Clore Leadership-AHRC Online Research Library Paper

Museum collecting and sustainability

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Year paper completed: 2005

Leadership Content Theme/s: Inclusive Leadership Practice, Hard Skills, Sector Insights

AHRC Subject Area/s: Museum and Gallery Studies, Heritage Management

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Museum Collections and Sustainability

Nick Merriman

Clore Leadership Fellow 2004

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first of all, Chris Smith, Sue Hoyle and Helen Acton of the Clore Leadership Programme for making the Fellowship such a transformative experience, and for all of their help and advice.

Tristram Besterman, my supervisor for this piece of research, has been a wise and friendly critic and I want to thank him for sharpening up my ideas in many areas.

Thanks are due also to a range of people who have helped me in providing information for the case studies:

Jen Kaines of Leeds Museums
Finbarr Whooley and Kirsten Walker of the Horniman Museum
Martin Harrison-Putnam of London's Transport Museum
Ellen McAdam and colleagues at Glasgow Museums
Malcolm Chapman and colleagues at Manchester Museum
Margarette Lincoln and colleagues at the National Maritime Museum
Tim Heyburn of Ipswich Museum

In addition, my former colleagues at UCL, Suzanne Keene, Liz Pye and May Cassar all discussed some of the ideas put forward here and I am grateful for their insights.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Fellows in the Clore Programme, for informal discussions on my topic, and for their general inspiration and friendship.

Contents

Museum Collections and Sustainability

Summary

This study is a contribution to the debate on museum collecting and disposal. In it, I present the results of a survey which demonstrates that museums are continuing to collect at a significant rate, and that disposal is not being used as a collections management tool except in a few individual museums. However, it also shows that the relative annual growth of collections in museums, as a percentage of their overall collections, is very small. I argue that, although museums are currently unsustainable institutions, which pass on their expanded collections in a way that increases the resource implications for future generations, they are only unsustainable because they have not brought the management of their collections under control. It is however possible to imagine a future, following the investments provided by Heritage Lottery Fund, Renaissance, Designation and other funding streams, when museums will have solved most collections management problems and they will then be able to continue to collect in a managed, sustainable way. Sustainability, I argue, does allow for gradual growth, and what museums need to commit to is a journey towards sustainability. In this context, the sustainable museum can be defined as one with a fully strategic approach to collections management, which includes programmes of community engagement, documentation, storage improvement, acquisition, and disposal.

Disposal, I suggest, does have a significant role to play in collections management, but is still currently rarely used. This is because a professional reticence over the issue has developed, both through decades of professional training which has instilled a 'presumption against disposal' into museum staff, and because all disposals -- apart from restitutions to communities of origin – have been done on pragmatic grounds of saving costs and/or space, with no coherent intellectual framework within which to justify them.

Making disposals on grounds of practical necessity is, I argue, dangerous in that it lays museums open to the charge of being driven by expediency rather than principle. Why not focus efforts on raising the appropriate resources rather then divesting themselves of collections? What is needed, instead, is a review of the

philosophy underpinning museum collecting and an examination of whether it still serves us well. I argue that the current literature on cultural heritage and the anthropology of memory provides a framework for challenging the notion that museums still function as repositories of objects and specimens that represent an objective record or collective memory. Instead, they should be seen for what they are: partial, historically-contingent assemblages which reflect the tastes and interests of both the times and the individuals who made them. The intellectual framework I put forward would enable museums no longer to be held hostage to the collecting decisions of our predecessors, but to re-work these object 'memories' and to choose to 'forget' some of them through disposal.

In the final section I examine some of the practical implications of this framework. It does not mean that museum professionals can blithely choose to get rid of anything they like, but it does mean that, instead of treating collections as all having equal importance, the ascription of value (of all kinds) must become a fundamental part of curatorship. A number of existing schemes which ascribe value to collections are summarised, and some prospects for future development are outlined.

1. Introduction

> 'Time-honored goals of eternity, stability, and permanence are nowadays increasingly discarded as unreachable. Cultural guardians who once hoped to husband heritage for all time, like ecologists who envisaged a timeless, changeless nature, are learning to accept that things are in perpetual flux' (Lowenthal, 2000: 20).

From their emergence out of the private collections of scholars and nobles to become institutions dedicated to the public, the *raison d'être* of museums has been to collect and preserve objects for study, learning and enjoyment for the benefit of present and future generations. However, for several decades, there has been a feeling in the museum profession that the scale and scope of museum collections - the core resource of the institution - has become an increasing problem. Even now, relatively few museums know precisely what they hold in their collections, there are massive backlogs in conservation work, and the long-term storage of material (in the majority of cases, rarely used by public or staff) is an increasingly costly task. Both museum directors and their funding bodies are becoming concerned by the resources taken up by the management of ever-growing collections. A recent example is the National Museum of Wales, whose Director reported in May 2004 in response to a question from a member of the National Assembly for Wales, that the collection is growing by 40,000 items a year, despite a lack of adequate storage space. Less than 60% of the storage space for the 4.7 million items is rated good or very good. Around 22% is rated very poor, and some of the archaeology collection is held in a sub-basement which floods (Betts 2004).

Museums have worked hard over the last couple of decades – and with considerable success – to transform their image from fusty places focused on the past, into forward-looking engines of social engagement and agents of change. This is to some degree symptomatic of an overtly instrumentalist attitude to culture reflected in Government policy and funding for museums and the arts since 1997. In this political climate, underlying, long-term and rather intractable issues around collections management have become submerged, as 'unsexy'. The irony is that, as a consequence, the public image of museums as having 'dusty basements filled with forgotten stuff' is now closer to the truth than most museum practitioners would care to admit. The point is well illustrated by the recent 'discovery' of an important

scientific specimen that had languished forgotten in one of the world's leading science museums, as flashed around the world by CNN on 26 January 2006:

> "A toothless, two-legged crocodile ancestor… was discovered in the basement of New York's American Museum of Natural History, according to a report published on Wednesday. The 210 million-year-old fossil had sat in storage at the museum for nearly 60 years and was found only by accident, the paleontologists said." http://www.cnn.com/2006/TECH/science/01/26/fossil.archosaur.reut/

As a result of these kinds of issues, over the last three years or so, the museums profession has begun to re-consider the issue of disposal from museum collections as a means of bringing their management under control, while still continuing to allow museums to collect in order to reflect changes in society. In the past, disposal has been seen as a taboo subject for the museums profession, hedged around with horror stories about regrettable disposals (Robertson 1990), and considered to be ethically dubious.

One of the reasons that the issue of disposal has been so difficult for museum professionals is that the profession has argued for decades that there is a 'presumption against disposal' of collections because curators hold the material in trust in museums on behalf of the public. It is clear from the history of museums that, at least from the 1950s to 1970s (if not earlier), disposal by sale was not an infrequent occurrence (ibid; Davies 2005). In response to concerns about government institutions selling off works of art as assets, the 1964 Cottesloe report on the sale of works of art (prompted by the public outcry over the Tate Gallery's sale of one of its paintings) clarified the position:

> 'The basic principle upon which the law rests is that when private persons give property for public purposes the Crown undertakes to see that it is devoted to the purposes intended by the donor, and to no others. When a work of art is given to a museum or gallery for general exhibition, the public thereby acquires rights in the object concerned and these rights cannot be set aside. The authorities of the museum or gallery are not the owners of such an object in the ordinary sense of the word: they are merely responsible, under the authority of the Courts, for carrying out the intentions of the donor. They cannot sell the object unless authorised to do so by the Courts, or by the Charity Commissioners or the Minister of

> Education on behalf of the Courts, because they have themselves nothing to sell'. (In Lewis and Fahy 1995: 134).

This notion of trusteeship was enshrined in successive codes of ethics of the UK's Museums Association (MA) and of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In 1977, the Museums Association code of ethics first used the phrase that '…there must be a strong presumption against the disposal of any items in the collection of a museum' (Davies 2005) and it is this attitude which permeated the training of museum professionals for two decades.

However, by the 1980s, through a combination of growing professionalism, particularly in the areas of conservation and documentation, and the growth of accountability in public management models, a concern was arising about the stewardship of museum collections. The principal catalysts were two critical reports, one by the National Audit Office (NAO) (1988) on a sample of English national museums and one by the Audit Commission (1991) on local authority museums. The NAO report, in particular, discovered huge backlogs in documentation and conservation in the museums they reviewed, and expressed considerable surprise that they were still continuing to collect actively.

These reports form part of a series of initiatives at that time, including the development of a 'registration' scheme for museums, launched by the Museums & Galleries Commission (MGC) in 1988, which provided a minimum set of standards which every museum should reach, including an acquisition and disposal policy. A year later, the MGC-commissioned report on the cost of collecting (Lord, Lord & Nicks 1989) was published, which showed that on average, over 60% of museums' resources were being devoted to the direct and indirect costs of managing their collections. It also provided a formula which each museum could use to calculate the true costs of taking on additional material. The realisation that there is no such thing as a free gift caused many museums to tighten up their acquisition procedures (particularly in relation to fieldwork disciplines such as the natural sciences and archaeology, where curators have habitually collected 'free' material without a consideration of the resources needed to curate them) and investigate the use of disposal as a means of reducing their holdings. This realisation came relatively late for museums, compared for example to the National Trust, which has for decades declined gifts of land and property unless accompanied by an endowment sufficient to ensure the economic viability of the gift.

By 1987, the MA's Code of Conduct for Museum Professionals, whilst still following the presumption against disposal, did allow for selective disposal under certain circumstances, normally by transfer to another museum. However, in the face of examples of previous disposals which were subsequently much regretted (Robertson 1990), and the example of Derbyshire County Council, which was expelled from the Museums Association in 1991 for the sale of works of art from the Buxton Museum and Art Gallery to ease a fiscal shortfall in the Council's finances, in practice it seems that relatively few disposals were made from museum collections in the 1980s and 1990s. This can at least partly be explained by the fact that the Registration standard (and now Accreditation) continued to make a clear presumption against disposal, contravention of which (and consequent loss of registered status) would result in loss of eligibility for funding from most public bodies.

By 2002, the wording used in the UK Museums Association's *Code of Ethics for Museums* reflects a much more open, positive and proactive stance on disposal, despite the continued caveat on the presumption against disposal. Disposal as a legitimate management tool is expressed : "Disposal should be undertaken only within the strategic framework of a long-term collections management policy, as a means of… improving care, access or content".

Nevertheless, it is still axiomatic in the museums profession that it is the role of museums to collect – something I shall be challenging towards the end of this paper. In fact, the recently-issued Museums Association report Collections for the Future (2005: 15) says that current collecting is seriously underpowered, and that museums need to collect with more ambition and focus. The document argues that museums need to address the collecting of intangible heritage, objects which degrade, a wider variety of artworks, and more of the typical and everyday.

At the same time the document says that 'too many museum collections are underused -- not displayed, published, used for research or even understood by the institutions that care for them' (ibid: 14). One could forgive the NAO auditors perhaps if they still felt perplexed – why are museums continuing to add to their collections when faced, still, with these kinds of problems?

In order to try to provide some guidance on the way forward, the National Museum Directors' Conference (NMDC) has issued a report, Too Much Stuff? (2003) which

argues that disposal is an issue which must be tackled seriously and responsibly, and the Museums Association's report (2005: 24) takes this up by arguing that 'more museums should take active approaches to disposal'. A few museums, such as the National Maritime Museum and Norfolk Museums Service, are currently undertaking pro-active rationalisation programmes which include disposing of some of their collections. Judging by sell-out attendances at recent Museums Association seminars to discuss disposal, this is an issue of major contemporary concern and many museum professionals are looking for guidance on how best to proceed.

Disposal is an issue that the museums profession has attempted to tackle for a good many years now (see e.g Ainslie 2004, Babbidge 1991, Besterman 1992, Lewis 1992, Museums Journal December 1987, NMDC 2003), and there is a general recognition that the issue of responsible disposal must be tackled by the museums profession. However, while a considerable amount of work has been done on ethical procedures, it seems unclear how much disposal is taking place in museums.

As a result, there still seems to be a tension between the idea of the museum as a trustee holding material on behalf of the public for posterity, and the apparent feeling that there needs to be greater rationalisation and disposal. One of the aims of this study is to provide some data on the actual rate of collecting and disposal in a sample of museums. If museums are continuing to collect at a significant rate, and if disposal is not being used as a collections management tool, what implications does this have for the future development of collections? Having provided these data, the remainder of this report will examine a possible intellectual framework for museum collecting which takes into account the history of museums and ideas around sustainability and collective memory.

2. Rates of Collecting and Disposal in Museums

> 'At present there is a real danger that the indiscriminate amassing of materials will by its sheer dead-weight retard the rate of progress' (Crawford 1921: 53-4)

Background

The purpose of this part of the study is to take a small sample of museums, chosen to reflect different sizes and governance arrangements, and examine their rates of acquisition and disposal of material over a given period. In addition, issues such as the level and detail of their documentation, procedures over acquisition and disposal, any specific initiatives on disposal, and figures on current access and use, were also investigated where possible. As stated in the previous section, the ultimate aim is to establish whether museum collections in general are continuing to grow through time, and what the implications are of this.

Development of the survey

It was felt that the most appropriate way to gain the information outlined above was to develop an informal questionnaire as an *aide-memoire*, pilot it for its effectiveness, select around seven museums for the study, send it with a covering letter, and then follow this up with a telephone call to discuss the work in detail. This, in turn, was followed up with a visit to go through the necessary sources of information.

