

Concepts and planning – The Mary Rose Museum: A vision, a building and an interpretation for a 21st century audience

Christopher Dobbs

Introduction The *Mary Rose* was a Tudor warship, built for King Henry VIII in England in 1510. It had a successful career fighting in a number of wars until it sank during a battle with the French in 1545. It was rediscovered in 1971 and then excavated before finally being raised from the seabed in 1982. Further details about the excavation, salvage, conservation and publication programmes were outlined in the previous paper for this workshop.

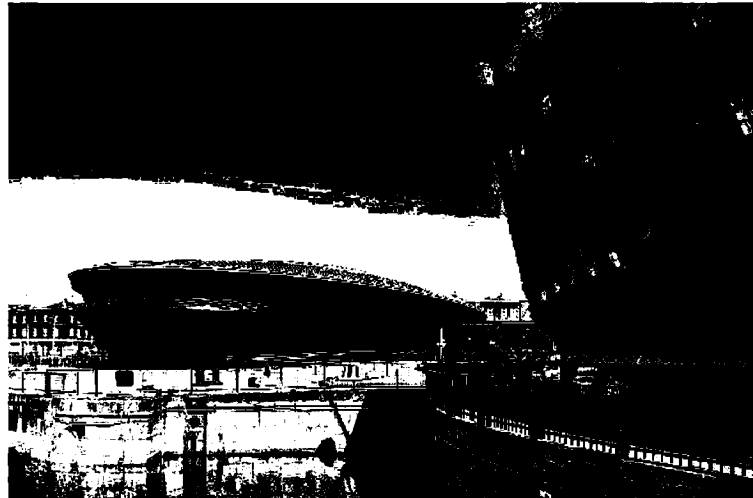
Museum display When the *Mary Rose* first came ashore in 1982, it was displayed in a temporary building initially on its side still looking like a shipwreck. It was turned upright in 1985 to be displayed as a cutaway section through a ship. Much of the port side had rotted and had been eaten away by marine creatures such as the shipworm (*Teredo navalis*). The conservation of the ship was carried out in this temporary building whilst many of the most special objects were displayed in a separate exhibition building over 400m away. Whilst the ship was being sprayed with the wax, it was not practical either to build the permanent museum around it or to combine the display of the objects with the display of the ship. But it was always the vision of the Mary Rose Trust to display the objects and the ship together and finally in 2007 a new museum finally became possible when the Mary Rose Trust succeeded with a bid to the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund for a grant towards the cost of the final phase of conserving the *Mary Rose* and building a new museum. There was then six more years of planning the content in detail, the external architecture, the internal architecture, the museum designs and interpretation and finishing the conservation spray programme. This ended in July 2013 with the opening of the brand new museum, displaying and interpreting the ship and collections in new ways designed to be interesting and relevant for a 21st century audience.

Vision The stated vision of the project was:

'To create a sensational and sustainable museum where the Mary Rose and her artefacts will tell their unique stories'.

Embedded in this vision are a number of concepts. Here, sensational does not just mean that there will be a great 'Wow factor' but also that the displays would appeal to different senses – to hearing, smell, touch and others – not just to the sense of sight. It should be sustainable – both financially into the future and should be constructed as much as possible from sustainable materials. It should combine the displays of objects with the display of the ship and it should tell stories – not just give information to visitors.

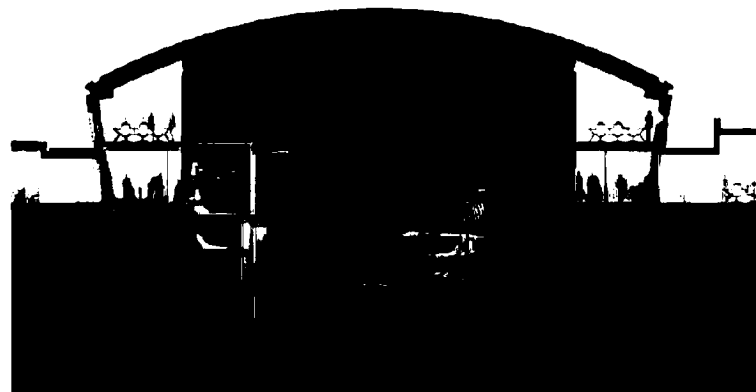
The Building The choice of architects was by an open competition and the appointment team were particularly impressed with the winning consortium of Wilkinson Eyre (external architects) and Perkins + Will (Chris Brandon, internal architect) as they stated their design philosophy would be to work from the inside to the outside. They wanted first for the building to work as a showcase for the *Mary Rose* and then for the external



