

Creativity and innovation – the Tower of London and the British Crown Jewels

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The Tower of London is one of the most ancient, still occupied and working historic sites in Britain. It was built both to defend London and to instil fear into the hearts of the people of London, soon after the conquest of England by William, Duke of Normandy in 1066. It still stands at the very heart of London, and it is one of the most readily-recognised icons of Britain.

The Tower of London is also the most-visited historic site in Britain. Over 2 million visitors a year enter its forbidding gates, and a majority of them are visitors from other countries overseas. They come to see and experience both the dark side and the lighter history of royal power, to feel the long march of history, to marvel at priceless jewels and to shudder at the stories of imprisonment and execution.

Stories is a key word. In recent years, Historic Royal Palaces – which looks after the unoccupied royal palaces in London, Hampton Court Palace, Kensington Palace, Kew Palace and the Banqueting House Whitehall as well as the Tower – has reassessed its values and its ways of working. That has resulted in adopting our *Cause*, the underlying philosophy for our work. ‘Our challenge’, the Cause says, ‘is to help everyone explore the story of how monarchs and people have shaped society, in some of the greatest palaces ever built.’ Story is at the heart – and this overturns earlier assumptions. Rather than architecture and art being the *guiding* elements for how we think and work, they become the *expressions* of the people who built and inhabited these places and of the stories they have left behind.

This work has been innovative. In Britain at least, no other heritage or cultural organisation has engineered such a profound shift in its direction, and found the ways to animate all its work through this shift in perspective. And it has released a new wave and a new type of creativity. Sometimes the methods are traditional, tried and tested, sometimes they involve new technologies. They always aim to bring out new understanding, and to reach out to audiences in different ways.

The Crown Jewels

The single most important association with the Tower of London is the collection of the Crown Jewels, the coronation regalia that date back in their essence for well over 1200 years, and physically for 400 years. The crowns, orbs, sceptres, swords and robes are the symbols of monarchy, and are a working collection in the sense that they continue to be used in state ceremonial. Some items are used only in a coronation, the last of which was in 1953 when Elizabeth II was crowned Queen. Others, such as the Imperial State Crown, are used at least annually. The jewelled objects are beyond price, and they contain some of the world’s largest and most famous gems. In their current display, some 40 million people have seen these objects, and they pronounce themselves on the whole satisfied with what they see. Why should we change anything?

For we do want to change the displays. As with the Cause, we are constantly striving to meet the needs of our audiences better. And we want to broaden our audiences, to reach new people and persuade them that heritage is for all and open to all.

Set in the front of the crown of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother is what is arguably the most famous diamond in the world, the Koh-i-Noor. People killed each other for this diamond in India, Persia and Afghanistan, rulers lusted after it. It went through many hands, until the last Sikh ruler, the boy Maharajah Duleep Singh, was defeated by the British in 1849 and the fabulous diamond was presented to Queen Victoria. Since then, it has only been the property of royal women.

This diamond has a very special place in the interests and affection of people from the Indian sub-continent. The area surrounding the Tower of London has a very large Bangladeshi population, and in the course of consultation research in the area we discovered women who spoke little or no English, had no concept of empire or knew what the Tower of London was, but they did know there was a large building that housed the Koh-i-Noor.

Through simple techniques – storytelling, short dramatised episodes, written texts and new-style guidebooks that highlight the hidden stories – we are increasingly able to unlock hidden meanings within what we display. The story of the regalia as the symbol of power, and the constitutional significance of coronation and monarchy, will never go away, although we can find better ways to tell those stories. But by using ingenuity and simple techniques we can make these things come alive for wider and different audiences.

Variety is the key

At least some of the methods we have adopted to tell the stories of the Tower involve the latest technologies. Over the course of some eight years, we have invested in virtual reality, flying through both exteriors and interiors at different points in the Tower of London's history from the eleventh century to the present day. The technology has moved on, and the technology and expertise are expensive – so what was cutting edge when the project started has become commonplace. The desire to realise the scenes in very fine detail resulted in huge data files that could only be navigated in pre-determined ways, rather than allowing visitors to navigate for themselves, and were not web-friendly. The investment has been substantial, at least for an independent heritage organisation, and the return in terms of visitor enjoyment and understanding less than hoped for.

