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How To Accommodate A Whale: **Manx National Heritage's New Natural History Gallery** **- Kate Hawkins, Manx National Heritage**

Factors influencing the design

As the Isle of Man Government's statutory heritage agency, Manx National Heritage (MNH) has a wide range of responsibilities (see box), including running twelve museum sites. The Manx Museum is the nerve centre for this integrated service, and the starting point for exploration of the Isle of Man's cultural and natural landscape through a themed island-wide presentation called 'The Story of Mann'. As with our other museum displays, our philosophy for the new gallery has always been that we should attract visitors in to whet their appetite for more natural history, and then equip them with the confidence and practical information to go out and find it for themselves.

Of course there were other factors to consider. The Museum receives a very mixed audience through the year. Island residents, their families, school parties and students are joined in summer by tourists, including coach parties and bikers on wet days during the TT Festival. At 213 square metres the gallery space is not huge, but it has a high ceiling, with large roof lights. Over the 30 plus years that the old natural history displays were in this space, the roof lights caused fading in the specimens and large temperature fluctuations often made the gallery uncomfortable for staff, visitors and exhibits. This needed to be addressed in the re-display project.

As the gallery design evolved, so did a strong desire to raise awareness of MNH's museum role, which came to gel nicely with the need to encourage appreciation of biodiversity. Amongst other things, this meant acquiring new specimens for display and finding ways to present awkward material. Major investment in new taxidermy over the five years leading up to installation enabled us to retire the ancient, faded and poor mounts which had served their time in the old gallery. We felt it was essential to display quality life-like taxidermy to engender curiosity and respect for the animals represented, rather than to distract visitors into disgust or ridicule for faded and poor specimens.

And last, but not least, there was the whale. A 13 metre long skeleton of a Sei whale *Balaenoptera borealis* hanging from steel roof beams dominated the old gallery, and at first seemed to constrain ideas for making full use of the height and domed roof shape in the new design. However, on discussing the prospect of removing the whale from display with museum staff, it became clear the skeleton was a popular exhibit and had its education uses. This, coupled with the sheer impracticability of removing it to storage, prompted the decision to keep the specimen where it is and to make a virtue out of a necessity with imaginative interpretation.

Bringing people into the gallery

Despite the very rich intertidal and inshore marine habitats around the Isle of Man, for practical and historical reasons marine life is poorly represented in the Museum collections. A previously uninspiring corridor between the Museum shop and the gallery provided an opportunity to extend the displays on a marine theme. By using ripple lighting and dark sea-green colour, we turned the corridor into an atmospheric backdrop for large dramatic images of sea animals, and projected a film about the transition between intertidal and subtidal habitats. The corridor space now suggests and underwater journey to the Isle of Man, and is an appropriate way to introduce visitors to a story about an island set in the Irish Sea.

Once inside the gallery, visitors can orientate themselves geographically with the help of a map of the Island's wildlife hot-spots, and get an idea of how the gallery works. The distinctiveness of the Island's natural history is emphasised with a simple taxidermy display representing animals which symbolise the Isle of Man (Loghtan sheep, chough, Manx cat), as opposed to animals which are not found here at all (badger, squirrel, snake, mole).

Interactive table projections

The main gallery space divides into an inner collections and biodiversity exploration area, and an outer habitat/place display. The inner exploration area is framed by six large showcases which form an aisle underneath the whale. To each is fixed a shaped MDF 'fin' with an illuminated edge. Together, the effect of the cases and their fins is to lead the eye upwards towards the skeleton, making the whale visually part of the displays and enhancing the sense of height in the gallery space.

In choosing specimens for the central cases, our idea was to exhibit a loosely classification-based cross-section of the Museum's natural history collections. As it has turned out, space is rather biased towards the birds. We make no apology for this; bird mounts make glamorous exhibits and the Isle of Man is well known for its avian fauna, particularly its choughs and birds of prey. The other cases present mammals, plants, lower vertebrates (fish, amphibians, reptiles), and some of the larger invertebrates (especially molluscs). One case is devoted to fossils, as illustrations of past life and habitats in the Isle of Man.

Each of three pairs of case arrangements is replicated as a digital image, projected from above onto a white table. Visitors can use a roller ball and click device mounted on each of the tables to choose a case arrangement, and then to select a specimen that they want to know more about. Choosing a specimen takes them to an information screen, where they can click on-screen 'buttons' to call up more text, a film extract or a sound recording if available. Clicking the 'draw' button here takes them to a screen where they can trace on paper around images of the specimens, an activity that has proved to be particularly popular with children.

