Museum, Visitor and Heritage Centres

by
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INTRODUCTION
1. The Foxton Inclined Plane Trust (FIPT) was established in 1980 and opened its museum in 1992. FIPT has since received enquiries from others considering similar projects. The following paragraphs are intended to address such enquiries, provoke thought, and suggest ways of moving forward. FIPT reconstructed the Inclined Plane Boat Lift's boiler house for use as a museum, which is now its flagship operation. This is paying dividends for the FIPT, but every project is different and a museum may not be appropriate in every circumstance.

2. There are many reasons why a restoration group wishes to establish a "centre". Reasons for doing so must be well thought out; and as much advice as possible should be sought. In making the decision to set up a centre ask WHY and ask why NOT? The answers should fit on one side of an A4 sheet of paper. Think carefully about the answers.

DEFINITION
3. A full definition of the differences between a museum, visitor or heritage centre (hereafter referred to as centres unless otherwise stated) is complicated by the overlap which can occur as a centre develops. Visitor and heritage centres are primarily "attractions" whereas museums "preserve artefacts for the public good". An organisation may hold archives, but they are not necessarily museum objects. In any "centre" the public will expect well-informed staff, a sales area, toilet facilities, and possibly refreshments. It is a good idea to visit several centres of similar size to that under consideration before making any decisions.

Visitor Centres
4. The name "visitor centre" carries the widest definition. It can incorporate aspects of heritage centres, and museums. A centre may hold some artefacts but its prime function is to inform the public about the present situation, background history, and future plans. A visitor centre provides the best means to raise funds, especially if staffed entirely by volunteers. It provides an excellent opportunity to promote a restoration project. It will rely on models, words, pictures and maps to tell its story. Its displays can cover a smaller area leaving extra space for sales and other fund raising activities.

Heritage Centres
5. The main theme of displays in heritage centres should be about history, although it can promote the future of a restoration project. Real objects, replicas or copies of historical objects can be used to tell the story. The name may be used to "soften" the museum image. It is often used in place of "museum". The word "heritage" is also used to escape the duties of a true museum. If an organisation is to be taken seriously, it must not misuse the word in this way. If the centre is not registered as a museum, it infers a lesser duty of care to any objects used in its displays. A heritage centre is less likely to make a profit than a visitor centre, because of its extra commitment to historical research, and the probability that it will be caring for some artefacts. Heritage centres can be converted to museums during their development.

Museums
6. The name "museum" implies a commitment that is on a different scale from that of a visitor or heritage centre.

7. The Museums Association's definition is: "A museum enables people to explore collections for inspiration, learning, and enjoyment. It is an institution that collects, safeguards and makes accessible artefacts and specimens, which it holds in trust for society."

8. The commitment of being a museum is therefore not to be taken lightly. Its intention must be to preserve its collection forever. It is expected to: seek registration by the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC); operate within the ethical guidelines, published by the Museums Association; produce policies for collection and disposal of artefacts; and keep records to a standard acceptable to the museum community. These rules may seem onerous
but they act as a safeguard. They prevent individuals or organisations setting up "museums" (often collecting donated artefacts), and then closing them when interest is lost or they are not financially viable. Collections are then often sold off to the highest bidder. (Registered charities cannot do this). Museums do not normally make a profit; indeed they can be a liability. Museums can, however, attract funding unavailable to visitor or heritage centres. The support network for museums is now extensive and easy to access. Registered museums are the only proper vehicle for the preservation of a collection of artefacts. The essential ingredients of a museum are the objects in its collection. To set up a museum, a collection or the promise of a substantial number of items is essential. Good quality historic waterway objects are not easy to come by. Some objects are better displayed in their original situation. It is easier to set up a museum without a collection because objects can be collected to a fixed acquisition policy and then properly documented. Storing and caring for objects not on display is expensive.

Warning!

9. All "centres" are businesses; the responsibilities are serious. If something goes wrong, individual trustees, if found negligent, could be held responsible.

10. The Establishment of any form of centre can create unwanted and conflicting divisions in an organisation. An "us and them" attitude can develop to the detriment of the final objective. The allocation of funds to the museum or to restoration can be problematical.

