

Why write a collection biography?

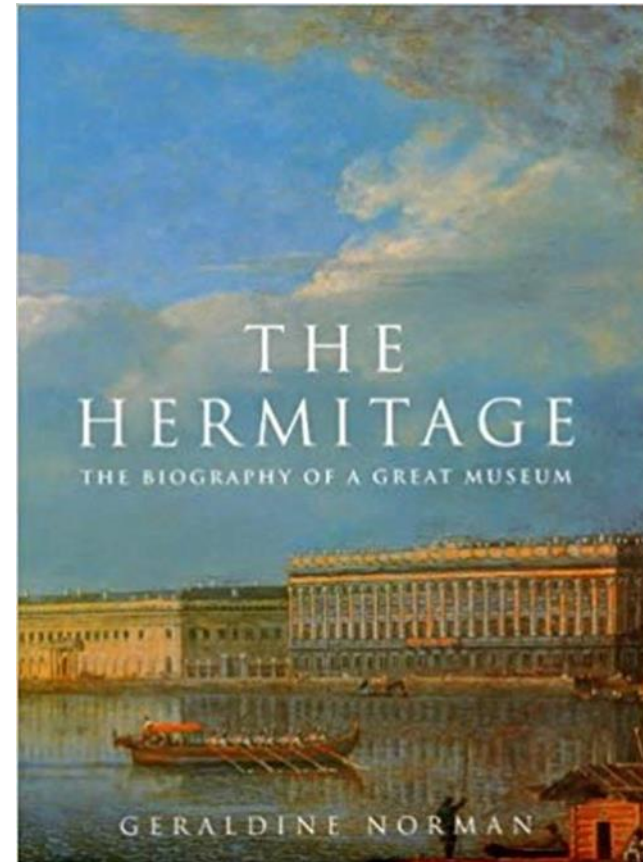
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(Museum Development Yorkshire)

Yorkshire Industrial Collections Network 30th. October 2018

What is a collection biography?

- A useful tool for understanding the history of your museum's collections and the environmental, social and organisational factors and people that have shaped it.
- A useful tool to assist the understanding of current issues which are being faced in the strategic management of the collections.



Collection biography – what is it?

