

## Heritage

For well over a decade, museums in the United Kingdom have been aware that their services need to be made more accessible to the growing number of ethnic minority communities across the country. Many individual museum services, especially those in areas with significant ethnic minority populations, have undertaken much good work in building relationships, developing relevant exhibitions and activities, and initiating collecting policies and recording systems to present and preserve the traditions and experiences of ethnic minority communities. Examples of such good practice can be found, for example, in Bradford, Halifax and Rotherham, all of which are in the Yorkshire region in the north-east of England. However, the majority of work undertaken by such museum services has been project-based, often with special funding, and has concentrated on dealing with the heritage of individual ethnic minority communities. Such initiatives have been valuable in encouraging many first-time attenders for whom museum-going may not have been a traditional family activity.

In some larger cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool, ethnic minority communities have also participated in developing permanent galleries on broader subjects such as rites of passage and slavery. Such community consultation can often be challenging and time-consuming but results in a strong sense of cultural ownership. Such examples, however, represent only a tiny fraction of the 3,000 or so museums and historic sites which are in the public domain in the United Kingdom. Many of these are sites in areas where there are few or no ethnic minority communities and have a focus which is likely to remain centred on English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland history. A key challenge is to build ethnic minority audiences for such venues, which often have no direct cultural relevance to the communities involved. This issue is important because ethnic minority communities also contribute to the upkeep of such sites through their national and local taxes and, in the longer

term, they represent a valuable and still largely untapped audience in what is currently a static visitor market.

In the Yorkshire region, the percentage of ethnic minority groups is 4.4% compared to a national average of 5.5%, but this is expected to continue growing over the next decade. However, some districts within the region have a far higher percentage, for example the city of Bradford has 15.6% and Kirklees has 8.6%, whereas the largely rural sub-region of North Yorkshire has only 0.7%. In order to begin to tackle the issue of ethnic minority audience development on a more strategic regional level, the Yorkshire Museums Council, a regional development agency for museums, joined forces last year with the Yorkshire region of English Heritage, the government agency responsible for historic buildings and archaeological sites, to commission an initial research report on ethnic minority attitudes to the heritage. Funding was also received from the Heritage Lottery Fund as it was felt to be a useful small-scale pilot for work that needs to be developed nationally. A small steering group of representatives from each of the three funding bodies was set up to manage the project, with additional input from Kirklees Community History Service, a museum service which already had some years of experience in providing services to reflect local cultural diversity.

A variety of consultation methods were used in order to gather information from a range of individuals and organisations within the limited timescale available.

#### 1. Action Research – consultation group

Sixteen young Asian women aged 16 to 25 were identified by Roshni, the Asian Women's Resource Centre in Sheffield to participate in four consultation sessions. The aim of these sessions was to provide opportunities for the women to identify why they do or do not visit museums and heritage sites to visit and make a critical appraisal of two sites – Brodsworth Hall, near Doncaster, a traditional 19th century country house run by English

Heritage, and Bagshaw Museum in Batley, a local authority-run museum with a range of local history and other displays including two directly related to Asian culture, for example calligraphy.

## 2. On-site data survey

In parallel with the consultation sessions, data was also gathered by assisted questionnaires from 24 Black and Asian visitors at the Tolson Museum in Huddersfield, a general local history museum which, at the time of the survey, had organised events to support Black History Month, and the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds. Most respondents fell into the 16 to 44 age range and 80% were women. The aims of the research were to discover ways in which the Black and Asian community learns about events and the publicity approaches they respond to examine reasons why they attend discover what is important to them in making their visits pleasurable. The sample sizes were small, so the results are an indication of tendencies rather than solid conclusions. However, in many cases they correspond with other research, especially in the arts, and they provide a starting point for further work.

### *Discovering the Barriers*

#### *Attitudes and assumptions*

Through discussion with the group of Asian young women a range of attitudes and assumptions about museums and heritage sites emerged.

*Negative* Those who had little or no experience of visiting such sites were more likely to express negative attitudes and to have a dated and inaccurate view of them. Museums were seen to be boring because they are “full of stuffed animals, dead birds and skeletons”. It is thought that there are no opportunities to participate.

*Positive* Those who had visited museums and heritage sites were more likely to have a positive attitude towards them. They find them interesting and enjoyable for reasons

principally associated with learning. Their interests included different countries, history and how people lived. “Get to know about more things, different countries”. There was also interest in arts-based activities and exhibitions. Both the negative and positive comments support findings in other studies where the importance of the relevance of exhibits and collections, and opportunities for learning, have been highlighted as key issues and deciding factors in making visits.

