

# The museum micro-fellowship

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## Abstract

Sharing research ideas and connections between universities and museums is a complicated subject. Time pressures, limited resources and the differing needs and objectives of partners can make these working relationships hard to get off the ground, despite the clear benefits. Here Dr Oli Betts, the Railway Museum's Research Lead, and Dr Anna Geurts, former Research Associate National Railway Museum at the University of Sheffield, offer a potential solution. Partnerships, they argue, can open up new avenues of collaboration, especially when kept open-minded, mutual and, importantly, fully supported by the host institutions.

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## Keywords

National Railway Museum, University of Sheffield, collaboration, partnership, fellowship, postdoc, scoping, collections research

## Introduction

How easy is it for museum curators to take a step back from the daily routine of object care and organisation and consider the bigger picture? How can university academics step into the heady swirl of material culture and public engagement afforded by a museum? Can even brief moments to pause and come together as researchers enhance our understandings and expertise? This paper, covering a micro-fellowship between a postdoctoral researcher at a leading university and a research fellow at a national museum, argues that such small collaborations are not only useful but vital. Lasting just two weeks, the partnership allowed both of them time to research together, exploring collections, considering new approaches, and developing working

practices and ideas that have continued to shape their outlooks for far longer than the funded fortnight itself.

For two weeks in July 2016, Dr Anna P H Geurts, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Sheffield, was resident at the National Railway Museum in York, working alongside the Museum's Research Fellow Dr Oliver Betts. Having met at a workshop hosted by the Yorkshire Country House Partnership (YCHP) and the White Rose University Consortium an initial conversation about mutual interests in nineteenth-century experiences of travel led to a micro-grant from YCHP and White Rose resources, generously topped up by Geurts's home institution that allowed for ten days of intensive collaboration.

This project, 'A Traveller's Map of the Yorkshire Country Houses, 1830–now', generated a number of exciting outputs of the sort usually considered academic markers of success, including a conference paper, a digital collection of study resources drawn from the NRM's collection, and an upcoming academic article on travel and tourism by rail in Victorian Britain. This paper, however, is more reflective in nature, considering the value of the wider 'micro-collaboration' that this intense period of research co-operation entailed. Driven by their shared passions as researchers and collaborators, this project enabled both Betts and Geurts to re-examine not only the practice but also the purpose of their respective research roles. Able to bring their external expertise to bear from the start, and entering into the micro-collaboration in a spirit of open inquiry, they reflect here on why such small-scale chances to step back and consider can have deep and lasting value for researchers and institutions.

## The context of the project

Collaborations between museums and universities are nothing new, of course, but they tend to be framed as large-scale and institutional projects. Often, these can be somewhat unwieldy. As Kate Oakley and Sara Selwood note in their recent report on 'Leadership of Collaborative Projects between Higher Education and the Arts and Cultural Sector' for the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, collaborations between heritage institutions and universities 'do not necessarily emerge in a natural, organic way in market economies'. Public funding, they argue, has often had to take a very direct role in creating these working relationships ([Oakley and Selwood, 2010](#)). Recent research by Jane Dawson and Abigail Gilmore on North West England has demonstrated the nuances of minor variations within Higher Education and Heritage partnerships. They have contrasted, for example, the organic collaboration that has emerged between the University of Salford and the Salford Museum and Art Gallery (located at the heart of the university campus) 'where it would appear to be second nature that they make approaches to each other about joint working on a regular basis' with the more individual-led approach that led to a funding bid shared by the Bolton Museum and Mark Grimshaw from the University of Bolton, emphasising the importance of 'thinking and planning' that should pre-figure a new venture ([Dawson and Gilmore, 2009](#)). Yet in each case the focus has been on the large-scale, often funded partnership which requires significant planning and thinking across institutional hierarchies to realise.

