

Interview with Dominic Tweddle

Director General of the
National Museum of the Royal Navy

Interview conducted by Brian Hole
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PIA: What made you take up archaeology in the first place?

DT: You're asking me to think back an awful long time! And the answer's bound to be made up after the event. I was always interested in history and archaeology, and I can't remember a time when I haven't been, so I thought, well, it seems like a good idea for a career. Many people tried to persuade me against it, on the grounds that there were no jobs, no careers, but there we are.

PIA: So, you studied at the Institute of Archaeology...

DT: No, it's a slightly more convoluted story than that. I did my first degree, which was archaeology and history, at Southampton, in the first year that Colin Renfrew made an appearance there, which was entertaining. I then did a year at Emmanuel College Cambridge before fetching up at University College, in what was then the Department of Scandinavian Studies, now subsumed into the Institute (well at least the staff have been).

PIA: What was your PhD topic and how did that shape your career?

DT: It was on the Anglo-Saxon sculpture of South-East England - it was gripping stuff. And did it shape my career at all? Only getting me into my first job, as a research assistant at the British Museum, in what was then the department of medieval and later antiquities. That was largely because David Wilson, who had been my professor, was by then director of the British Museum. So the interview went broadly - what are you studying, who are you studying under - oh - I think you've got the job. You could do that sort of thing in those days!

PIA: Where did your career go from there?

DT: I enjoyed every minute of the British Museum, a wonderful experience. The problem is that if you work at the British Museum it's such fun and you've got such lovely things to play with, that you could be trapped there for the rest of your life. I lasted nine months before I thought that I needed to get out, because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in an institution, even one as nice as the BM. So I went to the York Archaeological

Trust as Assistant Director. I was responsible for research in its broadest sense, not for excavation because it wasn't regarded as research, but for all other kinds of research in the organisation. Which was quite fun - I spent 16 years doing that. And in doing that I got involved in the creation of the Jorvik Viking Centre, and the Archaeological Resource Centre for the Trust. The Trust built a business out of that kind of work, and then it decided that it wanted to go back to its roots as an academic organisation, and so I bought the business off them for two pounds. It was quite a good two pounds worth! And then I took on the business [Past Forward Ltd.], which was effectively doing consultancy on what we would broadly call heritage projects, designing and building projects, and also had a multimedia business. I spent 13 years building that up, merged it with another business (which owned some cultural visitor attractions and also did consultancy, so it was quite a good fit), and I became Chief Executive of the merged business [Continuum Group] and spent some time running that. So the merged business basically designed, built, owned and operated visitor attractions in the cultural field.

PIA: What was the most interesting or challenging aspect of those years?

DT: Oh, there were hundreds of them, and every one was challenging in a novel and unexpected way. We did quite an interesting project in Zimbabwe in the early years, which was some consultancy work on how you could turn the site of Old Bulawayo into a sort of theme park, I think for want of a better word. That was quite entertaining. We did a lot of work in Israel, including on the site of Caesarea Maritima where we did some major interpretative work. The wackiest one was the design of a Dracula theme park for the government of Romania, which was just a bit of fun - we didn't normally do that kind of thing, but they were insistent.

PIA: Why did you decide to move on from there?

DT: Well - the company still exists, which is great, but I got to the point where I thought, if I stay here I'm going to be here till retirement, so it's time to move on. And anyway, a Chief Executive normally has a shelf life of about three years, and by that time I'd done eight at the merged company, so I was living on borrowed time anyway. The time to get out is when you're ahead. That's when I went on to become Director General of the Museum of the Royal Navy, where I am today - back to the charitable sector.

PIA: Who has been the greatest influence for you throughout your career?