A pilot questionnaire/topic sheet was drawn up and tested on colleagues and my supervisor, and then sent in August 2005 to Martin Harrison-Putnam at London's Transport Museum and Malcolm Chapman at the Manchester Museum with a covering letter explaining that it was a pilot and asking for their feedback on the viability of the questionnaire. Both were then telephoned to discuss whether it was possible to answer the questions through their documentation, especially if I were to make a personal visit to go through the sources. Following the feedback some amendments were made to the questionnaire/topic list, and case study museums selected.

Selection of case studies

The case study museums were chosen to give a range of subjects, sizes and governance, and some were selected because they have undertaken interesting work in relation to collections in recent years. Those originally selected were:

Name of museum service	**Reasons selected**
Glasgow Museums	Large local authority service; high profile disposal of Ghost Dance shirt, new resource centre
Horniman Museum	Medium sized DCMS-funded but with strong community base
Ipswich Museum	Medium local authority service
London's Transport Museum	Large independent museum with accessible off-site store
Manchester Museum	Large university museum with track record in repatriation and interest in sustainability
National Maritime Museum	National museum with ongoing programme of rationalisation
Sheffield Museum Trust	Former local authority service now with trust status
Leeds Museum service	*Replacement for Sheffield (see below)*

All museum services were able to participate in the survey, except Sheffield Museum Trust, which was unable to provide the information requested due to inadequate documentation. Instead, nearby Leeds Museum service was suggested as a replacement, and was able to provide much of the information needed (though see below for caveats about the responses of each museum services).

Implementation

Questionnaires and covering letters were sent out in early November 2005 and followed up soon thereafter by a telephone call to the contact person to establish what would be possible, and to fix a date for a research visit. Visits were made in December 2005 and January 2006, and in some cases took several days.

Response biases

There are a number of common factors that have to be taken into account when reviewing the data on each museum's rate of acquisition and disposal (and there are

also a series of circumstances specific to each institution, which are outlined in the sections on each museum). First, each museum's approach to documentation is unique; some immediately accession all new acquisitions, some accession acquisitions shortly after they enter the museum, and in others there can be a long delay between the two, with sporadic programmes of 'backlog' accessioning undertaken in order to catch up. As a number of museums could only provide information on items formally accessioned into their collections, it was decided, for the purpose of comparability, to only use data on the number of items accessioned each year (rather than the number of items acquired, which may be different). This makes the study subject to a number of caveats, which are outlined below.

The most serious of these is that in the time available it has not been possible in most cases to separate out accessions of new material from so-called 'backlog' accessioning, i.e. the retrospective documentation of material which is already in the collections. The rate of backlog accessioning very much depends on the existing state of documentation of the museum. For example, in London's Transport Museum, the collections are mostly fully documented, and much is computerised. Glasgow Museums has prioritised exhibitions and renewal of museums, and is only later in 2006 undertaking a major documentation project, so the figures given are a reasonably accurate reflection of actual new acquisitions, though some backlog accessioning is included. In the case of the Manchester Museum, the figures include some significant backlog accessioning in some curatorial areas, but not in others.

In some cases, a whole collection has been accessioned with a single number, and no further information on the size of the collection is given. It has proved impossible in the time available to go to the original material to assess the number of items involved, so these have been recorded as a single acquisition. As a result, the numbers given are likely to represent an underestimate of the total number of items accessioned.

Finally, it is clear that the number of items accessioned in a given year can be strongly affected by the particular circumstances within a museum. A planned new gallery might be the prompt for a programme of active collecting, as was the case for the Horniman's Africa Gallery. A new curator might take on an energetic programme of backlog accessioning, or fieldwork collecting, as has clearly happened at Manchester Museum on several occasions.

As a result, the figures given in this study have no claim to provide a closely accurate picture of the actual numbers of accessions and disposals in each museum, and raw numbers are difficult to compare between different institutions, which will always need explaining in their own specific circumstances. However, the figures do have an internal coherence within each museum, particularly in the relationship between the rate of accessioning and the rate of disposal, and there are a series of general conclusions that can be claimed to have some overall validity at the end.

Discussion of responses

In this section, I will set out the findings from each of the seven surveyed museums in turn, in order to demonstrate how each museum needs to be considered in its own terms before any generalisations are possible. I will then summarise the general findings at the end of the section before moving on to discuss their wider implications.

Definitions

Throughout this paper, the following terms are used in the sense defined below:

- ***Acquisition*** is documenting and managing the addition of objects and associated information to the collections of the organisation and their possible accession to the permanent collections
- ***Disposal*** is the transfer of items from the museum's collections to another body or individual, or their destruction
- ***Accessioning*** consists of assigning a unique number to the object and entering certain common basic information about it in an accession register. As will be seen below, a single accession number may refer to one object or to a collection comprising many objects.
- ***Inventory*** is the provision of a basic minimum of information about a museum item in order to allow it to be identified, managed and used
- ***Object*** applies to all three-dimensional material in the collection, including human artefacts and natural history specimens.
- ***Item*** applies to both three-dimensional and two-dimensional material in the collection.

(Definitions based on mda's SPECTRUM standard, 2005).

Glasgow Museums

Glasgow Museums service has over 1.4 million objects, of which about 1.5% are on long term display or temporary exhibition at the service's 13 museums. It has recently opened the Glasgow Museums Resource Centre in Nitshill, a regeneration area some distance from the city centre, to house the 200,000 objects formerly stored in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, which is itself due to re-open following refurbishment in July 2006. A bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a second phase of the Resource Centre, to include the stored collections from the Museum of Transport, has recently been submitted. Following the re-opening of Kelvingrove, a major collections project will be undertaken to provide a Collections Level Description (CLD) or inventory for all holdings, and a grading in terms of their significance, the details of which are still under development. At present, they hold 376,178 object records on their computerised collections management system (c. 27% of the total), with around 1 million natural history specimens still to be computerised (much of it to CLD level rather than to individual item level).

Acquisition and disposal

As can be seen from Tables 2.1 and 2.2 (See Appendix 1), there continues to be a huge disparity between the rates of acquisition and disposal.

From 1990 to 2004, Glasgow Museums formally acquired (by accessioning) 38,510 objects, whilst over the same period it disposed of only 50 objects: a ratio of one disposal for every 770 accessions.

As can be seen, the disposals cluster into two categories: transfers to the non-public domain, subdivided into transfers to originating communities (4 Australian Aboriginal skulls in 1990 and the Lakota 'Ghost Dance' shirt in 1998) and returns to the donor (28 in 1998 and 5 in 1999); and items destroyed (1 plaster cast in 1990, and 9 on health and safety grounds in 2000).

Horniman Museum

The Horniman Museum, in Forest Hill, south London, has around 350,000 objects and related items, in three main subject areas: anthropology, musical instruments and natural history. For many years it was funded by the Inner London Education Authority and then the Greater London Council, and is now directly funded by DCMS. It has undertaken a major programme of gallery renewal, which is at present continuing with the redevelopment of its aquarium and natural history galleries. Less attention has been paid in recent years to the upgrading of its stores, though this is planned in the longer term following the gallery redevelopments.

All of the collection has some kind of manual record at inventory level. Of these, 100% of the musical instruments are fully catalogued, c. 60-70% of anthropology, and c. 10% of natural history (Walker pers. comm.). All of the musical instrument records are computerised at inventory level, c. 70% of anthropology, and none of the natural history collections.

Acquisition and disposal

The relative rates of acquisition and disposal at the Horniman are even more extreme.

From 1992 to 2004 (figures for 1990-91 were not available) there were 7,195 acquisitions recorded in the registers of the Horniman, compared with only 6 disposals, which were all Australian Aboriginal skulls returned to the originating communities in 2003. The ratio of acquisitions to disposals is 1,199 to 1. According to staff, there has been little disposal principally because they do not have a complete inventory and they believe that they could not take a pro-active approach to disposal until this was achieved. It is also clear, they say, that disposals were undertaken in the past which are now regretted, for example a suit of horse armour, and a large number of natural history specimens were sold in the 1940s.

Ipswich Museum

Ipswich Museum Service is a medium-sized local authority service with a range of mostly local collections of archaeology, botany, fine art, geology and zoology. It operates on two sites: Ipswich Museum itself, and Christchurch Mansion, a historic house.

Record keeping practices are such that both single items and whole collections are given individual accession numbers. In the latter case there is no indication in the registers of the number of individual items in each collection. As the scope of the study did not allow time to inspect each collection individually, the number of accessions each year is therefore a significant underestimate of the actual number of items entering the collections.

Acquisitions and disposals

Table 2.6 shows that the total number of accession numbers given out from 1990-2004 is 745. There is a clear fall-off through time of the rate of accessions, but given the caveats above we cannot be clear that this represents a fall-off in actual numbers of objects. Only one formal disposal is reported for the entire period.

Leeds Museum

Leeds is a relatively large museum service with seven museums, galleries and historic buildings, and a planned Discovery Centre opening in 2007, and a newly refurbished Leeds City Museum opening in 2008. All material has at least a manual record at inventory level, and 75% has a record at catalogue level. A computerised collections management system was only introduced in 2005, so there is a large backlog of inputting remaining, estimated at some 2-3 years of work. According to registrar Jen Kaines, record keeping was in the hands of individual curatorial departments until 1996 and were patchily maintained. In particular, it has not proved possible to track disposals before that time.

At Leeds, there were 25,170 acquisitions over the last 15 years (of which some 11,000 consist of a collection of glass negatives acquired in 2003). This compares with 1,686 disposals, of which 1,497 comprised a single transfer of material to

Beamish Open Air Museum. However, as disposals were only recorded centrally from 1996, the figure given here is likely to be an underestimate. Using the available figures, the ratio of acquisitions to disposals is therefore 15 to one. If the one-off Beamish transfer were removed from the equation, the ratio would be 133 to one. If the collection of glass negatives were removed, the ratio is 75 to one.

The great majority of the disposals (1,587 or 94%) were by transfer within the public domain (Table 2.9). The museum service will be looking carefully at a more active programme of collections rationalisation as part of the new Museum and Discovery Centre projects.

London's Transport Museum

London's Transport Museum is one of the larger independent museums in the UK. It is funded and governed by Transport for London, the capital's transport authority, and has a substantial collection (c. 370,000 items) of material relating to the history of transport in London, including vehicles, photographs, oral history and film recordings, uniforms, maps, and ephemera. The great majority of this material is housed at the Museum Depot in Acton, west London, which is open to the public on certain days of the year. The Museum itself, in Covent Garden, is currently closed for a major redisplay, and will re-open in Spring 2007.

The majority of the collections are fully documented, and c. 80% is computerised to full catalogue level. Collecting over the last ten years has tended to be reactive, with the majority of objects acquired directly from Transport for London infrastructure (there is a system whereby operationally obsolete equipment is offered by TfL to the museum, which is one reason for the large number of acquisitions noted below). At present, acquisition decisions remain in the hands of individual curators, but as part of the planned accreditation process the museum will be developing a new, more proactive, collecting policy and instituting a collecting review panel.

Acquisition and disposal

More than any of the other museums in this study, acquisition far outstrips disposal (Table 2.10). From 1990 to 2004, the museum acquired 168,779 items (a mean of

11,252 per year) but disposed of only 72 (a mean of just under five per year) (Table 2.11). Here, the rate of acquisition outstrips that of disposal by 2,344 to one.

One of the reasons for this, registrar Martin Harrison-Putnam informed me, is the governance arrangements, which means that every disposal has to go to the main board of Transport for London. Of the disposals, the great majority were disposed of within the public domain (81%), 18% by sale, and 1% by destruction (Table 2.12)

Manchester Museum

Manchester Museum is a large multi-disciplinary museum which is part of the newly merged University of Manchester. It has around 4.5 million objects and specimens (Malcolm Chapman, pers. comm) covering the fields of anthropology, Egyptology, archaeology, archery, geology, and biology. It has recently undertaken a major capital refurbishment, and a staff restructuring to make it fit for purpose to deliver its services both to the university and to the wider public. Around 60% of the collections have manual records at least at inventory level (the remaining 40% is mostly comprised of bulk natural history specimens). About 420,000 items are recorded on the computerised collections management system, some at full catalogue level and many at bulk level.

There was an embargo imposed on further collecting in 2004, in order to allow collections staff to catch up on backlog documentation, which represents the bulk of the material accessioned for 2005. All of the collections are stored within the museum building, and as part of the capital redevelopment programme storage spaces were rationalised with the result that, unusually for a museum of this size, there are no major pressures on space at present.

A new acquisition and disposal policy was developed as part of the accreditation process in 2005. Under this policy, a proposal to acquire involves consultation internally and with the Community Advisory Panel, and discussion with the acquisition and disposal panel, which includes consideration of how the item is going to be used, as well as its academic importance. As a result of all of the above, the museum tends not to collect large items, and feels that there is no need for a collections rationalisation programme at present (Malcolm Chapman, pers. comm.).

Acquisition and disposal

The figures for acquisition at Manchester Museum are strongly affected by the circumstances of individual curators, particularly the field-collecting natural science curators. In total, from 1990-2005, the Museum made 89,745 acquisitions (Table 2.13), and just 51 disposals (Table 2.14). Acquisitions therefore outstrip disposals by 1760 to one.

Of the disposals, all but one were transferred within the public domain (in this number is included ten items repatriated to communities of origin). Just one item (a painting) was returned to the donor's family.

