

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF THE LEAD MEMBER FOR LEISURE AND ARTS

Decision Made: 18 November 2022

Carriage Museum Options

Issue for Decision

The Tyrwhitt-Drake Museum of Carriages houses a nationally important collection, which has the potential to become once more an important visitor attraction in Maidstone. The issue for decision is to determine the preferred option for the future of the Carriage Museum.

Decision Made

That all elements of Option 3 for the future of the Carriage Museum, as set out in the report of the Museums' Director, be adopted.

Reasons for Decision

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Tyrwhitt-Drake Museum of Carriages was opened on 6th November 1946 by Sir Leigh Ashton, the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is still considered to be one of the finest collections of its kind in Europe. Most of the carriages are over 100 years old. They were designed for only a limited number of years of roadworthiness and, as a consequence, they are now too fragile to be sat in or to go behind a horse. This collection is important because the carriages are in the same original condition as when they were last used. This means that there is no shiny paint work and the leather and metal does not sparkle. However, what visitors to the Museum see is a very rare glimpse of something completely unaltered, which our Victorian forebears would recognise as very much their own.

Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake was born into a wealthy local brewing family in 1881. He was well known for his political interests which saw him Knighted in 1936, made High Sheriff of Kent and elected Mayor of Maidstone twelve times. Sir Garrard also had great affection for the horse drawn carriages of his youth. He realised that they were being completely replaced by the motor car and that our carriage-driving heritage was in danger of being lost forever. He decided to establish a collection to preserve this heritage. He began with a letter to The Times newspaper (dated 9th Sept 1946) in which he appealed for unwanted carriages to be donated. The response was good, and before long carriages started to arrive, some even came by special train. The collection not only includes carriages but also sleighs, other horse and hand-drawn vehicles and associated material such as horse harnesses.

Current Position

The Carriage Museum remained closed during the two years of the Covid pandemic. However, it has opened on three Saturdays so far in 2022, on each

occasion attracting over 100 visitors. Due to the unheated nature of the building in which the carriages are housed, it is only practical to open the Museum in the Summer season. For the two years prior to the Covid pandemic it was open for 2 days a week from May - September. Prior to 2018, the Museum was open three days a week. There is an admission charge of £2 for adults.

	Visits
2011/12	2,488
2012/13	1,310
2013/14	2,338
2014/5	1,615
2015/16	1,605
2016/17	1,409
2017/18	809
2018/19	982
2019/20	341

Table: Annual visitor numbers 2011- 2019

It is clear that visitor numbers were affected by the reduction of opening hours in 2017/18 which was the result of a staff reorganisation which reduced the number of staff employed in visitor facing roles. However, seasonal opening and a low-profile compared to the St Faith's Street site have resulted in visitor figures which are clearly unsustainable.

The Building

The Museum is housed in the Grade 1 Listed Stables formerly associated with the Archbishop's Palace. Grant-funded work has been carried out to attempt to stabilise the environment in the mediaeval building which is prone to temperature and humidity changes in line with the external weather. The current building has no public toilet or space in which to host schools' learning and in an attempt to make conditions more pleasant for staff, a small conservatory-style office was installed a number of years ago. A Wi-Fi connection was installed two years ago.

A meeting with Historic England's Sites and Monuments Inspector in 2018, suggested that the organisation would be supportive of measures to make the building more accessible and practical for use in the 21st century.

Interpretation

The carriages downstairs can only be seen from one side at ground level. This means that only the exterior is really visible. They are somewhat crammed down the edges of the space and have the appearance of storage rather than a vibrant and interesting display. Where current visitors are provided with plastic periscopes to see inside the carriages, video or simply room to open carriage doors would give visitors a much more realistic and exciting view. A simulation of a ride in a carriage has long been discussed by staff.

The interpretation of the carriages is carried out by information boards. The information presented is very technical and could be improved to better tell the 'people stories' associated with the collections and introduce visitors to the social history of the people who drove, rode in and owned carriages. Other elements

such as sound and video would provide different ways of telling those stories and make them more compelling.

The Collection

The relevance of the collection to Maidstone is in its connection to Tyrwhitt-Drake as most of the vehicles on show were not originally used here.

