

1807 COMMEMORATED

LEARNING FROM THE BICENTENARY -
A GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

Exhibitions Toolkit

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Introduction

The [1807 Commemorated](#) project recorded over 180 exhibitions, displays and installations in museums, libraries, galleries and archives which were set in place to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

Drawing on this large resource the project has created this toolkit which considers the ways in which visitors were informed, encouraged to reflect and asked to interact with exhibitions and displays in 2007.

This toolkit provides a means of shaping future displays and considering how to coordinate visitor experiences with a traumatic past.

This toolkit is based on the [1807 Commemorated](#) project, located at the [University of York](#). The project received funding through the [Arts and Humanities Research Council's](#), [Knowledge Transfer Fellowship](#). As part of the project, over 180 individual events in museums, libraries, galleries and archives were recorded. At least 60 of these events were examined in detail.

This toolkit has been created on the principle that sharing approaches and comparing methods within the heritage sector can assist in policy and planning. The toolkit is a guide for practitioners in the production and dissemination of a project.

This is not a prescriptive checklist of what to do but rather a series of thinking points to consider to aid practitioners and provide a means of reflection.

Toolkit aims

- The toolkit is a self-assessment tool for heritage practitioners assessing the experiences of individuals and their impact on the development of projects. It is for use by the museums, libraries and archives sector
- This toolkit aims to facilitate self-reflective and critical practice and to identify areas to improve understanding of how practitioners responded to the demands of representing a traumatic past
- This toolkit aims to provide a reflective exercise that identifies key issues to think about in terms of developing strategies to consider the roles of practitioners

This toolkit is based on

- The extensive survey carried out by the [1807 Commemorated](#) project examining the exhibitions and displays across Britain installed to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade
- The recognition that heritage practitioners can benefit greatly from the exchange of knowledge and practice
- The belief that practitioners, due to shortages of time and pressures of work, are rarely able to observe and assess work that is carried out elsewhere

- The recognition that heritage practitioners do face great difficulties in the development and production of museum, library or archive output concerning a traumatic past and its legacy
- The recognition that whilst exhibition and display development are controlled and differentiated from one another by resources of time, finance, collections and space, there are nevertheless certain key concepts that require assessment
- The belief that identifying areas of similarity and difference within exhibitions or displays across the heritage sector can enrich the practice and policy of institutions

Why use this toolkit?

There are a range of practical reasons for engaging fully with the various ways in which institutions represented the past to the public to mark the bicentenary of the 1807 abolition of the slave trade act:

- to help to understand how institutions and practitioners respond to complex histories and legacies
- to develop transparent modes of working
- to facilitate a greater understanding within institutions of the range of practices that are undertaken within the heritage sector to construct exhibitions or displays
- to assist in the development of academic and community consultation programmes, as both the consultation and the exhibition development process cannot be considered separate
- to assist in the creation of contentious and dissonant exhibition content

Issues discussed within the toolkit

This toolkit considers the issues regarding exhibition and display development with reference to 5 specific issues:

- Framing the exhibition: examining the openings of exhibitions and displays
- Objects, texts and images: examining the use of materials within institutions
- Emotional / Imaginative engagement: incorporating alternative ways to engage with visitors
- Community sections: sharing space within an exhibition or display with community groups
- Legacy: addressing the issues of how the past is considered and remembered in the present

The toolkit will be concluded with an evaluative section, where the issues that have been faced by heritage practitioners and wider institutions can be considered and used to inform future policy and practice across museums, archives, libraries and galleries.

Framing the exhibition

The openings of the exhibitions and displays marking the bicentenary were some of the most important aspects of the representation of the past in 2007. To a large extent these areas framed the experience of the bicentenary and its meanings for visitors, as it informed individuals with the manner in which this history and legacy were to be considered.

The variety of ways in which institutions structured the visitor experiences of entering exhibitions was quite diverse. Many museums provided 'statements of intent' to visitors or attempted to communicate the key messages in the opening panels of exhibitions or displays. For instance at the [International Slavery Museum](#) in Liverpool, visitors are greeted with the declaration:

**This museum explores
how millions of Africans were forced into slavery
the crucial part that Liverpool played in this process
how there are permanent consequences for people living in Africa,
the Caribbean, North and South America, and Western Europe
This story has been neglected by too many for too long.**

Similarly, visitors to the *Breaking the Chains* exhibition, at the [British Empire and Commonwealth Museum](#), were also reminded of this call to remembrance through the exhibition:

**In 2007 we remember the courage and strength of all those who fought
and campaigned against slavery – in Africa, Britain and the Caribbean.**

Other institutions also chose to use the opportunity presented with the opening sections to question the motivations of installing an exhibition to mark the bicentenary of the 1807 abolition act.

