

Studies in Partnership: Something Borrowed



Acknowledgements

The work described in this booklet is supported by Renaissance, the MLA's ground-breaking programme which is transforming England's non-national museums. It strives for excellence, and through targeted investment, and cultivation of local, regional and national partnerships, it is realising the sector's potential to make a real difference to people's lives. Central government funding is enabling regional museums across the country to raise their standards and deliver real results in support of education, learning, community development and economic regeneration.

In the East of England, Renaissance is managed by the Renaissance East of England Office, and delivered by the four large museum services which together make up the East of England Museum Hub:

- Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service
- The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge
- Luton Culture
- Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service

You can read more about the impact of the Renaissance programme in the East of England by visiting our website: www.mla.gov.uk/renaissanceeastofengland



The
Fitzwilliam
Museum



Cover Image: Flopsy Bunny Gardeners Beatrix Potter, illustration from 'The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies', 1909.

Image courtesy of the British Museum © Frederick Warne & Co., 2010

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Something Borrowed: In a nutshell

“This has been a challenging and highly rewarding project, offering colleagues from many different departments at the BM the chance to work with regional partners and pass on knowledge and advice that will hopefully see these venues borrowing from national institutions regularly in the future.” John Orna-Ornstein, Partnerships Manager, British Museum

28%

increase in visits to Ely Museum in August 2010 compared to August 2009, following the opening of *An Egyptian Cat in Ely* based on a loan from the BM collections

Visitor quotes from *Beatrix Potter in Hertfordshire* exhibition:

“Wicked, very interesting.”

“Wonderful to be able to see the original paintings! Thank you to all concerned with the exhibition!”

“When times are tough, it makes sense to club together and share resources. Skill-sharing is not just a survival tactic though – it can deliver tangible benefits to the institutions and individuals who participate.” Rebecca Atkinson, from an article in the *Museums Journal* featuring the *Something Borrowed* project

“We’ve had our busiest summer ever, and many people were asking to see the Beatrix Potter exhibition when they arrived, demonstrating that they had come to the museum for that reason.” Caroline Rawle, Museums Manager, Mill Green Museum and Mill

£10,000

committed by British Museum to develop the *Something Borrowed* project

“We’re delighted to have been given the opportunity to work with the British Museum on this exhibition. It’s been fascinating drawing together the different stories around our mummified cat.” Elie Hughes, Curator, Ely Museum

Foreword

In the current economic climate there is a greater emphasis than ever on working in partnership to deliver services more efficiently and more responsively to local needs.

This booklet is one in a series of six highlighting ongoing projects led by East of England museums which have partnership working at their heart. Taken together they demonstrate that museums have a valuable contribution to make in:

- Engaging local people in decision-making
- Promoting community cohesion through exploration and celebration of the past
- Providing economic benefits through employment and tourism.

Communities benefit when museums share resources and expertise with each other:

- **The Greater Fens Museums Partnership and Maritime Heritage East** are networks which bring together museums with similar collections to celebrate and promote unique aspects of the region's past. Economies of scale are combined with a richer offering to the public and more effective promotion of heritage to visitors.
- **Something Borrowed** is a partnership with the British Museum which is enabling smaller museums in the East of England to borrow items from the BM's collections, creating new opportunities for tourism and learning.

Museums are also working increasingly with partners beyond the cultural sector:

- **Growing Communities** provides a forum for museums, local communities and planning departments in Growth Point areas in the region to explore how the past can help shape future development
- **Stepping Stones** has brought together 24 museums in a partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions to create 32 jobs and apprenticeships for long-term unemployed young people
- **The Sustainability Project** is unlocking the potential of rural life museums to engage the public in debate around environmental and social issues, as well as joining forces with other organisations to find ways of reducing the sector's carbon footprint.

This work is supported by Renaissance, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's ground-breaking programme that is transforming England's non-national museums. The staff leading these projects are funded by Renaissance East of England which has also developed the strategic vision and infrastructure to help the sector become more outward-looking and innovative.

The projects showcased in this series show museums have a part to play in making the Big Society a reality – by providing a unique space for communities to learn about their past and get involved in shaping their future.

Vanessa Trevelyan
Head of Norfolk Museums &
Archaeology Service
President, Museums Association
October 2010

Something Borrowed: A partnership project with the British Museum

“This has been a challenging and highly rewarding project, offering colleagues from many different departments at the BM the chance to work with regional partners and pass on knowledge and advice that will hopefully see these venues borrowing from national institutions regularly in the future.” John Orna-Ornstein, Partnerships Manager, British Museum

Something Borrowed came about as a result of Renaissance East of England’s 2009 Partnership Day event. During a session focussing on collections, displays and lending

programmes, it became clear that the British Museum is keen to develop new ways of working that enables their collections to be borrowed by museums of all sizes across the country. This seemed like too good an opportunity to miss and so, in discussion with the BM’s National Partnerships Manager, the *Something Borrowed* project came into being.

The main aim of *Something Borrowed* is to enable a number of smaller museums in the East of England to borrow objects from the British Museum’s collections, museums that are not, perhaps, the BM’s most obvious partners.



