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4

Croydon: What History?

Sally MacDonald

A city but not a city

This chapter looks at some of the issues of interpretation that were encountered in making a museum in Croydon. We had to ask: where is this museum going to be? Why is it going to be? Who is it for? (And do they want it?) What should it be about? What should be in it? What should it feel like? And for how long can we sustain it?

Of course, we never looked at it quite as systematically as this; the answers to some of these questions evolved through discussion over several years. Much of that discussion took place with local people. In the process of designing the museum between 1990 and 1995 (when we first opened to the public) we conducted several pieces of qualitative research, and their words, together with the recommendations of the researchers, informed what we did. Most of the quotes reproduced here come from the very earliest, and most general, piece of research we carried out (Fisher, 1990).

'Croydon is pretending to be a city.' (family museum-goer)

Croydon is not a city, though on two occasions (in 1928 and in 1993) it has made a bid to become one. It is nevertheless the tenth largest town in England, with a population of 313,500 in 1991; larger than that of many cities. Administratively it is a London borough; one of thirty-three. Until 1965 the present London Borough of Croydon was two separate entities: to the north was the County Borough of Croydon; the south was part of the county of Surrey. These two areas had very different socio-economic and demographic characteristics which to a great extent survive today. The north is significantly poorer, more densely populated and ethnically diverse than the south. The borough has a significant working population and is a major regional shopping centre. Yet for many of the people who live and work there, or who visit, the London Borough of Croydon is the local authority, an administrative entity, but not an identifiable place.

Roughly at the centre of the borough is the town of Croydon. Unlike the borough, it is a distinct and recognizable place. From a Saxon settlement in the eighth century it grew into a sizeable market town. Its significance and status was partly due to a long connection with the Archbishops of



Figure 4.1 Wellesley Road, central Croydon
(Croydon Local Studies Library)

Canterbury, who from the eleventh to the eighteenth century owned property in the area and used palaces in Croydon as their summer retreats. Its dramatic growth began in about 1840 with the new London and south-coast railways. Many of the northern parts of Croydon still consist of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century terraced housing built for middle-class commuters.

The development of suburban housing spread southwards, and during the 1930s large new estates were built in what was then Surrey. The greatest developments in the centre of the town took place in the 1960s and 1970s, when the local council encouraged firms outgrowing cramped London offices to move out to cheap development sites in Croydon. Much of the town centre was demolished to make way for new office blocks and roads, and Croydon was nicknamed 'Mini-Manhattan' (Figure 4.1). It is the central office and shopping centre that most people think of when they speak of Croydon, and many of them dislike it.

The media

Anyone reading this who has lived in London or south-east England will probably know what I mean when I say that Croydon has an identity

problem. For some time now it has been the butt of jokes, regularly characterized in the press and media as the epitome of boring, faceless, soulless suburbia. There are several reasons for this. One is its proximity to London. It is not like a city, because it no longer has a clear border between itself and the capital; it might be called an 'Edge City'. In 1996 Croydon Council helped form a group of European edge cities. One of the issues they will be addressing is the forging of a cultural identity: the aim is to remain distinct, in order not to be swallowed up.

Another problem is the way the centre of Croydon looks:

Croydon has become synonymous with the *laissez-faire* attitude of 1960s development, characterised by a crop of debased international-style towers and a militant rejection of all but the most short-term and expedient planning solutions. It is a kind of English Alphaville. (Sudjic, 1993:2)

'Croydon's a big shopping centre. Damn great office blocks.' (family museum-goer)

But it goes deeper than this. Not only is it ugly, it seems soulless:

Croydon is a commercial centre with commercial values. These are hard, like the 'Dallas' skyline, leaving people with the impression that Croydon can look after itself and does not need 'my' sympathy. A common criticism is that although Croydon is self regarding, when you come down to it the town is quite boring. If you want the real thing – culture, architecture – then you go up to London. Croydon is a focus for many surrounding communities, but people use Croydon without compunction and reserve their loyalties and identity for their own immediate surroundings. (Fisher, 1990:9)

And because the centre of town looks so modern, people assume it has no history:

Croydon is such a triumphant embodiment of current values, it seems as though it has always been that way. Not only is it inconceivable that Croydon should have a history, history itself has become irrelevant. (Fisher, 1990:10)

'How can there be a history of Croydon? It's only been up fifty years.' (family museum-goer)

The soullessness of the place is regularly remarked on in the national and regional media, and the mockery extends by inference to those who live there. If you live in a boring place, that makes you boring too:

Croydon is the monolithic mirror glass headstone to the life that none of us wants. (Coster, 1992)

Croydon, the Great American Hinterland of England, where there is nothing much to do but shop. (Cotton, 1991:24)

'Alternative' in Croydon means not buying your underwear at Marks and Spencer. (Bailey, 1994:10)

This kind of media coverage has a further distancing effect on the people who live in Croydon. Many do not use the name Croydon in their addresses, preferring to say that they live in Thornton Heath or Shirley (both areas within Croydon). We in turn, setting up our museum service, decided we could not call it Croydon Museum.

This is not to say that people hate living in Croydon. Many local people, especially young people, like certain aspects of it, and have high aspirations for the town. But it does mean that most local people are ambivalent or mildly embarrassed about the place:

'Croydon's a prosperous area. It's very clean.' (black teenager)

'It's better than living somewhere that no one's ever heard of.' (white teenager)

I imagine that this identity problem, while not peculiar to Croydon, would not be an issue in, say, Canterbury or Manchester. People who live in an evidently older, more clearly defined or less embarrassing city would be more likely to regard their city museum as having a story to tell. Although many Croydon people cited the lack of culture and leisure facilities as lying at the heart of Croydon's problem, few felt that a museum about Croydon was the answer, doubting whether there would be anything interesting to say:

'Croydon – what history?' (family museum-goer)

'If the museum was just about Croydon, I don't think I'd really bother.' (black teenager)

Politics and the economy

So why amid such apathy was a museum set up? The establishment of a city museum, or of a museum of any kind, does not normally happen as the result of a mass movement. It is usually justified as being in the public interest, but is likely to have more to do with the preferences and policies of an elite or special-interest group. Their views will set the agenda for the way the museum is run and how it interprets history.