Since the original collection was brought together, additional items have been added to the displays at the Museum. These include items from the Museum's wider transport collection, items on loan from individuals and institutions such as the V&A Museum and Royal Mews. The care, management and costs relating to these loans is borne by the residents of Maidstone. Despite comments in local and social media over the years, the items in the collection are all in stable condition and at no risk of 'falling apart'. The carriages which have been in the Museum for many years have acclimatised to the cycle of the year in terms of temperature and humidity. Some surface mould was discovered a few years ago but was treated and further outbreaks prevented as mentioned above.

Strategic Context

One of the Council's Strategic Priorities is to make Maidstone a 'thriving place'. It will do this by bringing visitors and residents of the Borough into the Town Centre. Developing a Town Centre Strategy will be one of the ways we seek to meet this Strategic Priority over the next five years.

In this context, a valuable and historic town centre asset, like the Carriage Museum, can only enhance Maidstone as an attraction. The options set out below need therefore to be considered in light of how effective they are in showcasing the Carriage Museum, within the financial and operational constraints faced by the Council.

OPTION 1: DO NOTHING

It would be possible to continue the temporary measures currently in place and retain the building and collections while opening only by appointment to fee-paying groups and on special occasions. The minimum number of visitors required for a visit to take place would be reviewed.

Benefits:

- Costs are fixed and known
- Some level of access is maintained
- Levels of interest in the Museum and collection can be monitored

Risks:

- Access is limited to those willing and able to arrange visits for themselves
- This may contravene loan agreements with carriage owners
- Reputational damage to the Council

OPTION 2: CLOSE THE MUSEUM AND DISPERSE THE COLLECTION

There are a number of Carriage Museums in England so this Museum is not

unique in its general content. If a Museum of this sort is unsustainable and unused by residents then the building might be repurposed or sold by Maidstone Borough Council as the owner. The collections would then either be returned to the owner institution or individual or be put through the process of Deaccessioning to remove them from the Council's responsibility. Suitable homes in other Museums would be sought in the first instance although it is unlikely that any Museum would have capacity to keep the collection together.

Benefits:

- Maidstone Council is no longer responsible for the management and care of the collection
- The Museum building is freed for other purposes

Risks

- No Museum may come forward to take carriages meaning they will have to be disposed of through other means such as sale or destruction if no home is found
- There would be reputational damage for the Council as it is seen to be closing and disposing of the Museum. These actions are frequently misrepresented in media as 'selling off the family silver' method whatever the disposal of the collection
- All costs of moving and rehoming any parts of the collection would accrue to Maidstone Borough Council and this might be a significant amount in the short term, potentially running into hundreds of thousands of pounds
- The collection and all the stories, knowledge and memories therein are lost to the Borough in perpetuity

OPTION 3: REVISE THE OPERATIONAL MODEL FOR THE MUSEUM

There are a number of smaller changes which could be introduced either singly or in combination which are listed below.

Use of Volunteer Staff

There is no current capacity for Museum staff to work at the Carriage Museum and so the recruitment of dedicated volunteers is the only real option. The overall security and care of collections will remain with the professional staff but trained volunteers can open the Museum and provide customer services on site. With the right training they will welcome visitors, provide answers to questions and monitor the collections during the day. Volunteers would be used to open the Museum more regularly, starting with regular Saturday opening during the summer. Some seasonality would still be required as the Museum is extremely cold in the winter. Harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of volunteers provides a way of re-engaging with visitors generally and with carriage enthusiasts in particular.

Benefits:

- Regular involvement by residents in the running of the Museum
- Increased access to the collection and greater opening hours
- Retains potential for paid guided tours

Risks

- Failure to recruit or retain enough volunteers
- Volunteer expenses outweigh the budget available (volunteers are reimbursed for travel costs)

Integrating Museum with Overall Offer to Visitors to Maidstone

The Carriage Museum has attracted a healthy number of visitors on the limited number of occasions it has opened in 2022, because it has benefited from the publicity associated with events taking place at the same time – the Platinum Jubilee celebrations, the Maidstone River Festival, and the Open House Weekend. These events in turn have been able to offer the Carriage Museum as part of a comprehensive roster of attractions.

In future, developments at the Archbishop's Palace offer further opportunities for joint working with other attractions.

Benefits:

- Maximising visitor numbers
- Contributing towards overall visitor offer

Risks

- Carriage Museum is over-sold – the Collection is not necessarily of interest to all Maidstone visitors.
- Competition with other attractions for willing and competent volunteers

Investment in Modernising Interpretation and Presentation

There are a number of improvements which could be made at the existing Museum, including interpretation telling the stories of people involved with coaches, from makers to drivers to passengers; the introduction of film, sound and interactive activities which would improve the experience at the Museum and make it more enjoyable; the installation of a platform lift to provide access to the upper floor through an existing but blocked up window/door space; creation of a small public toilet.