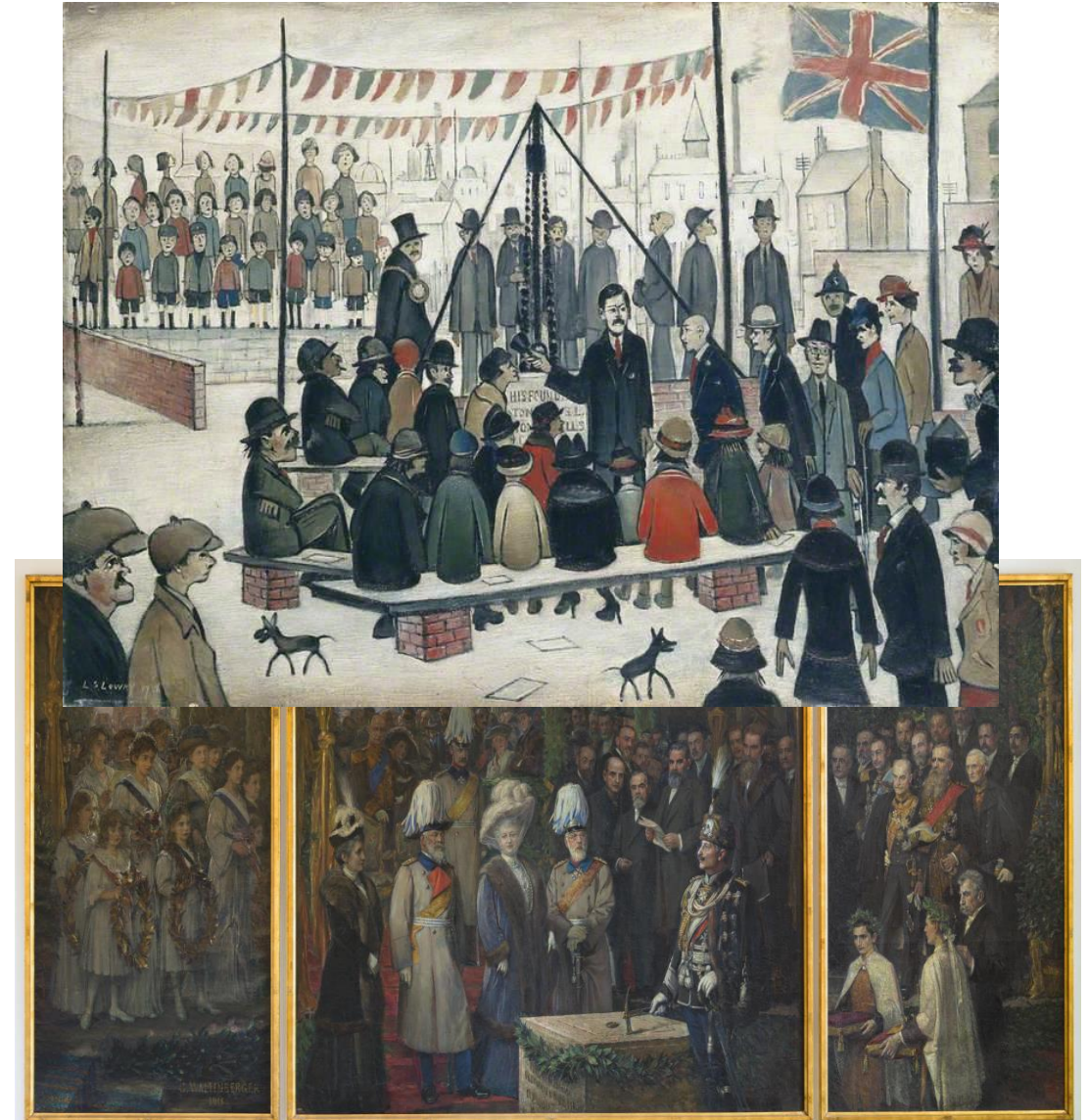
- A Collection Biography contains important information which needs to be considered when significant changes are on the horizon as it provides some context to the collections management data that the museum holds.
- It also provides a useful introduction to the museum's Collections Development Policy and Plan.

Collection biography – what is it?

- In its basic form it is also useful as a simple aid to access and to inform key stakeholders whose understanding of the collections and the issues which relate to it might be minimal.
- A simple statement which provides an overview of the collections and how they came about might be usefully incorporated in the content of the museum's www site.

Collection biography – value not £!

- **Museums have generally not been very good in documenting their own histories and operations**
- Current curator's are often unaware of the interests, plans, personalities and ways of working which influenced and shaped what is within or was excluded from the museum's current collections.
- Key exercise undertaken in advance of any significant collections rationalisation exercise or plans to develop the collections in new areas.
- Understanding current collections at a strategic level is also key to planning for their future
- Considering the museum's approach to sustainable succession planning for the effective management of its collections.



Collection biography

- A process of detection that may be popularly seen as something like *CSI Museum Collection*. (a potential new heritage TV format?)

- CSI Attraction Orlando USA



Collection biography – points to consider

- When was the museum in its current form established?
- What is the current location of the museum and its collections? Include exhibitions and off site storage buildings.
- What organisation operates the museum and cares for its collections?
- Was it at another site(s) previously? Where?
- Was it operated by another organisation? Which and when?



Transport Museum

Travel back in time! The Museum of British Transport contains relics of public transport over five generations: Historic locomotives—Royal coaches—trams—horse-drawn and other buses. You can also see MaVard, the fastest steam locomotive ever built—126 mph on 3 July 1938.
Visit also: The Railway Museum, York
The Great Western Railway Museum, Swindon

Museum of British Transport
Clapham High Street
London SW4

It's open:
10.00—17.30 Mondays to Saturdays
Including Bank Holiday Mondays
(closed Good Friday, Christmas Day, Boxing Day).
It costs:
1s 6d for boys and girls under 15 years;
2s 6d for adults. Reductions for school parties.
It's easy to get to:
By Underground: Northern Line to Clapham Common.
By Bus: 35, 37, 45, 88, 116, 137, 155, 181, 188.
By Green Line: 711, 712, 712A, 713.
By British Rail: Clapham (South London Line),
Clapham Junction, or Balham, then by bus.
Ask for Clapham Common bus or coach stop.



