

Can Social History Make us Happy?

Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator at Reading Museum & Town Hall, shares his experience of attempting to combat contemporary social issues through engaging local people with social history, as part of Reading Museum's Happy Museum project.

During the course of my working life I often experience eudemonic flow, a state of well-being derived from captivating activity which can lift everyday troubles from one's consciousness¹. It occurred to me recently when accessioning a set of 19th century photographs of Reading's Oxford Road area. These were donated by a descendant of John Powell, a chemist of St Marys Butts. The donor's family tradition, that their ancestor became a pioneer of the new technology as a result of a business relationship with William Fox-Talbot, makes sense, since we know that Fox-Talbot's assistant was viewed with suspicion in the town due to the volume of chemical he was seen purchasing and transporting to the studios in nearby Baker Street.

As I took my magnifying glass to the calotypes to observe details for inclusion in the database's content field, my imagination was carried away to a bygone age. The shape of the track out towards Pangbourne is recognisable, but the Fox pub on the corner and the business opposite have long since been swept aside, by buildings preceding today's shopping centre and bank. The place appears ramshackle, at a time just before the town's biscuit factory, brick making and seed supply really took off with enterprise to create conditions for capital investment that saw Reading expand beyond recognition during the later part of Queen Victoria's reign. I travel out along the gravel track, past fields of malt and grazing sheep and reach the strategically placed turnpike house which stopped those sneaky travellers who fancied their chances of avoiding a toll by entering the town via this quieter route.



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Today, the old turnpike is a Grade II listed building, housing one of the many letting agents in the area who provide single occupancy accommodation in the terracotta town houses and terraces that sprang up in the decades that followed. The property speculators of the time capitalised on the housing needs of an army of migrants from the West Country and Wales seeking a better life as another pair of hands in the town's factories. As I looked at the picture, I wondered about the figures in the foreground; what would life have been like before the industrial boom? Did they fear the changes on the horizon? What would they make of the newcomers?

The phone rings and an email pings to bring me back to the reality of time pressure. I need to leave my own little day dreams aside and make sure the documentation is completed and means something in the future. I must ignore the distractions and get on with the data entry. These moments of eudemonic flow are important to hold on to, especially given the words of warning contained in Ealasaid Munro's recently published research into the dangers of emotional burnout amongst those seeking to use museum collections to promote social justice.² Certainly if we do not find joy in our privileged access to material culture then it is probably time to find another occupation through which to achieve our vision of a more equitable future.

Eudemonic flow is a component of all five ways to health and well-being prescribed by the New Economics Foundation. It is, according to this Think Tank, when we connect, take notice, become active, keep learning and give, that we are happy. It was upon the principle that museums are well placed to provide opportunity for people to pursue all of these that the Happy Museum Project was founded in 2011. Conceived by former social history curator Tony Butler, the project is providing leadership within the UK museum sector by commissioning a series of micro-projects which 're-imagine museums for a changing world'.³ In August 2012 Reading Museum was a recipient of one such commission for a project we called 'Nag, Nag Nag to Reveal Reading's Hidden History'.

Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) have been commended by Thames Valley Police and local politicians for their work in assisting to deliver a 17.5% decrease in the level of reported crime in the Oxford Road, Newtown and Norcot districts of Reading. These neighbourhoods have suffered disproportionately from high levels of inter-generational unemployment, anti-social behaviour and the criminal activity of a small number of persistent offenders. This has had a negative impact upon the urban environment, leading to social problems such as feelings of loneliness and isolation amongst older generations and disillusionment and low aspiration amongst younger people growing up in poverty in neighbourhoods with bad reputations. Well-being, self esteem, career aspiration, skills, numeracy, literacy, diet, life expectations and life expectancy are all detrimentally impacted. Thus levels of happiness among members of these communities are greatly diminished in comparison to other parts of town.

The work of Reading's NAGs offers reason for hope and the opportunity to work in partnership through the Happy Museum project coincided with Reading Museum's own wish to focus our community engagement work in neighbourhoods which score poorly in national indices of social deprivation. In so doing our work responds to and aligns itself with the local authority's corporate priority towards the vulnerable sectors of society. By virtue of this we add value and social return on the council's investment. The premise for the project was that within any community, each individual's happiness is connected to their sense of self-worth and aspiration in life; that this is bound up with identity, which is in turn attached to the history of their locality.

