

From Them to Us: Historic Royal Palaces

Fundamentally, you've got to like people, and like seeing them having a good time.

Learning is at the heart of everything Historic Royal Palaces does - linked to our charitable status. Understanding audiences shows us how to do the learning part.

Historic Royal Palaces (HRP) has developed a clear sense of purpose, driven by philosophy and charitable status, with people at its centre. They note a wider transformation of culture and heritage: a new sense of audience and democratization of culture, partly driven by a much more engaged, informed, demanding public who wouldn't stand for 'this is not for everyone' and 'we know best'; and partly by the Labour government 1997-2010, which changed the purpose of public funding to cultural organizations to require them to reach out. As an organisation without public funding, audiences are integral to HRP's business: 'people need to choose HRP and want it'.

HRP embarked on the Identity Project in 2004-5, facilitated by Robert Jones at Wolff Olins. '[His] brilliance was to encourage HRP to think about 'who are we here for?' as an integral part of our cause, built into everything - not only "what are we here for?"' This shaped a clear cause, with people and stories at its heart:

"Our aim is to help everyone explore the story of how monarchs and people have shaped society, in some of the greatest palaces ever built."

HRP's cause set a huge ambition of universal engagement - 'everyone' - and an invitation to people to participate rather than receive - 'explore' not 'tell'.

This transformation 'was driven by instinct rather than intelligence': at the time, HRP had little information about their audiences. Over time, HRP has expanded its understanding about audiences' motivations, behaviours and how audiences receive and experience what they do. HRP then uses this knowledge to drive change: they ask: 'So what? What does this mean for us? This changes stuff.' They align teams to respond to the intelligence they have gained, to provide the impetus and initiative for change; and to engage everyone. 'When change comes out of understanding, people are more likely to work with it.'

Increasingly, HRP sought to develop its domestic market and reformulated its strategies for Learning, Digital and Programming. In 2013/14, in a new initiative, Audiences First, these public-facing aspects of the business were brought together and challenged against a new audience segmentation model developed by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre. The organisation also recognized that 'Audiences First' needs to happen everywhere so that all the different elements of people's experience are good and their experience is seamless. They bring all staff come together in regular customer service sessions to explore: 'If this was a 5* hotel, what would each part of the experience be like?' How might we treat visitors in the ways that we would like to be treated? Staff ask this of their encounters with each other too.

John Barnes, Director of Conservation and Learning, notes the significance of where he focuses his own attention as a leader: 'What do leaders bring their attention to? On the whole, people in organizations will be interested in what their leader is interested in, not in what their leaders say is important, but don't themselves have an interest in.'

He recognized that he needed to give space and support to colleagues who pay attention to audiences because of their disciplines and backgrounds. For Barnes, these colleagues were Ruth Gill, then Head of Interpretation and David Souden, then Head of Education. Both recognised the essential place of interpretation to influence visitors through interpretation.

Barnes describes his 'wake up moment' in 2007 when Gill was leading teams to explore what audiences might want from HRP for the 500th anniversary of Henry VIII. The research identified two distinct visitor groups, 'culture families' and 'leisure families'. Leisure families 'wanted to know about people and stuff about people, not concepts. They wanted Henry!' Some were specifically turned off by what HRP was doing. In families who were seeking a good time, the decision maker sometime feared being shown up or 'getting it wrong' in mediating between the information which HRP provided and the family group. This led Barnes to question who else might HRP be excluding? They started to survey people who might not come to HRP.

In 2008 Gill and Sandra Botterill developed the 'Dartboard', 'a brilliant piece of work, which really made us think differently'. This placed audience segments on a radiating circle, with a 'hot core' of people who would come anyway, and were receptive; and a perimeter of 'cool rejectors', unlikely to visit.

Because engaging 'everyone' is part of their cause, HRP seeks to reach every segment: 'to do more and better for those we already serve - to deepen their experience - AND to extend beyond them, broaden our reach, bring in others with different, surprising things so they think differently about [us]'. In the Enchanted Palace at Kensington Palace, HRP learned that reaching out to new audiences can alienate the people who 'normally' come. They now address different segments through layering in different experiences with their programme, rather than by making fundamental changes to well-loved places.

For example, the installation Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red in the moat at the Tower of London in 2014 marked the centenary of the outbreak of the World War One. It is estimated that one billion people saw this installation, making it is the largest seen heritage/ public art work. Yet it was non-invasive and worked with the grain of the Tower. Again, the Magic Garden which opened at Hampton Court Palace in 2016 created 'a new and unique way for families to explore Hampton Court's past'. It was created on a former tennis court, formerly King Henry VIII's Tiltyard, which was not open to the public. The design is inspired by myths and legends of the Tudor Court, and includes battlements, towers, a secret grotto, and mythical beasts. Memberships grew by the largest number ever in the 4 weeks after it opened - so that families can keep coming back.

HRP reaches out to audiences in different locations. A dance inspired by the 18th century court was performed at Hampton Court then toured to the Latitude Festival in 2016. 'Tudors on Tour' travelled to Cheshire in 2015, and to Camp Bestival and to Butlins in 2016 - reaching out to family audiences for whom Hampton Court Palace may not be seen as family friendly. In a recent project in partnership with Aardman Animations, 6,000 children were involved in making an animated film, 'Royals, Rascals and us: 500 years of Hampton Court Palace', which was shown in cinemas around the UK as well as online.

Distinctiveness is a big driver for HRP, to create distinctive experiences which connect with audiences in very specific ways that they can design; with a 'look and feel' that people associate with the organisation, beyond the 'portfolio' of its properties; and which stand out from their peers/ competitors. They have used immersive theatre to enliven spaces, create movement, sound, light, event and visceral experiences. Can't stand still - has to keep evolving, moving. 'What will the next generation of distinctiveness be, building on what we

already have? We need to start from audiences and how people are motivated; their learning styles and preferences.'

For Michael Day, CEO, 'the audience question is vast, the context changes it completely.' In 2015, HRP took on the management of Hillsborough Castle, an 18th century country house which became the official royal residence in Northern Ireland and the place where many of the formal and informal stages of the Peace Process happened. For HRP, Hillsborough presents completely new and different audience challenges and segmentation, where histories are learned and understood differently by different school populations and families.

HRP has made Hillsborough their number one project and it represents a huge investment in heritage for Northern Ireland. HRP is slowly building trust with local people, and taking small steps so people may be more forgiving if HRP makes mistakes. They have formed a local advisory group with senior and respected public figures; they have recruited a staff team, almost all of whom are from Northern Ireland; and most of the consultants they employ are from Northern Ireland.

Gaby Porter interviewed John Barnes and Michael Day in April 2016.