In Croydon the decision to establish a museum was made before any research was carried out. It was never part of a published strategy or policy, but was the result of a combination of politics, personalities and opportunity. Senior officers within the Council perceived that Croydon had an image problem and that this was key to its economic future. Some of the

big companies that had relocated to Croydon in the 1960s were, now that rents were not so attractive, thinking of moving to places where there was more going on. The officers, one or two of whom had a personal interest in museums and the arts, persuaded leading councillors that a cultural centre in Croydon could have a positive impact on the town's image and economy. These councillors were receptive to the idea, and knew that it would be popular with local-amenity societies, who had been campaigning for decades for a local museum. The opportunity came in the form of a £30 million land sale and (as so often) a partly redundant building: the old town hall and library. The new complex, Croydon Clocktower, opened fully in 1995. It incorporates a new central library (including a local studies library), arts facilities, cinema, cafe, shop, galleries and a museum called Lifetimes.

Over the five years it took to create Lifetimes, the museum staff at Croydon both absorbed and to some extent shaped the Council's aspirations for the museum. This is not an easy process to describe. Key councillors and council officers held a range of views: some liked traditional art galleries, some were in favour of the idea of a community museum but were vague about what it might be. Others truly disliked the local museums they knew but were resigned to the fact that Croydon had to have one. Their views were important, because they were making decisions about funding the museum. We, as museum professionals, had views based on our experiences and opinions about what would make the best kind of museum service. Our views were also important, because we had some idea of what was possible and because we had to be committed to our work to do a good job. But Croydon people had views about museums as well; views that would not be heard unless we made special efforts to listen. Their views were important because they would be paying for the museum, and would form the majority of its visitors. Consequently we conducted regular market research surveys with local people to help filter and balance what politicians and professionals felt and to arrive at a shared vision. The results of this research have allowed us on several occasions to convince politicians and colleagues that their views, or those of vocal constituents, although valid, are in the minority and that it would make sense to pursue a more popular course.

Usually, though, what people and politicians wanted amounted to the same thing. Almost everybody desired a proposal that would put Croydon on the cultural map, though many believed this would be impossible. In order to do this, Croydon's museum had to be new, different, modern, daring, high profile, glossy, sponsorable and popular. It would be a symbol to help market Croydon to a hostile outside world.

But local people wanted their museum to be substantial as well as glossy.

To sum up, they felt a good museum should:

- be relevant to my life
- be about the future as well as the past
- take you out of yourself
- make you think
- be bright, busy, sociable and funny

The research made it clear that the museum could not hope to achieve all these things for everyone, and that maybe it would be enough if it could act as a stimulant. If it could give people an initial vision of themselves from another perspective: how I might have been in the past; how I might be in the future; how might I get there? Information and direction would be readily to hand so that people could follow up their new interests in their own time. And the museum should aim to be a friendly place, a meeting place, a place that could give richness and humanity back to the community: 'It'll give Croydon more of a name' (white teenager).

The audience

Very early on we had to address the question of who the museum was supposed to be for. As far as the Council was concerned, it was for everyone who lived, worked in or visited Croydon; a potentially huge and ill-defined audience. We knew quite a lot about the resident population from the 1991 census, but almost nothing about those who, though they worked in or visited Croydon, lived elsewhere. We felt that they might have different needs and expectations. It might be, for instance, that a worker temporarily based in Croydon or an occasional day visitor might prefer a more general and comfortable historical survey of the place, whereas local residents might want frequently changing displays of more contemporary relevance. All cities will have this diversity of potentially conflicting audience groups.

Many cities also have ethnically diverse populations: about 20 per cent of Croydon's resident population define themselves as either of African-Caribbean, South-East Asian or Irish origin. Cities tend to attract concentrations of people who would be marginalized elsewhere: Croydon, like London and Brighton, has significant numbers of gay and lesbian residents. And cities have mobile, shifting populations. In Croydon, people have tended to move outwards from London to the more affluent south. Few people live their whole lives in the place, which is perhaps both the cause and effect of its identity problems.

We had to ask ourselves how we could begin to cater for these very diverse and changing interest groups, or whether we should make the

decision to create a museum particularly for certain visitors. We knew that there would be a natural audience for the museum, and that this was likely to consist of white, well-educated, middle-class people. As museum professionals working for a local authority with a commitment to equal opportunities we felt the museum should try to attract diverse audiences, and that we should make special efforts to target non-visitors. But we were concerned that our attempts to do this might distance traditional audiences.

Because of these fears, we carried out our research with a cross-section of local people of different ages and ethnic backgrounds, including both museum visitors and non-museum visitors. To our surprise, we found that visitors and non-visitors felt fundamentally the same about how they wanted their museums. The researchers commented that the two groups were distinguished mainly by the presence or absence of a sense of duty about museum visiting.

