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Delivering Collections Information to Users

Summary
The paper analyses the different categories of users of collections information and the ways in which the information can be exploited. It outlines two case studies from the Museum of London. It stresses the importance of the sustainability of collections information and the need for this information to be based on established standards.

Delivering Collections Information to Users

It is a privilege to be contributing to this conference, as I was Chair of CIDOC when the Committee last met in this region, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in September 1993. The 1993 conference heard a number of presentations about work in Slovenian museums, from Gregor Moder, Marjeta Mikuž, Alenka Simikič and others. There were also papers by Branka Šulc about the situation in Croatian museums and by Ecaterina Geber and Pavel Jirásek about developments in Romania and the Czech Republic (International Council of Museums. International Committee for Documentation, 1993).

This paper discusses the relationship between users and collections information and the importance of understanding and responding to user needs. Many museums have extended the range of users of collections information and strengthened the quality of the services which these users are offered. Museums have developed their services from a focus on internal users and researchers to also give priority to making information relevant to a wider audience, including schools, learners and the general public. The paper analyses the different categories of users, the types of information that are relevant to users and the ways in which the information can be exploited. It outlines two case studies from the Museum of London, based on my experience as the former Head of Information Resources: an internal project to give access to the Museum's ceramics and glass collection and a partnership project to develop a national resource about migration into England. It concludes with a discussion of the importance of the sustainability of collections information and the need for this information to be based on established standards.

Users and user needs

Four aspects of the relationship between museums and the users of collections information are considered below (Ashby, McKenna and Stiff, 2001, p. 22-25; Museum Documentation Association, 1992; Roberts, 1985, p. 25-26; Roberts and Light, 1980, p. 44-45):

- categories of user;
- types of information;
- different uses of information;

- different ways of providing access to information.

Six broad categories of user are identified in Table 1. Museum staff, governing bodies, auditors and other professionals may need access to a full range of information, including collections management and historic details. They may need access to in-house systems and files, either direct or through an intermediary such as an information manager or curator. Researchers may also need access to a wide variety of information, including non-confidential collections management details. They may want to be able to carry out complex searches and look through historic files. Users from the media – such as journalists and picture editors – are more likely to want rapid access to specific resources, such as an image. Teachers and lecturers who are responsible for facilitating education and learning, will need access to contextual information packaged into suitable course material, but may also want to be able to use primary catalogue details and images, as will school children, students and individuals in a structured learning programme. Finally, the general public and informal learners may have wide ranging interests, including wanting to browse through images and records and facilities to pursue lines of interest. In recent years, particular attention has been given to the role of museum information to support learners involved in formal and informal education (see, for example, National Museum Directors' Conference, 1999 and 2000).

One of the key issues to considering when developing a collections-based Web resource is the need to define the potential users and match the resource to their interest. The priority might include supporting researchers, the general public or education groups. The main interest of researchers is likely to be the flexibility to search and browse through detailed catalogue records and images. The public and education users may be more inspired by a combination of contextual information, images and basic catalogue information, such as the history of the collection and the ability to browse through its major themes.

Table 1. Users of collections information resources
Museum staff, auditors and other professionals
Researchers
Media and information providers
Education and learning facilitators
Education users, specialist groups and individual 'lifelong' learners
General public, informal learners, visitors

It is useful to distinguish between four main types of collections information that are relevant to users (Table 2). Primary collections information about individual objects or groups of objects can include including extensive descriptive, historic and management details, held in catalogue or 'metadata' records. These details are built up from the time the museum becomes aware of the object, through its subsequent life in the museum. Authority information might be relevant to many different objects, such as records about people, organisations, places, events and subjects. Digital resources about the objects in the collection can include digital images and digital audio files. Contextual information enhances the primary information, such as a commentary on an artist, the background to a style of ceramics or the history of an event.

