

ROCKBAND - USING PARTNERSHIP WORKING TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO GEOLOGY COLLECTIONS

by Christine Taylor



Taylor, C. 2014. Rockband - Using partnership working to provide access to geology collections. *The Geological Curator* 10 (2): 99-102.

Many museums have geology collections which lie unused through lack of specialist staff and expertise. A partnership of five museums in south east England was formed to try and address this problem by commissioning a suite of geological activities that could be delivered by staff and volunteers with little geological knowledge. This local initiative was very successful, with targets for improved access to local geology collections being exceeded by over five times in the first year. The project model is one which could be applied more widely.

Christine Taylor, Keeper of Natural Sciences. Hampshire Cultural Trust, Chilcomb House, Chilcomb Lane, Winchester, Hampshire, SO23 8RD UK. Received 6th November 2014. Accepted 10th December 2014.

Introduction

Geology can be a challenging subject to interpret without specialist staff. Museum staff can inherit good quality displays, but delivering geology sessions based on the subject can be daunting. To try and address this problem a partnership was formed with the aims of pooling ideas and expertise to create a suite of geological based activities that could be delivered by non specialists.

The partnership, known as Rockband, has its origins in SLIME (Science Links in Museum Education), a network of museums in the south east region. Although a number of museums were initially interested in the project, several dropped out, through other commitments, before the preliminary bid stage, leaving Hampshire County Council Arts and Museums Service (now called Hampshire Cultural Trust), English Heritage Education Centre, Dover (specifically providing for the Osborne House site on the Isle of Wight); Canterbury City Museums and Galleries Service, Kent; Painshill Park, Surrey; Vale and Downland Museum, Oxfordshire as the five partners. In retrospect the smaller partnership made the project much more manageable and ensured that the resulting suite of activities was of very high quality.

Four of the five partners have geology collections, two with substantial collections. The diverse backgrounds of the individual members helped form the basis of the HLF bid and ensured that overall aims of the project had an even balance of geological / curatorial / educational requirements.

Aims of the Project

- To produce a series of mobile learning kits exploring the geological heritage of the south east region. These to include story telling resources/props, focussing on stories, poems, songs and folklore aimed at younger children, to provide a fun introduction to geology.
- To recruit and train 10 volunteers (2 per partner) in how to deliver relevant educational sessions using the new materials.
- To engage 450 participants through the education sessions, including primary school groups, adults, blind and partially sighted people.

The Rockband Kit

After identifying a wish-list of resources and outcomes, the partners successfully secured a grant of £47,250 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (Your Heritage Programme). The funding was used to commission a team of freelance consultants to help interpret the geology collections within the partnership in innovative and exciting ways.

The resulting kit comprised the following:

- A bespoke 'collector's box' of geological curiosities. These can be used in facilitated sessions with schools as well as self led family and group activities (Figure 1).
- A Geology/Chemistry Kit with resources and a session plan relating to building materials.
- A series of cards entitled 'Think you've found a Fossil?' These illustrate some of the most commonly found fossil invertebrates in South East England, along with fascinating facts about them.

- A bespoke textile geological mat, one for each partner. Each mat, produced by textile artist Jenny Langley, contains pockets for fossils, flaps to explore, geological features and a story, with props, relating to the local area of each partner (Figures 2-5)



Figure 1. Children's Festival activity using a bespoke 'collector's box'.



Figure 2. Adult group working with a bespoke textile geological mat.

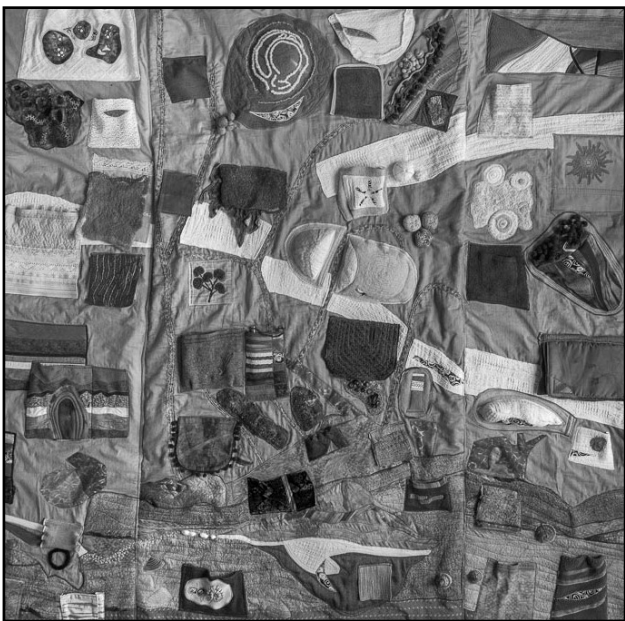


Figure 3. Bespoke geology mat as a geological map, with the Isle of Wight in bottom centre of view and Danebury Iron Age Hillfort top middle.