### *Barriers to Attendance*

Barriers to visiting museums and heritage sites are shared across cultural backgrounds, for example, travel, cost, physical access, intellectual access, psychological access. These barriers can have as much to do with class and level of education as with cultural background. However, some barriers are specific to Black and Asian communities: anxiety about visiting unfamiliar places because of previous experiences of racism and the uncertainty of the welcome they may receive; lack of knowledge of different family models and the facilities they may require; concern that artefacts and objects will be treated with the respect due to them; lack of knowledge about what is available and the benefits of visiting those sites; language barriers in terms of access to information for those who do not have English as a first language; travel outside the immediate vicinity is problematic with young women relying on public transport. Access to private transport is limited and would be negotiated through parents, brothers, relatives or friends. Thus a visit by private transport would need to be attractive for a wide range of age groups and interests.

Respondents to the on-site data survey were very local, generally travelling less than 30 minutes to attend. Entrance fees for an Asian family are likely to include the cost for four adults and two to four children. Many family discounts currently in place work to the western family model and not the extended Asian family. Free entrance was a definite incentive. The group suggested that direct mailing of information to their homes together with a discount

voucher for entrance would encourage them to visit. Physical access is a particular concern. Visits would be made with elderly relatives and young children. There is a level of anxiety when visiting unfamiliar places for the first time. The group felt anxious about fitting in, turning heads as they walk in and being afraid of the welcome they may receive. These feelings are not unique to young Asian women but they may be heightened as a result of previous experiences of racism and a difference in the way that they dress. This has also been identified as a factor affecting visits to arts venues.

The welcome the Asian women's group received from staff when walking in to a venue played a vital part in the group's enjoyment of Brodsworth Hall and Bagshaw Museum. For respondents to the on-site survey, staff attitudes to them were less important in making a museum visit pleasurable than activities for children, clear labelling and directional signs, and opportunities to learn about their own and others' culture. Intellectual access is also influenced by interaction with staff. Although both visits were seen as interesting and enjoyable, the exhibitions at Bagshaw Museum were felt to be of more interest as they directly related to the group's life experiences and culture. At Brodsworth Hall the group were interested in the history of the house and its owners. They liked the fact that there was "lots to see and (it) was interesting and new". The group enjoyed walking in the gardens and many would have liked to see more of both the house and the gardens. All would like to make a return visit, some with their families, and they were prepared to pay the entrance charge next time.

The majority of visitors interviewed in the on-site survey were primarily aware of the event or museum through recommendations from family or friends. There was some awareness of other secondary information. It is clear that personal recommendations form a key determinant for this client group and publicity alone is not necessarily enough to encourage visitors to come to events. The Asian women's group had little knowledge of any

museum marketing activity. They do not pick up information at traditional sites such as libraries and tourist offices. They suggest that they would respond positively to direct marketing of events with a discount on entrance fees. Publicity material should contain information on those facilities that they consider important in making a visit pleasurable. These include: activities for children; facilities for families; a cafe sensitive to dietary requirements; tour guides; introductory talks.

Those questioned in the on-site survey reported that they were primarily influenced to attend because they could bring their families. 75% came with families, others with friends, only one came on his own. Of those who were regular visitors i.e. at least once every six months, most (42%) found out about the sites through personal recommendation. Brochures and leaflets were significant (25%), as were articles in newspapers and magazines (33%) and local TV and radio (29%). When invited to identify what is liked most about museums and heritage sites, the most frequently mentioned responses centred on opportunities for learning, being inspired or seeing new things and events (50%) and activities and events for children (42%). A number of comments were made about the importance of history and links with the past. For some respondents the opportunity to learn something new and exciting was more important than information about their own culture.

As part of the study, museums and English Heritage sites in Yorkshire were also surveyed by postal questionnaire to assess their own needs in this field. Two-thirds of respondents stated that they considered their visitor catchment area to be “the region” as a whole. However, the survey found little accurate data available on the numbers of Black and Asian visitors, with two-thirds of venues broadly estimating a figure of well below 2%, compared to a regional proportion of 4.4%. However, it was encouraging that 86% of respondents wanted to develop their numbers of Black and Asian visitors. The additional support they would require to do this included more information, awareness raising, and help

with interpretation, visitor targeting and resources. Training was also a common theme. Many sites simply do not know how to go about creating links with Black and Asian communities or how to best meet their information and interpretation requirements.

Museums and heritage sites work within a range of potentially conflicting priorities. However, an inclusive approach to audience development will also help to build traditional visitor numbers. Such audience development needs to be sustained and also needs to use the contribution of Black and Asian communities themselves to develop long-term strategies. Good practice needs better dissemination and new partnerships need to be developed with a wide range of other individuals and organisations working in this field.

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