Another prime example of this have been the successful and long-running Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships. Funded through the Arts and Humanities Research Council, CDP student awards only emerge after long-term planning and application writing between university academics and curators and other staff at museum and archive consortia. This has produced numerous exciting collaborative projects, fully immersed in the collections and environments of host museums, yet they also represent major investments of time and organisation. Each one can involve up to a year of preparation before the studentship is even taken up, as the funding criteria are highly specific and competition for places intense. A good example of the benefits, but also an exploration of the time pressures and long-term engagement of such collaborative studentships can be found in James Fenner's account of his research at the Science Museum ([Fenner, 2013](#)). With a focus on long-term collaboration and funding bids, it can be very difficult for museums and universities to operate more spontaneously around shared research interests. Yet as Nuala Morse notes in the same edited collection, the work museums undertake with communities already embodies the 'improvisation-friendly, participation-centred' methodologies research collaboration requires ([Morse, 2013](#)). The groundwork for more spontaneous partnerships already exists – it just needs to be capitalised upon.

It was the opportunity for a small amount of seed funding that stimulated both authors to initiate this project. Speight, Boddington and Boys have argued that the focus on responding to major funding calls has typically 'reinforced rather than challenged' those partnerships in which shared strategic visions remain limited. The small-scale nature of this project, however, meant that in this instance the authors had an opportunity to work from a very broad foundation of shared research and educational interests, professional convictions and vision for the future of heritage and public history ([Morse, 2013](#)). An

initial grant of £500 from the Yorkshire Country House Partnership, generously matched by the University of Sheffield, acted as the stimulus.

Around £1,000 and ten days, then, to explore something of the relationship between the railways (the NRM interest) and country houses (the YCHP interest).

**Figure 1**



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Bamburgh Castle on a pack of playing cards, London and North Eastern Railway/John Waddington Ltd., *Beautiful Britain* series ([1930–1940]), NRM no. 1998-7568

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**Figure 2**



© Anna Geurts

Harewood House, in *British Railways, Holiday Guide* / [Area no. 3] Eastern England (Derby [printer], 1957), pp after 84, and 142), alongside a contemporary photograph (CC-BY) of the same room

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**Figure 3**



© Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library

Fountains Hall, North Yorkshire. Alfred Hind Robinson (1864–1950) was a pioneer of panoramic photography whose work was recognised by many of the British Railways companies who bought many of his works to display in their First Class Carriages

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It was the combination of a large, open-ended potential with these limited parameters, as oxymoronic as that may seem, which helped set the actual collaboration (rather than just its preparation) in motion: the forced focus on achieving a number of goals within a short timespan gave the partnership a head-start. Critics may argue, with some justification, that collaborations are at their most fruitful when least constrained. Keri Facer and Kate Pahl have recently staked a claim to the best collaborations as ‘messy, contingent on practice, uncertain...and lacking distinct anchorage’ (Facer and Pahl, 2017). Yet the freedom to pick and choose an approach within a ring-fence of time and resources to us felt like an asset, at the *beginning* of a partnership. Although not without its challenges, as will be discussed below, it enabled partners to explore the potential of working together whilst also producing tangible outputs. We always considered this project to be a first step, not a fully-fledged partnership in

its own right. For these reasons, we would recommend it as a useful model for fostering partnerships, particularly for precarious and early-career researchers trying to find their feet in both museums and universities.

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## Reflections by Oliver Betts of the National Railway Museum

My role within the Museum, primarily, is to provide an 'academic spine' to the Museum's research activities. This means in practice encouraging a broad approach to speculative research projects. With the NRM focused on a large-scale redesign, the challenge of looking anew at our collections was at the forefront of our minds. Examining these through a lens as unusual as the country house was appealing. The National Railway Museum had not been involved with the Yorkshire Country House Partnership prior to this project, but after being contacted by partnership chairman Chris Ridgway about the upcoming Travel and Transport season was keen to make contact. This willingness to engage in open-ended research and potential partnership across heritage institutions was, in hindsight, critical to creating the circumstances where our collaboration with Anna Geurts could flourish. The democratic, public and, most significantly, mass nature of railways has traditionally lent itself to the broader discussion of the explosion of popular leisure in the nineteenth and twentieth century in Britain. Football fixtures, bank holidays and, of course, the seaside feature prominently in the established literature and in museum collections (and thinking) but the country house, so often rural and tied to older patterns of living before the railways, does not immediately suggest itself as a tourist destination to be examined.

