

The City of Bath, museums and heritage students

The City of Bath, museums and heritage students: a case study in HE/ Museum sector collaboration

The City of Bath, designated a World Heritage Site in 1987, is incredibly rich in its artistic, cultural and intellectual provision. History, heritage, art and culture are why Bath attracts almost four million visitors per year, and collaboration between the two universities and the city's wide range of art and cultural institutions has a long history embedded in the very fabric of some of its key museums.

A key curriculum initiative at Bath Spa University (BSU) since 2008 has been the development of a strand of Heritage Studies course within the History undergraduate degree running through all three levels. Each course provides a rigorous academic engagement with the complex relationships between 'history' and 'heritage' while also introducing students to the practical aspects of the heritage and museum sector. They are delivered through a combination of teaching by academic staff and sector practitioners, and through an emphasis on student-led projects aimed at giving students 'real world' experience of the heritage industry and museum sector. Collaboration between the University and almost every museum in the city on this programme has created an exciting range of courses that provide students with a unique opportunity to enhance their cultural and educational provision while also practically expanding their employability skills.

Variations of the below courses were piloted in 2007/2008 and 2008/2009 at levels four and five, but 2009/2010 marks the first year where we have offered a year long Heritage course at each of the three undergraduate levels culminating in the final year 'Heritage and the Wider World' course featuring a whole class, student-led project in collaboration with a local heritage/museum partner.

Heritage and history (level four)

Description of heritage courses

Heritage and History introduces students to the growing field of heritage studies. In the first term the course focuses on the relationships between the academic discipline of history, 'heritage' and the heritage industry and asks the question 'Is 'heritage' really history?'. In term two the course considers the question 'Whose History?' by examining various debates around 'heritage' versus 'public/community history', and issues of class, race, gender, nation and community. In term three the main focus is on the students' group presentations. The whole class is introduced to a particular local heritage site or museum by a guided tour and talk by one of the institutions key practitioners. From this each group decides on a historical topic/person/event that relates to the site that they think is worthy of a special exhibition. The group presentations then take the form of their 'bid' to have their topic/person/event chosen as if they were applying for a small amount of funding from a source like the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Heritage in practice (level five)

Heritage in Practice focuses on the practice of making History for the general public by introducing students to the workings of the heritage industry in the UK today. Term one includes guest lectures from leading local and regional heritage institutions (English Heritage, the National Trust, the Lottery Heritage Fund, the Bath Preservation Trust, etc.) and different heritage practitioners in key fields (fund raising, budgeting, marketing, education, outreach, project/exhibition management, curatorial, archival, etc). In this term we also consider debates about preservation, conservation, access and funding, the politics of collecting and historical interpretation. Term two focuses on the other side of presenting 'heritage'



BSU students at Arnos Vale cemetery



Bath Spa University - Newton Park Campus



Heritage and the wider world (level six)

– gathering information and evidence. In this section the course introduces students to the roles that libraries, archives and record offices play in the heritage industry and in our ability to discover and present our past. Students become familiar with the use of IT resources in historical research and deal with issues such as the interpretation and presentation of historical evidence. This section of the course also includes a short intensive project-based placement in an archive, record office, library, museum or heritage site with archival collections. In term three students focus on their joint presentations. Based on the research carried out during their archive placement, they chose a topic/person/event to commemorate with a project. The final project output is their joint presentation.

Heritage and the Wider World combines a theoretical approach to the study of heritage with a work environment project. Term one explores issues and debates about heritage and the heritage industry beyond the UK. It considers the concept of World Heritage and the role of institutions like UNESCO; explores debates about the politics of collecting, appropriation and display; and introduces the issues surrounding heritage for societies in transition after conflict like South Africa. Term two focuses on the increasingly important issue of outreach, educational output and widening participation for heritage sites and institutions. It explores the roles played by outreach workers and education officers in relation to interpretation and dissemination; and the relationships between heritage, government, business, the education sector and community organisations. In term three the entire focus is on the module exhibition, which is a team project, developed, researched and mounted by the whole class. The project is carried out in close association with a local heritage site or museum.

Delivery and assessment

All three courses are year long (October to May), 20 credit 'options' (ie. not core courses) with a similar format. The more formal academic section of the courses is delivered through a combination of lecturers and seminars by the course tutor, fieldtrips to heritage sites and museums in the region, and guest lectures by heritage and museum practitioners. For this section, students are assessed by individual essays and/or reports.