The Mary Rose museum – in Portsmouth next to Nelson’s HMS Victory. Photo: Wilkinson Eyre

appearance to be correct, not the other way around. As it turned out, they produced a stunning building which they compared to a jewel box in which to display the jewel – or an oyster in which to display a pearl. There were many constraints: the building had to span across a historic dock that was itself a protected monument; the building should not over-dominate the local area – with Nelson’s flagship HMS Victory just next door; and the building had to be thermally efficient to ensure the tightly controlled environment that was needed for the ship was not going to be too expensive to maintain in the long term.

Interpretation Although I am biased, to me the most important part of the museum planning was the interpretation – ensuring that the visitors do not just learn something but actually experience something or make a connection with the past whilst they visit our museum. We were keen to make this experience as accessible as possible to as wide



The Mary Rose museum concept. Drawing: Wilkinson Eyre

an audience as possible. Key to this was providing information in a number of different media, giving access at a number of different intellectual levels and in ways relevant to a 21st century audience.

The achievements of this new museum include creating a spectacular juxtaposition by displaying the original ship on one side of the museum whilst thousands of the objects found inside the ship are displayed opposite them. This was only possible as the ship was excavated archaeologically and the position of each find was carefully recorded. A second principle has been to tell stories about individual people: many personal objects were found inside chests or in a closely defined area so we can assume they belonged to one person. In this way, history is brought to life - for although we may not know their names, we can

identify with these people from almost 500 years ago. We can sympathise with the man whose shoe has been worn through; we can see the plates and bowls that they ate and drank from; we can see the remains of the food they never ate.

We tell stories about people and for people and our museum had over one million visitors in the first two years after it reopened in 2013. This is very encouraging as it is neither a free museum nor in the densely populated area of a capital city. Furthermore, it has been calculated that our visitors contribute some £20-25 million per year to the local economy, showing that financial benefit as well as cultural value is derived from this example of the underwater cultural heritage.

But attracting large numbers of visitors is not the end of the only way of evaluating success. There are many other ways nowadays to judge whether you are doing well and we are pleased that even the traditionally very critical reviews given on social media such as Trip Advisor have been giving us good feedback. Independent comments logged with them include encouraging quotes such as:

- “There has been so much thought, love and attention put into this attraction!”
- "This has to be one of the best museums in the world."
- “Absolutely breath-taking mind-blowing exhibition of the ship and its contents...”
- “Excellent. A 'must do' attraction”.

After being open for two years, the museum had a planned closure for seven months allowing the final phase of the museum construction to take place and for the *Mary Rose* to be fully revealed to the public. For the first two years of opening, views to the hull were restricted both by the large drying ducts that were being used to circulate the dry air around the ship and



The hull displayed opposite objects found in the lower decks. Photo: Hufton + Crow

because the views into this conservation laboratory could only be through small windows. The ship can

now be seen from all of the nine galleries around the ship and the floor-to-ceiling glass gives the closest possible experience to walking down the decks of the ship – looking in one direction to view the ship and in the other direction to see hundreds of the objects the ship contained, displayed exactly opposite where they were found in the ship. This emphasizes one of the great values of the *Mary Rose* collection – we can show the context – we not only have the ship itself but also the thousands of objects that were contained inside it.

A further technique adopted in July 2016 has been to project images of the soldiers and sailors into the ship going about their lives in both wartime and peacetime and using examples of many of the objects displayed in the museum. This provides a final part of the



Images of the crew are projected onto the hull for a few minutes every quarter of an hour. Photo: Hufton + Crow

vision we are trying to achieve: to integrate the presentation of the hull, the objects and the people so that visitors really appreciate the context of the stunning archaeological discovery of the ship. It is a cross section of society, preserved for almost 500 years at the bottom of the sea and now displayed in Portsmouth for all time to bring history to life for people of all nations.

