

Bagshaw Museum

Space title

The Education Room

Location

Batley, Kirklees, West Yorkshire

Brief project description

A dedicated, permanent Education Room with the facilities – including toilets – to enable the Museum to offer a wide variety of activities to schools and other educational users.

Cost of project

£225,000

Participants

Client, Brian Haigh for Kirklees Metropolitan Council; Architect, Paul Turner of Kirklees Estates, Properties & Markets. Funders, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) (£115,000); European Regional Development Unit (£90,000); Kirklees Metropolitan Council (£20,000); plus £85,000 for art works from Arts Council England.

Timescale for the project

Initial contact was made with the Council architects in 1994, and a Heritage Lottery Fund application submitted in March the following year. HLF approved the grant in September 1995 and work began in December; however, the first contractor went into liquidation and a new contractor recommenced the project in August 1996. The Museum was re-opened in November of the same year.

Background to the project

Bagshaw Museum is housed in a Victorian Gothic mansion in parkland overlooking Batley. Built in 1875 as a private house, it was purchased in 1909 by Batley Corporation and opened in 1911 as a museum containing varied collections including local and natural history.

The Museum houses displays which embrace local and natural history, Ancient Egypt, and objects from around the world. In 1986 Brian Haigh was appointed to run the Museum which, following local government reorganisation, had come under the control of Kirklees Metropolitan Council and was part of a group of museums and galleries. His priority was to develop the Museum's educational services. Despite lack of space and inadequate budgets, school usage of the Museum and its collection increased, placing great strains on the limited facilities available. An extension was needed to provide a dedicated Education Room and toilets; the emergence of Lottery funding made this more than a pipe dream.

The development process

The original building and the potential budget dictated the scope of the new space, which had to be located on the ground floor. It was out of the question to use existing rooms, because of their decorative interiors and because doing

so would reduce the Museum's display capacity; however, building something new to match the high standards of the original stone building would be expensive. 'We knew what we wanted and now needed to put something down on paper, get a better idea of costs and start applying for funding,' says Brian Haigh.

Haigh determined what he wanted by assessing how schools use the Museum, and by talking to teachers and artists. He also looked at art spaces in schools and education spaces in other museums, and drew on his own experience as a teacher taking school parties to museums and galleries. Although schools are the Museum's main users, it also works with local community groups; they too were consulted and the plans adapted to ensure that the space was flexible enough to meet the diverse needs.

The Museum worked with Paul Turner, a Council architect, and it was decided to build on the side of the Museum. Haigh gained approval from local councillors and officers for leisure & recreation and education: 'Their interest was that we provide better facilities, but they were also keen to know how we would pay for it and what the revenue implications might be.'

Turner had to address two challenges: to create a design that was sympathetic to the existing building, and which would partly be below ground level because of the slope of the land. Both Haigh and Turner wanted the building to reflect the Victorian architecture and materials but also to look contemporary.

Key considerations included the need for a lot of light coming into the building. The decision to reject a flat roof, avoiding water and security problems, and to go instead for a steep pitched roof mirroring the roofs of Walter Hanstock's original building, created the opportunity for skylights. It was also important for artists to work in the space, and a programme of art works was incorporated into the design.

Despite trying different layouts, neither curator nor architect could create the space they wanted on the restricted site. 'That was the main disappointment and we had to acknowledge what could be done on this particular site,' Haigh concludes. 'I knew what I wanted and stuck out for it. There are people who say, well you can manage without this – or, can we go for a cheaper option? I didn't want to cut corners. I wanted very good finishes.'



Features:

- The benefit of having a project champion with educational expertise
- The benefit of consulting teachers and other users
- The benefit of involving artists in the development process
- The challenge – in terms of design constraints and costs – of adding education space as an extension to a museum housed in a historic house
- The value of natural light in an education space
- The advantages of knowing what you want from the outset

The outcome

The Education Room is compact and airy. Light streams in, especially from skylights in the steeply pitched roof. Kathryn White, current curator, calls it 'a modern bright jewel that connects with the rest of the building'. She reports that 'children love that sense of space and light; it just doesn't look like a school classroom'.

The space measures 94m² and caters for 35 to 40 children doing a range of activities. Primary schools come from across northern England. Groups can be divided into two, with one working in the Museum and the other in the Education Room. The space's flexibility allows the Museum to programme conferences, corporate events, and evening and weekend talks, as well as school, community and holiday activities.

The extension is divided into two parts by a corridor, which provides access from the original building. A glass screen with coloured panels by Kate Baden Fuller separates the Education Room from the other facilities; the same stained glass architect was responsible for the huge sculpture that hangs in the roof space, and for the decoration of the terrazzo floor of the corridor.

Walk on around the corner and you reach the new toilets: the Museum now has a 'Loo of the Year Award' for their child-friendly facilities and unique tile decoration based on themes from the collections by a local artist.

Inside, storage and a sink take up the back wall, hidden behind cupboard doors. Tables and chairs are readily stackable. At the far end, a door leads into a small courtyard where children can work outside or have their lunch in warm weather. Again, art works (by Marlon Brandis and Andy Hazell) have been created around this area.

Carpet has not proved the most suitable floor covering, although children do like to sit on the floor as well as on chairs; it looks grubby from all the clay and paint which has been used in the room, and worn from the numbers of people passing through. Another problem has resulted from the temporary cessation of building work in early 1995 – due to the insolvency of the original contractor. As a result of water getting into the foundations at that time, salt periodically fluoresces from the plaster of one of the walls.

Safety concerns required less than compatible fire doors. The stained glass of the Education Room doors had to be reinforced between two sheets of strong clear glass, but (adds Haigh) 'we did get very expensive non-reflective glass which would not break and did not compromise the colour of the stained glass'. Haigh also won a battle over commonly used but 'unattractive' Georgian wired glass.

Lessons learned

Overall, the space works and does what is required of it. Rethinking small details would gain more space and storage remains a Museum-wide problem: 'A strong education programme requires a lot of storage.' Haigh would also like to have created a dedicated working space to plan and put exhibitions together. Mistakes should be 'put right immediately rather than storing up problems for the future'. He cites some faulty plumbing and wrongly cut stone lintels. 'It's all about quality. Whatever happens, stick to your guns. You can't change part-way through; it's too expensive. So stay focused.'

For architect Paul Turner, this was an exciting project and different from the more mundane work that local authorities must do. He stresses the importance of establishing close links with the client – 'make sure you know what they want and they understand that is what you are giving them'.

Key factors

This project highlights the importance of having someone with vision, drive and not a little cunning to 'run with' such an initiative. The client was clear about what was needed, and what experience he lacked he happily sought from others. His background in both education and museum work was vital, as was his ability to work within the local authority set-up, identifying the main people to persuade and influence. He gives credit to others in the local authority who backed him, and identifies a critical ingredient when he talks of someone's personality being as important as their experience in key posts. 'If someone sees the value of what you are doing, you are halfway there.'

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