

The future for london's museums: development strategies



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THE FUTURE OF LONDON'S MUSEUMS

Q. What does the future hold for London's museums?

ABSTRACT

The following research paper investigates the present condition of London's museums, focusing upon three aspects: their historical development, their present issues and debates, and their strategies for ensuring future survival and prosperity. To ascertain these facts five senior management figures from five leading London museums were interviewed and asked to complete questionnaires discussing the themes mentioned above. The research focuses at much length upon the decision of the present Labour government to introduce free admission to London's museums and to finance this policy with funds from the National Lottery. Another key aspect of the research was to determine the level of competition posed to London's museums by European, American and other international museums; further, to discover how London's museums might raise their performance to match this competition. A third central aspect of the research, viewed both from the sides of museum management and from the government, is the question of the strategies that London's museums will pursue in the twenty-first century. The survival and success of London's museums will very much depend upon the decisions made regarding such strategy and its efficacy once put into place. The present research assesses the likely efficacy of such strategies,

and the consequences that their implementation will have upon the public's 'museum experience'. The results of the research paint double-sided picture: on the side, of optimism regarding the increased admissions figures witnessed since free admissions began, and, on the other side, a gloomy scene dominated by the London museums' lack of financial support and by the negative consequences of the government insistence of putting attendance figures before a qualitative artistic and cultural experience.

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Section 1: Introduction

Since the foundation of the British Museum almost two hundred and fifty years ago, London has had an international reputation as the museum capital of the world, as the city with the finest collections, the best specialists and the most to offer the fascination of the public. In addition to the British Museum, London can boast the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, the London Transport Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Theatre Museum amongst numerous other world-class museum-experiences. In their early decades London's museums flourished through the generosity of private donations and gifts, and through royal and government funding; these ample resources gave museums such as the British Museum unrivalled funds for the construction of magnificent architecture and the gathering of the most splendid specimens and pieces from across the globe.

But by the early 1990's, and reflecting Britain's changed economic circumstances, London's museums found themselves in need of considerable new funds to pay for refurbishments and developments so as to keep pace with other museums in the capital cities of Europe and in America. The advent of the National Lottery in 1994, and the terms of its constitution whereby a majority of its funds would go to museums and galleries, apparently offered the very chance to bring about a revival in the fortunes and prosperity of London's museums. Thus between 1994-2003 more than <https://assignbuster.com/the-future-for-londons-museums-development-strategies/>

£13 billion was given to good causes by the National Lottery and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) (Selwood & Davies, 2005: p. 3); £1 billion was given to six hundred museums across the country (Selwood & Davies, 2005: p. 3). These funds were intended for the construction of new buildings and exhibition halls, and to compensate museums and galleries for the loss of revenue that they would incur once free admission was introduced. A few smaller museums were also enabled to open in London because of grants from the HLF.

The next radical step in the recent history of London's museums came when the Labour Party in their 1997 manifesto, promised that when elected they would introduce free admission into London's museums — a move that it was anticipated would greatly increase attendance from members of the general public. In the event, this prediction turned out to be just right, particularly in the two years immediately succeeding the introduction of free admission. The government minister then in charge of museums in 2001, Estelle Morris, spoke of 2000 as ' an unprecedented season of openings and flourishing' (DOC, 2000) for London museums. The year 2000 witnessed nine major construction or refurbishment projects in London's great museums and a total of £379 million spent on this (£193 million of which came from lottery sources) (Selwood & Davies, 2005: p. 4). The most spectacular of these projects was the construction by Norman Foster of the Great Court at the British Museum costing £110 million (of which £47 million was derived from lottery sources) (Selwood & Davies, 2005: p. 5). All in all, it seemed that the lottery was proving a vital fertilizing force in the rejuvenation and restoration of London's great museums. This optimism was very clearly reflected in the

visitor figures following free admission. In 2001/2002 London museums that had previously received capital funding from lottery sources noticed a staggering rise in visitor numbers of 5.3 million when compared with the 1999/2000 season; in 2002/2003 this figure jumped again to 6.3 million extra visits compared with 1999/2000 (this representing an increase of 89%). In stark contrast London museums that did not receive lottery funding say they annual attendance figure drop by 7% in 2001/02 and 13% in 2002/03 when compared to the 1999/00 season. To take an individual instance, the Victoria & Albert Museum witnessed an increase in attendance from 75,773 in November 2000 to 132,882 in November 2001 (this figure even jumped 270% by March 2002). Likewise, attendance figures at the Science Museum rose by 120% and the National History Museum by 74% in the same period (All figures: Selwood & Davies, 2005: pp. 6-10).

