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Well, it worked for me ...
A personal view of the new Natural History Gallery
at Norwich Castle Museum.

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Introduction

Museum galleries are dreadful places in which to learn. There are too many distractions, they are often full of noisy kids, and most of the time you have to stand. However they are great places to be inspired, to become intrigued, to be moved, to be fired with a desire to find out. Sometimes inspiration comes from contemplating an isolated iconic exhibit. But, as natural historians, our greatest asset is biodiversity. Even for us it is sometimes difficult to comprehend the amount of diversity this planet has produced – so celebrate it, in any way that you can, and display it so that your visitors can experience the same sense of wonder that drew most of us into this field.

So when it came to deciding how to redisplay our natural history gallery, to engage the public in a more effective way, I thought – “What worked for me?” All we had to do was remember what had inspired us in museums, and all would be well. If we could produce something that inspired us now – then maybe we would be OK. We did consult with others – notably a group of art students, a class of primary school children, and our museum access group. We also relied on our admin colleagues to express an opinion about work in progress. An “mmmm...” meant a rethink, while a “Wow!” indicated we were on the right track.

Redisplaying Norwich

Our displays in Norwich Museum cover a small area, and we couldn't begin to include all the information about our specimens, but that information is available to anyone with access to the internet or a public library. All they need is a key – the name of that weird bird or fish or insect they saw at the museum. Not everyone is turned on by the natural world, but most our specimens all have their own stories to tell – so we have presented a social history as well. Our aim is to engage with the public in many different ways and different levels. There is spectacle, there are secrets, there is information, there are serious messages, there are jokes. Most of all there are specimens and objects. There's not much to read, but there is more on-line.

I'd been thinking about redisplaying this gallery for about 25 years. I knew that I didn't want to waste money on new cases. The current ones were 110 years old, and had been viewed by millions of happy visitors. The glass was still see-through, and according to what I'd heard at last year's conference, we'd only be able to afford half a new case before the budget ran out, so new cases weren't an option. We wanted to keep the gallery open for as long as possible, so we hit upon the idea of constructing a mock-up case, the same dimensions as the existing cases, within which we could design the displays using actual objects. Thus we would know that everything fitted, and what size the labels could be, and what height to put them at so that everything was visible. Within the team we had representatives of most of the common height classes, so the position of the exhibits could be adjusted to suit everyone. Measurements and photos could be taken and mounts could be designed so that installation should be a rapid, trouble-free experience. Which it was with a few exceptions.

I have to say here that I have an allergy to external contractors, particularly design consultants. Some of the symptoms are raised blood pressure, increased heart rate, hair loss and something akin to Tourette's Syndrome. Despite my protestations we still ended up contracting out some work, and sure enough, we received some items that were not what we thought we had specified. Apparently this often happens during new gallery work, so now I'm beginning to understand where all the money goes.

I'd never written a display brief before this project. I still haven't. At least the brief I produced was so brief, it doesn't count. Here it is :

We have some stories to tell. For each story we will select a few big objects that might help. We'll put them in a mock-up case, see how they look and get some more objects to go with them. We'll play around with them until they begin to look interesting then think how to show them off nicely. We'll take some measurements and a photo to help us remember what we've done. Then we'll write a big label for the case, and move on to the next one. If anyone's not happy with what's happening then say so. Crazy ideas are not necessarily crazy. If we think it's funny, at least some of the public will think it's funny too. If we're having a good time, then our visitors should have a good time too ...

Fitting the cases

In this project an object list is something that is created as the displays are designed. It is finalised when the gallery opens – well, actually 3 months after the gallery opens, just when the final labels are being written. After the opening I received one e-mail of complaint and I quote *“Saddened to be unable to find the sloth in your new display. The sloth in your old display had been for many years both a role model for me and a terrible warning for my children.”* Fortunately as the final labels hadn't been written, we were able to rearrange things within the Taxidermist case and include the sloth (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The redeveloped taxidermy display case full of animals, including some old favourites! (The sloth is in the case, but to the right, just out of shot.)

During the course of the redisplay work we were fortunate to be able to take on contract staff. We were also blessed with several outstanding volunteers and interns, in both design and natural history conservation. Joanne Osborne was able to let her design skills flow when creating graphics for the interactive area. And some of you will have met our French conservation student Marie de Beaulieu at last year's conference. She did outstanding work on restoration of the giant tortoise and many of the birds.

Occasionally restoration work was contextualised. On the deck of our reconstructed sailing ship, we have a crew formed from the natural history specimens that were collected on the Rattlesnake Expedition, or by Captain Glasspoole of the East India Company, or from various other voyages of exploration. Among them is a parrot that only had one glass eye, as it was originally intended to be viewed from its left side. We wanted to show it from both sides, so our contract conservator Trish might have given it another eye, but she opted for an eyepatch instead. Our Thorny Devil lizard had met with a schools loan accident and lost a front leg. We could have recreated a perfect prosthetic, but somehow it seemed more appropriate to carve a little peg-leg (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The Thorny Devil specimen with its hand carved wooden leg.

