

Culture Link South East Conference

Questions and Answers

Q. What is the Culture Link South East Project?

A. It is a project to provide opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to become actively involved in learning about their local heritage. It will also encourage them to learn new skills and to disseminate these to the wider community

A key aim of this project is to make our museum collections more accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

Q. Where is the project based?

A. It is based in the South East of England. There are also other similar projects in other parts of the country e.g. West Midlands.

Q. Who is involved in the project?

A. The project is being managed by the RNIB and there are 6 partners involved in the project. They are:

- Canterbury Museums
- Lewes Castle / Anne of Cleves House
- Shipwreck Museum
- Oxford University Museums
- Brighton and Hove Museums
- Conan Doyle Collection Portsmouth

Q. Where is the funding for this project coming from?

A. It is a heritage lottery funded project.

Q. Can you tell us more about the Conan Doyle Collection?

A. The collection was bequeathed to Portsmouth City council in 2005 by Richard Lancelyn Green. He had amassed the most wide ranging collection on Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle in the world. The collection includes all of the books written by Conan Doyle; Sherlock Holmes stories written by other people as well as bound volumes and single issues of journals.

There are a large number of pamphlets and journals including newsletters of Sherlock Holmes groups in various countries all around the world.

The objects in the collection are the smallest and most diverse section of Lancelyn Green's collection. They range from an original Sir Arthur Conan Doyle waistcoat to a Snoopy detective lamp. These objects illustrate the way the world of Sherlock Holmes has evolved in films and popular culture.

Lastly the Archives are the largest part of the collection in fact they are the core of the collection consisting of approximately 40,000 documents. There are several themes within the collection. These include Richard Lancelyn Green, Arthur Conan Doyle and family, Spiritualism, Dramatisations, Groups and Societies, Sale Catalogues, Scrapbooks, Victoriana and Edwardian World, Exhibitions, Newspaper and Newspaper Cuttings, Archival Items found in books and Sherlock Holmes phenomena.

The collection has almost finished being catalogued, and there are many ways and opportunities in which to take the collection forward.

Q. How did the Conan Doyle Collection become involved in this project?

A. Zoe Partington was watching the BBC programme Celebrity Antiques Road Trip which included a visit by the celebrities to the Conan Doyle Collection. As a result of watching the programme Zoe contacted us to ask if the Conan Doyle Collection would consider being part of the Culturelink South East Project. After discussion with the Head of Libraries in Portsmouth we were very happy to agree to be a part of the project. We were excited to be able to explore ways in which we could make the collection more accessible to Blind and Partially sighted people.

Q. How do you think this project will help blind and partially sighted people?

A We feel that one of the benefits of improving access is that blind and partially sighted people will be able to engage more actively with their heritage and that they will therefore be able to meet other people with similar interests. This in turn will lead to them feeling more involved and included in their local community.

Q. Do you think there will be other benefits of this project?

A. The staff at the Conan Doyle Collection believe that by improving access for the blind and partially sighted we would improve access for all and the more we have continued work on the project I have found myself agreeing more and more strongly with this opinion.

Q. How did you know what improvements needed to be made?

A. Visits were made to each partner to carry out Access Interpretation Audits. This enabled an assessment of what was already in place in the different locations and contexts of each the partners. The audits provided a baseline from which to plan further improvements.

It was important to us to include feedback from local users and so each partner has held focus groups to add information so that individual improvement plans could be made. The focus groups have been different in each location for example Anne of Cleve and Lewes Castle have looked at developing work which particularly focuses on families and blind children.

Q. So what were the outcomes of the Audits and focus groups?

A. The steering group were able to identify themes that would inform the strategic planning for the project. These themes were

- Resources
- Technology
- Sharing and networking
- Tours
- Workshops and activities
- Training
- Curating and programming
- Volunteering
- PR and marketing
- Exhibition design

Each of these themes is being explored with a view to improving access across the collections involved.

Q. How did you find out what sort of thing is possible in terms of improvements?

A. Input from Blind and partially sighted people as part of the local focus groups gave some insights into how locations could be altered to improve access. Things like poor lighting and the use of glass doors limit access to BPS people.

We also have had 2 workshops where we were presented with ideas from experts in the field. This included different aspects of technology that could be used to improve

access such as audio description, haptic technology, 3D printing and scanning. This would enable us to provide tours that include descriptions of exhibits as well as being able to touch and experience exhibits. It would also enable us to reproduce items in the collection that can't be handled because they are valuable or delicate, further enhancing the experience of BPS people and actually all users of the collections.

Q. Do you think there will be any other knock-on effects from this project?

A. There are already some knock on effects. This is because other members of staff ranging from senior managers to learning colleagues as well as people on apprenticeships and volunteers are becoming involved in discussions related to the project.

Museum Development Officers in our partner areas are supportive of the project and this in turn may lead to further sharing of good practice across the South East to museums and collections that we are not currently working with.

Another effect is that the project has enabled each partner to become more familiar with the work of other partners and this in turn will spread knowledge and heritage information across the area.

Q. What sorts of improvements do you think will be made to improve access?

A. First of all fairly simple things like attending to the environment. Providing better lighting, ensuring that glass doors are clearly identified, putting up guide rails to help people around the collection, putting in tactile strips applied to walls floors or display cases to guide people around the exhibition and making graphics larger so that they are more accessible to partially sighted people.

Then there are more complex technological solutions such as 3D scanning of fragile objects which would not normally be accessible to the public, the Penfriend system which will allow audio labelling of objects, use of phones to help people know where they are in the collection and Audio description of items to bring them alive for BPS people.

A third intervention is more people based for example a buddy system where volunteers are used to guide people around the collections (this already exists in Brighton), Handling boxes that can be used with the help of volunteers, tactile tours where volunteers help people to understand the scale and feeling of an object and workshops and activities These sorts of activities will enable participants and volunteers to learn more about their cultural heritage.