

Review and Rationalisation of Collections at North Hertfordshire Museums Service



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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 North Hertfordshire Museum Service over the last two years. 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 the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust](#)
- [Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at Leicestershire County Council Museums Service](#)
- [Good Practice Case Study: Collections Review and Rationalisation at Historic Royal Palaces](#)

North Hertfordshire Museum Service museums have Provisional Accreditation status, the most recent award being November 2013

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 focusses 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.

North Hertfordshire Museum Service: Case Study

North Hertfordshire District Council provides the **North Hertfordshire Museums Service**. The council is currently in the process of developing the new North Hertfordshire Museum, which will bring together the collections of Letchworth Museum and Art Gallery and Hitchin Museum and Art Gallery into a single venue at Hitchin Town Hall.



The museum service aims to use its collections to tell the stories of the people who lived and worked in the district and through these to increase enjoyment and understanding of culture and heritage. It also aims to ensure that collections are used effectively and are accessible. The collections held by the museum service cover a range of subject areas and include archaeology, social history, natural sciences, costume, art and photographs and documents.

Project summary

The main reason for reviewing collections was the development of the new North Hertfordshire Museum; the museum will open in summer 2015 and will combine the collections of Letchworth Museum and Art Gallery and Hitchin Museum and Art Gallery.

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Butterflies originally on loan from Bognor Museum which closed in the 1960s

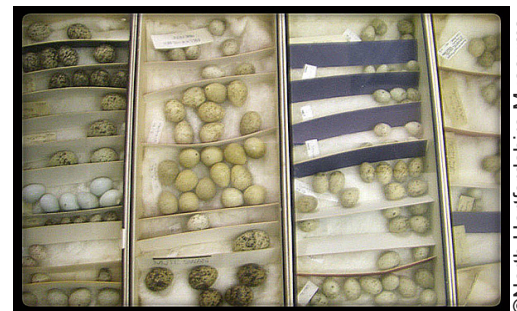
A two year period of development created an opportunity to focus on the collections before the opening of the new museum and coincided with the review of the Natural History collections by volunteer Bob Press, who previously worked at the Natural History Museum. This led to the review and rationalisation of the Holben birds egg collection, which was completed in-house but was supported by Bob Press who provided expert natural history knowledge plus an understanding of relevant legislation and ethics.

The project staff and volunteers were supported by the [Share Museums East](#) Rationalisation project, which provided a forum for support and discussion with other museums and enabled a robust methodology to develop.

Project description

The Holben birds' egg collection was an historic collection of known importance. The collections review was influenced by:

- The sensitive nature of the collections, which are fragile and susceptible to light damage and security issues
- The legal and ethical restrictions on use and display of birds egg collections
- The importance of ensuring that in the long term collections should be as accessible as possible
- The current storage and documentation of the eggs, which was judged to be poor
- The importance of the collections as a research and taxonomic tool and the need to ensure access to them
- The museum not employing a specialist natural history curator
- Access to the knowledge and expertise of an expert volunteer



Eggs from the Holben collection

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Service - 2014

Methodology

The museum reviewed published collections review methodologies and developed a Rationalisation Assessment Form (see **Appendix 1**) to guide the collections review work. The following areas were identified for assessment:

- Relevance
- Condition
- Duplication
- Safety (Health and safety issues)

- Usefulness
- Context
- Ethics

A full examination of the records held about the collections was carried out. This revealed that an earlier report on the natural history collections had identified the importance of the Holben birds' egg collection. It also mentioned that forty years earlier a part of the collection had been transferred to the Natural History Museum store at Tring.

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Bird skins on loan from the London Natural History Society

There were a large number of manuscripts, photos and correspondence relating to the collection and it was also apparent that there were some eggs, belonging to the original collection, which had arrived at the museum by a separate route; these eggs were unknown outside the museum.

