

The antiques roadshow

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If the punters won't go to the museum, then the museum must go to the masses. Aaron Davies catches up with the mobile museums.

Faced with the ever-present issue of how to get people to see their collections, some museums are looking at it from a different angle. Instead of trying to get people to the museum, they're finding ways of getting their collection to the people.

Museum services such as Colchester and Ipswich and small museums like the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary Heritage and Learning Resource have launched new mobile museum services this summer. Like a kind of cultural meals on wheels, these museums are getting to large numbers of people that they wouldn't normally reach. Which makes a mobile museum a powerful tool, especially for small rural institutions.

'We are a tiny museum with really limited funding,' says Angela Sutton-Vane, the collections officer at the Constabulary Resource. 'We have this fantastic collection, but it was all in store and we couldn't get funding to open it to the public.' So, with the help of £40,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund, they started Driving Change, a transit van that transports exhibitions to schools.

'It's a way of getting our collection used,' she explains. 'For schools, particularly in rural areas, getting children to a museum is quite a lot of work. It's taking the museum to the kids rather than the kids to the museum.'

Taking an exhibition out to schools and other community groups means that you can display objects in a new way. With a small van, like the one used by Driving Change, there is no room for static displays. Objects have to be unpacked and set up in whatever space is available.

However, you do have to think carefully about what you're going to display. Nobody wants a delicate piece of 14th-century Chinese porcelain being bandied around by a class of hyped-up eight year olds. But there are plenty of objects that are suitable for anybody, even excited children, to handle.

'To us, a box full of Roman tiles may not sound that interesting, but to someone who has never held a Roman tile, you can tell lots of stories about how we lived,' explains Caroline MacDonald, the project officer in charge of Colchester Museum's new mobile museum. The project recently won £100,000 of funding from the Designation Challenge Fund Phase 4 to develop Museum To Go, its van-based museum.

Dave Paget-Woods, the learning manager at Plymouth City Museum and enthusiastic supporter of mobile museums agrees. 'We spend a lot of time handling objects. That's the way to the hearts and minds of people,' he says. 'If you're going to lock all the objects up, you have to wonder what the point of a museum actually is.' And Plymouth City Museum certainly reaches a lot of hearts and minds. Last year its mobile museum visited over 30,000 schoolchildren. This number was achieved by leaving the display at schools for a week, so different classes could use it for different projects.

Pembrokeshire Museum Service in Wales reaches out to the Romany Gypsy community in a similar way. Instead of a van, however, they use a vardá, a traditional bow-topped van. 'The largest ethnic group in Pembrokeshire is the Romany Gypsy community and historically they didn't visit museums. We wanted to find a way of reaching them,' says Mark Thomas, the county museums officer. 'We talked to the community and came up with the idea of having a travelling museum in a vardá.'

Fife Museum and Art Gallery's mobile museum also reaches out to schools and the local community, but using a very different sort of vehicle. A bespoke 30-foot truck that they use as a moveable mini-museum. This gives them a lot of flexibility when it comes to designing a space for different exhibitions. Iain Clark, an outreach officer at Fife, explains: 'We worked with designers to completely change the way the interior looks. A few years ago it was a miner's cottage. We had a miner telling visitors about what his daily life was like working down the mines.' This year they have divided the space into four to look at the different ways that objects are interpreted.

Whatever size the museum, there is another positive effect of having a mobile museum: publicity. Plymouth's vans, emblazoned with the name of the museum, are a popular target for local newspaper photographers and often pop up in the local papers. There seem to be lots of benefits to having a mobile museum, so why aren't the roads full of vans, kitted out in museum colours, criss-crossing the nation? The answer is that while they have advantages for some museums, they aren't suited to all situations.

'There aren't that many mobile museums because of how hard it is to look after the objects and because of the paid staff need to run them,' says Sally Cross, the collections coordinator at the Museums Association.

Many museums, particularly those in urban areas where there are plenty of suitable venues to house exhibitions, concentrate on touring exhibitions and long-term loans.

One thing those services with mobile museums have in common, is a conviction that they're part of the future. Despite the fact that we're well into the digital age and most people are used to accessing a colossal amount of information at home via the internet, the advantage of mobile museums is that they bring physical objects that people can handle and explore.

Colchester's Caroline MacDonald emphasises this. 'Not only is a mobile museum accessible and inclusive, it is creative, exciting and fun' she states. 'It challenges what people think museums are all about.'

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