# Store Tours: Accessing Museums' Stored Collections

Lucinda G. Caesar
UCL Institute of Archaeology

In the Science Museum, London, it is envisioned that the future of the collection lies with the creation of an open storage centre, a means to ensure that its stored collections become a permanent way of engagement with the public. Access to stored collections is a topical subject, and open storage has been adopted by many museums as an access strategy. This report explores the use of a particular interpretation method: guided tours of the stores. Are store tours a worthwhile investment? Should store tours be used as an interpretative medium for accessing stored collections on a national level? Are store tours the best tool to engage the public in stored collections? What do store tours provide as a means of accessing or promoting engagement in museum's stored collections? Are they indeed the access tool of the future? This paper reviews these questions, drawing on the data from a series of store tours hosted in 2004 and 2005 by the Science Museum, London.

**Keywords**
Store tours, public access, visitor awareness.

## Introduction

> Museum collections and the research done on them are core functions of the work of museums. Both are areas of potential interest for visitors, yet in *their* eyes are one of the great 'hidden mysteries' of the museum.
>
> (Kelly 1999: 1)

Are store tours a worthwhile investment? Should store tours be used as an interpretative medium for accessing stored collections on a national level? Are store tours the best tool to engage the public in stored collections? What do store tours provide as a means of accessing or promoting engagement in museum's stored collections? Are they a way for museums to 'reassert the place of their collections at the heart of the public realm, and find new ways to ensure that they really are for everyone' (Wilkinson 2005: 4)? Are they indeed the access tool of the future?

Access to museums' stored collections has been extremely topical and more and more museums, like the Science Museum, London, are realising the immense value of this resource. Store tours are not the only means of access for the public to museum collections. Many museums have created, or proposed the creation of, open storage centres. But if this is not possible then conducted tours of the stores for groups of people is a commonly used alternative. This is what is meant by the term, store tours, in this paper.

Store tours are a relatively recent addition to the museum experience. They bring together the three facets of the museum: 'a triangular relationship: knowledge and ideas, and people' and make the collections 'central to the user's experience of museums' (Museums Association 2004: 1). Store tours as an interpretative medium for accessing

stored collections have been described by many as requiring some investigation, yet their effectiveness has not been examined.

At present over 90% of the collections of the Science Museum, London, are in permanent storage. A 'world renowned collection of over 300 000 objects represents the past and current practice of science, technology and medicine' yet it is mostly locked away, hidden from the very people for whom it was intended (Gammon and Mazda 2004: 1).

Data collected from the series of tours hosted by the Science Museum, London, at their West London store during 2004 to 2005 was analysed to assess visitors' appreciation of the extent of museums collections, the usefulness of store tours as a particular interpretation method and education tool, and the administrative effects. The findings were enriched and conceptualised by an email survey requesting the opinions of museum professionals from thirty-seven museums nationwide.

The following aspects of the store tour visits were examined (Modified from Kelly 1999: 1):

- Public perception of collections access
- Who makes store tour visits?
- Expectations of the store tours experience
- Visitors' motivation for taking part in store tours
- Is public access to stored collections important or should these collections remain part of the museum's hidden treasures?

The question of whether or not 'all objects are equally suitable for selection and second, does visual selection matter?' was not addressed (Pes 2002: 3).

**The Science Museum Store Tours**

The Science Museum scheduled a series of bookable store tours twice weekly from October 2004 to May 2005. The museum's marketing department developed a programme of promotion, which included interviews on radio, television and the national press. 'The result was that the museum received over 1500 enquiries within a day of going public. The tour programme, from October 2004 to May 2005, offered 700 places on 46 tours. All tours were fully booked, with a waiting list of 200 people' (Keene 2005: 125). As suggested by Keene (2005: 125), the application of the museums' marketing skills and resources lead to outstanding levels of public interest.

Each tour was hosted at their West London store by one of the Science Museum's curators. According to the Head of Collections Access, Xerxes Mazda (pers. comm., 11 June 2004), this was an experimental program with an agenda to 'best meet the need of our publics within our resource constraints and strategic direction'. 'One of the major ways we are driving access to the collections this coming year' is though store tours. These regular events were timetabled to take place on a Wednesday, fortnightly, to coincide other visitor activities such as research in order to 'help us manage object movement and maintenance activities within the store'.

The public had a choice of tours based on the following themes: *Engineering, Conservation, ICT, Space, Science - Weights and Measures, Non-Western Medical Traditions, Medicine, Science - Astronomy* and *Biomedical Sciences*. Due to organisational and planning requirements tour groups were small, with a maximum of 15 visitors accepted on each tour. This was so as to effectively manage collections and personal security, as well as the health and safety of visitors and staff in a closed storage environment.

