

Heritage for All: ethnic minority attitudes to museums and heritage sites

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Introduction

For well over a decade, museums in the United Kingdom have been aware that their services need to be made more accessible to the growing number of ethnic minority communities across the country.

Many individual museum services, especially those in areas with significant ethnic minority populations, have undertaken much good work in building relationships, developing relevant exhibitions and activities, and initiating collecting policies and recording systems to present and preserve the traditions and experiences of ethnic minority communities. Examples of such good practice can be found, for example, in Bradford, Halifax and Rotherham, all of which are in the Yorkshire region in the north-east of England. However, the majority of work undertaken by such museum services has been project-based, often with special funding, and has concentrated on dealing with the heritage of individual ethnic minority communities. Such initiatives have been valuable in encouraging many first-time attenders for whom museum-going may not have been a traditional family activity. It is obvious for example, that a special exhibition on Sikh culture, developed in partnership with the Sikh community, is likely to attract Sikh families, as well as a range of other visitors.

In some larger cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool, ethnic minority communities have also participated in developing permanent galleries on broader subjects such as rites of passage and slavery. Such community consultation can often be challenging and time-consuming but results in a strong sense of cultural ownership.

Such examples, however, represent only a tiny fraction of the 3,000 or so museums and historic sites which are in the public domain in the United Kingdom. Many of these are sites in areas where there are few or no ethnic minority communities and have a focus which is likely to remain centred on English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland history. A key challenge is to build ethnic minority audiences for such venues, which often have no direct cultural relevance to the communities involved. This issue is important because ethnic minority communities also contribute to the upkeep of such sites through their national and local taxes and, in the longer term, they represent a valuable and still largely untapped audience in what is currently a static (or even slightly declining) visitor market.

In the Yorkshire region, the percentage of ethnic minority groups (based on 1991 census figures) is 4.4% compared to a national average of 5.5%, but this is expected to continue growing over the next decade. However, some districts within the region have a far higher percentage, for example the city of Bradford has 15.6% and Kirklees has 8.6%, whereas the largely rural sub-region of North Yorkshire has only 0.7%.

The Project

In order to begin to tackle the issue of ethnic minority audience development on a more strategic regional level, the Yorkshire Museums Council, a regional development agency for museums, joined forces last year with the Yorkshire region of English Heritage, the government agency responsible for historic buildings and archaeological sites, to commission an initial research report on ethnic minority attitudes to the heritage. Funding was also received from the Heritage Lottery Fund as it was felt to be a useful small-scale pilot for work that needs to be developed nationally. A small steering group of representatives from each of the three funding bodies was set up to manage the project, with additional input from Kirklees Community History Service, a museum service which already had some years of experience in providing services to reflect local cultural diversity.

The project was undertaken for the partnership by Sue Hayton, a freelance consultant, who had carried out similar work in the past for the performing arts sector. Despite a very limited budget, we decided to focus on qualitative rather than quantitative research, with both users and non-users of the Black and Asian community. The research aimed to identify:

- the barriers to attendance
- what makes museums and heritage sites attractive to Black and Asian audiences
- the support and resources needed to create improved access.

Methodology

A variety of consultation methods were used in order to gather information from a range of individuals and organisations within the limited timescale available.

1. Action Research – consultation group

Sixteen young Asian women aged 16 to 25 were identified by Roshni, the Asian Women's Resource Centre in Sheffield to participate in four consultation sessions.

The aim of these sessions was to:

- provide opportunities for the women to identify why they do or do not visit museums and heritage sites
- to visit and make a critical appraisal of two sites – Brodsworth Hall, near Doncaster, a traditional 19th century country house run by English Heritage, and Bagshaw Museum in Batley, a local authority-run museum with a range of local history and other displays including two directly related to Asian culture, for example calligraphy.

2. On-site data survey

In parallel with the consultation sessions, data was also gathered by assisted questionnaires from 24 Black and Asian visitors at the Tolson Museum in Huddersfield, a general local history museum which, at the time of the survey, had organised events to support Black History Month, and the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds. Most respondents fell into the 16 to 44 age range and 80% were women.

The aims of the research were to:

- discover ways in which the Black and Asian community learns about events and the publicity approaches they respond to
- examine reasons why they attend
- discover what is important to them in making their visits pleasurable.

The sample sizes were small, so the results are an indication of tendencies rather than solid conclusions. However, in many cases they correspond with other research, especially in the arts, and they provide a starting point for further work.