DT: I think there have been different kinds of formative influences. In academic terms, it would be David Wilson, James Graham-Campbell and Leslie Webster, which is the team that was in place when I was a PhD student and working at the British Museum. In those days University College worked quite closely, and it still does, with the British Museum, and so all three of those were very formative influences, all first class scholars. Perhaps my career has taken such a bizarre turn because I thought 'I'm not as good as them, so perhaps I should do something else' - they were really good people. In terms of

getting things done, Peter Addyman who was Director of the York Archaeological Trust was quite a powerful influence. He turned quite a small archaeological organisation into something quite large, respected and powerful, in what were then novel and interesting ways. And in business, a chap called Ian Skipper, sadly now no longer with us, who was always clear that you could make money out of archaeology, and spent a lot of time showing us how that could be done. He was a supporter of the York Archaeological Trust, and he helped us to get the Jorvik Viking Centre created, by helping us to deal with such unexpected creatures as bankers, whom I'd certainly never dealt with before.

PIA: That's an important point - a lot of students wonder how they will ever gain those sorts of skills within archaeology. Do you have any advice for them?

DT: The advice is to exploit your contacts ruthlessly. A student might think they don't have many contacts, but that's not actually true. You have all sorts of people flowing through any university department, every one of which has got an address book which might be of use to you. The more networking you can do, the better it is. People don't object to being asked. They object to having their time wasted, but if there's a point to it they will help, usually.

PIA: You're also a member a lot of societies, including being a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. How valuable do you find these sorts of memberships?

DT: Again, they're what you make of them. Actually I hadn't been that involved with the Society of Antiquaries, until the point where I was asked to come on the council. Then you've got to be much more committed to doing things, and that's been quite interesting. But the principle of doing a lot of things is to make sure you network. You are doing things for other people - that's valuable and you should be, particularly at my stage in my career, but also you do get something out of it, and that's important.

PIA: Do you have time for research interests in your current position?

DT: Not really. I think I probably gave up any serious academic research a decade ago. The days of scholar curators are now behind us. That's not because scholarship is not valuable - I think it's the bedrock of what national museums certainly should be doing, but because there is now so much to know and to do. With the professional job of running museums and funding them and making them succeed, while scholarship is a good starting point, you can't do two things at once. You end up doing two things badly instead of one thing well.

PIA: Is it more difficult for scholars to access the collections in military museums such as the National Museum of the Royal Navy?

DT: No. We have very good curators who are very knowledgeable, both about our own collection and about the broad history of the Navy. We have very good collections, we

have very good archives, and they're all available to the public and to scholars as you would expect. You may have to go through a rigmarole of getting a security pass to get in, but that's only because our library entrance happens to be placed beyond a security fence.

PIA: So would you encourage students who are looking for MA and PhD topics to work with your collections?

DT: Absolutely. What we're doing at the moment for example, is setting up a scholarship system for students that is offering 1-2,000 a year, to people who are working on topics that we're interested in. It's not much, but on the other hand when you're starting out it's better than nothing. We are very keen that our collections are used and understood more widely.

PIA: Does the Navy influence museum policy?

DT: It doesn't. The museum is an 'arms-length' body - a charitable trust and a company limited by guarantee. The only influence the Navy has over us comes through a financial framework, which sets out the broad objectives of having a museum and then very largely concentrates on how public money is handled. Providing that what we do is done within that framework, nobody is going to interfere. It's very different from the DCMS trying to micromanage its museums, which I'm afraid it has done. There's the whole thing at the moment about whether national museums should be able to use their historic reserves, which is a debate we would never have because the Navy would never imagine that it could tell us that we couldn't use our historic reserves - they don't have the power.

PIA: How do you think the current cuts are going to affect UK museums? Is it different for armed forces museums?

DT: I don't think it makes a difference which sector you're in. Everybody is getting cuts, and there are two ways of handling this I think. The first is to say that it's all ghastly, which of course it is - we all accept it's ghastly, and we don't want to be cut, and to try and preserve what we have with less money as a result. 'OK - I'll salami-slice everything,' is a reaction to it. Another kind of reaction is to say that this is an opportunity to reorganise, and to do things rather differently, and to ask what things we value most in our organisation, and what things we value least. It sounds terrible, but if there isn't an order of priorities in your organisation you must be barmy, so you should be able to answer the question. I'm of the sort of reorganisation school. For example we have four naval museums, and they've each got a complete staff so they're duplicating functions. It's not that I want to spend any less money - I just don't want to spend it in the way that I'm spending it now. I want to redirect some of that money to things that are more frontline, one might argue. So I think it's an opportunity to change radically. I'm not sure that many people are going to take it.