Each visitor was asked to complete a questionnaire, designed by the Science Museum's evaluation team, before and after their store tour (see Appendix 1). The data presented in this investigation is from these store tours: *War and the Body*; *Britain: Workshop of the World*; *Attraction through the Ages*; *Getting Under the Skin* and *The Wellcome Medical Collection*. In total 540 questionnaires were analysed. Questions had retrieved audience demographics such as age, gender, socio-economic status and location, and also individuals' reasons for choosing particular tours, audience expectations, their leisure activities and the effectiveness of the tour as an administrative and educational tool. A series of open-ended questions yielded an additional rich response.

**The Visitor and the Store Tour Experience**

> 'The size of many museum collections now means that most of the things they contain can never be displayed'
>
> (Museums Association 2005: 11).

Upon arrival at the store visitors received a 20 minute introductory talk on the history of Blythe House (previously the headquarters of the Post Office Savings Bank), its current uses and the objects in storage. An hour long store tour followed, led by a curator who was a specialist in the theme of the tour. Before they began the tour, visitors were asked to leave their belongings in a secure location on site, for security and comfort. During the tour the visitor was able to engage with the collections and freely converse with the specialist curator. Visitors were also offered the opportunity to view other stored collections, in a more general tour. This extra tour was an enjoyable experience for visitors, who loved the idea of visiting a restricted access area.

How effective are store tours as a method of live interpretation? Analyses of 324 questionnaires were used to address the demographics of store tour visitors, their expectations of the event and whether these were met; their motivation for making the visit and finally whether public access in this way is important or whether these collections should simply remain the museum's hidden treasures.

***What the Public Perceives as 'Access to Collections'***

The visitors' perception of 'What is access to collections?' could not be precisely determined by the information collected. The survey questionnaire asked: '*What are you expecting to see or do today?*' (Questionnaire Part 1: Question 2). Most respondents viewed access to the store with an open mind and saw the store tour as a chance to 'see objects that would not necessarily be displayed for various reasons', 'something very interesting and rarely seen' (questionnaire responses).

Previous work has suggested that the public are unaware of the existence of collections (Kelly 1999; Gyllenhaal 1996). This investigation would have been enriched had questions been included on visitors' views and understanding of the general concept of access to collections. However, when curators were presented with the concept of access as described here, via a UK-wide email questionnaire, they agreed that the visitor could fully appreciate the concept of 'access to collections'. Curators suggested that the visitor perceived 'access to collections' as delivery of the collections, a facilitation that permits the 'inspection and gain of information' (G. Wheeldon pers. comm. 2005). Laura Gardner's complementary research, reported in this volume, suggests that most visitors to museums in London do now have a concept of museum collections.

***Who Made These Visits?***

Occupational Status

The Science Museum's store tours were scheduled during weekdays and weekends, offering the possibility for a wide audience range to attend. Still, it was expected that the visitors would consist primarily of the retired and students as it was believed that this group would be likely to have spare time to devote to more leisure time activities. Unexpectedly, the majority, 62% of the visiting total, were persons in employment, closely followed by the retired. Most of the visitors were in one of these two categories, as illustrated by figure 1. Many of the comments received in response to the question '*Why did you choose this tour?*' were that the tours were conveniently timed.

Among visitors in the analysed data set it was very rare for more than 10% of those in any one tour to be from the unemployed and student populations, possibly because of the cost of taking part in the store tours. The charge on average was £10, with costs such as transport in addition (C. Mark, pers. comm. 23 June 2005).

| | **Percentage of sample %** |
|---|---|
| Employed | 62 |
| Students | 5 |
| Unemployed | 1 |
| Retired | 29 |
| Undisclosed | 3 |

**Figure 1**. Employment status of all the individuals in the sample (n = 324).

Age Range and Leisure Interests

The age range of those individuals attending the store tours mirrors their employment status. The greatest number of individuals attending the store tours were aged 45 to 65 (Fig 2); of this group, only 38% were retired. Within this sub-set, the ages of those who regularly visited museums or the like (one to three times a year) was 26 to 65 years (see Appendix 2). These individuals may be presumed to have higher incomes and well-established careers, which allow them to pursue their chosen interests. This theory holds true, significantly, when the same data set was analysed from the other direction: the

pastimes of individuals and then employment status. Those who were frequent visitors to museums and the like were either employed or retired (See Appendix 2).

| | **Percentage in sample %** |
|---|---|
| <18 | 2 |
| 19 - 25 | 6 |
| 26 - 35 | 24 |
| 36 - 45 | 18 |
| 46 - 65 | 32 |
| 65> | 18 |

**Figure 2.** Age range of the individuals who attended the Science Museum's store tours in 2005 (n=324).

Unfortunately the leisure activities of the store tour visitors could not be analysed in relation to age group or employment status, due to the uneven distribution of the sub-categories in the data.