Discovering the Barriers

Attitudes and assumptions

Through discussion with the group of Asian young women a range of attitudes and assumptions about museums and heritage sites emerged.

Negative

- Those who had little or no experience of visiting such sites were more likely to express negative attitudes and to have a dated and inaccurate view of them.
- Museums were seen to be boring because they are "*full of stuffed animals, dead birds and skeletons.*"
- It is thought that there are no opportunities to participate. "*I prefer to do rather than look.*"
- Because exhibits are all the same, "*mummies in rows behind glass.*"
- Painting collections which are historical and representational "*make me feel discouraged that I can't do that.*"

The on-site data survey also highlighted the attitude that such sites are "*not for me*" because

- "They don't do activities that interest me"
- "Not enough black culture"
- "Doesn't relate to me"
- "Don't feel included".

Positive

Those who had visited museums and heritage sites were more likely to have a positive attitude towards them. They find them interesting and enjoyable for reasons principally associated with learning. Their interests included different countries, history and how people lived.

- "Get to know about more things, different countries"
- "There are a wide range of things to see"

There was also interest in arts-based activities and exhibitions.

Both the negative and positive comments support findings in other studies where the importance of the relevance of exhibits and collections, and opportunities for learning, have been highlighted as key issues and deciding factors in making visits.

Barriers to Attendance

Barriers to visiting museums and heritage sites are shared across cultural backgrounds, for example, travel, cost, physical access, intellectual access, psychological access. These barriers can have as much to do with class and level of education as with cultural background. However, some barriers are specific to Black and Asian communities:

- anxiety about visiting unfamiliar places because of previous experiences of racism and the uncertainty of the welcome they may receive
- Lack of knowledge of different family models and the facilities they may require
- concern that artefacts and objects will be treated with the respect due to them
- lack of knowledge about what is available and the benefits of visiting those sites
- language barriers in terms of access to information for those who do not have English as a first language.
- Travel outside the immediate vicinity is problematic with young women relying on public transport (which is generally acknowledged as poor in the UK). Access to private transport is limited and would be negotiated through parents, brothers, relatives or friends. Thus a visit by private transport would need to be attractive for a wide range of age groups and interests.

Respondents to the on-site data survey were very local, generally travelling less than 30 minutes to attend.

Cost is a deterrent. Entrance fees for an Asian family are likely to include the cost for four adults and two to four children. Many family discounts currently in place work to the western family model and not the extended Asian family.

- Free entrance was a definite incentive. The group suggested that direct mailing of information to their homes together with a discount voucher for entrance would encourage them to visit.
- Physical access is a particular concern. Visits would be made with elderly relatives and young children. Wheelchair, pushchair and accessibility for the inform were considered very important in contributing to the quality of the visit.
- Psychological access is also key. There is a level of anxiety when visiting unfamiliar places for the first time. The group felt anxious about fitting in, turning heads as they walk in and being afraid of the welcome they may receive. These feelings are not unique to young Asian women but they may be heightened as a result of previous experiences of racism and a difference in the way that they dress. This has also been identified as a factor affecting visits to arts venues.

The welcome the Asian women's group received from staff when walking in to a venue played a vital part in the group's enjoyment of Brodsworth Hall and Bagshaw Museum.

For respondents to the on-site survey, staff attitudes to them were less important in making a museum visit pleasurable than activities for children, clear labelling and directional signs, and opportunities to learn about their own and others' culture.

Intellectual access is also influenced by interaction with staff. Although both visits were seen as interesting and enjoyable, the exhibitions at Bagshaw Museum were felt to be of more interest as they directly related to the group's life experiences and culture.

At Brodsworth Hall the group were interested in the history of the house and its owners. They liked the fact that there was

- *"lots to see and (it) was interesting and new"*
- "interesting information – pleasant staff, bright colourful pictures, the beautiful garden"

The group enjoyed walking in the gardens and many would have liked to see more of both the house and the gardens. All would like to make a return visit, some with their families, and they were prepared to pay the entrance charge next time.

Their response to the house was influenced by the fact that they went as a group booking and had a guided tour. They were unsure whether they would have responded so positively to the house if they had not visited as a group.

Despite the fact that the exhibitions were felt to be more relevant, responses to the Bagshaw Museum were more mixed.

Positive comments included:

- "Lots of things relate back to my own life, especially as an Asian girl!"
- "Different things about different cultures"
- "It was fun."