Figure 4. An outdoor session with a children's group and a large textile mat.



Figure 5. Bespoke textile mat of Vale and Downland geology.

Benefits from working in a partnership

1. Value for Money

The partnership made this an extremely cost effective project. The different backgrounds of the individuals on the team enabled the partnership to tap into geological, art based, story telling and educational expertise. It also enabled the exchange of non data material between the partners especially where gaps in the collections were identified. Although the collectors' boxes, story telling props and interactive mats were bespoke to each partner there were elements that were generic, such as the bases and some of contents of the collectors' boxes. The 'Think you've found a Fossil Card' and geo / chemical kits were generic as they used examples of fossils and rocks common to all partners.

2. Network of expertise

Working with partners provided a ready made network of expertise and experience which has been sustained long after the completion of the project. Each partner was able to contribute different skills and provide advice, enabling a collective and individual growing in confidence.

3. Improved access to geology collections

The initial target of 450 participants to be engaged through education sessions, including primary school groups up to adults, blind and partially sighted people was exceeded by over five times (2632) within the first year. Of these 96 were partially sighted, many of whom had never held a fossil before.

The Rockband Kits fit in perfectly with recent changes in the National Curriculum - Rocks (Year 3), All living things (Year 4), Evolution and Inheritance (Year 4) and has providing 'off the peg' geology sessions for schools.

In order to meet the demands of the brief partners had to seek out local geological expertise, which in itself has opened out new opportunities to work with local universities, geological societies and other geological initiatives. The project also provided staff with research time to get to know their collections. One of the targets of the project was to engage 10 volunteers. By March 2014, 34 people had volunteered and been trained in the delivery of geological sessions. Twelve of these were new volunteers, many with a geological or science background.

Volunteers continue to be recruited, not just to deliver Rockband sessions, but to work on the geology collections. Making initial contact with other institutions and talking to geologists led to offers of volunteer work and student based projects.

Lessons learned from working in a partnership

A partnership can only work effectively when each partner pulls their own weight! Although frustrating when potential partners did not respond to requests for basic information, the initial planning stages identified potential issues and ensured that partners were fully signed up to the project. Even when a key member of staff at a partner museum left just before the delivery of Rockband activities, the remaining members were able to exceed the targets set out in the HLF bid.

Don't under estimate the amount of training required. The bespoke nature of some of the activities (mat and the collector's box) and the diverse backgrounds of the partners meant that the one training day wasn't enough time to become fully engaged with the product. Further training at partner sites was required to deliver the sessions confidently.

The geographical distance between the partners meant that meeting up on a regular basis became costly in both time and money. Communicating by email, telephone and setting up a closed group on Facebook proved to be effective methods of resolving this issue.

Factoring in enough time for consultants is critical, especially if commissioning bespoke products. If partners are in close proximity a visit to two partners in a day is realistic. In this instance only one site could be visited in a day.

Conclusion

Partnership working is an extremely effective method of working, especially in an area where more expertise or research into a subject area is required. The success of a good partnership relies on the members working closely with each other as a team. Costs can be kept down, especially where there is a generic aspect to the project and resources can be shared or duplicated. Finally, share the success of the partnership - this one has gained impetus since its completion and ensured that the geology collections are firmly embedded in the activity planning process.

References

Taylor, C. 2013. Rockband links fossils, fabrics and folklore. *Earth Heritage* **40**, 24-25.

Acknowledgements

The Heritage Lottery Fund (Your Heritage Program) for providing the funding. I would also like to thank the following for making the partnership work: Phil Hadland, Fran Lashmar, Sabrina Coxon, Dorothy Burrows and Ruth Howard. Special thanks to the consultancy team: Annette Shelford, Naomi Chapman, Marion Leeper and Jenny Langley.