Gender

It was interesting to discover that the majority of visitors taking these tours were men (Fig. 3). They made up 63% of the visitors. Is this is a common trend among other science museum visitor figures or does this simply reflect the subject matter of the store tour themes?

| | **Percentage in sample %** |
|---|---|
| Male | 63 |
| Female | 37 |

**Figure 3.** Gender balance of visitors in the sample questionnaires.

Where Did the Visitors Come From? (Appendix 3)

The majority of the visitors, 65%, stated that they lived within the London or Greater London area: close enough to make the journey to the tour location easily. A further 23% came from locations in the home counties around London. However, the geographical range extended far beyond the vicinity of London; 12% of visitors described their residence as being in England, as far away as Newcastle. The store tour received supportive interest from as far away as the United States of America and Africa (presumably tourists and visitors to the UK), the home countries of 1% of the visitors. This demonstrated the effectiveness of the 'Science Museum's store tour' promotion. It would be interesting to compare the means of promotion that were used to achieve this outcome with those employed by other museums offering store tours.

***Visitors' Expectations of Store Tours***

An important issue that could be addressed through the questionnaire responses was that of audience or visitor expectations.

| |
|---|
| Unusual objects and interesting stories |
| Magnificent astronomy |
| Old equipment |
| Famous equipment |
| Historic exhibits |
| It is in the lap of the gods - I shall wait and see |
| Historic artefacts |
| Scientific exhibits |
| Historic exhibits |
| Astronomy collection |
| Scientific instruments |
| Old telescopes, measuring equipment |
| Rare historical instruments |
| Telescopes etc |
| Cold War exhibits |
| Unusual objects (not usually displayed) |
| A general impression of the store |
| Learn something new |
| No preconceptions |
| Gain knowledge |
| Something very interesting and rarely seen |
| I hope some old items |
| Interesting engineering exhibits |
| No idea |

**Table 1.** A representative selection of responses to Part 1, Question 2: 'What are you expecting to see or do today?'

Although some visitors were expecting to see specific types of object (scientific instruments, the astronomy collection, engineering exhibits) many or even most had only a vague idea, or even no idea, of what to expect (Table 1). However, almost all visitors were happy with their Science Museum's store tour experience, as Fig. 4 clearly illustrates. Many agreed that the experience had exceeded their expectations. In replies to the open ended questions visitors had the opportunity to express their astonishment at the vastness and diversity of the collection, the number of objects housed, the sheer scale of the store and 'the stories about the objects, the connections between objects,

people and events' all of historical significance (Table 1). They were pleased with the knowledge communicated by those explaining the history of some of the objects, and with the relative freedom to view the extensive variety of objects in store. Many of the visitors believed that having made the tour as a member of a fairly small group made their experience more enjoyable. Those who attended a general supplementary tour as well noted the thrilling experience of entering other areas of the museum's stores.

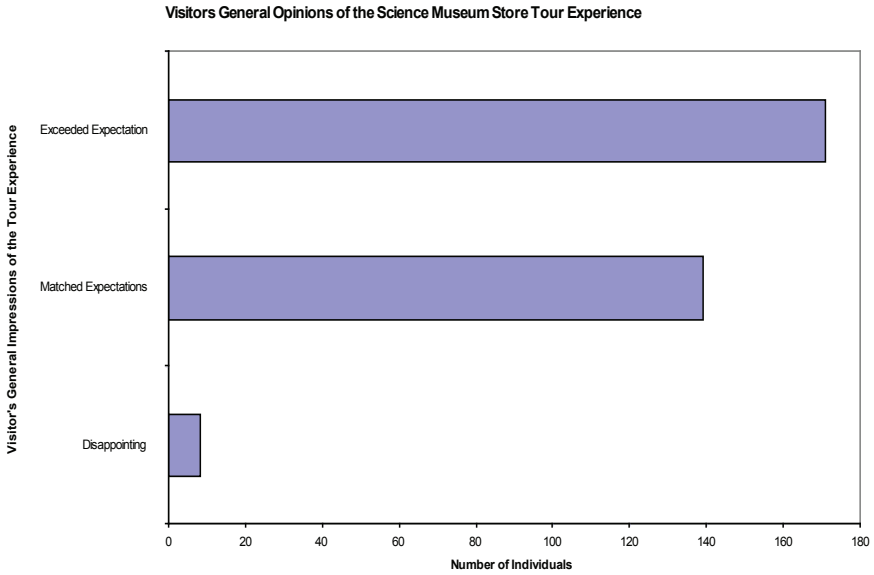


**Figure. 4.** Visitors' general opinion of the store tour experience.

This leads to the question, why did visitors come on the tour? Had the levels of knowledge of specific collections, or the collections themselves, encouraged them to take part? Why was the visit made? These questions were only partly answered by the survey questions.