Perhaps the greatest asset of the project, from the Museum's perspective, has been the chance Geurts's visit afforded for academic reflection. Members of the Collections and Research team, particularly Karen Baker (librarian), Alison Kay (archivist), and John Clarke and Ed Bartholomew (curators), helped not only in putting together material before Geurts arrived but, during her fortnight in the Museum, advised and assisted in finding more archive documents, historic texts and small objects for research. Preparation in advance, drawing on the knowledge the team already possessed, was key. Even more useful was the opportunity this process provided for reflecting on the wider collection. A topic which had not been a pre-existing focus of research, visiting country houses and the experience of tourist travel of that nature, challenged staff to think laterally across the collection. Not only did this produce a dynamic array of material to support that found by Geurts herself through the catalogues, but it has afforded the wider Collections and Research team the chance to reflect on connections between archives and small object collections not normally considered.

The research itself was of considerable value to the Museum. It corresponded to several key clusters of ongoing research, namely 'Moving People', which considers a passenger-based approach to railway history, and 'Revolution and Mania', which focuses on the explosive potential of the new technology in the nineteenth century. In both cases it provided useful new insights into the collections and their contexts. The proliferation of cheaper guidebooks in the twentieth century, to cite just one example, was already known to the Museum, a development thought to echo wider interwar patterns of mass consumption. Our research, however, has revealed not just the remarkable array of cheap guidebooks for the 1870s–1900s period held in the Museum collection but also the surprising depth such guidebooks covered. The texts themselves, and associated objects, spoke of the slow transformation of railway tourism from a directed, didactic pursuit to a more democratic 'pleasure outing', with the country house and its grounds as attractive visitor destinations. Additionally, the amount of detail offered in old brochures and maps, guidebooks and tours was fascinating for the Yorkshire Country House participants interested in the past presentations of their houses.

Figure 4

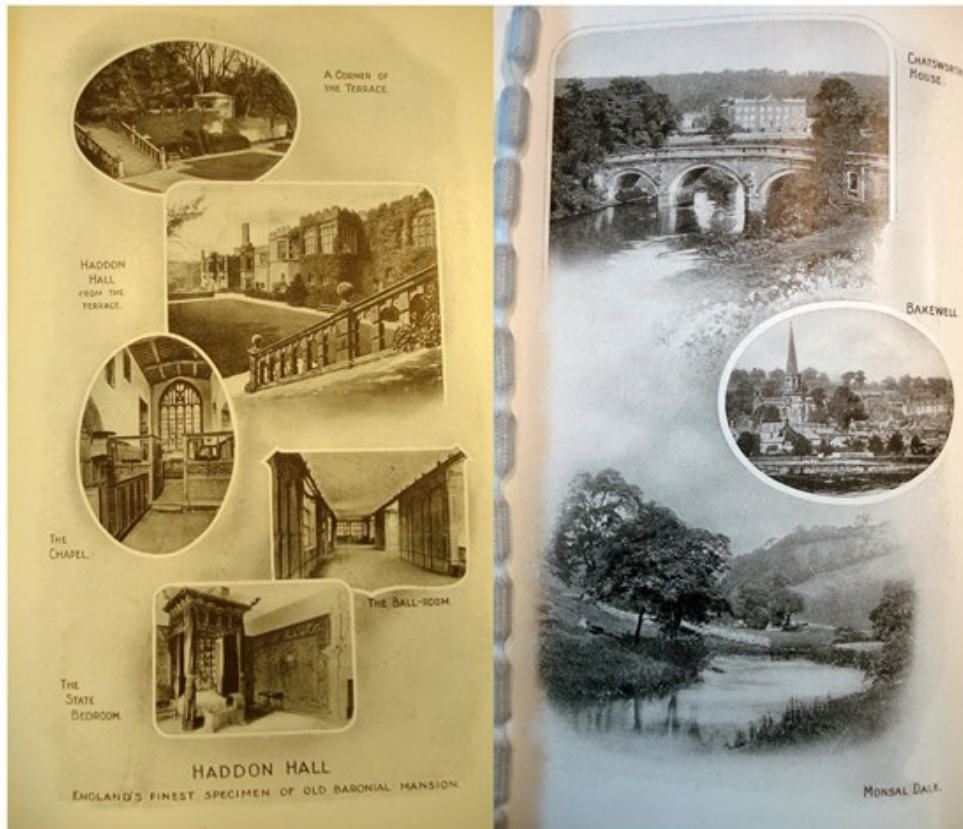


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Haddon Hall and Chatsworth House, in Bradshaw's [Illustrated] *Handbook for Tourists in Great Britain and Ireland in Four Sections: Section III* (Manchester: Blacklock and co., [1880]), between pp 86–87

