

**Collection Biography Simple Survey Toolkit**

A collection biography is a history of a museum’s collection or collections which focusses on the way that it has developed and changed.

This toolkit provides a framework to undertake an initial survey of a museum collection to create a collection biography and provide an overview of the collection.

**Why do it?**

A collection biography is useful as a simple aid to increase understanding of a collection and to give access to all who use it or are involved in its management. It can also be used to inform key stakeholders whose understanding of the collection and the issues which relate to it might be minimal. At its most basic it can be used to create a simple statement which provides an overview of the collections and how they came about which might be usefully incorporated in the Collections Development Plan and in the content of the museum’s website.

**How it is done**

This is a self-completion toolkit which can be used by anyone wishing to document the history of the museum’s collection. When completing the survey gather as much information as you can to respond to the prompts. The information might not be complete but it is useful to get down the best state of knowledge at this point in time. You can always return to it later to add additional information and detail. You or one of your colleagues may also wish to complete more detailed versions for specific collections within your museum or add further information later on. The biography will be of practical use if it includes a reasonable amount of relevant information and is made available to those who use it or could potentially use it. While some would wish the biography to be totally comprehensive this is not essential.

**Structure**

Sections 1-3 look at the current collection and how it has been gathered together over the years. Section 4 looks at opportunities to develop the collection and its use in future. Section 5 provides an opportunity to identify where further actions, research, investigation and publication would be useful to enhance knowledge and accessibility.

Thanks to the Science Museum Group for sharing some of its methodology in scoping collections.

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| **Museum Collection Biography Simple Survey** |
| **Museum** |  |
| **Collection** |  |
| **Reviewer(s)**  |  |
| **Date** |  | **Version** |  |
| **SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLECTION** |
| **1.1 Brief description of the collection (max 500 words)** |  |
| **1.2 Main types of object in the collection e.g. subjects and scope****(High level descriptions)** |  |
| **1.3 Locations at which collection material is displayed or stored****(include whatever level of location information is helpful – it can be refined in future)** |  |
| **1.4 When did the museum start collecting? What did it collect when established?** |  |
| **1.5 Brief description which outlines the nature, themes and rate of past collecting. Include the acquisition of major named collections or subject areas or significant projects e.g. opening a new site** |  |
| **1.6 What organisation currently operates the museum and cares for its collections?** |  |
| **1.7 Was it at another site(s) previously? Where?****Was it operated by another organisation? Which and when? What was the transfer process and how as it documented?** |  |
| **1.8 Were there any pre-existing collections e.g. from individual collectors or institutions which pre-dated the establishment of the museum? Describe the size and scope of these “founding collections”.** |  |
| **1.9 Is the museum now responsible for the collections of another pre-existing museum which is no-longer open? Describe the size and scope of these and provide any key dates.** |  |
| **1.10 Are there any key collectors whose work shaped collections before they were transferred to the museum? Please provide any biographical details of individuals and brief scoping statements for their collection.** |  |
| **1.11 Are there any key members of staff e.g. curators, directors, trustees or volunteers who had a significant influence on the development of the collection at key periods? Please provide brief biographical details of individuals, their employment and brief statements about the collecting, developments and projects that they were involved with.** |  |
| **1.12 Were there any significant contemporary, social, economic, religious or cultural influences which may be seen as shaping the collection in the past? E.g. dominant industrial concerns, religious movements, political party or colonial or imperial factors.** |   |
| **1.13 Is there evidence of curatorial or museological trends or “fashions” in the development of the collection at key periods in the past?****E.g. C 19th. Antiquarian, post-WWII development of social history collecting, industrial collecting in response to economic decline.** |   |
| **1.14 Are any of these key people still around and would it be possible to gain information from them to help with “grey” areas or generally enhance current understanding of the collections to-day?****What could you do to gather this information?** |  |