The questionnaire requested visitors to provide a reason for their choice of store tour. It was believed that visitors registered for various tours based on their own personal interest in the subject content and, more importantly, the related collections. Many visitors had a special interest or worked in specialised fields related to the theme of the tour such as engineering, physics, nursing and astronomy. However, it was also noticed that many of the visitors chose their tour based simply on available times, convenience or by recommendation. Table 2 provides a representative selection of visitor's reasons for choosing their store tour.

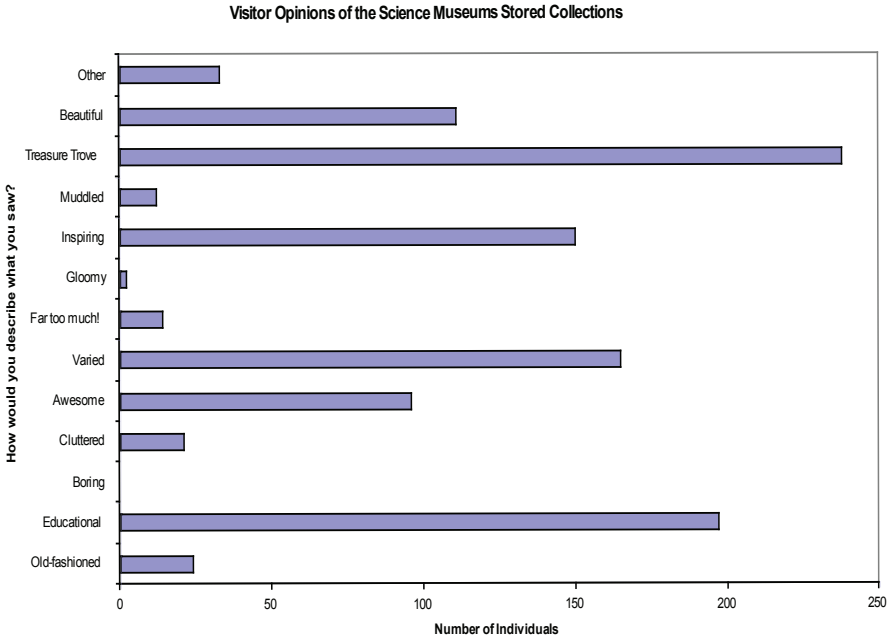


**Figure 5.** Visitors' opinions of the Science Museum's collection.

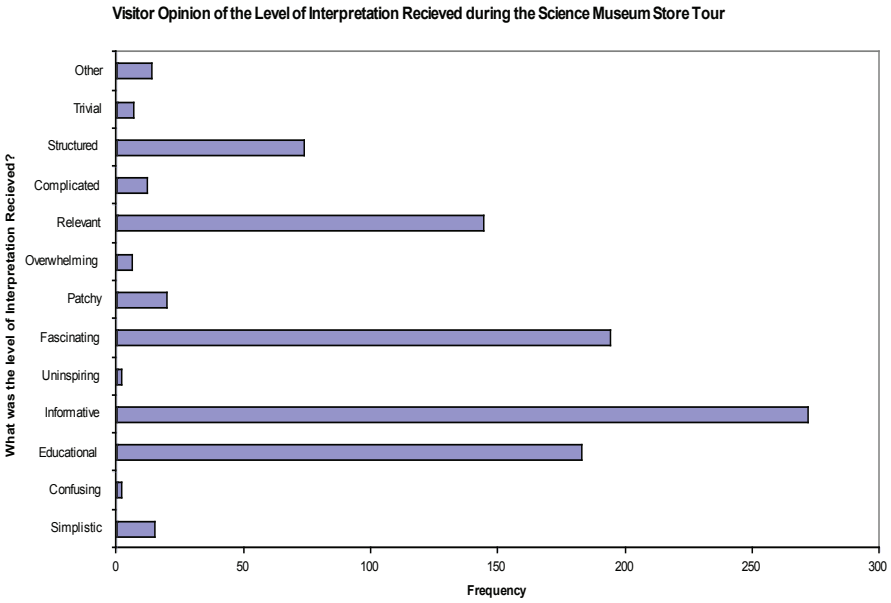


**Figure 6.** Visitors' opinion of the level of interpretation received during their store tour.

| |
|---|
| I have an amateur interest in astronomy |
| Interest in astronomy and historical instruments etc in general |
| It was the first tour we could book a place on |
| A chance to see exhibits not on display |
| Interested in astronomy - husband v interested - contacted by friends @NPL |
| Publicised by colleague |
| Hobby is astronomy |
| NPL internal e-mail, description was attractive |
| Interest and timing (easier at weekend) |
| Choice made by my husband |
| Nearest to interests |
| I know that the curator is a lively interesting person |
| Recommendations |
| I chose anyone of 3… and was offered this one |
| It was the most convenient time for us |
| Interested |
| Curiosity |
| Thought it would be interesting to find out about conservation |
| It was my second choice |
| It sounded very interesting |
| To see interesting exhibits not seen by anyone else |
| As a museum worker I'm interested in conservation and storage issues |
| Invited by interested friends |
| Limited opportunities |

**Table 2.** A representative selection of responses to Part 1, Question 1: 'Why did you choose this tour?'

The visitor was also asked what they had found most enjoyable about the tour (Appendix 1, Questionnaire, Question 3 (a) and (b)). Many replies related to surprise at the vast quantity of objects in storage. When asked to provide a general description of 'what they saw' on the tour, visitors said that it was inspirational and educational (Fig 5). A significant number of the visitors recorded that what they saw was a treasure trove: this description was mentioned 238 times. Were these visitors aware that that the 'museum collections do not only consist of treasures, like the Rosetta Stone, or the wonders of the natural and technological world'? It would have been useful to determine visitor opinion of how successfully they felt the store collections 'reflect the contemporary lives of people, and the vitality, diversity and uniqueness of communities', an approach which has been adopted by many museums considering the future for collections (Wilkinson 2005: 14).