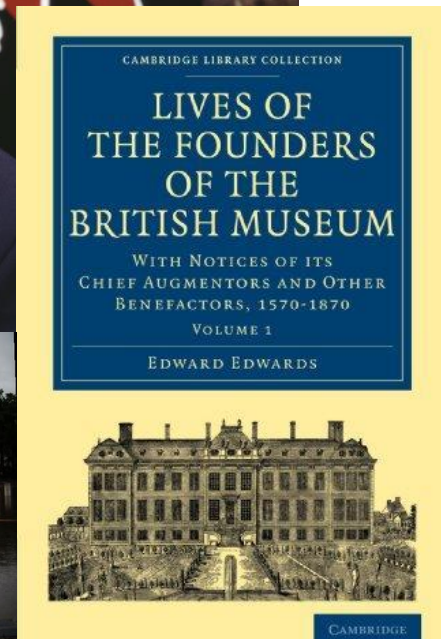
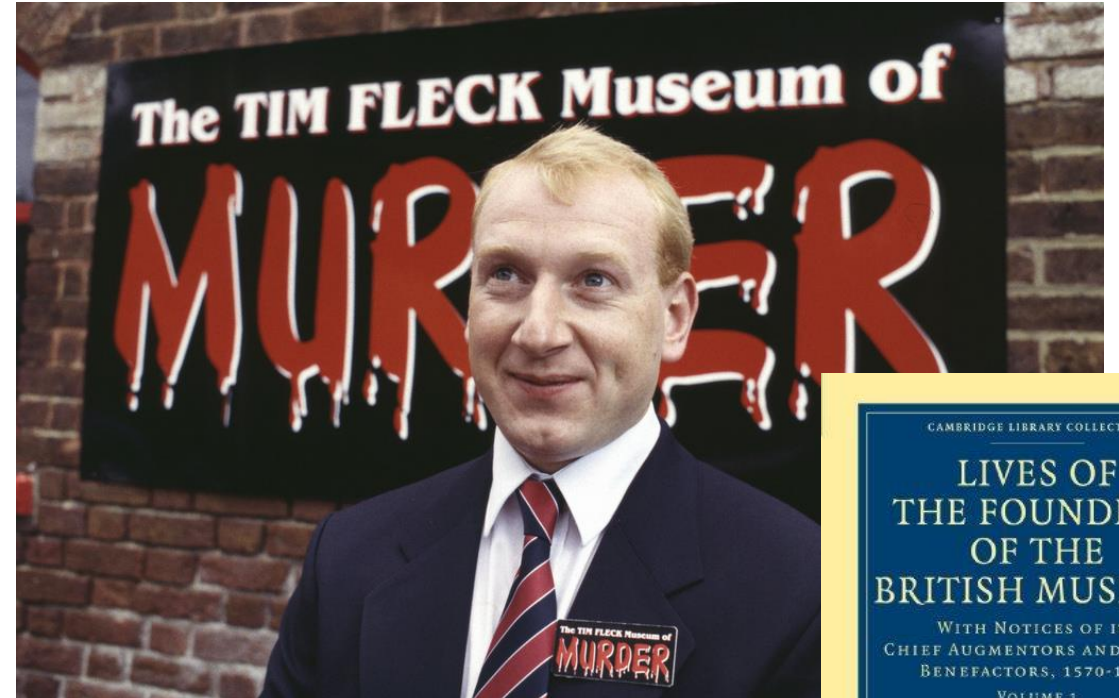
Collection biography – pre-history and themes

- 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.
- Any pre-existing collections e.g. from individual collectors or institutions which pre-dated the establishment of the museum.
- The size and scope of these “founding collections”.
- Is the museum now responsible for the collections of another pre-existing museum which is no-longer open?