Nonetheless, this stream of incessantly impressive and rising admissions figures masked a major concern unsettling many of the managers and director's of London's leading museums. These figures of course welcomed lottery funding as a vital means of rejuvenating London's museums and making them competitive with museums found in New York, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere. Nonetheless, the advent of free admission introduced at the same time a far greater degree of vulnerability and uncertainty in the financial arrangements and security of London's museums. It was obvious to museum strategists and directors that a great deal of lottery money would be needed to compensate for the loss of revenue endured once free admission was introduced. Crucially, it would be paramount that lottery contributions of the levels of 2001 would be sustained for the long-term;

nothing would be worse than one spectacular year for two of prosperity and massive investment followed by ten or twenty years of under investment and decline.

It is recent charge imputed by many museum directors against the government and the HLF directors that they were naïve in profoundly underestimating the levels of investment that would be required to sustain not only the rejuvenation of London's museums but merely also their survival. The British Museum alone, for instance, according to its director Neil MacGregor stands to lose £80 million over ten years from lost revenues and reclaimed VAT. Increased attendance figures are welcomed naturally by all museum directors on the absolute condition that sufficient funds are made available to pay the costs of this increased attendance. Selwood and Davies calculated that since the advent of free admission and 7.3 million extra visitors each of these visitors cost London's museums on average £3.56 per visitor — £3.56 extra that has to be found by the museums from non-lottery funding (Selwood & Davies, 2003: p. 8).

Thus free admission has had a bitter sting in its tale, and it may be said that presently a great many of London's famous museums find themselves in financial difficulties, unable to pay for restorations and improvements; unable to compete with American and European museums for the finest pieces and exhibitions, unable to attract the brightest researchers and curators — and ultimately in danger of losing the great reputations that some have nurtured for as long as two centuries. It is clear to all, museum directors and government officials alike, that the present funding

arrangements of London's museums are precarious and that a serious
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strategy needs to be devised to offer such museums long-term financial security and thus a platform to compete with the other leading museums of the world.

This present dissertation conducted interviews, by way of questionnaires with five senior figures from five of London's leading museums — the British Museum, the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, the London Transport Museum and the V & A museum — to ascertain their thoughts and attitudes regarding the present state and the likely future state of London's museums. These senior figures were questioned on their beliefs regarding the lottery funding of museums, on the advent of free admission, on the extent of government funding, on international competition, and on future strategy. The picture that emerges from these interviews is one of profound uncertainty over the future survival and prosperity of London's museums; buffeted on the one side by the loss of revenue from free admission, and on other sides by the short-fall in promised lottery investment and the present government's obsession with the quantitative aspect of museum attendance at the expense of the quality of the visitor's experience.

Section 2: Literature Review

It perhaps appropriate to preface this literature review with a few remarks about its undertaking. Often when undertaking research that refers to relatively recent events, the researcher finds that the academic world has

not yet had time to catch-up in print and publish scholarly books and articles covering these events. With the present research however the proposition was entirely opposite; even though the subjects of lottery funding, free admission and so on are relatively recent, there is nonetheless an abundance of literature dealing with the specific question of the future of London's museums. The task of the researcher was thus to sift this material so as to isolate its most pertinent and relevant parts. Another unusual aspect of this present literature review is its wide use of government documents and announcements. An overriding theme throughout the present paper is the intimacy of the relationship between the government and museum managers and directors. Naturally, the government perspective upon events is not published through academic books and journals, but by speeches, white-papers, press releases and so on.

