

A Response to the DCMS Paper on Equality

The Royal Armouries believes in the provision of equality of opportunity and has a commitment to providing transparent, meaningful, educational access and linked services to all.

The Royal Armouries Museum welcomes the new structures under development in the DCMS papers on equality, diversity, disability, gender, age and race. These mark turning points in response to the many needs of the wider public as a whole, and when implemented should become agents of change and a force for good. All educational institutions, or sponsored bodies such as the Royal Armouries, owe a general duty of care to the many publics which they serve. After all, it is one of the reasons why museums, galleries and archives receive funding from Central Government. However, we believe that these papers when subsumed into an overarching equal opportunities policy, take up a much stronger position with regard to the way museums should operate in the future. It is with pleasure that one can remark on the decisive nature of this document; in particular that equality and diversity pursue targets 'beyond fairness'. The Royal Armouries welcomes this statement in particular as it generates the spirit in which this document has been devised.

The core values stated in the vision which the Department wishes to pursue - diversity, creativity, simplicity, integrity and excellence - should be pivotal targets for all those wishing to serve in partnership with the public in the twenty first century. These are simple values, but they lie at the heart of any work that attempts to build bridges between museum institutions, founded often in the nineteenth century, and the way that they are evolving in the present. Moreover, it is right that the Department states its values so succinctly. It signals a clear sea change for those in Non Departmental Public Bodies, and when developed in tandem with a statutory requirement in the form of a tool kit for analysis, it becomes possible to challenge stereotypes and construct new methods in the operation of DCMS policy requirements. This moves the requirements from plausible, well-intentioned debate into positive and meaningful stipulations.

Most importantly, the Museum recognises that the DCMS expects us to follow the Department's leadership by establishing our own policies in the elimination of 'unlawful discrimination against racial groups and disabled people and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons from all sections of society'. It also views the Document as an opportunity to begin making changes within the Museum as a whole. This is less easily objectified. Pluralist societies cannot support a white, masculine, cultural hegemony, and the collection of the Royal Armouries tends to reflect just such a past! It is perhaps the most important challenge we face in our future role in our divergent organisations of the Tower of London, Fort Nelson in Hampshire and the Arms and Armour Museum in Leeds.

A World Apart

If we begin by viewing what museums seek to do, then we must first examine their role in the past as well as in the present. Museums have an extraordinary presence and power in twentieth and early twenty first century Europe, signifying the prestige accorded the heritage industry and the transformation engendered by the advent of consumer politics. Within them, power often operates insidiously, and is often indistinguishable from the operations of knowledge and taste. Certainly they are more than just places of study, of education or entertainment. Museums and Galleries occupy a top-ranking position in the hierarchy of education in their respective countries, usually shared only with other institutions such as Universities, or top ranking suppliers of art objects such as auctioneers. So it is then an important consideration that the Department's vision includes a wish to reorder its internal structure by the representation of all levels within that structure. In stating this so clearly it is evident that the Department wishes to move its organisation away from rule from the top to a more cohesive and diverse reflection of society today. The challenge faced by Museums and Galleries is how to eliminate hierarchies of responsibility within their organisations. Often there is a frequently held observation that 'the scholars' or curators of these institutions rank higher than other post holders within the same organisations. The democratisation of Museums and Galleries is the only sensible way forward. As the Document states firmly, this is the only effective way forward in efficient business planning, another consideration for the operation of the DCMS in its government targets for the twenty first century.

A Struggle with Time

There have always been critics of museums, in part because of the political, social and cultural forces that mediate their fundamental relationships. Those who organise the glass case experience are seen as more knowledgeable than those who study objects displayed in them. This imbalance has propelled the dominant ideological determinant within museums, in the form of patriarchal, cultural mapping, which directs acquisitions, cataloguing, interpretation and display. It is now time to question not the objects themselves as much as the humans who are responsible for mobilising the march of material culture. In this sense it is of great importance that the DCMS action plans are reviewed and implemented as 'living documents' in partnership with stakeholders. With this in mind, it is critical that the Museum's senior management team is seen as a role model in the pursuit of equality and diversity. Again, the Museum might also need to review the way the DCMS's robust Equality Impact Assessment Tool can play an integral part in the process of reordering the institution itself.