11. Hundreds of all types of centres are closed each year.

Funding

12. At an early stage it is essential to create a business plan. This will include the plan's purpose, its scope, budgets, financial forecasts, time scales and milestones. The Heritage Lottery Fund publishes a useful booklet on this entitled "How to Prepare a Business Plan". Setting up a bank account will be an essential early job. Separate accounting is recommended for the centre and its parent body, but a combined annual report and balance sheet will probably be required. Good quality accounts, acceptable to all concerned are essential. They are needed by several regulatory bodies including the Charity Commission, and are proof that the centre is properly run and funded.

13. In considering funding for the centre project, both set up costs and long term future funding must be considered. It is far easier to obtain set-up funding than it is to secure sufficient funds for future running costs. If working in partnership with local government they may give an annual grant towards running costs but such funding is increasingly under threat. High profile funds such as the lottery do not normally cover running costs. Any set-up grant will depend on evidence that the centre can be run and financed for an extended period. Lottery money is now covered by several documents available from the Heritage Lottery Fund. A long term lease or title to the centre's premises will be essential. The majority of the Foxton Canal Museum's funding was and still is raised almost entirely from visitors' donations. In constructing the building, FIPT ran a scheme where visitors paid £1 to write their name on a brick. This paid for all the materials used in its construction but it did take a few years to raise the money. All the labour involved was voluntary.

14. High set up costs will require a long term occupation of the property. A lease from the owners should be for at least 25 years but preferably longer, with options to renew. Owning the building is the ultimate security. The London Canal Museum chose this route. Although the high initial financial outlay slows the development of the project its long term future is better. Local councils may have suitable property, as may British Waterways. A solicitor's help should be sought in negotiating any lease arrangements to keep costs down. At Foxton, British Waterways eventually agreed a nominal annual rent, plus a share of net profit.

15. Shared premises. It may be possible to share premises with another organisation, a BW office, Tourist information centre or a cafe for instance. Sharing can be problematical; insurance companies don't like shared accommodation and should be consulted in advance. If the other
organisations sharing change their needs how will it affect the centre? Security can be problematical in shared accommodation, and opening times may be affected by other users.

16. The property will be liable to business rates, but a registered charity automatically receives 80% rate relief. The other 20% can be waived by local authorities, if they so choose.

CONSTITUTION AND CHARITABLE STATUS

17. Before making any commitment check whether the constitution of the parent body allows the operation of a centre or will need to be changed. Check that the charitable status is appropriate. If in doubt ask the Charity Commissioners or, in the case of a proposed museum, your local Area Museum Service or the Association of Independent Museums.

THE BUILDING

18. Museums and visitor centres are often housed in redundant buildings that need to be saved. Many waterway buildings are no longer used for their original purpose and some, because of their situation or design, are difficult to convert for future use. Saving a building is not in itself a good enough reason for setting up a centre. The need for a centre must first be demonstrated. Can the building be converted without destroying the very features for which it should be preserved? Success may depend on how well the building can be converted to the new use.

Access

19. It is now unlawful to discriminate against members of the public with special needs. Access to the building should be level or ramped and doors should be of adequate width for wheelchairs. The interior should be accessible at all levels and all passageways should be unobstructed (Do not forget that the law covers all types of disability, including eyesight, hearing and mental ability). Proper access will also be welcomed by families with children's pushchairs, and it will make moving heavy items around the building much easier. Steps will need to be fitted with ramps, and stairs may need chair lifts. There are exceptions in historic buildings where change would be unacceptable and where the financial burden is inappropriate. If in doubt take advice. It is also good practice, and something of an eye opener, to borrow a wheelchair and then use it to view the centre. In most areas there are organisations set up to help those with special needs. The telephone numbers can be found in the phone book or at the local citizens advice bureau. Such organisations will welcome a request for advice - on hazards that most of us do not even notice. Look at the approaches to the centre even if they are controlled by others.