This research of course made much use of the outstanding museum journals, pre-eminently *Curator: The Museum Journal*. Of the several articles from this journal used in this dissertation, one was of seminal importance in providing statistical and analytical evidence of the impact of lottery funding and free admission upon London's museums, this being: S. Selwood and M. Davies (2005) ' *Capital Costs: Lottery Funding in Britain and Consequences for Museums*. The article excellently articulates the dilemma that has crept upon London's museums now that the inadequacy of lottery funding to meet extra visitors numbers has become apparent. There are hints in the above article to possible solutions to the funding crisis facing London's museums, and these solutions are discussed in greater depth in R. Baron's ' *Reinventing a State Program for Museum Funding*' (2003). Question marks as to the

thoroughness and efficacy in practice of the government's free admissions policy is raised in several places: Freudenheim's '*That Politics Problem*' (2005), Babbidge's '*UK Museums; Safe and Sound?*' (2000) and Sharp's '*Controversy and Challenge: British Funding Increases Nationally, But Not to National Museums*' all echo the apprehensiveness and fear felt by many museum directors and staff towards the financial liabilities that would arise in the wake of free admissions (2006). Freudenheim, in particular, highlights a certain naivety in government's attitude towards the workings of national museums; citing in particular the government's inveterate insistence upon the increasing of admissions figures no matter what the effects of this upon either museum costs or the aesthetic museum-experience of visitors.

The government's position, and its obvious delight and sense of fulfilment at increased attendance figures since free admission, is given in a number of documents. Principally, the paper *London Cultural Capital – Realising the Potential of a World Class City* published by the London's Museums Agency (2004) establishes the governments intentions and strategy towards the future of London's museums. The paper gives fifteen government policies, under the headers *value*, *access*, *creativity*, and *excellence* by which the government's museum strategies will be delivered in future. The government, in association with the National Lottery, has written in several places of its satisfaction at the results of the introduction of the policy of free admissions. In particular, the paper '*One Year On – Visitor Numbers Soaring At National Museums Following Abolition Of Entry Charges*' published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 1 January 2003 gives a sense of the euphoria and achievement perceived by the government. Also, the paper

' *Two Years On - Free Admission to National Museums Draws Even Bigger Crowds* ' again published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on 9 March 2003 gives much the same impression. In each of these documents the government stresses its loyalty and commitment to the principle of free admission and to the extension of this principle as far as possible. At the same time, there is little reference in these documents to the nervousness and trepidation felt by museum directors and managers about the future prosperity of the institutions they preside over. It is in this absence of self-criticism, that the reader perceives the origins of the discrepancy between that government's perception of the financial condition of London's museums and the reality of their condition. The possible consequences of such as disparity increasing, and of a competition gap widening between London's museums and those in America and Europe, are well delineated in Cain's article ' *Museums and the Future of Collecting* ' (2005).

In short, the extant literature paints the present picture of London's museums as a time of grave uncertainty with respect to their financial predicament and thus their world-class legacies and reputations. These sources also acknowledge the considerable benefits already brought by lottery funding and free admission, and point also to the great future potential of these schemes; they instil in the reader at the same time a warning that idealism must be checked by pragmatic considerations before London's museums can attain the future they deserve.

Section 3: Methodology

The principal method of primary data collection for this research was the interviewing, by way of questionnaires, of several senior figures at five of London's leading museums. The decision to interview senior management and directing figures, rather than members of the public, had the obvious advantage that the answers obtained would be the specialist opinions of people with an intimate knowledge of the subject matter of the research. Members of the general public, especially those living in London, often show much interest and curiosity towards the subject of the prosperity and fate of London's museums, but at the same time are not professionals with direct experience of the key debates and consultations.

To arrange these five meetings, the researcher wrote fifteen letters to major London museums. Of these fifteen requests for an interview, seven positive responses were returned to the interviewer, of which five eventually furnished the opportunity of an interview. In requesting these interviews letters were sent to the director of each museum, irregardless of the sex, race, or religion of the person. Of the five eventual interviewees, three were men and two women; their ages ranged between forty-one and sixty-three.

At the behest of interviewees, all of whom preferred to speak off the record due to the sensitivity of many of the issues of discussion, neither their names nor their titles are given in the final publication of this research. Thus, in the transcripts presented in the appendix of this research, each of the five interviewees are referred to as ' a senior figure' and ascribed a coded number following the simple scheme 001-002-003-004-005.