National Maritime Museum

The National Maritime Museum collection consists of around 2.6 million items related to seafaring, navigation, astronomy and measuring time. It is directly funded by DCMS and has recently been undertaking a major programme to rationalise its collections, details of which are given in a later section. It is important to note that the vast majority of the Museum's holdings are of an archival nature (e.g. c. 1 million ships' plans, 1 million photographs) and that the majority of acquisitions and disposals are of this kind.

The Museum is currently working on plans to build a new library and archive on the site of the current restaurant to provide better access to this material. The plan is to sell the museum store at Kidbrooke following the rationalisation programme, to provide the capital for the library and archive development.

Acquisition and disposal

An important caveat to be noted here is that the figures up to 1997 do not include acquisitions of ships' plans, charts, manuscripts or photographs, while from 1997 onwards they do. The archival collections are not catalogued to item level, but to box level or even collection level. As a result, the figures for the number of acquisitions

can only indicate the number of separate collections acquired by the museum, not the size of their individual holdings.

Consequently, while it seems (Table 2.16) that the rate of acquisition of material is not huge, in that in the 15 years from 1990 to 2004, the Museum made 1986 accessions, the number of items in these accessions is not known.

In contrast, the number given for the disposals is that of the number of individual items (Table 2.17). This shows that between 1990 and 2004, 1229 individual items were disposed of. Of these, the majority (716 or 58%) were transfers or sales into the public domain, of which around half is estimated to be the Gabb collection, which was transferred to the Science Museum in exchange for a series of ship models. Sale outside the public domain comprised the next largest category (316 or 26%) and 146 (12%) of disposals were destroyed, most of them radioactive material.

However, as a result of these differences in recording methods, it is difficult to compare the rates of acquisition and disposal at the National Maritime Museum, but according to Dr Margarette Lincoln, Head of Collections the actual number of acquisitions continues to far outstrip disposals.

Summary of findings

Table 2.19 summarises the findings from each museum by comparing the amount of material acquired between 1990 and 2004 with the material disposed. While the caveats about the data outlined at the beginning of this section must be borne in mind, it is striking that, with the single exception of the National Maritime Museum where the number of acquisitions is not given on the same basis as the disposals, in every museum, the rate of acquisition far outstrips that of disposal. In five of the museums, the ratio of acquisition to disposal is over 745 to one.

When these figures are compared to the Cost of Collecting survey (Lord, Lord & Nicks 1989: 112) we see some disparities (Table 2.20). The National Maritime Museum, with a mean number of 132 acquisitions, contrasts sharply with the mean for national museums of 38,500 and the median of 17,000. The Manchester Museum, with a mean of 5,609 per annum, does not fit into any category (university

museums were not reported separately in the study), while the Horniman, with a mean of 553 is again difficult to classify. Ipswich Museum, with a mean of 47, is considerably lower than the median for local authority museums of 300, and the mean of 5,862.

Where disposal is undertaken, it tends to be done as a result of the necessities of health and safety, or under the particular circumstances of repatriation. Only the National Maritime Museum has a track record of frequent disposal, but the fact that the figures for acquisition and disposal are not comparable means that the relative scale is difficult to grasp.

When compared with the *Cost of Collecting* report, again the rate of disposals seems to have reduced (Table 2.21).

However, when the rate of collections growth is examined, it seems that, as a proportion of the overall size of their collections, collections are only growing very slowly on an annual basis. Table 2.22 shows the relevant figures.

From these figures, it can be seen that the mean annual growth of those sample museums' collections whose figures could be determined, is between over 0.1 and 0.2% per annum, except for the case of London's Transport Museum, which has a mean growth rate of 4.2%. This is in strong contrast to the figures reported in the *Cost of Collecting* survey (Lord, Lord & Nicks 1989: 103), which showed a median collections growth of 1.5% across all types of museum, but with contrasts between a median of 1% for local authority museums, 1.5% for national and university museums, and 4% for independent museums (the high latter figure probably reflecting the relative infancy of these museums, most of which had been established within the 15 years prior to the report. London's Transport Museum is an independent, and as explained above, most of its collecting is reactive owing to its governance arrangements). The 1989 report's methodology was rather different, and was based on only a single year. These figures could be taken to show that there has been a considerable diminution in the rate of collecting since the report, as a result of the various procedures introduced in consequence. However, scrutiny of the tables above does not show a significant reduction in numbers of objects collected since 1990, only a year after the *Cost of Collecting* report was published. These figures therefore are most likely to represent the fact that museums have become much

better at calculating the overall size of their collections and are therefore more able to give accurate figures relating to growth.

Conclusions

The first conclusion of this survey is that, for these sample seven museums at least, the rate of museum acquisitions far outstrips that of disposal. In other words, despite all of the concerns raised over the last twenty years about the growth of the collections and the ability of museums to look after their holdings, little is being done to slow down the rate of accumulation. It seems that these seven museums are not unique. Search of the Internet shows, for example, that the Black Country Living Museum has 40,000 items, growing at an average rate of 800 items a year, or 2% (http://www.bclm.co.uk/collection.htm). The collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford comprise around half a million items, and grow at an average of 4000 items a year, or 0.8% (http://pittweb.prm.ox.ac.uk/Kent/musantob/intro2.html).

Of the disposals (Table 2.21), most are in the public domain (and here, the small number of items repatriated to communities of origin are counted as transfers within the public domain). Of the other categories, most of the sales are from the National Maritime Museum, as are most of the destructions (largely radioactive material), reflecting both the scale of the collections and the more proactive approach to disposal there.

While these figures cannot claim complete accuracy, and it may be difficult to generalise to other museums, they were nevertheless chosen to represent different kinds of museum, and the overall picture of continued growth almost certainly holds true. For those who are concerned about the issues raised in the introduction to this work, such as documentation and conservation backlogs, and the sheer resources needed to manage ever-expanding collections, these figures must give some cause for alarm. The next section examines the wider implications of these findings in terms of developing a sustainable approach to museum practice.

3. Sustainability Issues: Is Continued Growth a Problem?

In the previous section we have seen that over the last 15 years, museum collections have continued to grow at a significant rate, and that disposal has been very little used as a collections management tool. However, it could be argued that the level of acquisition in comparison with the overall size of the collections makes this of negligible concern. Is a growth rate of only c. 0.1% per annum really a problem? The answer lies in the responses of those taking part in the survey, and in more general surveys of the state of collections in UK museums.

There was almost universal agreement amongst the collection managers and senior museum staff I interviewed that continued indefinite expansion of museum collections was not a realistic option, especially in the light of ongoing difficulties with documentation, conservation and adequate storage of existing collections. However, those interviewed argued that, in their opinion, museums needed to continue to collect, and that rationalisation was necessary. All accepted the need for disposals as an element within this, yet most also accepted that it was inevitable that acquisitions would outstrip disposals. Most were unwilling to embark on programmes of rationalisation until they had greater knowledge of their collections through documentation initiatives.

At Glasgow Museums, they have identified that it costs around £1,000 per square metre to build additional storage space for new material. They cannot fund indefinite expansion so they are looking to rationalise a great deal in order to continue to collect. However, they feel that they have been hampered in this process so far because of very poor knowledge of their holdings – something which will be addressed by the collections management project following the opening of Kelvingrove.

> 'We believe that it is not realistic, prudent or ethical to expect indefinite funding for infinite expansion of our collection. If a collection is not being used and has no potential use for enjoyment or learning then it is hard to justify the expenditure of public money on maintaining it' (Ellen McAdam, Glasgow Museums).

> ‘I would think that current levels of collecting for most museums are unsustainable taking into account storage space and other limitations’ (Martin Harrison-Putnam, London’s Transport Museum).

The National Maritime Museum has already embarked on a rationalisation programme, principally on pragmatic grounds concerned with the need to save on costs and storage space (Margarette Lincoln, pers.comm.).

However, as noted above, Malcolm Chapman, Head of Collections Management at the Manchester Museum, did not feel under such constraints, and felt that in the current state of insufficient knowledge of the collections, a programme of rationalisation would be inappropriate.

A further clue is provided by the benchmarking surveys undertaken by several of the regional museums, libraries and archives councils. One was undertaken in 2000 for the South-East England Cultural Consortium (SEECC 2000). This provides a comprehensive snapshot of standards in all south-eastern museums at that time, based on common range statements, with gradings from 1 to 6, with 3 equating to registration standard. Appendix 3 gives details of the range statements used.

In the survey, some 22% of the region’s museums were below registration level in terms of environmental standards, 26% were below in terms of storage, 43% below registration for housekeeping and security, and 13% below in terms of documentation (ibid: 64). Except for the case of housekeeping and security, the largest number of the region’s museums were at level 3 – the minimum required for registration. Only a fifth to a quarter were above minimum registration standards. Four museums met the highest standard (6) for storage and housekeeping & security, and only one met the highest standards for documentation and environment.

A similar picture is given in other regional mapping exercises (South West Museums Council 2002, West Midlands Regional Museums Council 2002), although the data is not directly comparable from region to region in the published reports. While improvements are clearly being made in collections care and management over time, there is still a very long way to go before most museums have their collections under control, in terms of storing material in appropriate conditions, knowing what they have and how to retrieve it.

The UK Museum Needs Assessment report (ABL Cultural Consulting 2002), produced for the Heritage Lottery Fund and Resource (now MLA) provides the most comprehensive overview of the state of the UK's museums, including standards in collections management and care. It showed, for example, that 91-99% of museums covered by the regional mapping projects had documentation backlogs; only around 45% felt their storage was adequate for their current needs, and only between 1 and 6% felt they had sufficient expansion space (ibid: 23).

Summarising these and a wide range of other reports, the assessment puts forward a series of collections-related needs for UK museums (ibid: Table 1):

- Need to standardise and improve approaches to documentation of collections, and provision of access to that documentation
- Need to invest in the development of digitisation of collections
- Need to improve collections care and management
- Need to improve environmental conditions in which collections are stored and displayed
- Need to increase volume of museums storage space, and to make better usage of existing space

Taking all of this evidence together, it seems that, while clearly steady progress has been made in collections management and care since the introduction of the Registration scheme in 1988, some of the concerns highlighted by the National Audit Office report, also in 1988, are as applicable today as they were then. Continuing to add to the collections in the numerical terms revealed in the sample, notwithstanding the small fraction this represents of the overall collection, is exacerbating the existing collection management problems facing the great majority of museums. This deepening crisis is compounded by an apparent absence of any clear strategy identifying the means by which museums might close the widening gulf between the needs of collections management and the resources required to meet those needs. In short, one is driven to the inescapable conclusion that museums are in a continuing state of denial.

For this reason, museums seem inherently unsustainable institutions, taking the most commonly used definition of sustainability, that of the Brundtland Report of 1987:

> ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 8)

Although sustainability and sustainable development have huge literatures of their own, much of which is concerned with putting the case for competing definitions of the terms, there are a number of common principles relating to sustainability that can be extracted.

The most important of these, and one which was brought out in the Brundtland report, is that sustainability is at root about equity, both between generations and within generations:

> ‘Even the narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation’ (ibid: 43)

The ideas of inter- and intra-generational equity stretch back to the Biblical and Classical worlds, and were expressed by Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Edmund Burke (Cassar 2003, Dresner 2002). The principle of equity between and within generations sees humans as holding the natural environment and cultural heritage of the globe in common with all other humans, past, present and future. The present generation holds these resources in trust for past and future generations, and at the same time is entitled to use and benefit from them (Owen et al 1998: 29-30). This is reflected in museum thinking:

> ‘Collections are a tangible link between the past, present and future. Museums balance the interests of different generations by safeguarding collections…’ (Museums Association Code of Ethics Para 6, p15)

> ‘Museums are the custodians of an intergenerational equity which may extend well beyond local or even national boundaries. The museum’s stakeholders range from long dead benefactors and makers to future generations of users, from local audiences to overseas source communities, and from public funding bodies to private sponsors. Being accountable to such a diverse range of stakeholders inevitably involves

reconciling competing claims on the museum.' (Besterman, forthcoming, 2006).

Museums whose collections continue to grow whilst their existing collections lack effective management are unsustainable by this definition. They seem not to be meeting the needs of the present in full because they are not able to realise the potential of the collections they hold (indeed often do not fully know what they hold), and they are compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs by passing on these collections for them to look after, having added even more material to them. A simplistic cure for this condition would therefore be to say that the only way for museums to become sustainable would be to cease to increase their collections, or to dispose of as much material as they collect.

However, this approach would fail to grasp the subtleties of thinking about sustainability. As Dresner points out in his overview (2002: 30-37), sustainability, and in particular sustainable development, do not mean an absence of growth, but rather are an attempt to manage growth in a way which does not damage resources and people in a significant way both now and in the long term. As such, sustainability is not a 'goal' to be achieved in a linear way, such that it will be 'achieved' after a certain amount of time, but rather it is a path, a new approach or a way of life and a set of values that have to be constantly reinforced (Sutter and Worts 2005: 130).

In addition, there are several dimensions to sustainability, namely:

- Social Sustainability
- Economic Sustainability
- Environmental sustainability (subdivided as follows):
    - Ecology, habitat, biodiversity & wilderness
    - Air and water quality (pollution)
    - Conservation, preservation and management of renewable and non-renewable resources

(from Paehlke 1999: 244).