20. Some disabilities may stop visitors enjoying full access to the centre, so an attempt must be made to allow the fullest possible "intellectual access". This may be as simple as avoiding descriptive labels in small text, and can extend to offering text in Braille, offering objects which can be explored by touch, or providing taped guides for use in a "walk man" tape player. High contrast markings can help some visitors with poor eye sight, and special "induction loops" can help those who use hearing aids. With the internet it is relatively easy to make the collections and displays available direct to the person's house. This is a big subject and it should be approached with an open mind.

Location

21. The Foxton Museum gains many visitors because it is situated at the hub of a thriving visitor attraction. The Foxton Locks site has been a natural attraction ever since the locks were opened in 1814. Today the Foxton Museum attracts 15,000 visitors per year (from 200,000 on site). Car parking for the site is good and this helps. The first ever waterway museum at Stoke Bruerne has had many years to build up its visitor base. Its boat trips, restaurants, pubs and picturesque setting, all add to the visitors' experiences. They attract over 41,000 visitors per year; however car parking is restricted and can be difficult on bank holidays, etc. The ideal location will be picturesque, close to a large town, have easy road access, good car parking, and be connected to all mains' services. There is a growing trend to support projects that do
not require people to use their cars to get to them. This should help the London Canal Museum which is served by a first class transport system and a short walk. You can fit a museum into any space. The smallest known to the author is the Measham village museum, which occupies a space only 10 feet by 8 feet. They are looking for larger premises, possibly the old railway station which could be on the route of the new part of the canal re connecting the village. Very small museums are ideal for the limited resources of small villages but the financial viability of the project will be easier with economy of scale. That is to say, more money can be taken from more visitors on larger sites. Lock cottages could be good for a modest project; old warehouses are very good. Visit Gloucester, Ellesmere Port or Nottingham for ideas. Consider space needed for future expansion.

Internal Space

22. The display area is the most important part of any visitor attraction but consider the extra space needed to provide support services. Space is needed for staff coats, storage for sales stock, a broom cupboard, toilets and perhaps for a mower, shovel, etc. Where will the rubbish be kept until it can be disposed of? Museums need extra space for the storage of artefacts not on display. An office for the staff is useful. Storage space for records and archives is essential. The larger and more diverse the activity the more service space it will require. If the intention is to run a gift shop within the building it will need its own space plus storage for the stock. Catering services add a considerable burden to the space requirements depending on what is offered: if this is to be considered, contact the local council for advice on the minimum requirements. If the internal space is divided into small rooms, as would be the case in a lock cottage, more staff will be required than in an open space.

23. If the property is leasehold, have the building checked thoroughly, agree its condition and confirm the maintenance liabilities before taking over. Consider the maintenance of the average home. Everything that needs doing at home will need to be done at the centre including such matters as cleaning windows and gutters. A maintenance programme is good practice; and if properly applied will make sure that work is restricted to a maintenance level rather than turning into a major problem.

Insurance

24. Insure the property, contents, and personnel, as well as covering visitors. The Inland Waterways Association and the Association of Independent Museums have policies that may be suitable. Objects on loan should be valued and if necessary recorded separately with your insurers. It may also be prudent to consider Directors personal liability. Insurance cover available varies depending on the type of organisation involved; it can be a mine field so advice should be taken from an independent insurance expert.

Health and Safety

25. In the excitement of setting up a new centre, rules and regulations can be overlooked. Agree a Health & Safety policy and take advice from the Health & Safety Executive or your local authority as appropriate: their addresses are in the local telephone directory. It is easier to comply with their requirements from the outset than to change later; their advice is free.

Registration

26. To register as a museum contact the Museums & Galleries Commission*. Registration is an important objective for any museum wishing to be taken seriously. There are no costs involved above those of good practice. Take advice from the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) and your local Area Museums Service.

*from 1st April 200, the “MGC will become the “Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLAC)”.
Documentation

27. This is not just red tape: any person willing to donate objects should be informed of the centre's status. It will be prudent to keep records of objects lent or donated to the centre, even if a museum is not the intention, to avoid confusion in the future. An important object on which money has been spent, or an object that is the centre piece of an important display, could be reclaimed by its owner or their descendants. Proof of ownership could be vital.