Among other things, we wanted to know: how personal does history have to be to make it interesting? How far are people willing to engage with the history of people and places which are not necessarily their own? The researchers found that 'Croydon itself cannot easily trigger interest in a new history venture' (Fisher, 1990:11) and that the concept of local history in the abstract did not spark much enthusiasm. This may have to do with the way history has been taught in schools. Many people the researchers spoke to had found traditional history teaching dull: 'When history is about politics it's really boring. I'm not interested in old places, palaces and things' (white teenager). Also it is only recently that local history has begun to be regularly taught in schools. Consequently people felt that it must be less important, and probably therefore even more boring than national history. The researchers recommended (and it was no surprise) that the key to unlocking an interest in history was through people and human experiences:

The truth is that many things do go on in Croydon which are of extreme human interest. People get married, go to the doctor, choose their clothes, play in bands and so on. History may have to jump over to matters of personal interest within Croydon, rather than using Croydon as an umbrella concept. (Fisher, 1990:22)

Representing the audience in the museum

This led us to the decision that the museum would present history through people's lives, to the name Lifetimes and back to the question of which people's lives should be documented. It seemed to us that if we wanted the museum to appeal to a wide range of audiences, they had to see themselves, in some form, in the displays. In asking people who the museum should be

for we found that young and old people felt very differently. Young white people were mainly enthusiastic about Croydon's ethnic mix and wanted the museum to represent a range of Croydon people. For young black and Asian people it was essential that their history be presented as integral to mainstream British history, and not as something separate or different: 'I'm not interested in an ethnic museum. I don't know anyone who would be' (black teenager). In contrast the researchers found that older black and Asian people felt more confident about their past and the value of their experience. Black elders wanted their struggle represented: 'History is not a pretty thing' (black retired man). Asian elders spoke more of cultural exchange: possessing a strong culture, they were keen to have opportunities to describe it so that other people might better understand and feel closer to them.

At the same time the researchers found a hard core of white elderly people who felt threatened and undermined by the idea of subverting (as they saw it) a British museum to tell the story of another culture. I remember an instance that occurred around 1990 when, after a discussion about the proposed museum with a local history society, an elderly white local historian approached me with the plea: 'I hope you're not going to have any of these ethnic minorities in the displays. We Croydonians have been waiting years for a museum; it's ours.' We were agreed that one task the museum could undertake was to tackle the ignorance apparent in such remarks. However, it was evident that we had to do so sensitively.

Types or individuals

Our designers were very keen that we should base the exhibits and interpretation around a presentation which involved a large and complex fictional family, whose composition was determined by information gleaned from the census. For example, one of the people featured in the displays about the late-Victorian period would be a domestic servant, as a high proportion of working Croydon women at this date would have been in this kind of occupation. Appearing as a character or guide to information about being in service at that date, this figure might direct the visitor to an object that related to housework. She would also refer you to other members of her 'family' to point out how life had changed over generations. Our designers felt that presenting history in the format of a TV soap dynasty would give it both simplicity and an immediate popular appeal. They may have been right, but after much discussion we abandoned the idea as both ethically unsound and impractical.

I have often wondered whether, had we been dealing with a more clearly defined city that possessed a more distinct accent – a prouder city – it would have seemed more natural to synthesize facts and feelings and to present generic rather than particular people: a Mr and Mrs Croydon. As it was,

my colleagues felt particularly uncomfortable with the idea of 'typical' people, and persuaded me and the designers that it would be impossible to portray the ethnic diversity of Croydon over generations if we were restricted to a single family tree. We knew that we wanted to present real people, real stories and real things, and felt that these would be more powerful and more surprising than any characters we could invent. In creating a fictional overlay, much real history would get lost.

A way of collecting

In planning whose lives Lifetimes would interpret, we decided to concentrate first on local residents, since we knew more about them. We analysed the Croydon censuses for the periods of history we were covering, and particularly the most recent census which told us much about our potential audience. We spent a year trawling other museum collections for Croydon-related objects but found practically nothing; most social history collections had been built up with little concern for provenance and no indexes that could help us. We had in any case decided that our displays were going to be about people, and our means of collecting exhibits and related information broadly reflected this. We appealed directly to local people to contribute to Lifetimes, using a variety of means: roadshows around the borough; an exhibition in the shopping centre; appeals in the local press; contacts with local groups. We borrowed most of the exhibits from local (or ex-local) people, carried out extensive oral history interviews with them, had their personal photographs copied: collecting, as one of my colleagues has described it, with a personal touch (Fussell, 1992).

We found after a while that the people who were naturally offering us objects and information tended to be white women in their fifties or sixties, and that most of the objects dated from the 1920s and 1930s. It was apparent that not only were there cycles of redundancy (in terms of potential exhibits) but that those people coming forward were not representative of Croydon's population. Because we felt it was important to redress the balance, we employed Irish, African-Caribbean and Asian researchers to make contacts with people from these, Croydon's largest ethnic minority groups, and to encourage them to lend exhibits and information to the museum. As a result the contributions from Irish, African-Caribbean and Asian people in the current Lifetimes displays are in almost exact proportion to their presence as Croydon residents (Fussell, 1995). These histories are, as requested, presented as integral to Lifetimes (only half of the stories even refer to ethnicity): an Irish woman describes post-war housing conditions in Croydon, a black soldier from Croydon talks about his experiences in Northern Ireland.

We decided that we would aim to borrow rather than acquire most of our exhibits in order that we can regularly update the displays and use this as a way to introduce new audiences. For instance, at the time of writing, we are in the process of collecting objects and information from gay men and lesbians in Croydon for our next redisplay in 1999.

All of the exhibits and people featured in Lifetimes have some connection with Croydon, and this connection is drawn out in photograph and exhibit captions. But the presentation of history focuses on the people rather than the place, as recommended by the research. The stories presented in the displays tend to have titles like 'Having My Tonsils Out', or 'Spanish Holiday Affair'. In a survey carried out with our visitors in 1995, 66 per cent agreed with the statement, 'the displays are interesting even if you're not from Croydon' (Croydon Museum Service, 1995). So although people who know Croydon well may get more from the displays, knowledge of the place is not the key to enjoyment.

