} vol.19, no.6, 1979, p.126.
studies have sought to acknowledge the contribution a much wider range of staff make to the character of an organisation, including front of house staff and cleaners. But the Yearbook listings reflect contemporary perceptions about status and professionalism. Where it is possible to compare listings from the Yearbook with those in museums’ annual reports, they are usually the same, reflecting the same set of assumptions about the relative value of the contribution of different staff to the work of the museum.

The data from the Yearbook listings do not permit an exact comparison between different services, because services may have made different decisions about which staff to include and omit. Equally, this approach does not allow a fine-grained study of the state of a museum’s staffing in one particular year because of possible errors and change in practice in terms of what is included. Identifying broad trends and significant shifts of this kind has been my aim in this undertaking this analysis and, in spite of the limitations identified here, the records in the Yearbook have allowed me to do this.

Method

Having extracted the relevant records from the Yearbook, I entered them into a spreadsheet and coded every entry to indicate the type of role concerned. This was a substantial piece of data analysis, with over 14,000 individual entries from the forty-year period. I then used this coded data to produce the summary figures and charts in Chapter 4. In coding the entries, I followed the following protocol:

- Administrative posts: these include finance, personnel, estates management, general administrative and gallery supervisor posts, except those at senior management level (see below).
- Management posts included senior management level posts in any area. I initially categorised marketing staff separately, but aggregated them with the management posts in the charts in Chapter 4, as the growth in marketing was so closely linked to the change in management approach emerging in the late 1970s and 1980s.

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765 For example, Alberti, Nature and Culture.
Curatorial posts: these were usually relatively easy to identify from the job title. I categorised technical staff in curatorial departments as technical not curatorial posts.

Conservation posts: in identifying posts as conservation posts I was guided by job title. Conservation officers in conservation departments were identified as conservation posts; technical assistants or technicians were not. In some cases, the same individual was listed as a technician one year and later a conservation officer. This may be purely a titular change, may reflect a change in the nature of that person’s work, or may be indicative of a broader shift taking place across the profession as conservation work became professionalised.

Technical staff are those described in this way, no matter what department they work in. It is clear from job advertisements and other sources that the actual work of posts described as ‘technical’ and the level of skill needed to carry it out varied considerably, but it was impractical to reflect this.

I categorised registrars and documentation posts separately to curatorial posts to reflect the growing professionalisation of this area of museum work. However, there were so few of these posts it was not possible to represent them on the graphs and they are included in the ‘other’ category (see below).

Education and outreach posts are those with a focus on learning, schools and community projects. They were often referred to as ‘extension services’ nearer the start of the period under review, a term adopted to indicate the beginnings of a broadening of focus from schools to include adult education and initiatives such as off-site displays in non-museum venues.

Interpretation and exhibition posts are those with a sole focus on exhibitions, publications and communicating collections to the public, although clearly this work was also an element in most curatorial posts.

Shop and commercial posts include both those with a narrow focus on the museum shop or catering and those which have a wider remit for developing the museum’s commercial operations.

Design and display posts include those posts which seem to be specialised but do not include technical staff working within design departments.

I omitted from the charts and summary figures any non-museum posts listed because they were part of the same service as the museums (for example, field
archaeologists and archives staff). This was necessary to allow a reasonable comparison between services.

- Where they were listed, I also excluded warding and security staff (apart from those with a senior supervisory role) from the analysis for the sake of consistency, as they were listed in so few cases.

- Where branch museums came into the remit of a service, or were newly established, I included these in the listings. However, I excluded Croxteth Hall from the Liverpool analysis as this museum was included in the Merseyside County Museum service but did not pass to the control of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside in 1986 and its inclusion distorts the totals.

- Leicester City Museum Service became the responsibility of Leicestershire County Council, following local government reorganisation in 1974. Following the later round of reorganisation which took place between 1995 and 1998 and created a number of new unitary authorities, the service was split in 1997, into Leicester City and Leicestershire County. From 1997 onwards, I kept the same museums in the sample, whether in Leicester or Leicestershire to allow longitudinal comparison.

The classifications used are clearly open to challenge and they do not necessarily give a full picture of the amount of resource dedicated to a particular area of work at a particular time: curatorial work is not the preserve only of curators and education work is not the preserve only of education officers. Some directors and deputy directors in particular might have been better classified as curatorial posts as a considerable amount of their time might have been spent on curatorial work. However, without extensive contextual information it was impossible to reflect the complex reality of working lives in this analysis. Given that increased professionalisation and increased specialisation were characteristics of this period, it seems reasonable to focus on the formal designation of posts within staff structures, as this offers significant insight into shifting priorities and patterns of investment, if not into the day-to-day realities of museum work.

In the graphs in Chapter 4, I combined design and interpretation/exhibitions into one category. ‘Other’ includes administration, shop and commercial staff, registrars and documentation posts.
In many of the Yearbook entries, a number of posts are described as ‘vacant’ or ‘frozen’. Where posts are frozen, it is reasonable to assume that this is because of a lack of funding or other imposed restrictions. The significance of vacant posts is harder to gauge: posts may sometimes be held vacant because of a lack of funding, but may equally be vacant because a recruitment process is ongoing or because of difficulties recruiting a suitable candidate. For this reason, I have included frozen and vacant posts in the overall totals rather than excluding them. But this may distort the picture somewhat. Before 1973, there were always fewer than 10 such posts in the sample of six museums in any given year. Between 1974 and 1991, there were between 10 and 20 frozen and vacant posts in all but two years. From 1992 the number of frozen and vacant posts briefly increased sharply (at the time of the recession of the early 1990s), and then gradually fell: there were 28 such posts in 1992, 32 in 1993 and then there was a steady downward trend, with only 3 in 2000.

766 With the exception of 1977 when there were only 3 and 1984 when there were only 8.
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