

BEATING THE CRUNCH: Delivering Local Studies and Heritage Library Services in Challenging Times

Anne Sharp

With little sign of the recession lifting, increasing pressures placed on local authority budgets, and ever more complex demands placed on local studies and archives services, how can we continue to maintain, develop and deliver these services to meet current and future demands? Do we admit defeat or do we explore other ways of doing things?

This article shares some of the challenges faced by South Tyneside Libraries, and steps we have taken to overcome the barriers and constraints.

South Tyneside, once part of County Durham, now standing alone within the Tyne and Wear conurbation, is geographically small, but with a comparatively large population and fascinating local heritage. The Great North Run leads some 54,000 runners to the stunning coastline at South Shields every year. Heritage and Tourism are recognised as vital to the local economy. The riverside can be alluring and intriguing, with clues to the former businesses along the river and the industries that have declined and disappeared: fishing, boatbuilding, coalmining, salt-panning, glass-making, chemical industries, and shipbuilding. Part of the Durham coalfield, Tyneside drew people from Wales, Scotland and Ireland, to work in the coalfields and other industries, and to take advantage of other opportunities which grew up alongside. The river carried coals from Newcastle, to London and beyond, and brought sailors to Tyneside, for work and training.

When interviewed for the post of Local Studies Librarian in 2005 the strengths and weakness of the service were made known:

Strengths

The collection is a wonderful treasure trove, with printed works covering Northumbria generally and South Tyneside specifically. The South Tyneside collection comprises photographs, maps, ephemera, newspapers, microforms and audio visual materials. There are five microfilm reader printers, one fiche reader, and four People's Network terminals. All printed works are catalogued on card. Many local printed works have been indexed on card. The department is within the central library, and is open six days a week, with late night opening to 7pm on four days. The Local Studies Library is situated in the basement of the Central Library, in South Shields, which is on the metro line from Newcastle and Sunderland, and accessible from the north side of the river Tyne by ferry. There is a car park outside the library. The department can be reached by stairs or lift, and the service is enhanced by the proximity of a cafe, toilets and library theatre. There are two full time members of staff, a librarian and senior library assistant.

The services of the library are well used by family historians, local historians,

schoolchildren, students, teachers, councillors, other librarians, museums and archives, planners, architects, authors, and browsers.

Weaknesses

Non-book materials seemed to disappear into a chasm. While the knowledge of staff within the department was recognised, the collection remained a mystery to the uninitiated. There were backlogs of photographs and donations waiting to be sifted, indexed and catalogued. Many items of the collection, including the card index, were not publicly accessible, for reasons of security and lack of space. Retrieving items for enquiries often necessitated leaving the department unattended. There was insufficient capacity within the department to make a meaningful impression on the backlogs, and insufficient capacity within the rest of the library service to bring additional staffing in. The option of disappearing into the stack to sort, index and catalogue was not an option in the climate of project and partnership working. So we turned to the bigger picture to look for solutions. We needed to create a balance.

Opportunities to meet the Challenges

The first three months in post provided time to take stock, to get to know the collection, how it was used, and individuals and teams within the library service, colleagues and potential partners outside of libraries, the needs of regular customers and occasional visitors; to assess the wider picture and to consider the challenges set. This involved a process of exploring the chasm, mapping the collection, identifying gaps, assessing the scale of backlogs, considering priorities, finding funding and support.

The traditional local studies service remains essential: acquiring, cataloguing books and non-book materials, indexing information, answering enquiries, supporting research and publishing. However, the service also has a vital role in meeting council and government priorities, which change as the needs of society change. Sense of Place is high on the Council agenda, along with community engagement, family and informal learning opportunities. The value of the local heritage to the area and potentially to the economy is recognised: the Cultural Services department had developed an exciting heritage trail and walks, which enhanced the experience of visiting the local area, and uncovered the amazing heritage. There was a wish to develop this further, by digitising the photographs and publishing these to a website, but funding had yet to be found.

How could we balance the traditional role with the new challenges without additional staff?

Developments

Access to websites such as Ancestry has enabled aspects of the family history service to spread across other departments and branch libraries. All library assistants across the service have received introductory training in Ancestry and how local studies resources, such as maps, photographs and trade directories, help to build up a picture of the past. The Council's online register search service

is one of the most popular parts of the Council Website: made possible with the drive and support of the Web team and volunteers, this service has enabled researchers to make preparatory searches at home, before visiting the library.

Support

Recognising the need for support, we set up a local history group of, and for, individuals interested in local heritage. The group developed a role to support the local studies library, with projects which enable volunteers to contribute to collection care, (for instance a glass negative repackaging project) outreach to schools and homes, to create and support displays in the community, and to support programmes for local history month and heritage open days.

Strategy

The first step was to map the collection and list all things that needed doing, - everything from labelling a drawer on a filing cabinet, bringing card indexes into the public domain, sourcing and purchasing copies of maps to plug gaps, and putting the 19th century posters into order.

The next step was to develop an action plan to deal with the major backlogs, and identify priorities. Dropping a collection, for instance indexing the newspapers rather than cutting and filing the articles, did not meet with approval. As main articles in the local paper are now archived online, and there are microfilm copies of the local newspaper at Colindale, although the newspaper cuttings collection required attention, this is a lower priority compared with the photograph and map collections. Plugging the gaps in the map collection was achievable with a planned acquisition strategy.

