

Saving the Horniman Library



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The Horniman Museum and Gardens is one of those places that either you know and love or you've never heard of. If you're part of the second group, the museum is in south-east London, in Forest Hill, and was founded by the Victorian tea trader Frederick Horniman.

The collections cover anthropology, natural history and musical instruments and we also have an aquarium and sixteen acres of gardens. As a result, the library collection is very diverse. When Horniman gave his collections to London to be a free museum, there were around 10,000 objects and 2,000 books, and there has been a librarian at the museum since it first opened in 1901.

As in all sectors, museum libraries have been seen as easy targets for budget cuts over the last five years.

In November 2010, I had been working as library assistant at the Horniman Museum library for a year when the library manager left for a new job. I went into a meeting with the Assistant Director for Curatorial and Public Services prepared to offer my services as an acting librarian while a replacement could be found, only to be told that, in fact, I was to be made redundant and the library would be closed.

Following the formation of the Coalition Government that year, the Horniman Museum was one of the 'non-nationals' that the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) announced they wanted to cease funding altogether. Although this has not actually happened, we continue to receive year-on-year cuts to our funding.

The library had not seen a need for advocacy up to that point. A long-serving librarian had run it from the 1980s until his retirement in 2004 and I think the vacuum he left resulted in a lack of understanding which left the library vulnerable to a closure attempt like this one. As it was, I was pregnant when the library closure was first announced so I figured I had nothing to lose and took on the role of Library Project Manager.

Library access

From the beginning, I knew I was trying to save the library from closure but I also knew that I wasn't going to achieve that by doggedly opposing the aims of senior management (namely, saving money). The library was already operating on an appointment booking system, but we did also accept a high number of drop-in visitors. (The library is very visible, in a large building with a grass roof and huge windows right beside the main museum entrance.) The very local population are regular visitors to the museum (although not necessarily to the library). Following consultation with other museum libraries in similar situations, I suggested that we stop advertising opening hours but carry on accepting visitors by appointment. I emphasised that this would avoid any 'closure' announcements, which were likely to be unpopular and provocative, whilst also allowing us to retain the option of increasing access in the future, if or when the climate was right. At one point, the idea of being a 'library of last resort' was mooted but was never actually put into practice – so long as the researcher was willing and able to visit on one of the library's staffed days, it seemed curmudgeonly to insist they went elsewhere.

This access policy has served us well and, although visitor figures have remained expectedly low, it does allow me to experiment: for the last few years I have run Sunday open days several times a year and last year that was extended to include opening during our 'late' events too. This year the library will be open on the first Sunday of every month, no appointment needed, alongside our usual opening hours of Mondays and Tuesdays.

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Journal subscriptions

During the year I had already spent at the museum, I had worked hard to build relationships within the organisation, and particularly with curators, by assisting them with their research and mediating their use of the library collection. I had recognised that the library was not easy to navigate, so I would always offer to retrieve books and, often, deliver them to the curator's office.

As a result, the curators were very supportive when it came to the library project and particularly with the reduction of our journal subscriptions. They were taken aback by our spending (then c. £9000 per year) and were very co-operative in identifying the titles they really needed and those they could live without. This led to a 50% reduction in our subscriptions with relative ease.

The library manager under whom I initially worked at the museum was very keen to make the library more 'academic' in the university mould and increase our online offering. However, our institution has fewer than twenty staff members at any given time who would make use of e-journals, and they have varied subject interests, so I felt it would not be financially worthwhile to increase our online offering. In the early days of the closure project, I had a conversation with the assistant director who was managing me; it went along the lines of 'well, of course, we'll have more online resources'. I did not agree with this proposal because the workload involved in administering multiple e-resources is not feasible for a solo librarian, and I thought it would be unwise to try to replicate services that were available to our staff all over London via our membership of the M25 Consortium.

Historic library collection

Much more interesting to me than digital collections was the nature of our physical library collections and how they were uniquely placed to tell the stories of our museum objects.

