

BUILDING BRIDGES

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*Museums are our hallowed halls of culture.
They deserve respect, man. So the next time
you get dragged into one of these dusty old
dumps, remember to behave.*

Bart Simpson, *Bart Simpson's Guide to Life*, 1995.

Many of you, I'm sure are familiar with the musings of Homer though not perhaps, as familiar with those of his young son Bart. This quotation has served as the touchstone, or perhaps more bizarrely, the inspiration for many of the activities that been run off at the County Museum, Dundalk and the Newry & Mourne Museum over the last two years.

To give you a brief insight of the socio-economic profile of both towns by way of background to the project. Both towns have suffered adversely as a result of the Troubles – Physical evidence of the conflict remains in the presence of a military border checkpoints, watchtowers and camps around the border. Dundalk was notorious as a lawless town a hideout for those on the run and had been nicknamed as El Passo in the national Press.

The Hasse Index, which measures deprivation beyond measures of material deprivation, noted a score of 6.2 for County Louth whilst the National Mean was 4.7. The county has the highest proportion of medical card holders (47%) whilst the National Average is 32%. Moreover during the period 1981-1991 the county suffered dramatic decline in its industrial base whilst simultaneously experiencing a large population increase due to population movement in the North. The Policy Planning and Research Unit highlighted that the Newry & Mourne area was ranked as being the 4th most deprived District Council in Northern Ireland, whilst most recently the Altnaveigh House Enterprise and Cultural Society undertook a social audit of the Protestant Community. This study identified that Protestants felt excluded from facilities in the town but would be prepared to make use of these facilities if the events were cross-communal and respectful of all traditions.

It was with this backdrop that the idea for the first Joint Education Project between the Local Authority Museums at Dundalk and Newry was first mooted. It was felt that within the respective Museum collections both institutions had the basis for the development of a project that could provide the basis for greater social interaction for the various communities. The project was scheduled to run for one year and had a working budget of IR£20,000, or €25,400 through funding from Co-operation Ireland, Newry & Mourne District Council and Dundalk Urban District Council. To facilitate this objective several milestones were identified which it was believed. These were six lectures, six workshops and four presentations ranging; whilst the topics themselves ranged from

Stone Technology in Prehistoric Ireland, the 1960s, Wartime Ireland, Newspaper and Printing.

Commencing in May 2000 the project began rather inauspiciously meet-and-greet session with local Primary school teachers. It was felt that this would be the best way to attract and develop the school going audience. Moreover with the advent of the school holidays this facilitated a time lapse for the development of school activities that would be available with the commencement of the new school year. School visits in the meantime would also allow the fine-tuning of the Project. Given the diversity of the Museum collection it was decided that the best way to realise these goals was that the Project would react to the needs of a visiting school. In personalizing the visit of the school it was hoped that this would complement specific aspects of a school class – to be the movie to the class's screenplay. This in turn would have the effect of rendering visits to the Museum as a matter of routine, a matter of fact event that captures the imagination of the visiting group; placing the visiting child in a paradox of sorts wherein learning is almost by accident, that an environment is created placing the individual at the ease and as a result are more likely to question and as a result learn.

With the approach of Heritage Week 2000 this theory was put to the test an eclectic calendar of events was organised which, it was hoped, would attract a diverse audience. Activities included free admission to the Dundalk Museum, a free-guided coach tour of the Cooley peninsula, workshops into conservation techniques at the Dundalk Museum, with introductory classes into archaeological surveying of ringforts were offered to schools in Newry. This was the first real public interaction for the Education Project and in hindsight it was very successful. The conservation classes were picked up on by schools returning for the new year, and indeed prompted the contribution of some items to the Dundalk collection. (which subsequently were copied by the National Museum of Ireland.)