In the case of these neighbourhoods, alternative narratives about the area's heritage is hidden, overshadowed by the constant reminders disseminated in the local press and through urban myth that these are undesirable homes which deserve their reputation. If we peel back the layers of time and disregard contemporary perceptions, we soon discover plenty of evidence to the contrary: Oxford Road has, in recent times, produced an Oscar-winning actress and an England cricket captain. The iron-rich clay and geological resources of Norcot built red brick towns across the South East, and in the last century, Newtown was home to the men and women who supplied a whole empire with Huntley & Palmers biscuits and cakes.

These locations have been inhabited since prehistory and so, by working with NAGs, the project sought to build bridges into these communities. We wanted to help make the future better by encouraging a wide group of local residents to become active and

take notice of their hidden heritage. The idea was that we could use heritage to go some way towards countering social problems that can be connected to misrepresented identity. As well as this, and through the enriching nature of connecting, taking notice, being active, learning and giving, we hoped that the project would offer participants a sense of well-being.

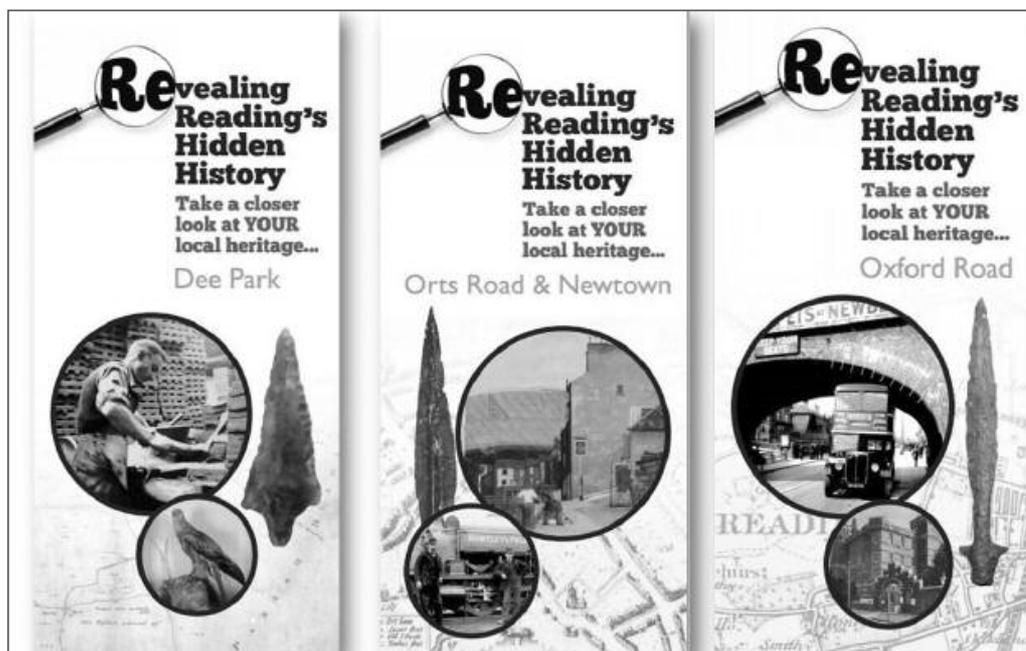
Happy Museum methodology uses a "Story of Change" planning technique which has a vision statement as its starting point. Ours was:

To create something that the community can be proud of, something community guided and high quality; revealing hidden history, recognising the present and imagining the future.

The Happy Museum project prioritises "outcome" over "output" in a process of "action research" which assesses success by "measuring what matters", i.e the positive bearing a museum can have upon people's well-being and the environment. Therefore, as well as 'creating something to be proud of', we were looking for evidence that the activity promoted attitudinal change amongst participants and the wider community.

