

Case Study:

Community Digitisation Project: Bath's Underground History Unlocked



An inclusive, well organised, and appealing community volunteering project. Centred on a compelling collections story, this South West Museum Development Small Grants-funded project was designed to be genuinely accessible to all.

This project targeted and prioritised two local communities closest to the museum and ensured there were no barriers to participation. The volunteering was also fully accessible to people living further away or who can't come into the museum for any reason.

Miranda Litchfield, CEO at the Museum of Bath Stone, has shared her Top Tips for running accessible volunteer projects, which can be found throughout the case study.

About the Museum

The Museum of Bath Stone tells the story of Coombe Down, its stone and its people. The museum opened in 2014 following the infilling of the Combe Down Stone Mines. It has Working Towards Accreditation status and is currently open by appointment while it enhances the visitor experience. One of the stories told by the museum is Combe Down stone's role in creating the buildings of the UNESCO World Heritage city of Bath.



Seeing the videos and thinking about the men who worked down the mines in the 18th and 19th centuries has given me a deeper appreciation and connection to the area.

Bath's Underground History Unlocked, Project Participant

What was the challenge?

The Museum of Bath Stone received a large donation of video tapes documenting the Combe Down Stone Mines prior to their infilling. This was an exceptionally rich archive recording areas of 'High Grade Archaeological Importance' with huge potential to be cross referenced with museum's collection of 100,000+ digital records. These 61 hours of footage were inaccessible and required professional digitisation.

The collection was intriguing: mainly 'never-before-seen' footage. The museum wanted to involve the community in discovering it.

In the wake of the stabilisation and infilling of the mines, a new housing development had doubled the number of homes in Combe Down since 2016. There is an ongoing need to continue to bridge the gap felt between longstanding and newer residents.

The museum had an acute challenge of attracting and retaining volunteers and community support, identified in its current Forward Plan.

How did the Museum respond – project concept, partnerships and funding

The museum...

- Created the project concept for Bath's Underground History Unlocked, to provide unique volunteering opportunities, open to all residents, to:
 - be the first to discover this collection
 - develop skills in archival practice
 - nurture a sense of place
 - re-ignite interest in the museum following a long closure
 - volunteer in house for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic
- Put in place key partnerships to progress the project – with The Hub, a community asset located in between the area's newer and older communities; and with the original videographer responsible for creating the video archive
- Applied for funding (South West Museum Development Small Grant - £5600 for collections expertise, digitisation, travel costs and hardware); with £4800 of match funding for additional computer terminals at the museum for volunteering, for project advertising costs, for volunteer refreshments and for building running costs. Additional match funding came via the time of the fixed term Museum Director (for volunteer recruitment, evaluation and delivering the project legacy). The museum estimated that 400 hours of volunteer time would be contributed to the project, and described the volunteering opportunity in their grant application:

"Volunteers will be presented with a rare opportunity to transcribe content, record their observations and support the development of museum's core collection. Priority will be given to individuals applying from the Combe Down and Fox Hill communities. The placement will be accessible to all residents and adjustments required to support wider inclusion will be made in every possible instance."



Miranda's Top Tip:

To get support for a complex project, you will need to clearly communicate its value and legacy.

What were the key objectives?

1. To prioritise the involvement of residents of Combe Down and Fox Hill, two communities close to the museum and a key target audience for the museum
2. To recruit a minimum of 20 volunteers
3. To offer a remote/volunteering-from-home option
4. To ensure a mutual benefit - value to participants as well as to the museum
5. A project that was genuinely accessible to all
6. To ensure a legacy beyond the life of the project: enhanced interpretation of the Bath stone story in the museum; maintained volunteer interest, strengthened capacity to attract volunteers; longer opening hours
7. To devise a project that was able to run alongside, and support existing work to safeguard the museum's future (Accreditation, developing the visitor experience, volunteer recruitment)
8. To evaluate the project against these objectives through qualitative and quantitative data gathering

What was the strategy for recruiting volunteers?

The museum planned towards a recruitment 'launch date', taking a similar approach as for the launch of an exhibition or website. They planned the practicalities of the publicity, recruitment process and welcome in detail, from the perspective of potential volunteers, so everything was ready on the launch date.

What else was prioritised in the volunteer recruitment strategy?

- Alongside advertising priority for Combe Down and Fox Hill residents, the museum wanted to enable every potential volunteer to participate, by making the project fully accessible. At sign-up stage, everyone would be routinely asked to share any access needs
- Clarity and flexibility about when (which days) and where volunteers could do their volunteering – either from home, at the museum or a combination of both
- Clear messaging about the suggested time commitment – 10 hours over 3 months
- Full support and training offered as standard – not requiring any prior skills or experience
- Clarity about the project benefits for individual volunteers, including the difference they would be making
- An opportunity for under 18s (with a clear lower age limit of 14 years)
- Communicating the projected project timeline and milestones at the beginning
- A clear, easy to remember timeframe – one month - for people to sign up
- A choice of dates to receive training for the project in the project information – and additionally offering people the option to complete training online in their own time
- Clarity about when participants would have their place on the project confirmed – within 7 days of applying

The museum then developed key project information – this would become the project page on the museum's website, with clear 'headline' information about the volunteer opportunities.

The museum then shaped all their promotional copy from that key project information.

Next, the team commissioned project graphics to give a clear visual identity to the project webpage. This graphic was the basis of social media banners.



Bath's Underground History Unlocked

A Community Digitisation Project

Project duration: November 2022 – January 2023

Project title: Bath's Underground History Unlocked: A Community Digitisation Project

Volunteers required: 20 individuals from Combe Down and Fox Hill

Volunteer commitment: 10 hours (approximately)

About you:

Would you like to discover the underground landscape beneath the surface of UNESCO World Heritage Site?