Eight women said they would return whereas five said they would not return because they had "seen everything" or had "already been".

Language was an area of considerable discussion with some positive suggestions made. At Bagshaw Museum it was noted that the word "welcome" was translated into Urdu on the entrance door and that the Gallery Guide was translated into Urdu, Gujarati and Punjabi. These added to the sense of welcome.

The group pointed out the need for awareness of language on labels and text panels which could prove difficult for those whose first language is not English, especially if a sophisticated level of understanding is required. Language was also raised in the context of older Asian people not always having a sufficient grasp of the language to understand information given by guides.

The use of more diagrams and pictures in labelling and directional signs may get round the need for translation into different languages. This could also be beneficial for young children and people with learning disabilities. Simple maps and gallery guides with a short introduction in a community language may be enough to help visitors find their way around.

Moving on to visitor facilities, group members bought items from both museum shops. At Bagshaw Museum the jewellery and items for children attracted a lot of interest because of the excellent value for money.

Catering was also considered important in providing a pleasurable visit. However, some sensitivity about the food to be served was required. Vegetarian and fish options would be welcomed by most Muslims and it was pointed out that Halal snack foods such as samosas are now enjoyed by a wide range of people beyond just members of ethnic minority communities.

Encouraging attendance

The women's group was keen to provide realistic and useable advice.

Programming

The group felt that to interest them, content did not have to directly or exclusively relate to their culture. Suggestions included:

- different sculptures and writings from different religions and cultures
- giving unknown artists a chance to exhibit
- exhibitions that relate to people's lives
- more up-to-date collections
- living standards since the 1950s.

More specific suggestions relating to Asian interests included:

- exhibitions about the history of Asian culture in Britain
- positive images of Asian people
- issues that directly affect Asian communities, for example racism
- collections for young Asian people growing up in this country so that they can learn about their parents' heritage
- work produced by Asian people.

Although there is a desire to see more museum and heritage staff recruited from ethnic backgrounds, it was felt that the most important thing is to have someone to welcome you at the door, who could perhaps give a short introduction to the venue.

Activities for children were considered important in allowing children to benefit from their visit and also freeing adults to have a more leisurely experience. Activity packs that children could take home with them were high on the list of desirables, as were hands-on activities and participation by adults and children together.

Again, stress was laid on the need to move away from unimaginative labelling towards friendly directional signage, which

could develop a variety of routes through the sites, along with bright design and some music to add to the atmosphere.

Marketing and Publicity

The majority of visitors interviewed in the on-site survey were primarily aware of the event or museum through recommendations from family or friends. There was some awareness of other secondary information.

It is clear that personal recommendations form a key determinant for this client group and publicity alone is not necessarily enough to encourage visitors to come to events.

The Asian women's group had little knowledge of any museum marketing activity. They do not pick up information at traditional sites such as libraries and tourist offices. They suggest that they would respond positively to direct marketing of events with a discount on entrance fees. Publicity material should contain information on those facilities that they consider important in making a visit pleasurable. These include:

- activities for children
- facilities for families
- a cafe sensitive to dietary requirements
- tour guides
- introductory talks.

Encouraging repeat visits will be a key challenge.

Those questioned in the on-site survey reported that they were primarily influenced to attend because they could bring their families. 75% came with families, others with friends, only one came on his own.

Of those who were regular visitors i.e. at least once every six months, most (42%) found out about the sites through personal recommendation. Brochures and leaflets were significant (25%), as were articles in newspapers and magazines (33%) and local TV and radio (29%). Least useful were posters (4%) and the internet (0%).

When invited to identify what is liked most about museums and heritage sites, the most frequently mentioned responses centred on opportunities for learning, being inspired or seeing new things and events (50%) and activities and events for children (42%). A number of comments were made about the importance of history and links with the past.

In ranking elements that would make visits pleasurable, the attitude of staff was seen as less important than the provision of activities and facilities for children (which was undoubtedly top of the list), clear labelling and directional signs, and opportunities to learn about their own and other cultures. For some respondents the opportunity to learn something new and exciting was more important than information about their own culture.

Organisational Consultation

As part of the study, museums and English Heritage sites in Yorkshire were also surveyed by postal questionnaire to assess their own needs in this field. Two-thirds of respondents stated that they considered their visitor catchment area to be "the region" as a whole. However, the survey found little accurate data available on the numbers of Black and Asian visitors, with two-thirds of venues broadly estimating a figure of well below 2%, compared to a regional proportion of 4.4%.