Connecting with history

We had decided to interpret Croydon through its people, but there remained a series of decisions to make about the museum's physical and intellectual content, its scope and means of presentation. We felt we wanted to know more about how people might connect with history, about which periods and subjects interested them most. We also wanted to know about specific philosophical and practical questions: did people want facts or interpretation? Did they care whether things were real or replicas? Did they want to dig for information, to investigate, or to be spoonfed? Did they want to participate or watch? Would visitors prefer traditional labels or should we use multimedia displays if we could? What about artworks, theatrical effects, drama and evocations? Should the museum be noisy or quiet, bright or dark? What should it smell of? How should it make you feel?

Our researchers asked people about these issues, using words, sketches and photographs as stimulus material. They found that for young people, history equalled dead. Young people were looking for a live experience geared to the concerns of Now. They were prepared to think about history only if they could see its relevance to their lives. A sense of history requires a vision of the future as well as of the past (Fisher, 1990): 'Museums are boring. They should have the future' (Asian teenager).

Older people by contrast have a deep-rooted need of history, although they will not usually identify it by that name. The parents of today and particularly the old of today actively call on the events of the past to help them interpret their lives and set the seal upon their identity. Living memory is all important. Events within living memory are not distant and dead, but are imbued with reality and meaning:

'History is anything that has happened in your lifetime. Things that have affected your life, the way you live your life.' (family museum-goer)

'I'd like to go back and find out where my family came from if you could get a nice piece of paper to go away with.' (white teenager)

The more personal, evocative and dramatic the experience, the better:

People spontaneously talk about starting from now and shading back imperceptibly into past events. The ideal is to get onto a train which takes you slowly into the past in such a way that you see exactly how it has changed between now and then. Experiences are at their most immediate when you yourself are having them. Rather than having an abstract theme such as the history of transport it is more inviting to have a people-centred theme such as Getting to Work in the Morning. In the same way, rather than basing exhibitions around artefacts, it is easier to interest the public if you base exhibitions around common experiences. Once you are in the past by whatever route, you want to experience it as directly as you can. People talk of the recreation of Trafalgar at Madame Tussauds where they were deafened by the sound of gunfire. This has a deep effect because suddenly you begin to understand what it must have been like for the sailors and gunners. (Fisher, 1990:31-2)

Another idea is to recreate a scene or a scheme on video exactly as it would have been using the objects, costumes and locations of the time. Once having oriented the visitor, s/he should then be invited to touch and use the actual objects which were demonstrated in the film. Many people would rather have reproductions which they are allowed to play with than the real thing in a glass case. If animateurs are available, so much the better. (Fisher, 1990:33)

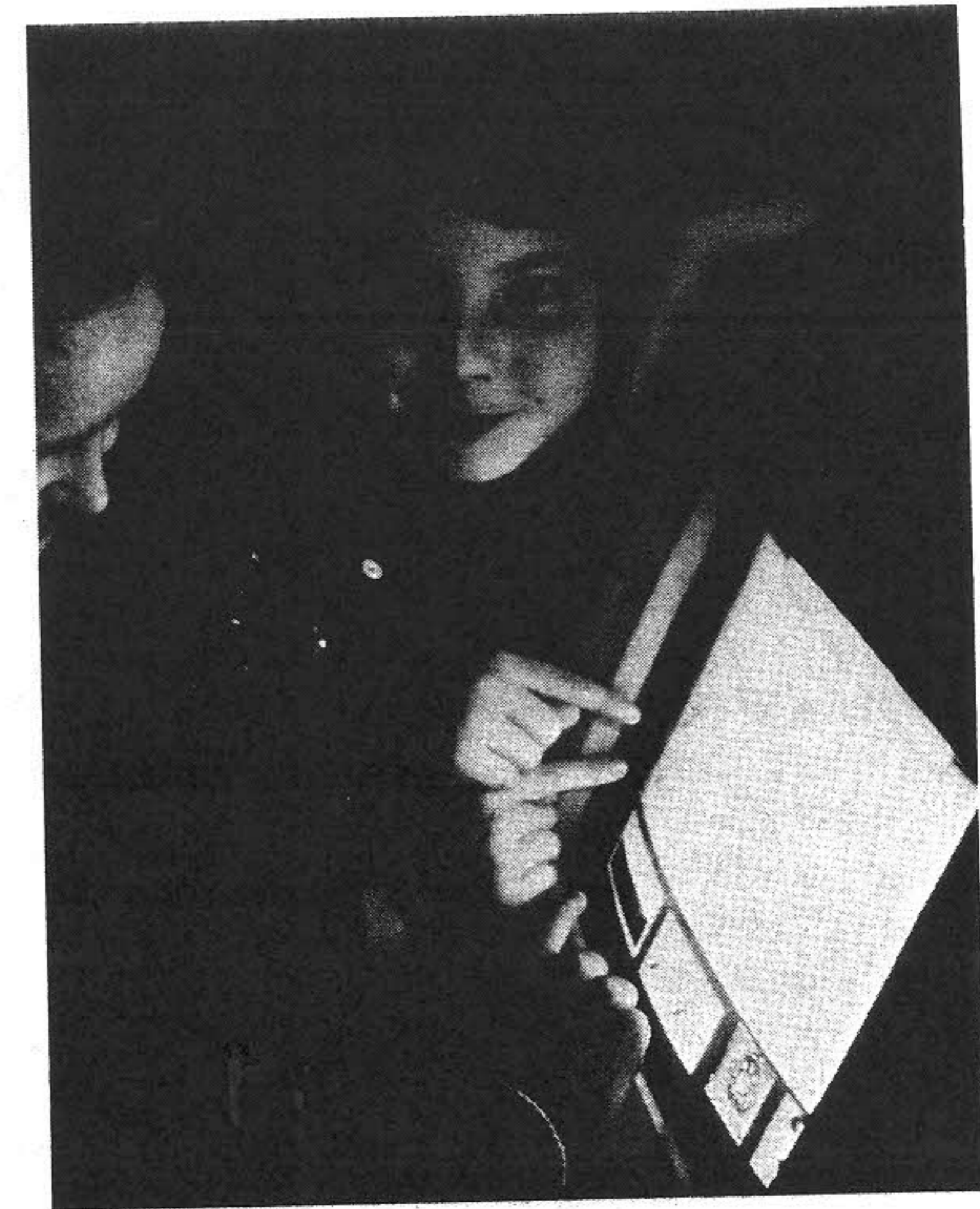
'I hate it when you feel as though you can't walk up and touch things.' (white teenager)