Pes (2002: 2) has written, 'museums that open their stores face a dilemma about how much information to provide'. The Science Museum curators conducting each of the tours were expected to deliver talks appropriate to their tour audience. The questionnaire addressed the level of interpretation from the audiences' perspective, as in many cases the delivery could limit or restrict the visitor's depth of understanding. As in the gallery environment, museum professionals have control over what and how information is provided. When asked to select from a set of pre-chosen words that could describe 'what you were told', the vast majority, 272, of visitors suggested that the tours were *informative* (Fig. 6). 194 and 183 votes respectively suggested that the tours were also *fascinating* and *educational*. Very few visitors voted negatively either on 'what they saw' or on 'what they were told': not one person suggested that what they saw was *boring* and no more than four votes suggested that the information was *uninspiring* or *trivial*.

***Motivation for Taking Part in Store Tours***

Pes (2002: 3) has suggested that 'if a welcoming atmosphere is created by staff and reinforced by the design of the store, its power to engage visitors is increased greatly', as has been the case with many resources centres including the Darwin Centre of The Natural History Museum, London. Pes (2002: 3) then states that 'until visitor evaluation is completed, sceptics will still be able to argue that only special interest visitors are interested in seeing collections in this way'. Part 1, Question 5 of the questionnaire directly addressed this point, asking, *'if you have a special or professional interest(s) what are they?'*. Of the 324 individuals in the sample, only 158, less than 50%, clearly identified a special interest. By revisiting visitors' responses to Part 1, Question 2 of the survey questionnaire, '*What are you expecting to see or do today?*', it was discovered that a majority of visitors expected to '*learn something new*', '*be educated*' or '*enlightened*', distinct motives for embarking on the store tour, and a vindication for collectors who like Sir John Sloane, 'intended this collection to educate' (Palin 2002: 1).

**The Curators' Perspective**

Curators in 37 museums nationwide were emailed to canvass their views on store tours (Appendix 4). The main question was: "Is public access to stored collections important or should these collections remain part of the museum's hidden treasures?"

Curators maintained in their replies that stored collections were not hidden and that such a statement would be untrue, suggesting that they considered that the sole reason why stored collections were not on display was a lack of exhibition space. Many curators stated that even if they did not open the collections for public tours their collections are accessible by appointment. Many of the curators agreed that '*if people are entitled to access to museums, then they have to be entitled to engage fully with museum collections*'. However, what is access without the means of reaching the collections; what is access without interpretation (Wilkinson 2005: 11)? Many collections were made with the intention of educating or providing cultural enlightenment, but how can a collection fulfil that ultimate goal if access to it is restricted (Palin 2002: 1)? Increasing access is an objective that many museums now have to meet, certainly those appealing for Heritage Lottery Funding (HLF). As of May 2005 the HLF has

awarded funding to 28 Open Storage projects proposed or implemented by 26 museums (Table 2).

