

Radical Museums Podcast - Victoria Ryves

Sharon Heal: Hi, I'm Sharon Heal, the director of the Museums Association, and I'm presenting the first episode of our Radical Museums Podcast. At the museums Association, we've been exploring what radical practice and activism means for museums for a number of years now. We're a campaigning values-led organisation, and our current campaigns include decolonisation, anti-racism, climate, justice, and wellbeing. We know that museums can make a real positive difference to people's lives. And throughout this podcast series, we'll be talking to museum activists and those that are striving for and driving change. today. I'm delighted to say that our guest is Victoria Ryves. Welcome to the radical Museum podcast.

Sharon Heal: Please introduce yourself Victoria and tell us a little bit about your role and what you do.

Victoria Ryves: Yeah, of course. I'm Victoria and I am the ;earning and community development manager here at Heritage Doncaster, so, Heritage Doncaster is the local authority-ran heritage organisation. So, we have a number of different sites as well as our education service. And my role is formal and informal learning and our community and outreach work and I manage all of that and bring it all together and make it work.

Sharon Heal: That's a big job. I know you've been undergoing some change here at Doncaster. So, I hope you're sliding into your new role. I think Doncaster is a great city (people might be able to tell from my accent that I'm from Yorkshire ,and I love Yorkshire) but not everybody will know it. I love

walking from the train station through the city centre and seeing that amazing statue of the mines and the mine rescue and all the pits that used to be here. What is it that makes Doncaster special?

Victoria Ryves: First of all, it's really exciting to hear you call it a city. It's really new. We became a city this year in the Queen's Jubilee honours. That was a really exciting moment in itself. It kind of sums up really how Doncaster sees itself. It always had this kind of city mentality even when it was a town. My favourite thing about Doncaster though, is that it's a city of stories. And it's a city of many places. We are the biggest Metropolitan Borough in the UK, so we cover a huge amount of geography. And each area of Doncaster has its own unique identity and its unique stories. You've got Mexborough, which is an area that has this incredible past of cinema history and brick building. And then you move over to Stainforth, where you've got the remnants of the last pit that was here in Doncaster that didn't close until the 2000s. But each area feels like its own place, which I love. It has its own set of challenges, though, because that means that something that works and Stainforth ain't gonna work in Mexborough, necessarily. And it also has this really thriving and exciting cultural scene, which I don't think will be a secret for much longer. We have this new building right now. Our local authority has invested huge amount in culture, which is brilliant. So we're in a brand new building, which we'll talk more about later, I'm sure. But as well as that there's incredible community arts organisations, there's loads of incredible freelance artists and creatives that make this place a really exciting place to be at the moment. And I wouldn't want to work anywhere else.

Sharon Heal: Wow, that's a real testament to the city. So, we're sitting here, as you say, in this brand new museum building you only opened last year. I'm interested, as well as how exciting it must be to

work in a new building with lots of great facilities. I'm interested in, you know, how you put together the mission and the vision and what drives your practice here in Doncaster.

Victoria Ryves: Yeah, so the building where we are sitting is the Danum Gallery, Library and Museum. And as you said, we opened last year, we opened 18 months later than planned because of the pandemic. But that opening kind of challenged us in a couple of ways, really, that has been reflected in our current practice now. So, when we first opened, we actually opened virtually so we opened with a virtual launch where you could kind of explore the building. In a similar way to explore things on Google Maps, you can kind of wander around. But the tour was more than that. It wasn't just going to look at things and think, oh, that's it. That's a display case, that's lovely. As you wander around, the voices of our community are there at the forefront. So, when you wandered in to the spaces, where we've got an exhibition about the story of 2020, rather than actors or someone like myself explaining the stories, it was the people who had loaned the objects for display that are telling you the stories of their museum. And I think that kind of boils down, really, to what our, what our mission and values are. So, we are a very community driven place, very community driven museum. And in 2020, we introduced a series of new strategic objectives for us as a service. And they were around providing heritage for all, which is a really bold ambition. But also, more importantly, I think about being embedded at the heart of Doncaster. So that community focus has been really, really key in our new service restructure. So, you've alluded to the beginning, we've been through some change. We've just come through the final stages of a restructure that has brought together libraries and museums. And it feels like a really exciting blend, because for both of those organisations for libraries, and museums, communities, and our people are at the heart of those.

