



The Birth of a Museum – a Personal Account

by Dick Squires

Richard Foster, ex-director of Museums Services in Oxford, said in a lecture about starting museums that it could be likened to childbirth - conception is easy, confinement can be long and drawn out with miscarriage threatened at all times, birth is painful, but when the museum is finally up and running you can easily forget all the agony that produced it. This is a short personal account of just some of that agony.

The Wantage Museum had been started in a back room of the Wantage Council offices in Portway by Mary Whipple when she was Chairwoman of Wantage U.D.C. in the late 1950s. This was later moved to a room above the Victoria Cross Gallery, more central for the town. It was in the late 1960s that Dr George Greenhalgh and I were invited by the Museum Committee to a meeting as they had been given some farm machinery and thought we might be interested in restoring it. I was very pleased to be asked but, as the meeting progressed, I became increasingly frustrated at the limitations of the small display room, particularly as half an hour of the meeting was taken up by two of the ladies arguing about the best way of cleaning the military uniform. Having been born and now living in Wantage, I felt there should be a larger museum worthy of the town which reflected its fascinating history. This would give people living in the town a sense of pride and would also be a place to welcome visitors to their town. At the end of the meeting I stood up and stated my views, but I had a pessimistic response and was told that the museum had:

- ◆ No larger building in mind
- ◆ No large collection
- ◆ No spare money

I suggested I should answer the three points at the next meeting. One month later I returned:

NO BUILDING

I suggested several vacant buildings and possible sites in the town, eg. the old Police Station, Wheeler's Orchard by the brook, the Old Surgery in Church Street etc.

NO COLLECTION

Wantage in its setting is a microcosm of national history, so the theme of the museum could be the interpretation of this story - a massive collection of "bygones of yesteryear" was therefore not vital. Kathleen Philip had encapsulated this in her books "Reflected in Wantage", which showed how national events had influenced the lives of previous inhabitants of the town. The display could use objects, photographs of buildings, and quotations from past records to bring history to life, showing the struggles - good times and bad times.

NO MONEY

Careful thought would be given to other aspects of community life which could be incorporated into the museum to justify the money that would have to be raised. The future Vale and Downland Museum Centre had been conceived.

CHOOSING THE PERFECT SITE

Over the next few months I explored the possibilities of the various sites and buildings and overwhelmingly came out in favour of the Old Surgery site. Not only was this in the ideal position - close to the church and the town centre - but there was space at the rear for development. Medical care was to be transferred to the large health centre behind the Wantage Hospital so the Old Surgery would be on the market. The Old Surgery belonged to the five partners of the practice, and I owned a fifth share.

At this time the town council had started work on the Civic Hall to replace the V.C. Gallery, and so the museum would soon be homeless. I felt this would be an ideal opportunity to put all our energies into a more ambitious "Museum Centre" in the old doctors' surgery - but the committee were adamant they should accept the room offered in the ground floor of the Civic Hall, when it was completed. As time went by I became increasingly frustrated that the committee merely wanted to discuss how the displays could be arranged in the Civic Hall, and could not focus on the wider concept of a museum centre which I had in mind. I was also anxious that once "bedded down" in the smart Civic Hall with a smart display it would be far more difficult to persuade them to move again into the Old Surgery - that is, if we ever managed to get the building. The new health centre was not complete so the Old Surgery would not be vacant for about a year, and they felt it was vital there should not be a gap in museum services in the town.

So I had to accept their views - they were all in favour of the "bird in the hand" while I was staking all my money on the "bird in the bush". Eventually I worked out a compromise proposal which I presented at the next meeting. I said that I thought the committee would be very busy working on all the new displays for the transfer to the Civic Hall, so it might be sensible for George Greenhalgh and myself to set up a subcommittee to do the groundwork for the larger scheme. This was agreed and I was given a free hand to invite people outside the committee to form this group. We were fortunate in persuading a balanced cross-section of the community to join us - Don Bean from Barclays Bank, John Miller, John Anderson a local author, Mary Whipple as the link with the main committee and Don Alexander with his experience and knowledge of local councils.

