

Review of the Offer for Schools at Portsmouth Museums

Introduction

Portsmouth Museums manages six venues that are open to the public:

- Portsmouth City Museum
- D-Day Museum
- Cumberland House Natural History Museum
- Southsea Castle
- Charles Dickens' Birthplace
- Eastney Beam Engine House

The offer for schools includes self-led visits, museum trails, led sessions delivered by Interpreter Demonstrators and the School Loans Collection. This offer is enhanced by one-off projects such as *Flights of Fancy* in 2013 which enabled over 100 children from two local primary schools to work with an artist and a writer to produce artwork and stories inspired by natural history specimens for display at the refurbished Cumberland House, and externally funded projects such as *Discovering D-Day* in 2011/ 2012 in which pupils from local secondary schools produced artwork and creative writing in response to museum displays and meetings with veterans.

The offer for schools has changed little in recent years. The aim of this review is to ensure that the schools offer at Portsmouth Museums:

- Provides high quality, collections-focused learning opportunities for schools
- Responds to the changing needs of schools
- Focuses on quality not quantity
- Is achievable, sustainable and inspirational

The review process has been complicated by the on-going review of the National Curriculum, in particular the confirmation in October 2013 that the Tudors and World War II, key topics in the current offer for schools, will no longer be core elements of the primary history curriculum from September 2014. The new National Curriculum is the most significant external factor affecting recommendations for the future of the schools' offer at Portsmouth Museums.

Led Sessions

Portsmouth Museums introduced led sessions for schools in the 1980s.

These sessions:

- Are delivered by knowledgeable and skilful facilitators
- Provide inspirational learning opportunities based on real objects and historic buildings
- Use museum objects to bring history to life
- Are linked to the National Curriculum and tailored to specific age groups
- Bring added value to visits to sites managed by Portsmouth Museums
- Provide pupils and teachers with memorable and enjoyable experiences.

The led sessions are delivered on a full cost recovery basis and must attract enough bookings each year to cover costs.

Four led sessions are currently on offer, all aimed at Key Stages 1 & 2 (primary schools):

What: The Home Front Experience at D-Day Museum

A lively one hour session in which children investigate original artefacts and documents and engage in role play to find out what everyday life was like for families during World War II.

The session is delivered by a single interpreter demonstrator. The role is shared by two temporary, part-time employees, recruited, trained and managed each year by the Learning Officer.

When: Tuesdays, Wednesdays & Thursdays from November to March

Cost: £40 for one workshop; £60 for two workshops; £100 for three workshops; £120 for four workshops. Non-Portsmouth City Council schools are also charged separately for admission to the museum.

Numbers: 2,300 to 2,900 children from 45 to 55 different schools each year.

What: The Tudors at Southsea Castle

An exciting and dramatic two hour session in which Time Guides take children back to 1545 to experience life in Tudor times through their encounters with a series of costumed characters.

The session is delivered by a team of costumed interpreters who 'dress' the Castle with high quality replica artefacts to complement the original objects on view at this historic site. The contract to devise and deliver the programme was put out to tender and awarded to Tempus Fugitive. The director of the company recruits, trains, manages and arranges accommodation for a team of approximately seven interpreters each year and liaises with the Learning Officer and staff on site at the Castle to ensure that the programme runs smoothly.

When: Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays & Thursdays over four weeks in June / July (15 days in total).
Cost: £6 per pupil.
Numbers: 1,600 to 1,700 children from 28 to 30 different schools each year.

What: The Tudors at the Square Tower

A two hour session in which children are introduced to different aspects of Tudor life when they meet Lady Avis and members of her household. The session has been delivered by the same team of five costumed interpreters for many years. The team is recruited and trained by freelance historical interpreter Denise Quinney but their contracts for the programme are with Portsmouth Museums. Costumes and high quality replica artefacts for 'dressing' the tower are provided by Denise and members of the team and suits of armour, benches, dustsheets and lunchboxes are provided by Portsmouth Museums. The Learning Officer books a van and a member of Front of House staff is brought in to drive it and collect and return objects and equipment from Denise's house, Southsea Castle and D-Day Museum. As the Square Tower is no longer managed by Portsmouth Museums, a member of Front of House staff is brought in to open and lock the Tower at the start and end of each day the programme runs. Denise also liaises with the Learning Officer and museum admin team to ensure that the programme runs smoothly.

When: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays & Fridays for two weeks in October (total eight days).
Cost: £4 per pupil.
Numbers: 450 to 800 children from 9 to 13 different schools each year.

