

# Talking Point

## Sharing Untold Stories



The Memory Café Project at Wilderspin & National School Museum, Barton upon Humber

### Summary

Visitors explore historic school rooms beginning with a restoration of Samuel Wilderspin's Model Schoolroom (1845), described by English Heritage as "*one of the most important schools in England*". The final display room is a 1960s/70s classroom, leading to our award-winning coffee shop - and the two together are the focus of this project which aimed to deepen our involvement with older and socially isolated people, children and young people, and families with young children.

### Background

Our 1960s/70s Reminiscence Classroom was set up a few years ago as part of *Childhood Memories*, a project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Old School Canteen coffee shop, now in its seventh year, is operated independently of the Museum. Its most recent award was "*Most Atmospheric Café for Yorkshire and the Humber*" a Northern Enterprise Business Award 2021. Although both businesses work together well, this project aimed to develop even closer links, piloting a combination of refreshments in a museum space - and capitalising on the successes of both operations.

The Reminiscence Classroom was cleared during Covid to create more space for the coffee shop to spread out its tables more safely. A National Lottery Heritage Fund Covid Recovery Grant enabled the Museum to undertake a redisplay project during the 2020 Lockdown which included reinstatement of the Reminiscence Classroom.

This project, supported by a Humber Museums Partnership Small Grant, aimed to further develop the reminiscence value of the space with new audiences by organising events and activities to share untold stories.



The Memory Café seen from the Old School Canteen coffee shop.



A wartime school session earlier in the year highlighted the scope for intergenerational activities when visitors in their 80s enthusiastically shared their memories with younger visitors.

The idea of the Memory Café Project was born.

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## Challenges

One immediate challenge was re-possession of the space by the Museum. The well-spaced tables had become popular with coffee shop customers during Covid, and so we expected some “pushback.”

This blurring of museum and coffee shop space was something we needed to help our museum volunteers navigate. Despite an earlier chatty café experiment some volunteers had a mindset of “our space” and “their [coffee shop] space.” “In it together,” we’d hoped, would be our motto going forward!

Our Collection volunteers were understandably anxious about safeguarding objects where sticky fingers or accidental spillages are a risk. This was addressed by confining the mix of object handling and refreshments to specific tables, clear signing and, of course, the acquisition and selection of low-value, handling material. Core Collection items and material of value are protected in display cases.

Reaching out to new audiences would require research and good organisation.

## Approach

Three types of activity or strands were planned. The main outcomes common to each strand, and which were all achieved, were:

- untold stories would be revealed, shared and collected
- improved wellbeing of participants through social interaction, and possible future involvement with the Museum as volunteers
- engagement with new audiences and nurturing of specific user groups, especially older and socially isolated people, children and young people, and families with young children



## **Strand 1 - Friends & Family**

We wanted to try merging the museum and coffee shop experiences, and attract coffee shop customers (about 70% of our footfall) into the Museum. Items from our store would be used to prompt informal discussion and interaction. Formal group discussion sessions were also to be part of the mix.

### **Intended Outputs:**

- 10 Memory Boxes to unpack “over a cup of tea”
- 4 formal events involving 16 people

Two chatty tables and a cosy corner (ostensibly the school staff room!) were set up where Memory Boxes could be unpacked and discussed. A selection of toys for family use provided a popular distraction for some families. Concerns about over-use by coffee shop customers led to some layout and signage alterations. Keeping the balance tipped in favour of “museum” will be important going forward.

The room is perceived as a safe and cheery space and is being used for repeat visits by groups with children or a vulnerable adult in their group.

Small informal groups have used the room for informal social meet-ups, and one family group has used the room for an 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration.

### **Additional Outcomes:**

- involvement and support of coffee shop staff helps encourage use of the Memory Boxes
- growing recognition as a safe, drop-in space
- pop-up displays by collectors, hobbyists and crafters



*“Can we use the dementia room?”*

A recent coffee shop customer

*“It was good to meet other people from my generation and swap memories. We all understood what it had been like”*

Sharing Memories participant



## ***Strand 2 - Sharing Memories***

This focussed on individuals living alone or isolated and who might just need a little help to leave the house and spend a short time meeting others to talk about schooldays, childhood or anything, lubricated by tea or coffee, with chat helped along through exploring the Memory Boxes. We were prepared to help with the practicalities of travel to facilitate this.

### **Intended Outputs:**

- 4 formal sessions
- 3 family bookings

23 older, vulnerable people took part in two events with an additional 20 adults as members of organised group visits. Two pop-up exhibitions and a chatty café were piloted.