This sensitivity, arising from the various present tensions over funding between London museums, the HLF and the government, clearly raises certain ethical questions about the present research. Above all, is it permissible to expose senior figures to possible embarrassment or worse, for the sake of the findings of this research. In answer to this question, the present researcher would say two things: firstly, that explicit consent for every interview was obtained by the researcher before the commencement of each interview, thus all interviewees participated at their own volition; secondly, following Utilitarian principles of seeking 'the greatest good for the greatest number', the researcher decided that the possible positive benefits and improved public understanding of the topic that might arise from this research could justify the slight ethical risks associated with the carrying-out of this research. It is a belief of the researcher that by informing the academic community and the public of the chief issues and controversies now affecting London's museums, that the debate generated from this knowledge will lead to greater consideration on all sides being shown towards the preservation and improvement of London's world-famous reputation as a museum centre.

A number of criticisms may be levelled at the methodology discussed in this section. Firstly, it might be asked, with some justification, whether or not the interviewing of only five museum figures can produce results characteristic of attitudes and opinions of London's museums as a whole. Naturally, critics might ask how the researcher can infer from the collection of five opinions general trends governing the many hundreds and thousands of senior figures working for the management of London's museums. Likewise, why does the

report interview exclusively figures from museum management and not from the government or from the National Lottery? In response to the first question the reply must be that with limited resources and limited time, it seemed most prudent to the researcher to restrict the field of investigation to a narrow focus, where the results obtained could be subjected to a significant scrutiny and analysis — something which resource constraints would have rendered impossible had the field been extended much wider. Moreover, whilst only five persons were interviewed, these figures preside over London's five largest museums which between them see greater attendance figures and government investment than all of London's other museums combined. Thus the opinions of the figures interviewed actually are far more representative of London as a whole than would first appear likely. In response to the second question, a similar answer might be given: only museum directors were interviewed because they are the persons with the most intimate knowledge of the matters under discussion. If the present researcher were in future to extend the present research, then the opinions of others outside of museum management would certainly have to be included. As it was, the present report incorporates sufficient expert opinion, to make its findings relevant to the better academic and public understanding of the issues affecting the future of London's museums.

Section 4: Results & Analysis

The aim of the present research was to investigate the likely future of London's museums; this research was undertaken by way of interviews with five senior figures from five leading London museums. From the information gained from the literature review undertaken by the researcher it seemed most appropriate to question these museum directors on five main subjects: lottery funding, the advent of free admission, international competition, future strategy and the employment of new researchers and curators. The expectation of the researcher was that the general opinion of these senior figures would have initially been one of welcome to the proposed lottery funding, but that this initial welcome would have turned to mild scepticism in the wake of free admission and the provocation of severe uncertainty following the extra costs incurred by increased visitor numbers and lesser-than-expected lottery investment. What opinions then did these results produce in actuality?

(1) *Lottery Funding*. The five interviewed senior figures unanimously (5 of 5) welcomed the original government proposals to aid London's and Britain's museums through funds made available by the national lottery. Museums such as the British Museum, with its newly built Great Court, was given considerable lottery funding amounting to £47 million (Selwood & Davies, 2003: p. 3). Museum directors were quick to concede that such developments would have been impossible without these lottery funds — or an extremely large, but unlikely, private donation. In short, museum directors were united in their praise for proposed lottery investment.

(2) *Free Admission*. The chief feature of the respondents' answers to questions posed about free admission were twofold: on the one hand, respondents welcomed the opportunity to open their doors to ever greater numbers of people, thus disseminating cultural and scientific experience as far as possible; on the other hand, words such as 'apprehension' and 'scepticism' were used liberally by nearly all of those interviewed. What most strongly prompted this apprehension was the 'twining' of free admission introduction with the compensation for lost revenue by lottery funding. Directors confided that when allowed to charge admission fees their museums did at least have a degree of self-sufficiency and so could determine their own future strategies and successes. But lottery funding conditioned by the introduction of free admission policies has subjected London's museums to a profound financial vulnerability and loss of independence.

These museums, now depend upon the HLF for often as much a half of their income; if controversies or difficulties arise with the lottery directors or with the ministers directing them, then the museums are forced to abide by outside instruction and policy. Moreover, the great fear that lottery investment would not be sustained appears to have come true for all of the five museums whose for whom senior figures were interviewed for this research. So too, insufficient lottery funding has been made available to compensate for the extra costs incurred by the vastly increased visitor numbers experienced after the introduction of free admission. Interviewees hinted at a certain naivety and lack of preparation on the part of ministers

and lottery managers with respect to the projected visitor increases following free admission and the costs that would be incurred by this.