And from a learning perspective, I'm really excited that I get to now include more storytelling, and work in our community libraries at the heart of what we do. So, you can kind of see the kind of the community thread through all of our work. If you were to wander into the into the museum spaces in the galleries, a lot of the objects that are on display, we don't own – they're not ours, they are loaned by members of the community. And that was in recognition of the fact that we don't have all the stories, we don't have all the information, and we're definitely not always the people best placed to tell the stories. So, every year, we pledged to have at least 150 loans in the museum's range of objects that don't belong to us, which means people get to showcase their wonderfulness, which isn't always the big stories either.

Sharon Heal: And has that it must have been so incredibly difficult opening a fantastic new building with your vision and your work with a community in the midst of a global pandemic. So, how's it been getting back to normal? Are the visitors coming in? Is the community in the centre, in the heart of the building?

Victoria Ryves: Opening in a pandemic, and trying to engage community was a challenge. But I think we kind of took that by the horns really. When we first opened – there's a there's a case in the museum downstairs that's called the Museum of You. And the intention is that, everything in there, it changes twice a year, and it's a space for community groups, but it's also a space for community loans. The exhibition we opened with in those case was called The Story of 2020, which was entirely co-curated and co-produced virtually. We spent months talking to people on Facebook, in different forums, asking people what to use that sums up 2020. We had lots of really personal stories. So it was, you know, one thing on display was a lady's sonogram, that was her 2020. And then we had

really powerful first-hand accounts of the experience of being just out here on square for the Black Lives Matter protests. So, we kind of really took on that challenge of the community being really here as it kind of hits you in the face as soon as you walk into the museum. In terms of our visitors, when we opened in May of 2021, we opened in kind of strict Covid rules. But those kind of initial tours were selling out. I say selling, it's a free admission, but we're kind of coming and going really quickly. And then we found that we've been kind of busier than ever. So yeah, they're coming.

Sharon Heal: Well, I don't know if you remember when I first tried to visit, it was in the restrictions, and there was a Covid case in the museum, I think.

Victoria Ryves: That was only time we had to shut down.

Sharon Heal: We were standing on the doorstep trying to get in, along with all the people who were queuing outside waiting for the museum to open. So, yeah, I'm really pleased that you're getting your visitors in, it must make it feel much more alive.

Victoria Ryves: The some holidays in here were beautiful to witness to be honest, it was incredible to see, there was so much going on in each space. And children have been able to come to the school programmes we've been running here. They've been kind of dragging mum and dad to come and have a look. And, yeah, it's great to be in a space that is so alive.

Sharon Heal: Fantastic. So, I asked you Victoria to choose an object that exemplifies your brand of activism or art and the and the work that you're trying to do in the museum. I'm really excited to find out what you've chosen and why.

Victoria Ryves: I've cheated a little bit. I've chosen two objects, but they are from the same person so I think I can get away with it. So, the objects that I've chosen were displayed earlier this year in the main museums spaces at Danum. Neither of them at the time belonged to the museum service. So they are not our accessioned objects. These were objects that were loaned to us by a community member. And they came into being on display as a result of a project called Changing the Record, which was something that I set up for lots of reasons. It was set up very much as a product of 2020. So, in 2020, as a museum, we did a lot of thinking about whose stories we tell, and why and how we tell those stories. And like a lot of museums, I think it's fair to say that our accessioned collection tells the story about only a very narrow part of Doncaster's community. And lots of stories weren't told. And then it shouldn't really be us telling them anyway – I am not the person to talk about black experience, I'm not the person that should be telling that story. I'm not the person to be telling the story of what it's like being part of the disabled community, that's not me. So, we launched Changing the Record with the intention of shining light and encouraging community researchers to come forward to help us to find and showcase under-told stories or never-before-told stories from Doncaster's past. And the key thing about this is that we invited people to use their lived experience as an asset in this. We invited people to select people to research or stories to research that they could relate to. And we recognise that people's lived experience is a skill, it's an asset, it's a marketable thing. And so we reimbursed all of our community researchers. We ended up with a cohort of nine community researchers that researched 10 stories - one of them was very keen, so did two. And during the pandemic, we worked with them to develop research skills. The majority of these researchers had never done any kind of research before. And we were also operating at a