Benefits:

- Rejuvenation of a currently dated and dry presentation making it more desirable to a wider audience
- Scale-able as funding is available
- Likely to attract grant funding from smaller grant givers
- Opportunity for positive publicity

Risks:

- Need for defined budget/fundraising target
- May clash with fundraising efforts at the main Museum
- If the Museum is not open regularly, it would not justify the investment required

Return of Carriages on Loan to their Owners

At the moment, roughly 30% of carriages and other items at the Carriage Museum are on loan from other collections. It may be possible to return some of these to their owners, to the extent that they are not required in order to present a coherent and attractive display. This would create space that would allow for an improved quality of display.

Benefits:

- More space to view and interpret the remaining carriages
- A more visitor-friendly environment
- Staff are currently responsible for care and management of loans and this would free up time for other responsibilities

Risks:

- Major lenders are known, but some minor and historic lenders are unknown. In the case of some historic lenders, they may not be identifiable, but reasonable steps to find them should be taken and documented to ensure best practice is adhered to and there are no future legal complications
- It is likely that MBC would be responsible for returning the vehicles and the associated costs

OPTION 4: A NEW CARRIAGE MUSEUM FOR MAIDSTONE

Whilst the carriage collection may seem like a niche area of interest at first sight, there are many interesting stories of both local and national interest which can be told by this collection. A new Museum with a welcoming entrance, in a better location, offering full physical access, toilets and facilities for school groups, could provide the base for exploring the stories of both the people and ideas behind the collection. If only the core collection of carriages was retained, a really clear focus would be possible. The development of new audio-visual technologies such as Augmented or Virtual Reality offer new means of interpreting the movement and experience of travelling by coach in a Museum where the carriages are, by necessity, static. Potential venues have been considered but initial indications are that the relocation of the Collection would not be viable.

Benefits:

- The Museum would be a new attraction
- Greater access to collections and the history encapsulated in them
- It would allow for greater emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects in sessions led by the Learning team

Risks:

- Funding would need to be secured locally as national grants are very over-subscribed in the current environment
- Any new Museum would require a long period of planning and development, even if funding were available
- Transferring the existing Collection to a new venue would require great care and expense in order to avoid damage to the carriages

- If the Museum is not more exciting and better promoted than the current one, the investment may not bring in sufficient visitors to justify the investment
- As we move into a potentially more challenging financial environment, it would be difficult to justify use of the Council's capital programme for some or all of the required investment

Consultation Results and Previous Committee Feedback

Before it was decommissioned, the former Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee agreed, at its meeting on 19 April 2022, that the Member of the Executive responsible for the Carriage Museum under the new governance arrangements would be asked to review the opening hours of the Museum to ensure that it is accessible to the public. Subsequently, the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee, at its meeting on 5 July 2022, considered the Maidstone Museums Forward Plan, which included as a priority a review of the Carriage Museum and its operation with a short-term goal to open the Museum using volunteer staff. The purpose of the report of the Museums' Director was to respond to these commitments.

Visitors to the Carriage Museum are invited to record their comments in a visitors' book. Recent comments in the visitors' book express a wish for the Museum to be open more often and enthusiasm about the quality and depth of the Collection. This supports the decision made.

This issue was considered by the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee at its meeting held on 8 November 2022. The Committee supported all elements of Option 3 as set out in the report and this is reflected in the decision made.

Alternatives Considered and Why Rejected

The alternatives considered and the associated benefits and risks are set out above. Options 1, 2 and 4 were rejected as it was considered that Option 3 provides a sustainable and realistic model for the future of the Carriage Museum. Making space and improving the quality of the displays to create a more exciting and visitor-friendly offer and tapping into the enthusiasm of volunteers to open the Museum more regularly starting with regular Saturday opening in the summer provides an opportunity for organic growth in opening hours and visitor numbers. This will contribute to the wider cultural offer of the Borough and allow the Museum to contribute increasingly over time to making Maidstone a thriving place.

Background Papers

None

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.

Signed: _____

Lead Member for Leisure and Arts – Councillor Claudine Russell

Full details of the report for the decision and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#).

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm on 25 November 2022**