Would you like to be the first to see rare footage documenting an integral piece of Bath's history?

Would you like to gain valuable experience within a heritage setting?

Important information:

- No experience necessary
- Minimum age 14 (no upper age limit)
- Approximately 10 hours commitment
- Project begins November 2022 and finishes January 2023
- Volunteer from home, at the museum or a combination of both
- All training provided
- Full support provided throughout
- Opportunity to make a valuable contribution to the Museum of Bath Stone
- Opportunity to have your observations preserved in perpetuity

Registration:

To register, email the museum's team on info@museumofbathstone.org with your:

- Full name
- Address
- Telephone number
- Email address
- Training session date preference: 2nd November, 9th November or virtual
- Any accessibility requirements you have

Registration for the project closes at midnight, Monday 24th October 2022.

Volunteers will receive a confirmation email of their place on the project and residents applying from the Combe Down and Fox Hill communities will automatically receive priority. Please contact us if you have not received your confirmation email within 7 days.

Volunteering commitment:

November 2022: Welcome and Introduction (two hours)

Volunteers will need to choose from 1 of the 3 from the following options:

Available dates:

- Wednesday 2nd November 7:00pm – 9:00pm, Museum of Bath Stone. Light refreshments provided
- Wednesday 9th November 7:00pm – 9:00pm, Museum of Bath Stone. Light refreshments provided
- Virtual training session (complete from home anytime during November)

November/December:

Each volunteer will be able to decide when and where they wish to complete their assignments, either working at the museum during office hours or from home at their leisure, supported by the Collections Manager.

January 2023: Project Debrief and Celebration (two hours)

The Project Debrief and Celebration will be an event held exclusively for Project Volunteers. Details to be announced in December 2022.

Further and additional volunteering opportunities will become available following the project's completion, however – there is no commitment or expectation for volunteers to continue.

Click the links below to download the **Volunteer Role Description** for this project: Bath's Underground History Unlocked.

[Volunteer Role Description](#)

[Volunteer Role Description \(large print\)](#)

The museum used their project priorities to set the tone for all the communication materials about the project. Throughout, the communication materials:

- Were warm and friendly
- Clear and concise
- Set expectations
- Communicated the aspirations for the project
- Expressed the value of - and to - volunteers
- Highlighted key information
- Specifically asked for accessibility requirements
- The museum was now able to follow a clear step by step plan for launching the project.

Launching the project

Shortly before the launch, the museum's blog highlighted a previous, successful digitisation project to demonstrate a track record.

The day before the 'launch date', the museum:

- Published a blog post announcing their funding success and project plans
- Shared the funding success on social media

Then, the next day, the launch date, the museum:

- Published the Project Page on the website
- Published a blog post announcing volunteering opportunities now available and key dates, linking this through to the Project Page
- Published a new homepage banner linking to the Project Page
- Changed Twitter and Facebook banners to Project graphics
- Shared news of volunteering opportunities on social media, with link to Project Page (once)

What was the outcome of the recruitment drive?

- No emails or calls received asking for further information or clarity
- Volunteers followed sign-up instructions and provided all necessary details without the need to chase or follow up, saving time
- Half of the project participants live in the 'targeted' communities Combe Down and Foxhill; of the remainder, half were from the Bath area and half from further afield.
- Those with additional needs brought unexpected and valued skills to the project, particularly neurodiverse volunteers.
- Volunteers from further afield were not discouraged from applying
- 23 volunteers registered – no one was turned away
- Near 50/50 gender ratio
- Variety of ages 14 – 70+
- Approximately 70% of volunteers self-reported a range of accessibility requirements which suggests that the approach to enabling access worked

Miranda's Top Tips:



- Have clearly defined time commitments
- Short term projects have great appeal – try to always have a community project!
- Be forthcoming and ask for accessibility requirements; we are the barriers to wider inclusion, and it is our responsibility to address and remove these barriers

Welcoming, training and supporting the new volunteers

Volunteers could choose between two alternative training dates or to receive training remotely. Project training started with refreshments and everyone received a museum lanyard, ensuring a positive, warm welcome for anyone new to heritage volunteering or to the museum. The training content did not assume prior knowledge. As the project got underway, the group developed its own dynamic and cohesion, and at the request of the group a private Facebook group was created for group communications (Facebook was chosen as a manageable and less intrusive communication tool than, for example, WhatsApp).

Key points from evaluation and for effective practice

75% of participants shared they felt 'much more connected to their local heritage' and 25% felt 'a bit more connected'.

60% of participants felt they have 'learned ... new things about Combe Down's industrial heritage'.



Volunteers who returned the survey said they were 'very likely' or 'likely' to volunteer with a heritage organisation again. The museum received messages from several people congratulating them on the launch and expressing that they would love to be involved if they had the time and to consider them for future projects.

Everyone brought rich life experiences to the project and some participants were able to offer geological expertise to inform future interpretation of project material. The project has opened up the possibility of co-creation for the museum.

Several project volunteers have expressed a desire and commitment to continuing their descriptive work and the museum continues to support volunteers to work either remotely or onsite with the team. The project has emphasised the value of different perspectives – we all see things differently and we all have something unique to offer.

Of the project volunteers, one individual has volunteered for the new role of Steward/Museum Guide and will be volunteering fortnightly when the museum reopens. A second participant, a chartered geologist, is joining the charity's board of trustees.

References and links

[Projects | Museum of Bath Stone](#)

[Digital Preservation | Museum of Bath Stone](#)