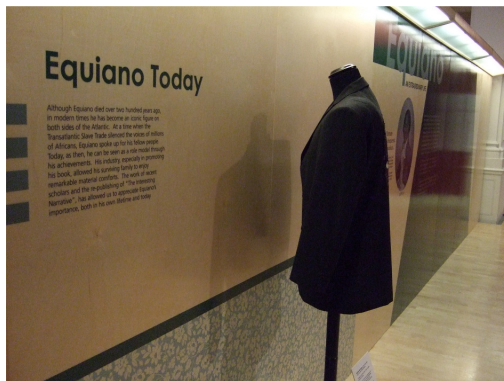
**This engagement raises many questions, not least about how we approach
challenging aspects of our own heritage, and why so many institutions
and organisations are particularly keen to do so in 2007.**

Accompanying these text panels were also images and objects to assist in drawing visitors into the exhibition, its messages and its aims, explicitly or implicitly. At the [Museum in Docklands](#) for the exhibition, *London, Sugar and Slavery*, a large display panel was installed of the names of the British ships carrying enslaved peoples from the West Coast of Africa to the Americas.



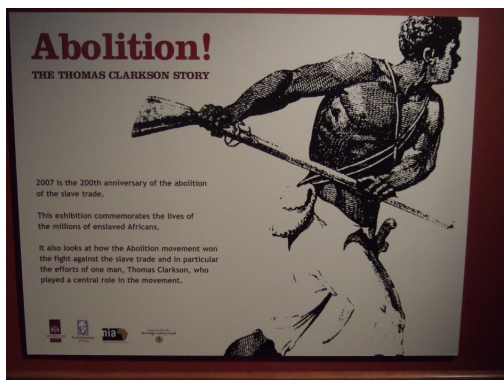
Museum in Docklands, *London, Sugar and Slavery*. Photograph: 1807 Commemorated

The *Equiano Exhibition* at [Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery](#) utilised one of the artworks, created through collaboration between a local youth group and a number of artists, to stress the connections between Equiano as a historical figure and Equiano as an significant contemporary figure.



The artwork, an embroidered blazer, linked to Equiano's own 'Freedom Suit', bought to mark the end of his enslavement. Photograph: 1807 Commemorated.

The exhibition, *Abolition! The Thomas Clarkson Story*, at the [Ipswich Museum](#), utilised the image of the Maroon Hero, Leonard Parkinson, to guide visitors through into the main section of the exhibition. The image used in this manner creates a rather different perception for the visitor, rather than an image of chains or even a picture of Thomas Clarkson himself.



The image of Leonard Parkinson is used to provide another dimension to the exhibition, *Abolition! The Thomas Clarkson Story*. Photograph: 1807 Commemorated.

The manner in which the entrances to exhibitions are managed and how they communicate to visitors is of especial importance, particularly in considering the ways in which the history of British complicity in the transatlantic slave trade and its

legacies of colonialism and racism have been marginalised. Therefore, in the construction of opening areas and sections for exhibitions, a number of issues might require consideration:

- What are the messages of the exhibition or display delivered in the opening panel or introductory display sections?
- How are these messages delivered?
- Has this introductory section been discussed with the community representatives or partners?
- How do you want to present the exhibition to the visitor?
- What tools, ideas or understandings should be presented at the outset for the visitor to take with them throughout the rest of the exhibition?
- How does the opening section address local or national cultural memory regarding particular histories and legacies?
- How does the opening section address the level of awareness, debate and engagement with the subject amongst the wider public?

Objects, texts and images

The selection of objects, texts and images within an exhibition or display was one of the most complex areas for practitioners, and indeed wider institutions, that were involved in marked the bicentenary. There was an obligation upon each institution to consider their role in society, the manner in which they communicated to the public and the responsibilities they held towards community groups.

The variety of ways in which institutions utilised objects, texts and images to convey the messages of exhibitions or displays is highly informative. It highlights the diversity of practice and the varying issues that arise.

Objects were at the forefront of many of the discussions within institutions marking 1807-2007. From debates concerning the display of objects of restraint to arguments regarding the repatriation of stolen cultural artefacts, institutions were also faced with a perceived lack of objects through which histories could be told.

To overcome this absence, museums engaged with various techniques, most notably, the process of ‘revealing histories’. Through this engagement with the collections of institutions, the ‘biographies’ of objects were investigated, to highlight their implicit and explicit links to the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. This process encompassed the re-labelling of objects such as tea and coffee silverware to wholesale examinations of the rights of museums to possess particular objects. In the *Voices from Africa* exhibition at the [St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life](#), community representatives were asked to reinterpret artefacts from the collections:

‘We don’t know how some objects arrived here from their original source. But we do know that our people were inhumanely treated during the brutal era...’