During a period of five months, over 60 residents from each of the neighbourhoods were recruited through contact made via the NAGs. Participants were supported in conducting historical research through regular work shops, library visits and behind-the-scenes access to the museum stores. Local history talks and informal social gatherings were organised in pubs and community centres and, by working together, groups in each neighbourhood were able to produce accounts of a wide range of themes running through their social history. We also shared views and opinions about the problems that the areas face today and discussed ideas about alternative futures. All this information was then gathered together to form the basis of the project's output.

Through discussion and negotiation, group members were all given a say in developing a consensus about how the funding that came with the Happy Museum commission would be used to most effectively disseminate our findings. In the end it was decided to produce pocket leaflets containing an illustrated potted history of each area, including a synopsis of their current situations and some reasons we identified to be hopeful about the future. The leaflets were then distributed locally in what was felt would be the best antidote to the headlines carried in the free newspapers which drop through letter boxes each week.



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With the money left over, it was agreed to also purchase a branded gazebo, allowing the museum to “pop-up” whenever and wherever it likes in the future, for instance at community events such as the Oxford Road Fun Day and the East Reading Carnival in Newtown. In the end, 15,000 leaflets were given away for free in the neighbourhoods. We placed them in doctor’s surgeries, launderettes, pubs, tattoo parlours, letting agents, primary schools, church halls and in branch libraries; wherever we could think of that the wider community might find them. In the Dee Park estate in Norcot we were able to develop a good working relationship with the housing association, who agreed to match fund and distribute a leaflet to every household.



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How successful we were in promoting widespread community well-being through social history is difficult to measure convincingly. It is entirely possible that the work has had no effect at all in this regard, and producing the leaflets and pop up museum was no more than an end in itself. Nevertheless in evaluating the project we did deploy a number of tools in an attempt to monitor any signs of impact and attitudinal change.

Narrative evaluation involved observing participant interactions to look for indications of well-being and, for me, one of the most gratifying outcomes of the project was to be able to report back that laughter was shared and new friendships were formed. We also saw some of the local residents become actively engaged in the local development framework, with a delegation from the Oxford Road meeting with the ward councillor to discuss their views on how Section 106 funds, arising from the construction of a Tesco hypermarket, could be invested in bringing ramshackle properties into greater community use, as they had been in the past.

The Newtown group recorded their views on the value of the project with the following statement:

As a community, undertaking research into the history of this area has empowered us to see the area with a new perspective. Households have much of what they need for achieving a greater sense of well-being and happiness and all that is lacking is social support and shared activity. There was a sense that when drug dealing was at its worst, residents felt the need to keep themselves to themselves. We minded our own business. The Happy Museum activities have brought some residents out and perhaps this could be a starting point.

We also conducted a longitudinal survey, asking participants at the outset to choose from a selection of positive and negative signifying words and phrases which might best describe their current perspective on their neighbourhood. We repeated this exercise after the leaflets had been published and analysed any differences. In all, 31 participants took part in this process. From a list of 40 words, between them the participants chose a total of 126 in the first visit, whilst 120 were selected from the second. Of the 126 signifying words chosen originally, 58 (43.06%) remained the same in the second round, indicating that, as a group, participants had gained a somewhat different outlook on their local area. While there was a small increase in the proportion of positive signifying words being chosen, overall the most common words across areas remained similar, with "drug users" being the most common, chosen by individual participants on both occasions a total of 11 times. The next most popular word was "diverse" which was selected on both occasions by 8 participants. Clearly drug use is seen as a big issue in these areas which were also predominantly perceived as being "Working Class".

The experimental nature of a Happy Museum commission to pursue action research re-imagining the sector's role means that some consequences of the work can be unforeseen.⁴ In our case, the museum has acquired an increased sphere of influence within an area of public policy it might not have previously been considered relevant to. Earlier this year, as a direct result of 'Nag,Nag,Nag to Reveal Reading's Hidden History', the museum was invited to contribute to 'Reading 2050: Revealing Reading's Potential'. This multi-agency initiative, which is part of central government's *Foresight Future of Cities* programme, aims to take the first steps towards developing a smart and sustainable vision for Reading. It seeks to influence how Reading plans to deal with environmental and socio-economic issues arising from its economic growth whilst also complying with the Climate Change Act that commits the UK to an 80% reduction of greenhouse gas emission by the year 2050.⁵