The table projection technique derives from an idea pioneered by the Horniman Museum in its musical instruments gallery. It has been modified and expanded upon in the Manx Museum display, largely by the use of different media. One of our main objectives was to provide to all our visitors, even those with only a mild interest in wildlife, the means to recognise at least some of the species they might encounter in the countryside. We felt this could be much more effective with a full range of media, and quite a large part of the budget was spent on acquiring library film footage, still photographs and sound recordings to enrich the interactive table experience.

Interactive drawers

At one end of each of the three tables is a set of four drawers which link to a touch screen. On opening each of the drawers, an image of the contents is displayed on screen, with buttons to activate layers of information and related still images, working in much the same way as the interactive table projections. The drawers are useful for showing smaller specimens, such as insects, and for exploring the history and function of the natural history collections, for example changing attitudes to egg collecting and bird conservation (yes, we are displaying birds' eggs).

The Tale of the Whale

Interpretation of the Sei whale skeleton needed a more individual approach as there was a good story attached to its acquisition by the Museum. The whale was stranded on the south coast of the Isle of Man in 1925. News of its demise spread quickly, and attracted crowds of sightseers, who all seemed eager to have their photograph taken next to the whale, posh hats and all. Bags of carrots were stuffed into the unfortunate creature's mouth to see how many would fit inside, and baleen plates were removed as souvenirs. The carcass was hauled onto trailers and pulled back to the knacker's yard outside Douglas by two traction engines, providing a spectacle to onlookers along the route. Policemen travelled ahead of the party, advising residents to close their windows against the terrible smell from the corpse. It was buried (with more photographs) and the skeleton was eventually recovered for mounting and display in the Manx Museum in the early 1930s.

This story says as much about the reaction of the local people to the stranding as it does about the whale, and encapsulates an instance of social history meeting natural history. Our solution to its display was to use some of the old photographs of the incident to make a short sub-titled animation sequence as a screen saver on the table interactives and drawer touch screens. The screens automatically default to the animation after a few minutes if the interactives are not being used. In addition, a souvenir baleen plate is displayed in one of the drawers underneath the whale, together with a pigmy shrew mount and skeleton, as a graphic exam-

ple of the extremes of size in the mammalian body plan.

The habitat/place displays

Encircling the collections and biodiversity exploration area are six modular displays about the Isle of Man's main wildlife habitats. Each of these displays represents a specific named place which exemplifies one or more habitat types, eg. Snaefell Mountain representing upland moor, bog and conifer plantation; the Ayres representing coastal dune and heath.

The six displays are arranged around the gallery roughly in order of the geographical relationship of the named places. Each consists of a large curved wall-mounted image of the landscape or habitat, a small display case with six to eight 'key species' for the habitats featured, a digital screen showing a short, specially commissioned film about the place and its wildlife, and one or two hanging banner graphics. Three of the displays include children's interactive exhibits which relate in some way to the places represented.

For each display, one of the banners carries an 'orientation' graphic, which consists of a stylised map of the Island, with summarised information about the featured place, including where to find it, traveller's tips, similar places to see and habitat characteristics.

Achievements of the gallery project

From so far informal comments, the new gallery seems to be well received, and is certainly very popular during the school holidays. Its family-friendly, interactive approach is balanced with availability of more in-depth information, should people want it, and the Museum's Education Service successfully uses the displays to compliment its curriculum sessions. Promotion of Manx identity is at the core of Manx National Heritage's work, and the 'local angle' is emphasised in the natural history gallery by weaving folklore and the Manx language into species names and accounts.

In terms of museum conservation, specimens are now displayed in sealed, dust- and pest-proof, humidity controlled cases. Light falling on sensitive objects is much reduced with the help of a false ceiling installed between the roof lights and display space. The gallery offers a window on the reference collections and their role in the Museum, hopefully winning us more friends and stimulating welcome interest in Manx National Heritage's work behind the scenes.

Manx National Heritage is the national heritage organisation for the Isle of Man, and combines a range of statutory responsibilities.

These include:

**The National Museums Service
The National Monuments Service
The National Trust Service
The National Library and Archive
The National Art Gallery
Education Service.**

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