Table 2. Types of collections information resources
Primary catalogue information
Authority information
Digital resources
Contextual information

There are a number of ways in which collections information may be used (Table 3). One key use is for internal collections management, security and accountability, where catalogue details such as storage location, valuation, conservation, the source of the object and reference images are vital. The second use is as a long-term archive about the collection, where the historic value of an object is significantly diminished if we cannot demonstrate its provenance and maintain information about its use. The third type of use is in support of research and enquiries, by staff and other users, where details such as the object's maker, date, classification, history and historic context may be important. The final category is the application of collections information in products such as exhibition development, gallery resources including captions and multimedia guides, publications, learning resources and Web resources.

Table 3. Uses of collections information
Collections management, security and accountability
Historic archive
Source for research and general enquiry
Development of exhibitions, gallery resources, publications, learning resources, Web resources, etc.

A further issue to take into account is where a museum may need to provide access to collections information (Table 4). Each of these delivery methods can be seen as a way of repackaging or re-purposing the underlying information resources. One approach is to deliver access to information in a gallery or an adjacent reference area, through methods such as captions, printed, audio and interactive guides and the use of on-line systems. The users have made the commitment to come to the museum and the information is adjacent to the collection to which it refers. The users may be the general public, lifelong learners or researchers, with a range of expectations and requirements, but an overall focus on the theme being pursued in the gallery. Another approach is to provide access in a more neutral reference area, away from a specific gallery or exhibition, such as a library or search room. Here, the user is more likely to be a learner or researcher and their interest may go across the museum's collections and subject areas. The museum may also provide access to collections information on the Web, through database services, virtual exhibitions and other resources. The user may be planning a visit or have no specific intention to come to the museum. They may be looking at this museum's resources alongside those from other cultural organisations and their interest may range from research to general curiosity. A further approach is to incorporate information in reference products, such as books or CD-ROM's, where the interests of the user may again be very varied.

Table 4. Access to collections information
Galleries and gallery reference areas
Research areas
Web, on-line exhibitions
Reference products (books, CD-ROMs)

On-line Access to the Museum of London's Ceramics and Glass Collection

Introduction

The first case study in the use of collections information is the development of access to the Museum of London's Ceramics and Glass Collection.

The collection includes around 26,000 objects of regional, national and international significance. These reflect the whole spectrum of society, including everyday items and luxury wares. As a result of London's position as a centre of national and international trade and manufacturing innovation and the Museum's long-established acquisition programme, the objects are very representative of the evolution of ceramics and glassware. Many of the objects were acquired in the years before scientific archaeological excavations, when building workers finding complete objects were encouraged to offer them to the Museum. They complement finds from excavations, which form a separate collection within the Museum.

The bulk of the collection had been stored in the main Museum since it was built in the 1970s. In October 2001, the collection had to be packed into 1500 crates and moved to the Museum's external resource centre, as the original storage area was affected by building work to create a new exhibition space. Following this, the Museum worked on plans for a project to provide physical and on-line access to the collection and to develop ways to engage the public. In 2002, the Museum was awarded a grant of £150,000 (approximately 225,000 Euros) towards the cost of this project, from the Designation Challenge Fund administered by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC).

The project ran from 2003-04, during which one of the bays at the resource centre was fitted out with improved lighting, etc., new storage units were installed and the collection was unpacked, reorganised, catalogued, digitised and incorporated in the new units (www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics/pages/project.asp).

The information resources developed during this work were added to the Museum's internal database (Multi MIMSY). A new Web site was developed with access to this information and other details about the collection, targeted at researchers, learners and specialist groups. (www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics) (Figures 1 and 2). At the end of the project, the internal database and Web site included 26,000 catalogue records, 13,000 digital images, 800 subject records, 100 publication records, 200 maker records and inter-linking between the information resources. The Web site also included contextual information about each of the major elements of the collection.

Target users the collection

Prior to the project, the collection had a well established user base of researchers, but only limited use by the public. Research users include archaeologists, art and design historians and ceramics and applied art specialists. Direct requests for information were dealt with by the Museum's two curatorial departments. Users were also able to consult an extensive range of publications which drew on the collection and acted as a vital source of information. The collection was also in demand as a source for loans to UK and overseas museums.

