

Links with Maidstone Museum

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Background

RIT is embedded at all levels and in all courses within the History programmes and some of the American Studies programme. The aim was to build on RIT where it already existed and extend the experience of RIT into a wider range of American Studies courses.

The Department was approached by Maidstone Museum with an invitation to use the Museum's artefacts. The objective was to maintain and build on links with the Museum and be able to use their collection as part of teaching resources. Students were supported to research the context in which items from the Museum's collections were produced.

Approach/methodology

In the first instance the project co-ordinator and 30 Year 3 undergraduates helped to curate an exhibition in 2008. The students researched the historical context of the Civil War Battle of Maidstone in 1648 using primary sources such as printed newsletters from the period. They researched the historical significance of the artefacts, which included 17th century political tracts, petitions, manuscripts, and Civil War weapons and armour. The students provided information on the exhibits, working in groups to produce texts to be used as labels and storyboards for the exhibition and for a brochure.

The research was organised in the same way that students would normally go about doing a group presentation, which forms part of the assessment in the third year of the course. The key difference was that they had unique access via the Museum's collections to a variety of historical artefacts and primary sources from the 17th century.

American Studies students also used the artefacts collected by Julius Brenchley in the 19th century to study Native American culture.

The Department held a conference on the English Civil Wars with experts from other universities, to contextualise the exhibition and so students could hear about the wider historical debates.

Outcomes

The students had to work very hard but they really responded to the challenge and were more enthusiastic and inspired than any previous group. The students made it a success – they went back to the Museum several times to take photographs and track progress and they said that they realised they worked harder because they knew the public were going to see their work.

Giles Guthrie, curator at the Museum, commented in *The Journal of Kent History* (Issue 66, March 2008) that "it has been a fantastic project so far and it has been a real pleasure to work with Jackie Eales and her excellent students".

Some students have subsequently worked with local museums as volunteers, which gives them good experience to add to their CVs.

Four students from the group went on to Masters studies, more than the usual number. The work with the Museum also highlighted different career opportunities, such as museum and archival work.

History students have been able to use their skills to show people in the community the type of work that is done in the Department and student evaluation forms have been positive. One student commented that "I have highly enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in the exhibition at Maidstone Museum. It has been a wonderful change from the inevitable essay-presentation-exam triad. I have been able to get enthusiastic about it".

This has enhanced the project co-ordinator's own work on pedagogic research by showing positive work that can be done with students. One change was to work with students so that they could articulate what they had learned during the course, developing a transferable skill. The project co-ordinator said that being involved with exhibitions is increasingly seen as research in the academic community, a bit like a professional performance from musicians, so this was a really good experience.



Students (and a friend!) working in Maidstone Museum

Enhancing RIT

The project encouraged students to think more about what they can do with primary material – they often work with documents as primary sources but it is unusual for students to be able to work with surviving artefacts such as weapons.

The co-ordinator learned a tremendous amount about organising an exhibition but also about how electrifying it is for students to be involved with artefacts like these. Although the students are used to working with their tutor's research this project enabled them to do their own research.

It was possible to integrate the scheme into existing courses very smoothly and the research that the students have done has been developed in line with existing coursework requirements ie group presentations in the Year 1 Native Americans course and in the Year 3 course on the English Revolutions. Students are assessed on their research using existing criteria for knowledge, methodology, argument, referencing, presentation, writing style etc.

Advice for others

Approach local museums to see what use could be made of their collections, as this generally fits well with museum outreach work. This sort of relationship could work for other disciplines such as English, Geography and Science. If you are working towards an exhibition for the public, a lot of the work takes place just before the opening, so be prepared for a flurry of queries and label writing at the end of the project.