(3) *International Competition.* On the question of international competition there was further unanimity of opinion amongst the senior figures interviewed. Each respondent vigorously asserted that the collections of the museums he or she presided over as a manager were the equal of any equivalent museum anywhere in the world. Managers from the British Museum and the Natural History Museum, not to mention others, could rightly boast that their reputations were pre-eminent amongst international museums. At the same time, three of the figures interviewed (the exceptions presided over specialist museums with little international competition) confided that many American and European museums simply had far better funding and so purchasing-power than their own London museums. For the immediate future, this gap will mean that these international museums will continue to purchase new pieces of exceptional public interest whilst London's museums will have to remain content with their existing impressive but static collections. In the medium- and long-term future, if this purchasing disparity continues then a qualitative difference will emerge ever more clearly between the museums of London and those of America and Europe.

(4) *Recruitment.* When embarking upon the present research the researcher did not anticipate that ' the difficulty of recruiting new researchers and curators' would be a major concern to London's museums regarding their futures. Nonetheless, as the searching through the literature review proceeded and as the topic came into better perspective this problem seemed to be a central concern for several of the major London museums.

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Specialist museums like the V & A and the Theatre Museum do not, according to results, face such problems; but senior figures from the Natural History Museum, the British Museum and the Science museum may all face crises over recruitment in the near future. According to these figures the recruitment of new staff has been a subject neglected by the government in their ceaseless quest for higher admission figures and in ' *measuring the value*' of a museum-goers' experience. The science museum can no longer attract top scientists and researchers because they are paid so little: £20, 000 as a starting salary, peaking at £50, 000 (). Commercial companies and American museums offer far better salaries and improved facilities. If this ' brain-drain' continues for much longer, then it may prove to be the greatest of all dangers to the future prosperity of London's museums. These institutions are sustained not only by their pieces and specimens, but by the care and expertise of their curators and other staff; it is this expertise and the respect that arises from it that gives these institutions their world-class reputations. If this expertise evaporates, then no amount of increased admission or funding or improved strategy will protect the legacies and future prosperity of London's museums. But towards the re-capture and enticement of these experts the government and the lottery fund seem somewhat blinded; given the extent to which London's museums now rely upon government funding, it is precisely with the government that the responsibility lies for providing sufficient funding for home-grown and international experts to crave as they used to the opportunity to work in the prestigious museums of London.

(5) *Future Strategy*. The senior figures interviewed for this research are nearly as one when they declare that future strategy has to be built around the attainment of financial stability; this is to be sought through an improved, more efficient and more effective relationship with the government and the HLF. A better balance has to be struck between the government's ardent desire for ever increased admissions and the practical and pragmatic methods by which these extra admissions, dragging with them their extra costs, will be paid for. If a resolution and balancing is not achieved here then the obvious and inevitable path down which London's museums must slide is that of ever greater debt and so lesser purchasing-power for new pieces and so a general decline in the standing and reputation of London's museums. The reality of this predicament is brought home, even as this dissertation is written-up, by the announcement today of the London Theatre Museum (BBC, 2006) that they face imminent closure unless a major cash injection from the lottery fund is received. The alternative strategies are these: firstly, an abrupt about-face by the museums whereby they begin to charge for admission. This path is unattractive as there are numerous legislative, ethical and civil obstacles to this policy's reinstatement. Another alternative is increased public funding from a source other than the lottery; this however looks most unlikely in the short-term. Thus, setting aside the remote chance that a massive private donation will save them, museums must, in their strategising come to agreement with the government about how extra funding from the lottery may be obtained.

In short, the results obtained from this present research point to two things: firstly, that senior figures from the five museums interviewed welcomed in

general lottery funding as a means to achieve rejuvenation and restoration; secondly, that this optimism changed to apprehension and tentativeness once it became clear the extent to which lottery funding would be dependant upon free admissions policies. Thirdly, it is obvious from all the interviews, that London's museums are at a cross-roads and a defining moment in their illustrious history. To the left, is the danger of an ever greater financial disparity caused by increasing visitor figures and inadequate lottery funding; to the right is offered a sound financial structure that will ensure the continuation and prosperity of London's museums' world-class reputation.

Section 5: Conclusion

In the final analysis, it seems mo