As mentioned previously the general subject matter for the lectures had been decided when project funding had been agreed upon. It was decided on the grounds of political expediency that lectures held in one venue that their workshop equivalent would be held in the other. This, it was thought would maximise the reach of the project whilst also facilitating the possibility of encouraging a cross-border following in respect of the subject matter. A further development of the audience building theory lay in the attempt to tie-in lectures with activities such as travelling exhibition – where the exhibition provided the hook for a passing audience. This was most successfully realised in the Ulster Museum's War and Conflict in 20th Century Ireland exhibition. This exhibition provided the springboard not only for a lecture but also a workshop in Newry that examined various aspects of 20th Century conflict and the ensuing impact on Ireland (North and South) socially, politically and culturally.

From my own point of view one of the most successful events undertaken was a re-enactment of a chamber debate held at the Dublin Parliament which ultimately saw the passing of the Act of Union. This event was held in Newry and comprised four parts:

- (1) An introduction to Georgian times with a description of contemporary culture and society.
- (2) The re-enactment itself with the Living History Personnel of the Palace Stables, Armagh supplemented with members of the audience, comprising not only the debate itself but also the duel between the Isaac Corry and Henry Grattan– who were for and against the Act respectively.

- (3) An audience vote based on the strength of the arguments put before them
- (4) A question and answer session.

The audience comprised secondary school pupils from both sides of the Border as well as members of Newry's University of the Third Age. From my own point of view this event captured the very essence of the Education Project. Here was the examination of a hugely important episode of Irish History before an audience comprising a variety of age groups from both sides of the border. Moreover, the event was designed in such a manner that invited audience participation both physically and mentally in a Museum setting. Here was the Museum working in a proactive fashion and doing so successfully.

One of the most successful aspects of our endeavours was the introduction of a first come, first served policy for some events. This began with the Coach tour of Cooley in Heritage Week and was stressed wherever possible. This worked to greatest effect with our first Christmas event. The activity comprised elements of Christmas card making, storytelling, a seasonal video, not to mention Christmas concerts and even a pageant. In the space of approximately 3½ weeks some 1400 children had passed through the Museum doors. The *first come, first served* principle is best illustrated in the visit of the Mighty Zulu Nation to Dundalk in April 2001. Billed as a unique opportunity to meet with and experience various aspects of native Zulu culture letters to Primary schools throughout County Louth. Given the confines of space available to us at the County Museum, Dundalk – a mere 72-seater auditorium and that the workshop was free we expected that the take up of the offer would be great. In point of fact the Museum was inundated with interested schools of varying backgrounds – urban and rural, large and small ... Given the obvious inroads that the Museum had made into the collective consciousness of these schools we set about organising a new venue for the event, eventually booking the local Town Hall theatre for the show. The audience comprised some 700 children and teachers, from the response to the workshop and presentation was uniform in its praise and appreciation for the event. I am glad to say that on foot of these activities that we have arrived at the point where schools ring us to confirm participation in an event upon seeing the Museum envelope in their basket without having read the letter. As one teacher said to me “we missed out before and I swore to myself that that would never happen again.” One of the intended spin-offs from these events has been the development of children pressurizing their parents to bring them to the Museum, whereupon the children literally lead the charge to those items and artefacts they find most interesting, claiming that they “know where everything is”.

Whilst much of this might be decried as a step away from the educational brief of the museum institution I would also like to point out that during the summer we have developed the concept of living history workshops during the summer months. First started in the summer of 2001 these workshops examine aspects of medieval and even Stone Age life in various forms and manifestations though with particular emphasis on the traditional crafts. These have included woodturning, ropemaking and blacksmithing, as well as forms of medieval cooking and the work of a scriptorium. These events, which have proved popular and have develop a cult following of their own, represent the marriage of elements of the scholarly and the popular, presenting the past not as a foreign land but as a place of intrigue and with an element of mystery as well. Whilst targeted primarily at children of school-going age these events are suitable for all ages, I have even seen esteemed archaeologists discuss in detail the manufacture of chain mail with the various personnel at work. Ultimately though these workshops also provide us with the opportunity to collect the names and addresses of those in attendance who will

then subsequently be circularised in advance of other Museum activities e.g. lectures and workshops during the winter months. Moreover it also provides us with the opportunity to get feed back on elements of our marketing and promotion as well as providing the chance to further our cause through word-of-mouth.