It is possible for museums to be unsustainable in all areas. They may be socially unsustainable through weak partnership with key stakeholders, resulting in low levels of political support and perceptions of social value. They may be economically unsustainable through their costs in relation to the perceived value of their services,

and they may be environmentally unsustainable in all three sub-areas (through, for example, using construction materials from unsustainable sources, through using high energy air conditioning systems, or through failing to preserve and manage their collections effectively).

In fact, all three areas overlap and mutually influence one another in a kind of dynamic museum ecosystem. A museum that is socially sustainable through working in dialogue with its communities, is more likely to be economically sustainable through increased perception of value. A museum that takes environmental sustainability seriously, with its implications of equity, is also more likely to be a museum that addresses issues of social and economic sustainability. The point here is that a truly sustainable museum does not only address one area, but sees all of these areas as interwoven in an overall approach to sustainability. The difference between a sustainable and an unsustainable museum results, as often as not, from a mutually reinforcing interaction of the commitment of the museum's governing body and the quality of leadership displayed by the museum's director.

This way of thinking allows us not to be so pessimistic about collections growth and sustainability. Whilst the surveys and needs assessments show that museums are not on top of collections management at present, and therefore not sustainable in terms of their management of their resources, recent initiatives in terms of Renaissance funding, documentation and ICT programmes, and rationalisation projects, details of some of which will be given below, show that perhaps for the first time in their history there is the prospect of many museums bringing their collections under control.

At the same time, in recent years, a great deal of effort has gone into making museums more socially sustainable with a concerted effort to attract wider audiences through partnership working, which has clearly paid dividends in terms of increased support and investment in many areas.

So, while at present it seems unsustainable for museums to continue to expand their collections while they cannot manage existing holdings adequately, more complex notions of sustainability allow for some managed growth, particularly when collections management is brought under greater control. Under this model, we can tolerate continued expansion, as long as a path towards sustainability is followed. It is therefore possible to envisage a future for many museums where collections are

effectively housed and documented, and sustainable growth of collections is accepted as part of the mission.

The path towards sustainability has to begin with a fully strategic approach to collections management, which includes programmes of community engagement, documentation, storage improvement, acquisition, and disposal.

Disposal does have a significant role to play in collections management, but is still currently rarely used. This is because a professional reticence over the issue has developed, both through decades of professional training which has instilled a ‘presumption against disposal’ into museum staff, and because all disposals -- apart from restitutions to communities of origin – have been done on pragmatic grounds of saving costs and/or space, with no coherent intellectual framework within which to justify them.

Making disposals on grounds of practical necessity is dangerous in that it lays museums open to the charge of being driven by expediency rather than principle. Why not focus efforts on raising the appropriate resources rather then divesting themselves of collections? What is needed, instead, is a review of the philosophy underpinning museum collecting and an examination of whether it still serves us well.

4. Towards an intellectual framework for sustainable museum collecting

> ‘ The lesson that we cannot fully preserve (either by collecting or keeping or by future interpretation) the past or the present, or know the future, actually removes some of the fear we might have about getting it right. If individuals construct their own sets of values, there is no such thing as a correct decision about what should be collected’ (Knell 2004a: 36).

The long-held ‘presumption against disposal’, which persists in the current Code of Ethics for Museums, has developed through a combination of factors, which stretch back to the original idea that museums hold material forms of collective memories which provide an objective record in which are located the identities of particular communities, be they global, national, regional or local. In this section I want to look at the history of these ideas of objectivity and collective memory, and begin to challenge their utility as a set of ideas with which to structure the contemporary museum.

Museum Collections: Objectivity and Permanance

First, I want to examine how the notion has arisen that museum collections should generally be retained in their entirety for posterity, and how post-modern thought has begun to challenge this.

Several writers, most especially Susan Pearce (1995), have shown how the emphasis shifted in the 17th century – or Early Modern Period – from cabinets of curiosities which were essentially concerned with the rare and the curious, to the assembly of the normal and the regular. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s work Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (1992) draws on the work of Michel Foucault in describing this period as one of a transition from the Renaissance episteme to the classical one, in which knowledge derived from classification through observation and measurement.

A number of scholars have shown that, in their public form in the 18th and 19th centuries, museums are almost archetypal modernist institutions. Benedict Anderson, in Imagined Communities (1983), wrote that modern states use three technologies of power to control their subjects: the census, the map and the museum. Just as maps laid claim to tracts of foreign land (and clarified ownership of land at home) and naturalised the colonial

project, so too museums legitimised colonisation, and placed the boundaries of 19th century nation states in the mists of the past. Museums were the storehouses of the very material which justified the possession of territory by a particular nation, and justified the exploitation of others through the explicit and implicit narratives of their collections and their displays.

Susan Pearce in her book On Collecting (1995) takes this further by arguing that in the heyday of museum collecting, which she places from 1850-1950, systems of classification based on evolutionary principles developed in natural history, became applied to all aspects of human history and human relationships. Evolution could be transferred to society, and archaeology and the discovery of stratigraphy via geology, added a time dimension to it. In this period, she argues:

> 'The big collections…demonstrate the central fact that organised material is knowledge, and knowledge is organised material. The belief that material display creates both knowledge and proper social relationships is a fundamental aspect of the European mentality' (Pearce 1995: 139)

In other words, the museum is fundamental to modernism because modernism's notion of knowledge is based on material evidence, organised systematically to legitimate the social system which gave rise to it. The encyclopaedic nature of collecting (and the aim of completeness, and the rhetoric of 'gap-filling') were fundamental because the total collection was a fundamental element of the totalising grand narrative explaining European supremacy.

Pearce has also noted (1992: 33-5; 1995: 389) that it is no coincidence that state museums and their collections emerge at the same time as mature capitalism. One of the important functions of museums in capitalism, she argues, is the role they play as a kind of sacred set-aside for objects which would otherwise be market commodities: 'In order for values to exist at all', she says, 'there must be a point of reference where the acknowledged 'good of its kind' can be used as a comparison against which other material can be judged. But at the same time it is necessary that this touchstone material is kept carefully separate from the workings of the market and so preserved from charges of corruption and special pleading which would fatally undermine the whole value system' (1995: 389).

It is this notion of set-aside, coupled with notions of objectivity, classificatory completeness, encyclopaedic holdings (though never realisable save perhaps for natural history collections) and the notion of retaining collections in trust for posterity, which have led to such anxieties about disposal from museum collections.

Another suspected cause of the persistence of a strongly held 'presumption against disposal' resides in an inherited, collective vigilance in a profession understandably sensitised to past decisions by governing bodies to 'sell off the family silver' for reasons which have been seen to undermine public trust in the museum and marginalise a profession, which is by its very nature, conservative. Such deeply ingrained attitudes are only partially rational, and are perhaps hindering professional debate on this issue.

The changing museum paradigm

In museum studies circles – if not in the wider museum profession – there is now a strong feeling that, in reaction to the modernist associations of the museum, we are already moving into a new kind of museum paradigm, which, for the sake of argument, we can call 'the post-museum', a rather awkward phrase used by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in her book, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture (2000). Here are a series of phrases she uses to describe the post-museum:

> 'The great collecting phase of museums is over. The post-museum will hold and care for objects, but will concentrate more on their use rather than on further accumulation….Knowledge is no longer unified and monolithic; it becomes fragmented and multi-vocal. There is no necessary unified perspective – rather a cacophany of voices may be heard that present a range of views, experiences and values…Rather than upholding the values of objectivity, rationality, order and distance, the post-museum will negotiate responsiveness, encourage mutually nurturing partnerships, and celebrate diversity. It is likely, too, that much of the intellectual development of the post-museum will take place outside the major European centres which witnessed the birth of the modernist museum'. (ibid: 152-3)

This is a reflection of a much wider shattering of consensus about grand narrative explanations for social and cultural change, it is a reflection of the post-colonial world and the demands of the dispossessed for a voice in their future, and it reflects a certain loss

of faith in technology and future improvement. Fragmentation, multiplicity and hybridity in new forms of identity, living and culture, are the order of the day.

What this approach to the museum expresses, as Hooper-Greenhill implies, is a new kind of epistemology for the museum. The idea of a single universal truth expressed in museum collections and interpretations is replaced by an acceptance that knowledge is contingent upon historical and political circumstances, class, gender, ethnicity, and a host of other factors, and that there are therefore multiple perspectives on the 'meaning' of particular objects or of particular displays. There is also a much greater emphasis on the recognition of intangible forms of heritage.

The question then arises as to whether, in the light of this changed conception of the museum and its role, the notions of permanence, posterity, set-aside and presumption against disposal of the modernist museum, still pertain in the 'post-museum'?

Posterity, memory and heritage

Examination of some of the literature in the wider field of cultural heritage and the anthropology of memory can provide some assistance. The starting point for this must be the growing interest in memory and forgetting, summarised in Forty and Küchler's book The Art of Forgetting (1999). In this, Forty (1999) clearly sets out how, following the Aristotelian model, the Western approach to memory since the Renaissance:

> '…has been founded upon an assumption that material objects, whether natural or artificial, can act as analogues of human memory. It has generally been taken for granted that memories, formed in the mind, can be transferred to solid material objects, which can come to stand for memories and, by virtue of their durability, either prolong or preserve them indefinitely beyond their purely mental existence' (ibid: 2).

Susan Crane, in writing more specifically about museums and memory, makes a similar point, drawing on John Locke's notion of memories being a storehouse of ideas:

> 'The externalizing of the memory function in museums literalizes Locke's metaphor: the museum stores memories' (Crane 2000: 3).

Given these ideas, it is hardly surprising that maintaining the integrity of museum collections has been so closely defended. Museum collections, under this way of thinking, were literally physical embodiments of the collective memory of the nation (or region, or locality), and were also objective records through their tangibility and through the all-encompassing classificatory schemes which provided the collecting impulse.

However, increasing numbers of scholars have begun seriously to question this framework as a basis for understanding how memory and material culture can best be understood (Connerton 1989, Gross 2000, Urry 1996). They argue that, for example, advances in neurobiology have overthrown the idea that memories are in any way accurate or true, and have demonstrated that collective memories (for example of nation, class or religion) have been shown to be partial and manipulated for particular purposes (Gross 2000: 1-7). For Forty, 'we cannot take it for granted that artefacts act as the agents of collective memory, nor can they be relied upon to prolong it…Seen in these terms, objects are the enemy of memory, they are what tie it down and lead to forgetfulness' (Forty 1999: 7).

From this latter insight has developed an interest in forgetting, as a corollary to the scholarly interest in social memory. For Lowenthal (1999: xii):

> 'Artfully selective oblivion is necessary to all societies. Collective well-being requires sanitizing what time renders unspeakable, unpalatable, even just inconveniently outdated'.

Others go so far as to challenge the notion that the past is a non-renewable resource. According to Holtorf (2001), this is misleading because 'the heritage' is created again and again from the available materials, and if some are destroyed then the values with which they were imbued become transferred to other materials. Whilst this may seem an extreme argument, there is surely some truth in the notion that heritage does not exist 'out there' to be saved, but is rather created through the actions of heritage professionals. Again, Lowenthal summarises the situation well:

> 'In shedding claims to omniscience and omnipotence, in admitting that their stewardship can only be partial and temporary, heritage managers gain both self-confidence and public credence. It is not a sign of despair but a mark of maturity to realise that we hand down not some eternal stock of artefacts and

sites but, rather, an ever-changing array of evanescent relics' (Lowenthal 2000: 20).

The need to ascribe value

If we begin seriously to challenge the notions of objectivity, permanence and collective memory in museums, then where does that leave us? Does it now mean that museum collections become subject to the whims and interests of individual curators? Does it mean that we can simply get rid of anything we like? As with the reaction to the post-modernists' challenge to objectivity in discourse, it is not the case that the only alternative is a descent into extreme relativism. What it does mean, however, is that the museums profession has to give far greater attention to the purpose of holding collections in museums than it has before, rather than hiding behind notions of objectivity and permanence as a means of avoiding tackling pressing issues of collections management.

The opportunity afforded by the challenge to traditional museum values outlined above is to free up museum workers to see museum collections not as inalienable assemblages passed on from their predecessors, but as dynamic resources, which can be re-worked to suit contemporary and future needs, and to be able to pass on a sustainable legacy to the future.

This in turn means that we will have to assess collections much more in terms of their value and significance for present and future, rather than treating all material as if it were of equal merit. Heritage professionals are used to ascribing values to the historic environment in order to make choices about what to preserve and what to allow to be destroyed, yet we tend to resist such categorisations of museum material. However, we have had Designation of whole collections; and there are now some good examples (see below) of museums beginning to grade their collections in terms of importance so that they can make decisions about their future management, including disposal.

We also need to recognise that there are many different ways of assessing value – for example research, enjoyment, educational, symbolic, monetary (Carman 2002, 2005, Darvill 1994, Holden 2004, Nudds & Pettit 1997, Pettit 1991, Young 1994) -- and we need to develop mechanisms for assessing these for museum collections, drawing on the wide experience of other areas of environmental resource

management, including archaeology and conservation. One of the touchstones must be, in parallel with critical natural capital in thinking on environmental sustainability (Chiesura and De Groot 2003), defining for each museum what is the 'critical cultural capital' that must be passed on to future generations. We can never know what future generations' needs will be (de-Shalit 1995: 129-30), so we have to be clear that we are making value judgements based on today. We must also be clear that heritage is not actually contained within the objects and records that are preserved. Rather, heritage is comprised in cultural values, which society constructs and imposes on objects and the way in which we see them. Such values are inherently evanescent, a fact that we would do well to remember when considering the status of objects and the way we develop a sustainable paradigm for collections management.

