

Assignment feedback

Student Name: Rosie Nye

Student University Email: 1400683@student.uwtsd.ac.uk

Module code: AHAC6007

*Student ID
number:*
1400683

*Educational
support needs:*
Yes

Module title: Museums, Heritage and
Representation

Assignment title: Based on your visit to the National Museum Wales, consider how
the museum promotes public understanding of the archaeological record

Assignment due date: 03/04/2018

Assignment Number: 1
(i.e. 1,2,3)

Marker's signature:

Date:

Provisional.

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.

SELF-REFLECTION SHEET.

PLEASE COMPLETE BEFORE SUBMISSION AND ATTACH TO YOUR WORK

Date: 02/04/2018

Module: AHAC6007

Name: Rosie Nye

Guidance: You might consider the following elements:

- Argument: does it have one/ is it backed by sufficient evidence/ how lucid is it?
- Structure: how clear is it / is my essay easy to follow/ does it help my argument?
- Analysis: is more/less analytical than narrative/ does it address the question?
- Reading: was this sufficiently broad/ have I referenced properly?
- How might I improve my performance in future?

Strengths

Examines different parts of the museum and how it promotes public understanding of the archaeological record with reference to own individual findings.

Used a range of sources

Weaknesses:

Struggled to fit everything into a 2000-word essay.

General Comments:

It would have been nice to have more words so I could provide an in-depth analysis of a variety of topics instead of being restricted to a brief discussion of what I thought to be most relevant.

Please give a mark for your work: 2/2

(for eg: 1st = 70+: 2/1 = 69-60: 2/2 = 59-50: 3rd = 45-49: pass = 40-44: fail = 39-)

Based on your visit to the National Museum Wales, consider how the museum promotes public understanding of the archaeological record.

For an outsider, the museum is a point of entry to a society providing the visitor with cultural keys of knowledge, artefacts, experiences and perspectives (Keene 2005: 7). Museums allow a maintaining of continuity with collections building public histories and collective memories as well as providing interpretations of the past that are inaccessible otherwise (McManamon 2000: 5). With the notion that museums provide visitors with such knowledge, it is interesting to consider how museums promote the public understanding of a subject being displayed within the museum itself.

National museums and art galleries are symbols of national culture, knowledge and pride (Keene 2005: 15). They are storehouses of knowledge though very few museums displaying their entire collections (Keene 2005: 16).

When discussing how the National Museum Wales promotes public understanding of the archaeological record, this essay will focus on the National Museum Wales in Cardiff rather than the museum of St Fagan's. The National Museum Wales, Cardiff predominantly provides visitors with Natural History and Art exhibitions over what is defined as the archaeological record (<https://museum.wales/> accessed 31/3/2018); this is also what resides at St Fagan's. However, the National Museum Wales in Cardiff does have a substantial archaeological record within the museum. Furthermore, despite the fact that the exhibitions that will be examined will be presenting the palaeontological record, the same discussions and methodologies can be applied to other museums promoting public understanding of the archaeological record.

The archaeological record which is present at the National Museum Wales in Cardiff remains predominately in the archaeological stores (Walker 2018). The National Museum of Wales houses 50% of all archaeological finds from excavations and fieldwork projects from Wales; amounting to thousands of archaeological artefacts (Fig 1, 2). The archaeological collections are constantly growing with every individual item recorded (Walker 2018). However, the archaeological record is not noticeably present within the museum's exhibitions, if at all. Nearly all of the archaeological artefacts stay within the stores both to conserve the finds as well as preserving them in carefully monitored conditions to elongate their lifespan. The conservation labs allow university students to gain valuable work experience in conservation practices and the bone labs provide a separate home to the largest collection of human remains. With all of this archaeology underneath the museum, it could be implied that the museum does not effectively present the archaeological record as other museums when considering that the majority of the archaeology present at the museum in Cardiff is not on display.