Co-operation and exchange Sharing our knowledge with people of all nation is an important part of our work and as well as the objectives relating to the ship and her contents, further aims of the Mary Rose Trust when it was formed in 1979 included “to promote and develop interest, research and knowledge on ... all matters relating to the underwater cultural heritage”. We have achieved this through working with colleagues internationally and this co-operation has been immensely beneficial to ourselves as well as, we hope, benefiting others. For example, we have had a long association with the Vasa Museum in Stockholm, Sweden, who curate and display the remains of the Swedish warship Vasa that sank in 1628. This led to us having a formal ‘twinning’ in 1995 whilst in 2015 we entered a new phase of co-operation with a Peer Learning Scheme that is encouraging staff from all departments to make exchange visits and thus discover ideas and examples of best practice that can be transferred from one museum to the other. Co-operation in the field of conservation has been particularly strong and whilst we have learnt from their experience of conserving the Vasa with PEG, we are also contributing to joint research on the problem of sulphur compounds reacting with PEG in the presence of iron fastenings in the ship. Our related organisation – Mary Rose Archaeological Services Ltd, is available to carry out independent contracts and is a world leader in the conservation of waterlogged wood.

The *Mary Rose* has been designated by the UK Maritime Collection Strategy to be the ‘Lead Museum for Maritime Archaeology’. As part of this work, we have been very active

advising museums and projects in many other countries as well as UNESCO itself. Whilst other specialist colleagues at the Mary Rose Trust have concentrated on sharing our experiences on matters such as the conservation of waterlogged wood or research into ordnance or human remains, examples of conferences and workshops that I have contributed to with presentations include the following: the UNESCO international workshop for studying the establishment of an underwater museum in Alexandria, Egypt; the UNESCO international meeting in Chongqing on Protection, Presentation and Valorisation of the Underwater Cultural Heritage; the first joint UNWTO and UNESCO World Conference on Tourism and Culture, Building a New Partnership, Cambodia, Feb 2015; workshops to consider the management of the wreck of the *Vrouw Maria*, Finland; a similar workshop to consider the wreck of the *Covadonga* in Peru and other conferences in India, Canada, the USA, Croatia and Poland. Conferences that we regularly contribute to include IKUWA, ISBSA, ICOM, SHA, and ICMM (including in Hong Kong and Macao in November 2015). Further cooperation with international colleagues occurs from being the UK representative on the ICOMOS committee of ICUCH (the International Committee on Underwater Cultural Heritage) that advises UNESCO.

Conclusion We hope that through the work of the Mary Rose project over the years we have achieved a number of goals beyond the obvious ones of raising a ship from the seabed and placing it in a museum. We have shown that excavation underwater can be done to the same standards as those on land. We have raised awareness of the underwater cultural heritage amongst the general public, divers, politicians, museum professionals and academics. We are showing that museums need not be dusty places of learning but exciting places to gather new experiences and empathise with people of the past. We are showing that museums should have the confidence to concentrate on showing the real thing and not just rely on technology and virtual reality to excite their audiences. Above all, we hope that we are providing access to fascinating parts of our cultural heritage that have been inaccessible beneath the seabed for generations. We are revealing stories through the possessions of people who lived 500 years ago.

SPEAKER PROFILE:

Christopher Dobbs MA, MBA, PGCE, MCIFA, FSA

Christopher Dobbs has been a leading practitioner in the field of maritime and underwater archaeology since leaving Cambridge University with a degree in archaeology in 1979. He has worked on many sites both in the UK and internationally, but much of his career has been devoted to the excavation, raising, research and public display of the sixteenth-century Tudor warship Mary Rose in Portsmouth, England. He is a past Chairman and currently a Vice-President of the international organisation the Nautical Archaeology Society. He is the UK's representative on the ICOMOS committee of ICUCH (the International Committee for Underwater Archaeology). He is also Chairman of the Maritime Archaeology Committee of ICMM (The International Congress of Maritime Museums) and is a co-opted member of the Council of ICMM. He lectures on aspects of both Museum Studies and Maritime Archaeology in a number of countries and universities.