Existing schemes to ascribe value to museum collections

In this section, I want to look at some of the schemes – both theoretical and practical – that have explored the ascription of value to museum collections, and I want to examine, in the final chapter, some of the implications of all of this research for museum thinking and practice.

In Holland, the Delta Plan of 1990 assessed all of the country's collections in terms of their conservation needs, and graded them in terms of their importance, leading to a practical programme of clearing conservation backlogs. De-accessioning is now also accepted as a significant tool of collections management, and an inevitable consequence of embracing sustainable approaches to collections management. This has been followed up by the Museum Inventory Project, which is making every museum collection, at least at the level of subcollection, available digitally (de Rijke 2001, Scholten 2001, Willink 2001).

One of the pioneers of de-accessioning has been the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada, which in 1992, as the culmination in a long history of disposal, began a programme of de-accessioning some of its international collections in order to reduce its expenditure and enhance the effectiveness of its public service (Ainslie 2004). It did this openly and with extensive consultation, and at the end of the process had de-accessioned some 3000 objects, or 0.13% of the collection.

In the UK, museums have fought shy of de-accessioning on this scale, particularly for fiscal purposes, but a few have instead embarked on large-scale 'rationalisation'

programmes in which collections are graded in terms of their significance. A number of schemes have used different forms of grading, which are summarised in Table 5.1. From these, we can see that there will always be a central 'core' of collections which are likely to be retained for as long as possible. These, it is important to note, would include well-documented research collections, such as the voucher specimens essential to scientific research or the archaeological archives fundamental to the construction of the early past. Level of use should thus not normally be the main axis on which value is measured.

The National Maritime Museum (NMM) has been undertaking a Collections Reform Programme which has used curatorial expertise to grade collections from A to E, and then carried out a preservation assessment of those in grades C and D. For those in grade E, collections reviews were carried out in order to prepare for their disposal (Linclon pers. comm.). Reviews have so far been carried out on the props in the Queen's House, the ordnance, furniture and ships' models.

Glasgow Museums Service is to embark on a review of all of its collections from summer 2006 following its major capital programmes (McAdam pers. comm.). It has developed a scheme for assessing the significance of its collections by grading them on a scale from international importance to no importance (Appendix 4). Assessment will be undertaken by specialist curators, who have to justify their choices by reference to a series of questions which examine its representativeness, potential for research, learning, creativity and display or for informing better management of the resource. Its provenance, state of documentation and preservation are also taken into account in coming to a recommendation for future use, from a choice of:

- Discard
- Cannibalise
- Offer for disposal
- Offer for long-term loan
- Suitable for unsupervised public access and handling
- Suitable for supervised public research and handling
- Likely to be on more or less permanent display

Table 5.1: Grading schemes for collections rationalization

Knell 2004	National Maritime Museum	Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service	S W Museums Council 2001	Glasgow Museums Service (see Appendix 4)
A-list: Premier collection. Objects of established artistic merit & rich contextualization, crucial to mission	A: Onsite archival storage linked to new library	**Core Collection**: 1: Display	A: The Core Collection	International
B-list: Objects useful to the wider communicative objectives of the museum	B: Secure onsite store	2: Study collections	B: The Working or Use Collection	UK
C-list: Objects which fulfil particular objectives but which, because they don't fully meet with museum policy, can be considered ripe for exchange, disposal or replacement	C: Local store within 20 minutes	3: Long-term research material	C: Education and Handling Collection	Scottish
D-list: Objects which are to be disposed of by prescribed means, preferably in the current year.	D: Remote storage – for material that is to be kept but does not need to be near	**Non-Core Collection**: 4. Working or demonstration material	D: Set Dressing	Regional
	E: Material that does not fit within NMM Collections Development Plan	5. Education, handling and loan collection	E: Dispersal	Local
		6. Set dressing and cannibalisation	F: Disposal	None
		7. Dispersal		
		8. Disposal		
		(plus six access categories)		

In Norfolk Museum & Archaeology Service (NMAS) a review is being undertaken of all collections, particularly focusing on material in their category 3 and below (See Table 5.1). The Collections Management Officer is responsible for the programme, with staff teams including curators and conservators (Trevelyan pers. comm.).

This process need not be one that is confined to the large scale museum services. Proportionately, the biggest disposer in the country is apparently Horsham Museum in West Sussex (Knight pers. comm.), and reviews have been carried out at a number of small museums including Heritage Merit Appraisals at Athelstan Museum (Malmesbury, Wilts), the Town Museum in Shaftesbury, Dorset, and the Leek Museum Collection in Staffordshire. Two small museums have had large-scale dispersals undertaken, namely the Monica Britton collection of medical history on Bristol, and the Llanyrafon Farm Museum, Cwmbran, where the whole collection was disposed of via the National Museum of Wales (Viner pers. comm.).

Having demonstrated an intellectual rationale for treating disposal as a normal part of the collection management process, and explored some initial schemes for assessing value and significance, I want to turn now in the final chapter to summarise the ideas in this paper and set out briefly some prospects for the future.

5. Conclusions and Prospects

In this paper I have tried to show that museums are continuing to collect far more material than they dispose of, which means that their collections continue to grow inexorably. Even in the unlikely event that such indefinite expansion were matched by a growth in the resources necessary to support them, this makes museums seem inherently unsustainable institutions. However, the literature on sustainability shows that gradual growth can be sustainable if it is undertaken in a context in which a path towards sustainable practice is being followed. I argue that at present the state of collections management in museums in the UK means that they are operating unsustainably, but that current initiatives such as the rationalization schemes just noted offer the prospect of museums gaining control of the collections and being able to tolerate sustainable growth of their collections.

Disposal must become an important element within a sustainable approach to museum collections, and I have tried to show that the presumption against disposal is the legacy of a philosophy which saw museum collections as an objective record of collective memories appropriate to their 19th century florescence. If we examine post-modern approaches to knowledge, and ancillary subjects such as the anthropology of memory, we can happily discard the notion that collections represent anything other than a partial and idiosyncratic record – even in the natural sciences where collections aspire to comprehensiveness but are in fact shaped by the interests of individual curators. This has led many to examine notions of forgetting in a heritage context, and I argue that this is an appropriate framework in which to re-think our approach to museum collections.

If we begin to see museum collections as historically contingent and partial, and we accept the implications of academic discourse on forgetting, then this frees us up to take our own responsibility for active stewardship of collections rather than feeling under the burden of slavish acceptance of our predecessors' decisions which have to be preserved intact for an indefinable posterity. This, emphatically, does not mean that we can get rid of anything we like. Rather, it means that curators and managers will have to develop the confidence to ascribe value and significance to collections, in order to allow their sustainable development. This, of course, would have to be done within the context of policies and procedures that have been publicly debated, are formally approved by the Governing Body, and which are frequently reviewed, challenged and tested against its evolving role, purpose and utility.

Examples have been given of some recent approaches which have attempted to do this. What I have done is to show that there is a philosophy which can underlie these initiatives, which allows them to be seen as developments appropriate to the age, rather than undertaken on grounds of expediency.

Hindrances to Progress

One of the hindrances to the development of a sustainable approach to collections – one which involves accepting disposal as a normal part of the curatorial process – has been the feeling by museum staff that incomplete knowledge of the collections, and of what is held elsewhere, has made disposal inappropriate. Moves towards greater digitization, the aim to expand the Cornucopia project to become eventually an index to all UK collections (www.cornucopia.org.uk), the development of Subject Specialist Networks to pool expertise and information, should all help to overcome this. Already, the Rural Museums Network (www.ruralmuseumsnetwork.org.uk) has been instrumental in the rationalization of collections of agricultural machinery, as has the UK Maritime Collections Strategy group in relation to maritime history, with different museums taking the lead in relation to different kinds of collection (www.ukmcs.org.uk). These kinds of initiatives also help to overcome another barrier to rationalization, which is that it is difficult to undertake such work in isolation. The kind of partnership working promoted through the Subject Specialist Networks should help to overcome the notions of institutional reticence and pride that can hamper rationalization.

One of the implications of accepting rationalization and disposal as an inevitable part of the path towards sustainability is that expertise becomes absolutely fundamental to the process. As Knell has written, we need to revive the word 'connoisseurship' which means 'to distinguish between what should be acquired and kept, and what should be disposed of' (2004a: 17). Collecting through connoisseurship, he argues, encompassed disposal, such that '…material can flow in, but it can also flow out. It is not two processes, but a single dynamic act of balance' (ibid). Investment in the expertise which allows the exercise of valuation and judgment is therefore vital, and something recognized in the Museums Association's recent paper (2005). But it should not only be the individual expert who makes these judgments (as seems to have happened in all of the rationalization exercises undertaken so far). We also need to ensure that mechanisms are developed for taking account of community values (Carman 2002: 187).

A final hindrance has been the imbalance between the ease of acquisition and the difficulty of disposal, with relatively few constraints on the former, and the latter hedged about with ethical and bureaucratic hurdles. This has been recognized by the Museums Association's Disposal Forum, which will examine possible ways of streamlining the disposal process.

Prospects: The Sustainable and Relational Museum

The prospect is therefore held out of a loosening up of the whole process of collecting, disposal and collections management. It may be helpful, then, to think of the museum as analogous to an ecosystem which comprises a number of collection habitats. The latter need careful management to ensure a healthy museum ecology – the interrelationship between the museum and society. Managing the collection habitat will entail both the encouragement of selective growth and cutting back to prevent choking. The challenge for museum professionals, then, is to work back from what defines a healthy museum ecology to inform the ways in which the collection habitat should be most beneficially –and sustainably - managed.

At its most fundamental museum professionals would recognize that not all museum collections should be accorded the same treatment and valuation. It may be the case, for example, that different kinds of museums – and different kinds of collections – might have different life-cycles and trajectories. The great national museums come closest to the notion of permanence and preservation for the indefinite future, while some community museums – for example mining museums founded as an act of collective community grieving for the passing of an industry and a way of life – might have a shorter lifecycle once grieving is over and recovery is underway. So, while a museum collection should not just be for Christmas, it also need not be forever.

A healthy museum ecology will also accept that the three areas of sustainability – social, economic and environmental – must structure museums' approaches to everything they do. In order for a museum to be sustainable, for example, it is not axiomatic that every museum needs to collect in order to thrive. A socially sustainable museum in the future may be one whose success is gauged through the development of relationships rather than through the ownership of material. As e have seen, for their entire history, museums have been the bank vaults securing territory and identity through possession of evidence. In the postmodern climate of recognition of uneven power relationships, there is a need for a truth and reconciliation phase in museums in relation to their past, and a need for museums

now to be judged less on what they have than on what they do. One way in which this can be expressed is through the generation of relationships between stakeholders in the collections. It is in this sense of the museum's dynamic interactivity with its diverse audiences that the model of a healthy ecology is best expressed.

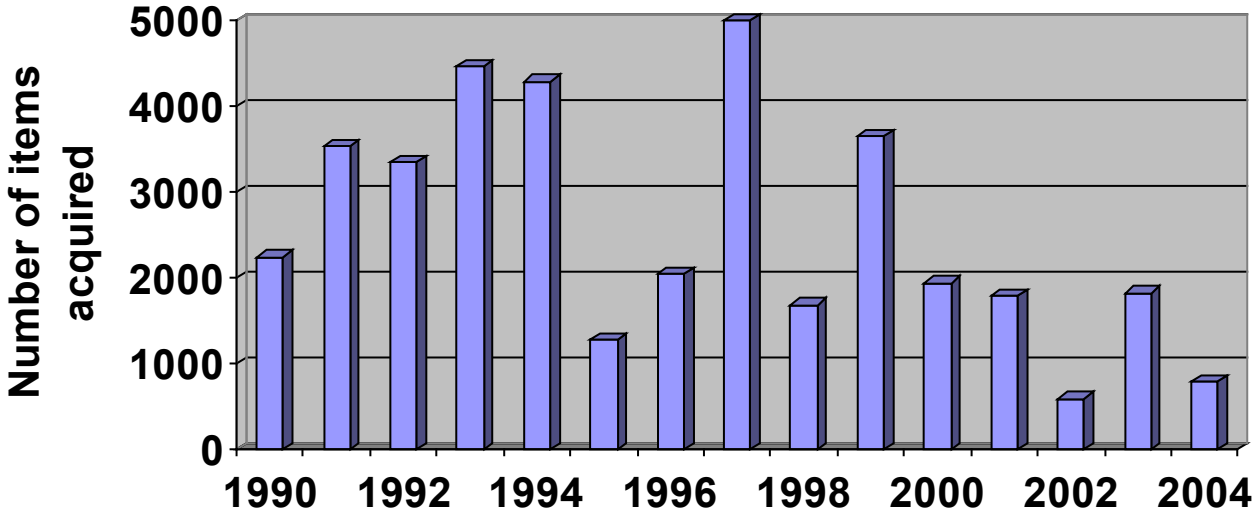
As Gosden and Marshall (1999) and others have shown, the biography of an object can be expressed in terms of the relationships it generates. Let us now think of collections not as the possessions of a museum, but as opportunities for the creation of relationships. For some museums, these relationships can be created in the process of collecting new material, or in disposing of existing holdings. For others, such as UCL's Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, where collecting of new material is less possible owing to antiquities legislation, the opportunity can be seized to develop relationships with new audiences through their unexploited interest in the existing collections. The Petrie, realizing the strong interest amongst African diaspora audiences in Ancient Egypt as an African civilisation, has gone out of its way to forge relationships with this previously excluded group, and has done likewise with the large Egyptian community in London, who had hitherto rarely been involved in collections of Ancient Egyptian material in the UK. Museums like the Petrie, then, become socially sustainable in the future by collecting not objects, but relationships.

