

Revisiting Collections case study

Pitch To! Farming, Family and Tradition

Case study submitted by: The Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro

Date: February 2011

Link: <http://www.royalcornwallmuseum.org.uk/>

Domain: Museum

An exhibition at the Royal Cornwall Museum; part of a Cornwall-wide programme of oral history recording, contemporary photography and exhibitions to illustrate farming life in Cornwall past and present.

Partners:

Led by Royal Cornwall Museum, the exhibition was part of a larger project, which was facilitated by the Cornish Audio Visual Archive (CAVA) and used the skills of freelance photographer Sarah Catherine Chapman. Members of the farming community participated in focus group work at the museum.

The team who developed and delivered the project were:

- Sarah Lloyd-Durrant – Curator of Later Human History, Royal Cornwall Museum. Organised focus group sessions, selected objects and photographs
- Louise McDermott – Community Engagement Officer, Royal Cornwall Museum. Produced standard *Revisiting Collections* participant forms/ permissions for use across the museum
- Roo Gunzi – Volunteer at The Royal Cornwall Museum. Participated in focus group sessions, sorted data for MODES in-put.
- Stephanie Clemens – Registrar, Royal Cornwall Museum. Developing MODES database fields for focus group information related to specific objects
- Rowan Musser – CAVA. Undertook the audio visual recordings of members of the farming community, participated in focus group sessions
- Sarah Chapman – freelance photographer. Produced contemporary photographs of Cornish farming practices, participated in focus group sessions

Timing:

The project ran from June 2010 and is on-going. The final stage in the process will be to add the focus group comments onto the MODES database. The Registrar will be devising a process for this once the museum has up-graded the database to MODES XML in the first half of 2011.

Description:

The exhibition aimed to capture the stories, histories and memories of Cornish farming families, documenting their lives and traditions from the late 1800s to the present day. This was achieved through:

- Oral history video interviews with members of Cornwall's farming community;
- Contemporary photographs, taken by Sarah Chapman, of participating farms and modern day farming practices;
- Focus groups with the farming community, using agricultural objects and farming photographs from the Royal Cornwall Museum's collections



Focus Group session at the Royal Cornwall Museum

Outputs for the Royal Cornwall Museum:

- A temporary exhibition, entitled 'Pitch To! Farming, Family and Tradition', which took place in September 2010.
- Enhanced documentation records for the museum's selected group of agricultural objects and images, based on the responses given by local farmers who attended the focus groups.

Target audience:

The exhibition was targeted at general museum visitors but, in particular, members of the farming community, both young and old.

The enhanced documentation records will help future Curators of the collection. Comments provided in the focus groups can be used in future interpretation.

Aim:

Main aims of the project:

- To bring together the present-day Cornish farming community through cross-generational working
- To promote an awareness of farming history and heritage amongst local communities

Key objectives for the museum:

- To encourage participation in the curatorial process
- To capture specialist knowledge about an area of our collections that had previously been under-used and poorly catalogued



Process:

The museum was initially approached by CAVA and Sarah Chapman as an exhibition venue for their project work. The request was very timely, as an audit of the Social History collection was being undertaken, which identified our agricultural collections as being under-used and poorly catalogued.

A joint partnership project was then undertaken with the twin aims of producing an exhibition and increasing our collections knowledge through the use of focus groups, using the *Revisiting Collections* methodology.

Using and adapting *Revisiting Collections*

We chose to use the Focus Group approach to working in order to achieve objectives for the museum. The farmers who had already been interviewed for the wider project were a ready-made group for us to liaise with and they were also experts in their field (literally!) who could provide multiple interpretations of our objects and archives.

We held 3 focus group sessions; the third was developed due to popular demand so that the group could look at and discuss a selection of our agricultural photographs.

We decided that we would take notes to record the conversations about the objects and photographs, rather than ask the farmers to fill in forms. We wanted the group sessions to be informal and relaxed so that farmers could chat freely. Therefore, we limited sessions to a maximum of 16 people, based on a ratio of 2 participants per museum recorder. We also provided a cream tea before each session (sponsored by a local dairy) as an incentive to attend. This served as a 'warm up' session, allowing people to come together and chat before the session started.

