

A Whitby Fisherman's Life – 'Stumper' Dryden Through the Lens of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe Whitby Museum

Whitby Museum is an independent museum and registered charity run by Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society. The Museum is entirely volunteer-run, with a part-time paid registrar.

Type of interpretation

This project created a permanent display of photographs and historical documents accompanied by text and audio descriptions. The display focused in depth on the life of one man, Robert 'Stumper' Dryden, a 19th century disabled fisherman, examining his working life and role in the local community.

The Museum identified a stand for this project, a full-length Victorian display case located in the main Museum gallery. It was particularly important to Museum staff that the display would be designed to complement the existing 19th century feel of Whitby Museum, which holds an eclectic and fascinating mixture of objects and displays, all strongly rooted in Whitby town. Even staff who have worked in the Museum for many years still find material on display that surprises and delights them and the agreed aim of the project was that the **Rethinking Disability Representation (RDR)** display would be sympathetic to existing material and so also be a source of surprise and delight. Therefore the themes of the display focused on the story of Dryden's life in the Whitby fishing industry, the Church Street area, and his family and home life.

The Museum holds copies of photographs taken by renowned Victorian photographer Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, five of which feature Robert Dryden. We aimed to create a display detailing Stumper's community life and experiences in the fishing trade. Whitby Museum does not use a lot of labelling or interpretation on its material, so to keep the display sympathetic to the Victorian feel of the Museum we decided that the display should be 'image rich' – Sutcliffe's pictures fit in perfectly with the Museum's aesthetic – rather than using questions and quotations to stimulate ideas around disability.

The Museum had been involved with the **Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG)** previous research project **Buried in the Footnotes**, so we were aware of the conclusions of that project and how they related to our material. For example, we knew that disabled people were infrequently represented in museums, and that when they were depicted it was often in a stereotypical context such as medicine or the freak-show. With this research in mind, it became clear that focusing on Stumper's ordinary life contrasted powerfully with the way the historical lives of disabled people have been displayed – or more often ignored – in museums more generally. Robert Dryden was 'just another fisherman' photographed in the context of his normal life and the depictions of him resist all stereotypes; he was not photographed for his disability or in any medical context and his disability is not singled out or treated as abnormal.

The 'incidental' nature of the photographs of Stumper was important, and, as the previous research had shown, rare. Stumper and the Dryden family feature in many of Sutcliffe's photographs and through these family and work groupings Stumper is shown to be integrated within, and integral to, his family and working life. He was not absent. The research had identified that disabled people were rarely presented as part of everyday life, whereas in Stumper's case it was impossible to imagine him presented separately from the Whitby community. We knew that incidental occurrence of disabled people in museum displays was 'regrettably rare' and where this incidental occurrence did happen, the explicit link with disability was awkward or missing. Therefore we ensured that the text accompanying the photographs makes this link – in a natural narrative way – by recounting the story of Robert's accident and amputation, with equivalent emphasis on his subsequent working life as a fisherman. Robert's disability is presented as a fact; interestingly the accounts we were able to obtain from his descendants treated the matter in much the same way.

The aim was to challenge contemporary perceptions of disabled people's economic role and status, and to reveal new perspectives on the power of the historical image to enable rethinking about disability.

The project also produced accompanying educational and interpretative material comprised of extended text leaflets, which explore the context of Stumper's life in more detail, along with the connections with wider issues of disability representation.

Consultation

Whitby Museum do not have the staff or resources to undertake in-depth research and rely on a network of 50 volunteers to curate their collections, produce temporary exhibitions and undertake educational work. We were, however, able to access a member of the RCMG team, Jackie Gay, who has specific knowledge and skills in the area of disability representation. Jackie, a

writer, researcher and editor (and also herself disabled) acted as a consultant to this project, undertaking research into the life of Robert Dryden with the assistance of Whitby Museum librarians and volunteers. The final panels were produced in collaboration with external designers in consultation with the Museum.

The Think Tank acted as overall thematic consultants to the project.

Collaboration

Museum staff made contact with remaining members of the Dryden family and we were able to obtain a family tree and other documents from Robert Dryden's great-nephew, Shaun Dryden. Initially we were unsure whether the family would wish to be involved with this project, however they were willing and provided us with many documents including a memoir, 'A Whitby Childhood', by Mary-Jane Dryden which included many memories of the family's life and also specific ones of Robert 'Uncle Bob' Dryden. Another descendant of Robert Dryden, Maureen Eves (great-great-niece) agreed to read the text for the audio description, which enabled the project to utilise both a local voice and a member of the remaining Dryden family for the reading.