The more practical section of the courses are a combination of student-led projects or placements supported by the course tutor and a particular heritage institution or museum. At levels four and five this is assessed by group or joint presentations, and at level six by an individual project log, a group progress presentation, and the final project exhibition.

Heritage/museum sector involvement



BSU student working with children at building of Bath Collection during heritage open week

For 2009/2010 a whole range of local and regional heritage sites and museums were involved in the delivery of the courses. Sector participation ranged from being the venues offering traditional HE fieldtrips, individual practitioners providing course-focused lecturers either at BSU or at their own sites, broad support for particular student-based projects, provision of short-term placements, and close collaboration on a long term 'real world' experience project.

The following list of the heritage/museum sector sites and practitioners that provided fieldtrips and guest lectures covers all three courses for 2009/2010

Fieldtrips

Roman Baths (Bath)
Museum of Bath at Work (Bath)
Beckford's Tower (Bath)
No. 1 Royal Crescent (Bath)

Guest lecturers

Building of Bath Museum (Bath)
SS Great Britain (Bristol)
Arnos Vale Cemetery (Bristol)
Laycock Abbey and Village (Laycock)
Radstock Museum (Radstock)
Stonehenge

Stephen Clews (Manager, Roman Baths and Pump Rooms)
Lindsay Braidley (Education Officer, Heritage Services, Bath & North East Somerset Council)
Stuart Burroughs (Director, Museum of Bath at Work)
Amy Frost (Curator, Beckford's Tower)
Victoria Barwell (Curator, No. 1 Royal Crescent)
Tom Boden (Education Officer, Building of Bath Collection)
Joanna Robinson (Conservation Officer, Bath Preservation Trust)
Colin Johnson (Archivist, Bath Record Office)
Lucy Robinson (Archivist, Bath Abbey)
Tony Crouch (World Heritage Manager, Bath & North East Somerset Council)
Amina Wright (Fine Art Curator, Holburne Museum of Art)
Alexander Sturgis (Director, Holburne Museum of Art)
Richard Maggs (Director, Radstock Museum)
Rhian Tritton (Director of Education and Curatorial Services, SS Great Britain)
Adrian Tinniswood (Chair, Heritage Lottery South West Committee)
Terry Bracher (Archives and Local Studies Manager, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre)
Kath Graham (Outreach Officer, English Heritage South West)
Lisa Barber (Education Officer, The National Archives)

The archive placements for the 'Heritage in Practice' course for 2009/2010 were provided by:

For the level four 'Heritage and History' course, the group presentations were supported by and with reference to the Bath Abbey.

Bath Central Library, Local Studies
Museum of Bath at Work
Building of Bath Collection
American Museum
Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre
Radstock Museum
SS Great Britain

For the level six 'Heritage and the Wider World' course, the exhibition project was done in collaboration with, and supported by the Holburne Museum of Art (to be discussed in more detail below).

Heritage/museum sector involvement on the courses was provided in a variety of ways in terms of cost:

- Some fieldtrips were paid for at the sites' normal educational visit rate per student;
- Some fieldtrips were free to BSU as they were covered in the sites' educational remit;
- For fieldtrips to National Trust properties, BSU has an institutional membership;
- Some site visits were free entry, but BSU paid for the guest lecture session;
- Some guest lecturers offered their time and the session for free,



The Holburne Museum of Art

'Heritage and the wider world'
– student exhibition project

- as part of their own organisation's outreach agenda;
- Some guest lecturers were paid at the BSU visiting lecturer rate per hour;
- There was no financial exchange with the Holburne Museum of Art, whose collaboration ranged over all three courses as our partnership with them fit within their remit as a partially HEFCE funded University Museum.

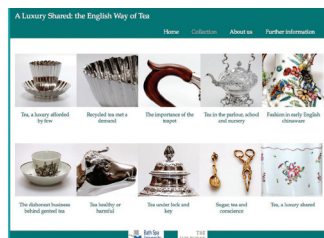
The closest museum collaboration we engaged in for 2009/2010 has been with the Holburne Museum of Art on the student-led exhibition project for the level six course 'Heritage and the Wider World'. This was a particularly unique collaboration this year as the Holburne is currently closed for a major redevelopment.¹ Throughout their redevelopment, they have maintained their education provision, offering sessions to us on 'Objects and Interpretation' for 'Heritage and History', and on the development itself for 'Heritage in Practice'.