**The Store Tour Experience: Discussion**

The Science Museum's store tours provided an opportunity for the public to 'engage with the objects or specimens it contains, or with ideas and knowledge generated from them, either directly or indirectly' (Wilkinson 2005: 11), but were they successful?

Pes (2002: 3) congratulated the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester for 'undertaking formative evaluation, which found that visitors liked the idea of encountering objects 'behind the scenes' in a space different from a gallery. The evaluation also showed that while many visitors found the idea of an open store odd, it has become an attraction since it has been open. Storage access and store tours 'provide visitors with a unique opportunity to see the real thing' (Gammon and Mazda 2003: 1).

Kelly (1999) discovered in 1999, in Australia, that the public were unaware of the collections stored by museums. However, Laura Gardner's study in 2005 found that the public in London were generally aware that museums had non-displayed collections, but not of their quantity. Many people could not fathom the sheer quantity of objects held in storage compared with that which can be displayed (Gardner, this volume). Still, individuals visiting the Science Museum's store at Blythe House found it difficult to imagine what access to these collections meant. Their responses supported Kelly's findings, which suggested that visitors 'didn't know much about this and are interested to find out more about behind-the-scenes functions, as well as specific information about the objects and specimens held in collections' (Kelly 1999: 6). However, Pes has commented that 'only the special interest visitors are interested in seeing collections in this way' (2002: 3). Given differing opinions and findings on people's interest in stored collections, why has the Science Museum offered public access to them?

Museums, generally, are being encouraged to explore how they 'can make cultural entitlement to collections a reality'. Inspired museums create awareness of their stored collection 'by offering more opportunities for people to engage with those collections and the ideas and knowledge associated with them'. Although museums have an obligation to 'preserve material for the future', the inquiry lead by the Museums Association in 2004 finally concluded that 'while preservation is an essential part of the role of museums, it is not on its own sufficient: museums must take steps to ensure that more of their collection is used' (Wilkinson 2005: 11).

In order to promote awareness of their stored collections among its visiting public, the Science Museum uses a number of interpretation methods. The museum views live interpretation, such as actors in galleries, Explainers or demonstrators, as being more advantageous than 'other forms of interpretation providing opportunities to increase physical, intellectual and cultural access to the Museum's collections ... as it provides far greater flexibility with the opportunity for the presenter to adapt the content and style to their audience' (Gammon and Mazda 2003). This type of live interpretation provides and achieves a high quality of engagement, as it provides the present visitors with:

- The opportunity for dialogue and increases visitors active participation in the experience
- Information in a form that is easy for visitors to comprehend
- A chance to look at the object while listening to the presenter
- Information to suit their audience in a way that would be extremely difficult to achieve with other media, however this is dependent on the skill of the presenter
- The range and depth of information that can be far greater than would be possible with other media
- And a presenter who can draw the visitors' attention to salient details in the object, they can also operate machines or dismantle the object to reveal features not obvious on the surface.
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(Modified from: Gammon and Mazda 2003)

The Science Museum has made access to collections available to all members of the public, but are special interest visitors the only visitors?

The questionnaire survey revealed that over 50% of visitors had no specialist interest. Thus Pes's scepticism that only visitors with special interests want to visit collections appears not to be supported (2002: 3). On the contrary, store tours appear to be a useful tool in providing access, as they can be adapted to suit the audience. They can easily be made informative enough for the specialist and universal enough to satisfy the curiosity of general interest visitors. An evaluation of the concept of open storage, conducted by Holgate, Cane and Webb (2002) with specific reference to the Museum of Science and Industry's Collection Centre in Manchester revealed that visitors 'immediately responded to being allowed 'behind the scenes'. It also revealed the 'non-users, including young adults, like juxtaposition of different types of objects, while existing users valued the access to further information and the expert knowledge of museum staff'.

But, what did visitors expect from a tour of an open store and in the case of the Science Museum, does no expectation, mean low expectations?

According to the survey which has been the basis for much of this investigation, most of the visitors to the Science Museum store tours embarked on the experience without knowing what to expect. Many had no expectations at all. The public must have somehow foreseen 'The ability of works of art, historical objects and natural science specimens to inspire us ... Museum and gallery collections can be exotic, intriguing, affirming, pleasurable and challenging – they can stir emotions, inspire connections and stimulate ideas.' (Glaister 2005).