As a result of the project, it was envisaged that the collection would be more widely used by:

- staff from the Museum of London and other museums, for the development of permanent displays, temporary exhibitions, publications and loans;
- researchers, postgraduate students and archaeologists;
- students carrying out work placements and dissertations;
- educational and professional groups (such as the English Ceramics Circle) and evening classes;
- the general public.

It was envisaged that the project would enable the Museum to actively promote the collection and provide on-line access to the information about the objects on its Web site, bringing it to the attention of a wider audience than had been the case in the past.

Reorganisation and development of the information about the collection

The aim of the information management work was to produce a comprehensive set of catalogue records, digital resources and supporting information which would reflect the significance of the collection, could be used and developed in the future as an internal resource and could be made accessible through the Web interface.

The database records about the individual items were at a basic inventory level prior to the project. This contrasted to the richness of information about many of the items, incorporated in a number of publications (for example, Adams, 1987, Adams and Redstone, 1981, Evans, Ross and Werner, 1995, Green, 1999, Jackson, 1996, Marsh, 1981, Pearce, Lakin and Edwards, 1992 and Vince, 1985). The records were enhanced during the project by incorporating details from these publications. In addition, the main fields in the records were fully reviewed, standardised and updated as an integral part of the unpacking process. The project team and core curators checked and revised key fields and added descriptive summaries. In the case of the most important groups within the collection, the records were reviewed and further updated by subject specialists and curators.

The production of digital images was also integrated with the unpacking process. The Museum set up a basic digitisation studio within the storage area. As part of the work flow, staff decided whether an object justified having

one or more digital images and the object was held back to be photographed before being placed on the shelf.

A digitisation specialist on the project team established imaging standards based on national guidelines, developed the work process and took the majority of the images. She processed the primary TIFF images to produce a set of JPEG derivatives for use in the internal system and on the Web site and archived each version of the images. The digitisation specialist and the information manager created metadata for the images and incorporated this in the database. By the close of the project, 13,000 images had been linked to 12,500 catalogue records (such as A27744 in Figure 2).

The Museum's internal system includes an authority module, with separate sections for information about subjects, publications and people and organisations. The subject section was used to hold 800 records about the main ceramic and glass groups in the collection. Existing research resources were incorporated in the database and records were developed for the broad groups. These records were then linked to the catalogue records about the collection (there are 17,500 of these links). A similar approach was taken with the publication section, where 100 records were set up about the key ceramics and glass publications relevant to the collections. In the cases where a publication cited individual objects in the collection, the publication and catalogue records were linked, including specific citation details (there are 2500 of these links). The person and organisation section was used to hold 200 basic records about the main makers of items in the collection (individuals and companies).

Web access

The project team held initial discussions about the structure and aims of the Web site at an early stage in the planning of the project. It was agreed to develop a single site as part of the Museum's overall site, which would be relevant to the public, learners and researchers, with an emphasis on access to the primary catalogue and digital resources. The team reviewed progress by other museums with comparable collections, particularly those that had received previous project funding. These provided valuable models and pointers to the approach to be taken for this collection.

The Museum's in-house Systems Team was commissioned to develop the site. This had advantages over commissioning external consultants to carry out the work: the Systems Team could build on systems and skills used for previous projects, work closely with the project team, develop in-house skills and work with the in-house database to which they had direct access. The systems model starts with an extraction routine, which takes information from the in-house database (Multi MIMSY) and other internal sources. This information is restructured in a project database. The Web front-end provides access to this database through an ASP interface.

As the project progressed, the Web model was itself developed. The concept was then evaluated in a number of focus groups sessions, with general users and specialists. These were very helpful in clarifying the ideas and encouraging the team to concentrate on access to the primary catalogue records and images. The site was then developed in the final stages of the

project. It proved very useful for the systems and the project staff to work side by side and evolve the concepts as the work progressed.