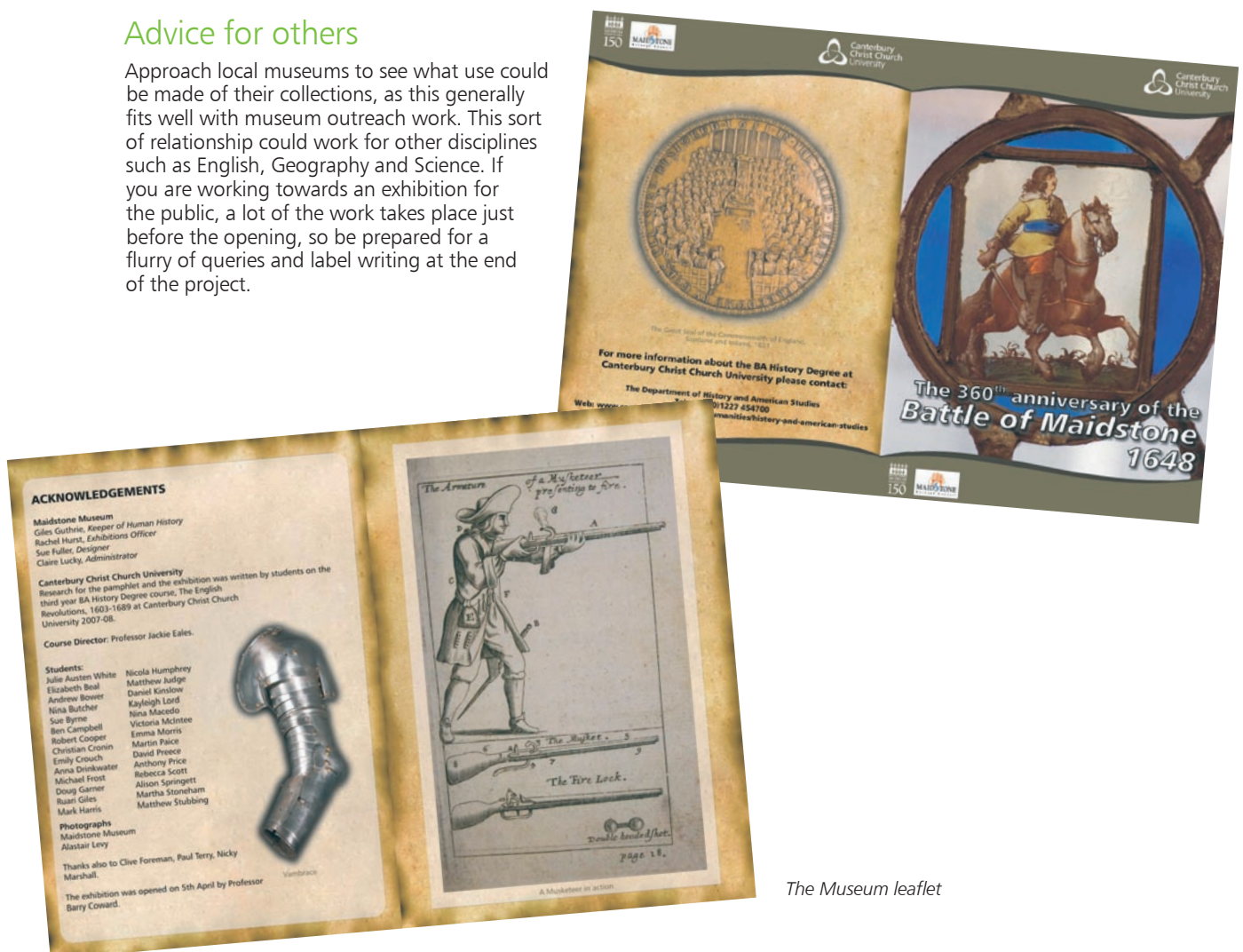
Reflections and any future plans

The response from everyone was overwhelmingly positive. The Department has been awarded some money from the Heritage Lottery Fund to mount an exhibition – there is a professional researcher but the students will work on it too as guides. We have established close links with the Museum and will build on these.

As one student commented “working towards something that will be shown to the public is exciting and makes you want to work harder”.

Details of the project are available as part of the Case Studies in Active Learning website at the University of Gloucester, available at <http://resources.glos.ac.uk/ceal/resources/casestudiesactivelearning/undergraduate/casestudy5.cfm>

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The Museum leaflet