PIA: But many smaller museums don't have as many options...

DT: No, they don't, but we're a medium-sized enterprise I would say - we're not huge and we don't have the kinds of resources say that the British Museum has got, sadly, but we still do a very effective job. I think for smaller museums, there are options there. I think museums can come together as larger groups - economies of scale is one way of going, sort of up-sizing. You can transition to more of a community base, with more volunteering, that's another way of dealing with the problem. There are all sorts of ways. You can partner between large and small institutions, for example we are partnering with HMS Unicorn and HMS Trincomalee - very nice early 19th century ships both of them. They are relatively small organisations, but we can learn a lot from them and they can maybe get something from us.

PIA: So you don't necessarily feel that the cuts are unhealthy?

DT: No - I don't think it's unhealthy. I don't want cuts, I don't want any of my colleagues to have cuts, and I don't want to see the kind of wastage that might happen of talented people. That's the most difficult thing about dealing with this because we might have not only the effects on individuals, which are important to think about, but also in 20 years time we might have a whole cohort of people's experience missing, which could be a problem for us. So I'm not saying cuts are a really good thing and we should embrace them. I'm simply saying, given what we've got, we've got to take a positive attitude not a negative attitude.

PIA: So would you recommend that someone now embarking on a degree in archaeology think more carefully about their career options in the light of these cuts?

DT: No - what I would say to anybody who is in academic work, or taking a course, is do it for its own sake and because you enjoy it, because it's the one time in your life you'll get to do what you want to do. OK - it comes at a price tag these days, which it didn't in mine, but I think the advice is the same. If you don't enjoy it, don't do it, and I wouldn't do academic work simply because you think there's a career at the end of it - it's worth doing for its own sake. An unfashionable view, but then you can 'exploit' it later - you'll have skills and you'll have experience and knowledge that can be applied across all sorts of different fields.

PIA: What have been your other main tasks since taking over the NMRN?

DT: The main task, or priority, is to bring the four museums together. And that's really, in a nice way, very boring - it's not very interesting, but it opens the doors to achieving what we want to achieve as a group of museums, so it has to be done well. It's not easy because everybody in the four museums thinks they're doing a brilliant job, which they probably are, and that they don't need to change, which I don't agree with because we all need to change.

PIA: Is the merging mostly due to funding changes?

DT: No, it was set in train before the cuts, quite properly, because why would the Royal Navy want four museums? You can see it in the funding, as the National Army Museum and the Royal Air Force Museum get possibly twice the amount of money we do, because they've got a single voice. I would argue of course that the Royal Navy is six times more important than either of them, and therefore should have much more money, but it's not an argument that's going to be bought unless you've got a single voice. So all that merger stuff is boring and tedious, but it's very important. But the other thing we've got to do is to balance that with some quick successes, because nobody's terribly interested if you say triumphantly after eighteen months or two years, 'I've now brought the museums together.' The complaint will be, 'now what have you been doing other than that,' so you have to do other things and you've got to get some quick wins in a change process. We have managed to organise two successful lottery bids in the last eighteen months. One is for HMS Alliance, which is a submarine built in about 1946, the last sort of hand-cranked submarine, which is dropping to bits - we have a lottery grant for this and have raised the matching funding and that work is about to start. And we got another successful lottery bid for new 20th century galleries, which will get under way soon. We're also trying to organise a future for HMS Caroline, the last surviving ship that fought in the battle of Jutland, which is just fantastic and she's still in commission. And we have been trying to change the business model for HMS Victory, so that all of the visitor-facing stuff is transferred away from the Navy and to the national museum, which will happen finally on the 1st of April next year.

PIA: Do you think that the British public values military museums?