The final model for the site included interlinked sections for the catalogue, ceramics, glass, makers and publications, which are closely based on the in-house catalogue and authority modules, supported by additional contextual information about the collection and the project (Figure 1). The effectiveness of the site will continue to be assessed in the following years and the records will be updated as changes are made to the information in the in-house system.

In the year since the launch of the Web resource, the site has proved to be a popular area within the Museum's overall Web site ('www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics' subset within 'www.museumoflondon.org.uk'). A series of searches on Google for terms which covered the key parts of the collection, each resulted in the Museum site being listed on the first page of the search results (searches for 'London ceramics', 'Chelsea porcelain', 'Bow porcelain', 'Fulham Pottery', 'Mill Green ware', 'Surrey whiteware', 'Border ware', 'London samian pottery' and 'Whitefriars glass'). The Museum received 200 email enquiries about ceramics and glass in the 9 months after the site was launched.

Figure 1. Museum of London Ceramics and Glass collection, home page, www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics.

Figure 2. Museum of London Ceramics and Glass collection, catalogue record A27744, www.museumoflondon.org.uk/ceramics.

The Moving Here Project

Introduction

The Museum was also involved in a national project called *Moving Here*, concerned with evidence of migration into England (Geser and Wood, 2004, Roberts, 2003). Under the management of The National Archives, a group of museums, libraries and archives worked together to create a Web site with 200,000 records and digital resources, extensive narratives about migration and the opportunity for users to contribute personal stories (www.movinghere.org.uk).

At the beginning of the project, a number of museums, libraries and archives were concerned that they held rich collections that were relevant to cultural diversity, to the movement of people into England and to the assimilation and involvement of migrants within the country. However, these collections were typically omitted from galleries and exhibitions and were relatively unknown to general users. This was certainly the case at the Museum of London, where a visitor will see little evidence of cultural minorities in the displays, despite the importance of those communities to London's society. After consultation with community groups and the cultural sector, it was agreed to pursue a project to catalogue, digitise and give access to information about many of these hidden

collections. Thirty partners agreed to join the project, from across the museums, libraries and archives sector. The project started in late 2001, with a total budget of £4m (6m Euro), including a grant of over £2.5m from one of the English lottery agencies, the New Opportunities Fund.

Target users

The primary user group for the project were individual lifelong learners, with other targets including community groups, schools and researchers. The project planned to attract users from minority communities and the wider communities that live alongside them. One of the aims was to motivate and involve individuals and communities and encourage participation with the cultural sector, using this initial project as a spring-board for longer-term developments.

Overall concept

The vision was to develop an overall programme that explored migration into England across all types of community. For this initial project, the partners agreed to focus on four key communities:

- south Asian migrants (from India, Pakistan and the surrounding countries);
- Caribbean migrants;
- Irish movements;
- Jewish migrants, particularly from eastern Europe.

The project covered the period from 1800 to the present, under four broad strands:

- the origin of the people who have moved;
- the journey or movement process and the problems people met during that process;
- how the arriving communities have settled in England;
- how the communities have developed their day to day working lives, their political involvement, their schooling, their lifestyle and their religious environment.

There were a number of advantages in selecting these four communities. They were well represented in the collections of the partners. There were also a number of active community groups which provided evidence of user demand and could contribute to the development of the project. Previous research had shown the enthusiasm for a greater awareness of collections which demonstrated black history in England. In addition, there was a strong research base in these communities, with a number of leading authors who were expert in migration issues.

In addition to the scope across museums, libraries and archives, it was agreed that the project should work at national, regional and local levels. The involvement of London was particularly crucial, as it is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. The project was able to use national, regional and local collections which reflect the history of the city. There have been a number of research reports that have stressed that a revolution has

happened in the last generation within London, where many people from diverse communities have come to settle in the city as their first point of arrival within the UK. Over 300 languages are spoken in London's schools and over 30% of the population is from minority groups (in central London, the figure is more like 50%).