Collection biography - history

- Where there periods when the museum was collecting for specific projects e.g. new or planned museums or specific collecting initiatives which shaped the collections?
- Any key collectors whose work shaped collections before they were transferred to the museum? Biographical details of individuals and brief scoping statements for their collections.
- Any key events in the past which may have resulted in disposals from the historic collection e.g. planned collections rationalisation plan, site closure, major out of course events like fire, flood and war damage?



Collection biography - people

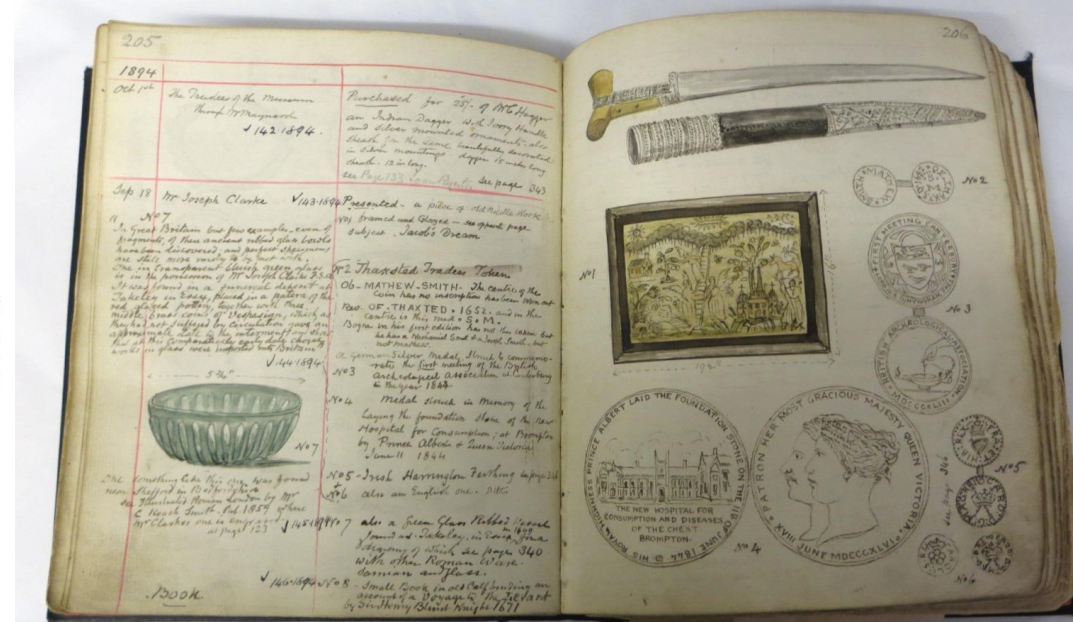
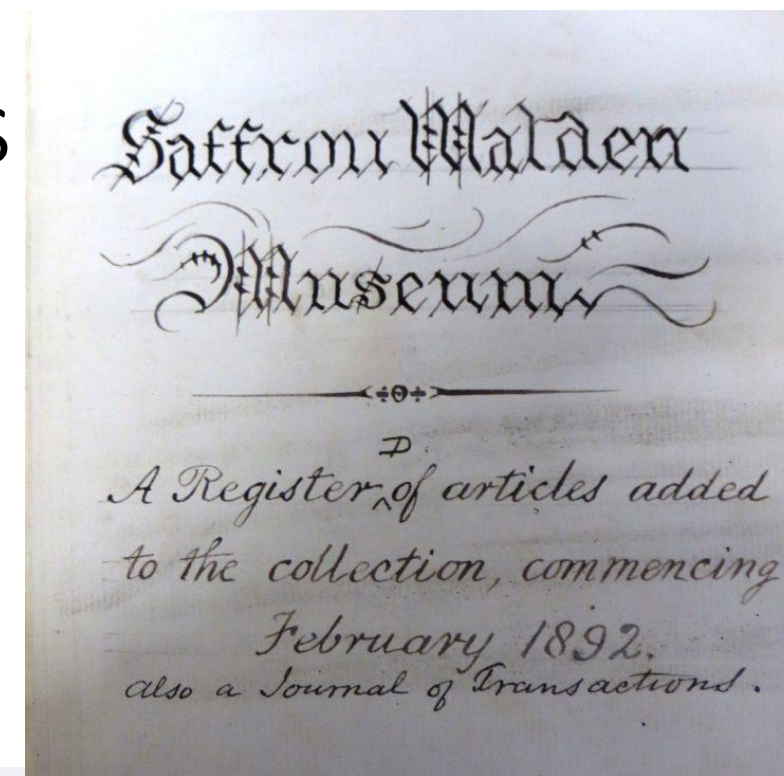
- Key members of staff e.g. curators, directors, trustees or volunteers who had a significant influence on the development of the collection at key periods?
- Key identifiable influences on their activities e.g. specific academic or personal interest? Did their backgrounds impact on the development of the collections?
- Are any of these key staff members still around and would it be possible to gain information from them to help with “problem” areas or generally enhance current understanding of the collections to-day?

