

Wessex Museums

Contemporary Collecting Strategy 2020 - 2025

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1. INTRODUCTION

Wessex Museums is a thriving consortium of four museums which best tell the stories of Dorset and Wiltshire from Prehistoric times to the present day: Dorset County Museum, Poole Museum, The Salisbury Museum and Wiltshire Museum. This is a natural partnership covering the geographical spread of Dorset and Wiltshire, and with world class collections spanning archaeology, fine and decorative art, ethnography, literature, social history, costume and textiles. The Wessex Museums are perfectly placed to share the story of Wessex and its relationship with the rest of the world.

Wessex Museums is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation 2018-22. Our ambition is to inspire more people to explore and enjoy the outstanding art and heritage of the region and to understand its significance to their lives. The partnership will share the amazing story of the region in new and exciting ways and make a major contribution to the cultural, social and tourism economies of Dorset and Wiltshire.

Wessex Museums has developed a five-year Contemporary Collecting Strategy as part of its shared Interpretation Strategy, and to align to the partner museums' Collections Development Policies. The story of Wessex as told through the four partner museums' is one of rich cultural diversity and Contemporary Collecting is central to the vision of the Partnership, as a forward facing and engaging organization. The aim of the Contemporary Collecting Strategy is to work with local audiences to co-curate projects and create new content for future displays, as well as strengthen collections where there are gaps.

2. WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

Contemporary collecting is the collecting of objects and stories that reflect the recent past and what is happening today. Usually covering the past 50 years from the date collecting is being undertaken, there are two main ways that contemporary material can be acquired. Passive collecting through offers of donations is one way, but in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of modern-day life, active and collaborative types of collecting in the form of coordinated projects are usually more effective.

Contemporary collecting means acquiring new material, to fill the gaps identified in existing collections. It also helps to future-proof collections for as-yet-unknown exhibitions and research projects, therefore ensuring that museums remain relevant to and representative of their audiences. A great benefit of contemporary collecting is that the histories falls within living memory, so can be documented with insights from those who experienced them first-hand. This provides museums with the opportunity to work in partnership with other people and communities, to be creative, dynamic and inclusive.

3. WHY CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING IS IMPORTANT

Wessex Museums will strive to reflect the various viewpoints of the present-day communities they serve and not just the past achievements of particular individuals and small groups.

Contemporary collecting acknowledges that society is diverse and its evolution is constant. It is important that our museums collect contemporary material in order to best represent the people that live around them and to listen to different voices. Wessex Museums aim to share these narratives and contemporary collecting is an effective way to do this.

The Benefits for Wessex Museums:

- Collecting contemporary material highlights the similarities and differences between the past and life today
- It's an opportunity to develop collections and bring them up-to-date
- A chance to collect objects and stories that resonate with our audiences, making collections more relevant, engaging and accessible in the longer term
- Encourages new audiences and partnerships, by inviting different groups to work in collaboration with museums
- Challenges our museums to engage with current issues and be a place for debate
- Provides professional development for museum staff and volunteers across the partnership by delivering community projects, conducting oral histories and curating new types of materials.

4. WHAT TO COLLECT

It is difficult to know what to collect, when so much is happening all around us every day. Major events, such as the 2012 Olympics or Brexit, are obvious in their importance, making it easier to identify them as topics for contemporary collecting. However, our museums also need to consider the everyday lives of the people and communities around them, to determine what to collect and to try and predict what will be historically significant in the future.

It can also be challenging to know how to collect and when to stop, especially if the material available is plentiful. Therefore, it is important to start small and see how a collecting initiative develops.

Contemporary collecting projects do not have to result in major exhibitions and displays. Instead, new acquisitions and their stories, can be shared with the wider public online, or as part of a series of talks.

It is important to be realistic about the capacity to collect. Think about storage issues, conservation requirements and other potential costs when acquiring items in perpetuity.

Determining what to collect

The Wessex Museums will identify the gaps in our collections by doing a top-level review of what has been acquired over the past 50 years or so. Are there themes which are well represented from past collecting that could be continued and brought up-to-date? Are there any obvious stories missing that could be documented? We will write up a list of themes and ideas as a starting point – environment, health, technology, religion etc. – and look for synergies across the partnership through our Contemporary Collecting Working Group.

Have other museums collected this material already

There are sometimes overlaps in museum collections, especially if material was abundantly available around a major event or in a certain time period. We will check if any of the stories or objects have already been documented elsewhere in the partnership or beyond, to ensure that resources are targeted on something that needs recording and work isn't duplicated.

What is significant

It can be difficult to know what will be historically significant in the future. However, there will be events, trends, fashions and anniversaries that lend themselves to collecting projects. We will think about local communities that are underrepresented in our collections, or significant companies or industries in our region that are not well documented. Perhaps a major political event has taken place in recent years that needs to be better recorded.

Who to collaborate with

Local people, new communities, or recently established organisations are often the owners of and gatekeepers to diverse and important objects and histories. We will identify what stories should be documented, and then consider who will be able to assist in collecting the material. We will ensure that the people we are engaging with help us to shape what we will collect; it's a two-way process.

Set out the aims

We will set the parameters and have clear aims from the outset. Start small and focused, by collecting only several objects.

- Build on existing collections relating to a particular topic
- Focus on a specific time period
- Identify new themes that reflect the events that are going on around us
- Document the experiences of people associated with the contemporary material, using oral history interviews and film.