Information development and access

The individual partners were responsible for identifying relevant material in their collections and then cataloguing and digitising this material within their local systems. With funding from the project, individual partners catalogued from 5 to 20,000 items. The Museum of London established a team of three staff to work on the project. The Museum contribution included 1000 catalogue records and digital images about objects and publications in its collection. The Museum also created 1400 catalogue records and digital audio files with in-depth details about 60 oral history interviews, the originals of which had been recorded over the previous 15 years. The Museum incorporated these resources in its in-house systems, creating 2400 records in Multi MIMSY which could be used as a long-term asset. Other partners catalogued and digitised original government papers, passenger lists, life histories, objects, books, ephemera, newspaper entries, etc.

Copies of these records and digital resources were passed to The National Archives, which set up a central team to manage the project and co-ordinate links with communities. The National Archives commissioned an extension of their existing information systems to support this project, including developing an integrated database and Web environment (Figure 3).

The Web site incorporates the merged database with 200,000 records and digital resources. In addition, the project commissioned learning resources which tell the story of migration and how a user can trace their roots, illustrated with examples of individual catalogue records and images created through the project. It site also has a gallery of the 500 -1000 key images which the project team have selected as being the most representative of the project. Finally, there is an area with over 200 personal stories that have been contributed to the site. Users can add their own story, including submitting their own images and incorporating images from the exiting site.

One of the strengths of the Web site is the integration between the extensive contextual information and the primary records and digital resources submitted by the partners. Figure 4 shows part of the results of a search for the phrase 'Empire Windrush' (one of the boats that carried migrants from the Caribbean to England in the 1940s), with hits from the learning resources, stories and catalogue.

Access to the web site

The project went live in July 2003, with extensive publicity and media coverage, including full page articles in a number of national newspapers. Brochures about the project were widely distributed, and tens of thousands of postcards with images from the project were placed in cinemas across the country.

The initial level of use of the Web site was very positive, with figures significantly exceeding the project targets during the six months after the launch (between 150,000 and 500,000 page views per month and between 20,000 and 40,000 unique visitors per month) (Child, et. al., 2004). The project has continued to achieve its targets in subsequent months, with page views stabilising at a consistent level. A series of searches on Google for relevant terms each resulted in *Moving Here* being listed on the first page of the search results (searches for 'migration', 'migration England, 'Irish migration England', 'Jewish migration England' and 'Caribbean migration England').

The National Archives carried out a user survey of the *Moving Here* Web site between three and six months after the launch. Of the 500 responses, 57% were White British, 8% were from an Irish background, 14.6% were from an ethnic Asian, African or Caribbean background and 18% were stated to be from 'other' white background. The most popular sections of the site were those with general information about migration or on a specific community. 75% of users agreed that the site added to their understanding of migration to England, 75% agreed that they discovered new information from using the website, 85% thought that the quality of information provided on the site was either excellent of good and 83% would visit the site again. The overall satisfaction rating was 89%.

Partner and community involvement

In addition to the Web site, the project has been remarkable successful in inspiring action by the partners and community groups, through collaborative initiatives such as exhibitions, events and community programmes. In the case of the Museum of London, the education staff strengthened their community links, particularly with the Asian and Caribbean communities, and brought those groups into the project. This work has continued since the main phase of database development was completed. For example, a number of partners have arranged events to respond to the 100th anniversary of the passing of an Aliens Act in 1905, to provide an historic perspective on migration and asylum. The Web site includes a news section with a directory of events, to encourage awareness of these activities (http://www.movinghere.org.uk/news/).