DT: It's a difficult question. I think there are two strands of thought, probably many more amongst the British public, but at least two important ones. The first is that the armed forces are fighting in Afghanistan and in the Gulf, and hitting the news a lot. So since armed forces museums commemorate, and I suppose to some extent, celebrate what the armed forces are doing, they become more relevant. And then on the other side of that there are those who find the idea of going for a day out to visit something which is about the military as a bit of a turn off. Typically military museums have had the sort of profile that they're 'dads and lads' days out, and they're not for wives and daughters, but I think that's changing actually, quite rapidly.

PIA: Considering the role that the military has played in British history, is military history sufficiently represented and funded in our museums?

DT: Well - I have a sort of bias here. I think the broad answer is no - it's not well enough represented. DCMS doesn't see military museums because they're run by the MOD, so no government policy is formulated with national military museums in mind, a very interesting blind spot, particularly when we are fighting wars. So we don't get adequately reflected in government policy, and we aren't given enough priority. Within that is a very

interesting paradox for the Navy. Historically the Navy's been far more important than either the army or the air force. The army was always kept small, ineffective and largely overseas where it can't do any harm, because it's dangerous and might overthrow the government, while the air force is so new, barely a hundred years old. The Navy has been much more important throughout its history. If you go back a hundred years, 75% of taxation was spent on the Navy - it was enormous. But it has virtually disappeared from the historical consciousness of that century, so while the army and air force have gone up and become more visible in people's estimation, the Navy has become invisible, very curiously. And so people say, look - we're fighting a war in Afghanistan with the army and the air force, but actually 30% of the resources deployed in Afghanistan are naval, that's aeroplanes, helicopters, troops. So I think we've got a whole problem for the Navy about visibility, and of course that determines how resources are allocated.

PIA: How representative are the NMRN collections?

DT: Well, the collection is not desperately representative - it's a sort of survival of the fittest collection as many are. They're the things that happened to survive. For us, a lot of our core material went to Greenwich, to the National Maritime Museum, and another whack of material went to the Imperial War Museum, but what is left is still a tremendous collection. A slightly weird collection as a result because it's got odd gaps in it, but it's still tremendous. And the Navy still holds enormous collections. The one thing we've never collected is ships, which is very weird. The only ships that the national museum possesses are HMS Holland 1, which is a submarine that sank in 1905 and was recovered, a very early form of submarine, and HMS Alliance, which is a Second World War type submarine. And actually that's it.

PIA: In this edition of PIA we're also holding a forum about the Portable Antiquities Scheme and the Treasure Act. Is the naval museum in any way involved with these?

DT: Not at all. One of the odder things about the museum is when you look at our collecting policy up to when I came in. We aspired to represent the Navy from the earliest times to the present day. Terrific, perfectly reasonable, but the collecting policy forbade the collection of archaeological material. I'm not sure how you go about the first without collecting the second, so now we've changed that. But it doesn't mean to say that we're engaged with archaeology yet, and that's both archaeology on land, but also significantly for us undersea.

PIA: Is the museum involved with military wrecks though?

DT: We are beginning to be. For example recently we've had a case where someone has been looting, and I don't think that's too strong a word, the wreck of HMS Indefatigable, which blew up at the Battle of Jutland. They were caught red-handed with one of the propellers from the ship. It's a war grave, owned by the United Kingdom government, because warship wrecks are, and this had been removed without permission. It was

difficult to actually enforce action though, particularly across borders in Europe. The Portable Antiquities Scheme is great for land-based stuff, but I think that the whole issue of underwater archaeology is hidden - you can't see the damage that's being done for the most part, and so it's out of sight and out of mind. I think it's recognised that there is a wholesale looting problem on underwater sites.

PIA: Where do you stand on free versus charged entry to museums?

DT: I think it's a very difficult argument, and ultimately it's a matter of personal opinion. You've got the argument on the one hand that people don't value what they don't pay for, which is actually quite strong. But against that you can place the argument about social exclusion, and I don't think there's a right answer. I think there's an answer for now, but that may change in the future. We charge at the moment - we have a two year exemption from the government's policy that national museums will be free. So we charge, and a goodly amount of our income comes from that charge. However we are going to take our main site free, probably. Watch this space.

