

National Maritime Museum

Caird Library – Cuts in Service

What is happening

In direct breach of its stated objective of maximising access, the Museum has imposed severe cuts in public access to its unique Library and Archives collections at the Caird Library. Opening hours are halved until 2012 during construction of the Sammy Ofer wing, and there is no commitment to restore opening hours after its opening.

The Museum had already, for months during 2008, reduced access to its archives to 32 hours per week, failing even to adhere to its promised minimum of 40 hours per week published in its Library Access policy.

But now, without any meaningful public consultation, the Museum has further reduced opening hours of the Caird Library to approximately 20 hours per week, and in March will close direct public access to the major part of its manuscripts collection for three months while it is moved to off-site storage to allow building work to commence. Although the decant of manuscripts will be complete by June 2009, the reduced opening hours apply all the way through to 2012, and the service will be further limited by fewer document retrievals per day because of the retrieval from off-site storage.

The cuts in service are contrary to the Museum's stated objectives and in contravention of the spirit of its foundation. The cuts are also incompatible with the 2008-11 funding agreement with the Government, which specifically commits the Museum to a strategic priority of maintaining a core public offer providing opportunity for research to visitors during the development.

There is concern that the reduced opening hours may become permanent as no commitment has yet been made to restore or to increase the opening hours when the new research centre opens in the Sammy Ofer wing in 2012.

Notice, Consultation and Planning

In August 2008 an announcement was made in the Caird Library blog of a two or three month closure planned for spring 2009, but this went largely unnoticed by researchers. However, in October, only two months' notice was given of an earlier and greatly extended closure from December. After much protest from users and the research community, some revised arrangements were announced on 3 December, and further adjustments to the arrangements were announced on 19 December allowing reduced access to manuscript documents for two months before the three-month closure from March until June 2009 of all direct access to manuscripts other than designated public records and to manuscripts already held off-site. These adjustments have addressed to a small degree some of the short-term concerns, but the major issues about cuts in services for the next three and a half years remain, as does the concern about future service provision beyond the planned re-opening in 2012.

Researchers querying the online catalogues for the Archive or the Library on the website are given no warning of the drastic cuts in service unless they also visit the NMM or Library home pages.

No consultation took place about the original plans for closure or the sudden earlier and extended closure which is now replaced by the arrangements above. No meaningful consultation has taken place about the cuts in service through to 2012.

None of the £35 million project budget for the Sammy Ofer wing has been allocated to the strategic priority of maintaining the core Archive and Library service provision to researchers during the development.

The Impact on Researchers

The cuts in service and the three month closure of access to the major part of the manuscripts collection will bring much research to a standstill, and the lack of properly publicised notice will have left many who are wholly dependent on access to the library and archives unable to take steps to mitigate this in any way. For many authors, historians, students and researchers, this is likely to materially affect the way they earn their living or continue their studies. In some cases it will delay publication of planned research, inhibit research on new projects, and curtail the development of teaching courses.

With opening hours halved, and the additional restrictions from retrieving manuscripts from off-site storage, the cuts in service from 2009 through to 2012 will seriously hamper all users.

The impact from 2012 onwards remains unknown, but there seems to be increasing emphasis on broadening the appeal of the Museum, rather than on meeting the needs of researchers. The Museum should do both.

The Wider Issues

The cuts are incompatible with the National Maritime Museum's strategic priority of maintaining a core public offer providing opportunity for research to visitors during the development. This strategic priority is part of the 2008-11 funding agreement with the Government.

But for some time the Museum has already been falling behind its objective of increasing access to its archives. While other publicly funded bodies have been increasing opening hours, the Museum has failed even to adhere to its own published policy of opening minimum of 40 hours per week. Even before the imminent closing of access to most manuscripts and the reduction in hours, the Caird Library has opened for only 32 hours per week. This failure to deliver an agreed level of basic provision does not instil confidence in the ability to deliver an appropriate level of services to researchers in the future.

In its announcement on 19 December 2008 the Museum admitted that it "simply underestimated the ongoing demand for access" to its library and archives collections. This is perhaps not surprising, given the lack of consultation, but it is deeply worrying that the Museum is considering cuts in its activities without understanding the demand for its services. The minutes of the Trustee Board meeting in February 2008 record that the "Trustees were acutely aware of the risk of all the management and financial attention

being focussed on the [SW Wing] project and the core work of the museum being put at risk", and the chairman stated "that the NMM had moved from a cash rich environment to a cash stretched environment", and that "this would mean that even without the SW Wing Project, choices would have to be made and some activities either stopped or cut". It seems ominous that the Museum has offered no justification for the reduced opening hours of the Caird Library all the way through to 2012, and that it has not committed either to restoring or to increasing opening hours when the new research centre opens in 2012.