Support Services took on the task of putting catalogue records online. Mindful of the size of this task, we approached this challenge strategically, working not from 0 – 999, but from 942, and then to titles most relevant to South Tyneside, then Tyne and Wear, Durham, and so on.

The pictorial survey was the most vulnerable and least accessible area of the collection. The photographs are stored carefully in any available space in the basement stack, a store shared with other library service collections. The full potential of the collection is not realised, in terms of access and income generation.

Opportunities

If the photograph collection could be digitised, and incorporated into a searchable electronic database, many problems could be addressed. In addition, copyright information could be linked directly with electronic copies of each image. Published, the website would address issues of access, supporting education, research and provide resources for reminiscence. It would also create a memorial to the changing heritage, and possibly address many of the issues of loss experienced by local people. The digital surrogate images would prevent further

wear and tear on photographs, and provide a back up to be stored elsewhere, to meet disaster management issues. Unprecedented access to a valuable collection of images would create opportunities for income generation. In summary, digitisation offered a solution to many of the problems that we faced. Digitising the photographs became the main priority and focus for attention – a project that would eventually become a mainstream activity.

The next challenge was finding the funding to achieve this. An earlier bid for heritage lottery funding had not been successful – a large bid providing opportunities for community engagement. We looked to turn this idea upside down and to build our digitisation programme project by project. To this end we put in a pre-application for lottery funding from Your Heritage. This was a project to digitise up to 4,000 images which describe the considerable changes to the riverside - a regeneration area and a council priority. Our application was supported and we received funding to purchase image management software and website frontend, with opportunities to work with local communities and volunteers. Library and Council ICT provided support in sourcing and evaluating image management software, and developing the procedures to enable volunteers to support the project (CRB checks and log-ins for volunteers).

Building capacity to support community engagement was developed through a second project: *Respecting the Past – Remembering South Tyneside Wartime Memories*, funded by the Big Lottery through TPYF2 (Their Past Your Future 2 – coordinated nationally by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council). This was an inter-generational reminiscence drama project, which explored the impact of World War 2 on the local area and people. This project encouraged engagement across the Borough, breaking down parochial boundaries and bringing in material about bomb damage to areas outside of South Shields, oral histories of women shipyard workers, and so on. There were local history and creative writing workshops for different generations. The drama, based on the experience of local children in World War 2, was taken out to schools and performed to public audiences.

Both projects have been supported by other initiatives, for example Creative Partnerships, Opening Cultural Doors and Find Your Talent, which have enabled colleagues in libraries, museums and archives to engage schoolchildren, ESOL students and Homereaders (housebound) with project activity, by coordinating visits, paying transport costs and organising crèches.

Volunteers support the collection and projects, giving time to a range of activities: listing donations, putting images into the main sequences ready for indexing, sharing their knowledge of the local area to describe images for the website, scanning images, inputting information, creating and taking displays out into the community, supporting heritage open days and local history month, organising and delivering a programme of monthly talks, and project meetings, recording memories and helping to evaluate project activity. The volunteers have come forward from local and family history groups in the area, as a result of the

librarian giving talks about the collection, and also from Culture Works – an initiative funded by One North East and administered locally by Age Concern, to provide opportunities to engage with and contribute to local heritage.

Results

Outreach displays, events and photographic competitions have created opportunities for media coverage, and for individuals, colleagues and partners to give time to support a valuable heritage resource which in turn will support education, research, publishing and regeneration. Local people have an increased awareness of local heritage and access to sources within the collection. The local studies collection has an increasing presence on the online catalogue and an increasing number of images are now accessible on our pilot website. Customers can research from a distance and prepare their visit in advance. When they arrive they can use the indexes independently and have access to nearly a full range of maps representing the history and development of South Tyneside.

The traditional roles of acquiring, processing and cataloguing material, thus making this material accessible are still important, as are assisting customers and answering enquiries. However, the role of local studies has been enhanced through the coordination and development of the volunteer role, in caring for and increasing access to the collection. Working in partnership to deliver projects to targeted audiences has brought in funding to produce better quality publicity material, media opportunities, to develop the service and enable outreach – helping to find ways to beat the crunch.

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JUST ONE WORLD – OR IS IT? Information Skills for the Small Museum

Diana Dixon

As a newcomer to managing a small local studies museum I started to question whether my traditional library skills would transfer comfortably to this new environment. Southwold Museum opened in 1933 as an independent museum and it was completely refurbished in 2008. Its permanent exhibition was highly commended at the Museums and Heritage Awards in 2009 and this year it attracted over 7,000 visitors. With some 4,000 objects of all shapes and sizes ranging from 14' high Viking rudders to a tiny light bulb from our operational lighthouse, prints and paintings, over 4000 photographs, archives and a local studies library, it covers a wide range of materials. We also answer a large number of queries relating to local and family history. Some knowledge of local studies work was certainly a help but I soon realized that there were glaring gaps in my skills.

'Local studies stands at the cutting edge of modern library and information work and demands a variety of skills and techniques' ¹ so my first task was to identify these skills. To a large extent my task was made easier by Jill Barber's