This unpredicted development from 'Revealing Reading's History' has presented an opportunity for the museum to engage with the other key motivator behind the Happy Museum Project, namely the reimagining of museums as part of the solution in the transition to a low carbon world. The planet we live on faces critical issues, with depleting resources leading to acute polarisation of equality of opportunity for happiness amongst its population. This is aggravated by an international focus on perpetual economic growth, where securing happiness is lost in the drive to consume. Like many English towns and cities, Reading faces pressing internal issues: its population has increased by 9% in the last decade and is projected to grow by 25% by the year 2050. Creating an environment in which the town's people can flourish economically and lead happy lives in a manner that does not cost the earth is a huge challenge, yet limited communities of people within the town are aware of current debates or active in finding solutions. Decisions made in the here and now will determine whether the future in Reading is one where inequities become more or less acute. Decisions about how an increased population can be sustained will have an effect on Reading's urban and natural environment.

That museums might have a part to play in finding creative solutions to these pressures may seem a lofty ideal, but on a simple level there is scope within social history collections to take us back to the future, with the evidence they contain of the transitions that took place in the past and how communities were sustained without burning gas and electricity as if there was no tomorrow. The museum service within Reading Borough Council is well placed to generate wider debate because of its social history collection and its strategic role in promoting active citizenship and community engagement. We were therefore very pleased to recently receive a second commission from the Happy Museum Project to support us in a further programme of action research in which we have a vision to be 'a trusted advocate and influential agency through which communities are active in shaping public policies that advance well-being within a sustainable environment'.

This project, which is currently in the planning stage, will engage our audiences with issues that affect the future, and it is our idea to reflect their responses back to the Reading 2050 project through museum productions. One idea is to encourage participants to send postcards from the year 2050, describing what the town looks like from there, outlining the solutions that were found to the pressures facing us in the here and now. We plan to collect and preserve the results of the process so that, just like visions of the past contained in old photographs, pictures of the future will be captivating for successive curators at Reading Museum!

As described above, the data set collected during our first Happy Museum project is not in itself sufficient to conclude that social history makes us happy. Much more compelling evidence of this can be found in a report commissioned by the Happy Museum Project in 2013. Economist Daniel Fujiwara's *Museums and Happiness, the Value of participating in Museums and the Arts* analyses the 'Taking Part' data set collected since 2005 from a national sample of 14,500 interviews.⁶ Chief amongst the headlines is that if happiness was considered as a currency, along the same lines as Gross Domestic Product, then the individual wellbeing value of museum visits would equate to over £3,000 a year. The report also identifies what makes people more likely to visit museums, finding that participation is 60% higher amongst those brought to museums as a child by family. Therefore, as a parent, you invest in your child's prospects of happiness in adulthood through the simple act of bringing them to a museum. By multiplying visitor figures by individual well-being value, funding bodies would also discover that they achieve a significant surplus return on their investment. If only more policy makers thought as Robert Kennedy did:

Gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.⁷

Reading Museum is just one of 22 institutions to have successfully applied for a Happy Museum commission and become part of a "community of practice" which is pursuing the philosophies driving the scheme. It is well worth visiting the Happy Museum's website, which contains case studies arising from the whole variety of projects that have taken place up and down the UK. By the sum of these parts, the Happy Museum project is showing that, with imagination, museums can be places where eudemonia flows.

References

- 1 Mihalyi Csíkszentmihályi describes the experience of flow in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. People are happiest when they are in a state of *flow* – a state of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand. For them, time stops.
- 2 Munro, Ealasaid, 'Doing emotion work in museum: Reconceptualising the role of community engagement practitioners', *Museum & Society*, March 2014, 12(1) 44-60.
- 3 Tony Butler was appointed Executive Director of Derby Museums Trust in 2014, following his Directorship of the Museum of East Anglian Life.
- 4 The Happy Museum, 'Re-imaging Museums for a Changing World. Learning and Evaluation Report', 2013.
- 5 See: <https://futureofcities.blog.gov.uk/2014/10/13/reading-2050/>
- 6 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/taking-part>
- 7 University of Kansas, March 18, 1968.