What: Toys & Games from the Past at Portsmouth City Museum

A fun, hands-on one hour session in which children investigate and play with a range of toys and games from the past. The session is delivered by a single interpreter demonstrator employed on a casual basis and recruited, trained and managed by the Learning Officer. The low rate of pay for these sessions has resulted in a high turnover of interpreter demonstrators.

When: On request subject to the availability of the Activity Room and staff.
Cost to schools: £40 for one workshop; £60 for two workshops; £100 for three workshops; £120 for four workshops.
Numbers: Not available.

Evaluation of led-sessions

Feedback forms from schools demonstrate that the led sessions are highly regarded. The quotations below are a small but representative sample of the views expressed on the forms:

- “The children were thrilled that they were able to actually hold the artefacts and it brought all they had learnt in class to life.” (KS2 teacher, Home Front Experience 2013)
- “This was a brilliant day and exactly matched what we needed – we just wished we could have stayed for longer!” (KS2 teacher, Home Front Experience 2013)
- “It was a thoroughly enjoyable trip. It supported the classroom learning and was enjoyed by children and adults. Thank you!” (KS2 teacher, Tudors at Southsea Castle 2013)
- “This was one of the best trips I have ever been on in 12 years of teaching. My children were enthralled. Even my Special Educational Needs children were engaged. We will definitely book again!” (KS2 teacher, Tudors at Southsea Castle 2013)
- “Children had a fantastic time and learnt lots!” (KS2 teacher, Tudors at Southsea Castle 2013)

Teachers consistently score the sessions highly in terms of quality of content, quality of delivery and value for money.

Teachers particularly value the fact that our sessions enable children to experience and learn from original objects and historic buildings.

Teachers recognise that our sessions enhance classroom teaching and learning and cater for children with a range of learning styles.

The sessions attract a significant number of repeat bookings.

The sessions do attract bookings from Portsmouth schools but the majority of bookings are from maintained and independent schools from outside the city. In 2012 / 2013 for example schools travelled from Havant, Petersfield, Reading, Oxford, Gosport, Southampton, Bournemouth, Chichester, Bognor Regis, Littlehampton and the Isle of Wight.

However, overall bookings for led-sessions have been uneven in recent years. The sessions have not been full to capacity and income from bookings has not always covered costs.

Reasons for this could include:

- Increased competition for school visits from other museums, heritage attractions and outdoor education sites.
- Changes in the pattern of school trips nationally, with demonstrable links to a narrow range of key curriculum areas and access to objects, sites, knowledge and skills that teachers would find it difficult to provide in school outweighing other factors such as an interesting and enjoyable day out.
- Inconsistent promotion of the schools' offer.
- A tendency to rely on repeat bookings for established sessions at the expense of exploring how the offer could be developed.

Recommendations for led sessions

The new National Curriculum is the most significant external factor affecting recommendations for the future of the schools' offer at Portsmouth Museums. Here, as with many other museums, the majority of school visits are from primary schools and most of them are motivated by links to the history curriculum. At a training session on history teaching in primary schools in November 2013 Hampshire County Council's Inspector / Advisor for History made it clear that museum offers will be viable only if they support delivery of the new National Curriculum. The emphasis of the new history curriculum for primary schools is on British history up to 1065. Topics supported by many museum visits nationally under the current curriculum such as the Tudors, the Victorians and World War II will cease to be compulsory elements of the Key Stage 2 history curriculum from September 2014. The Advisor stressed that from September 2014 museums cannot expect bookings from primary schools for the sessions they currently offer on the Tudors, The Victorians and World War II.

The following recommendations are informed by bookings for led-sessions over the past three years, feedback from teachers and changes to the National Curriculum:

- That Tudors at the Square Tower is removed from the schools' offer with immediate effect. The programme is not cost effective, it involves a lot of staff time and the fact that the Square Tower is no longer managed by Portsmouth Museums raises concerns around Health & Safety and security.
- That Tudors at Southsea Castle is run for eight or nine days in June / July 2014 instead of 15 to reduce the financial risk if the programme is not fully booked.
- That the Learning Officer investigates whether or not Tudors at Southsea Castle and the Home Front Experience can be modified in such a way that they will be strong contenders for bookings from any primary schools choosing these periods as their 'local history study post 1066' under the new curriculum.
- That the Learning Officer makes a decision on the future of Tudors at Southsea Castle and the Home Front Experience by May 2014.

- That Toys & Games from the Past continues to be offered but is revised to ensure the closest possible match with the new Key Stage 1 history curriculum.
- That new ways of working with schools are actively explored, for example the self-led learning resources produced for use by primary schools visiting the Secret Egypt exhibition.
- That the potential for developing new led sessions for schools is explored.
- That the pricing structure for led sessions for schools is reviewed to remove inconsistencies and to reflect both the cost of delivering sessions and prices for similar sessions offered by other museums. A price per pupil is favoured over a price per session.
- That the terms on which we employ session deliverers are reviewed to give greater consistency and increase our chances of retaining high quality staff. Payment per session delivered is favoured over the current hourly rate.