28. Do not accept "permanent loans": there is no such thing. Agree a time limit on loans (renewable if appropriate) and put it in writing. Keeping good records will assist a visitor or heritage centre which decides to register as a museum in the future. Museum organisations will be pleased to advise on current minimum standards and the Museum Documentation Association was set up to do just this job. Their publication "Spectrum" is the accepted basis for what information should be recorded and how to organise it. The important information is:

- The name and address of the artefact's original owner,
- Whether it is on loan, a gift, or has been purchased?
- If it is on loan, how long is the loan period?
- What is the condition of the artefact?
- Ensure that the owner signs a form stating his/her intent in clear and unambiguous terms.

29. This will lead to numbering the artefacts for identification. It is also recommended that heritage and visitor centres follow the museum practice of producing collection and disposal policies. Copies of typical policies can be obtained from the local area museums service. The policy should say what type of artefact can and cannot be collected. Adopt a policy of consulting local museums, and other waterway museums, to check if the artefact on offer might better be preserved in the controlled environment of a large museum or archive elsewhere. The object concerned may be one that another organisation needs to complete its collection. The Disposal Policy will set out what will happen if the centre is forced to close - objects would then be offered to other museums - and what is to be done when objects are no longer appropriate for the collection or have deteriorated beyond repair. Historic objects should not be viewed as assets for disposal.

Fitting out

30. Setting up a centre will take considerable expertise. Consider employing a professional designer but make sure that the designer understands the constraints of your budget. Centres running on a shoestring can acquire a charm all of their own. The public will respond more generously to a display that has obviously been done at limited cost but with a great deal of effort.

31. Environmental conditions must be right for all types of centre. If the building is too damp, or dry, it could ruin costly efforts in a short time or even destroy a valuable museum object. Too much light will fade displays rapidly. Most local area museums services offer training days on this subject at a modest cost or even free to their members. Heating and humidity must also be balanced for the benefit of the objects in the displays rather than for the visitors.

32. Display cabinets and shop counters are very expensive to buy new; try calling local shop fitters who often have used units to dispose of. The glass in second hand cabinets can be a danger. It will probably not be safety glass and should either be replaced or covered with a safety film.

ADVERTISING

33. The best centre in the world will not succeed if few people know it exists. In the early stages get the local press involved and keep feeding them with information. Designate a press officer
to place articles in the papers, on local radio or TV. The best forms of advertising are free. Good quality posters, not too big, can give permanent adverts in libraries pubs, hotels, tourist information centres, boat yards and even some shops and post offices. A leaflet giving opening times and contact numbers, will be useful but only if you get them out to the general public.

**STAFF**

34. Staffing of the centre is a critical component of success. How often you intend to open and how easy it is to supervise the area will dictate how many staff will be needed. The absolute minimum is 2 staff at any time; even if the centre is closed to the public staff should not be alone for safety reasons. If summer weekends are the target then it can be possible to cover the opening times with volunteers, thereby reducing costs. Experience at Foxton has shown that if you go beyond this paid staff are essential.

35. At Foxton being open 7 days a week is very desirable in summer. To achieve this full time staff with support from additional part-time staff are needed but turnover should increase to pay them a modest wage. Employing staff has the drawback of increased responsibility for the trustees and more work for the treasurer (unless you can also support someone to do the paperwork). It is important that staff have a knowledge of good business practices as well as knowledge of the skills required to run the type of centre chosen. Dedicated amateurs often do an excellent job of setting up a centre. With some training, of the type often offered free by area museum services, they can produce a first class attraction. Many museums are run exclusively by volunteers to very high standards. Avoid relying on a few willing people: when they retire for whatever reason they can be very hard to replace. Over reliance on particular individuals can make them feel "put upon" and is often the cause of valuable skills leaving a project.

36. Selecting and training staff both voluntary and paid is an important step on the road to success. Ideally volunteers should be interviewed for a position in the same way as paid staff; at least two members of the managing organisation should be present, armed with a set of questions to ask. It is necessary to establish the suitability of a person for a job and not just accept the first willing hand. This needs considerable care: the staff are responsible for the smooth running of the centre and must possess the appropriate skills to do so.

