

Chiltern Open Air Museum Case Study

Chiltern Open Air Museum was founded by volunteers from the Chiltern Society in 1976 and has always relied on volunteers to help run the Museum and erect historic buildings on the 45 acre traditional Chilterns Landscape.

Chiltern Open Air Museum is a registered charity (No. 272381) and an independent museum with no regular revenue or capital funding. A small number of paid staff are assisted by around 300 volunteers in the operation of the Museum including selling tickets, serving in the shop, managing the shop, stewarding historic buildings and office reception. Volunteer teams also help maintain and re-build historic buildings on site and assist with the development of the Chilterns landscaping features and the care of the traditional farm animals to provide the context of the buildings.

Director Sue Shave explains:

'Volunteers make an enormous contribution to the running of our museum. Without volunteers none of these vernacular buildings would have been rescued and re-erected for future generations. The life experience and enthusiasm of the volunteers creates a fantastic visitor experience as they share their love of our historic buildings and site with visitors of all ages.'

New training opportunities

Volunteers for Museums has enabled Chiltern Open Air Museum to expand the training opportunities and learning experiences for their volunteers which would not have been possible without this funding. A re-enactor and professional conservator were able to deliver a series of training sessions on stewarding historic buildings and traditional farm, along with the creation of resources that could be used by volunteers to engage the public's interest in the building collections and associated artefacts. Traditional rural craft skills such as pole lathing were also passed on with sessions by a local woodsman as he gained experience in working with volunteers and shared his skills with them.

The Museum was particularly keen to create new roles for volunteers to interpret the historic buildings and traditional farm practices in the Chilterns. A new team of farm stewards has been created along with suitable resources to help engage visitors with the collection of farm buildings and artefacts. Development of existing teams of front of house volunteers was also a focus. The Museum volunteer manager undertook the Welcome Host trainer course from Tourism South East which will enable quality training on customer service to be delivered in the future.

Some of these training sessions have been recorded as learning resources for existing and future volunteers by Sporadic Productions, creating several short training films about the historic buildings and use of the volunteer resources to engage visitors. A short promotional film about the Museum's existing volunteers and their roles is now available on Youtube at ChilternOAM.

Marina Long, volunteer Buildings Steward.

'I would encourage any volunteer to come along to these sessions, even if they have been a volunteer here for many years. I have been volunteering at the Museum for a long time and I have learnt a great deal that I did not know about some of the historic buildings at the Museum. They have been excellent and the new handling boxes in some of the buildings for volunteers to use in interacting with the public have provided that "hook" to gain the interest of the visitor!'

Reviewing volunteering procedures

The Museum also undertook a complete review of all its volunteering policies and procedures with assistance from Felicity Dwyer and a revised application and induction process has been embedded into their volunteer management plan. A new professionally designed leaflet to recruit volunteers was also produced to attract new volunteers.

Reflecting diversity

One of the recent concerns of the Museum is that its visitors and volunteers do not reflect the diversity of the local community. During the project they worked closely with Wycombe Museum and Daffodil Forbes, a local member of the West Indian Community, to uncover shared histories of all local communities within the range of exhibit buildings, spanning 2000 years of history. This involved exploring barriers to accessing both museums for diverse local communities and finding ways to address such barriers. Outcomes included consultations with many different local communities, group visits to both museums and the creation of cultural events and community focussed events programming to take place in the Museum's 2011 season.

Sue Shave, Museum Director

'We hope that the new volunteering opportunities and learning resources for volunteers will encourage local community members to consider volunteering at the Museum in future. The new community links will enable us to work with local community members to develop volunteering opportunities that reflect the shared history of the local community.'

This project has allowed the museum to explore new audiences for volunteering and visiting as well as opportunities for working with the local community. The decision to collaborate with existing community groups in the design and delivery of community focussed events ensured that new activities were sustainable and greatly raised awareness of volunteering opportunities within the museum sector in general.