School Loans Collection

The School Loans Collection (SLC) is a rich and versatile resource, full of objects that can amaze and inspire learners of all ages. Established in the late 1960s / 1970s, it now contains over 1,000 objects grouped into art, history and natural history categories. The SLC is mainly used by local schools and colleges. Loans are administered by Portsmouth Museums' administration team and managed by the Collections Supervisor at our off-site store. Loans are delivered to and collected from Portsmouth City Council schools by the Council's despatch service. Other borrowers collect and return loans boxes themselves. Use of the SLC is free of charge.

Evaluation of the School Loans Collection

The SLC has been well-used and enjoyed by generations of children and teachers and is now showing its age. Most loans items consist of single objects housed in bespoke wooden boxes. These are sturdy and secure but unattractive. Reductions in staffing levels mean that there is less time for routine maintenance and repairs. The loans boxes are generally tired looking and many lack even the most basic information about their contents.

The profile of the SLC with local teachers is low, with regular borrowers accounting for a high percentage of loans. There is no comprehensive, illustrated and accessible catalogue listing the items available for schools to borrow.

The 2010 Learning & Access Strategy for Portsmouth Museums & Records highlighted the need to review and streamline the SLC.

By 2011 / 2012 the number of requests to borrow artworks from the SLC had fallen to such a low level that they were removed from the list of items available on loan. Several works were transferred into the main collections, and works on paper were de-framed to reduce the amount of storage space required.

In August 2013 a freelancer was brought in to advise on how items in the SLC could be grouped together to create new themed boxes to support the National Curriculum. Priority was given to items linked to ancient Egypt to complement the *Secret Egypt* exhibition. Egypt is one of the ancient civilisations that primary schools can choose to study in both the current and the new history curriculum. Six new or refreshed loans boxes, each containing multiple objects, are in production and will be ready by the end of November.

Recommendations for the School Loans Collection

- That a programme of review, rationalisation and re-presentation is essential if the SLC is to remain high quality, accessible and relevant to changing needs and expectations. This is a major undertaking and will need to be tackled in stages.
- That priority should be given to the natural history specimens, the most requested loans items in recent years, and to the production of new multiple item boxes to support the new history curriculum.
- That the Learning Officer should liaise with the Collections Manager / Registrar to identify objects for which a transfer to the main museum collections is the most appropriate option.
- That items that are damaged beyond repair or no longer relevant to schools, such as video tapes, should be disposed of in accordance with the guidelines for disposal in the Collections Development Plan.
- That packaging of the loan items should be refreshed or replaced and clearly branded to identify it as a resource provided by Portsmouth Museums.
- That standardised contents lists should be produced for all loans boxes. Any additional supporting material should also follow a consistent format. All printed material should be clearly branded to identify the loans boxes as a learning resource provided by Portsmouth Museums.
- That a new, fully illustrated online catalogue should be produced as part of a wider campaign to raise awareness of the SLC and increase its accessibility.
- That from September 2014 charges should be introduced for all users of the SLC to reflect the amount of staff time involved in administering and managing loans and to bring Portsmouth Museums in line with other museums that provide a loans service. A charge of £30 for one thematic box containing multiple objects or three boxes containing single items or natural history specimens per loan period (currently up to three weeks) is recommended. This is lower than the price charged for comparable loans boxes elsewhere to ease the transition from a free service to pay as you use.

- That consideration should be given to recruiting a suitably skilled volunteer to work on repair and maintenance of the loans boxes.
- That consideration should be given to promoting the SLC to a wider range of borrowers such as community groups.
- That the new-look SLC should be re-launched as the Community Loans Collection.

Conclusion

Portsmouth Museums has an impressive track record of delivering high quality, collections-based learning opportunities for schools. If the offer for schools is to remain attractive it must respond to their changing needs and expectations in an increasingly competitive market. In the short term, especially in view of the new National Curriculum, this may result in a reduced offer and a corresponding fall in the number of schools visiting the sites managed by Portsmouth Museums. If changes are not made, we risk a more gradual decline in school bookings as resources that were at the forefront of museum learning when they were introduced lose their appeal. The new National Curriculum undoubtedly presents challenges for museums. It also gives us opportunities to re-evaluate how we work with schools and to think creatively about we can put collections at the heart of learning to enable children to access, understand, enjoy and be inspired by their cultural heritage.

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