The Sutcliffe Gallery, a business directly descended from Frank Meadow Sutcliffe's photographic career, generously allowed full access to, and use of, their digital copies of the original glass plates donated to the Museum over forty years ago for preservation. The originals are no longer used for reproduction because of their age and condition. The Museum and the Gallery entered into a formal agreement at the time of the gift, regarding subsequent reproductions.

Collections

Materials used in developing the exhibition:

Photographs (Frank Meadow Sutcliffe)

Maps

Archive material such as newspapers, the Whitby Directory, census returns, dispensary records

Historical records on Whitby town, the Church Street area, the fishing industry.

The project team investigated the possibility of including other objects associated with the Victorian fishing industry and home life, and did identify some material; however it was difficult to display these objects coherently within the display case and space allocated. In the end we felt that the photographs on their own created a more coherent narrative and stronger impact.

Timescale

Planning and preparation, including the RCMG team visits, and individual visits, to Whitby Museum, took place from September to November 2006. This period included identifying material and potential interpretative themes, and consultation with the Think Tank.

Research into specific areas and decisions over the design of the display and which photographs to use took place from December 2006 – January 2007.

Production and installation of the exhibition was from February – April 2007 and included working with Objectives designers who visited the Museum to view the display case and Museum environment.

The display was finalised in summer 2007 and the exhibition is now permanently displayed in the main hall of the Museum.

Process

Initially, some of the staff of Whitby Museum found it difficult to envisage how a project such as this would fit in to their staffing and processes. The Museum was also keen to ensure that the resulting display did not 'stand out like a sore thumb' and to emphasise that use of gadgets would not complement the historic feel of the building. It was felt that any new display needed to complement existing displays but be serendipitous.

After several visits from the RCMG project team, relationships were built and confidence in the value of the material developed. Jackie Gay worked on the project plan in consultation with Mark Edwards, Honorary Keeper, and the Museum, drawing on both the expertise of Museum staff and RCMG's understanding of innovative display and interpretation ideas as well as supporting academic theories. The quality of Frank Meadow Sutcliffe's photographs meant that we were confident that the display would have aesthetic and documentary value as well as being innovative in rethinking the historical representation of disability. Good relationships were built up between the RCMG research team and the Museum, although perhaps it would have been beneficial to explore wider links between Whitby and the other RDR partner museums.

Once the research material and focus for the display had been agreed upon, the designer attended a team meeting in Whitby. He immediately understood the issues of maintaining the 'feel' of the Museum and Jackie Gay subsequently worked with him on the final text, positioning and emphasis of the display.

There were some issues with the timing of mounting the display. The display case was emptied in May; however the work was not in place until August. There were also concerns over the lighting of the display as the Museum has no

individually lit cases. The placing of the lamps meant there was an overspill, and their height above the case meant that the lamps were visible from the Entrance desk.

Members of the Society and staff expressed disappointment at the lack of objects – but this was in great measure due to the lack of suitable material within the Society's collections.

Evaluation

Response cards were available at both the ticket desk, where they were actively promoted, and at the display. However, because of the volunteer staffing of the Museum, it was not possible to have a dedicated person to pursue this process. Response cards were also distributed to various groups attending the Museum for meetings, and within the Society.

Dissemination

Dissemination will be achieved via RDR publications, web-based material and reports.

Issues learnt from the project and wider involvement in RDR

This was the first time that Whitby Museum had been involved in such a large project. Involvement with RDR allowed the Museum to experiment with possible new ways of interpretation within its overall ethos. There were, however, some internal issues, and Museum and Society members would be keen to build on the experience of the wider museums world gained during this project and to clarify expectations and outcomes for future projects.

Legacy

Whitby Museum's involvement with the RDR project has resulted in a permanent display in the main hall of the Museum, focusing in-depth on a historical Whitby character who had a disability. The display will be of great interest to disabled people and also to photographers, local historians and members of the public.

Because of the strong local interest in the fishing industry and the Victorian period in Whitby, the project holds a great deal of human interest to non-disabled audiences whilst also revealing fascinating, hidden aspects of the period to disabled visitors. It may be possible to incorporate information from this project into existing tours of Whitby town.

This project can act as an example to other museums of how high quality, innovative work around disability can be developed from a small number of objects whilst still being rooted in the locality and character of the museum.

The project can also be used to stimulate and develop a dialogue between disabled people and Whitby Museum, and local consultation initiatives could be developed as a result of this work.