Fig 1. Archaeological stores under the NMW. (Hare 2018)



Fig 2. Archaeological stores under the NMW. (Hare 2018)

That is not to infer that the museum does not allow the public access to the archaeological stores. University and school groups are regularly taken on tours around the stores. However, no physical interaction is allowed between the students and the archaeological artefacts. Although this could be partially due to delicate nature of the artefacts, it does restrict the amount of engagement the students can participate in. Other museums, such as Carew Cheriton actively encourage the handling and physical engagement with archaeological artefacts (<https://www.carewcheritoncontroltower.co.uk/> accessed 31/3/2018). For example, when students from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David visited Carew Cheriton, they were permitted to try on uniforms dating back to the Second World War. Not only did this interaction with the artefacts provide the students with an enjoyable experience, the 'hands-on' approach to promoting the understanding of the archaeological record resulted in students gaining a deeper understanding of the site, and the archaeology, which they were visiting.

In contrast to the methods used by Carew Cheriton to promote public understanding of the archaeological record, the National Museum Wales in Cardiff does not make the archaeological record as readily available. Although the public are able to access the archaeological stores, there are no signs to suggest that the stores are present in the museum; a very stark contrast to the signs leading to the Natural History and Art exhibitions which are extremely difficult to miss. This suggests that the promotion of public understanding is not a priority at the museum in Cardiff; again solidifying the implication that the understanding of the archaeological record should remain within the world of academics instead of the public. (Moore 1994: 256). However, it needs to be remembered that the majority of the archaeology on display at the National Museum of Wales resides at St Fagan's and not at the museum in Cardiff. Even when taking that into consideration, the museum in Cardiff does not promote archaeology in the same way other museums do.

Museums give the authority to select, interpret and present what they decide has value or significance (Edson, Dean 1994: 152). Through this authority, a museum is able to promote a specific record or discipline and encourage the public understanding of it. The National Museum in Cardiff promotes public understanding of the palaeontological record over the archaeological record by putting on display what it believes to be of the greatest importance. The exhibition that will be discussed here is that of the Origins of Wales exhibition in the Natural History section of the museum. A number of different ways in which the museum promotes public understanding will be examined, including the engagement that visitors have with the displays and the amount of time spent in specific exhibitions. From these findings taken at the museum in Cardiff, we should acquire an understanding of how the museum promotes public understanding of the palaeontological record, if it does.

The first exhibition which visitors encounter with is that of Evolution of Wales. A small display with fossil and rock displays (Fig 4, 5) along with explanations on earthquakes and how the world was formed (Fig 6). It is a very standard exhibition combining both traditional methods of display with technological aspects to try and engage a number of ages. However, as can be seen in the movement map (Fig 3), very few individuals stay in this specific exhibition longer than five minutes despite there being interactive displays and fossils which you can touch. In this way, the museum is promoting the understanding through physical interaction with tangible objects, similar to the way archaeology is promoted at Carew Cheriton. Despite the museum trying to promote the palaeontological record through both technology and more traditional methods of exhibition, the fact that there was little engagement suggests that, although the palaeontological record is promoted, it depends on the individual as to whether that understanding actually takes place.

