

Blake Museum, Bridgwater

Documentation Plan

September 2005

Mission: The Museum collects, documents, preserves, exhibits and interprets material evidence of local archaeology and history, and associated information, to promote understanding of local heritage among the public, especially the life of Admiral Blake, the Monmouth Rebellion and local carnivals.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Documentation is essential to enable museums to fulfil their fundamental responsibilities for collections. Objects are accepted for museum collections in perpetuity and there is a strong presumption against their disposal. Objects given and lent to museums are done so on the understanding that they will be properly cared for.

‘A museum must know at any time exactly which items it is legally responsible for (this includes loans as well as permanent collections), and where each item is located.’

MLA Accreditation Standard 2004

1.2 The purpose of this plan is to improve the standard of documentation on individual items in the collections belonging to Sedgemoor District Council (SDC) and on the collections as a whole. It also aims to provide new information on existing collections. The primary aim of this plan is to eliminate basic documentation backlogs that exist for historical reasons. At the end of this exercise the minimum standards required for Accreditation, as set out in SPECTRUM (the nationally agreed standard for museums) and the Museum’s own Documentation Procedures Manual, will be achieved across the collections. The actions set out in this plan are incorporated in Blake Museum’s Forward Plan.

2. Position Statement

2.1 Staffing over the last 10 years

In 1994 SDC employed a Museum professional for the first time. Since then the Museums Officer has managed the documentation of the collections. This post was re-named as the Cultural Services Manager in 2000, and responsibility reverted to the Museums Officer in 2002. In April 2005 a part-time Curatorial Assistant was appointed to cover documentation of the collection, amongst other duties.

2.2 General Overview of Collections

An increasing number of items have been accepted for the Museum each year. This is partly due to the Museum’s higher profile in the community, the expansion of storage space for archaeology and large items at Colley Lane, and the purchase of the Chubb collection in 2004.

The most comprehensive overview of the collections to date is that undertaken as part of the South West Museum Council’s Mapping Survey in 2000 (see Care of Collections Policy). Since then there have been a substantial expansion in the number of fine art items (the Chubb Collection) and photographs (Squibb Collection). In addition to this around 500 individual items have been donated since 2001, and many have not been processed fully yet. This forms the core of the Museum’s current backlog. The South West Museums Council mapping project graded the documentation of the Blake Museum’s collections as a **5 = Good**, but this situation would be reconsidered in relation to current standards.

2.3 Existing Manual Documentation

In common with many museums, Blake Museum has had a variety of different cataloguing and documentation approaches since its foundation in 1926.

2.3.1 Accession Registers

Since 1959 all objects entering the museum have been recorded in a series of ledgers, referred to as Accession Registers. These are kept in a safe, and a security record is stored off site. However, due to the lack of standard procedures in the past they were also partly used to record loans of objects, some of which are no longer in the Museum. They are now kept according to SPECTRUM standards, with new loan records separate.

2.3.2 Object History Files

Paper records and correspondence about items in the collection are kept in individual Object History Files. Some of these are more comprehensive than others, due to their age. Some contain the cards from a past index system that was abandoned some time ago. All recent history files contain a copy of the Entry form and all relevant correspondence and information.

2.3.3 Disposals Files

There are very few of these files. These are similar to Object History Files but are the records of items that have been disposed from the collections.

2.4 Current Status

Staff with responsibility for documentation refer to the Documentation Procedures Manual written to SPECTRUM standards when dealing with objects, and have a full understanding of the SPECTRUM minimum standards and 'best practice' when accessioning objects.

All objects now entering the collections are documented and accessioned to SPECTRUM minimum standards. All objects retrospectively accessioned and all objects leaving the collection for any reason are also documented to these standards.

2.4.1 Entry Documentation

Accessioned items

All objects entering the museum collection by gift, bequest or purchase are accessioned. They become SDC property (subject to the Museum Acquisition and Disposal Policy). The documentation procedures for accessions are set out in the Museum's Documentation Procedures Manual and are SPECTRUM-compliant.

Loans in to the collections are not accessioned. However the museum is responsible for all items on loan to the museum, whether stored or exhibited. The documentation procedures for loans are set out in the Museum's Documentation Procedures Manual and are SPECTRUM-compliant.

