

Scottish Textile Heritage Online

Final Report

Appendix Feedback from users, project partners and team

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with input from other members of the Project Management Group and the User Groups

Feedback 1: User Group report: Catriona Baird

Feedback: 2. The Project Partners

Feedback: 3. The experience of the project team and dispersed working

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Feedback 1: User Group report: Catriona Baird

User Group sessions were held at Heriot Watt University Scottish Borders Campus, Glasgow School of Art Archives and Dundee University Archives, Records Management and Museum Services. The first round of meetings took place in each venue in September 2003. Follow up sessions were held in April/May 2004.

The aim of the User Group sessions was to seek feedback from a sample of potential users of the project web site. Individuals were invited to participate by members of the Project Team and Project Management Group. Those who attended included archive, library and museum professionals; Higher Education institution design and textile lecturers; local historians; representatives from local history societies, local and national textile interest groups; textile design students and graduates. 45 people attended one or both user group sessions.

22 people attended the first three user group sessions. Each session began with a presentation from the Project Coordinator about the aims, objectives and progress of the project. This was followed by a group discussion to provide feedback to inform the development of the resources available through the project website. One of the Project Officers recorded the views of each group.

The second round of user group events took the form of drop-in web site browsing sessions. Participants tried out the latest version of the web site and completed feedback sheets commenting on various aspects of the web site content and functionality.

Feedback from the second round of User Group sessions depended to a certain extent on the IT experience of the users and how much experience they had of web sites. It was useful to have a range of participants as it was anticipated that a wide range of people with varying levels of IT experience would make use of the web site.

Feedback from the first User Group sessions that was applied directly into the design of the web site included:

- Demand for more images, especially from design lecturers and students. The initial plan had been for 200 images to be included in the web site. Following the User Group feedback this number of images was nearer 500.
- The level that the online essays should be pitched. It was generally felt that people did not want to read in depth academic essays online and instead wanted an overview of a subject with bibliographic references to other sources for further research.

Feedback from the second round of User Groups was also very helpful for the development of the web site. Users were asked for feedback on the following issues:

- How easy it was to search the catalogue and their opinion of the content of descriptions.
- Ease of navigation of site, tone and content of articles and bibliographies, glossary terms and use of images.
- Opinion on layout, search availability, graphics and feel of web site, level of text and descriptions.
- If they had used the site since it was set up and how useful it was for teaching purposes.
- What else they felt should be included on the web site.

Written feedback from the web site drop in sessions was collated by one of the Project Officers and fed into the final web specification.

Feedback: 2. The Project Partners

Towards the end of the pilot project, all of the project representatives from the partner institutions were asked for feedback on their involvement in **Scottish Textile Heritage Online**. The partners all agreed that this had been a very positive experience and had opened further possibilities for development of textile collections, documentation and professional networks.

Some of their feedback was as follows:

Organisation

- In some cases this was the first major collaborative project that some of the partner representatives had been involved with and so they had the opportunity of finding out how such a project can be organised and developed.
- Partners who hosted a Project Team member were able to be involved in day to day development of the project. This did however involve more time commitments on the part of hosts than that needed from other partners. Host partners felt more ownership of the project.
- The most detailed documentation in the project was done at the 6 project partner institutions.
- The responsibility of being a project partner should not be underestimated

Connections and networks

- Increased knowledge of textile collections across Scotland was mentioned by many partners as a positive outcome.
- Links were made between archives and museums in the same geographical area who had not previously worked together.
- Learning from other institutions about how they catalogue collections and operate was seen as a benefit.
- Linking of partner collections to the other textile collections surveyed for the project has given them a better idea of the bigger picture of textile heritage across Scotland.
- The project has given partners and others opportunities to find related textile collections that they had not previously known about.
- The project gave participants opportunities to network with professionals in similar or related fields.
- Nearly all of the partner institutions hold material dispersed when the Needlework Development Scheme (NDS) was disbanded. The project web site "reunited" NDS collections with supporting material.
- Contact with other partners with textile collections was seen as an important and lasting benefit of the project.
- A previously unknown collection of quilts was located by one of the partners as a result of discussions with a member of the local quilter's guild about the project.

Website and technology

- Partners learnt about technical issues relating to the project and website development issues.
- As a result of the project, many partners benefited from having good digital images of textile collections. Some partners had no digital images of their textile collections before this.
- The website has already proved useful for researchers visiting partner institutions and to partner staff doing research for the public and answering enquiries.

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Collections issues

- In some cases partners increased their knowledge of their own collections with help from project team expertise; this is already assisting researchers working with these collections.
- Obtaining new and enhanced descriptions of textile collections was seen as beneficial.
- Partners' textile collections were given a higher profile as result of publicity about the project.
- The cross-sectoral discussion about textile collecting issues at the Verdant Works event was regarded as an interesting and helpful project outcome.
- Several partners mentioned the benefits of the project in relation to the Museum Association consultation document: Collections for the future.