- Frank Atkinson, Beamish, Arthur Smith Usher Gallery, Lincoln,
- Peter Brears, York and Leeds



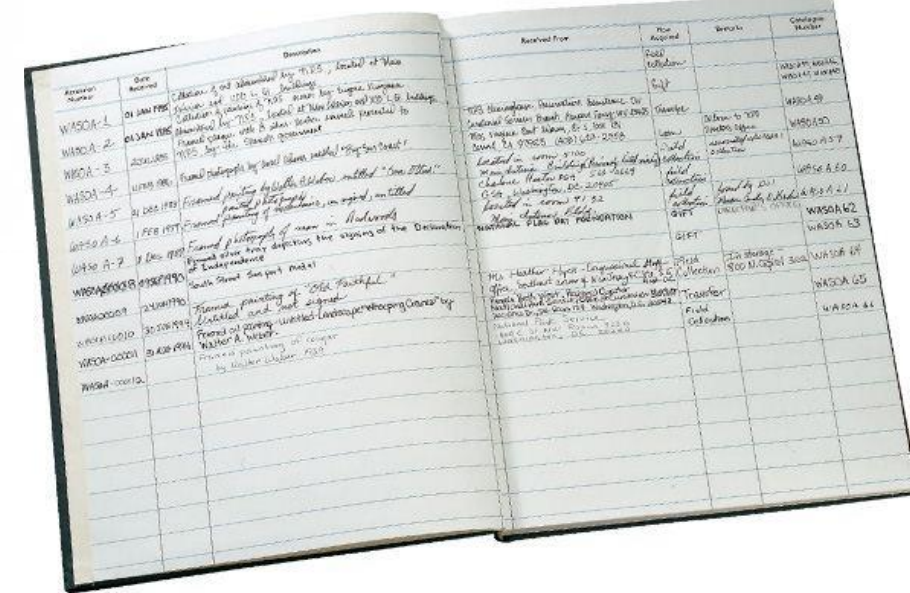
Collection biography – Collections Management Systems

- What is the earliest entry in the first Accession Register? What date?
- 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?



Collection biography – Collections Management Systems

- Are the legacy documentation systems properly archived and retrievable? If not what are the problem areas?
- What sort of object numbering systems did the museum operate in the past? Provide examples of numbering styles and the date/subject and site ranges for their operation.



Accession Register

[illegible]

Deaccession Register

[illegible]

Collection biography – Collections Management Systems

- 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? How many records does the database contain?
- How complete are the records on the database? Are they current and maintained?
- Does the museum operate any other computerised records for its collections? E.g. Access or other general databases, Excell or other spreadsheets.
- Is information about the museum's past collecting available in publicly available documents e.g. local authority museum or other committee minutes or documents from the charity's board?

HORNIMAN MUSEUM. LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL.