2.4.2 Cataloguing

Database

Since 1994 all accession catalogue records have been input on MODES (currently MODES for Windows), a museum collections management computer database. All

current acquisitions are now documented on to this system, which holds about 8,000 records.

2.4.3 Exit Documentation

Documentation of loans out

Objects from the collections borrowed by other institutions remain the responsibility of Blake Museum. However the borrowing institution is responsible for providing insurance. The documentation procedures for loans out are set out in the Museum's Documentation Procedures Manual and are SPECTRUM-compliant.

Disposals

On the rare occasion that disposal of an object is considered, and if a decision to proceed with disposal is made, the procedures set out in the Documentation Procedures Manual will be followed in full.

3. Analysis and Review of aims and objectives

Whilst much of the collection is fully accessioned and is recorded on the computer database, there are several areas where the documentation needs to be much improved. These are;

Elimination of the recent accessioning backlog

Object Location control

Permanent marking of objects with their accession numbers

Cataloguing , especially use of the brief description field on MODES

Old loans in

Unaccessioned or unidentified objects

The overall aim is to ensure that all of the Museum collections are documented to SPECTRUM minimum standards. This means we will know what we have, who owns it, where it is and how to identify it. A fully documented collection benefits the Museum's staff and visitors, as the collection is more accessible for display and research.

3.1 Recent Backlog

The documentation backlog is the main cause of concern for Blake Museum. There are around 500 objects that have entered the museum since 2002 that, whilst they mostly have the correct Entry forms, have not been further dealt with. The first priority is to accession those items to be accepted into the collections. Once this is done we will have a clearer picture of what the museum has within its collections. This will help avoid future duplication of objects, and will make the objects more accessible to staff and the general public.

3.2 Location Control

Until recently there has been little enforcement of the SPECTRUM procedure Location Control. Many of the recorded object locations were last updated in the mid-late 1990s and may be out of date. About 500 items included in this exercise were mistakenly listed as 'UNFOUND'. As a second priority in this plan, their locations should be checked and entered. Until the Location Control procedure was recently put into place there was little or no recording of temporary moves for exhibition, so

the display history of an object has not been recorded.

The second priority is to carry out an audit/inventory check of all the objects in the collections, to ensure that location details are all up to date.

3.3 Permanent marking

Much of the collection is correctly marked with individual accession numbers, but it is known that some objects are not marked, thus exacerbating the issues faced with keeping location records up-to-date. Whilst objects' locations are being checked the aim is to also check for identity marks, and those without adequate marks can then be given them. This will ensure that future location movements can be traced and objects can be easily identified.

3.4 Catalogue

Certain areas of the collection are not fully catalogued to SPECTRUM standards. This is particularly true of a large area of the collection, the photographs. Many of the photographs on the database are not individually described. Paper records have been made out for some items such as the Don Smith collection, but are awaiting transfer onto the computer. The archaeological objects are also mostly recorded as general collections rather than in analytical terms. More detailed work needs to be carried out in this area too, including the correct identification of artefacts. The long-term aim is to have a full catalogue record for every individual item within the Museum collection. This will make searching for objects such as photographs more efficient. Currently many have to be found simply by searching through the subject areas within filing cabinets. Cross-referencing is difficult in these circumstances.

3.5 Brief description

The information recorded in the brief description field is a mandatory part of the computer database and an essential feature of a museum catalogue. Many of the photograph and postcard records have had this information recorded in the wrong field, so it needs to be transferred. Other objects in the collection do not have adequate information within the brief description field.

Our aim is to ensure that every object on the computer database will have a unique brief description that will help distinguish it from other objects. This will enhance the quality and usefulness of the Museum catalogue.

3.6 Old Loans In

There are a number of loans into the collection that began over 10 years ago and agreements need renewal. These can be identified from the database, the owners contacted and the objects either returned to them, or new 5 year renewable agreements made, in line with the SPECTRUM procedure.

The aim is to establish what objects were loaned to us in the past, review our need to keep them and then either return them to their owners or negotiate new loan agreements. This will help clarify the legal status of certain areas of the collection.

