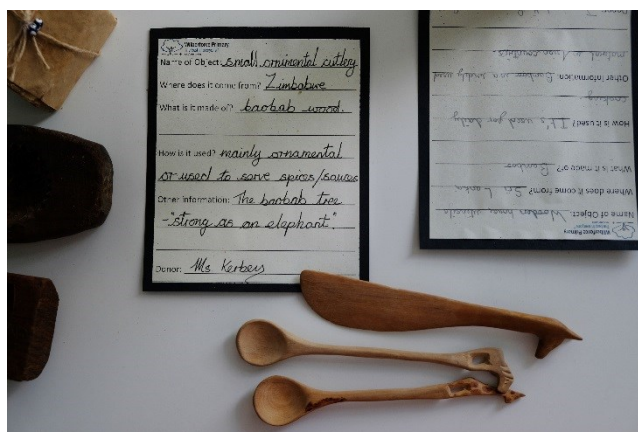


The School Museums Initiative



Introduction

The Mobile Museum was a 3-year collaborative research project between the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the Economic Botany Collection at Kew Gardens, which ran from January 2017 to December 2020.¹ The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).² The general aim of the project was to map the distribution of the many thousands of objects dispersed from Kew's Museum of Economic Botany over the period 1847-1990. A specific strand of the project involved an historical investigation into the dispersal of objects from the Kew Museum to British schools between 1877 and 1914 for the purpose of classroom-based displays of natural history or cultural objects used in the teaching of science and geography.

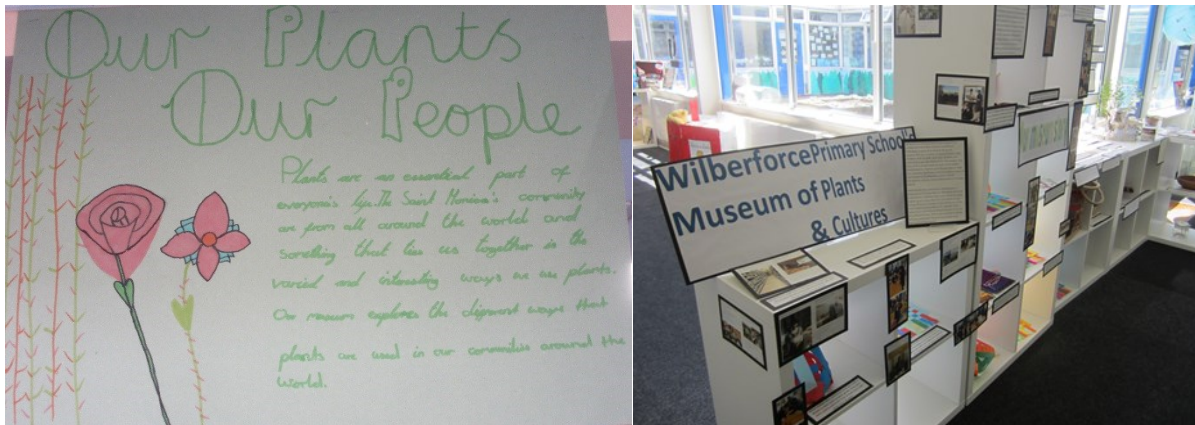
The Mobile Museum project was designed to be of lasting benefit to a number of academic and non-academic beneficiaries, including museum and education professionals. One of the pathways to impact within the education sector was through the **school museums initiative** described in this report.³ Conducted in collaboration with Kew's Learning and Participation Department, this initiative took the form of an innovative programme of activities centred on object-based learning. This included a participatory project with the pupils, teachers, and parents at two London primary schools - Wilberforce Primary School, Queen's Park, and St Monica's

¹ For a summary of the project, its outputs and associated resources, see <https://royalholloway.ac.uk/mobilemuseum>

² 'The mobile museum: economic botany in circulation', AH/N00941X/1

³ An extended evaluation of this initiative, supported by Royal Holloway and Kew Gardens, is currently in preparation. A summary will be published on the project website in 2020.

Primary School, Hoxton. This culminated, in Summer 2019, with the opening of a plant-based exhibition at each school.



Left: 'Our plants, our people': St. Monica's school museum, July 2019; right: Wilberforce School 'Museum of Plants and Cultures', July 2019.

Kew's biocultural collections

One of the wider aims of the Mobile Museum project was to identify and explore new uses for collections like the Economic Botany Collection at Kew. This collection, consisting of over 100,000 plant specimens, plant derivatives and plant-based artefacts, was originally formed in the mid-nineteenth century to educate scientific, commercial and non-specialist audiences on the potential uses of plants. Such collections, part nature and part culture, are nowadays commonly referred to as 'biocultural.'

Within this broader context, the school museums initiative was designed:

- to support the curation of exhibitions devoted to plant-based objects in two London primary schools, using an innovative 'whole-school' approach; and
- to create supporting cross-curricular educational materials that link to science, geography, history, arts, design and technology, and language learning for Key Stages 1 and 2

Support for exhibition planning was provided by members of Kew's Learning Department, as well as by other members of the Mobile Museum project team. Provision was also made to enable the two schools to purchase objects for their museums and to allow for the costs of the various training workshops and learning materials, including design, photography and printing.

Beyond the two schools directly involved, it was further envisaged that educators more broadly - both museum learning departments and school-teachers – and pupils themselves would have the opportunity to benefit from educational resources made available online through the project website.