strange time where they weren't able to do your kind of traditional research using archives, or even have that much access to our collections because we were mostly shut down. So, we had to really interrogate kind of digital resources, and what we could find and where, so we ran a series of training sessions, and then I would run semi-regular check-ins with all the researchers to see what they were uncovering, and they had complete free rein to explore what they wanted to explore. So, at the end of the programme, they were then encouraged to express their research in any way that they were comfortable doing so. For some of them, that was a fairly traditional research paper. Someone wrote a pamphlet about something about the history of a 1920s female entrepreneur. We also had someone that expressed it through artwork, so she painted a picture of the suffragette that she researched what she felt kind of captured her character. And then one of our researchers, Emily produced a documentary, and that is where this object comes in. Emily had researched Women Against pit closures. Those people listening in Yorkshire will know exactly what I'm talking about. But women against pit closures were an activist group in the miners' strike of 1984-85, who supported the miners. They ran soup kitchens, they picketed themselves. And their story is kind of fairly untold in the history of miners' strike. And when it is told, it's only to be told about ladies from Barnsley, which Emily, our researcher was very angry about because there's brilliant Doncaster examples.

Sharon Heal: I love this – a little bit of South Yorkshire rivalry.

Victoria Ryves: And this project kind of kind of struck me, because on several occasions I have tried to engage women who we knew were in women against pit closures, to tell their stories, to sit down and do an oral history interview to consider doing an exhibition. And they just weren't that into it. But Emily went along as a really interested community member, and was able to get the women to

open up in a way that I wasn't able to. I think a lot of that is because I came from it from, you know, this position of perceived authority, from a museum, and they were potentially worried about saying the wrong thing, but Emily managed to record these incredible oral history interviews and produce this incredible documentary that really captured the spirit of these women. And those oral history interviews have since been accessioned so now we have those stories in our collection forever. And Emily was able to persuade a couple of women to loan objects for the combination exhibition of his programme, and one of those objects is this incredible vest. It's a brown gilet-style vest that is absolutely covered in hundreds of little pin badges. So, when you pick it up, it's incredibly heavy with all this kind of metal on it. And the really special thing about it, it definitely hasn't been washed since the 80s. It had this kind of smell of brazier smoke and still smells like perhaps when the lady had been on a picket, and it belonged to someone called Aggie Curry. And she collected these pin badges throughout her activist career. She came to see the item on display and was very struck by it. And as a result, she has donated it and given to the museum, one of the WPC pit closures banners. So, we now have items in our collection that tell the stories that we just wouldn't have had without community input.

Sharon Heal: Amazing, fantastic objects there. And when I came, when I got in the second time when you didn't have a Covid outbreak, I saw the vest on display. And what struck me about it, as well as the history that's encapsulated in that object very viscerally, it's actually quite small. She must have been a really small woman.

Victoria Ryves: She was a very slight woman. But you know what she made up for it with her kind of her bite. Incredible. Anyone that lived in South Yorkshire at the time would have seen that Aggie's

face on television. And she was very much, the kind of, anytime there was a video of protestors being arrested, it was Aggie. She was never formally charged though. So, she's very she's very insistent that we all know that.

Sharon Heal: That's brilliant, and a really good and an obvious choice in some ways that exemplifies the work that you're doing here. I'm really interested in that research approach as well. We've been connecting to a few museums across the UK, and we're interested in that participatory action research, I suppose I might call it, but you described it so brilliantly. Are you planning to do any more projects like that?