'They should have people in the museum who would dress in the period clothes, but you should know they're museum staff, so you can ask them things.' (black teenager)

Technology and choice

In our research, the young and the old (less so the middle-aged) were enthusiastic about computers, multimedia interpretations, games and quizzes as a means of finding out about history. We eventually chose CD-I (compact disk interactive) as the main way of interpreting history in Lifetimes (Figure 4.2). We did so for three main reasons. One was that we wanted to offer a depth and richness of information that would not have been possible with straightforward text displays. We share a building with a busy central library, which people use on a weekly basis to borrow books

Figure 4.2 Visitor using one of the interactives in Lifetimes (Croydon Museum Service)



and study. We wanted to have a long-term relationship with our visitors, to give people a reason to keep coming back. At the same time we had only a limited space: two large rooms (ex-courtrooms in what had been the town hall) with enough space, our designers told us, for about 300 objects. We felt that given this constraint, every object had to act as a starting point for something deeper. Multimedia not only offered the opportunity to put in far more (over sixteen hours' worth of information), it gave us the chance to present a richness and diversity of information (oral history, music, sound effects, moving film, still images, graphics) not possible in two dimensions.

More importantly still, multimedia offered choice: visitors could choose which captions to look at, which stories to hear, which quizzes to play. Lifetimes has no labels in the displays, although we provide caption books for those who find it easier and quicker to refer to text. We felt that offering the opportunity to play, or the choice of what to experience, might be more stimulating for most visitors, and especially for those people who felt that school and school trips to museums had force-fed them with information they did not want or need. This was something that came up several times in research: as we took the interactive through various prototypes we found that the quiz was a highly appealing element. For one thing, it gets people talking to each other, arguing about the right answers. And secondly, though

not all of our visitors choose to play the quiz, its presence on the interactive, and the fact that it is given equal weight with the exhibit captions and stories, seems to say to people that it is OK to have a good time. Using multimedia also gave us the chance to make direct connections across subjects and through time: a story about civil defence in the 1950s can be linked through the computer programme to another story about Croydon CND. Thus visitors can follow paths or explore contrasting views of history in a non-linear way.

But probably the most important reason for using multimedia was to make the museum seem more modern, more alive. The very presence of computers in the museum, the fact that they show changing, colourful pictures and generate noise and buzz is, we know from surveys, very appealing to most of our visitors.

Boundaries in time and space

In planning our displays we not only had a shortage of space but a shortage of Croydon-provenanced objects, both among our own limited collections and from other museums. Our initial research suggested that (with the exception of finds from a small number of Roman and Saxon excavations) it would be difficult for us to locate objects with a Croydon provenance from before about 1840. We later found, as we began collecting from individuals rather than institutions, that 1880 might have been a more realistic starting point: we had great trouble tracking down locally provenanced exhibits much over a century old.

Because of this we decided we could not possibly attempt to cover the whole of Croydon's history. We felt it would be better to encompass a shorter period in more depth, and that in view of what people had said about living memory, we should concentrate on recent history, the present and the future (Figure 4.3). The current Lifetimes displays begin in 1830, though we commissioned an entrance sculpture illustrating Croydon's history back to the Big Bang.

On the other hand, we felt we could not treat local history as separate from national or global history. If local people took their holidays at Butlins in Brighton, or fought in the Boer War, we should record that, even if that meant their stories were not about Croydon. The more recent the period we were dealing with, the less particular, the less local, the stories became. In Lifetimes there is a story about eating out in Croydon in the 1930s. A local woman describes a coffee shop called Wilsons that had a very specific, individual atmosphere. The corresponding story from the 1990s is about McDonald's; although another local woman describes her own feelings about the place, there is nothing intrinsically distinctive about any individual branch. The issue of whether we should be highlighting what was different