As long ago as 2002, the Department Of Culture, Media and Sport, in its review of the Museum, recommended that "Consideration should be given to the introduction of further consultative panels, to provide more direct consultation with the visiting public", and that "The Museum should continue its work to provide wider access to its library and archives and to improve the facilities it offers to the non-professional researcher". The Museum's own Library Access Policy states that "The Library will collect statistics to show the number of physical visits to the Library each year, and undertake to survey its customers at regular intervals to assess performance and seek to improve services". The last such survey published dates to 2001, and without any meaningful consultation having taken place, the Museum has little on which to base its decisions.

During the last few months, the Museum management has been working on a 5-year Strategic Plan, divisional business plans, priorities and key performance indicators; at the same time they have ignored the potential for – and consequently underestimated – the demand for access to their archives, a central pillar of their foundation and a major element of their purpose.

None of these plans has yet been published. Public accountability, and sound management, demand that a publicly-funded body should consult with its current and potential users before taking such far-reaching decisions.

It would appear that the Museum has ignored DCMS recommendations on consultation and providing wider access, failed to carry out promised performance assessments, ignored its Government funding agreement, failed to adhere to its published policies, and has underestimated demand during its planning process for future service provision.

The National Maritime Museum appear to be undertaking a major redevelopment of the area of the building in which the library and archives are located, without any prior concept of what levels of service will be available in future, or consulting on the purpose the library improvements will serve for core users. It is not at all clear what improvements the new research centre will bring for the "serious" researcher of naval history – amateur or professional. The improvements mentioned so far comprise:

- A new treasures gallery for iconic objects
- An interactive gallery
- More frequent retrievals than are currently provided
- Enhanced online catalogue records
- More electronic resources
- Zoning into quiet and less quiet zones

The enhanced online catalogue and other electronic resources can be delivered without a £35m building project, and the other "improvements" appear to be aimed at the casual visitor, rather than serious naval or maritime history researchers, who need a simple access service to original documents.

The Way Forward

The National Maritime Museum is the publicly funded keeper of a unique and important national library and archive, which includes public records. We appeal to the Museum to take into account the needs of its many historians, teachers, students, writers and researchers by reconsidering its plans for service provision over the next four years and beyond. In particular we ask the Museum:

1. **To further reconsider the plans for the temporary closure of access to manuscripts and to consider a shorter closure and/or partial closures.** For example, to consider phasing the removal of the manuscripts collection to the off-site location whilst keeping access open to the remainder of the manuscripts and clearly publicising these phased changes to service in advance to minimise disruption for users.
2. **To restore opening hours for the period June 2009 to 2012 to allow researchers to work effectively.** After the decant of manuscripts to off-site storage, the number of document retrievals per day will be reduced from an already low grade provision, because documents have to be retrieved from off site. To mitigate the impact of this, opening hours should be restored to the promised minimum of 40 hours per week.
3. **To commit now to providing greater access to the archives after the opening of the new Research centre in 2012,** and in particular to commit to extending opening hours, and to making progress on the published objective of digitising the Manuscripts collection.
4. **To engage now in a meaningful public consultation with both users and potential users** about service provision for researchers for the next four years and beyond.

What You Can Do

If this issue is at all of concern to you, please sign the **Online Petition to the Prime Minister** at:

<http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/caird-library/>

Please also consider:

- Writing directly to the Museum director
- Raising the issue with your MP
- Bringing the issue to the attention of others
- Raising the issue within relevant societies and organisations.

Additional Background Information

Caird Library Opening Hours

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/about/sammy-ofer-wing/caird-library-opening-hours>

The Caird Library Blog

Announcements and comments by the public:

http://www.nmm.ac.uk/library/2008/11/update_on_caird_library_closur.html

http://www.nmm.ac.uk/library/2008/10/temporary_closure_from_20_dece.html

Main Index Page:

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/library/>

'Nelson and His World' Internet Forum

Discussion by library users:

<http://www.nelsonandhisworld.co.uk/viewtopic.php?t=309>

<http://www.nelsonandhisworld.co.uk/viewtopic.php?t=279>

<http://www.nelsonandhisworld.co.uk/viewtopic.php?t=258>

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Library and Manuscripts Access Policy:

http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/pdf/Library_Access_Policy.pdf

Archive and Library Copying Policy:

http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/doc/Archive_and_Library_-_Copying_policy_-_October_2008.DOC

National Maritime Museum Funding Agreement 2008-11:

http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/pdf/Funding_Agreement_2008-%2711.pdf

Trustee Board Minutes (Minutes of the last three meetings have been withheld from publication):

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/about/the-organization/trustees/minutes>

Annual Report and Accounts:

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/upload/pdf/HC-801-Nat-Maritime.pdf>

Caird Library information:

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/researchers/library/>

Sammy Ofer Wing information:

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/about/sammy-ofer-wing/>