THINKING, THINKING, THINKING

During the early seventies my wife Kirsty and I used to go off nearly every Tuesday, my half-day, in our little Morris Traveller to visit museums all over the country to give ourselves a crash course on museums. We visited museums from Exeter to York, from Sheffield to Cardiff. Each time, we made an appointment in advance to see the director and asked a whole string of questions such as:

- ◆ What is your Budget?
- ◆ What do you feel you contribute to life in the community?
- ◆ If you had a gift of £ 100,000, how would you spend it?
- ◆ How do you manage integrating volunteers and paid staff?

We visited about forty museums and each time I made a reference file on returning with notes, together with all the available literature in information packs. In this way we came to grips with all kinds of aspects such as conservation policy, visitor surveys, the dreaded fire officer, collection policy, schools service etc. We met all types of curators from those who were extrovert and keen to impart knowledge, to the introvert who hated the public coming into his museum and was happiest locking his office to write a learned article about then radioactive carbon-dating of snail shells!

THE MINEFIELD OF MUSEUM POLITICS

At this time we also had very close contact with Richard Foster, ex-director of Museums Services in Oxfordshire, who held our hand and guided us over the minefield of museum politics. I would often telephone Richard several times a week asking advice on what do we do next? Or how do you think we should approach this one? We were also having discussions with the Area Museums Service, which is a government body set up to assist provincial museums. Richard also advised us to try to change the Wantage Museum from parish status to county status when the Vale of White Horse became part of Oxfordshire. In that way, we would have the academic and practical back-up for Wantage which was available to county museums. The Area Museums Service said they were unable to provide hard cash, but they would be able to increase help to Woodstock County Museum so we would in turn benefit from professional part-time staffing and some practical help from their workshops for mounting displays etc.

All the time this discussion and negotiation was continuing, I found it very important to write everything down to clarify ideas. Mary Whipple was wonderful - always a warm welcome as I dropped in to Charlton Road after the evening surgery to go through all my little scribbled bits of paper. She would listen very carefully and, saying she was the devil's advocate, find all the weak points in my arguments. It was indeed a sad day when I was asked to write a short piece about Mary for her memorial service in 1992. When I finished I was, by force of habit, about to pop round to Charlton Road to check it through but was quickly jolted into reality that it was in fact Mary's obituary I was writing.

THE OLD SURGERY SITE IS PURCHASED

The more I thought about the Old Surgery site the more I felt it was perfectly positioned for a "cultural centre". I had roughly sketched out ideas how the site could work and also listed all the other facilities which could be incorporated. It was therefore with great excitement that I received a telephone call from John Moir, the town clerk, one evening saying that there might be a small amount of money available from the sale of land at Challow for the purchase of the Old Surgery for a museum centre. He asked me to provide back-up material to present our case to the council so that they would be equally inspired. Within 48 hours I presented some pretty emotional thoughts and pictures - aerial views with remarks labelling the Square in the centre of town as the "Commercial Centre", the churchyard as the "Spiritual Centre" and the Old Surgery as the future "Cultural Centre". Also, John Anderson on our sub-committee produced an inspiring piece:

"Essentially this is an experiment in living history. Nothing quite like it has been done before. What we are trying to do is combine museums ..."

The council were inspired but John Moir said their district valuer would have to visit the building to work out a price. The next day we asked Greens the estate agent to put a commercial value on the Surgery site. Greens duly visited us and put a price of £25,000 on the property. A couple of days later John Moir telephoned us saying the district valuer had

come up with a price of £16,000 and if we did not accept, the deal would be off. My partners I dropped to £20,000 but the council would not budge. I therefore rashly said I would pay the difference out of my own pocket and gritted my teeth for the consequences. Eventually my partners generously agreed to the price, without my £4000, as they felt pleased that their Old Surgery building would be used for a centre which would benefit the community. I heaved a sigh of relief.

THE VALE & DOWNLAND TRUST IS FORMED

As we were about to acquire a building it was thought sensible to raise our position from a mere subcommittee to a trust with charitable status. We had decided to call it the Downland Centre - but then at the last moment I inked in "Vale" to make it the Vale and Downland Centre. Wantage was to be under the Vale of White Horse in Abingdon with the change of county boundaries. I felt that if we had "Vale" in our name they might feel more responsible for us in the future and also the centre was about the Vale and the Downs.