There are other covert issues struggling for expression, namely the rank ordering of objects and histories, the history of subjection of other non-European nations, and traditional collections of 'artistic value' to name but a few. A dangerous binary polarity of Occident and Orient in the collection, display and interpretation of objects can also lead to degrees of racial hierarchies. Where the DCMS Document on Equality is a departure for our time, in particular in the monitoring of race and gender, is that it ties its general duties such as eliminating discrimination and harassment within its own organisation to statutory obligations, and then proceeds to recognise that working in partnerships with its sponsored bodies it must also require of them the same rigorous

standards of review. It could be said that the Royal Armouries' collection is the last place from which one might operate an equal opportunities agenda. After all the nature of the objects themselves, speaks volumes of the gendered nature of history of the past. But it is precisely from within such a collection that one might be able to recognise the challenges of the past, and develop controversial and complex stories for the present generation of visitors who genuinely seek debate on interests that concern them in their everyday lives. It could be a 'street wise' reflection of gun crime and knives, perhaps a reflection of disability in the role of 'Simon of the Falklands', or of providing disabled riding days in our Tudor Tiltyard as part of an events' programme. It can move from Europe to the wider world, and follow the issues of non-violent protest in Gandhi's India, to present-day India where women considered low caste are arming themselves against rape with guns they purchase. Gender, race and class are often inextricably intertwined. The democratisation of knowledge is as important as following a policy of equality within employment and promotion. In our PSA targets concerning children, young people and communities, the Royal Armouries desires to be involved in the process of promoting social cohesion. This can take a variety of forms. All, however, have one thing in common, and that is to bring the collection into the lives of as many people as possible.

Implementing a Policy of Equality

If we examine immediate ways in which the Royal Armouries might develop its daily responsibility for our many visiting publics, then perhaps we should examine the process required in embedding policies of race, gender and disability into the daily working life of our Museum. This would first include linking all department business plans into an overarching policy of equality of opportunity and embedding them in all department statements. This implies that all Museum staff understand that there will have to be a fundamental change in attitudes and values, and that all must seek to analyse and quantify the roles played in the democratisation of culture. Walking a tightrope as we do between the intellectual strait jacket of the nineteenth century, the value system of high culture and the democratic propulsion of the present is no easy task. But, as has been previously mentioned, museums still retain a degree of autonomy within the educational framework of British society, and are thereby uniquely framed to penetrate intellectual devices, which constrain or oppose the renegotiation of cultural democracy. Within this context democratisation of culture would be seen as the substitution of object based ideology, with ways of mobilising the experiences of people into the discourses exhibited by museums. Attempts have been made by the Museum to set this in motion already. For example, its present campaign 'No to Knives' (NTK) has sought to demonstrate street life in the present, challenge the perception that the Royal Armouries glorifies war or violence, and raise questions in which the public at large can see reflections of issues that directly concern them in their everyday lives. This makes an impressive contribution to the issue of social cohesion. Other challenges remain with us, however, and we will need to implement some major changes in acquisition, display and interpretation if we are to face up to the directives of DCMS targets and milestones.

Putting together a new framework for the Museum would also determine in what areas change should occur first. Among the priorities would be policy statements with regard

to equal opportunities and social inclusion which should drive the ethos of the Museum, the establishment of parameters with regard to priority groups, a website which has a consistent structure for a 'one stop for all', an easily identifiable Access information point, trained staff to welcome all visitors with priority needs, a consistent structure for gallery experience, for example, with labels, films, lectures and handling experiences, support texts for those with reading needs such as dyslexia, the signing of lectures and films, the development of symbolic language forms, the use of more socially inclusive images, and specialist texts such as large print and Braille. Policy statements can be openly located within the public spaces of a museum, form part of the regular public service mailing system, and inform scripts of gallery interpreters, museum education services, e-learning, library support and leisure learning. An important beginning could be made in the forming of an academic committee, which has stakeholders to direct the process of change. An equal opportunities strategy should form the springboard for the fully conscious control of the working processes of the public and private arenas of the Museum. It will demand eventually that new models act as catalysts for change.

Structures for delivering Equality of Opportunity

The Royal Armouries is engaged in debate in all its sites and in all its projects regarding the provision of Access and Equal Opportunities. The Elephant Armour project (2007-08) has delivered a clear focus on Access objectives, a framework within this for prioritising and managing resources, cross boundary working and a drawing together of a network of relationships both from within the museum world and with external liaison in the community as well. Priorities were first evaluated based on leisure learning experience of the Armouries' keynote visiting groups, namely families with either parents or grandparents accompanying children under seven, the disabled in wheelchairs, the disabled with hearing or sight impairment, young adults between sixteen years of age and under twenty five, either with or without partners, senior citizens groups, and women as visitors. Language was also a priority issue as well. Most South Asian visitors within the catchment area of the Leeds Museum speak a combination of languages, including Hindi and Gurjarati. Plans were put in motion to provide text in a range of languages. Moves towards involving local businesses in the redisplay were taken, and projects were put together for sponsorship from within the wider business world. It is impossible to implement gallery changes to enhance the visitor experience without the guidance of a policy of equality. The interplay between social cohesion and democracy cannot be ignored as it affects the operation of learning at all levels. Diverse as the priority groups might seem, all benefit from sensitive and sensory cultural experiences and many other visitors can enjoy sharing materials produced for these groups as well.