However, it was encouraging that 86% of respondents wanted to develop their numbers of Black and Asian visitors. The additional support they would require to do this included more information, awareness raising, and help with interpretation, visitor targeting and resources. Training was also a common theme. Many sites simply do not know how to go about creating links with Black and Asian communities or how to best meet their information and interpretation requirements.

The development of special events is often piecemeal, dependent on external funding and, in many cases, reliant on the energy and enthusiasm of individuals with little organisational support through core policy. There appear to be no specifically dedicated budgets or staff available for this area of work.

The Broader Market Context

It is interesting to compare the initial findings of our Heritage for All project with similar work undertaken in the museum sector for the population as a whole. A major study which analysed 240 surveys of visitors and non-visitors from across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom was published by the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC) in 1994. The report, entitled 'By Popular Demand' shows much correlation with our own small-scale project.

The MGC report found that "a most important deterrent to visiting" among non-users and infrequent users was a poor image of museums generally, rather than specific views about a particular museum. People were often frustratingly vague about why they visited and what they liked with comments such as (it's) "a day out with family or friends", or an "enjoyable experience". Unlike the Black and Asian visitors surveyed, 'educational' reasons for visiting were not a strong factor. In

contrast to the positives, people were generally far more specific about why they didn't visit museums and lack of awareness of the museum was easily at the top of the list, followed by lack of time and lack of interest.

It was evident that the majority of visitors spent less than 30 minutes travelling to museums and this matches the Heritage for All findings. Thus, for most museums, the local market is an important core client group and awareness-raising needs to start in the immediate locality rather than across more ambitious territories.

The effectiveness of publicity methods was also similar in both studies, with 'word of mouth' recommendations topping the list with exactly 42% of respondents in each and, in the MGC study, 31% seeing items of publicity, 10.5% finding out through the media and 10.8% "just happening to pass by". The latter did not appear at all in the Heritage for All survey, but this may reflect locations that were not in city centres. On the other hand, it could indicate a reluctance by Black and Asian visitors to come in to a museum without a specific planned purpose.

In terms of changes and improvements that the population as a whole wanted to see, participatory and interactive activities were the most important. For first-time visitors, people-orientated events such as craft weekends and demonstration workshops were the greatest draw. This is paralleled in the wholly positive response of the Asian women's group to the Brodsworth Hall visit because of the personal welcome and the guided tour that they received.

Overall, the general public strongly supported local history displays, especially those featuring local personalities. This contrasts with the Black and Asian groups who were also keen to learn about other cultures and traditions. Special exhibitions generated up to one-third of visits, but many of these were from regular attenders. However, the key factor linking both studies was the primary importance to most adults of museums providing activities and facilities specifically for children.

The MGC study showed that the growth in visitor numbers to museums overall had been very modest throughout the first half of the 1990s. Significantly, however, 33% of all visits were made by children, mostly with family and friends rather than with school groups. All age groups were represented but visits peaked for the 35-44 age group (often those with families) whereas teenagers, young adults and the over-65s together represented only 25% of the total.

The comparison between the MGC study and our Heritage for All project is encouraging as it shows that many of the factors needed to build ethnic minority audiences also apply to the population as a whole. Building stronger awareness in the immediate locality, giving a warm personal welcome and providing hands-on activities specifically designed for children will help to develop new audiences across all communities.

Many of the particular needs of ethnic minority communities such as sensitivity to dietary requirements and recognition of different family structures are important, but do not present especially challenging (or expensive) problems for museum and heritage site managers.

Conclusion

Museums and heritage sites work within a range of potentially conflicting priorities. However, an inclusive approach to audience development will also help to build traditional visitor numbers. Such audience development needs to be sustained and also needs to use the contribution of Black and Asian communities themselves to develop long-term strategies. Good practice needs better dissemination and new partnerships need to be developed with a wide range of other individuals and organisations working in this field.

Next year, 2002, is being designated as the Year of Cultural Diversity in the United Kingdom. Regional bodies such as the Yorkshire Museums Council and English Heritage have an important role to play in supporting museums and heritage sites to respond appropriately and we will shortly be considering ways of acting on the findings of our research report so that the rich culture of the Yorkshire region can truly be said to be "Heritage for All".

ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography

<http://icom.museum/icme>

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