Next door in the mollusc case, a more aesthetic, formal arrangement of shells celebrates the beauty of form and colour, while astonishing the visitor with biodiversity within a single class. But even here, there's room for a subtle bit of humour, as the Roman Snail has left its appointed place and gone for a glide. Even if only one child is not quite sure whether it's moved by itself, then it's been worthwhile.

Most of the time the curators (Dave Waterhouse and myself) kept a fairly tight rein on the designers, who had only just completed a decorative art gallery, but we let them have their artistic way with the molluscs and also the birds' eggs. As I said, crazy ideas were not dismissed and so we ended up stringing the smaller eggs on nylon. A labelling nightmare, but everyone seems to love the Magritte-like effect.

In contrast, we adopted a more naturalistic approach in the Taxidermy Workshop Case. Yes, the children want to know if its real blood. We tell them its woodstain. And a drawer of glass eyes never fails to please.

Next door, the Curator's Office presents a tidier, less paper-filled version of reality, but there are plenty of only-just-visible objects to intrigue. Some things only children can see. Some things only grown-ups can. There's something satisfyingly surreal about a hedgehog living in a swordfish head.

Shallower cases at the end of the gallery have been used to display smaller objects – one for insects, one for Margaret Fountaine's butterflies, one for plants and one for microscopes. Having done it before with the butterflies, we have adopted a cyclic approach to the insects and plants on display. Each drawer or sheet is only out for a few weeks at most. It is then put away and another takes its place. In this way, the public get a chance to see research collections in the gallery, and the displays are regularly changing. The plants are much admired, and at last our unprovenanced New Zealand fern collection has found a role in the museum.

In the old gallery there were several "favourites" which had to be retained. The polar bear is the most iconic, but it had always troubled me that its icy polyfilla background resembled the top of a Christmas cake. We took the opportunity to replace the polyfilla with something a bit more realistic. Within this case we included some ethnography – it seemed fitting to illustrate the story of polar exploration with natural and man-made objects.

The polar bear case is used to introduce a message about climate change, and throughout the displays, conservation messages are appended to the labels to get visitors thinking about some of the contemporary issues which affect them and the species represented in the cases.

The fish case has a blatant biodiversity theme, but also a message about sourcing sustainable food (Fig. 3). The case of horns relates the early conservation work of Edward North Buxton, who shot many of the specimens, but is also a celebration of variety and form. The plain background colour for this case was chosen to match one of my favourite polo-shirts which we all agreed was the right shade to show off the heads. And within the case there are visual jokes which are spotted by some and might raise a smile.



Fig. 3. The busy fish case, almost mimicking an aquarium. Lots of specimens for children and adults to look at and explore.

The background graphic panels were chosen and designed after the case had been mocked up, and as a result there is a refreshing variety of styles from old reference book plates to wallpaper to photos. The safari photo that was used for the background to the African display was one that was taken by one of my mother's boyfriends in the 1930's. The selection of mammals and birds that we had available to illustrate collecting in the Empire in Africa happened to include most of the characters from the Lion King. It's not mentioned in the labels, but if young visitors want to make the connection, that's fine.



Fig. 4. The mock up for the travelling zoo case.

In contrast, the background for the Travelling Zoo case makes use of posters for Bostock and Wombwell's Menagerie – all of the animals in this case had once been part on tour, and the kangaroo was a boxing celebrity in its day (Fig.5). Previously these mammals had been dispersed through the gallery, each with its zoogeographic colleagues and a label declaring where this species lived and what it ate, with no mention of the extraordinary personal history of these specimens.

Among the 75 birds in one case there is a tinplate imposter tucked away, unseen by the fleeing visitor, but noticed by keen-eyed children and an indignant puffbird. Most of the birds are apparently on the move heading in homage to the Great Auk. The star of this display is in the dark, in a glass-doored fireproof safe. The last time it was on long-term display was many years ago on a table under a fragile glass dome. The button which switches on the light in its home is one of the few high-tech interactives in the gallery.

