

Subject: Right to remain silent?  
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Next month a conference on 'police museums and strategic engagement' takes place at The Royal New Zealand Police College. Its aim is to consider how police museums can strengthen their community relations. This is a seemingly unremarkable subject, just another example of museums ceasing to be 'inwardly focused' but instead 'looking at the needs of visitors and communities through a range of educational and other services' (Richard Sandell, *Museums Journal*, January 2007). And yet, in the case of police museums, this is less straightforward than it might first appear.

Take, for example, the Metropolitan Police's Crime Museum. It has been based at New Scotland Yard since 1874. The collection began following the passing of a law enabling the police to keep prisoners' property for 'instructional purposes'.

It still serves this function today. Its current curator, retired detective Alan McCormick, says that one task of the Crime Museum is to teach officers 'about the weapons they may encounter on the street'. This accounts for the frightening array of concealed guns and knives that were once used by criminals but are now on display.

The Crime Museum was revamped in July 2006. McCormick explains that this was prompted by the realisation that the museum 'had lost its focus as a learning resource'. He argues that, instead of being 'somewhere people just come to gawp', it is 'now a place where officers really learn lessons from past crimes'.

The temptation to 'gawp' must be immense when one is standing in front of a cooker that the serial killer Dennis Nilsen once used to dispose of his many victims. If the detective writer P.D. James is correct to describe murder as 'a contaminating crime', what might happen if the public were given unfettered access to such 'star' attractions?

We are unlikely to ever find out. Access to the Crime Museum is restricted to serving police officers and members of the judiciary. Even so, it is untrue to say that the public are completely forbidden from seeing it. The number of journalists and other dignitaries permitted on the restricted tours that occur every month must run into thousands. And objects from the Crime Museum are allowed to leave Scotland Yard, as happened last September when Barnet and Golders Green police stations held an open weekend. This event was intended to give the public a chance to see around the police stations, ask questions and look at objects from the Crime Museum.

This example shows that expanding public access need not necessarily be to the detriment of the Crime Museum's primary teaching role. A comparison might be drawn with the Wellcome Museum of Anatomy and Pathology at the Royal College of Surgeons. This is only accessible to practitioners and students of medicine. The associated Hunterian Museum is, however, open to the public.

An attempt to provide something similar around the theme of policing occurred a little over a decade ago. In 1997, a PFI scheme was initiated by the Metropolitan Police with the aim of converting the former Bow Street Police station in Covent Garden into a visitor attraction. Called 'The Beat' it was meant to provide 'a neutral and unbiased arena for discussion of policing practice and related issues'. It was never realised.

The long, complicated and ultimately unsuccessful story of this venture is told by the former leader of the private consortium, Andrew Thorburn in his book *The Missing Museum* (Trafford Publishing, 2006). The exact reasons why the police decided to pull out of the project in 2003 remain unclear. However, the fact that the apparently 'off putting' words 'police' and 'museum' were to be omitted from the title make it plain that any attempt to address contemporary policing in an entirely 'neutral and unbiased' way is a far from easy task.

This is especially true when the police themselves are the main backers of the museum. Are such institutions able to be critical and ask difficult questions?

Recent events in Sweden suggest not. In October a new national police museum opened in Stockholm. It draws on a collection of some 10,000 objects, several hundred of which are arranged into a series of exhibitions showing how the image of policing has changed over time, be it in terms of uniform or media representation. Methods of crime detection are also addressed, including a temporary exhibition about crime and the internet. An important target audience are children and young adults.

Reviews in both of Sweden's main newspapers drew attention to the fact that the museum was in effect an extension of the police's information department. The displays were criticised for avoiding controversial issues. That there is no mention of *Säpo* (the security police) is pointed out by Eva Bäckstedt writing in *Svenska Dagbladet*. She also notes that, whilst the Gothenburg riots of 2001 are addressed, nowhere is it mentioned that the police shot and wounded one of the protestors. Bäckstedt concludes that, if the museum wishes to become more than just a resource for the police themselves, it must be prepared to 'ask those really controversial questions.'