A Vision for the Future

The Elephant Armour project links to all five strategic objectives required by the DCMS, namely those relating to the enhancement of learning of children and young people, supporting the communities around us, the economy, efficiency of delivery and the connection with sport. It also has its own objectives as well. These include putting South Asian history 'on the map'. In both London and Leeds the Armouries has large South Asian populations in immediate catchments around both sites. Despite the obvious needs of our communities, South Asian history remains marginalized in university and college

courses, and also needs trained specialists working in schools. Mainstreaming what might be described as minority history provides an opportunity to strengthen links between the communities and will demonstrate how we can be equal in academic terms, and learn positive and important things about each other together. Using the history of South Asia as a springboard also offers an opportunity to provide refreshing and complementary avenues in religious dimensions as well. We have begun to discuss putting aside a small quiet area as provision for those who require a regular prayer facility. If we cannot provide such a space, then we cannot expect practising Muslims to visit our Museum when they have a daily schedule of five prayer sessions to maintain. There are obvious ramifications in following through a policy of equality for all museums and art galleries. All areas of communication such as marketing, education, group bookings, and events and exhibition programmes will require analysis. The independent think tank, the Runnymede Trust, has identified similar issues to those of the DCMS, in that they believe that the UK is at a turning point in its history, that our communities could become narrow and insular, or that we could build our future on the wealth of multiple cultures around a celebration of social and cultural diversity, and look forward to sharing that future together. The Elephant Access project offers a bridge into that world in which we can celebrate our past and present connections. It gives us an opportunity to expand our knowledge of South Asia's multiple faiths within a context that is sensitive and sympathetic to those whose individual concerns today include their wish to practise their faith as part of their democratic rights as citizens. In fact we could take the viewpoint that the basic structures of knowledge are people, their histories, their lives and their relationships. To sum up our future we could examine what the scientist and philosopher David Best, in his book, *The Rationality of Feeling*, meant when he wrote 'that moving somewhere else is only possible if one is already somewhere, and where one can move next depends on where one is now'! Gendered education still reinforces mythical processes. Constructs of racism activate an art of exclusion. Disabled people still require institutions to think of them, too, without placing them in ghettos. Children and young people require the example of adults around them in the process of combating outmoded forms of belief, and in this context the Museum can offer an important role model. It is considered equally part of that process that the Museum should develop a systematic and rational system of communicating Museum values and behaviours, and of appraising and assessing progress rigorously. We believe that the Royal Armouries has taken important steps towards this future, and that we recognise and value the importance of all our staff in undertaking and promoting an equal opportunities agenda.

The elephant project has offered an opportunity to review ways of working academically within the galleries of the Royal Armouries. The matrix system has been found to be an extremely useful construct in this process when balancing historical information. If we are to develop a system for delivering the DCMS requirements in race, gender, disability age and equal opportunities then a well structured matrix can offer a useful way forward. Utilising the matrix method and adding gender, race and disability components as well as historical concepts and themes offers a tightly controlled way of targeting issues and issue related knowledge. The matrix below demonstrates how the story of South Asia can be used as a way of integrating knowledge and reflecting stories that have something for everyone. This example has been based on the Mughals, Muslim invaders of India,

and contemporaries of the Tudors in England, and on the third great Mughal ruler, Akbar. The key to a different use of knowledge is to look for ways of working with diversity directly in mind from the onset of any project.

CONCEPTS AND THEMES	DISABILITY	RACE	GENDER
Warrior Ghazi, or leader Conquest and Consolidation Personality and Power Mobile Monarchy The Nature of Islam Conflicting religions Wealth and Power, Status and Control Personal Display Personal leadership Rank and Landholding Military campaigns War at sea and on land Law and Order Technology and Power	Akbar was dyslexic and never able to read or write. He truanted from his lessons! He found and used alternative ways to learn. His love of knowledge was so strong that books were read to him every night. He found things in which he excelled as a leader	A problem with Muslim historians because of the way he practiced his faith, his friendships with Hindus, and his role as ‘Emperor’. No bar to friendships from Europe and from India.	A typical role model for a warrior A Muslim warrior should not become a king, as Islam does not recognise kingship or dynasties. He commissioned the only history of Humayan, his father, to be written by his aunt, Gulbaden. Warrior women archers guarded the zenana (harem)

The same method would be equally useful in creating links between all departments in embedding strategic planning in policy documents, development and training plans, budgets and sponsorship. If we have a vision of equality as ‘a living and workable issue’ then we will fulfil our accountability as a sponsored body in all DCMS concerns, which includes consulting and involving stakeholders in all our internal and external processes.

The Royal Armouries will take the opportunity of reviewing its mission statements and policies in line with the guidelines of the DCMS. It recognises that the Museum will face significant challenges in this process, and that the way forward may not always be easy. However, we feel that we have made a positive beginning in keynote areas, and will continue to develop and appraise our projects in light of the consultative process.