Victoria Ryves: Yeah, so we're hoping that Changing the Record will be an annual thing, done in a very similar way. It was quite a long-term programme, it was very mindful of the fact that we were asking people to do things that could be full of emotional labour. So, one of the other women that was part of the programme, she researched six case studies in Doncaster's past related to black history. And for her, there was an awful lot of emotional labour and kind of personal kind of stuff she had to navigate herself. So, it's something we couldn't rush. We never said we have to produce something in 18 months' time, we kind of went with it, and at the pace that felt comfortable for the researchers. And the freedom that the researchers have is really, really important. I think some of the best work that we do as museums is when we hand over as much power as we can. It's a really scary thing to do. And it's especially scary for local authorities. Because risk is something that we manage daily. But the kind of freedom in handing over and saying you can research who you want, you can research it in a way that you want, and you can express it in a way that feels authentic to you. was really powerful. Yeah,

Sharon Heal: I do think hats off to you – that is sector leading radical practice to be able to do it in that way. It's proper, not even co-production, but that handing over of power is a really lovely thing to see. And, you know, I lived in Yorkshire in the 80s. And it was a tough time. And it was a tough time for cities like Doncaster because it was built on the railways and the pits in many ways. But we're facing a cost-of-living crisis. Now. There's been an announcement today about some support for communities, but we know that they're going to be tough times ahead. What can we do to support our communities? What have you got planned?

Victoria Ryves: Yeah, I think one of the important things to kind of note for Doncaster, I'm sure for many other places is that tough times are nothing new. For Doncaster, we sit fairly high on various deprivation indexes and matrixes. And a lot of our community has struggled over the past few years, the past a decade or so especially. And out of that we are already delivering an awful lot of community-based work and to make it work we have to understand our communities. One of the things I'm really conscious of is kind of settling into community carrying out some amazing work for six weeks and then having to run off because our funding has run out, or satelliting in for six weeks doing something that we think is really great, but isn't really achieving anything or helping anyone in anyway. So, with our wellbeing programme, we're kind of four years into a wellbeing programme called History, Health and Happiness and that programme took us a while to get off the ground. So, we were fortunate enough to be in a funding position where we could take time to really build community insight. And that is ultimately going to be the thing that people need to do at the moment, is to really get to grips with who is your community, when you say community, what do you actually mean? And that is having conversations on other people's turf. It's not inviting people to

come to you. It's going and having conversations in the coffee shops outside the school gates, about what these places are, what makes them tick. What are those local issues? And what we did with history, health and happiness, as we built this community inside, we met these community anchors, and then we're able to produce programming and activities in collaboration with these communities and groups, rather than doing what we thought would work. And that's going to be the key here, it's finding out what your community needs, what is actually useful. We might think that what people want is, I don't know, providing a Breakfast Club, but if, actually, that's prohibitive, because people still can't get here in their cars, and there is nowhere to park, then it's not really going to solve any problems. So, it's interrogating what is actually needed and where we can play a part. And the really important thing is kind of the authenticity in that making sure that you can deliver what you promise. When I first started the community engagement programmes here, I found that often I was walking into communities where they felt kind of kind of damaged from previous projects and previous engagement where they felt like they'd been picked up and dropped, or that someone promised them the world and then wasn't able to do it. And that damage of trust was still repairing. And that's not necessarily just trust in us, it's the trust in kind of any perceived authority. So, the idea of authenticity and what you can offer, delivering what you promise, and then thinking about the little things. I think sometimes as museums and organisations, we get trapped into thinking about the grand gestures, we think about the big things that we can do to make a difference. But there's lots of little things we can do that we do already, we're already incredibly welcoming spaces, we're already places where people can come and sit for free. We're already places where our staff can provide a listening ear, they can be someone to smile at them, all those little things are really, really

important as well. So, it's kind of important not to, to lose sight of what we're already really good at.