Another manifestation of audience development came through a partnership with AgeAction Ireland and the Bealtaine festival. This festival is a celebration of artistic endeavour throughout Ireland by Senior Citizens. In facilitating both the creation of, and subsequent exhibition of handmade books the Museum paved the way for the possible development of further activities with this organisation as well as others who also participated on the day including a daycare centre for sufferers of early Alzheimer's. Other traditional non-visiting groups that now visit the Museum include Traveller Homework groups as well as special needs schools. With such a wide and diverse audience, the development of inhouse exhibitions and activities is, therefore, a more involved process. Such activities tend to intersperse visiting exhibitions and possibly represent a more accessible aspect of the Museum institution. Moreover they are developed to complement a set schedule of events such as Christmas or Hallowe'en, or perhaps other popular events such as Valentine's Day, the Changeover to the Euro or indeed Seachtain na Gaeilge (a week which celebrates aspects of Irish culture and tradition around St. Patrick's Day). Such events, which at a *prima facie* level appear to be populist in endeavour actually hone in on salutary aspects of Irish culture be they aspects of courtship and romance or the development of the national currency. Another aspect is that they are heavily labour intensive in that they require the use of guides or invigilators to facilitate aspects of the activity. Again this element helps drive the Museum as more readily accessible providing for the possibility of engaging with a group that would not normally visit never mind attend a Museum. Concomitant to this consideration is that as these projects are developed inhouse they provide Museum staff with a sense of ownership. As a result, it is easier to project a sense of interest to a group when one's own work is promoted. Similarly, it ensures that an interest in and awareness of the need to maintain, refine and, possibly, improve the quality of the service is present. Thus the process approaches a point where it is almost self perpetuating with one recurring question 'what are we doing for?'

Both the County Museum, Dundalk and the Newry & Mourne Museum have benefited significantly from the point of view of audience participation, school attendance and even basic consciousness that a museum actually exists in the respective towns. Much of this is attributable to the success of the initial Education Project. Now that funding has been provided for a second project both Museums are set to build develop the range and reach of their outreach objectives. These plans include a number of workshops and conferences which will examine aspects of the Troubles, local traditions indigenous to the Louth/Down area, as well as the collection and publication of folklore in the area. In the case of the latter, this will necessitate visiting schools, recording stories and such like.

The First Project achieved a great many goals:

- it introduced a new broader definition of the Museum institution incorporating elements of flexibility, accessibility within the Museum building itself;
- introducing a new audience to the field, revealing the past as a vibrant and organic area which is not the sole preserve of academia but an area of the people and for the people.

The second project represents a dramatic development of this idea. It will literally bring the Museum into the classrooms and meeting rooms of schools and community groups in both counties Louth and Down. It will explore and examine not only the differences but also the commonalities between the various communities, with both Museums acting as the catalyst and venue for the integration of the respective communities. Events and activities will again be organised on a cross-border and cross-community basis. School events will be the vehicle for the Project most notably in the collection and publication of oral histories from the area. The organisation of conferences on elements of cultural and industrial pursuits indigenous to the areas will also develop our audience. It is intended that events such as these will break down communal divisions and help establish new links. Indeed the scope of the project will also include examine questions of language – including Irish, English and Ulster-Scots – and the attendant political baggage inherent therein.

I began this paper citing the wisdom of a ten-year old American cartoon character and his rather questionable attitude towards the Museum institution. I feel that the success of the Education Project at the Dundalk and Newry venues has proved that it is possible to develop projects which combine elements of the scholarly and the popular without diminishing or degrading the 'Museum'. If I might finish with the thoughts of one National School Headmaster who had attended one of our Christmas events. In a letter to one of the local papers he stated:

On Tuesday 11th December 40 children and their teachers from our school took part in four hours of Christmas activities organised by ... the wonderful County Museum. ... I would like to commend their efforts to make the County Museum a modern, vibrant, welcoming facility for all ages, the very young in particular. More adult memories and vision of a Museum are in stark contrast to what our children perceive a museum to be.

Our experience has been that if you build it they will come and it is the guiding principle that we have successfully adopted.