### **Additional Outcomes:**

- one person was identified for oral history recording
- improved understanding of target audience
- link established with *Living Later Life Well* Project
- contacts made with social prescribers and North Lincolnshire Council (Supported Employment)



## ***Strand 3 - Learning Together***

This was aimed at care homes, encouraging groups of residents to visit and meet up with children from local schools. This was an adaptation of Channel Four's "*Old People's Home For Four-Year-Olds*," and our approach was to use toys and games to prompt conversation.

### **Intended Outputs:**

- Introduction to a safe, secure and stimulating space where residents would return individually with care staff
- 2 care home sessions
- engagement with 12 older people and children

Two care homes and one primary school got involved. One training session in dementia awareness for museum volunteers was delivered.

One session was held when the Museum was closed to visitors, the second was held on an open day. A selection of old toys and games was provided. Nineteen residents took part. Pairs of children sat with small groups of adults supervised by school or museum staff. Card and board games worked best. The children engaged well with the residents. One adult was able to recount childhood stories which fascinated the children. Children helped chaperone one resident who wanted to wander – care staff had prepared us for this so the whole Museum was available. The session ended in the Playground where residents watched the children play and children showed toys and costume to the residents.

One planned visit was cancelled at the last minute due to a situation in the care home - something we were advised could happen and which is an understandable element with this type of activity.

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### Additional Outcomes:

- links have been established with 2 local care homes
- care home staff were surprised with the residents' sustained concentration
- a small group of residents returned for another visit subsequently, engaging with Museum volunteers
- promotion to over 20 care homes within five miles has led to subsequent enquiries and visits
- the profile of the Museum was raised
- expectations of the care homes and school have risen – anticipating more activities
- heightened appreciation among Museum volunteers of the value of this type of work



*“We have had an amazing morning and they all really enjoyed it.  
They lasted longer than I thought they would”*  
Care Home Manager

*“That was the best school trip”*  
Learning Together participating pupil

A project group was set up coordinated by a freelance Project Manager and assisted by the Museum's Education Lead.

### Intended Outputs:

- 4 new volunteers
- 2 training sessions
- launch event

### Additional Outcomes:

- involvement of the wider volunteer team e.g. Collections volunteers
- two Project volunteers have found work in local museums

An Open Day succeeded in recruiting new volunteers. The project team include 6 volunteers including new and existing staff. Two training sessions were provided focussing on dementia awareness and oral history, and a launch event involving the wider volunteer team.

## Obstacles & Issues

Early on, the name of the project threw up a concern and possible confusion. As “memory cafés” are associated with dementia support groups we decided to adopt “Chatty Café” as an alternative descriptor. We may rethink this in time as our space may not fully fit the concept of the national chatty café model.

Identifying and contacting isolated people living alone we knew would be tricky. Age UK offered advice, but their befriending service couldn't identify anyone in our area who might be interested. Social prescribers in our area promoted the project but this also drew a blank. Appealing to our volunteers for friends, relations or acquaintances who might be interested didn't work either.

We discovered another community project was up and running in our area, operating out of a Methodist church. *Living Later Life Well* is reaching out to older isolated people and we are giving one another mutual support. An outreach session to the group was provided to pilot early ideas of contents for our memory Boxes.

Lack of bookings for the themed discussion events led us to change their format and create pop-up displays instead. Maintaining publicity momentum to drum-up support may have been a factor. Nevertheless, two pop-up displays on *Empire & Commonwealth Day* and *Coronation & the Platinum Jubilee* were well received and prompted discussion and recollection, while other sessions were fairly easily adapted for visiting adult groups who shared their schooldays and childhood memories.

## Impact, Legacy & Next Steps

- The work with care homes and a school was tremendously successful and will be repeated and expanded
- The Museum is developing a growing reputation as a safe place to visit with older people, people with dementia and other needs
- Visitors and coffee shop customers enjoy being able to use the space with the handling boxes on an ad hoc basis
- More work will be done to contact isolated people – building on the successful link forged with other local community projects and organisations
- Regular scheduled chatty sessions will most likely be better than offering bookable sessions
- The Museum and coffee shop operations are more closely aligned. In practice, prioritising the handling tables for Museum visitors primarily has been difficult to police, and the popularity of the light and quirky, stimulating space for afternoon teas occasionally displaces “real” museum visitors. One possible solution we are trying is to restrict refreshments to a corner of the room and “dress” the remaining tables quite clearly as “museum” handling tables
- We have thought about how we engage with special audiences, and volunteers' perceptions of the community role of their museum are beginning to change
- The Reminiscence Classroom has become something much more vibrant
- The Chatty Café which has taken root as a hub in the Museum and helpfully dovetailed the visitor experience with its award-winning coffee shop

*“It has breathed new life into the place – it’s becoming a hub within the Museum”*

Museum volunteer

## Finding Out More

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