Review and Rationalisation of Collections at Historic Royal Palaces

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Review and Rationalisation Good Practice Case Studies

This case study is one of a series of Good Practice Case Studies, researched and written by the Collections Trust, and funded by Arts Council England. These case studies aim to illustrate how Accredited museums have developed their strategy, policy and practice to meet the needs of their own services, as well as to meet the Accreditation Standard.

This case study explores collections review and rationalisation work which has taken place at Historic Royal Palaces from 2013 onwards. It is published alongside:

• A Guide to Selecting a Review Methodology for Collections Rationalisation
• Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at The Polar Museum
• Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at North Hertfordshire Museums Service
• Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at Leicestershire County Council Museums Service
• Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Historic Royal Palaces museums all have Full Accreditation status, the most recent award being July 2010.
Accreditation, Review and Rationalisation

The Museum Accreditation Standard requires that Accredited museums have an approved policy for developing collections (also known as an Acquisition and Disposal Policy). (Accreditation Standard 2011, Arts Council England, 2. Collections. 2.2 Development Policy)

The policy must include:

- A statement of purpose
- An overview of current collections
- Future themes and collecting
- Themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal
- Information about the legal and ethical framework for acquisition and disposal of items

The Collections Development Policy encourages museums to consider rationalisation as a way to address collections management issues and make collections more accessible to visitors and users. Controlled rationalisation enables museums to develop a systematic and strategic approach to effective management and increased use of their collections, allowing them to maximise resources, refocus collecting activity and increase public access.

This case study explores collections rationalisation, placing an emphasis on the need to undertake rationalisation in the context of a planned and formal review of the collections. It focuses on how rationalisation can be linked to disposal, but can also create new and exciting opportunities for reconsidering the way in which museums use collections.

Historic Royal Palaces: Case Study

Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) is an independent charity that looks after the Tower of London, Hampton Court Palace, Banqueting House, Kensington Palace, Kew Palace and Hillsborough Castle.

HRP’s Cause is to help everyone explore the story of how monarchs and people have shaped society, in some of the greatest palaces ever built.

HRP owns a relatively small but highly significant collection of more than 30,000 objects. The vast majority of objects in HRP’s permanent collection are directly related to the palaces. The national and international significance of the palaces themselves defines the collection as important.

Project summary

In 2013, HRP commissioned a review of the majority of its stored collections as preparation for moving these collections to a new storage facility. The project involved staff from across the organisation, who all identified areas of future work on the display of HRP objects, their use in learning and engagement activities, their research potential, their status in terms of ownership and documentation, and their condition.
Project description

This project has enabled HRP to effectively address the aims and objectives of the collections review which were:

- To enable greater understanding of collections needs for the storage of collections project
- To provide a high level appraisal of collections, their needs and their potential
- To enable prioritisation of collections management resources within HRP

The methodology used in this review is based on the University College London Collections Review Toolkit and further developed with Heather Lomas Consulting.

The collection was divided into eight areas: archaeology; architectural fixtures and fittings; books and paper; paintings, prints, drawings and works of art; furniture; decorative arts and social history; textiles; Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection (RCDC). It was decided that the RCDC was well understood and catalogued so a review was not necessary for this area of the collection.

Objects were grouped together in ‘units of review’. These units could comprise objects of similar type, such as a group of framed works of art, or a group of doors, or objects from the same archaeological excavation. Other units were location-based, such as objects stored in the same room, bay or shelf.

For each unit, a score from A to E was assigned on six separate criteria:

- Historical significance
- Formal display potential
- Learning and engagement potential
- Research and enquiry potential
- Ownership and documentation status
- Condition

Numbers were not used as a reviewing device as curators were concerned that objects with low aggregate ‘scores’ might be targets for disposal without the necessary research needed before such an action.

A pilot study was undertaken in January 2013, in which the Tower of London archaeology collection was reviewed in full, by a multi-disciplinary team including curators, learning producers, conservators and interpretation managers. As a result, the reviewing grid was amended to suit HRP’s new learning and engagement strategy, and the data entry form modified to include extra fields clarifying the provenance and storage of objects across HRP’s five sites, and fields which clarified numerical values, to enable better data
quantitative analysis at the end of the project.

The full review took place from July to December. For this work, a full time project manager was recruited, and was assisted by a full time conservator seconded to the project. This core team took part in all reviewing to provide continuity and standardisation of the process.

Curators were allocated 10 days to prepare for and undertake reviewing in the stores. The reviewing was timetabled in 2.5 hour sessions, with two sessions taking place each day. The sessions were then offered to learning and engagement and interpretation staff who selected sessions depending on the collection area and its relevance to their work.

The greatest challenge was defining areas of responsibility and the units of review. The areas of responsibility for curators had previously been according to the site they worked at, rather than object type, so the curatorial team reduced a grid of 35 areas of responsibility (5 palaces, 7 collection areas) to seven, and added notes indicating curatorial expertise in addition to these areas of responsibility.

For the archaeology collection, units of review were defined by excavation, or a significant material type within a site. For other object categories, units were discussed within the review team and were usually related material by object type, such as doors, or by location, such as bay or rack.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Number of staff</th>
<th>Staff hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservation and collections care</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curatorial</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and engagement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outcomes and lessons learned.

- Improved and enhanced knowledge and understanding of permanent collections by HRP staff. The project has deliberately taken a high level appraisal of collections, but within these parameters a greater understanding and accountability for collections has been achieved. This will enable clearer identification of collection gaps and support the development of the organisation-wide collections development policy.
- Clearer knowledge of collections and their needs will allow greater promotion of collections both internally and externally and enhance research and use of the collections.
- Cross-disciplinary working across all curatorial, learning and engagement, and interpretation departments has resulted in a multi-layered response to the collections review. This has ensured that new approaches to reviewing objects have been applied; object significance is measured in terms of curatorial value equally with learning potential and user engagement.
- The need to prioritise care of collections in some areas and ensure the new storage facility is efficient and effective to meet these needs has been identified. Using clearly zoned areas within the store for specific collections needs would address this.
- The best reviewing sessions happened when the curator had spent some time either researching the collection on the Collections Management System, or in the store, and the objects were already arranged in a meaningful manner according to object type, excavation or provenance. Practical considerations such as the temperature of the stores, and how to record data can be critical.

'It was a hard slog working in stores in the summer heat, and although we considered going digital with a tablet to record reviewing data, we went with pencil and paper, and then the project manager input all data, moderating at the same time for consistent results.'

- It was critical to the success of this project that senior management bought into the project and gave time in work plans to curators and other department members to review and prepare for the work.

Next steps

The collections identified material which could form the basis of a handling collection for use in learning and engagement activities and has led to a project to create a handling collection. Certain significant parts of the collection are in need of basic and detailed documentation, such as the archaeology and architectural fixtures and fittings collections. A second phase of this project has been set up to address this issue and a team of cataloguers and a project manager have been recruited. This work, plus curatorial research, will feed into a rationalisation plan before collections are moved to the new store.

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