4. Plan and timescale

4.1 Recent Backlog

An inventory of the recent backlog items has been made (August 2005). If we are to take control of the backlog and turn it into a manageable project we need to now do the following;

- 1 Once it is decided to accession an object, allocate an individual accession number.
- 2 Record this in the Accessions Register and then mark each object then.
- 3 Create a MfW catalogue entry (searchable by number and at least one other piece of information). We can easily (and would prefer to) achieve more than this.

It is estimated that it will take the Curatorial Assistant approximately **6 months (to June 2006)** to deal with this backlog, spending half of their working time (1 day a week), given the urgency of this. Procedures must ensure that no new backlog builds up again.

A few new boxes and packing materials will be acquired within the current budget.

4.2 Locations

To update the locations for all the objects will involve a combination of a straightforward audit and an inventory check, as it needs to be assumed that many of the locations are out-of-date. This will involve taking the stores and displays area by area, printing audit lists from the computer, checking the objects on the lists and adding or amending relevant information. The stores need to be dealt with first, as these are the areas where the location information is most likely to be wrong. Displays will be the most straightforward areas to check and should be dealt with last.

Carrying this out requires few resources other than time. A volunteer could assist staff with this process. There is space for the process to be carried out in the Education Room where there are large tables, subject to the needs of other users of the facilities in that room.

It should be reasonably straightforward to systematically check the stores and retrieve all the relevant information for each object. Many objects may need little more than confirmation of their location. If $\frac{1}{2}$ a day a week was spent on this then it could be complete **in 6-12 months (by December 2006)**.

4.3 Permanent marking

Whilst checking object locations it will also be possible to note if they are correctly marked. If not this can be noted and then easily rectified once the correct identity of the object has been verified.

The Museum already stocks the equipment required to mark objects, and a budget allocation is made for this. A volunteer could assist staff to carry out some of this, as again time is the resource most stretched here. There is space for the process to be carried out in the Education Room where there are large tables, subject to the needs of other users of the facilities in that room.

It is difficult to quantify this how many items may need marking at this stage. The activity will follow on from the location audit, so it may be realistic to aim to complete

this within the **next 12 – 18 months (December 2006 – June 2007)**.

4.4 Catalogue

The full cataloguing of the **photography** collection should take priority, as it is so widely used. Paper templates have been completed for many of the photographs in the collection, but the information has not been transferred to the computer database to create a more accessible collection. We should aim to complete the cataloguing of this area of the collection in the **next 2-3 years (by December 2008)**.

For much of the archaeology collection a full inventory needs to be carried out enabling fuller catalogue records to be created, to make the finds more usable within the Museum and more accessible to researchers and the general public. There are probably thousands of items to be identified. It would also be necessary for whoever is checking it to have experience of the subject area, and be competent in identifying the finds. This may require collaboration with a local Archaeology Society or University Department. We should aim to complete the core of this within the **next 5 years (December 2010)**.

Other areas of the collection where catalogue records need to be enlarged upon will be checked and identified. Sometimes new information can be added to catalogue records as soon as it materialises.

Personnel time is again the chief requirement, and a volunteer could create paper templates in readiness for data entry by someone fully trained in the MODES computer programme. Three members of staff are familiar with it, and two are trained advanced users. It may be possible for a volunteer to work under staff supervision.

4.5 Brief description

Currently parts of the photograph collection (hundreds of records) have this information hidden from view in the wrong section of the MODES record. With other objects where the Brief Description is insufficient the information required will be collected, and additional information will then be transferred to the database. All new entries will be given full descriptions in this section.

As this is a matter of adding information to the existing database the chief requirement is staff time. This is really another on-going task. All the existing **photograph descriptions** should be moved **within a few months (June 2006)**. Other descriptions can be added once the information is available from the location check. This should be largely complete **within 6-12 months (January 2007)**.

4.6 Old Loans In

All loans will be identified and then the owners will be approached to see if they wish to continue with the loans. Once this has been done items will either be returned, or new loan agreements put in place, following the guidelines in the Documentation Procedures Manual.

Few resources are required to complete the checking of loans, as the information should be easily retrievable via the computer database. A member of staff will be required to send letters and process loan agreements.

Again this can be completed in tandem with the location checking, so it would be

possible to complete this within **6-12 months (June - December 2006)**.