Finally, in order to promote this kind of thinking, museums should be encouraged to develop sustainability plans of the sort promoted by Museums Australia (2003) which not only stress how museums can promulgate a message of sustainability, but how museums themselves can become sustainable institutions, including through their collections management.

Overall, my message is that, however much we may improve standards, we continue to operate unsustainably in relation to museum collections, and that this is no longer justifiable on intellectual grounds, on resource grounds, and on moral grounds in terms of intergenerational equity, so we must begin to be more honest and courageous about our responsibilities to the future by getting to grips with the problem today.

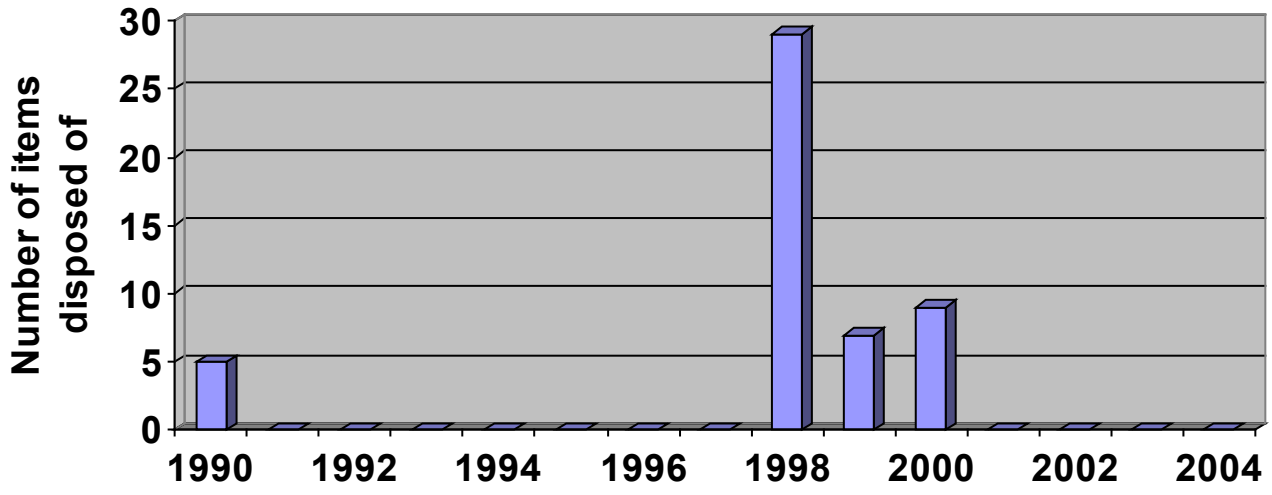
Appendix 1: Tables

Table 2.1 Glasgow Museums: Acquisitions



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
Number	2242	3535	3350	4462	4290	1282	2049	4999	1687	3647	1942	1796	600	1830	799	**2567**	**38,510**

Table 2.2 Glasgow Museums: Disposals



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
Number	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	29	7	9	0	0	0	0	3.3	50

Table 2.3: Glasgow Museums: Categories of Disposal

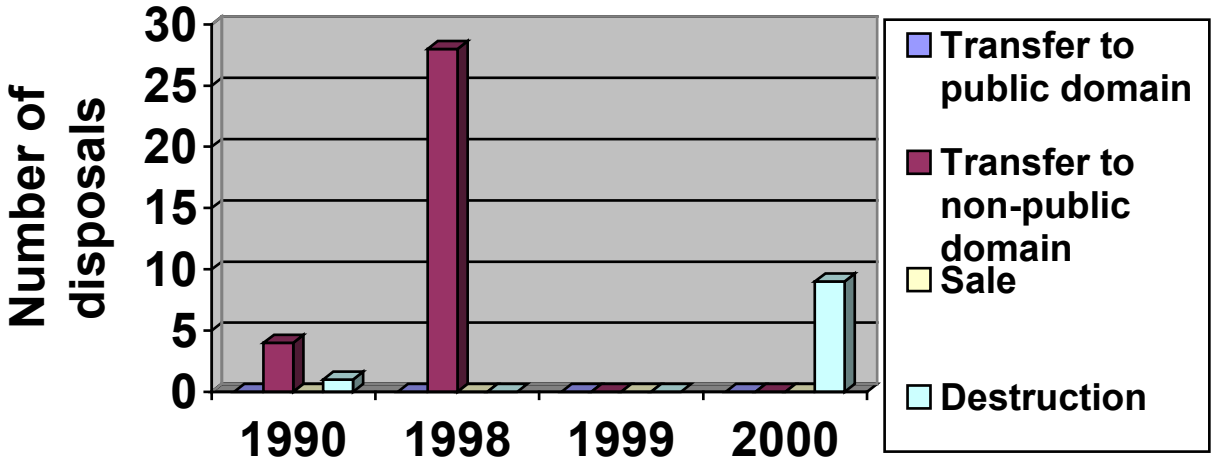
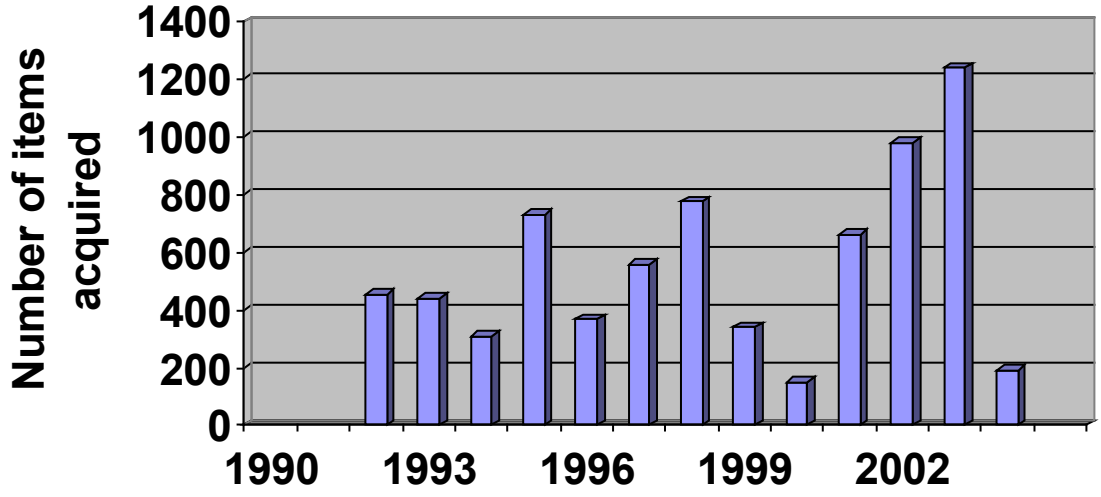
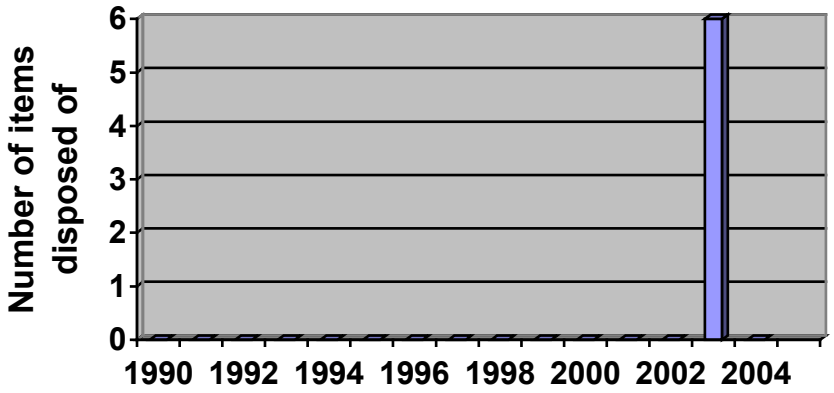


Table 2.4. Horniman Museum: Acquisitions



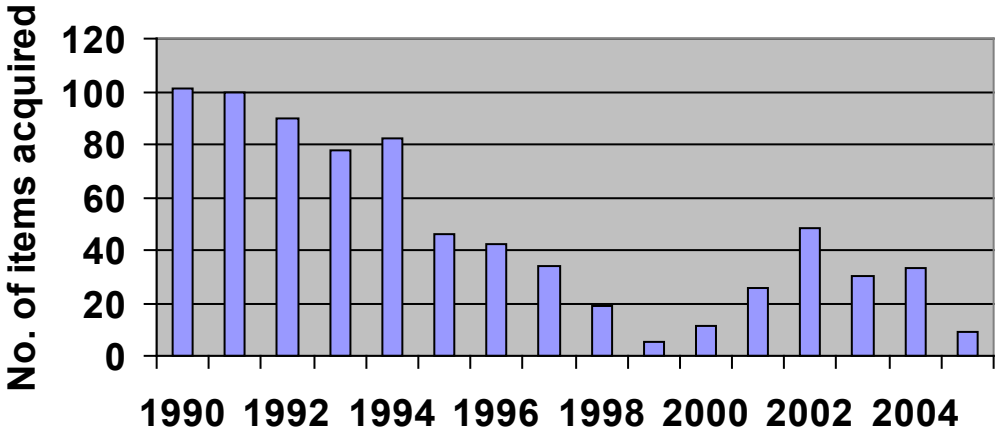
Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
Number	n/a	n/a	456	439	308	730	367	560	777	340	149	660	980	1240	189	553	7,195

Table 2.5. Horniman Museum: Disposals



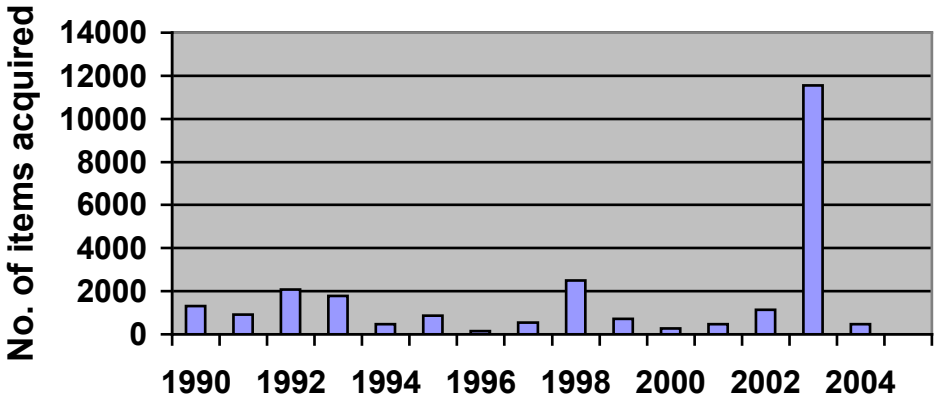
Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
Number	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0.4	6

Table 2.6 Ipswich Museum: Acquisitions



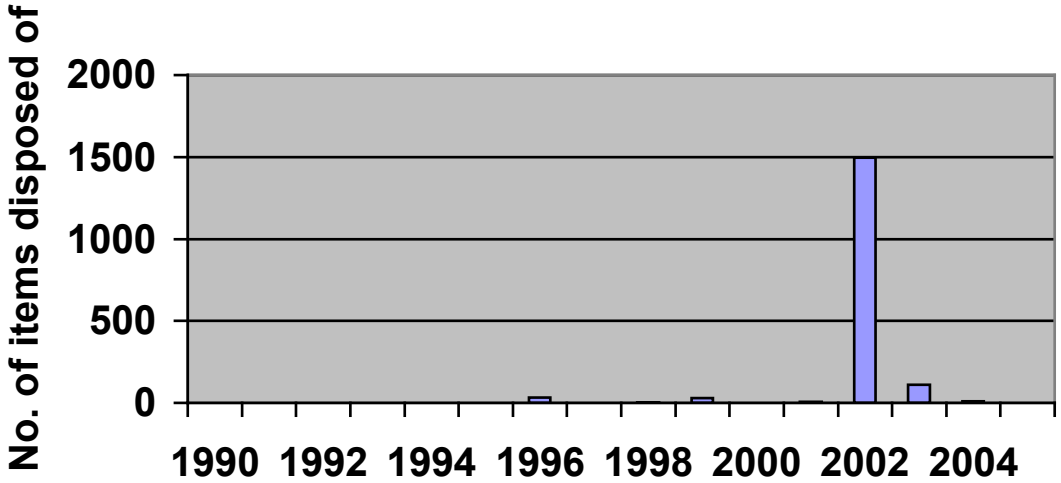
Yr	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Mean	Total
No	101	100	90	78	82	46	42	34	19	5	11	26	48	30	33	9	47	745

Table 2.7 Leeds Museum: Acquisitions



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
Number	1312	903	2071	1780	464	858	154	536	2494	708	264	477	1136	11554	459	1,678	25,170