RITUAL FIGURE

MUSEUM NUMBER 31-42

ACCESSION NUMBER 1051

NUMBER OF SPECIMENS 1

SERIES D.A. Africa C

OBJECT Carved wood figure seated ♀, suckling child, two more on back

LOCALITY, Etc. Yoruba, Nigeria

RECD. FROM Mrs F.H. Ruxton BY G

DIMENSIONS H 27" VALUE

REMARKS Re Sadler 'Arts of West Africa'

NE 205-207, 323

21137

Card of IDENTIFICATION

File Birds Institution: identity number LDHBN: NH.59.1 Part

Simple name Snipe & Jack snipe D Form mounted in case Sex Age Phase Number 2

Classified identification Lymnocyrtus minimus

C Current System Status D Identifier: date D

Label 200

Other

Classified identification

C Current System Status D Identifier: date D

Label

Other

Place name/detail Britain

vice-county locality number

Lat Long Other co-ordinates value & units/accuracy Altitude Other position value & units/accuracy

NGR Depth

Habitat keyword/detail

Locality detail

C Collection method Collector: date Collection number D

STORE Store: date Dreadnought: 4.9.1980 Recorder: date Natural History staff: 8.9.1980

NATURAL HISTORY © IRGMA 1975 1/12/75



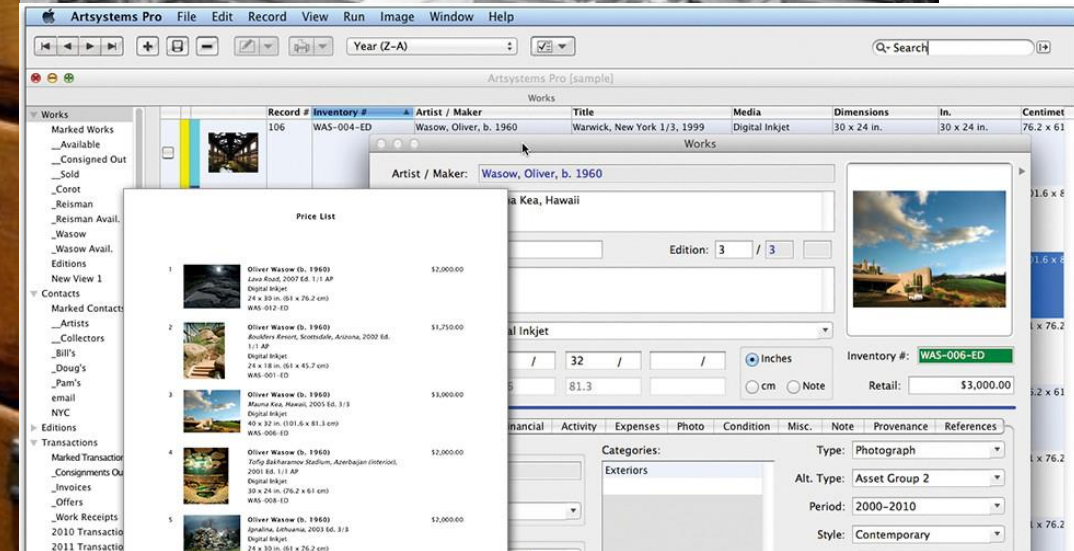
Collection biography - The Collection to-day

- What is the size and scope the museum's collection with a basic description of each section?
What are considered the most important bodies of material within the collection?
- Does the museum have good intellectual and physical control of the collections for which it is responsible?



Collection biography - The Collection to-day

- Are there any backlogs?
- How does your museum define a “backlog” in collections management?



Collection biography – current collecting

- Is the museum still adding to its collection?
- What is the nature of current collecting e.g. targeted relating to exhibition projects, themes in the collections development plan or passive?
- Are collections assessment/appraisal/rationalisation projects currently underway?
- What are the internal mechanisms for reviewing potential new acquisitions and disposals? - collections development committee or similar? Does this involve any peer review or stakeholder input?

• Coogan's Run



Collection biography : Storage

- Where is any material not on display currently stored?
- Is there a clear map or plan of all display and storage locations?
- Is there a numbering/ naming system that identifies all spaces where collection material is located?
- Is there a rack and shelf or box numbering system for the location of all collection material held in store?
- Is this system used in object location records?



Collection biography – key tool for curating and managing a museum collection