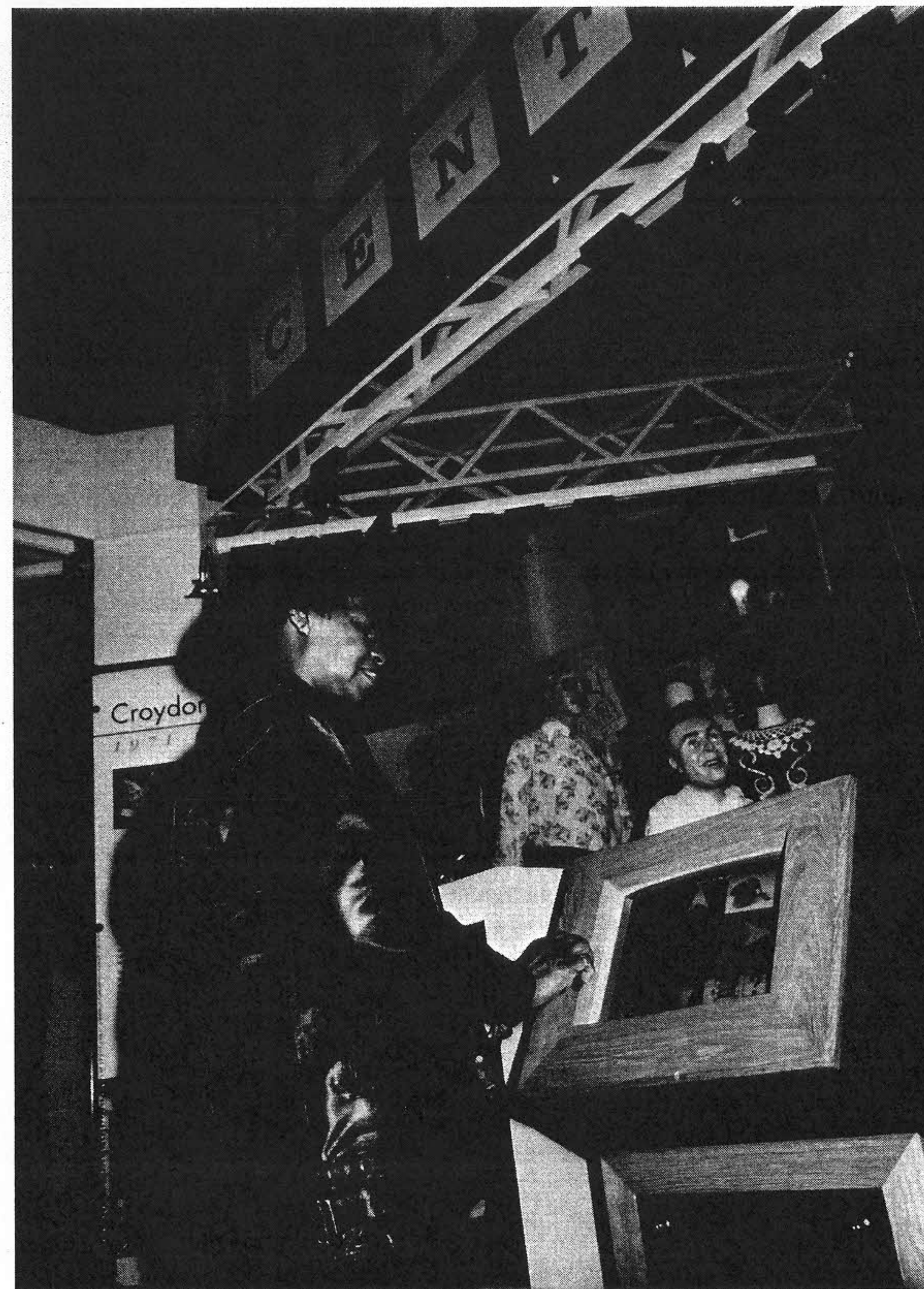


Figure 4.3 Visitors in Lifetimes
(Croydon Museum Service)

about Croydon or presenting common experiences was thrown into sharper focus as we dealt with more recent history.

Making a framework

Our shortage of collections was undoubtedly an opportunity as well as a constraint. We were under no pressure to display particular items. At the same time, we felt that we needed to give ourselves a framework for our research and collecting that would provide a structure for the displays. We decided to divide the period 1830 to the present into six chronological sections, each of roughly twenty-five years. Within each chronological section we wanted to cover a wide range of subjects and experiences. We worked out twenty-five themes which we felt would serve as a basis for our collecting (Table 4.1). These included familiar museum themes such as Transport, but also less obvious subjects such as Sex and Love, for which material culture

Table 4.1 Themes in Lifetimes

1.	World Events
2.	National Events
3.	Demography
4.	Homelife and Housing
5.	Work
6.	Personal Hygiene and Public Health
7.	Natural and Built Environment
8.	Fashion and Taste
9.	Media and Communications
10.	Religion and Morality
11.	Crime and Law
12.	Sex and Love
13.	Education
14.	Health
15.	Transport and Travel
16.	Arts and Crafts
17.	Welfare
18.	Politics and Economy
19.	Leisure
20.	Food and Farming
21.	Retail, Trade and Shopping
22.	Science and Technology
23.	Dying and Bereavement
24.	Parenthood
25.	Other

was much harder to find. Our idea was that there would be fifty objects within each chronological section; and that we would aim for two objects per theme.

To this thematic framework we added traditional local history and national history notes to guide our collecting. For example, we knew that for many people it would be important for us to refer, within our Transport and Travel theme, to Croydon Airport during its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s as London's main airport. Indeed, many of the subjects we wanted to cover were of national or global importance – the introduction of television, the spread of HIV – although we knew we wanted to speak about them through Croydon people and their belongings. Then for each period and theme we added what information we had from the census about local demographics, so that we could try to balance our coverage. This gave us a shopping list with chronological, thematic and demographic dimensions. To this we then added notes on what we were actually offered in terms of objects for display, memories/oral history and images. Often what we were offered did not tie in with one of our themes: in the early days we changed our categories quite regularly and even now one of our themes is 'Other'. The tables we built up then formed the index of all our research and the basis for our final selection of objects, stories and images for the display (Tables 4.1–4.5).

Table 4.2 Extracts from the tables of themes and finds, showing three items eventually selected (out of 300 featured in the displays and several thousand offered)

Overall Theme	Themes		People		Things (Objects, Images) Found
	Worldwide	Croydon	Wanted	Identified	
Death and Bereavement (Era: Wartime and Austerity)	Second World War	V1 and V2 bombs	Bomb survivor	WH	Shrapnel (FOWS) Photos of E
Demography (Era: Mini-Manhattan)	African/Caribbean/Cypriot/Irish immigration	Secondary migration from Central London	Emigrant from Jamaica	GB	Gig toy (GB) Photos of GB and house
Leisure and Popular Culture (Era: Croydon Now)	Punk and New Wave	Punk scene in Croydon	The Damned	Captain Sensible	Beret and glasses (CS) Film of New Rose performance (source)

Our decisions about which objects and stories to feature in the displays were therefore based on a number of general criteria: how important was it to tell that story or cover that theme? How important was it to feature that kind of experience? It was based on specific practical questions: could we find an object that related to a particular story? Would the object fit in the display? And it was based on our personal preferences: ultimately we chose what we thought were interesting stories or amazing objects.

