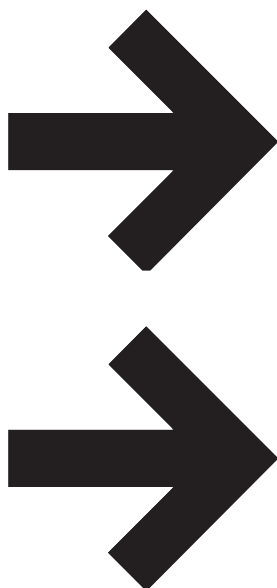


Reading Museum Service The Museum's Schools Loan Service

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In 1911, The Museum's Schools Loan Service, as it was named, began. It was one of the first museum services to give children «contact with actual material». By 1950, Berkshire County Council began to fund the service, which was moved, firstly to Castle Street in 1964, and then to Yeomanry House in 1970. Over the years many changes to the service have occurred, and it is now housed and managed within the Museum of Reading building.

The loans service employs a full-time booking assistant and two collection care technicians, and is managed by the Museum Education Department. The collection has grown to a substantial size over the years, now comprising more than 1,700 boxes. More than 2,000 boxes are used by schools each year. The majority of the objects used are genuine, as opposed to replicas, and the service has developed innovative ways to package fragile items, such as the «perspex sandwich».

Between 1999 and 2001, the government department of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) funded an extensive research project, «Loans for a New Millenium», led by Joy McAlpine, to analyse the learning potential of loans through focus groups, student questionnaires, in-depth teacher and student interviews, and classroom observations. Among its many findings was the exciting result that each box is used on average by 7 classes, giving approximately 300,000 pupil-uses for the service per year -a much higher figure than had previously been estimated. An identified teacher demand for display material for their classes, led to new travelling display cases with pull-out drawers for handling material. This research has led to five publications in UK professional journals, and the findings and data will be published on the web in the near future.

In 2000, the Museum released a web site that enables schools to view a picture catalogue and se-



'Hands-On Learning' offers learning opportunities that are creative and imaginative and is based on the use of real museum objects.

lect, and book, boxes on-line. This is believed to be the world's first fully on-line museum loans service.

■ FUNDING THE SERVICE

By April 1998, the regional government functions of the County of Berkshire were all devolved to six smaller unitary authorities (Reading, Bracknell, Windsor & Maidenhead, Slough, Wokingham, and West Berkshire) and the centrally held County education budget, which had previously funded the Reading Museum Loan Service, was delegated to those administrative units. The system for



controlling budgets within each authority is now under constant change, with schools controlling their budgets to different degrees. In consequence, Reading Museum has had to devise a new strategy for funding the loans service, as follows :

- Charges made direct to the schools (some payment being made via unitary authorities).
- Museum sponsorship in the form of the establishment of a Corporate Membership Scheme for local businesses. This partnership scheme provides support for the Loans Service and allows members to gain marketing advanta-

ges, and some unusual benefits for their staff and clients - in particular, a beautiful object from the museum collection in a purpose-built case for display in their foyer.

- Increased financial support from Reading Borough Council, as part of their commitment to the Museum as a regional service.

These financial changes have resulted in the Museum dealing with individual schools «on the open market», with only minimal support from the Unitary Authorities other than Reading. It is not new enough to provide an excellent service for schools, the Loans Service now has to compete with all the other demands on school budgets. It, therefore, has to inform schools, through effective marketing, of the value of learning through contact with museum collections.

Schools can choose to hire individual boxes for £25 if they collect and return themselves, or take out an annual membership which entitles them to 24 boxes delivered and collected during the year.

■ MARKETING STRATEGY

The following decisions have been made to ensure that the service is able to operate successfully throughout the financial changes of recent times :

- Maintain contact with all the schools currently using the service - ensure they are all ordering as many boxes as they are entitled to and that they are happy with the service they are receiving (through telephone calls and evaluation forms).
- Make contact with schools, who are not currently using the service through letters and telephone calls - offer to send museum staff out to staff-rooms to give a free pre-

sensation about the loans service, including suggestions for ways to use museum objects.

- Devise a new, more flexible method of subscribing to the scheme, including additional choices of education services provided.

- Work on producing more of the 'popular' boxes, that is, those subjects or areas requested most frequently by users.

■ FUTURE WORK

- Build on outcomes of DfES «Loans for a New Millennium» research project :

- Apply for funding to support research and writing up of new co-ordinated notes for all loans boxes

- Upgrade boxes to the new standard

- Use research findings in marketing approaches, for example, 'after a given time, lower ability boys remember the most about an object they have worked with than any other group of students'.

- Continue to develop the web-site, to include further suggestions for means of using the loans in the classroom, and opportunities for feedback from teachers.

Reading is facing a number of challenges, but the commitment to promoting the learning power of handling real objects remains central to the development strategy of the whole Museum Service. Work in recent years has led to the Reading Museum Loans Service developing national recognition, and it is now widely seen as the best loans service in Britain. Reading has held consultancy days for museums throughout the country to encourage the development of loans services in other centres. In a recent important strategic docu-

ment for government, the importance of loans services was highlighted, and a vision of «every primary school should be given the chance to work with museum objects as part of their core curriculum entitlement» was stated.

Several English museums have closed their loans service during the last ten years. This tendency may now be reversed. Reading is now looking to build on this national support by applying for direct funding from central government, to lead a widening of loans service provision throughout the south east of England. Exciting times lie ahead.