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Figure 5



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Chatsworth House and Haddon Hall, in *London, Midland and Scottish Railway, The Peak District* ([1920s?]), pp 15–16

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Figure 6

*"Yorkshire's Greatest Treasure House"*

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Harewood House, in *British Railways Holiday Guide* / [Area no. 3] Eastern England (Derby [printer], 1957), pp after 84, and 142

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Figure 7

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Newby Hall, in B H Belshaw, *North Yorkshire: Official Guide*, ed. 3 ([late 1970s]), p 28

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The work, and the partnership, were a revelation to the Museum more generally. Beyond the project's spur to spend more time in the archive and with the collection – always a hard balancing act given the day-to-day demands of museum work – it also allowed for the deep, critical thinking of academic study. Working with Geurts, impressive, passionate and committed, challenged my own conceptions about how to undertake and utilise research in a museum context. Her international outlook and expertise, particularly, was a fundamental influence on my thinking at the time. In conceptualising an international gallery for the Museum's redesign, I found myself then (and since) reflecting on Geurts's deep diving into the accessible human stories of transport. It has made me think again about not just the 'hows' of Japanese high-speed or the 'whys' of British railway

building in China but also the experiential nature of travel by rail in British India's heat, in South Africa's unknown and frightening landscapes (for migrants from Britain), and in the sleek modern potential of a bullet train or a Eurostar. The collaboration's potential for challenging my modes of thinking, just as Facer and Pahl suggest, has extended long beyond the budgeted research time ([Facer and Pahl, 2017](#)).

The greatest challenge was perhaps predictable: timing. The limitations of the project, in terms of both funding and time, did frustrate, but by far the greatest problem was me personally finding time to spend with Geurts during the two weeks she was in the archive. The conflicting time demands of a small department meant it was in practice difficult to meet up as regularly as would have been helpful across the two weeks. This is because in practice, the funding was not collaborative in delivery. Understandably, it was too small, both in terms of time allowed and funds provided, to arrange to backfill my time – the money instead bought Geurts's time and travel. Yet it was still a catalyst that enabled me to better protect my research time. With a visiting researcher with me for only two weeks, the immediate nature of the project's demands made rearranging other meetings and deadlines easier. For a museum, like many, where the appetite for detailed research inevitably clashes with the demands of everyday operations, such an opportunity to build time is useful indeed.

Looking back on the project, both Geurts's research expertise and position in academia and her own personality and outlook were crucial to success. The postdoctoral job market is notoriously unstable, but despite the availability of these skilled researchers, very few are tapped by museums outside of larger (often university-initiated) funding bids as discussed earlier in this piece. This seems a mistake. Geurts's research expertise allowed her to embed herself into the archive in a way a less seasoned researcher would have found difficult. Partnering with a postdoctoral researcher with years of archival experience and knowledge of the wider academic scholarship around the project themes maximises what can be garnered from such short-term, low-cost pairings. But finding the 'right' postdoctoral researcher is just as vital. With a pre-existing connection to a regional research institution and research interests that tied into the Museum's own collections and remit, Geurts was not simply skilled but committed and passionate. Geurts's affiliation with a university was also significant – the matching funding provided by the University of Sheffield was not only important to the direct execution of the project but, as with my support from the wider Museum, provided an institutional backing interested in the success of the micro-fellowship as a way of opening up wider collaborations. The success of the partnership, in many ways, lies rooted in the organic connection made at the initial Yorkshire Country House Partnership workshops; each of us was fundamentally interested in the work of the other, and the funding bid grew from there. That this partnership has already led to several further and more developed funding bids that go beyond the academic and museum outputs of the two-week bid is a testament to the gateway potential of micro-fellowships and the individual connections they can stem from. Such profitable and open-ended outcomes from relatively small amounts of funding suggest that this is a system that museums and universities should be developing.

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## **Reflections by Anna P H Geurts of the University of Sheffield**

Universities and researchers are familiar with a number of established types of research relationship with museums, archives and other institutions that curate historical heritage. Such relationships include the collaborative doctoral programme, the postdoctoral research fellowship, the research visit and the scoping exercise. The micro-fellowship which I conducted in collaboration with the National Railway Museum in July 2016 differed from all these established forms and brought with it a clear set of benefits.