It was with this more formal title that we met representatives from the Vale of White Horse who were very enthusiastic about our ideas and said that, as far as they could see into the future, the Vale would hold the freehold of the property and the newly formed trust would be responsible for raising the money for the building and setting up the museum centre in consultation with the County Museum Service. This was a three-way set of responsibilities - the famous Tripartite Agreement. The Vale hoped they would be able to give us £5000 as goodwill to start our fundraising drive. We were told to come back to an official council meeting in Abingdon when we had full architectural plans and costings. It was a heady meeting - very exciting and positive. After this we all felt we were on the road and nothing would stop us.

THE PLANS ARE DRAWN UP

The next day I rushed down to Ted Hammond's office and he promised to start work as soon as possible. We decided that we would leave the old building intact as a museum object in its own right. The visitors would enter the side of the building into a community space that could be spanned by laminated beams with which Ted had had success in similar situations -the modern equivalent of the cruck beam. I was hoping we might eventually acquire John Kent's site next door which would square off the land. To make best use of the site I felt we should push the buildings to the periphery to look onto a central grass area similar to an Oxford college or a farmyard. In fact John Kent's site next door was not available -I kept it in mind as a possibility for the future. It was decided to have the buildings at the periphery and at a later date we might be able to complete the central quadrangle. I had earmarked some long farm buildings at Bradfield's Farm sewage works which had old clay pantiles which we could use for the gallery buildings and possibly a new building at the rear to house larger objects.

STILL THINKING ABOUT THE CONTENT

Richard Foster advised us to ask a series of museum curators or academic specialists in a variety of subjects:

"If you were setting up a museum in Wantage -what, in your subject, should be included in the displays? "

The subjects ranged from pre-history to the Roman period, geology to natural history. One curator was seething when I telephoned having sent him Richard Foster's letter. After I explained my views on the wider concept of the community, he said, "That is not what I call a museum; you seem to be wanting a fun and bun centre." Another asked about the

Roman period replied with one curt sentence: "If I were setting up a museum which related to the Roman period, it would be best situated at Wallingford." I felt like kicking him. This was totally different to the reply from James Bond on the Medieval period - he sent us pages of fascinating information which made you feel you had to rush out and start digging the foundations at once.

I was passionate about the main gallery with a balanced shorthand account inspiring people about their town but I was equally realistic that there had to be more on offer, such as a good lunch, to make people come back and use the centre fully. From the point of view of "other facilities", we did a very simple exercise. We thought of the cross section of all the visitors who might enter the centre and against each we listed the facilities which would make their visit worth while. They ranged from a nappy changing table for the babe in arms to the cheap cup of tea for a senior citizen who would be encouraged to spin it out for two hours, enjoying the warmth and company.

WE PRESENT OUR PLANS TO THE VALE

At last the plans for the perfect community centre were complete, all summarized in three presentation boards for the Recreation and Amenities Committee meeting at the Vale of White Horse council chambers. As my turn on the agenda arrived I stepped in front of the committee proudly clutching the boards which represented nearly ten years of talking, visiting, and distilling ideas - in fact it had totally occupied most of my free time and weekends. When I had finished my allocated seven minutes I was flabbergasted that no one clapped but was told:

"There has been a change in the financial climate. There has been gross overspending by Wantage on the Civic Hall so if the scheme is to go ahead the Vale & Downland Trust will first have to raise £25,000 to buy the surgery site back from the council. This is considered the present value of the property. There is certainly no chance of the £5000 to start fundraising. If you do not raise that money within a set time-span we will be forced to dispose of the surgery site commercially."

I remember feeling extremely angry, despondent and let down but I had one outstanding memory of that evening. When I was leaving the council chambers the chairman John Jones came up behind me, squeezed my arm and said, "Don't worry old chap, you will get there if you keep battling, this is just the cruel world of politics."

It was 1977 and the following week was Jubilee Day. We had planned to involve youngsters in the town to turn up at the surgery site to help clear undergrowth and nettles. This was to be an emotive day that, symbolically, the Vale & Downland Centre was to be started by the youth in the community. I contacted the Vale after "our little set-back" and explained the position, asking if we could still go ahead with our site clearance exercise as the youngsters would be disappointed if it were called off. They agreed to this but I was slightly naughty in adding a JCB and a 20 ton lorry to the range of hand tools provided for the boy scouts.