Table 4.3 Exhibition caption and story used in Lifetimes

EXHIBIT CAPTION

Shrapnel. Fragment of a V1 flying bomb, commonly known as a doodlebug. This was found in the branches of a beech tree in Church Way, Sanderstead, in 1948. Over 5000 people were killed or injured in Croydon by German air attacks in the Second World War. Until 1944 all the bombs were dropped by enemy aircraft. Then, on the night of 15 June, the first robot bomb launched from the Continent fell on Croydon. This was the beginning of a continuous three-month attack during which 141 V1s fell on Croydon, and a further 54 on Coulsdon and Purley. People ran for cover whenever the spluttering roar of the approaching bomb cut off. This was a signal that the bomb had exhausted its fuel and was about to dive and explode. Kindly given by Group Captain F.O.W. Stokes.

STORY

'We could hear cries coming from under the debris of the house which had been shattered by the blast from the bomb. The ARP members worked hard to clear away enough debris to make a hole through which it was possible to crawl to the damaged shelter. When I had crawled down I found Mrs Wagstaff nursing her baby Nicola, and a young child, Elizabeth, buried up to her chest in debris. Mrs Wagstaff pleaded to be allowed to stay with Elizabeth, but I told her that if she did not get out quickly we would probably all be buried and killed. I promised I would remain with Elizabeth until she was rescued. Having got Mrs Wagstaff out, I started to clear the debris from Elizabeth. But the concrete roof of the shelter began to slip down. I also realized that Elizabeth would not survive, as it was obvious that her chest was crushed. She opened her eyes once and I said, "It's all right, love, I will keep the light of my torch on and we shall be all right." She just smiled and closed her eyes and I knew that the end was very near. I did not consider myself to be a very religious type but I could only repeat the Lord's Prayer out loud and hope for the best. I had one more go at clearing the debris from her but it was not good and by then I knew she was dead. The only hope of recovering her body was to get the heavy rescue gang with their mechanical machine. I realized that in doing this there would be the danger of debris falling down on her and damaging her face, so I built a small wall around her shoulders and face and put my steel helmet over her face to protect it. I had the sad task of telling Mrs Wagstaff the news of her daughter's death. The only comfort I could give her was that she had not died in the dark and alone. For myself I was very upset at the failure to save the child, and even today wonder if I could have done more.' (William Holloway)

The power of objects in themselves to attract attention was always a consideration. To illustrate a story about local politics in the 1910s we chose a local voting card with the wording MALCOLM.X. On the other hand we eventually rejected a Nazi flag relating to a story about a Canadian soldier in Purley during the Second World War, because we felt that, however interesting the story and caption, the object by itself was potentially too offensive.

Table 4.4 Exhibition caption and story used in Lifetimes

EXHIBIT CAPTION

Gig. Brought from Jamaica by Gee Bernard of Thornton Heath when she came to Britain seeking adventure in 1961. She was twenty-three years old and planned to return home in five years' time. By 1961, nearly 1800 Croydon residents had been born in the Caribbean. Gee had made the gig, or spinning top, when she was a child in the 1940s. 'We use solid wood such as nigambity wood or pimento wood or guava wood; the heart of these woods are best for making gigs. As children you do not know the value of such trees, therefore it is a serious problem to cut down your parents' prime pimento or other valuable trees. You use a cutlass and your knife and you chop and scrape until it came to the shape you want. The gig is finished with a small nail driven through the top and is played with a long sash cord to make it spin.' Kindly lent by Gee Bernard.

STORY

'People said "you come to England because the streets are paved with gold". No, if it wasn't England it would have been somewhere else. I have never known hunger, I have never known want until I came to Britain. My parents had at least six or seven hundred acres of farm land. The first house I stayed in in London was just outside a railway bridge. And the landlord had the stove on the stairs, so we had to cook on the stairs. And everything was kept in our room, one tiny room. A very narrow, mean, working-class experience. I work in a lot of different catering establishments, but I'm not staying in a job for long, because once I find people start taking liberties I'm moving on. As a young person I didn't understand racism. They used to say when you get your pay packet you mustn't show it to anyone. Then I think there must be something why they say so, so I said to the girls, "Come on, show it!" And then we discover that white workers were getting more wages than black workers. Then my little grass-roots politics begin.' (Gee Bernard)

Table 4.5 Exhibition caption and story used in Lifetimes**EXHIBIT CAPTION**

Beret and Sunglasses. Worn by Ray Burns, of South Norwood, when he played bass guitar with The Damned in the late 1970s. Ray joined The Damned after he met the drummer in the Fairfield Halls, where he worked as a toilet cleaner. He assumed the name Captain Sensible and took to wearing a beret and sunglasses. They protected his eyes and hair when the band played live. Like most punk bands, The Damned were often spat at by their audiences. Kindly lent by Captain Sensible.