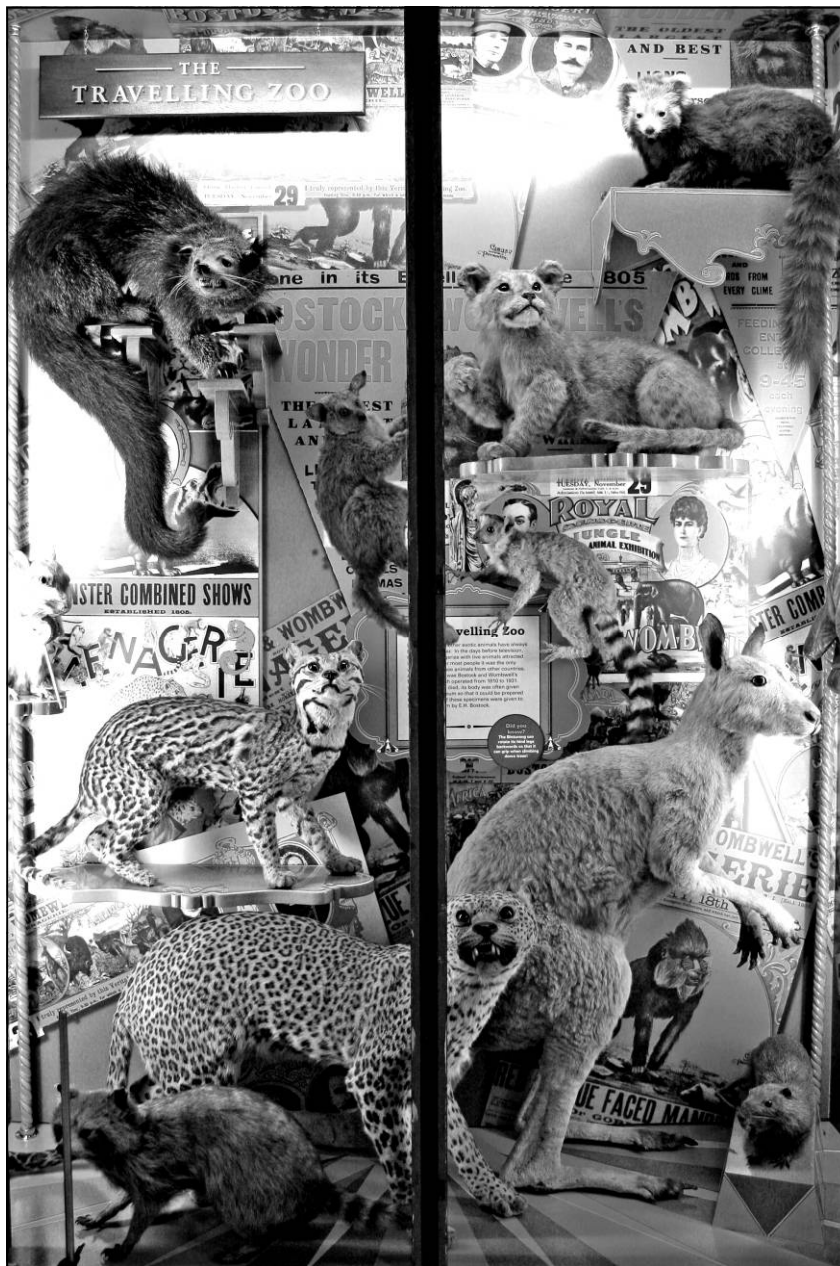


Fig. 5. The finished 'Travelling Zoo' display, with the boxing kangaroo.

Keeping things simple

Most of our interactives are more basic. A tiger skull, with the edges filed smooth and the teeth glued in, an elephant's tusk, an alligator – things which most visitors would never have had the opportunity to touch, an experience that will hopefully be talked about on the way home, or written about in class the next day. The bum nut is understandably a great favourite. Sounds to hear, smells to smell, and fur to feel. For the visually impaired, a life-size resin replica of our Great Auk enables them to talk about what their families have seen. One computer gives access to the webpages that describe the exhibits more fully, but no games, no buttons to push to see if you've randomly hit the right answer to a question you didn't read.

We have made extensive use of digital photoframes to liven up some of the displays. Apart from being cheap (between £29 and £59 in Jessops), they have the advantages of being reliable and silent.

We do have a resources trolley which the Interpreters are able to wheel out if things are slack. They can use the video microscope to look at feathers and butterfly wings, they can discuss how to stuff a squirrel, and they can talk more about the people who collected the specimens. But so far, the gallery has been very busy, and no-one wanders around with their children saying “can we go now?”. Somewhere among the visitors are the next generation of curators, the next generation of naturalists, the next Attenboroughs. Through putting specimens (lots of them) on show and letting them appeal to the visitors’ curiosity, we are engaging with the public in the best way that we can.

Happy Public

The following was over-heard during the Easter holidays – a small child has left his family sitting in the Rotunda cafe and poked his head into the new Natural History Gallery. He runs back to his table “Grandpa, grandpa, come and see – this is a REAL museum!”

Job done!

Acknowledgments

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Total budget - £74,000 (which included refurbishment work on other NH galleries).