Similarly museum texts were employed in different ways to inform but also to engage with visitors. Whilst many museums delivered the content of the exhibition in an

objective manner, many institutions experimented with utilising a distinctive subjective 'voice' within the exhibition or display. However, it was the representation of the traumatic past and legacy in a sober, objective manner which dominated:

The transatlantic slave trade began in the early 16th Century. Europeans had started to settle in the Americas and began enslaving Africans to work on their plantations.

Museum Text, 1807 Commemorated Archive

The [Wilberforce House](#) exhibition used this subjective voice in its discussion of human rights:

The only way to make sure people you agree with can speak is to support the rights of people you don't agree with.

Visitors were also presented within the museum text at a number of institutions with questions regarding their own perceptions, values and understandings of the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. A number of museums have used this device in their discussions about the Middle Passage. The [Royal Navy Historic Dockyards](#) in Portsmouth in the *Chasing Freedom* exhibition asked visitors;

What would you take with you?

The use of images was also another significant area of concern for practitioners. Issues involved in the selection of images were numerous, from cultural sensitivity to copyright laws. There was perhaps as a result of these issues a distinct similarity in the images chosen by institutions in the construction of exhibitions, displays and events. Images such as the, '*The Brookes*' abounded, perhaps inevitably, but there was also predominance of images of chains and shackles, used in a variety of contexts from title images to advertising materials.



BECM, *Breaking the Chains*. Photograph: 1807 Commemorated.



Manor House, 1807-2007. Photograph: 1807 Commemorated.

The use of objects, texts and images thereby requires a great degree of consideration and assessment. Issues to consider in this context could be:

- What are the main messages of the exhibition or display to be delivered through the objects, texts and images?
- How are these messages delivered?
- Has the use of these objects, texts or images been discussed with the community representatives or partners? How have their suggestions or comments been incorporated?
- Is the exhibition or display concerned with the display of the collection or the communication of messages and ideas?
- How does the representation of objects, texts and images shape the experience of the visitor?
- How does the use of materials address local or national cultural memory regarding particular histories and legacies?

Emotional / Imaginative engagement

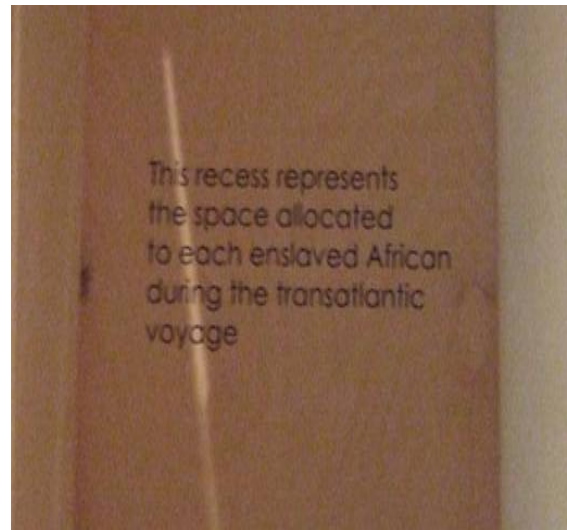
The use of devices within museums to engender an emotional or imaginative engagement with the exhibition or display can be a powerful device, encouraging positive engagement with the subject matter presented. It enables the visitor to access the materials represented directly, engaging in wider social, political and cultural events. It therefore provides a very different perspective for visitors to consider the past and its present day legacies.

A number of museums utilised an emotional or imaginative approach in the exhibitions and displays set in place to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. These were mainly restricted to the areas representing the Middle Passage and drew upon textual and spatial devices to engender an emotional or imaginative connection between the visitor and individuals in the past. For example, the [International Slavery Museum](#) used a video installation of enslaved peoples chained below the deck of a ship:



Video installation at the International Slavery Museum. Photograph: 1807 Commemorated.

Similarly, the *Equiano Exhibition* at the [Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery](#) used a series of recesses in the display of the exhibition to represent the space that each enslaved individual was forced into.



BMAG, *Equiano Exhibition*. Photographs: 1807 Commemorated.

However, there were other areas within exhibitions where attempts to draw visitors' emotional and imaginative engagement were also made. Prominent amongst many exhibitions was the use of personal narratives or historical accounts, which asked visitors to sympathise or empathise with the experience of individuals in the past. Accounts of individuals such as Mary Prince, Olaudah Equiano, Thomas Clarkson, Ottobah Cugoana and Ignatius Sancho could bring the experience of enslavement and the campaign against it directly to visitors. Issues of contemporary slavery were also explained to visitors who were asked to place themselves into the experience of others. Wilberforce House uses this mode of representation to question visitors regarding issues of modern day slavery and human rights.

What would you do to defend your rights?

What would you do to defend other people's rights?

The issue of using an emotional or imaginative engagement within an exhibition or display is a significant decision for any heritage practitioner. A number of issues that could be considered are:

- What are the objectives in employing attempting to elicit an emotional or imaginative response?