PIA: What do you see as the main mission of the NMRN moving forwards?

DT: Well, our mission is a bit different from most museums', because our charitable objectives are different. We are allowed to take part in recruitment, retention, training, and crucially commemoration of people in the armed forces. So those are a sort of discrete, armed forces based suite of objectives. The rest of what we do is the same as other museums, and what I conceive that we're here to do, a dreadfully unfashionable view, is to make sure that the scholarship, the knowledge and the collection survive to be used by people in the future. Many museums would go on about social inclusion, and yes I'm interested in that, but I'm not into social engineering as a primary function. It sort of comes off the rest of it. I think I'm probably a voice of one in this in the museum world, but there we are. I think that without scholarship we are nothing, and without collections we are nothing, so those come first.

PIA: Do you mean recruitment to the armed forces?

DT: For people coming to visit our museums, that might be the entry point, the point at which they think about the Royal Navy for the first time. If they do and then enter the service, that's an objective we're allowed, and encouraged to deliver. I don't know if we do it successfully, but those are a set of military-facing objectives which we have to deal with.

PIA: Is the museum's role in armed forces recruitment, for example involving school children, ever raised as an ethical problem?

DT: Never. If you come as a school party to the museum, what we want you to do is to have a good time and enjoy your day out because that's the most important part of

opening people's minds to what you've got to say, and maybe to learn a couple of things that you didn't know before, which is the same as every other museum. If kids are inspired to join the Navy by that, that's fine. But we've never had anyone raise an ethical issue, and in a sense I would say 'why would they?' People can take individual stances on whether they like the defence industry or not, that's a judgement that individuals make politically.

PIA: Do you have any criticisms of the way that UK museums are run?

DT: The kind of generalisation I would make firstly is that the museum sector is much healthier now than it was say 20 or 30 years ago. Gone are the days when the word 'museum' equalled 'boring.' And when we created the Jorvik Viking Centre that was very much the case. It was called the Jorvik Viking Centre because we didn't want to use the word 'museum.' I think the sector's in a much better state than most people will give it credit for. Of course it's a very interesting piece of rhetoric to say that it's in a dreadful state, in a crisis etc., because it's self-serving.

I do think that there are curiosities in the way that museums are run in England. I find the huge gulf between national museums and regional or local museums extraordinary. There is a national museum directors' conference, which is great, but local museums more or less (though there are some notable exceptions) are excluded from that. And there's a big gulf in the way funding works as well. There's been a partnership put together in Hampshire for example for museums to work together on bidding to be a core museum, but there's a huge gap in the plan because the Navy bits of the story belong to us as a national museum, and they can't work with a national museum in that funding construct. It's really extraordinarily weird.

I think that with most institutions it's as they always say, that generals and for that matter admirals, always fight the last war and not the present one. And I think museums are constantly fighting the last war, constantly reacting to things. I think it's always better to be proactive and to seek to change before anybody forces you to. Because being forced to do things is a bad place to be.

PIA: Do you think that British museums are innovative enough?

DT: I think that in some sectors they have been incredibly innovative actually. In terms of museum display, in ways that they're reaching out to different kinds of audiences, and the kinds of learning that they offer, they've been very innovative. The problem is - how do we keep that going? Innovation I think runs in waves, you become innovative and then you're stuck with 'we've always done it like this', and then you change again. I think, to go back to the subject of the cuts, that they're going to force us to change. That's actually good because I think we're in a state of stasis now, with the feeling that we've got there and reached the Promised Land. And the whole thing about the Promised Land is you never reach it.

PIA: So what do you most look forward to from here?

DT: As far as my current job is concerned, I need to make sure that the National Museum of the Royal Navy has a national profile, is properly funded, and has the right kinds of infrastructure to develop. And then I hope somebody will come in and change everything utterly, because that's what they should be doing, that's the way organisations renew themselves. Whether I'm going to move on to something else I don't yet know, because in part it's what's available, and in part it's where you are at the time.