**Pos23\100046 Watchet Market House Museum**

**Evaluation of this project -Waving at Watchet**

**Outline**

In collaboration with the Balmoral Trust and My Future My Choice the aim was to explore the historic links between Watchet, a small harbour on the North Somerset coast, and Bristol, at one time one of the busiest ports in the country. The Severn estuary and Bristol Channel provided the means to trade over a thousand years ago but these waterways are notorious to sail, because of their immense tidal range and powerful tides. The Bristol Channel has the second highest tidal range in the world and both Watchet and Bristol depended on the tides to enable entry to their harbours. This project explored these conditions to emphasize the challenges faced by sailors, the importance of calculations based on the currents and the nature of the cargoes.

The MV. *Balmoral,* moored in the City Docks, served as the venue for the exhibition. She is a small cruise ship primarily used for coastal excursions, based in Bristol. Following an extensive dry dock, she was in excellent condition to receive visitors. However due to the scope of necessary remedial work our start date was delayed. Consequently, our Exhibition ran from August 23rd to October 16th.

**How the project was enabled**

The Watchet Market House Museum (WMHM) curated the exhibition, conducting most of the research, co-ordinating display production through a third party and providing samples, photographs and a timeline. The Balmoral Trust organised the display boards and decorated the space and conducted some further research on ‘Bristol Glass’, which used seaweed imported from Watchet.

WMHM, formed a small subcommittee to delegate research areas. The findings were then compiled and a design strategy was developed. Once approved by the full committee we commissioned Active Signs of Minehead to produce the display boards and assist with design implementation.

The Bristol Channel tidal system and principals of tides were explored along with navigational practices used in this challenging area for small sailing ships. ( This topic was further examined at the exhibition where experienced sailors held a workshop discussing how they would have navigated these waters hundreds of years ago )

The various cargoes transported to Bristol were also investigated as was the popularity of ‘excursionist’ cruising, particularly from Bristol from the late 19th C, onwards.

The work of Victorian Photographer, James Date featured in the exhibition to illustrate Watchet’s past. This was brought to life by the artist Bandele Iyapo who used his plate cameras and processes for developing and explaining the science of photography to visitors.

<https://www.myfuturemychoice.co.uk/blog/article/411/2024/10/09/plate-camera-photography-with-bandele-iyapo-onboard-mv-balmoral>

*Examples of the work produced are included in the Appendix.*

**Impacts**

The funding, generously provided by the Royal Society, has enabled many people to visit the Balmoral, a listed ship, and make them aware of the historic trade in the Bristol Channel and in particular with Watchet. The geography, navigation and tidal processes presented has helped educate visitors to the difficulties faced by sailors plying their trade in the coastal environments. Families, including disadvantaged and SEND students were welcomed with interactive activities playing their part.

Most significantly the project has been embraced by our volunteer Museum researchers, never having done anything like this before, and who derived a great deal of satisfaction from the end results. Our Museum subcommittee were strong and our collaborations with the ‘Balmoral Trust’ (aka Hugh Thomas) and ‘My Future My Choice’ worked admirably. We had a very good rapport with ‘Active Signs’, who produced most of the display boards and were very patient with our whims and late changes to the overall design. It is hoped that further opportunities will be well served by this experience.

**Outcomes**

While there were no unexpected outcomes the Museum team were pleasantly surprised by the positive responses received. For example one visitor from Watchet, who has a prominent social media presence discovered the exhibition by chance and posted a video on *Facebook* expressing what a wonderful surprise it was to discover a display about their town in the heart of Bristol. In retrospect we should engaged more with social mediaourselves to better advertise the event.

The main challenges were in getting the timing right due to the delay with the vessel completing her renovation and leaving dry dock, then it was all go. The research work was challenging in it’s own way but rewarding on completion.

**Challenges**

The main challenges were time related due to delays with the vessel’s renovation and leaving dry dock. Once this was resolved it was all systems go. The research itself was challenging yet rewarding upon completion.

Advice for other participants of the Places of Science funding scheme :- embrace the challenge but allow yourselves plenty of time to prepare. Don’t skimp on the information display materials but keep narrative brief but concise with plenty of images.

**Legacy**

All Watchet based display materials have been returned to Watchet and will be used in the Museum in 2025 with potential future use in local schools.