An Egyptian Cat in Ely: The finished display at Ely Museum



Beatrix Potter originals arriving at Mill Green Museum

However, rather than a straight forward loan scheme, *Something Borrowed* is also an experiment. Each of the partner museums involved is purposefully quite different:

- Mill Green Museum, part of the Welwyn Hatfield Museums Service, is a local authority-run organisation employing a small number of professional staff as well as relying on volunteers to run effectively
- Ely Museum is an independent museum employing a museum curator, part-time education officer, assistant and front of house team alongside a dedicated volunteer workforce
- Dunwich museum is independent like Ely, but unlike the other two, it has no paid staff, being run entirely by volunteers.

By working with partner organisations that are quite different we are able to evaluate the process more thoroughly from start to finish, with a view to producing a report that can be used by a range of museums to inform future lending projects.

In addition to detailed ongoing evaluation, a third aim is to support the development of staff skills and knowledge within the partner

museums. Developing a successful exhibition around a new loan takes a lot of work. It raises numerous issues including security, specialist knowledge, display techniques, effective marketing etc. that can swamp a museum working with a small staff and a limited budget. Working with a national museum can also be a daunting prospect.

To turn these challenges into opportunities for the museums involved, Renaissance East of England has supplied targeted, focussed support through SHARE, its innovative skills and networking scheme. SHARE draws on the expertise of staff in the larger museum services in the region to develop the sector through free training and advice. The availability of staff from the region's hub museums, whether from learning, curatorial or display teams, has meant that tailored support can be on hand where needed, complementing the help on offer from the British Museum.

At the time of writing, two exhibitions are open (Mill Green and Ely), and are proving a great success:

- British Museum collections are benefiting from new accessibility
- Partner museums are benefiting from skills sharing and support and increased profile with visitors and stakeholders alike
- And local communities are benefiting through the availability of high-quality and interesting exhibitions, along with their associated events for all age groups.

Beatrix Potter in Hertfordshire:

A unique exhibition at Mill Green Museum

Mill Green Museum in Hertfordshire is located within the Old Mill House dating back to the 16th century. The house is immediately adjacent to a refurbished working flour mill that dates from the 18th century. With a small, but carefully planted formal garden and the mill stream running through, the museum is a beautiful corner of Hertfordshire that could be described as 'quintessentially English'. It is against this backdrop that the decision was made by the museum team to borrow original paintings from *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies* by Beatrix Potter.

These paintings are not only fitting in terms of the look and feel of the museum; there is also an historical link. Beatrix Potter was born in Kensington in London; however, she spent many holidays in Hertfordshire where the landscape influenced a number of her books. In addition to the Flopsy Bunny paintings, a number of drawings have been loaned by the

Victoria and Albert museum, including a sketch of the mill made by Potter in 1910.

Mill Green was the first of the three partners in the *Something Borrowed* project to open their exhibition. Moving from project inception to completed exhibition involved a great deal of work and many people. Key contributors included the museum curator (Mill Green), national programmes project coordinator (British Museum), marketing and events support officer (freelance), project evaluation officer (Renaissance East of England) and security advisor (MLA). In addition, there was support for display from Museums Luton through the Renaissance East of England SHARE scheme, and environmental control advice from the Renaissance-funded Regional Conservation officer, as well as from British Museum curatorial staff.

The exhibition was officially opened with a celebration on the 23 July 2010.

Visitor comments:

"Wonderful to be able to see the original paintings!"

"I really enjoyed it. The pictures are wonderful and I liked colouring in Peter Rabbit."

"Stunning to see these original illustrations"

"Very proud that she (Beatrix) stayed nearby"

"Brought back some lovely childhood memories"

"Lovely exhibition and so nice to come 100 years after the picture was done. 23.09.2010"

The opening attracted many more people than usual, including the Mayor and senior council officials, along with project partners, friends, staff and volunteers of the museum. Initial signs suggest that visitor figures for August are up by 25% on the previous year, with an indication that the Sunday afternoon cream teas at the Mill have been even more popular than in previous years.

A full analysis of the exhibition will be made after it closes on 31 October, but ongoing evaluation of the project process tells us that all partners involved, from the local museum, Renaissance team and British Museum have learned from the project. Skills have been shared and confidence and knowledge has grown, ensuring that the museum is in a good position to take further national loans in the future.

“We’ve had our busiest summer ever, and many people were asking to see the Beatrix Potter exhibition when they arrived, demonstrating that they had come to the museum for that reason.” Caroline Rawle, Museums Manager, Mill Green Museum and Mill



SOMETHING BORROWED

BEATRIX POTTER IN HERTFORDSHIRE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE BRITISH MUSEUM

26 JULY TO 31 OCTOBER 2010

Admission free

Mill Green Museum and Mill,
Mill Green, Hatfield,
Hertfordshire, AL9 5PD



Partnership UK

Publicity flyer for the
Beatrix Potter exhibition

An Egyptian cat in Ely

The second exhibition opened in Ely hot on the heels of the first. Ely Museum is situated in the heart of the historical city and housed in the old Bishops Gaol. It has a range of local history displays exploring life in the gaol and Fenland life from prehistoric times to the present day. In contrast to Mill Green, where the objects selected from the British Museum's collections relate to the museum, the Ely team decided to opt for something unconnected to their collections but which links to the National Curriculum, thereby allowing them to enhance their schools offer for the duration of the exhibition. With this in mind, they chose to develop an exhibition on ancient Egypt centred on a mummified cat.

