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# OIKOS

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- Building successful partnerships.
- Establishing participative relationships with the many audiences we serve.
- Making the most of our rich content resources.

Those themes for this conference closely fit the projects which Oxfordshire County Museums Service has been leading with support from the European Union.

The projects have relied on building good partnerships with our colleagues in museums in Greece and Portugal and on developing a relationship with the administration in Brussels.

Establishing participative relationships with our audiences - initially our audiences were family groups/museum visitors, but as you will see we are now broadening the scope of the projects specifically to include minority groups.

The projects have led us to review our collections in a new way; and in the words of the Official Journal of the European Communities *Call for Applications* to consider and 'encourage dialogue between cultures and interaction between European and non-European cultures and the explicit recognition of culture as ..... a factor for social integration and citizenship.'

The Oxfordshire County Museums Service is part of a Cultural Services Department including libraries, archives, local studies, museums and countryside services. Some years ago

the Department developed a vision of integrated public access to its collections which was presented in an ambitious application (ORION) to the Heritage Lottery Fund for some £6 million.

Unfortunately the project was ahead of its time and the application was rejected. Since then the Department has pursued the vision but has had to seek funding wherever it was available. Europe has been one source, and in addition to the OIKOS project I am describing today, you will also hear about HYPERMUSEUM in which Oxfordshire is also a partner - other projects have been funded through HLF capital schemes for the County Museum, Banbury Museum and Vale and Downland Museum, and most recently through some partnership Millennium Festival projects eg Parish Packages.

The fundamental objectives behind these projects have been:-

- To improve public access to the collections.
- To integrate that access.
- To provide a resource for education.

The aim is to provide public access through the 43 libraries, 8 mobile libraries, 6 museums, record office and centre for Oxfordshire studies that make up our local network. That may extend in due course to the web.

Much of this activity began back in 1995 when the County Council's sharp eyed European Officer noticed an opportunity for museum twinning led by Directorate General (DG) X in the European Commission; the announcement of the fund in August and a tight deadline limited the number of applications. After some hectic continental conversations partners were found in Greece and

Portugal, a proposal and budget planned and the application submitted. Awards were announced in December 1995 and to much surprise our project had been selected for a grant of 100,000 ECU.

OIKOS, Greek for 'household', the title of the project, aimed to twin the Oxfordshire County Museums Service with the Benaki Museum in Athens and Setubal Museums in Portugal. The three museums could not have been more different. The Oxfordshire service operates as part of a local authority Cultural Services department serving a predominantly rural population through a network of local museums; the Benaki Museum is a private foundation, supported by the Greek Ministry of Culture, with fine and decorative arts collections from the Mediterranean and middle east; Setubal Museums, governed by Setubal City Council, serve an urban population in a maritime city famous for its castle, convent and sardine canning industry.

After a launch meeting in Oxford the project took off with aims to compare the museums' collections from the first to the 16th century on the three themes of food, fashion and furnishing.

The themes were chosen on the strengths of the museums' collections and the appeal of those subjects to the family audience they were aimed to attract. Each museum, it was proposed, would make digital images of approximately 100 objects, prepare captions and texts and the whole would be integrated into one multi-lingual CD ROM for public access in each country and on the web.

For all of the staff involved this was new territory - not just the need to come to terms with new technology, but also the requirement to work co-operatively with European partners.

There was a lot to learn; meetings followed over the three year life of the project in Athens and Setubal as standards and procedures were thrashed out. In June 1998 the European Union Cultural Committee, by chance, met in Oxford and the opportunity was taken to invite them to a reception at Cogges Manor Farm Museum where the project could be demonstrated to them. They were impressed by the museum and the project because both illustrate 'everyday' life and not the high status art associated with so many European cultural projects.

OIKOS was due for completion in November 1998. More or less ready, the web site was eventually launched in December at:-

[www.oikos98.demon.co.uk](http://www.oikos98.demon.co.uk)

Last minute delays prevented the inclusion of the multi-lingual texts, and currently both partners in Greece and Portugal are working away at their translations.

Looking back now on the project and particularly on the multimedia programme on the web - we had a great deal to learn and we made many mistakes. Specifically we were far too ambitious - the programme is difficult to navigate and unnecessarily long. There is far too much text.

Meanwhile the RAPHAEL programme was launched in 1998 again under the DGX. It was agreed that an application would be submitted to continue the project by bringing the comparison of collections up to date (16th - 20th centuries), whilst retaining the same themes. Additionally it was agreed that the new project, OIKOS II, should focus on the impact of migrants and minority groups on host cultures - a decision influenced by the innovative work in Setubal by the museums' service with immigrant communities and of course to meet the social inclusion criteria of the European Union. The Benaki Museum unfortunately had to pull out as its 'modern' department was already committed to another European programme. Eventually the Jewish

Museum of Greece was invited to participate, with support from the Greek Ministry and PRISMA, a Greek consultancy specialising in European work.

In January 1999 an award of 150,000 ECU was announced for OIKOS II and the first meeting has taken place. That meeting was affected unexpectedly and beyond our control by the war in Kosovo, where Greece, so much closer to the action, took a very different view from that of Britain. The differences sharpened the discussion and exposed major differences in national and political attitudes to migrants and minorities. The meeting seemed to split between those of us who accepted the idea of multi-cultural states, and those who, for whatever reason, valued the idea of an homogenous culture. Interestingly this debate is likely to influence the structure of the multi media programme. Oxfordshire's current plan is to structure the project by migrant group: religious, economic, political and 'way of life' migrants.

For Oxfordshire this has led to the start of a research project and specifically, so far, to a review of our collections. Although there has been very little planned acquisition of the material culture of minority groups, the collections are proving to be remarkably rich in this area. So far a number of migrant or minority groups have been identified including Jews and Huguenots (religious), West Indians, Asians and Welsh (economic); prisoners of war, USAF personnel and refugees (Vietnamese) (political), gypsies, bargees and travelling merchants (way of life).

As is so often the case, this type of research is hugely dependant on the quality of documentation. Our task is eased by the integration of our archives, local studies and museums within one department, but could be even better.

Our next step is to start contacting the contemporary migrant and minority groups to try to involve them in the project.

Nelson Mandela wrote 'culture is the language of healing'; I hope that in a small way through this project we can not only deliver diversity, but also demonstrate that diversity enriches all our cultures. Our first hurdle will be to bring the whole of the team around to accept that philosophy and then aim to achieve a demonstration of it through the multimedia programme.

The planned outcomes of OIKOS II are a CD ROM, web site and exhibition to be completed over the two year life of the project. We meet in Portugal in October - I hope the outcome will meet my expectations.

The work will be shown on the County Council site  
[www.oxfordshire.gov.uk](http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk)