

Daniel Lambert: An Exalted and Convivial Mind Stamford Museum

Stamford Museum is a small local history museum, run by Lincolnshire County Council, which regards itself as the interpretation centre for the town of Stamford. **Daniel Lambert: An Exalted and Convivial Mind** is an exhibition re-display of part of the permanent displays in the Upper Gallery. For this project Stamford Museum consulted with the **Rethinking Disability Representation (RDR)** Think Tank, Access Stamford, and the general public before the exhibition was started, during the exhibition, and after the exhibition was finished. There was collaboration with the RDR project team.

Collections

The entire collection of items relating to Daniel Lambert comprises: a set of his clothes (grey flannel jacket and breeches, waistcoat, grey wool sock, grey felt top hat), a paper pattern for the sock, a copy of the oil painting of Daniel Lambert held by Stamford Town Council, an engraving, two printing blocks for Daniel Lambert advertisements, a porcelain figurine, various photographs of the portrait and his grave, a booklet of his life produced in 1894, and a letter describing his burial. The museum also has two replica sets of clothes made to look like the originals (i.e. patched, stained and worn – because of being on display in pubs and being tried on for many years) and one replica set of clothes made as if they had been bought new.

Many of the items were not used in the old display. The clothes have been conserved, but are too fragile to be on display except for short periods, likewise the paper items. A set of replica clothes was used for the model of Daniel Lambert in the old display.

The objects used for the final new display were: the copy portrait, the hat, and the set of 'new' replica clothes, displayed on a tailor's dummy, with the accoutrements of a tailor's shop added as 'set dressing'. Other items in the collection were used for information and images for the display panels.

Timescale

Stamford Museum was invited to take part in this project in March 2005, and we received notice that the funding for it had been confirmed in April 2006. The first meeting of museum partners took place in Leicester on 12th July 2006, and the first residential was in London in January 2007. Discussions over the possible form and story of the exhibition were ongoing throughout this time, but the exhibition planning took place January – June 2007. The physical work of removing the old display, making good, installing the new panels and creating the tailor's shop took place in July – September 2007; the new lighting was installed in October, and the hat-case finally installed in December 2007.

There were meetings with RDR staff and members of the Think Tank from May 2007, and a final visit in December to view the finished exhibition. In February 2008, new Daniel Lambert text formats were installed (Braille, large text, and audio) in the exhibition. The second RDR residential was held in London in February 2008, and the first draft of the e-learning package was sent to Queen Eleanor School, Stamford for trialling in March 2008.

Process

The process was long and at times quite painful, as we struggled to come to terms with the project. We had to reassess not only how we displayed material relating to Daniel Lambert, but also how we thought about it and him. We had to look honestly and critically at why and how the (much loved) display on him was perpetuating the old forms of disability representation. We had to move away from the historic, familiar and comfortable, and decide on new content and themes that did not solely focus on how big Daniel was.

We had to construct a new cultural narrative first, and move away from the emphasis on Daniel's size. This meant that we had to look at the other aspects of Daniel's life – as a swimmer, gaoler, singer, breeder – and the stories about him which reflected his personality. We had to look at the use of language in all of this – Daniel's own use of words, as well as those used about him, and the language which we would use in the display and when talking about the exhibit. Lastly we had to unpick all the different strands of narrative and what they showed us about him, and consider the meanings of objects to help illustrate the new story. This resulted in a reduction in the numbers of objects used, but those chosen were meaningful in the strict sense of the word, rather than using many objects which emphasise the shape of Daniel in different formats. This meant that the process was the reverse of the way we usually work; creating the story first then selecting objects to help illustrate it, rather than choosing the object to tell a story.

Adopting this new approach was a challenging process for the team – particularly addressing the concepts behind the existing exhibition then rethinking and re-presenting the display in a politically and publicly sensitive way. This experience constituted a real learning curve, which is still continuing.

The team itself underwent changes of its own during the course of the project, moving from two to three members and then back to two, and undergoing an Organisational Review within Lincolnshire County Council. At certain points, therefore, there were uncertainties for the team within our organisation which echoed the challenge of the re-conceptualisation of the story of Daniel Lambert.