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| **SECTION 2. COLLECTION MANAGEMENT (CURRENT)** |
| **2.1 Number of objects within the collection (state actual or estimate).** |  |
| **2.2 What are the current storage arrangements? Location, condition of storage equipment, environmental conditions?** |  |
| **2.3 How well is the collection currently catalogued in manual or electronic records (amount, accuracy etc., state actual or estimate)?** |  |
| **2.4 What degree of intellectual and physical control of the collections for which it is responsible does the museum have?** |  |
| **2.5 How does your museum define a backlog in collections management?**  |  |
| **2.6 What is the scale of any backlog?****(amount, accuracy etc., state actual or estimate)?** |  |
| **2.7 What is the earliest entry in the first Accession Register?** |  |
| **2.8 What sort of manual documentation systems did the museum operate in the past? E.g. manual card indexes, donor files, acquisition files, correspondence files. During what periods did these operate?** |  |
| **2.9 Was this a uniform system or did different systems operate on different sites, subject areas or individual members of staff? Describe them.** |  |
| **2.10 Are the legacy documentation systems properly archived and retrievable? If not what are the problem areas?** |  |
| **2.11 What sort of object numbering systems did the museum operate in the past? Please provide examples of numbering styles and the date/subject and site ranges for their operation.** |  |
| **2.12 When did the museum first adopt a collections management database? Which one was it? Is it still current and in use or has it been replaced with another, if so which one?** |  |
| **2.13 How many records does the database contain? What proportion of the collection does this represent?** |  |
| **2.14 How complete are the records on the database e.g. meeting SPECTRUM primary procedures or more advanced? Are they current and maintained?** |  |
| **2.15 Does the museum operate any other computerised records for its collections? E.g. Access or other general databases, Excel or other spreadsheets. What do they cover and how long have they been in operation?** |  |
| **2.16 How many inward loans are within the collection? Do all have current loan agreements? Should any of the inward loans be considered for re-assessment? e.g. return to source.** |  |
| **2.17 Are there any major long-term loans (outward loans)** **from the collection? (numbers, size, location, importance)** |  |
| **2. 18 Are there parts of the collection which may be considered for de-accessioning or disposal?** **Which are they?**(**Top-line identification of target areas at this stage, detailed disposal research may come later)** |  |
| **2.19 What is the date of the current Collections Development Plan? When was it last revised?** | [ |

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| **SECTION 3. EVALUATION OF COLLECTION CONTENT AND SIGNIFICANCE** |
| **3.1 What is its overall quality and significance of the collection as a whole?** |  |
| **3.2 Does the collection or part of the collection have ACE Designated status or any other externally recognised status?** |  |
| **3.3 What are the highlights of the collection e.g. specific groups or types of objects?** |  |
| **3.4 Are there particular areas of weakness?** **e.g. no documentation, poor** **depth, breadth, condition, provenance.** |  |
| **3.5 How does the collection compare to those of other museums?**  |  |
| **3.6 How has the collection been used or displayed in the past?** |  |
| **3.7 What is the extent of knowledge about the collection?** **(Have elements been researched/ published, etc.?)****How is this information used in the management of the collection?**  |  |
| **3.8 Are collections assessment/appraisal/rationalisation projects currently underway? If so, describe them.****Is this in line with the current Collections Development Plan**? |  |
| **3.9 Are there any items in the collection or types of objects that are particularly popular with enquirers or museum visitors?** |   |

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| **SECTION 4. FUTURE SHAPE OF THE COLLECTION** |
| **4.1 Is the museum still adding to its collection? Briefly describe the nature of current collecting e.g. targeted relating to exhibition projects, themes in the collections development plan or passive?** |  |
| **4.2 Have future opportunities/priorities for the development and use of the collection already been identified?****If so what are they?** **How are they** **included in the current Collections Development Plan** |  |
| **4.3 How could use of and access to the collection be enhanced in the future?** |  |
| **4.4 What material has been identified for future acquisition and what would these contribute?** **Is this included in the current Collections Development Plan?** |   |
| **4.5 As a result of the information gathered in Section 1 above, (especially 1.11 and 1.12) are there areas of the collection where the acquisition of “missing” or “excluded” material needs to be targeted in future collecting e.g. representing “hidden stories” or people who may have been excluded in the past?** |   |
| **4.6 In developing the collections is the museum aware of any significant contemporary, social, economic, religious, cultural or environmental influences which may potentially be shaping the collection?****Has the museum reviewed any** **or unconscious biases which may be potentially be shaping the development of the collection?****Are they acknowledged and documented?** |   |
| **4.6 What impact will future collecting have on storage and other resource requirements?** |   |

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| **SECTION 5. FURTHER RESEARCH, ACTIONS AND AREAS FOR INVESTIGATION** |
| **5.1 As a result of completing these questions are there any key areas which require further investigation? If so what are they?** | [ ] |
| **5.2 What additional resources or materials have you identified which could provide further information? If so, what or who are they?** | [ ] |
| **5.3 Do any of these areas warrant further in depth research? If so, which ones?** | [ ] |
| **5.4 How will this work impact on revisions to the museum’s Collections Development Plan?** | [ ] |
| **5.5 How do you plan to make this work accessible to museum internal users, researchers and other users of the museum’s collections?** | [ ] |

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