The site has also become embedded in a wide range of educational and life-long learning activities. For example, the Yorkshire and Humberside grid for learning features a regular *Moving Here* highlights section in its e-newsletter to schools (http://www.yhgfl.net/Moving_Here.395.0.html). The London Borough of Tower Hamlets is using part of an exhibition created by Moving Here within an education pack for primary schools. Similarly, a youth project based in Hackney, east London, is using *Moving Here* to help create material for a CD (http://www.movinghere.org.uk/stories/stories.asp?projectNo=28&SubmitProject=Go). The site itself incorporates a manual which trainers can use to help users develop their IT skills (http://www.movinghere.org.uk/help/it.htm)

Outcome and development

The project has created a very successful Web presence that is in the public attention. It has enabled the partners to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their collections and the need to continue to develop these collections. It has also led to the development of enhanced community links and involvement. In addition, the partnership process has been really successful. The project commissioned an in-depth evaluation, which confirmed the success of the Web resource and the partnership process (Child, et. al., 2004).

As a vindication of the *Moving Here* concept, The National Archives was awarded a further grant of nearly £800,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in late 2004. This project is called *Routes to the Future*, which will capture and record the experiences of first and second generation settlers in England. The funding will enable information to be added to the *Moving Here* database from Turkish, Yemeni, Chinese, Eastern European, Ugandan, Asian and Portuguese migrants, collated by museums and communities from around the country.