37. Training is essential and it is an ongoing process, full advantage should be taken of advice and training given by several museum organisations as well as the "Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation (CHNTO)."

38. A visitor centre needs VISITORS: the entire point of the exercise is to provide a service to them. It is very easy to get carried away improving displays, researching or even cleaning but, if open, the visitor must come first. "Front of house" staff are very important people: they must be distinguishable from other persons around and must be vigilant. Conversations with friends or reading the paper should stop when a visitor approaches. Whether they get in free or are asked to pay, visitors deserve a friendly but not overpowering reception. Many visitors prefer to be left alone to browse and as long as they can see that advice or further information is available they will be happy.

**Visitors**

39. Staff must also be very vigilant because of the tendency of a minority of visitors to steal or damage displays or stock. Visitors come in all shapes and sizes and appearance is no basis on which to judge them. At Foxton some of the biggest donations and most interesting information comes from the most unappetising visitors. Beware of distraction as this is the basis on which most crime is conducted by visitors during opening times. It is recommended that children are not allowed in unaccompanied. Most will behave exceptionally well but, if they do not, difficulties can arise trying to evict them: in the eyes of the parent they will be completely innocent. Adults rather than children are the cause of most problems. If children are asked not to touch they usually comply but adults assume that such signs do not apply to them! At Foxton it was found that insisting on an entry fee no matter how small stops the undesirable element from entering. The vast majority of visitors are no trouble at all. There is
a growing tendency for visitors to come with dogs: there should be no problem in admitting
them: they are usually less trouble and under better control than children. However, if food is
available dogs must be excluded.

Entrance Fees or Donations

40. It is always a problem to decide whether or not to charge for entry to a centre. In most cases
"visitor centres" operate on a free entry and voluntary donation policy. Museums and heritage
centres vary considerably. In the early stages of development donations are the fairest way
but this does not stop you suggesting a minimum. The public are conditioned to expect free
entry because national and local government funded museums are mainly free. The public
does not seem to appreciate where the money comes from or how much is needed. When
displays are of a high standard it is not realised that their donations and volunteers are
essential to support the centre. An entrance fee may be necessary to control visitor numbers.
This is the case at Foxton.

Security

41. The security of the collection, staff, and stock, is very important. Consult a representative
from the insurance company and the local crime prevention officer for advice. The biggest
threat is probably vandalism, but many small museums with antiques have been targets for
theft. At Foxton, FIPT have opted for a high level of physical security and a noisy alarm to
frighten off those intent on vandalism. The alarm is also connected to a panic button for staff
use. Foxton's policy is that the safety of the staff is paramount. Remote silent alarms may be
better where the police can offer a fast response time but Foxton is 3 miles from the nearest
police station, which is sometimes not staffed.

Networking

42. Networking is something of a buzz word at the present time but there are several opportunities
for obtaining real help if you join a group of similar interests, including promotions, free
advertising, information sharing, and easy access to advice. In some instances a network can
also open the door to grant aid. The most obvious group for any waterway centre is the Inland
Waterways Heritage Network, open to all organisations with a waterway interest: membership
is currently free. Most counties have an independent museums forum and similar organisations
are springing up for all interests. In most cases the more you put into the network the more
benefits you can receive.

Collections and Caring for them

43. Whether the centre is a museum or not, any historical object used within it can be considered
as part of “the collection”. Collections deserve proper care; previous sections of this chapter
deal with the documentation of collections and the environmental conditions needed, but
collecting and care should go further than this.

• Some objects should not be collected, for instance; if they have been stolen; illegally
imported, or contain hazardous materials. The collection of wildlife artefacts, particularly
stuffed animals and eggs is very strictly regulated, advice should be taken before adding
them to the collection.

• When an object is collected, consideration should be given to its proper care, can it be
looked after, or will it deteriorate? Take advice from a conservator on the condition of the
object, and what will be necessary to preserve it.

• Never restore” an object without careful consideration and advice: bad restoration can
destroy important historical information. Restoration should be reversible and visible, so
that you can tell the old from the new.