The collections review identified that rationalisation would be the preferred option for the collection as a whole; the following issues were identified:

- None of the Holben collection met the museum's collecting criteria for a clear and obvious geographical link to the district of North Hertfordshire or the county
- The collection was of significance and internationally important
- Collections of this type should not be split
- There was no evidence that the collection had been consulted or used in recent times
- The storage conditions at the museum were not ideal
- Part of the collection was already housed at the National History Museum at Tring
- There was evidence that the portion of the collection held at the Natural History Museum, Tring was actively used for research
- Transfer of the Holben collection would free up large amounts of storage space, enabling the remainder of the natural history collections to be better housed and curated

Once the collections review was completed it was evident that the preferred option for the collection would be for all parts to be brought together as one collection.

Following the Museums Association (MA) [Code of Ethics](#) and MA [Disposal Toolkit](#) as a guide the museum service therefore entered into discussions with the Natural History Museum in Tring to ascertain whether it would be willing to accept a transfer; this was agreed as the preferred option.

To ensure transparency and involvement of stakeholders, consultation with interested parties was carried out, including the local natural history society; everyone consulted supported the transfer proposal.

The necessary decisions for the disposal were agreed by the council.

Outcomes and lessons learned

- The decision to transfer the birds' eggs has enabled the three parts of the collection to be brought together in good environmental conditions, allowing improved understanding of the whole collection with enhanced access
- Transfer of the Holben collection freed up large amounts of storage space, enabling the remainder of the natural history collections to be better housed and curated
- Staff and volunteer expertise and confidence in conducting collections review and rationalisation projects have increased
- The importance of good documentation to support the review process is apparent.

Next steps

This project was seen as a pilot project and the first step in a wider review and rationalisation project for all collections. The museum service is embarking on a systematic approach to all other collections which it is approaching on a project by project basis. This allows for collections review criteria to be amended and for the collections team to celebrate small triumphs and not become overwhelmed with the issues.

'The project has been incredibly useful; reviewing the collections has helped us think more about display and use of objects. Once you get started it seems like common sense; we now feel confident in approaching the other parts of the collection.'

Case Study published by the Collections Trust, November 2014, with funding from Arts Council England

Appendix 1: North Hertfordshire Museums Service Rationalisation Assessment Form

North Hertfordshire Museums Service Rationalisation Assessment Form



Single Object/Collection (delete as appropriate)

Object ref no.	
Short object name	
Brief object description	

Relevance		
	Y/N	Reasons
Does item match the current collecting policy and mission?		
Would it be more appropriate to another museum's or organisation's collection?		
Condition		
Has item deteriorated beyond use?		
Duplicate		
Is the item a duplicate?		
If the item is a duplicate, can it be used elsewhere within the museum e.g. handling/education/reminiscence		
If the item is a duplicate and cannot be used elsewhere within the museum, can it be used elsewhere outside museum e.g. at other museums.		
Safety		
Is item a threat to people or other objects (e.g. through infestation or health and safety concerns)?		

North Hertfordshire Museums Service
Rationalisation Assessment Form



Usefulness		
Is item likely to be useful for display or research?		
Context		
Is item provenanced (i.e. has sufficient background information to provide a context)?		
Ethics		
Has item been unethically acquired or are there other ethical concerns surrounding its ownership and use?		

Assessment Summary	
FURTHER RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION?	

Completed by:
(signature) _____

(print name) _____

Others involved in consultation _____

Date _____

**North Hertfordshire Museums Service
Rationalisation Assessment Form**



Object ref no.	
Short object name	

Recommendations	Y/N	Details
Allocate item to a different use within the museum		
Return item on loan		
Convert loan to gift to the museum		
Dispose by gift to another Accredited museum or to other organisations or individuals		
Dispose by sale to another Accredited museum or to other organisations or individuals		
Dispose in cases of restitution, repatriation or spoliation		
Dispose by recycling		
Dispose by destruction – full or partial, in cases where no other option exists		

Completed by: (signature)		Print name:	
Date:			
Others involved in consultation			
Countersigned by: (signature)		Print name:	
Date			