Pedagogic approach

The School Museums initiative took a ‘whole-school’ approach in which in principle every pupil and teacher in the school was involved. This also extended to the wider community so parents and caregivers could contribute by lending culturally significant objects for curation and display. The process of developing educational resources was participatory, with teachers involved in choosing materials that best supported their teaching. The resources created were designed to support the National Curriculum, including Twenty-First Century Learning, Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development and Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education.



Wilberforce School staff INSET day at Kew, February 2019.

Left: object handling and packing; right: object sorting.

School selection criteria

As this was an outreach project designed to enable wider and more diverse audiences to be reached, the criteria initially used to identify potential partner schools included measures of disadvantage and cultural diversity. On this basis, 34 schools across London were identified, all with an above-average Pupil Premium rating and of a size which could enable a whole-school approach. These schools were contacted and invited to consider applying to participate in the initiative. Following a shortlisting process, two schools were selected to participate: Wilberforce Primary

School, Queen's Park, in the London Borough of Westminster, and St Monica's Primary School, Hoxton, in the London Borough of Hackney.

School approaches

The brief given to schools allowed them to explore a range of possible methodological and creative responses to the development of their museum.

From the beginning, St. Monica's teachers elected to follow a distinctly cultural approach. The vision was for a display featuring seven plant-based artefacts – one submitted from each year group – which had the potential to represent the various cultural backgrounds of the school's pupils. To this end, pupils were asked to elicit loans from their families and broader communities and invited to explain to fellow pupils the relevance of their objects to the final exhibition. In order to arrive at the final list of objects, pupils then voted by year group. With object selection resolved early on, the emphasis turned to developing museological skills. A 'museum crew' composed of two pupils from each year was elected to undertake visits to a range of museums – including Benjamin Franklin House, the Natural History Museum and Kew Gardens – and to share the knowledge they gained on these visits with their fellow pupils. At Kew, the workshop took the form of three activities: looking at objects (in the collections store), sorting objects, and handling objects.



St. Monica's School 'museum crew' visit Kew, March 2019.

Left: thinking about where plants and their products in the Economic Botany Collection;
right: thinking about plants and people in Kew's Palm House.

Wilberforce School opted for a more bio-cultural approach with equal emphasis on botanical and cultural knowledge. The teachers at the school participated in a training day at Kew for all members of its teaching and non-teaching staff. Individual sessions were delivered on the importance of plants to health, livelihoods and well-being; learning from objects using a 'Describe-Reflect-Speculate' (DRS) model;

handling objects; sorting and arranging objects; and writing exhibition text and labels.

Outcomes

1 Exhibitions

The schools launched their museums to pupils, parents and carers, and guests in July 2019. The St. Monica's museum – *Our plants, our people* – represented the cultural approach to plants and plant-based objects which the school had adopted from the outset. The seven original objects provided the basis for pupils' creative work in art, design and technology. The principal themes under which the objects were displayed were: 'Ceremony and celebration'; 'Fashion forward'; 'Fabulous food'. A further theme, "Plants and trees' was added as the result of a meeting between the learning officer and the lead teacher in July 2019.



Learning through making at St. Monica's school museum, July 2019.

Left: paper maché pestles and mortars; right: copies of Colombian zamponas.

The Wilberforce *Museum of plants and cultures* presented a display of many different objects, again largely sourced from pupils' communities. These were grouped according to the themes 'Around the home'; 'Entertainment'; 'Food and drink'; 'Clothing'; and 'Celebrations and cultures'. A science section was also included, under the rubric of 'Sustainability'.



Plant and human diversity: Wilberforce School Museum of Plants and Cultures, July 2019.

In both cases the launch events were well-attended by parents who evidently took great pride in the objects on display and in the cultural communities which they represented.

2 Handbook

In order to capture the information provided through the training workshops, the *Mobile Museum* team produced a handbook, *Curating a School Museum*. This was produced in hard copy distributed to the two schools and was made available as an online download via the *Mobile Museum* website.⁴



⁴ The Teachers Handbook is available from <https://royalholloway.ac.uk/mobilemuseum/schools>

3 Lesson plans

Based on project experiences, Kew's Learning Department produced three lesson plans for Key Stages 1 and 2, on the themes of 'Object handling', 'Creating your museum', and 'Why plants matter.' These will be available to all educators as downloads via the project website.⁵

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to other Mobile Museum project team members (Harriet Gendall, James Morley, Laura Newman and Beth Wilkey) and to the members of the Kew Learning Department (Brona Doyle, Helen Gill, Paul Henderson, Julia Willison) for supporting the project. The Mobile Museum Education Officers were Hanouf Al Ansari and Lucy Ribeiro. Further support was provided by the Royal Holloway and Kew press teams. Most of all we would like to thank the teachers and pupils of Wilberforce and St Monica's Schools for participating so enthusiastically in the project.



⁵ Lesson plans will be available from <https://royalholloway.ac.uk/mobilemuseum/schools>

Appendix: Project Timeline

January 2017	Start of Mobile Museum project
April 2018	Mobile Museum education project officer appointed
September 2018	Selection of schools
November 2018	First meetings at schools with project leads
December 2018	Follow-up meetings at schools
January 2019	Launch workshop at Wilberforce
February 2019	Plant-based learning: Wilberforce staff INSET day at Kew Learning from objects: staff training at St. Monica's
March 2019	St Monica's 'museum crew' training day at Kew
April 2019	Learning from objects: workshop for Years 3-6 at Wilberforce
May 2019	Why plants are important: workshop for Years 5 & 6 at Wilberforce
June 2019	Wilberforce self-led visits to Kew for KS1 and KS2 Plant stories: workshop at Wilberforce Organising a museum: workshop for Year 6 at Wilberforce
July 2019	Final meeting with St. Monica's lead teacher School museums open