It was on the second day that Don Alexander happened to visit the site. The whole of the 1950s extensions had been removed from the back of the surgery site, a huge pit for the future patio area had been dug and the division wall separating it from the church school had been demolished. Don was absolutely horrified by the "devastation" and insisted the digger should leave at once while he consulted his lawyer to find out if he could in any way be held personally responsible for the "chaos" we had produced.

Luckily we had finished all the site clearance work for the new extensions. Also, as we had ripped out half the back of the old building, it would make it more difficult for the council to sell the building on a commercial basis. Luckily they recognized how determined we were to build the centre and, as a compromise, worked out a lease agreement over the following few months.

FUNDRAISING GOES BANKRUPT

We were then faced with the daunting task of raising £30,000 for the initial building phase. I felt anxious trying to raise that sort of money merely from jumble sales and charitable events so I suggested we should employ a fundraising firm. The committee were dubious but I was anxious to raise the money as soon as possible. I had naively imagined that you sat back and the fund-raiser gathers it all in. Not at all. He spent two months on full salary interviewing key members of the community, some who had influence, some who had cash, to get the campaign poised but with not a penny raised. We were at last set to raise the cash when I had a midnight telephone call from Andrew, the fundraiser, sounding rather the worse for wear:

“Frightfully sorry, Dick, but our firm has gone bankrupt.”

When a fund-raising firm goes bankrupt it is like a doctor having a heart-attack when he takes his patient's pulse. I said, “That means you have no job and we have no fund-raiser.” My mean streak came to the fore. We had spent two months with no return for his salary so I said I would personally pay his salary. As the weeks ticked by I got a second shock. He only organized ME to go out in front to talk to all potential donors or make enthusiastic but forceful speeches at fundraising parties.

I was equipped with my travelling salesman box of a model of the museum as it was, with a quick gesture I could add the galleries made of balsa wood. I gradually acquired the low-down cunning tricks of the salesman to get those dreaded covenant forms signed. It dragged on for months but eventually we reached our target. If it had not been for all those generous donors in the early days the centre would never have got off the ground.

LAINS BARN APPEARS

It was at this time that Lains Barn came on the horizon - a magnificent courtyard barn which had outlived its farming life. I felt it would be tragic to stand by and see it demolished. Maybe we could hire it out for events if restored to raise money for the building fund. I had spent the previous two years using all my cunning trying to acquire it for community use from the owners, an insurance company. Eventually they agreed that they would, for a nominal fee, hand over the freehold to the Vale & Downland Trust. I had not in fact said anything to my trustees - I felt it was best to keep quiet until I was sure it was “in the bag”. When I broke the news, my trustees were horrified and incredulous that I could even contemplate anything more. They felt quite desperate at the Old Surgery looking like a bomb-site, and how could I think of producing more devastation? Eventually they agreed to hold the freehold as long as I simultaneously signed a licence agreement that would hold me responsible for raising the money for the barn, restoring it and giving them any money from the hire fees. In the early stages we were faced with this huge barn with a hole in the roof, and a farmyard full of rotted manure. As a practical self-help exercise we decided to bag up the manure and sell it. David Castle gave us 500 empty blue fertilizer sacks and we contacted the venture scouts to turn up with shovels. I was then left with all these sacks to market on Grove housing estate. As Harold MacMillan, “Super Mac”, had recently retired as prime minister we felt we could call the manure

‘Super Muck’ at 50p a bag. I had to deliver all these sacks in my trailer in between calls on patients. It grew superb nettles wherever a sack was emptied.

However, the best things the manure produced indirectly were Chris Stone and Christian Noll as venture scouts. All through the years they have been loyal supporters of the trust’s objectives and philosophy and now Chris Stone is chairman of Lains Barn Trust and Christian is chairman of the Management Committee of the Vale & Downland Trust. Some time later, when we were using the barn in its rough state for a wedding with 200 guests, I realized that we had only £25 for the hire but the caterers pocketed over £1000 for most indifferent food. I therefore persuaded Kirsty to do the catering in aid of the museum building fund. During the late 1970s to the early 1980s we did a wedding nearly every weekend. To this day I associate ‘Sailing By’, the signature tune on Radio 4 at half past midnight for the weather forecast and shipping news, with starting on the trifles and gateaux for the next day’s wedding. On the other hand I very much preferred helping Kirsty cook half the night for a wedding compared with having to creep along with my travelling salesman’s box to persuade some reluctant businessman to sign a covenant for the museum. We had to transport all the wedding food up to the barn and then had a rotation of gallant voluntary helpers as waitresses on the day.