Let me start by saying that within my discipline, that of cultural history, to work collaboratively is not self-evident. Research is still predominantly the work of the lone archive wolf. Although some of the research funding that is available within academia (e.g. from the EU's Horizon 2020 Programme) explicitly asks for teamwork, the current lack of staffing continuity in many departments within the humanities means that it is very difficult to set up such large collaborative projects. I was very glad therefore to be given this opportunity to work together with a team of highly knowledgeable colleagues at the National Railway Museum who possess a research expertise that perfectly complements my own, as well as an intimate familiarity with the Museum's collections which they have built over the course of many years of curatorship. As happens every time when I visit the 'backstage' of a museum, I was amazed by the breadth and depth of the Museum's collections which vastly surpass the

'frontstage' which the Museum has the capacity to display, whether in the form of exhibitions or of detailed catalogues. My own research trajectory, which is about probing the significance of transport revolutions for everyday experiences of time and space, has received many new impulses from talking with the research team at the National Railway Museum, and from being shown objects and texts which I would not have been able to locate by myself.

This already shows how a micro-fellowship differs from an 'ordinary' research visit. The collaborative set-up of the project, with both hosts and guest invested in its outcomes, meant that we could both benefit from our multiple perspectives, not only in terms of our complementary research methods and specialist knowledge, but also because the Museum's curators, librarian and archivist possess a familiarity with their collections which an academic on a research visit could never hope to acquire.

The aims of this micro-fellowship also differed from more traditional, academic-initiated research, whether this is a stand-alone thesis or book project, often funded by a scholarship or fellowship, or a multi-investigator project funded by a research council. The fact that the Yorkshire Country House Partnership and the National Railway Museum are both ultimately interested in creating concrete displays and educational activities that can be undertaken with their collections, made for a highly focused research experience. This also sets the micro-fellowship apart from the activity of 'scoping', in which a researcher spends time getting a broad overview of an institution's holdings in order for them or their colleagues to formulate a well-informed research project later on. Rather, this micro-fellowship offered the opportunity to work toward a well-defined, public- and 'industry'-oriented goal. This was, in the first instance, a report containing our research findings, rough data and a list of resources that may be used in country-house exhibitions (evidently, the creation itself of the YCHP's Travel and Transport exhibitions did not fall within the remit of this two-week project). This goal was defined by Oliver Betts and myself, but in consultation with the YCHP, White Rose Consortium and NRM. They demonstrated their interest in such a report by awarding the proposal in which Betts and I had formulated the idea of a micro-grant, and later at the conference where we presented the finished text. Writing it gave me the chance to work in a way that differs radically from the way most academic texts are produced, which take a much longer time to complete and have fuzzier deadlines. With the present project, furthermore, the end-product served not just to be read, but to be 'used'.

As Betts already remarked above, in order to work within such a short time frame and still produce something worthwhile, the researcher working in a micro-fellowship will have to be well-versed in the themes, the historical period and place, and the types of materials which the museum specialises in. This is because the little start-up time there is has to be spent on getting to know the people you will work with and the collections they care for, which are not usually fully catalogued (more about this in the final section). The same short time frame also offers benefits, however. In this case, it allowed me to step outside my own long-term project and the sources I am familiar with, and to finally get to study closely some of the sources which, although not at the core of my larger project, are very present in both the primary and the secondary literature which I use. The personal travel accounts which form the core of my larger project are part of an intricate intertextual web that includes the guidebooks and promotional material which I looked at during the micro-fellowship. And, of course, those travel accounts also refer over and over again to the rolling stock of which the Museum houses so many fine examples. The Museum's three-dimensional collections helped me think through some of the bigger questions that intrigue me, relating for instance to noise and privacy but also, and more fundamentally, to the very possibility of uncovering the sensory *experiences* of the past through *objects* from the past. This was a kind of thinking which I could not have done by just reading texts. As many historical geographers, historians of material culture, and of course curators have said before, handling and spending time among the objects I read about is essential if I want to understand the people who lived with these objects and in these spaces two hundred years ago.