The remit for the student exhibition project this year was to design a website for the Holburne to highlight one element of their collection within the context of the new display areas they will have after the redevelopment is complete. To do this the students were then presented with a variety of objects from the Holburne's decorative arts collection that all related to the subject of 'tea drinking'. From this they chose a small selection to use for their website. In sessions supported by staff from the Holburne, they were provided the opportunity to handle the objects, ask questions about them and the broader context they would be displayed in, and were able to photograph them. On their own, the students then researched the objects themselves and the broader social and historical contexts of tea drinking in the eighteenth century and the rise of a consumer society. They received IT and photography training support from the University, and were mentored throughout the project by the course tutor and the Curator of Decorative Arts from the Holburne.

While the course ran throughout the academic year with some of the IT training running through term one, the exhibition project began in earnest in January. In April the students presented a working model of the website at the School of Humanities and Cultural Industries School Showcase Day, and the feedback from this was invaluable in terms of highlighting aspects of the website that needed rethinking. The final website was then formally assessed in the middle of May, by a panel of BSU academic staff and by a team from the Holburne.² Suggested changes were then made before the website was officially launched at a small reception a week later. The website – 'A Luxury Shared: the English Way of Tea' will go live on the Holburne's website over the summer.³

Reflections

Overall, we are very pleased with how this first run of the new Heritage courses has gone this year. Student feedback is very positive in terms of the relationship between the academic content, the fieldtrips and the guest lecturers. More clarity was needed for both presentation assessments for 'Heritage and History' and 'Heritage in Practice' in terms of the explicit relationship between the assessment criteria and the broader context of the heritage site/museum/archive that was the focus, but in both courses students felt the support they got from the sector was appropriate and helpful. In particular students on 'Heritage in Practice' felt that they were well supported by their archive placement provider, both during the placement and in relation to the subsequent assessed project.



'Heritage and the wider world' student website May 2010 collections page

For 'Heritage and the Wider World', the overall experience of the student exhibition project has been a very positive one for all involved. The key elements that helped make this a success were strong guidelines from the Holburne in terms of the style and writing of the website, structures in place to help the students work through their project week by week, shaping the initial nature of the project so that they were not having to make to many wide-ranging decisions all the way through the process, and utilising a variety of means of communication to enable the students to work together outside of class time.⁴ The one problematic issue arising from this year's project has been the issue of how to actually assess the finished project. It is currently assessed as a whole group project and this of course raises issues when the mark does not reflect the amount of work put into the project by individuals (although they are assessed individually elsewhere on the course) particularly as this is a final year course. We are looking at the weighting of the various elements for next year, as well as considering how much of the process is assessed in comparison to the actual finished product.

Feedback from the sector in terms of their involvement on all the courses is also very positive. None have found the amount of potential extra work generated by such collaboration to be problematic. All have felt that the engagement with students has provided extra impetus for their own education and outreach initiatives, and in two cases may directly help in achieving funding. Based on meeting students through the courses and related students projects, most of our partners have ended up having recruiting our students as volunteers over the summer or for specific projects. All have agreed to be involved again next year.

The process of close collaboration with the local and regional heritage and museum sector has certainly been worthwhile for the University, helping to further establish BSU's role in the community. It has also provided excellent opportunities for staff development and enabled us to bring a unique element to the existing History provision. However, the future success of the Heritage strand of courses based on this model of delivery depends on continued student interest and a commitment to adequately resource the initiative in terms of staff and budget allocation. Embedding heritage and museum sector collaboration to such an extent is incredibly rewarding for all involved, but is also organizationally complex and resource heavy in comparison to traditional models of Humanities undergraduate delivery.

Author

Dr Kristin G. Doern
Senior Lecturer in History & Heritage, School of Humanities and Cultural Industries, Bath Spa University
k.doern@bathspa.ac.uk

Endnotes

- ¹ Due to reopen 2011, see <http://www.bath.ac.uk/holburne/future/> for further details.
- ² Although it is important to note that the Holburne's role in assessing the website and the students' presentation of it was to offer critical evaluation of the end result, especially in relation to meeting their needs of such a site. They were not asked to participate in awarding the academic grade for the project, though of course their comments were taken into consideration by the academic marking team.
- ³ The website would have gone live immediately if the Holburne were not in the process of redoing their own website as part of their redevelopment.
- ⁴ In particular they made very good use of BSU's virtual learning environment Blackboard, particularly for storing and sharing documents/images/etc., as well as communicating throughout the process by email, text and phone.