How to approach it

- Undertake research to best identify individuals who have both relevant memories and objects to share for the intended project. Use social media and local newspapers to reach out to people who can help get the project off the ground.
- Scope out ideas with colleagues across the partnership and through the Contemporary Collecting Working Group, and apply for additional funding to turn a collecting idea into a fuller project, if there is opportunity or rationale for doing so.
- Hold 'show and tell' events, inviting people to come to the museums with their treasured items and speak to staff and volunteers about their experiences. No commitment should be made by the museums to collect anything on the day, but instead collect the contact details of the owners and information about the objects. Take time to think about what the final acquisitions should be.
- Photograph the objects for possible acquisition and propose them to the museum's collections staff. Think very carefully about what might be acquired in terms of its long-term care requirements.
- Arrange for oral history interviews to be undertaken over the coming weeks and months. Where practical, ask trained volunteers to help carry out the interviews.
- If collecting born digital material, consider the storage implications and what format it is collected in, to ensure the material can be easily accessed and preserved in years to come. Seek advice from colleagues who have experience of collecting digital material.
- Confirm copyright and intellectual property rights from the outset. Make sure this is documented clearly when the material is acquired, so future colleagues understand how the material can be used.

5. CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING AND COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Just like with any new acquisition, contemporary material needs to fit the collecting criteria within a museum's Collections Development Policy. Included in all Collections Development Policies of the Wessex Museums is a small section which clearly outlines what the contemporary collecting objectives are.

Wording for Collections Development Policies across the Wessex Museums Partnership –
xxxxx Museum actively engages in contemporary collecting in order to capture a snapshot of what is new, what is changing and what is happening now. As with all additions to the permanent collection, when considering acquiring contemporary material the above collecting themes and criteria must be met.

6. CONSERVATION AND STORAGE OF MODERN MATERIALS

Today very few manufactured items are produced with the long-term or posterity in mind. Instead, things are usually produced for the immediate future, and in an environmentally conscious society, contemporary goods may be produced with the intention that they will biodegrade or be recycled.

For modern materials like plastics and rubber, it is not currently known how to stop some of them from degrading, and the breaking down of polymers is unpredictable. The earliest plastics are particularly prone to breaking down and rubber is a changeable material that can become brittle and crumble. In contrast, other synthetic material like polyester are far more stable.

When collecting electrical goods, think about how the object should be preserved – is it to be thought of a plastic box with components inside, or, where possible, should the functionality be maintained too. Mobile phones and games consoles are a good example here.

Checklist

- Be aware of the individual materials which comprise the object and try to find out as much about them as possible
- Remove or separate from the object any batteries, battery packs or easily detachable polymeric components
- Boxing with plastic or plastazote dividers between objects will help to reduce any cross contamination between objects
- A steady temperature and relative humidity are required. Lower temperatures will reduce the likelihood of internal chemical degradation. However, freezing may cause embrittlement

- Low light levels are desirable. Not only will high light levels cause fading of any colours, but may cause embrittlement of polymeric material
- The wrapping of some plastics and rubber in acid free tissue should be avoided. If they start to break down and become sticky, the paper will adhere itself to the object
- Vigilance and regular inspection are essential. Although it is often not possible to prevent the degradation of some modern materials, specifically polymeric materials, potential damage to adjacent objects can be mitigated in the early stages.

TOOLKIT ONE - HOW TO ACQUIRE OBJECTS

1. How does it fit with your Collecting Policy? Do you already collect material related to this topic? Find the aspect of your collecting policy that the object relates to, helping to justify the acquisition.
2. How will you acquire the object? Would someone be willing to donate one? Or do you have budget to buy one? Would you like it to be new or used and will this change the meaning of the object for your collection? Contact the relevant people and start discussions to see what the options are.
3. Determine the ownership and copyright status of the object and make sure this is clearly documented. Complete the required paperwork as you would with any acquisition.
4. What are the storage and conservation implications? Speak to your colleagues to ensure you have the capacity to store or display the object as required. Will it need to be quarantined, frozen or cleaned before coming into your store?
5. Consider collecting supporting material that would help complement the object's story. Could you do an oral history interview with someone who was involved with getting the object made, or used it as part of their job?
6. Write an acquisition proposal and present it to your collections team. Why do you want to collect this particular object? Consider the wider context of the relevance of the object and what it represents.
7. Consider the project's legacy and how collecting and community partnerships may be able to continue, if applicable and beneficial to all involved.

TOOLKIT TWO - UNDERTAKING A CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING PROJECT

1. Identify gaps in your collection and develop ideas for collecting project themes. Consider how this fits with your Collections Development Policy.
2. Consider who you could collaborate with to ensure collecting is accurate and representative of the story you want to capture. Whose story is it?
3. Write project aims, keeping the focus clear to help you clearly communicate to your colleagues and your collaborators what it is you want to achieve.
4. Identify the collection outputs in consultation with any project partners. What will you collect, how will you collect it and what will you do with it?
5. Deliver your collecting project, reviewing the outputs as you go along in case changes in direction are needed to meet your project aims.
6. Acquire the material and keep good documentation so that copyright, ownership, contributor information etc. is clearly captured.
7. Consider the project's legacy and how collecting and community partnerships may be able to continue, if applicable and beneficial to all involved.

Contemporary Collecting Toolkit. Museum Development North West and Jen Kavanagh. 2019.

APPENDIX ONE: OBJECT HISTORY SHEET

To maximize the long-term success of any piece of Contemporary Collecting, it is essential that the object is catalogued swiftly, and that as much information as possible surrounding the acquisition is captured and added the Object History File.

<p>What is the story of the object?</p>	<p>Are there any preconditions — copyright, ownership etc?</p>	
<p>What is the importance of the object to the museum?</p>	<p>What is the importance of the object to the donor?</p>	<p>What will happen to the object after it is acquired?</p>
<p>Describe what has been acquired. DZSWS:</p>		<p>What materials is the object made from? Are there any specific conservation requirements?</p>
<p>Wiltshire Museum, Devizes</p>		

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