STORY

Captain Sensible, singer and bass guitarist with The Damned, one of Britain's first punk groups, started out as Ray Burns, a South Norwood boy obsessed with glam rock. 'I saw Marc Bolan at the Fairfield Halls, and Alvin Stardust, Sweet, Gary Glitter, all these people and - WOW! It looked *so much fun!* I thought, Blimey, that's the job for me! But those bozos at the school careers office were saying things like "Well, Ray, you're quite tall, ever thought about joining the police force?" I just wanted to be up there on stage with tin foil all over me.' On leaving school, Ray tried a number of jobs. He worked for over six months as a toilet cleaner at Fairfield Halls. There he met a drummer who introduced him to a group who needed a guitarist. 'And he said, they're a bit demented. They've got this thing about short hair. And they've got this sort of aggressive attitude and they wanna change the face of the music business . . . We were a bunch of spotty oiks, basically four yobby blokes who were pretty antisocial. It was demented, lunatic, insane. It was so fast and so violent-looking. We were drunk most of the time - nobody could really believe us . . . One of the unfortunate aspects of punk was that people used to spit at you on stage. And The Damned have been accused of starting that, rightly or wrongly. You'd get covered in it, and I didn't like it in my hair, so I thought I'd wear a hat. And of course it's not very nice having it in your eyes either, so eventually it evolved into a beret and glasses. It was practical on stage. But it became a kind of trademark . . . I think my mum and dad only stopped saying "Go on Ray, go out and get a job" when they saw me on the telly and they thought, maybe there is something in this after all. After that it was mad. We still lived in a tiny house in South Norwood and we'd always get the blinking press round, banging on the door wanting some quote about this or that. But I enjoyed that celebrity to a certain extent 'cos working-class people don't usually get that voice, and I used it.'

Creating an atmosphere

When we asked Croydon people about the ideal level of activity in the museum, people spoke of an interested buzz: the atmosphere of the place should invite talk. We felt that we could achieve this by using oral history on the interactives: the museum would be full of the voices of people from the past. In fact, having experienced so few museums with a 'buzz' of noise, we completely underestimated the problem of sound interference; sometimes the place is too noisy to concentrate properly. In other respects,

however, we were perhaps too cautious. Many people hinted or said they would like a museum in which you could eat or drink:

The ideal environment borrows from the shopping piazza. Stores, shops, food and drink, bustle, buzz, live performances. The most direct way to create trust is to look after people's creature comforts. Visiting without commitment and picking up ideas without pressure. (Fisher, 1990:48)

'They should have a theme restaurant out of history.' (young white adult)

I think we simply decided that for conservation reasons we could not possibly serve food and drink within the museum itself, and abandoned the idea. Looking back, it seems to me that this was something fundamental and that we could have been more adventurous in integrating environments and experiences, creating if not a themed restaurant then at least a place where you could drink and learn at the same time.

Dealing with the present and the future

Our potential visitors had told us they wanted museums that were relevant to their lives today and that a sense of history required a vision of the future as well as of the past. They wanted museums to change - the idea of permanent displays was distinctly unappealing:

The main problem is that there is no sense of event. What's in there now will be in there in five years' time (so why should I bother to go now?), and when I do go and see them they will just be lying there, nothing will be happening. (Fisher, 1990:22)

Interpreting the present and the future in a museum was an exciting concept for us, but one it was hard to turn into reality. We tried to do it in three ways: by collecting contemporary exhibits; by using the multimedia programme to suggest current issues and by including a section on the Future.

We were exhibiting objects made in, and relevant to, 1994, but in order to create the interactive computer programme we had to have a cut-off point for collecting. This meant that by the time the museum opened in early 1995 even the most recent information was at least five months out of date.

At the end of each interactive story we inserted a 'ponder question': a question designed to make people think about the relevance of stories from the past to life today. For example, the question at the end of a story about taking the pill in the 1960s asks, 'Did the pill improve women's lives?' A story about making bubble cars in Croydon concludes with the question, 'How many people could you fit into a bubble car?' And a story about the

skyrise developments in Croydon asks, 'What would you do with Wellesley Road if you were a planner?'

Our section on the Future was the hardest section to conceive and create and now seems one of the most unsatisfactory. We had intended it to be an area where visitors could input their own ideas in some form. Because of our emphasis on new technology we spent weeks discussing how we might manage video boxes or design virtual-reality games. In the end time and money constraints (the Future was the bit we tackled last) caught up with us and we went for a straightforward laserdisc presentation featuring local people talking about their hopes and fears for the future. It now seems unadventurous where it should be visionary, repetitive rather than evolving.

A sustainable museum?

We have always thought of Lifetimes as a long-term display – never 'permanent' – but even so we failed to plan effectively for change. We had initially specified our multimedia programme to include a facility to change text and still images easily and cheaply. But over the course of the design process this requirement began to seem less important than creating a smart product. Then, after opening, the multimedia company who had produced the programme (very ably) went into receivership, causing us great contractual problems in alterations and updates. We had planned to update sections of Lifetimes every two years, but the problems with the contract and the consequent cost of updating even a section of the programme have made this impossible. Overall, we underestimated the cost of change and are now planning a more realistic four-year cycle. It is not ideal from the point of view of our users. By 1999 when we conduct our first update, the most modern exhibit will be five years old; a bit out of date by anyone's reckoning.

Croydon made its mark in the sixties as a symbol of architectural modernity. Now in the nineties it's decaying, but it can't go back to being a sweet old town. Its choice is to modernise and stay at the leading edge . . . or lose everything. (Croydon resident quoted in Fisher, 1993:14)

The display update will include transferring to easily updatable, probably online, technology. But if we want to remain relevant to new audiences, to deal with 'now' and to speculate about the future, it is not enough to have modern exhibits and stacks of technology. It will involve continuing to borrow and share objects; not always collecting to own. And it will involve designing displays that are flexible: we have to have displays that are easy and cheap to change.

Most importantly, of course, sustainability involves a constant dialogue with our visitors and non-visitors, who are likely to be more mobile, better

educated and to have a greater choice of leisure pursuits than is the case today; we have to continue to offer them something they want, where, when and the way they want it. Those who participated in the market research we conducted in 1990 wanted their museum to be relevant, involving, dramatic and thought-provoking. I doubt that people in other cities feel that differently. Museums are about Roots, Empathy, Creativity, Empowerment. Whether we can deliver these is the real issue in interpreting our cities.

'Be flexible and open to criticism.' (black retired man)

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