The Future

- Being involved in the project has given some partners ideas of future projects that could be developed or initiated.
- Participation in the project helped a local authority partner meet objectives in the Museum Service's Forward Plan.
- All of the project partner hope that the project can be developed further.

Negative aspects

- One partner had different expectations about the project from the final outcomes and had expected more direct access to textile collection expertise, advice and information leading to more cataloguing of textile collections. This was however recognized as an unrealistic ambition considering the small number of people in the project team and the large geographical area to cover. The strategic importance of involvement in the project was seen as equally important.
- Within one local authority museum service partner the project was sometimes viewed as an 'add on' or extra workload by staff and did as a result tend to slip down the list of priorities. This was partly due to staff shortages at the partner institution and no subject specialist being present on the institution staff.
- The fact that the database will remain static at end of pilot project if no further funding is sourced to update and develop was seen as a negative. This has less to do with the actual success of the project and more to do with the current nature of project funding.

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Feedback: 3. The experience of the project team and dispersed working

The project team consisted of Project Manager, Project Co-ordinator and two Project Documentation/Survey Officers. The composition of the team, bringing together two archivists with a curator and a conservator, both of whom having strong textile expertise, covered many of the skills and knowledge required and worked really well. The skilled knowledge of textiles brought to the project by the Documentation Officers was essential for the project to be a success in its short time-span and balanced out the comparative textile ignorance of the archivists. In turn, the archivists brought a knowledge and experience of XML, web technologies and metadata standards for net-based resource discovery tools. The team members recognised their own limitations and were happy to consult the other team members for advice or pass issues on.

The balance of skills brought to the project by its members meant that all were able to provide training in their particular area of expertise – cataloguing standards, documentation skills, textile identification, the handling and care of textiles – all of which were areas where training and skills were able to be shared amongst the team directly and to the project partners where relevant.

The team were dispersed across four locations. The Project Manager was based at Heriot-Watt University's Riccarton campus where she is also the University Archivist. A part-time Documentation Officer was based at the University's Galashiels campus, the Project Co-ordinator at the Glasgow School of Art and the final Documentation Officer at Paisley Museum & Art Galleries. This dispersed method of working had both advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages:

- The geographic spread of the team meant that most of Scotland was reasonably accessible to at least one team member for survey visits although a team member in Dundee may have been useful
- Recruiting and retaining staff for one-year contracts was easier as there was flexibility to accommodate preferences for geographic location through the project partners hosting team members
- Hosting team members created a sense of ownership amongst the project partners
- Basing each post with a project partner allowed for easier documentation as collection specific knowledge was quickly and easily available.
- The dispersed method of working allowed for greater independence for each team member and more flexible working that would maybe have been possible with a centralised team
- Skills were actively encouraged to be shared at team meetings so that team members could work independently away from the rest of the team
- No project partner was neglected in attention from the project as each was easily reachable by at least one team member
- All team members were very good at communicating via email and telephone but this is dependent on recruiting staff who are able to work well as a team under pressure. A different team may not have bonded so well and this needs to be considered at the recruitment stage.

Disadvantages:

- Arranging team meetings took some co-ordination. The geographic distance between the members required a lot of travelling and meetings needed to last all day to make them worthwhile. However, this did mean that team meetings were very productive and increased team morale.

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- Team work is easier when everyone is located in one place! However, regular communication through telephone and email between team members played an essential role in maintaining team spirit and support.
- Sharing technical and professional knowledge is much easier in person than by the phone or email. Survey and documentation were far more productive when team members with complementary skills worked together on site.
- Isolation. Team members could feel separated from the team through both geography and lone working. Regular team meetings, communication and finding opportunities to work in small teams on particular documentation helped to sustain morale.
- Although based within project partner organisations, the team members were not always embedded within the host institution through line management or on the payroll. This presents the risks of isolation and lack of recognition rendering staff “invisible” to host institution. This can manifest itself through lack of access rights to buildings and computer systems in the place of work. These problems need to be anticipated and addressed before project partners agree to host staff to ensure the smooth running of a project.
- It is essential that good working relationship is established and maintained between the team members from the start of the project through regular team meetings and communication to help foster a sense of ownership of the project. This was one of the strengths of the textile project team.
- Communication and careful planning is key to the success of dispersed working, especially when not all staff are full-time.
- Remote line management presents particular challenges at all levels. Communication is not always easy and obtaining focussed attention can be difficult through telephone and email, especially when decisions need to be made quickly on a fast-moving project. A structure of Project Director, Project Manager and Documentation Officers may provide a more practical and robust line management model.