Last but not least, the success of this fellowship absolutely hinged on the warm reception offered me by the research and reading-room staff at the Museum who, in spite of serious other pressures on their time, were always prepared to talk with me or take more materials from the stores. I have discovered that in this sense our experiences mirror each other: while academics at universities really spend most of their time (administrating) teaching, museum professionals also have to find most of the time for their research outside office hours. The time my colleagues at the Museum were nevertheless prepared to make for me made this collaboration into a truly enjoyable partnership.

A final thought on research and the railways. For the duration of two weeks, this fellowship turned me into a train commuter,

with a daily railway commute of an hour for the first time in my life. As such, I discovered that it is perfectly feasible to prepare and process the day's work, going through catalogues and research notes, even in the busiest of second-class carriages on a weekday train. And yet, sometimes it was just as productive to use the journey as 'time out'; as time to reflect on the collaboration and on our findings, without a set task to complete. At those moments, I was also learning about the carriage as the reflective space which at times it must equally have been for the historical travellers we investigate.

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## Recommendations

Overall, this was a successful project. Although not explicitly aiming to, it adhered to many of the positive points that Dawson and Gilmore identified in their exploration of successful heritage and higher education partnerships in the North West. With the objective set by the wider context in which the funding was established, the authors approached the project with a realistic shared outcome in mind (Dawson and Gilmore, 2009). As Anna Geurts observes in her section, having a pre-set goal which was partly determined by a 'client' funder helped neatly draw the parameters of our archival investigations. At the same time, the combination of this focus with the felicitous 'messiness' and perhaps a touch of intellectual holiday feeling offered by two weeks of brainstorming amongst a bunch of very different but like-minded colleagues was vital. The finished work, presented at the Yorkshire Country House Partnership's Travel and Transport conference in September 2016, created a positive buzz around the digital resource created to accompany the research. Although ultimate use of this resource depends upon the curators of the individual houses themselves, the research has served to create a conduit of conversation from which further partnerships can grow. Moreover, although it was the passion of Geurts and Betts that drove the work of the project forward within the short time-frame of the micro-fellowship, the supportive culture in which they worked was a clear benefit.

In advocating the micro-fellowship, though, the authors would urge a slightly more refined approach. There are small but nevertheless significant elements that can delay or otherwise complicate a small-scale project such as this, where time and other resources are limited from the outset. Issues of scheduling, time-management, and administration, from both Museum and University sides, ate into the short time available to the partners on the project. For instance, of the ten days available it took several days' work to set up and channel the financial claims that had to be made. Should replicating such partnerships prove desirable, streamlining these processes and ensuring that a more established pathway for such collaborations exists, would be an important and valuable step. The researchers in question also need to be aware of time pressures themselves – initial literature reviews, catalogue work, processing photographs and report-writing from both museum and university perspectives can take away from the short shared time available almost unnoticed, if not accounted for from the outset.

More broadly, the authors are clear in their desire that this should not be seen as a call for the casualisation of research work. Instead of receiving small grants, they believe it would be better if researchers are hired on micro-fellowships as short-term employees, or seconded from either institution or an external agency. This would not only ensure that those involved were correctly covered in terms of health and safety insurance, pensions and other workers' rights, but it would better promote the scheme as one which creates a new breed of respected researchers able to move between and build relationships with universities and museums. This may be a difficult prospect for smaller museums and departments, but the authors feel it is nevertheless an important addendum. At the very least, a clear system of reimbursing travel expenses should be in place before the micro-fellowship commences.

At the heart of the micro-fellowship is the personal relationship between the researchers directly involved, as the above experiences indicate. Such a partnership as this could only have sprung out of the chance encounters that events like academic conferences create. Awareness of the other's research interests, as well as the wider museum and university contexts each represented, ensured that both partners were already primed for potential collaboration when the small fund was announced. The wider auspices of groups like the Yorkshire Country House Partnership and the White Rose University Consortium are key in creating the *potential* for creative connections to occur, but a desire to explore and exchange knowledge in mutual fields of interest is vital. Both individual collaborators are ambassadors, in a sense, for their respective institutions. But more significantly, it is their passions and interests that must drive any such partnership forward and it is the shared work of the micro-fellowship, flexible and not bound by wider strictures and timescales, that will, the authors believe, help solve the

differences of perspective that keep universities and museums apart.

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## Tags

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