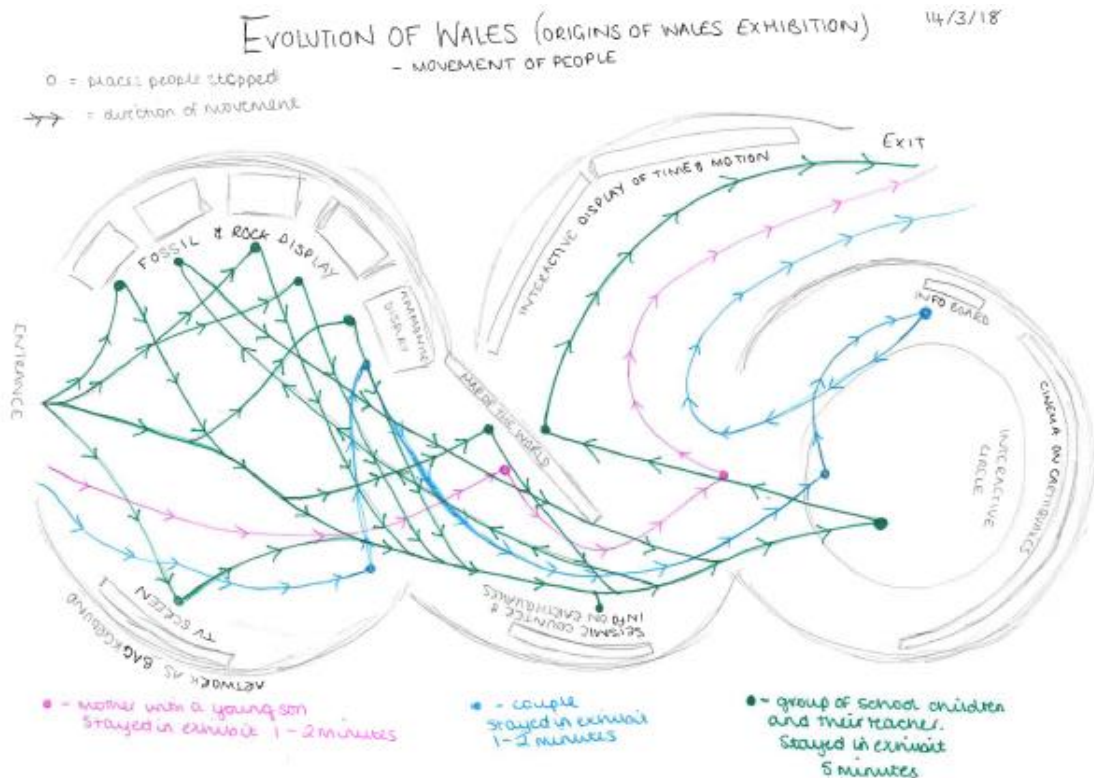


Fig 3. A movement map showing the movement of visitors within the exhibition and the amount of time spent there. (Nye 2018)



Fig 4. Fossils and rocks on display in the Evolution of Wales exhibition (Hare 2018).

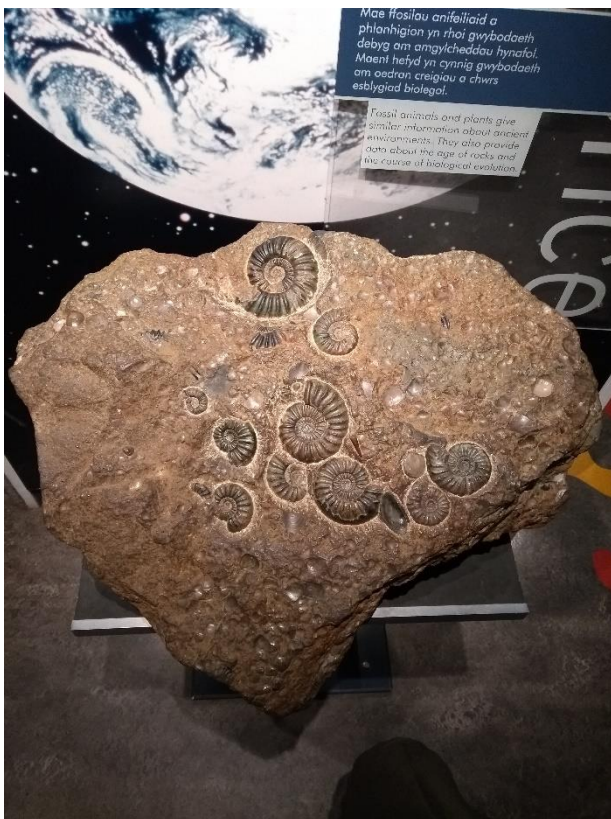


Fig 5. Ammonites on display in the Evolution of Wales exhibition (Hare 2018).



Fig 6. Interactive circle and cinema giving information on earthquakes (Hare 2018).

From the map, it is clear that the individuals who engaged the most were the school-group of children (Fig 3). The children spread out across the exhibit, many of them trying to see as much as possible. Many of them went to the sections where they could interact with the displays, both physical and technological. By providing more interactive displays, the museum was able to successfully engage the students and promote public understanding of the palaeontological record. However, other individuals, which includes a mother and child, failed to stay longer than a few minutes (Fig 3) which suggests no matter how effectively the museum can promote the public understanding of the palaeontological record, it is down to the visitors to engage and obtain the understanding which the museum is promoting.