YOU CAN HAVE HUNT’S BARN IF YOU TAKE IT AWAY!

During the mid 1970s Thomas Hardy’s “Jude the Obscure” was filmed with some scenes shot at West Hendred. That summer a group in East Hendred decided to have an exhibition of museum objects contemporary with Jude together with a display of all the costumes used in the film. This took place in a vast extended barn complex – Hunt’s Barn - belonging to Tom Eyston. I was asked if I had any objects for the display and produced fifty including Miss Miekle’s appendix. She used to run the local riding school and in 1948 my father had removed her appendix. He was so intrigued that it was full of lead shot from all the game she had eaten that he pickled it and kept it for posterity. It has been in our dining room ever since! We also towed over our gypsy caravan, camping in it with the children while I did the carpentry for the exhibition. We had queues of people for the week it was open and it confirmed for me how many treasured museum objects there were still in peoples’ houses.

It was some years later that Tom Eyston telephoned me offering Hunt’s Barn itself as he wanted to develop the land. I never say no so we measured the barn carefully and decided that out of the five bays three could be erected at the rear of the museum for the larger objects. Again my trustees were apprehensive that the main front of the surgery should be complete and perfect before the back was considered. I felt it was important to get the total scheme, even if it was only in shell form, otherwise the opportunity would be wasted. Also, the convent chapel was going to be re-roofed and Peter Rolls, mayor of Wantage, tipped me that the second-hand tiles were available. I said yes at once - the barn would have tiles instead of its asbestos roof. Christian and I spent many weekends dismantling the barn at Hendred. The large tie beams were lifted off with a huge crane to be hauled over to Wantage on a Land Rover and trailer to be re-erected at the end of the garden using Peter McCurdy’s timber framed building team for the more specialized work. Most of the barn was financed by Kirsty’s catering funds at Lains Barn. With a lot of voluntary help, help from firms at charity rates and a lot of money raised we struggled through and got the building finished.

CARNEGIE SUPPORT

It was a huge morale boost to be offered a £15,000 grant from the Carnegie Trust as they had a policy helping individual groups in interpretation displays though they no longer funded museums directly.

As opening day approached I had some personal frustrations over the actual message present in the main gallery. Although the display looked attractive, I felt it was too wordy and failed to give the ordinary visitors an inspiration or any concept of the passions of the previous inhabitants of Wantage. Hopefully when we do some more work in the main gallery we can rectify this as I feel it should be the most important part of the centre.

The other facilities work superbly - chiefly because so many different people in the community have devoted their spare time to make sure they work. On a Wednesday evening the faithful D.I.Y. brigade come in and mop up all the jobs which have collected during the week - mending tables, leaking radiators etc. The Childerleys, having retired from teaching professions, set up and ran the bookshop for many years until Ken had his "second retirement" to take up the job of head gardener at the museum. Madeleine Brown and others run the W.I. Market. On a Friday morning the museum is buzzing with activity with all the stalls being set up while the public are actually queuing to get in. Not only does it provide the public with the fun of buying home-grown plants and home-made cakes, but it provides a meeting place for the W.I. members who turn up with their produce, chat and exchange ideas.

The centre has now been open for ten years with 60,000 visitors per year - the second most visited museum in Oxfordshire. It has an official management structure which ensures its future. It is well integrated into the community with about 100 volunteers who staff the bookshop, the gallery and the kitchen, and behind the scenes cope with anything from academic research to the accounts. Hopefully this has given a lot of people a sense of achievement, involvement in the community and an outlet for their skills. It is the same sense of pleasure which I get every time I walk through the door which makes all the "agony" worth while.

Self-help schemes like the Vale & Downland Centre which harness local enthusiasm and abilities are a very economical investment for local councils to pump prime because, when completed, they are treated with great affection by the community which has had to work for them.

Every small town should have its Vale & Downland Centre.

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