Museum object collections are revered for their uniqueness and are protected by various codes of conduct, and archives seem to be seen as holding the key to an institution. Museum libraries, on the other hand, are often misunderstood and seen only as discrete (and under-performing) public services. This misunderstanding is often perpetuated even in their home institutions, which necessitates almost constant internal advocacy reiterating the fact that library collections are as unique as the objects and archives.

Library collections are an important information source: they have been built up specifically to unlock the stories of the object collection, and have been collected as widely as the objects themselves. These library collections could never be fully replicated digitally. The library (and its accession registers) can tell you the story of a museum much more clearly, often, than even the objects can.

The Horniman is an excellent example of that – we have complete accession registers all the way back to 1901, so it is possible to check what was being acquired when. Everything in the library represents curatorial and museum practice at a given time. This is particularly interesting – and complicated – at the museum, because the specialisms of the curatorial departments frequently change with staff changes. For example, our current keeper of anthropology specialises in the Americas, whereas the previous one focused on Africa and the African diaspora; the current deputy keeper of musical instruments specialises in keyboards while the previous one's specialism was brass. And it has been like this throughout the museum's history.

The presence of this important historic material was another thing that helped 'save' the library, along with some extraordinary and fortuitous discoveries in the collection.

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These included a previously unknown copy of Anna Atkins's Photographs of British algae, of which there are only around twelve copies in the world. Atkins is considered by many to be the first ever female photographer, and the book the first published book of photographs. Atkins produced the work over a period of ten years, between 1843 and 1853 and distributed it in parts to a number of recipients who then bound the work themselves. Because the binding was down to the individual (and not overseen by the author), all copies are unique, and ours contains one of the highest numbers of plates of all the extant copies. It is therefore enormously valuable, a fact that was helpful to me when it came to advocating for the library and its collection.

Future librarian role

During the project, along with trying to save the library, I was also trying to save the role of librarian, either for myself or for someone else!

From the beginning, I pointed out that closing the library in its entirety and disposing of the collections would be an enormous job, costing far more money than it would save, in the short term anyway. Once it was established that the collection would be kept, I set about demonstrating the need to have a librarian in post, even just for the management and facilitation of staff use of the library.

As the library is not easy to navigate, a staff presence is essential in keeping the collection available, organised and usable. I highlighted the further money-saving initiatives a librarian would be able to deploy to make up for the reduction in our acquisitions budget. These include the increased use of inter-library loans and the exploitation of our M25 membership, which allow staff to access material that we cannot afford to buy ourselves. I think this is one area where I have achieved particular success: the library budget is a fraction of what it was, but I feel there has been no drop in the level of support provided for staff and, in fact, there's probably even been an improvement. The added involvement I have in the research work of the curators also helps to embed the library collections in the work of the museum and strengthens my relationships throughout the organisation.

This is not to say that it has been all success and glory. When I was making suggestions for a future librarian role (and writing what would form a large part of my own job description – a strange experience), I put a considerable focus on carrying out further research into our own collections, saying that this had the potential to benefit the museum by identifying unique and important items (such as the Anna Atkins). This suggestion was not taken up, and although I have had some small successes in getting books into exhibitions, I have not been able to make progress towards incorporating library material into our museum 'offer'.

The outcome

The outcome of my work was a 0.4 full-time equivalent librarian position, which I have filled since my maternity leave ended in January 2012. The library budget went down from around £28,000 to £10,000 and the staffing costs have gone down by around 80% too. I like to think that the library will be safe from further cuts as we now cost so little as to make any saving negligible. However, my challenge now is to find a way to slowly start to 'grow' the library again. The new Sunday opening hours are a positive step forwards but I feel there is a lot of work to do. The ongoing struggle is the limitation of my working week, my budgetary constraints and getting recognition of the need for a strategic plan for the library within the institution.

Leadership for museum libraries needs to come from senior management. We need them to understand what museum libraries do and recognise the value that they bring to their institutions. We need them to value libraries themselves

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and advocate for them to funding bodies. If the Horniman Library needs saving again, I need them on my side.

To be writing around the subject of 'leadership' feels very strange to me as I in no way feel like a leader in the usual sense of the word, but if I manage to guide the Horniman Library to a more secure, more appreciated place during my time as librarian, I shall be happy.

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