The MV *Balmoral* is scheduled to sail again in 2026 with Watchet a planned call.

Since the planned visits to Watchet by disadvantaged families did not materialise during the exhibition we hope to reschedule them for 2025.

The Balmoral Trust and My Future My Choice wish to maintain their connection with Watchet in the coming years with the potential plans to organise art exhibitions .

**Visitors**

The exhibition ran from August 13th to October 16th with a launch event on 23rd August.

The ship was open 2 or 3 times a week with Volunteer Balmoral Stewards inviting people on board.

Launch event was attended by 64 people with 1% of these being visibly non white.

An open day as part of the ‘Heritage Harbour’ weekend om 19th October saw 324 people visit the exhibition. This audience was very keen on the Harbour Heritage aspect and was mainly families, many with young children. ^% of these visitors were visibly non white.

During the Shanty Festival 21st September 2450 people visited the ship with 640 of these visiting the exhibition. 6% were visibly non white. Visitors to the city from afar made up about 4% of the visitors.

The visitors towards the end of the day and into the evening were mostly couples and groups of friends on a night out. They were surprised by the exhibition but happily engaged with the information. Many acknowledged that they had very little idea about the content and were fascinated by information on the purpose of the cargo or the dependence on the tides for transport.

The exhibition was animated by the ship’s crew and the artist Bendele Iyapo. Enabling a clear sense of the levels of engagement through people’s questioning.

In total over 1090 people visited the exhibition.

**Evaluations and Feedback**

Visitors were able to add comments on cards shaped like the Balmoral. This was very popular with children including the very young. Visitors were encouraged to do their own calculation of when to leave Bristol to arrive in Watchet at high tide assuming they had nothing but the wind and current as propulsion. This appealed to those with some knowledge of sailing but was a new insight for those who had no idea of the tidal range or that there was so much engineering in place to keep the water levels constant in Bristol’s centre.

Short films were made to capture the exhibition and visitor feedback - see these links

<https://www.myfuturemychoice.co.uk/blog/article/403/2024/07/25/waving-at-watchet-an-exhibition-on-mv-balmoral-in-bristol-harbour-by-watchet-house-museum>

Young audiences were very responsive to the card templates

<https://www.myfuturemychoice.co.uk/blog/article/412/2024/10/21/young-scouts-(beavers)-visit-the-mv-balmoral>

Interaction with people was a positive aspect of the exhibition. The artist Bandele Iyapo’s work informing younger generations of the science (and art) of photography

<https://www.myfuturemychoice.co.uk/blog/article/411/2024/10/09/plate-camera-photography-with-bandele-iyapo-onboard-mv-balmoral>

Enthusiasm for the activity as part of a wider day out was very strong. The opportunity to explore a ship for free was very popular.

<https://www.myfuturemychoice.co.uk/blog/article/409/2024/09/23/waving-at-watchet-an-exhibition-by-watchet-house-museum-and-shanty-festival-on-mv-balmoral-in-bristol-harbour>

The exhibition on a ship caused recollection by some about their links to past travels on the water and for some youngsters imagined futures for the ship. Responses showed enjoyment of the ship as well as the exhibition and placing an exhibition like this in a real life context is seen a vital part of its success.

**Working with the Royal Society**

The overall experience was uplifting for a small museum like ours, especially working with such an esteemed body as the Royal Society. It was a pleasure from the outset, with no pressure when delays occurred. The one-day workshop at the Royal Society provided valuable preparation for our project’s start. Meeting other small museums and learning about their projects and difficulties was beneficial to everyone involved.

Additional impacts will be felt next season when the exhibition comes back to the WMHM.

Support was very good throughout, with Amy Harrison – Seales, our Public Engagement Officer, even finding time to visit the MV *Balmoral* on the exhibition’s official opening day.

The Balmoral – also commented on how useful the collaboration through this funding was for the ship. Hugh Thomas commented, *“Without this prompt to establish a gallery space the Lower salon would still be a store room. The project has revealed new opportunity to the ships volunteer crew, many of whom have found their calling in a public facing role explaining engineering and science rather than mending it.”*

**Suggestions, recommendations or further comments.**

We advise other participants in the Places of Science funding scheme to embrace the challenge while allowing plenty of time for preparation. Invest in high quality display materials, keeping the narrative brief and concise, complemented with plenty of images to engage your audience.