The general trend in expectation recorded by those individuals attending the store tours was similar to that described by Holgate, Cane and Webb (2002). These consultants used focus groups to test the concept of public access to stored collections (2002: 2).

They described the groups as being 'uncertain in their reactions because they had no experience of anything similar'. Many of the visitors to the Science Museum's store tours felt similarly, saying that they expected to see '*what I can't see at the Science Museum*', many said that they had '*no expectations*' or simply did not know what to expect (Holgate, Cane and Webb 2002: 2 and responses to Part 1, Question 2 of Store Tour Questionnaire). The majority of visitors were intrigued by the sheer vastness of the collections stored, many had no clue what they were going to see, but in the event they were overwhelmed. It was obvious that the majority of the visitors just came to see what they would find: they had attended with open minds and with little or no expectation. Visitors enjoyed the behind-the-scenes experience. They showed little concern for the cultural significance of the objects they saw or came into contact with; they seemed more to be frustrated with the short length of the tour.

In the survey, wishes expressed by visitors included: to explore the wonders held in the Science Museum's store; to have a behind-the-scenes look at why particular objects were chosen for display; to view a large item simply too big to be placed on exhibition; to have a sneak peek at how objects are cared for; to experience the vastness of the museums reserve collection; to view objects not normally accessible and to receive information on those objects not normally accessible. It was interesting to discover that some of the visitors were sure that many of the 'un-displayed' objects were in store simply because they could not be on display in the museum. They did not see that collections are useful in their own right.

More importantly, did visitors get what they expected from the experience?

If one were to register on a subject-specific tour, one would expect to see objects related to that subject, which was the response of visitors when asked this question. They were there to see things specifically related to the subject content of the tour; objects that had never been seen by the public and were not usually displayed. For many of the store tour participants, learning something new and expanding their own knowledge through an expert guide was a primary aim. These were specific learning objectives, which the visitor saw as attainable mainly through 'a chance to see things that wouldn't normally be seen' and 'a chance to see specific collections' (Store Tour Questionnaire responses).

The Science Museum prepared carefully for its tours. Curators were asked to prepare tour talks that considered their tour audience, the learning objectives and, importantly, a storyline or theme to keep their audience interested. Was this enough to satisfy the needs of a varied audience? Many visitors wanted information relating to objects, but a few were on the tour expecting expert commentary on the relevance of the collections to 'international, cultural, technological and social change' (DCMS 2005: 12). It would seem that most visitors were satisfied with the interpretation they received (Figs 4, 5 and 6).

***Costs and Benefits of Store Tours***

The Costs

UK Museums are expected by the government to provide the public with opportunities to access collections. Yet many can only provide access to specific objects by appointment, because of many factors. These include:

- The time needed to plan and organise
- The need for extra visitor research
- The extra cost related to the object/visitor environment and the maintenance of that environment
- Staff redeployment or recruitment
- Increased staff training costs
- The extra cost of preparing and regularly cleaning objects
- The increased risk of accidental damage or theft
- The provision of additional labelling and interpretation, and
- Possibly, additional storage equipment

(Pes 2002: 4).

The Science Museum has defined access as 'making sure more of our collections is seen by more people in more meaningful ways' (Science Museum, n.d.: 1), but what about the costs? The museum budgeted nearly £15 000 for store tours, as the means for the visiting public to engage with its stored collection. Before embarking on the project the museum compiled a financial forecast. The museum's management were fully aware that store tours would not be profitable, so why did they continue?

As Proudlove has said, 'it should not be assumed that museum audiences demand any particular type of access to collections'; museums are responsible for investigating the 'needs of all current and potential users ... before investing in facilities which many prove expensive to maintain' (Proudlove 2001: 1). By offering access though store tours the Science Museum, London, has done just that: provided an opportunity to investigate the needs of the users and determine costs, equipment and personnel. A significant trend has emerged suggesting that the museum has been successful in its approach 'to deliver what people wanted rather than what the museum thought they wanted or what the museum thought they ought to want' (Proudlove 2001, cited by Dodd et al. 2002: 7).

Approximately 95% of the cost of £15 000 was spent on staffing: curators, cleaners/porters, explainers and administrators. To offset the cost, each visitor was asked to pay a standard charge of £10. Providing access to stored collections is not a profit-making scheme and despite the charge, store tours at Blythe House made a loss, but less than £2500.