Like in Sweden, the New Zealand Police Museum is a department of the police. Its manager is Kamaya Yates. She argues that, even though the police are her 'sole source of income and support', that does not stop the museum from 'be[ing] critical of what the police have done or do'. She uses her museum's account of the controversial Springbok Rugby Tour of 1981 to illustrate this point. It juxtaposes two differing views of the resulting protest. One is from the grateful South Africans thanking the police for their work; the other is from a protest leader 'thanking' the police for inflicting so many injuries. For Kamaya Yates, this shows that the museum's association with the police provides 'a greater opportunity to provide a context for people to understand how such things happened.'

Another person who appreciates the paramount importance of 'providing an impartial view of policing' is Laurie A. Baty in the United States. She is senior Director at the National Law Enforcement Museum (NLEF). It will be interesting to see if she succeeds once the museum opens in Washington DC in 2011. Its

account of the Rodney King riots that took place in Los Angeles will provide one gauge of the museum's success.

In addition to tackling this and other contentious episodes, the NLEF must present a 'national' story. Baty points out that this can only work by emphasising trends in policing, thereby restricting the number of 'local' stories that can be told. The scale of this task becomes apparent when one learns that policing the United States involves '18,000 agencies, each with their own laws to enforce, their own jurisdictions, and their own culture.'

This draws attention to the distinctions between the overall national picture and the situation at the regional level. The latter can only be properly addressed by either constabulary museums, local authority museums or museum trusts. In Britain, an interesting example of the latter is the Prison and Police Museum run by Ripon Museum Trust. Opened in 1984, it places the story of policing in the Yorkshire region within the national context. The objects on display came originally from the collections of the North and West Yorkshire Police as well as Humberside Police. The Trust is independent of the police, although the Chief Constables of the four forces in the area are all patrons.

The Vice President of Ripon Museum Trust is retired police officer, Ralph B. Lindley. He is convinced of the need to tell the story of policing through museums and describes the absence of a national police museum as 'an absolute disgrace'. Lindley argues, somewhat contentiously, that 'the museum profession as a whole finds the history of policing interesting but mystifying as well.' And even those local museums with police-related collections look upon them 'as being of only nominal interest'.

When it comes to constabulary museums, two factors emerge: first, a severe lack of financial resources and, second, the problem of permitting public access to police buildings. The collection at Devon and Cornwall Constabulary provides an illustrative example of the challenges – and potential – of such a resource. The 15,000 strong collection of artefacts, photographs and library was begun informally by a retired police officer and bequeathed to a not-very-enthusiastic constabulary. It remained neglected in poor storage conditions until 2004 and the appointment of Angela Sutton-Vane as Collections Officer. She is candid about the challenges she faces. Her job would not exist without the support of the Chief Constable. Only by becoming more financially self-supporting would she succeed in her goal of 'looking at policing in a more intellectual and exploratory light.' Financing also causes other concerns: 'tax payers resent the police paying to look after a history collection... They want to see more bobbies on the beat and reduced crime.'

Yet Sutton-Vane shows that, despite the many difficulties, there is a great deal to be optimistic about. She has rebranded the collection as a 'Heritage & Learning Resource', attracted HLF funding, employed an Education Officer, set up a website and initiated school outreach projects dealing with policing and citizenship.

This shows that, with the right leadership, these issues *can* be addressed. The recently accredited Essex Police Museum confirms this. It now attracts over

6,000 visitors per year and offers free support for the teaching of history and citizenship at key stages one and two.

An even greater success story is the NCCL Galleries of Justice (GoJ) in Nottingham. It has for over a decade successfully addressed issues of citizenship and the law – and it was for this that it was rightly awarded the Gulbenkian prize in 2003. Its many activities include mock trials; outreach work with children at risk of offending; and assisting the teaching of citizenship in schools.

The GoJ would surely be the perfect model for any national police museum. Yet it is most revealing that the one gallery that is no longer part of the regular museum tour is 'Policing Today'. Set in a police station it was an 'issue based gallery in which the problems facing the police today were explored – through images, objects and provocative questions.' The GoJ wishes to continue this very important work – but has decided to hand it over to partners such as the Youth Offending Team and the Youth Justice Board. They will use the displays to work with specific, invited groups.

From this one can draw a stark conclusion: when it comes to the specific area of policing today, the traditional approach of an exhibition open to self-guided museum visitors simply does not work. It will be interesting to see if the delegates gathering at next month's police conference in New Zealand agree with this point of view. And, if they do, what implications does this have for 'police museums and strategic engagement'?