We adapted the *Revisiting Collections* recording, permission and evaluation forms for our own use. The recording forms were object specific with individual comments recorded on the same sheet for ease of collation afterwards. We then devised an EXCEL spreadsheet that recorded object information with participants' permissions, ready to be transferred to our MODES documentation system.

All participants filled in permission forms which gave consent to use the information we gathered in certain ways and at the end of the session they were given feedback forms so that we could gauge how the sessions went.

The material

One of our objectives for the focus group sessions was to increase our knowledge of the collection; therefore, we chose objects that we knew little or nothing about. We divided the objects into 3 subject areas for the groups to rotate around:

- Arable farming; which included models of ploughs and wagons and photographs of various activities.
- Live-stock; which included animal husbandry objects and photographs of prize winning animals
- Social and domestic life; which included toy farmyards and photographs of social occasions, such as harvest time and agricultural shows.

We provided catalogue information for each object in case the groups wanted extra information.

The staff

There were 8 members of staff and volunteers who took notes during the sessions. Several had already had experience of working with the group; others had experience of undertaking outreach sessions and oral history recordings.

What we found out

We got some really useful information, which we can now use in future interpretation. For example:

Factual information

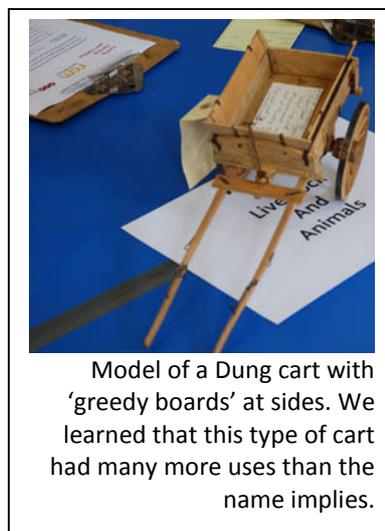
- We were able to date photographs of an agricultural show through the farmers' identification of farm machinery and when it was first produced.
- We were able to correct some of the terminology that had been used to describe agricultural practices in our photographs e.g.: binding instead of threshing (or thrashin' if you're a Cornish farmer!)

Contextual information and reminiscences

- Some participants were able to recognise people in a number of photographs. This people-centred information brings objects and images to life.
- The model of a dung cart provoked conversation around its multiple uses, including carrying pigs to market and carting mangolds for animal feed (one participant remembered being trapped underneath mangolds as they were tipped out of the cart)

Different ways of describing objects or activities:

- The focus groups were an excellent way of recording local dialect. It was surprising to participants and note-takers that there are so many localised terms; for example, lunch time is variously known as 'croust' or 'crib' and a sheaf of corn is known as a 'shock' or a 'stook', depending on where in the county the farmers were from.



Model of a Dung cart with 'greedy boards' at sides. We learned that this type of cart had many more uses than the name implies.

Capturing and sharing the information

All the objects used in the focus group sessions have basic records on our MODES database; none of them had paper-based history files to refer to.

The information gathered in the focus group session has not yet been added to the database as we are shortly upgrading from MODES for Windows to MODES XML. It seemed sensible not to try to absorb the information until we have the new system and can utilise all its functions.

MODES XML is SPECTRUM compliant and so we anticipate that the information can be migrated into the database fields relatively easily. In the interim, a volunteer has transcribed all the information collected



Through the focus group sessions we now know who the farmers in the photograph are and even how one of them lost his eye.

during the focus group sessions into a simple Excel spreadsheet, which we designed for the purpose. We wanted to make sure that all the information relating to the participants collected on their permission forms was not separated from the information they gave us about the objects.

The next step will be to decide what information we want to record on the database. The information will either be highlighted on the spreadsheet or separated out into another spreadsheet.

When the new XML database is up and running, the selected data will be entered directly into the appropriate field of the object record, together with the metadata associated with the person who gave us the information.

The information can currently be retrieved by colleagues in the museum, as it is held on a shared drive. It could be made available to the wider public if a specific enquiry were to be made, but it will be much easier to search and retrieve once it has been entered into our database.