When the team had decided on the approach to the narrative, we had to decide what to include and what to exclude, a major editing job in itself. The storyline went through seven different versions before the final text was agreed on, with three different headings: 'Daniel's Life and Personality', 'His Death and After', and 'The RDR Perspective'. Pared down to about 1,500 words on three panels, this still constitutes a fairly text-heavy display, which was restricted by the physical constraints of the size and layout of the display area. Only three images are on the panels: an engraving of Daniel, a photograph of his grave, and the Marshall portrait of Daniel from New Walk Museum and Art Gallery in Leicester.

Once the elements of the text were in place, the objects with their meanings could be chosen, and on the 'less is more' principle, were whittled down to three: the portrait, the hat and the set of replica clothes.

It was decided that the following ideas about Daniel needed to be projected by the display: that he was a companionable man with a wide acquaintance who took care in his dress; that he wished to live his life on his own terms, and not have it dictated by the curious; that all clothing at this time was bespoke, compared to today when bespoke clothing is only created for the very rich or very unusual. It was decided that having the replica clothes on display on a tailor's dummy, ready for Daniel's perusal, with the accoutrements of a tailor's shop as part of the display, would convey this idea.

The portrait was hung on the wall behind; this very striking image emphasises Daniel's presence, and the hat was displayed in a custom-made case, also wall-hung, with reduced lighting.

Issues Learned from the Project

The first step was the hardest, but once we admitted honestly that just because something has been displayed in one way historically, it does not mean that it should continue to be so displayed in the light of changing values, the way forward was wide open – but not necessarily clear.

We learned that to progress required an honest reappraisal of the Museum's approach, which could not be hurried. We were being given the opportunity to change and to realise that things were not 'set in stone', and we also had the freedom to create something which could open up a whole new dialogue with, and for, visitors. It is not often that we are given the time, money and other resources (such as consultation with Think Tank members) to work on a project such as this.

We realised that this opportunity was also an opportunity to fail, and felt that the risk-taking that we were being encouraged into was fairly nerve-wracking, but necessary if we were to move forward.

We have learnt that thinking about ideas in different ways has had a significant impact on how we approach all of our Museum displays, and that this structured approach can and will be used in future displays and projects. We further learnt that we didn't need to make huge alterations to displays in order to change the focus.

It is as much of a challenge for the public to accept and honestly rethink their perceptions of people who were different or disabled as it was for us during this project. People who are visiting a museum are not necessarily open to changing their focus and rethinking, especially if it makes them feel uncomfortable. Having a favourite or well-known display changed can be unsettling. We feel that it is important to acknowledge this, while remembering the equal importance of the necessity for a change of outlook. During his lifetime Daniel Lambert endeavoured to ensure that respect was paid to him, and that perceptions of him were based upon his worth as a person, not concentrated on the mere fact of his size.

Legacy

Comments made by visitors during the evaluation of the project and afterwards have made it clear that many people **have** been made to think about why they wanted to look at a display of Daniel Lambert in the first place, which of course was one of the main ideas. They have also been encouraged to think about disability and otherness more generally, to think about what it might be like to be disabled, and about how different people have lived their lives.

Some examples of visitor comments:

"It reminded me to take the person as a whole and not concentrate on the disability – to celebrate what someone can do/did."

"Excellent! I am impressed by the way you have updated the display. It is much more respectful now ... well done."

“Saw the point personality v appearance. Certainly extending remit of a museum: i.e. influencing views.”

“Challenges your motives for wanting to see Daniel Lambert exhibition!”

It has also been made clear that while the display made people think, they were not necessarily happy with this; some people wanted their comfortable old display back. Interestingly, many of these were young people, who had enjoyed the interactive weights and measures area, but it did seem that quite a few people did not want to be challenged to reconsider their views.

The team feel that this should not deter them from using the same critical approach to other displays and projects, as it has been remarkably successful in terms of consultation, partnership-working and working with people outside museums, as well as enabling the key motivation – to make visitors consider why and how they are looking.

One abiding legacy is the confirmation of the affection that Daniel Lambert is regarded with by the majority of people who have worked on this project, the staff, and those who have visited the exhibition. This seems to equate with the affection and respect that he was held in when he was alive, and must therefore be a tribute to the man himself, over 239 years. It also indicates that we have been correct in concentrating on his personality as being the most important thing about him, and that the issue with his size has simply been an overlay which has built up over the 200 years since his death, when he was no longer able to control the way people thought and felt about him. Perhaps we have now gone some way to restoring a balance to our perception of Daniel Lambert.