- How does an emotional or imaginative response deliver the messages of the exhibition?
- Has the use of this emotional or imaginative approach been discussed with the community representatives or partners? How have their suggestions or comments been incorporated?
- In what parts of the exhibition is an emotional or imaginative connection being made? Why is it important to engage emotionally or imaginatively at this juncture?

Community Sections

Increasingly, within many different exhibitions or displays, sections are specifically labelled as areas which are the work of the community consultation panel which worked with the institution. These sections can constitute anything from brief responses or opinions on a panel or display board, to entire aspects of an exhibition which are the responsibility of groups and communities to develop and organise.

To mark the bicentenary many institutions shared the space of an exhibition or display with community groups, providing an extra dimension and to some extent an alternative narrative of the past and the present.

The majority of exhibitions or displays used panels to include the views of their community. In the exhibition, *Bombay Africans* at the [Royal Geographical Society](#), the comments from the community groups were placed with the main text. The comments that were made focused on connections and cultural continuity:

‘Our children do not see these items and it is important for them to know about their history.’

‘It is a shame that not many people know about this story... I never heard or knew that Africans lived in India and I like to follow up the story of those who stayed and what their thinking is...how much of their original African culture has remained...’

Other exhibitions provided spaces in which contributions from community groups could be incorporated. The exhibition, *London, Sugar and Slavery* at the [Museum in Docklands](#) provides a permanent space for community projects to create and present new displays. The *Equiano Exhibition* at [Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery](#) was similarly constituted with responses from the community groups regarding Equiano’s historical and contemporary significance.

The manner in which community contributions are placed within an exhibition or display is a significant issue. Points to consider when deciding upon the extent and nature of these contributions are:

- What for you is the importance of incorporating community sections in the exhibition?
- How will these sections impact or shape the wider exhibition?

- Are the sections from community groups used to support the content of the exhibition or are they a forum for alternative voices/narratives?
- How should the community contributions be used within the exhibition? As a stand alone section, an integrated significant section or as a commentator on the display panels?
- Has the nature and extent to which these sections are incorporated been discussed and agreed with community representatives? How have their suggestions or comments been incorporated?
- How does the use of community perspectives shape the experience of the visitor?
- How does the community perspectives address local or national cultural memory regarding particular histories and legacies?

Representations of Legacy

One of the most important aspects of exhibition or display development is the manner in which the representations of the past are connected to the present day. This can be an area of tense discussion and negotiation to develop which legacy issues are explained and the form in which they are discussed.

Institutions marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade addressed the issue of legacies by focusing predominantly on one of two issues, contemporary slavery and issues of equality and racism.

The ways in which the previous sections of the exhibition or display had considered the history of enslavement and abolition were linked to the linked to the representation of legacy issues in many museums. Institutions which had focused on abolition, the history of enslavement and its local connections, might choose to consider the nature of contemporary slavery. Institutions which focused on issues of colonialism and the exploitation of Africa might consider the issues of human rights and the persistence of racism in contemporary society.

The [Walsall Museum](#) exhibition, *Trade Links*, engaged with legacy issues by examining the local responses to the poisonous heritage of the transatlantic slave trade in terms of racism. Members of the local African and African Caribbean communities described their experiences within the town:

‘It’s an everyday experience and manifests in different ways. It can get you down, knock your confidence, and bring self doubt. Sometimes it’s blatant and obvious, sometimes subtle and people don’t even know they are being racist. It still hits the same way.’

The exhibition also considered perspective of local self-identified ‘white British’ residents with regard to racism and discrimination;

‘White society enjoys Black music and dance, loves to eat Caribbean and African food, cheers when races and matches are won by Black sports men and women, and yet white society continues to perpetuate racist attitudes...’

The manner in which legacy issues are represented within an exhibition or display is therefore a significant issue. Points to consider when deciding upon the ways in which museums and community groups can address these issues are:

- What for you is the importance of incorporating legacy sections in the exhibition?
- How will these legacy sections impact or shape the wider exhibition?
- How will the wider exhibition contribute to visitor perceptions of the legacy section?
- Has the content and nature of these legacy sections been discussed and agreed with community representatives or partners? How have their suggestions or comments been incorporated?
- Is there a means for re-examining the legacy issues with the community group as the project progresses?
- How does the legacy section shape the experience of the visitor?
- How does the legacy section address local or national cultural memory regarding particular histories and legacies?

Evaluation

- What evaluation methods are in place to examine the design and construction of exhibition and displays?
- In what ways can the production processes of exhibitions/consultation programmes be designed so that practitioner experiences can be utilised to develop and rework the production process as necessary
- How are you planning to share insights into the development process with colleagues within the wider heritage sector and the community groups with which you have worked?