Sharon Heal: That's great. And it's interesting, isn't it, thinking about where we are now with winter ahead. And even though there's been some measures, introduced by government today, or flagged by government, that we still know that a lot of people will struggle over the winter. And there's been a lot of discussion about museums and libraries as warm, safe spaces. And that's true, if you can get there and if you feel confident, crossing the threshold. So, I know there's been a lot of discussion as well about getting out there into the community and what you say about asking people what they want and need and being able to deliver is really critical. And one of the things that we've thought about a lot is wellbeing. And as the Museums Association, when we say we want to campaign around wellbeing, we're thinking about workforce wellbeing as well. Obviously, we're a membership organisation, we want to support people who work in the sector. But we're also thinking about community wellbeing. So, you know, we I think we have to look after ourselves in order to be able to do that work with community. So how do you do that wellbeing, peace for yourself and for staff?

Victoria Ryves: Yeah, that was really true. So, we didn't talk about the cost of living crisis. And it's really important that we don't forget that our staff are also experiencing the same crisis. The demographic of people that makes up our workforce, particularly our frontline staff, is very similar to the communities that we're trying to work with, and opportunities that we're trying to provide to be warm and safe. And so it's important that we do that within as well. When we say community, we should also think about our internal community. But in terms of kind of what we do here, my remit i covers the history, health and happiness programme. And during the pandemic, there was a kind of a

kind of a lightbulb moment in my brain where I found myself sat on my living room floor, packing up thousands and thousands of activity bundles that we were sending out to vulnerable people in the community. And it was an incredibly worthwhile thing to do. And we know that it made an awful lot of difference and made people feel valued and empowered people to ask for further help in some cases, which is really important, but it did come at the detriment of my own wellbeing. You know, I was sat there at three in the morning with Sellotape, which wasn't ideal. And then I kind of reached out in into the world of museum Twitter, which is where all the good conversations happen. And just asked openly it was anyone else feeling this, is anyone else feeling that we are spending so much time looking after our communities but not ourselves. And this group of people came forward and said, yes, we're feeling this too. And we all had a virtual coffee. And in that coffee we kind of talked about the fact that we felt we weren't really able to do our jobs effectively, to hold space for our communities, and to support those that were supporting people whose wellbeing was kind of getting worse and worse over the pandemic, because we were feeling that too. So, that group turned into an organisation that now exists called Glam Cares. So, we are a peer support network that offers care and support for community engagement, people that work or volunteer in galleries, libraries, and museums, or heritage sites – we're very liberal and who can join us. And what we kind of advocate for in that is for this very thing, it's to support your own wellbeing to invest in self-care, so that you can look after others. And we hope to kind of create frameworks and encourage people to be able to manage up to create this culture of care within your organisation. And the culture of care means extends beyond those you work with. It's your communities, it's the staff, it's everybody feeling the same level of care. What that looks like, for me, as a manager, kind of submit practical

examples is leading by example. So, I try and I block out time every day for my lunch break, and I reclaim my lunch, and I try and get away from my desk, and hope that my staff see me doing that so they know it's okay for them to do it as well. I also have a couple of budget lines. I have a budget for self-care because I recognise that my staff are the experts in what they need to look after themselves. There's no point me saying we're all gonna go to Monday to yoga, because for some people that is their idea of hell. So, they can come to me and say, hey, I've seen this, this podcast subscription library like or crochet really helps me out so can I have some crochet hooks. And that means that they can tap into self-care in a way that's suitable for them. And then the second budget line is, is Moments of Joy. I think in museums, sometimes we forget about these wonderful spaces that we work in and the incredible collections that we work with. And we kind of forget the wonder that our visitors have when they walk into our spaces. So, the Moments of Joy budget is for that – it's to help my staff recapture wonder. So, we go and we've been we've been out in nature, we've been told that we're the museum places to recapture that jewellery for ourselves.

Sharon Heal: I absolutely love that culture of care and moments of joy. That's two really solid takeaways from this podcast. I'm sorry to say Victoria, that's all that we've got time for. Thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure to sit in this fantastic museum, and chat about activism and radicalism and work with our communities.

You've been listening to the Museums Association Radical Museums podcast. This episode was presented by me, Sharon Heal. We'd love to hear your feedback and thoughts about this podcast and what museum activism means to you. You can find out all about us and our campaigns through our website www.museumsassociation.org. Thank you for listening.