Rather more success has been achieved with hand-held electronic gaming. With support from Hewlett Packard, the Tower has experimented in electronic games that are re-programmable by children and young people who readily understand the technology, while also providing a simple and fun game that is based on prisoners of the Tower, and a chase masterminded by the famous 'Beefeaters' the Yeoman Warders who guard the Tower. In a further development, educational games including audio and video have been developed for a newer generation of hand-held electronic screen devices.

There will be many who are seduced by this technology, and see it as a – if not the – way forward for heritage sites. There is much to be gained, as children in particular are familiar with these devices in a way their parents can often barely comprehend. But heritage sites rarely if ever have the budgets or the research and development capacity to buy the equipment in sufficient quantities or to make electronic gaming anything but a pale reflection of what is widely available in shops or online. Our sector simply cannot compete – it needs

to choose between being cheap and cheerful, and using the technology to best advantage, or not pursuing this line. It can only ever be an addition to the mix, never a substitute for the real thing. For heritage sites do have 'the real thing'.

Fun works

At the Tower, we have established that fun works. The form it takes may be highly traditional, but there is always a twist, something that lifts it out of the ordinary.

We produce card games, featuring past prisoners of the Tower – visitors are given a playing card on admission, can swap with their friends and family, pursue the story the card gives them, and have a personalised learning journey.

There is a whole world online. Our website incorporates simple games, based on question and answer techniques, which have a surface gloss which appeals. Meanwhile, viral computer games are being 'seeded' in online gaming sites. A sixteenth-century jousting and tournament game, with scores for hits and unseating opponents, has proved popular. It leads to the Tower of London website, but players do not find it there.

The largest single component at the site is live, costumed interpretation, in which scenes and events from the past are re-enacted by specialists in authentic costume. Meticulously researched, with the players in character, these are staged events that attract visitors and at the same time draw them into the stories and – crucially – convey the emotions from the past. Some are funny, some are sad. Some require a big setting, some are intimate. They may involve the re-creation of siege weapons and attacks on the fortress. They may, like the imprisonment in 1554 of the future, and Protestant, Queen Elizabeth I by her sister, the Catholic Queen Mary I, be the re-staging of pivotal events in history in which we know exactly what was said (and how magnificent and anguished the words were).

At the centre of the Tower of London is the original keep, the White Tower, a huge 30-metre cube in stone that is currently being repaired and conserved. This has given us the opportunity to offer personalised ways to get close to the heart of the complex. On some days we offer visitors materials to sit and draw, expressing themselves on paper. The highly accessible scaffolding erected on successive faces of the building provides the opportunity to invite groups of all ages to get near and see history at very close quarters. For the past two years, this has been the offer for pre-booked visits in London Open House, the local version of European Heritage Open Days.

Live action is a key element, in terms of creativity and visitor enjoyment. Grounded in authenticity and research, this might be knightly sword combat, a medieval encampment, a full-scale tournament or meticulously re-created and devastatingly powerful bolt weapons and catapults. Action brings the past vividly to life. It does not always have to involve fighting. The first prisoner escaped from the Tower in the year 1100, the Bishop of Durham no less, who let himself down the walls of the Tower on ropes and knotted bed-linen, and his dramatic escape is re-enacted for visitors. Sometimes, a knight in full armour has been known to walk through local shopping streets to entice and intrigue potential visitors.

Most of these activities to a greater or lesser extent involve elements of fun. Often, they rely on visual effects rather than words, given the multi-lingual and international profile of the visitor population. Always, they have solid basis in fact and research.

Creativity and innovation

None of these techniques is new. Many heritage sites will use at least some of them. The key is in the *mix*. Whether the methods are traditional or at the cutting edge of technology, they are all done with both enthusiasm and care, and with an eye to novelty and to engagement. We no longer expect people just to look, but to get involved and become engaged. And what engages are the stories and the human emotions – wonder, joy, fear, pathos, enquiry. Through that mix the past can come alive, and the meanings and stories of these ancient places can come alive too. At a site as large as the Tower of London, the solutions have to be able to cope with volume, and the sheer number of visitors, while still giving a sense of the personal.

There is no magic bullet, no single solution, at a site as ancient and complex as the Tower, and perhaps not at any historic site. 'One size fits all' rarely if ever works. The creativity and innovation come in the mix of new and old. Whether it be the Crown Jewels, the torture of prisoners, or a medieval siege, we tell the stories by asking new questions of older material, finding new ways to present traditional stories, and unlocking a sense of the past through personal approaches. People were and are at the core of the experience of the Tower of London.