Participant and Visitor figures:

Focus Group Participants: 20

Audience (door figures for period of exhibition): 12973

Impacts and outcomes:

Key outcomes for focus group participants:

- For many participants the focus group sessions were an opportunity to meet, talk and learn from each other. During their busy working calendar this is something the farming community never normally gets the time to do.
- Participants appreciated the fact that the museum was not there to impart knowledge, but was rather looking for their expertise. All participants felt valued and were pleased that we were recording this information, particularly the differences in agricultural practices and local terminology across the county.
- Many participants saw the museum as being of relevance to them and an institution which they would like to work with again. We arranged the third focus group session due to this positive feedback. Some even wanted us to come and give talks about our collections to the societies that they belong to.

Key outcome for visitors:

- Evaluation, including a comments book, showed that the exhibition was extremely well attended by the farming community and we feel that establishing links with this group through the associated focus group work was essential in reaching this particular audience.

Feedback from focus group participants:

“Even though having been involved in the commercial/trading side of the industry, I was aware of both heritage and tradition in farming, but it is changing fast so it is very important to record it before it is lost forever” *Andrew Oatey*

“Other peoples memories were very interesting and reminds you of similar experiences in earlier days”
Anon

“Glad some of this is being recorded. I believe it is very necessary for our heritage.” *Harry Mann*

Feedback from the exhibition comments book:

“I found it a very interesting little exhibition on a very big subject. It brought back many memories as I am an ex-farmer. Especially nice to see the older farmers remembered with their working families” *Anon*

“We are so glad we came. It is all so good. Both our families were farmers and we were tenant farmers.”
Vivian and Jill Champion

Evaluation

One of the key outcomes for the museum and the focus groups was the two-way exchange of information. The participants really enjoyed interacting with the objects and it was important for us that the farmers involved valued their own experience as contributors to the curatorial record for future generations. An unexpected but important outcome of this for the group was the information that they learned from each other. 95% of participants said they ‘enjoyed hearing other people’s opinions’ and 90% found the sessions ‘stimulating’ and felt they ‘had learned something new’. This feedback confirms that using the *Revisiting Collections* methodology can be really successful and enjoyable if it is adapted to suit your purpose. Although the transcribing was sometimes difficult, it was very positive for group dynamics and increased participant enjoyment.

The richness of the information that we received from the group sessions has made the collections staff involved re-think the way in which objects are currently collected, particularly in a social history context. Consideration is being given to embedding the methodology into the Social History collecting policy, so that we can simultaneously collect objects and individual interview or focus group information for a more complete record.

Tips:

- The organisation of the focus group sessions and the processing of information afterwards are very time-consuming and labour-intensive. Therefore, you need to be sure that using the methodology is of benefit to the museum and the community group.
- Recording is very tiring and requires a lot of concentration. We made the mistake of holding 2 focus group sessions in one day (an afternoon and evening session). The quality of note-taking definitely dropped off towards the end of the evening session.
- Ensure you can understand your recorders’ handwriting! Some information was lost because we were unable to read all of the comments recorded.
- Some sessions were very noisy due to the objects provoking lots of conversation! Make sure you have enough room for everyone and that you cater for their needs. For example, one couple left early because the gentleman got very tired from trying to listen to his group through the noise of the room.
- Timing is everything – focus group sessions should fit around the participants’ lives. We held evening sessions so that farmers could attend after work. We also inadvertently tried to organise one session during harvest, the busiest time in the farming calendar. This was not well attended!

Future developments:

Unfortunately, the amount of time it took to process the focus group comments meant that we were unable to include any of this information on our exhibition labels. However, CAVA is creating a permanent resource from the exhibition into which we hope we can add farmers' comments about the objects in our collection.

Key beneficiaries:

Children and young people
Older people

Social outcomes:

Celebrating local identity
Raising participation

Geographic area:

South West
Cornwall

Final project budget:

£24,103

Project funding support:

Heritage Lottery Fund – Young Roots

Project lead:

Name: Sarah Lloyd-Durrant
Organisation: The Royal Cornwall Museum
Email address: sarah.lloyd@royalcornwallmuseum.org.uk
Telephone: 01872 242785