The mummified cat, with its painted bandages, is an extraordinary object that provides an interesting insight into ancient Egyptian culture. Of particular interest, although rather macabre, was evidence from a CT scan that showed that the cats bones had been broken as part of the mummification process.

The project at Ely has demonstrated the strength of partnership across the region and how this partnership can work effectively with a national museum:

- Renaissance East of England provided support for developing events and learning activities (Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service and Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service)
- Specialist curatorial support was provided by staff at the Fitzwilliam Museum as well as from the curatorial team at the British Museum



Mummy of a cat, Roman Period, Egypt. ©The Trustees of the British Museum

“The Something Borrowed project has not only given Ely Museum a high quality exhibition for our visitors to enjoy but it has also been a great learning experience for our staff, trustees and volunteers. With the help of SHARE, the hub and the British Museum, we now have the capacity to take loans from any museum in the future.” Elie Hughes, Curator, Ely Museum

- Support with evaluation is being provided from the Renaissance East of England team
- In addition, the curator of the museum and the BM's national programmes project coordinator have been pivotal in ensuring the success of the project.

Visitor figures at Ely Museum are up 28% this August compared to August 2009. In addition, local schools are benefiting from the exhibition through the new Egyptian session, which has not been available locally in the past.

There are other tangible legacies, including a security case and security system now in place, enabling the museum to borrow from a national museum again in the future.



Opening of *An Egyptian Cat* in Ely exhibition, August 2010

The Dunwich Seal: Symbol of a lost town

The final museum involved in this project is Dunwich Museum. This museum is dedicated to telling the local story of medieval Dunwich, a city that was famously reclaimed by the sea. It's appropriate therefore that the museum has decided to borrow the Dunwich Seal.

In 1199 Dunwich was made a free borough by King John, which gave it a degree of control over its own affairs and offices. To mark the borough's

freedom it was given a charter and a seal which is decorated with the image of a ship.

This exhibition is due to open in late March 2011 and is currently in the planning stage. But as with the other museums, partnership will be the key, with an emphasis on developing a programme of support for the museum volunteers through the Renaissance East of England SHARE scheme.

Partnership and evaluation: Creating a legacy

This project has aimed to achieve a number of different outcomes. At its very simplest, the aim was to take a high profile object from a national museum and display it in a smaller, local museum. The process of borrowing, however, is not a simple one. The national museum must be satisfied that various security and environmental conditions will be met and to ensure that the loan is seen and enjoyed by as many people as possible, an engaging exhibition needs developing and a marketing campaign rolled out.

Yet many small museums operate with few, if any, paid staff and they generally have limited funds. The anticipated outcomes of this plan were that the objects would reach a wider audience and the participating museums would gain skills, experience and materials enabling them to borrow from national institutions in the future. Therefore, to make sure the project was successful, the final strand was to bring in support where needed by drawing on the skills and expertise of staff across the Renaissance East of England Museum Hub.

In order to assess the success of the project, there has been an ongoing evaluation programme and, reflecting the complexity of this 'simple' project, the evaluation has necessarily had to have two strands: one focusing on understanding the impact of the exhibitions in the museums and the other assessing the loans process and support offered. Exhibition evaluation

has principally taken the form of feedback cards and visitor counts. The evaluation of the process has taken the form of a mini-ethnographic study comprising discussions and interviews with those involved.

"Something Borrowed has been a really successful partnership project from the outset. During initial meetings at the British Museum, all partners met with staff from Brent Museum, who had recently borrowed the BM's Gayer Anderson cat. This provided an opportunity to learn from their experience, which enabled us to distribute and direct our tight budget effectively, particularly around marketing. The rest of the project support has come from staff within each partner museum, the British Museum and the Renaissance SHARE scheme. It has, at times, been an extraordinarily busy project - but one that has been enormous fun, has produced two excellent exhibitions so far and importantly, has demonstrated that learning from one another and supporting one another is an effective way of working. The icing on the cake of this project will be to see the partnerships continue with more objects being borrowed into the future." Natasha Hutcheson, Museums Development Manager, Renaissance East of England

So far, the evaluation of the exhibitions is telling us that both Ely and Mill Green Museum are seeing an increase in their visitor figures. Equally, although still in the midway stage, feedback on the process is starting to give valuable information – both about what could be improved and of the benefits of working in this way. Importantly, what does come across from all those involved is a feeling of enthusiasm and an openness and willingness to work together in new ways.

Finally, one of the challenges of this project has been to develop three exhibitions on a small budget*. The key to the success of this project so far has been that partnership working has underpinned the project as a whole, ensuring that the budget has been targeted and used efficiently.

** This project has been funded by the Renaissance East of England Priorities Challenge Fund and the British Museums National Partnership programme.*



Beatrix Potter in Hertfordshire, exhibition display at Mill Green Museum

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