***Benefits***
Important reasons for providing access at this level and though store tours are:

- Give staff and visitors a better knowledge of the collection
- Raise the profile of reserve collections and of how museums care for them
- Increase the value of a collection as a public resource
- Lead to new ways of using the collection as a learning resource
- Encourage better management of stored collections
- Improve health and safety practice and awareness
- Provide a clear goal for improving collections care
- Increase opportunities to communicate with visitors using the collection
- Present objects under-represented in permanent galleries
- Create space in closed stores, reducing overcrowding and making more room for new acquisitions

(Source: Pes 2002: 4)

As Holgate, Cane and Webb found, 'better access benefits staff as well as visitors and increased visibility encourages better housekeeping and vigilance' (2002: 2). 'Store tours reveal what is held in the collection (if no on-line catalogue is available), enabling researchers to arrange return visits to study items or groups of items in detail and at length' (J. Phillips, pers. comm. 24 August 2005).

***Unanswered Questions***
An extension of this investigation would address the following questions in more depth:

- Does interpretation create added value from a public perspective, or is it sufficient for them to be able simply to view the collections?
- What does interpretation provide as a means of accessing this invaluable resource that are museum's stored collections?
- What kind of interpretation should museums invest in when providing access to their stored collections?
- Do store tours as an event or activity achieve the fundamental objectives of access and engagement?
- What are the impacts of store tours as one of 'the newer ways of promoting engagement with collection'?

(Museums Association 2004: 4)

**Conclusions**

> Museums are still largely defined by their collections; those that cannot be included in displays must be made accessible some other way
>
> (Proudlove, 2001: 1).

Driven by a strong collections access ethos, the Science Museum, London, offered public access to its stored collections though store tours. In doing so it provided an

effective form of interpretation despite the 'lack of time and money'. This study has confirmed that the museum can be assured that store tours, as implemented, do indeed succeed in facilitating access and engagement with the collections. Supplemented by earlier work and the experiences of other museums, the findings enable the questions posed at the beginning of this paper to be addressed.

Are store tours a worthwhile investment? At the Science Museum, a net £2500 was the cost of making the museum stored collections part of the public realm. As a result, the public's valuation of the collections itself has increased both as an education resource and as a reflection of the 'vitality, the uniqueness and the diversity of contemporary communities and their lives' (DCMS 2005: 7). Also, as suggested by Kelly, open collections create a better public understanding of the 'nature of museums and therefore increase their support for them (1999: 2).

Should store tours be used as an interpretative medium for accessing stored collections on a national level? Can they assist with the Museums Association's recommendation that 'Museums should do more to expand the opportunities open to people to engage with collections' (Wilkinson 2005: 4)? The findings of this study confirm that as an interpretative medium for accessing stored collections store tours are worthwhile if they are carefully planned and prepared. The results also confirm that store tours do create added value from the museum for the public. They assist it in achieving one of its fundamental objectives: as a trusted authoritative source of information, to increase physical, cultural and intellectual access to its stored collections (Gammon and Mazda 2003: 1).

Are they the best way to engage the public in stored collections? Dexter Lord and Lord (2002: 159) stated that 'the primary concern of interpretative planning is to ensure that the exhibition communicates meaningfully to the public at all levels'. The same should be expected within the store environment if the public are to fully appreciate stored collections. With so many objects in storage, textual interpretation that can be provided for the visitor is limited. However, the concept of the store tour almost promises to provide those essential qualities required by the visitor. Store tours not only offer an opportunity for visitor-curator interaction, but they allow museums to provide useful and effective access to their collections without the added effort of creating exhibition quality text. In some respects store tours are successful simply because many visitors have a common learning style. They prefer spoken information associated with viewing objects or demonstrations over reading text and imagining the associated functions or objects. What efforts do museums need to make to provide this particular type of access to stored collections? As previously stated, this particular aspect of access would require further investigation.

What do store tours provide as a means of accessing or promoting engagement in museums' stored collections? This study confirmed that store tours as an interpretative medium for accessing the Science Museum's stored collections catered for the individual needs of the visitor. If done well, the visitor is not regarded as a passive vessel expected to accept 'advice and information from experts' (Wilkinson 2005: 11). Visitors embark-

ing on tours at Blythe House during 2004-2005 experienced a level of interpretation in which the museum had thought about its role as a mediator for life long learning.

Are store tours indeed the access tool of the future? As many museum professionals have said, open storage on its own is not a 'solution to the problem of underused collections'. Store tours provide an opportunity for the visitor to get beyond the museum, the traditionalist institution, which in its exhibitions, like a tabloid newspaper, only tells its audience what it wants them to know.

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