This reaction by visitors of quickly moving through an exhibition is also evident at the Dinosaur display in the Origins of Wales exhibition (Fig 7). University students and couples did not spend an extended period of time within the exhibition which makes it difficult for their understanding to be developed substantially. However, it also needs to be remembered that these studies, which the information is being taken from, were conducted over a short period of time and therefore may not reflect the public engagement with the museum at other times of day or year. However, these studies do provide a framework in which individuals can understand the relationship between the promotion of public understanding of a subject and the public engagement.

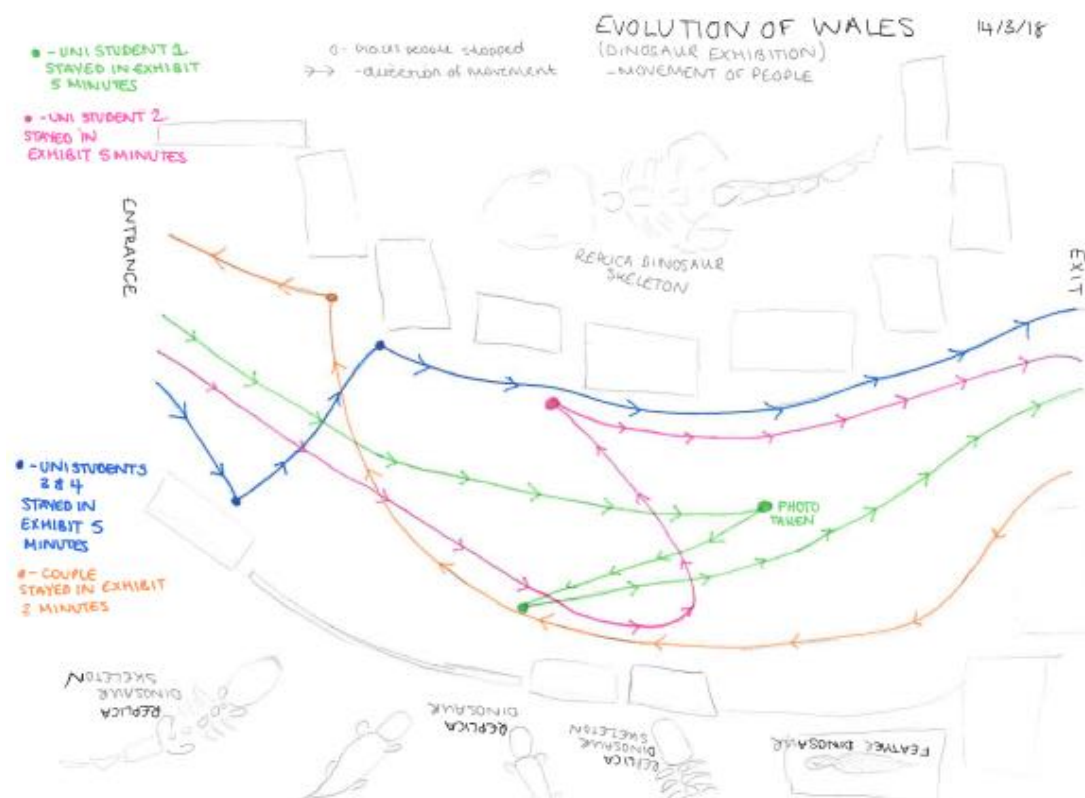


Fig 7. Movement map of the Dinosaur exhibition (Nye 2018).

However, other exhibitions, base their exhibitions on a very traditional approach to displays. For example, the Natural World (Fig 8) exhibition, which displays taxidermy animals and geodes behind glass with small cards explain what the artefacts are, is one such approach. In contrast to the previous exhibitions mentioned, a number of individuals spent a considerable amount of time examining the artefacts behind the glass cases. What is interesting to note, is the difference in reactions to the exhibitions depending on age. Visitors with children spent a short span of time in the more traditional exhibitions whereas the older generations took time and engaged with the exhibit. Here it can be inferred that the promotion of public understanding of a display is also impacted by age; something which the museum would take into consideration.



Fig 8. Movement map of the Natural World exhibition (Nye 2018).