Table 2.8 Leeds Museum: Disposals



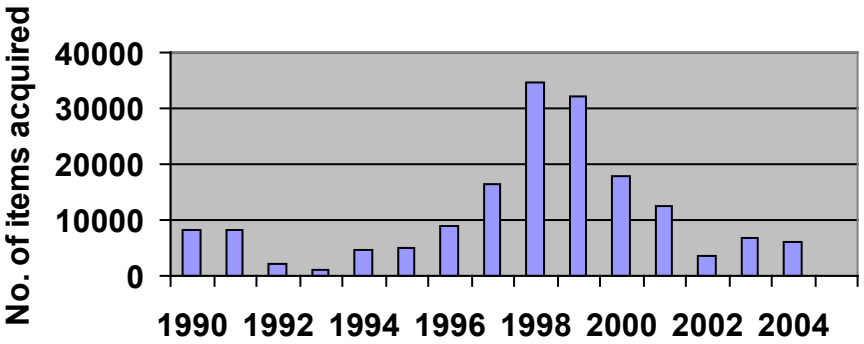
Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
Number	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	31	0	4	28	0	8	1497	109	9	112	1686

Records pre-1996 not kept centrally by Registrar but with individual curatorial departments. Disposal in 2002 was transfer of tools and shoes to Beamish Open Air Museum

Table 2.9 Destination of disposals from Leeds Museum

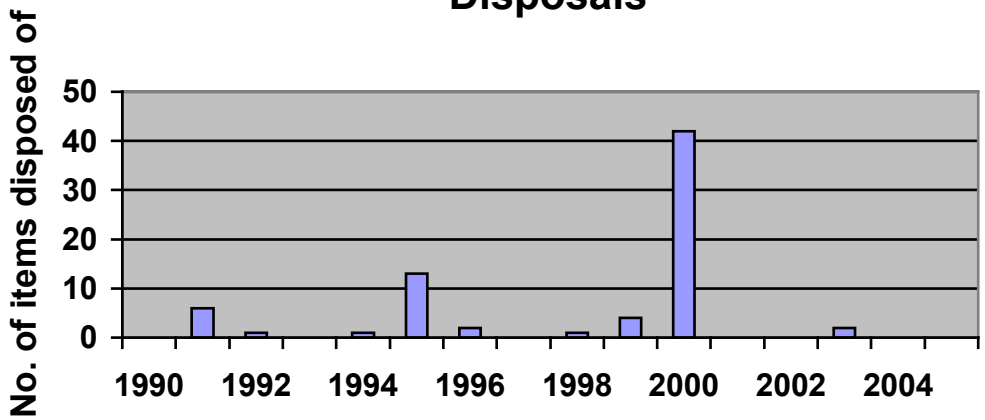
	Transfer Public Domain	Transfer Non-Public Domain	Sales	Destruction
1996	31	0	0	0
1997	0	0	0	0
1998	2	0	0	2
1999	17	0	0	11
2000	0	0	0	0
2001	3	0	0	5
2002	1488	0	0	1
2003	46	0	0	63
2004	0	0	0	9

Table 2.10 London's Transport Museum: Acquisitions



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
No	8329	8322	2008	1127	4603	4988	9025	16546	34652	32144	17911	12672	3725	6781	5946	168779	11252

Table 2.11 London's Transport Museum: Disposals

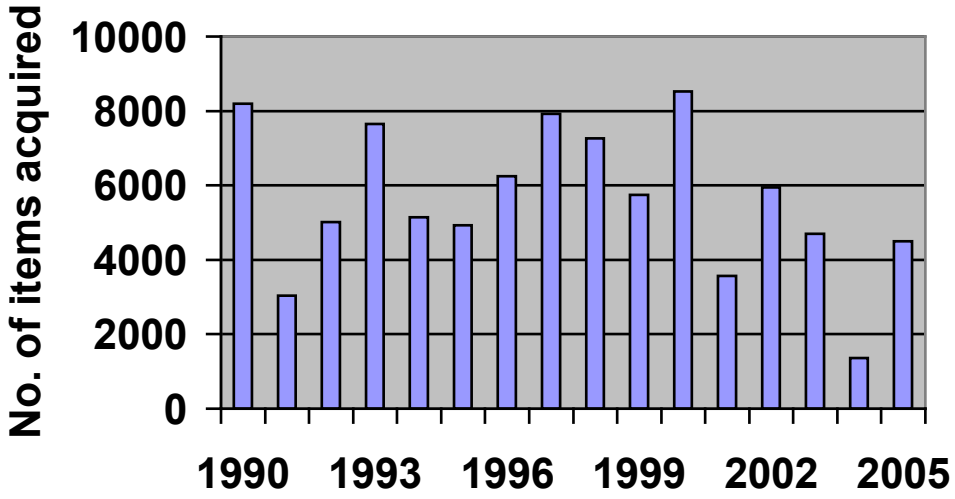


Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
No	0	6	1	0	1	13	2	0	1	4	42	0	0	2	0	5	72

Table 2.12 Destination of disposals from London's Transport Museum

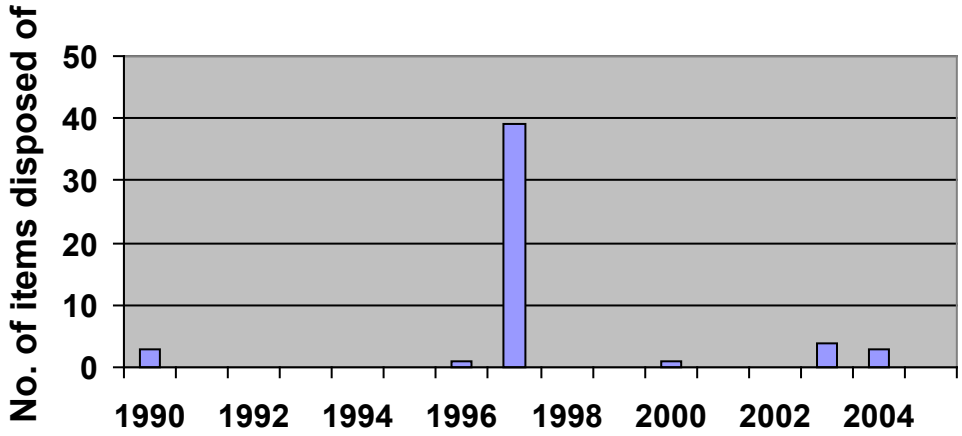
	Transfer public domain	Transfer non-public domain	Sale	Destruction
1990				
1991	6			
1992	1			
1993				
1994	1			
1995	1		12	
1996	1			1
1997				
1998			1	
1999	4			
2000	42			
2001				
2002				
2003	2			
2004				

Table 2.13 Manchester Museum: Acquisitions



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Mean	Total
No	8201	3031	5009	7655	5141	4934	6250	7923	7261	5749	8522	3562	5945	4700	1368	4494	5,609	89,745

Table 2.14 Manchester Museum: Disposals



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean	Total
No	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	3	3.4	51

Table 2.15 Manchester Museum: Categories of Disposal

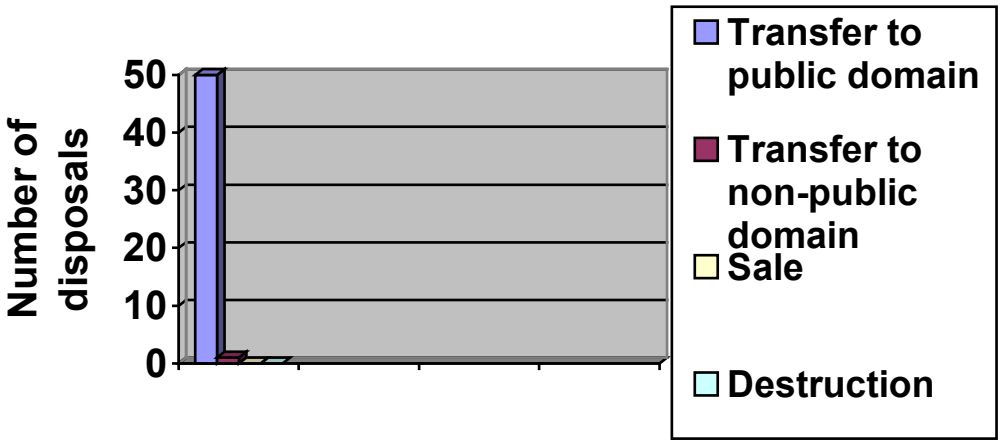
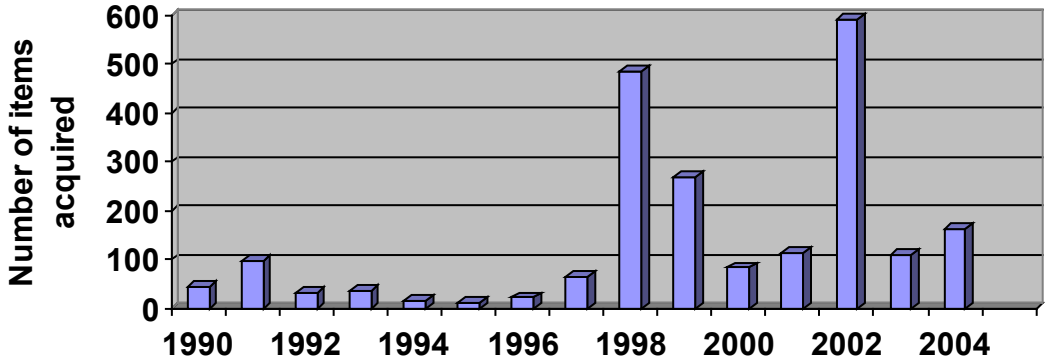


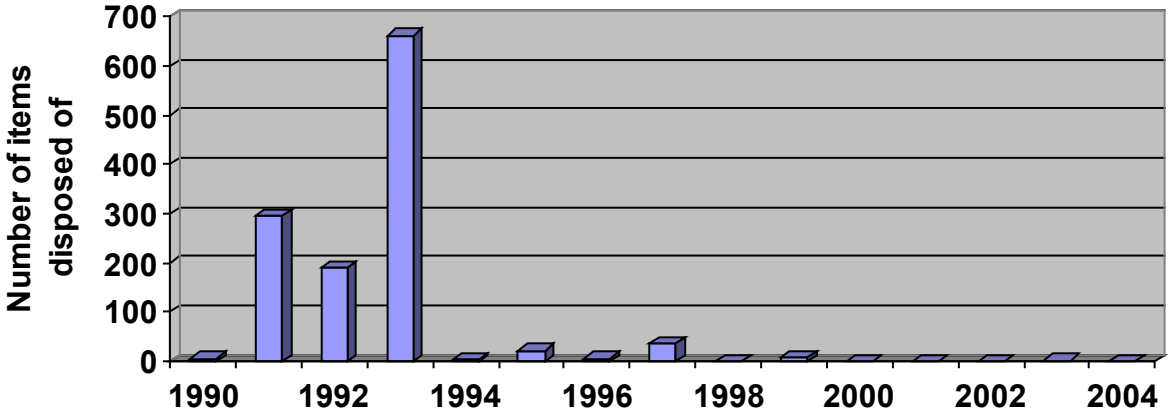
Table 2.16 National Maritime Museum: Acquisitions



	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean (both)	All
Prints, drawings or 3D objects	35	90	27	32	12	10	21	62	479	257	71	111	586	104	159	132	1986
Negative collections	9	7	7	4	5	3	2	2	7	13	13	3	5	7	4		

NB Pre-1997 figures do not include charts, manuscripts, archives. From 1997 figures are of all material acquired

Table 2.17 National Maritime Museum: Disposals



Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	**Mean**	**Tot**
No	6	296	189	663	3	22	5	36	0	8	0	0	0	1	0	82	1229