• Is there any information that will enhance the object such as where, when, and who used
it? Are there related documents, log books or letters, which relate to the object? If
possible collect all appropriate documents with the object and avoid the separation of information from objects as the information is an important part of the object’s history.

- Will it be used in the displays or will it need to be stored, and can it be stored safely? Storage costs money and if the object is to be left in store and not used would it be better somewhere else?
- Every day handling and cleaning is ultimately detrimental to an object: will it be open display to the public or must it be protected, possibly in a sealed glass case? Collections care is a subject big enough to fill several volumes so staff should be properly trained in this part of the “job”. Staff should at least have sufficient knowledge to know when to take advice.

FURTHER READING

*Fund Raising For Non-Profit Groups*
Joyce Young & Ken Wyman
International Self Counsel Press Ltd

Available from:
The Leicester University Book Shop
University Road, Leicester

*How to Prepare a Business Plan*
Heritage Lottery Fund
7 Holbein Place, London, SW1W8NR

*Museums Year Book*
The Museums Association,
Clarkenwell Close, London, EC1R 0PA

*Manual of Curatorship*
ISBN 0 - 7506 - 0351 - E
The Museums Association,
Clarkenwell Close, London, EC1R 0PA

*Access to Museums and Galleries for People with Disabilities*
Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AA

*Disability Resource Directory Supplement*
Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AA

*AIM guidelines on setting up museums*
Association of Independent Museums (AIM)
C/O The London Transport Museum,
Covent Garden, London, WC2E 7BB

*The Manual of Heritage Management*
Edited by Richard Harrison.
Butterworth -Heinemann1994
Available from the Museums Association.

*The National Trust Manual of House Keeping*
Hermione Sandwith & Sheila Stainton 1991
ISBN 0 - 14 -012344 - X Penguin books
From most NT shops.
The following publications are available from the MGC, and may be of assistance:

*Museums collections in Industrial Buildings*

*Larger and working Objects; a guide to their preservation and care*

*Managing Museums and Gallery Education*

*Positive Thinking; Creative approaches to providing museum and gallery education*

*Access to Museums and Galleries for People with Disabilities*

*Developing and Training Staff in Museums*

*Effective Exhibitions*

*Code of Practise Archives/Museums*

*Improving Museum security*

**USEFUL ADDRESSES**

Most waterway centres are listed in the Waterways World Canalanac and the IWA Waterways Directory (published by Canal & Riverboat).

**Area Museums Councils**
For your local contact write to:
Secretary of the committee of Area Museums Councils.
Cheltenham Road, Cirencester, Gloucestershire, GL7 2JF

There are 10 councils covering the country. They offer advice and training plus grants, they are part funded by central government and part by their own efforts. Essential for those setting up museums.

**Association of Independent Museums (AIM)**
C/O The London Transport Museum,
Covent Garden, London ,WC2E 7BB.

Network of Museums not run by national or local government. Good for voluntary organisations. Offers training and advice.

**English Heritage**
Postal Sales, P.O. Box 229
Northampton, NN6 9RY.

Useful heritage publications and free leaflets on conservation

**Inland Waterways Heritage Network (IWHN)**
C/o A.J.Conder
The National Waterways Museum
Llanthony Warehouse, Gloucester Docks
Gloucester, GL1 2EH

A self help group open to all waterway centres highly recommended.

**Museums and Galleries Commission**
Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1H 9AA.

Government funded professional body administering regulations and registration.

**Museums Documentation Association (MDA)**
Jupiter House, Station Road,
Cambridge, CB1 2JD

Association offering training and setting national standards for museum documentation. Provides useful book list.

**Museum Training Institute**
1st Floor, Glyde House,
Glydegate,
Bradford, BD5 0UP

NVQ and other museum training
The Charity Commission
Woodfield House, Tangier, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 4BL

Set up to further the work of charities by giving advice and information and checking abuses.

St Alban's House, 57-60 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4QX.

3 regional offices

20 Kings Parade, Queens Dock, Liverpool, L3 4DQ.

The Museums Association
Clarkenwell Close, London, EC1R 0PA.

Membership led professional organisation, offering advice, training, qualifications and setting standards.

Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts
Quality House, Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London, WC2A 1HP