What can also be taken into consideration when regarding how a museum promotes the public understanding of any subject, is how much prior knowledge an individual has of the subject in question. There is a stark contrast between the engagement with both the archaeological and palaeontological record at the National Museum Wales and the engagement of the historic and literary record at the History of Magic exhibition at the British Library (Fig 9). In terms of the History of Magic exhibition, nearly all of the visitors would have been Harry Potter fans and followed the book and film series for years. Not only this, in the majority of cases, individuals who had grown up with the book series and become attached to it would have continued that enjoyment through websites such as Pottermore and through purchasing merchandise (<https://www.pottermore.com/> accessed 31/3/18). Harry Potter is a subject that is ingrained into a generation's culture. As a result, the people who visited the museum, that would have had an in-depth knowledge and would

therefore engage more deeply with what the exhibition had on display. Therefore, the museum, in this case the British Library, would have played on this fact in order to promote public understanding of not just Harry Potter but also the histories and medieval manuscripts in which Harry Potter was inspired. In contrast, people visiting the National Museum of Wales may not have such an in-depth knowledge about either palaeontology or archaeology. The prior knowledge of a subject by an individual does appear to have an impact on how effectively a museum promotes said subject. In the case of the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, the majority of people visiting the museum probably do not have an in-depth knowledge of palaeontology and therefore may not be able to engage with the displays in the same way. Therefore, a limitation in prior knowledge could result in less engagement with displays as can be evidenced in the small amounts of time spent in the exhibitions at the National museum Wales in Cardiff.



Fig 9. History of Magic Exhibition at the British Library (Nye 2018).

There are also other ways in which the museum prevents the promotion of public understanding of the palaeontological record. The clearest example of this is when examining the information boards which accompany the displays. Whilst the Welsh is clearly distinguishable and easy to read, if the visitor is able to read Welsh, the English is often backed with difficult colours making the visitor work to understand the information being given. As this is the case in the Natural History exhibitions, it is, in a way, excluding a large number of visitors from being able to properly engage with the palaeontological record. Therefore, failing to promote public understanding.

This essay has attempted to address and discuss how the National Museum Wales in Cardiff promotes public understanding of the archaeological record. Throughout the discussion, it has been pointed out that public understanding of the archaeological record is dependent on whether the visitor is able to access the archaeological stores; the majority of the archaeology exhibitions being present at St Fagan. Whilst examining the ways in which the National Museum in Wales promotes

public understanding of archaeology, it has become evident that although the museum does put, or not put as the case may be, different techniques into place it depends on the individual as to how well they engage with what the museum offers. The museum can put a lot of effort into interactive technology based displays to accompany the objects and artefacts themselves, but it is then up to the individual to take the promotion of archaeology, or other subjects, and engage with the artefacts themselves.

Bibliography

Carew Cheriton. <https://www.carewcheritoncontroiltower.co.uk/> accessed 31/3/2018.

Edson, G. Dean, D. 1994. *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Wiley-Blackwell: West Sussex.

Hare, V. 2018. *National Museum Wales, Cardiff exhibition photos*. Nonpublished.

Keene, S. 2005. *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections*. Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann: Oxford.

McManamon, F, P. 2000. Archaeological Messages and Messengers. *Public Archaeology*. Vol 1. pp 5-20.

Moore, K. 1994. *Museum Management*. Routledge: London.

National Museum Wales. <https://museum.wales/> accessed 31/3/2018.

Nye, R. 2018. *Movement Maps of the Evolution of Wales exhibition at the National Museum Wales, Cardiff*. Unpublished.

Nye, R. 2018. *History of Magic Exhibition at the British Library photo*. Unpublished.

Pottermore. <https://www.pottermore.com/> accessed 31/3/18.

Further Reading

Hoffman, T, L. Kwas, M, L. Silverman, H. 2002. Heritage Tourism and Public Archaeology. *The SAA Archaeological Record*. pp 30-32.

McManamon, F, P. 1991. Forum: The Many Places for Archaeology. *American Antiquity*. Vol 56. No 1. pp 121-130.

Schadla-Hall, T. 1999. Editorial: Public Archaeology. *European Journal of Archaeology*. Vol 2. No 2. pp 147-158.

Silberman, N. 2005. Beyond Theme Parks and Digitized Data: What Can Cultural Heritage Technologies Contribute to the Public Understanding of the Past. *Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation*. pp 1-4.