Table 2.18 National Maritime Museum: Categories of Disposal

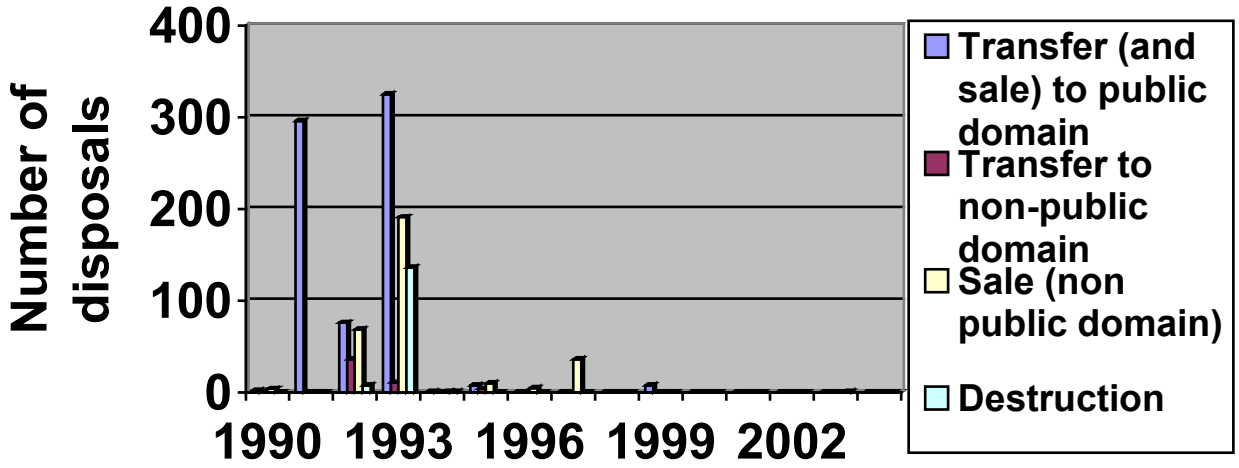
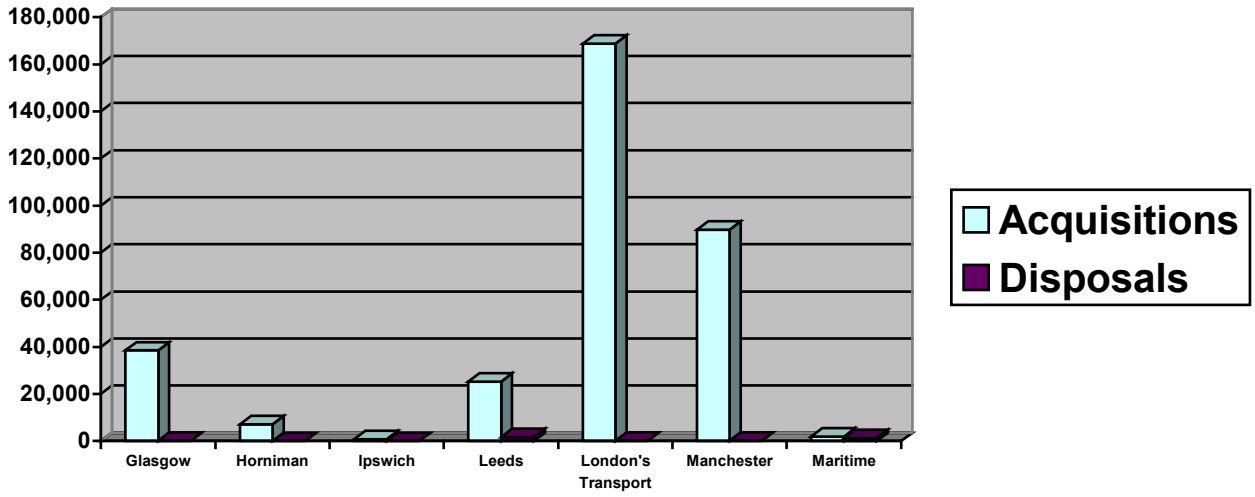


Table 2.18 (continued): Breakdown of disposals from National Maritime Museum

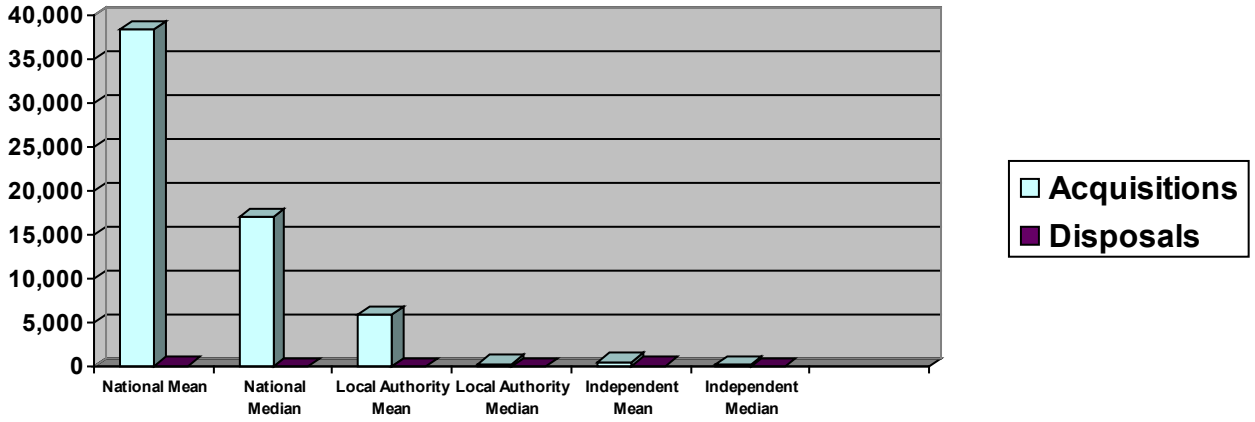
	Transfer public domain (incl sales)	Transfer non-public domain	Sale	Destruction	TOTAL
1990	2	0	4	0	6
1991	296	0	0	0	296
1992	76	36	69	8	189
1993	325	11	191	136	663
1994	1	0	1	1	3
1995	8	4	10	0	22
1996	0	0	5	0	5
1997	0	0	36	0	36
1998	0	0	0	0	0
1999	8	0	0	0	8
2000	0	0	0	0	0
2001	0	0	0	0	0
2002	0	0	0	0	0
2003	0	0	0	1	1
2004	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	716	51	316	146	1229

Table 2.19 Acquisitions & Disposals from sample museums, 1990-2004



	Glasgow	Horniman	Ipswich	Leeds	London's Transport	Manchester	Maritime
Acquisitions	38,510	7,195	745	25,170	168,779	89,745	1,986
Disposals	50	6	1	1,686	72	51	1,229
Ratio	770	1,199	745	15	2,344	1,760	1.6

Table 2.20 Acquisitions & Disposals from Cost of Collecting report, 1989



	Mean Acquisition Nos.	Median Acquisition Nos	Mean Disposal Nos	Median Disposal Nos
National	38,500	17,000	41	18
Local Authority	5,862	300	1	1
Independent	532	203	103	10
All museums	5,932	250	70	10

Table 2.21 Destination of all disposals in sample museums

	Glasgow	Horniman	Ipswich	Leeds	London Transport	Manchester	NMM	Total	(%)[2]
Public domain	0	6	1	1587[1]	58	50	716	2418	79 (57)
Non-public domain	32	0	0	0	0	1	51	84	3 (5)
Sale	0	0	0	0	13	0	316	329	11 (21)
Destruction	10	0	0	91	1	0	146	248	8 (16)
	42	6	1	1678	72	51	1229	3079	100 %

1: 1488 of these are transfer of items to Beamish. 2. Percentages in brackets give figures if Beamish transfer is discounted.

Table 2.22 Annual Growth of collections (%)

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Mean per annum
Glasgow	0.16	0.25	0.24	0.32	0.31	0.09	0.15	0.36	0.12	0.26	0.14	0.13	0.04	0.13	0.06	0.18
Horniman	n/a	n/a	0.13	0.13	0.09	0.21	0.10	0.16	0.22	0.10	0.04	0.19	0.28	0.35	0.05	0.16
Manchester	0.18	0.07	0.11	0.17	0.11	0.11	0.14	0.18	0.16	0.13	0.19	0.08	0.13	0.10	0.03	0.12
Leeds																
Ipswich																
London's Transport	4.14	3.97	0.92	0.51	2.08	2.21	3.91	6.91	13.53	11.05	5.55	3.72	1.02	1.83	1.58	4.20
Maritime																

Appendix 2: Museum collecting and sustainability: research questions

Rates of Acquisition and Disposal

1. Number of acquisitions made by the museum (or museum service) each year for the last 15 years:

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004

2. Number of disposals (by whatever means) from the collection each year

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004

3. Disposal broken down into categories for each year

	Transfer public domain	Transfer non-public domain	Sale	Destruction
1990				
1991				
1992				
1993				
1994				
1995				
1996				
1997				
1998				
1999				
2000				
2001				
2002				
2003				
2004				

4. Rate of collections growth each year (i.e. percentage increase in collections in relation to overall size of collections. E.g. if overall collection is 100,000 items, and 1,100 items are acquired and 100 disposed, overall increase is 1,000 and rate of growth is 1%)

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004

Documentation

5. Current percentage of collection with manual records:

    At inventory level:

    At catalogue level:

6. Current percentage of collection with computerised records:

    At inventory level:

    At catalogue level:

Access and Use

7. Are there any figures on the current level of direct use of collections? For example, what proportion of the collection was directly used in display, handling, study, loan in the last full year?

General Issues

8. Procedures for acquisition & disposal: how does the museum decide how to acquire 'historic' specimens (i.e. non-contemporary material)? Ditto for disposals.

9. How does the museum approach contemporary collecting (if it does this)?

10. Are there any current initiatives on collections 'rationalisation'?

11. What is your opinion on the issue of sustainability in relation to collections management (e.g. is there a limit on the size of collections; should a 'one in, one out' rule be followed?)

Appendix 3: SOUTH EAST MUSEUMS: COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT RANGE STATEMENTS

	Environment	Storage	Housekeeping & Security	Documentation
1	• No monitoring • No control • Little or no understanding of issues	• No dedicated storage area • Cleaning materials, shop stock etc stored with objects • No organisation boxes or racking • Objects stacked against each other	• Little cleaning of spaces or objects • No awareness of pest problems • Doors locked but no other security • No or little understanding of handling objects	• Very little documentation • No use of SPECTRUM procedures
2	• No monitoring • No control • Basic understanding of issues	• Storage area identified • Awareness of problems or hazards • Overcrowding and clutter • No store plan • No labelling • Daylight not excluded	• Regular cleaning of public spaces • Occasional inspection for well known pests • Doors, windows locked and secured	• Some SPECTRUM procedures • Major backlogs • No plan or timescale to clear
3	• Basic monitoring of Relative Humidity, temperature and light • Basic understanding of issues • Data is collected	• Planned but may be overcrowded • Safe access to objects • Conservation-grade packing for objects at risk • Shelves and work surface • Protection from dust and daylight • Controlled access • Staff trained in object handling	• Programmed cleaning • Knowledge of museum pests • Appropriate basic security • Specialist advice taken	• Core SPECTRUM in use • Documentation plan for backlogs • Retrospective work in progress
4	• Monitoring of RH, temp and light in place • Control maintained 50% of the time • Conditions required for specialist collections identified	• Conservation-grade packing • Random condition checks • Regular housekeeping • Study area • Inert store furniture and materials	• Records maintained • Training in basic object cleaning • Pest monitoring and identification • Basic Risk Assessment undertaken • Emergency response phone list • Specialist advice followed up	• Core SPECTRUM in use • Staff trained in SPECTRUM procedures • Documentation procedural manual • Retrospective documentation 60% complete
5	• Full monitoring programme for stores and galleries in place • Control maintained 75% of the time • Conditions required for specialist collections 75% complete • Records interpreted	• Well-organised and maintained, indoor storage, sufficient for current collection • Individual objects easily retrievable • Store location records and plan • Selective condition checks • Objects not stored on floors or in aisles • Adequate space for largest objects safely stored	• Integrated cleaning/care programme • Vulnerable objects identified • Regular risk assessment • Recommended security in place • Emergency plan including maintained equipment stocks	• Wide range of SPECTRUM in use • Retrospective documentation 80% complete
6	• Monitoring in place • Data informs planning and budget • Control maintained 90% of the time • Conditions required for specialist collections 90% complete • Records maintained and acted upon • Assessment of pollution risks planned	• Identified space for expansion • Inert store furniture and other building materials • Separate study area • Storage areas included in integrated cleaning programme and disaster response plan • Objects stored in accordance with Re:Source (MGC) standards of collections care where appropriate • Provision for easy movement of large/heavy objects	• Integrated housekeeping and pest management programme • Full security protection • Disaster response plan with stocks, rehearsals and regular review • Annual building and service check	• Wide range of SPECTRUM in use • Full and complete documentation • Collections audit programme

Level 3 equates to minimum standards for Registration MGC (now Resource) Levels of Care: 3 – basic; 5 – good; 6: Best

Appendix 4: Glasgow Museums criteria: survey of collections significance

Recorder's name: Title:

Date:

Collection area short title:

Collection area description (please append full list of acquisition nos):

Curatorial assessment

Level of importance (circle one)

None Local Regional Scottish UK International

Justification (Please write to these headings. Add more if desired.)

- What is the intellectual, scientific or aesthetic quality of the individual items?
- How representative is the collection of its subject area as a whole?
- Is this collection of value because:
    - it includes unique, rare or unusual items
    - it is a representative sample of a common type or types
    - it represents local, regional, national or period variations of a particular type?
    - it is a coherent group of related items?
    - It has coherent relationships with other collections, inside or outside the organisation?
    - It is known to be valued and enjoyed by the community that the museum serves?
- What is the potential for future collecting?
- Are there gaps and omissions? Are there related collections in Scotland/the UK/internationally that might fill these?
- Are there duplicates or damaged items?
- Would partnership with these raise your assessment of the level of importance?

Potential

What is the potential of this collection area (or individual items) for

- research?
- learning, creativity and display?
- Informing better management of the resource?

Documentation

- Is the provenance of the collection or individual items sound and reliable?
- Is the associated documentation complete and accessible?
- Has the collection been the subject of research leading to peer-reviewed scholarly publication? If so, please attach a full Harvard-style bibliography.

Physical, legal and ethical factors

Conservation assessment

- Beyond repair
- Requiring substantial conservation
- Requiring some conservation
- Minor cleaning
- Excellent condition

How close is the group or object to its original condition?

- Major restoration, additions or loss
- Some restoration, additions or loss
- Intact and original

Are there special factors to be considered in relation to using or disposing of this object?

- Assessment of security risk
- Cultural sensitivities
- H&S assessment: dangerous substances or structures
- Legal unknowns, restrictions or conditions
- Exceptional conservation requirements
- No longer in conformity with collecting policy
- Not an accessioned object

Recommendations for future non-display use or disposal

- Discard
- Cannibalise
- Offer for disposal
- Offer for long-term loan
- Suitable for unsupervised public access and handling
- Suitable for supervised public research and handling
- Likely to be on more or less permanent display

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