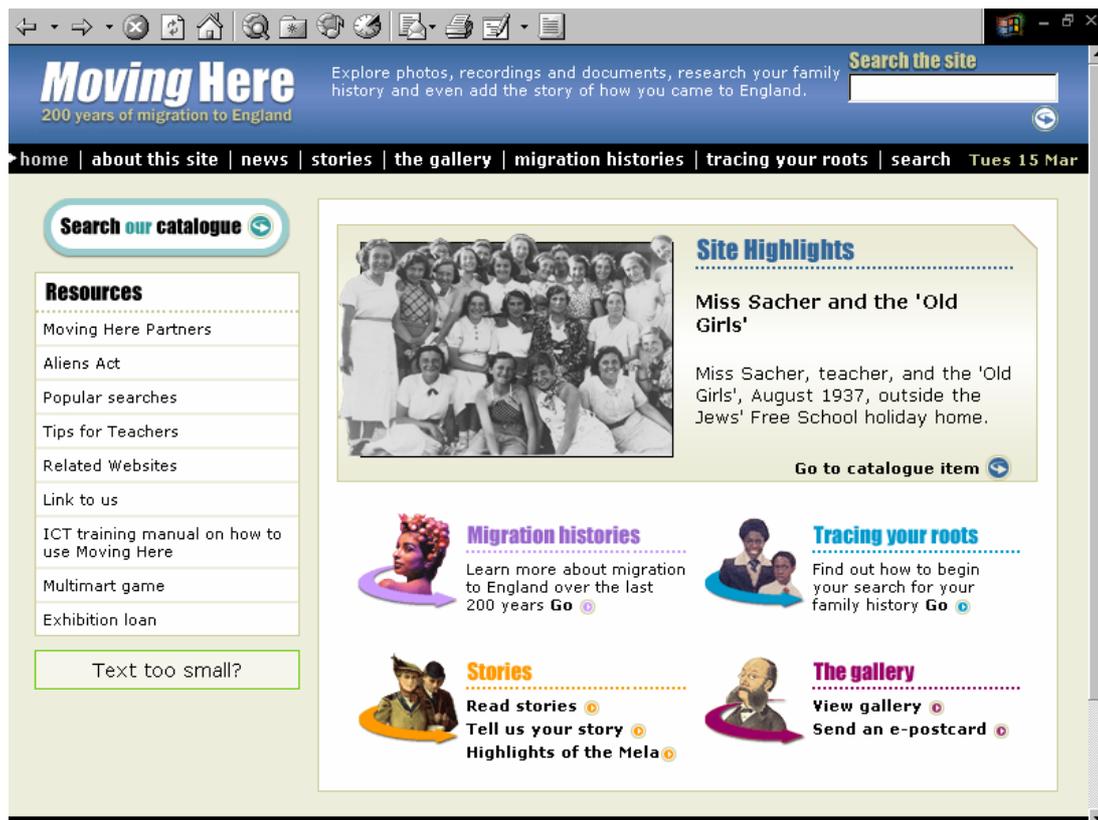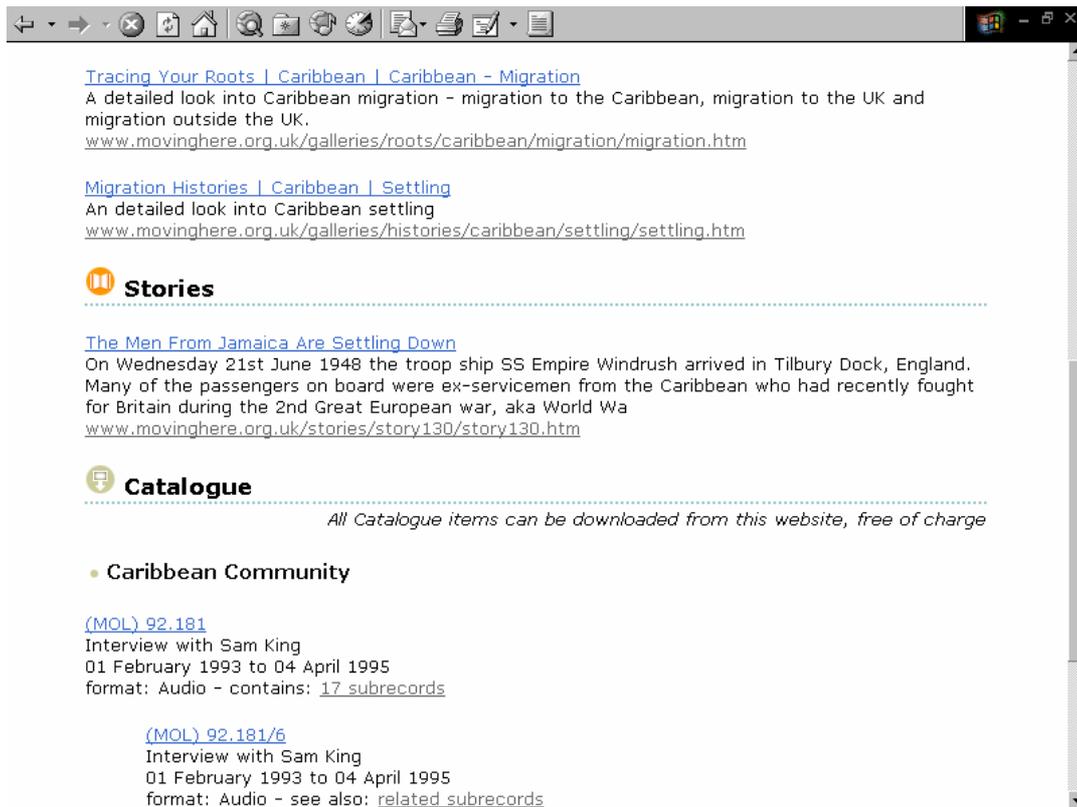

Figure 3. *Moving Here* home page

Figure 4. Sample of the results from a search on *Moving Here* for 'Empire Windrush'

Sustainability and standards

The Ceramics and Glass and Moving Here projects both placed considerable demands on staff and systems of the Museum of London and other partners. In order to justify this level of investment, the Museum needed to be confident that the project Web sites matched the needs of users and the content had a long-term future. In both cases, the Museum incorporated the primary catalogue records and digital resources in its main collections information system. This has the advantage that the resources can continue to be developed and used in other projects, as a permanent sustainable asset for the Museum (Roberts, 2000).

These and similar projects have benefit from the development of national and international standards. The Museum's in-house system is compatible with the SPECTRUM standard (Ashby, McKenna and Stiff, 2001, Museum Documentation Association, 1997, Roberts, 2005). The digital imaging standards were based on national guidelines (http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/pn/digi_tech_standards.asp), which are now being maintained by UKOLN (http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/interop-focus/gpg/). The

recording conventions and integrated database developed for the *Moving Here* project was based on the Dublin Core guidelines (http://dublincore.org/).

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