

# Shazam!

## Researching WebCatalogue Audience Needs

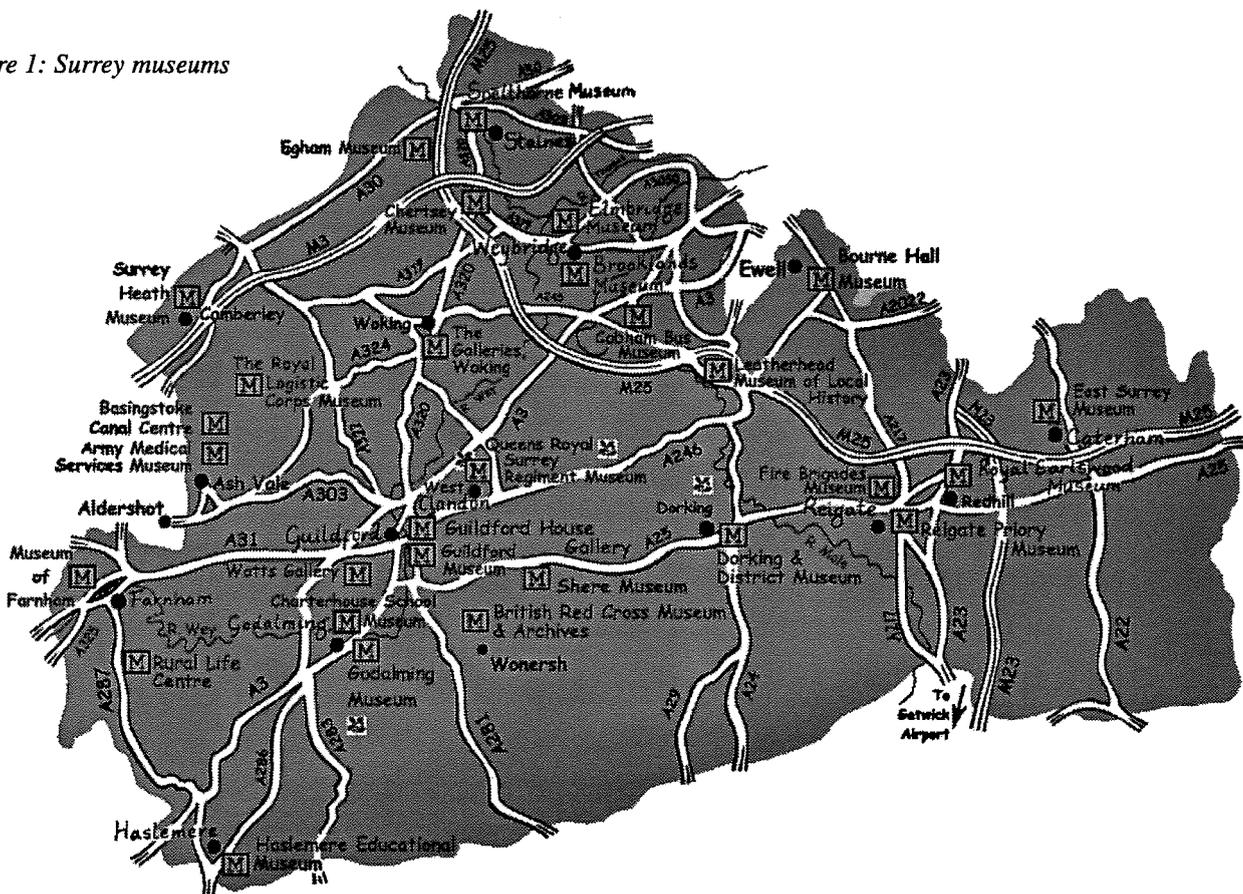
Pat Reynolds  
Surrey Museums

Surrey Museums Consultative Committee (SMCC) works to help museums in the county achieve their recreational, cultural and educational potential. There are 38 museums in Surrey, but no county museum. The museums are run by half the borough and district councils, by the army, and the majority are independent. Most are run entirely by volunteers, and all rely upon volunteers. Most are concerned with their locality, but others are specialised - for example fire brigades, fine art, or firearms. SMCC supports the work of museums in five fields: management, collections management, visitor services, marketing and education. Our work on collections management lead to the development of Shazam!

Shazam! The project name suggests, a little ironically, that the user will be able to find, instantaneously, the data he or she needs. There is also an echo of Arthur C. Clarke's line "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". Shazam!'s strapline is "Surrey Heritage Information Access and Management" It began as a project to provide each museum in the county with a computer and low-cost collections management software - Datapoint - which would allow museums to share data. Datapoint is an Access-based database which had been created by the husband of one of the curators in the county, initially for her museum, which has natural history and ethnographic collections.

Due to delays in obtaining funding, by the time I took up my post a year ago, museums were using a variety of database, including Catalyst, AdLib and ModesPlus, in addition to Datapoint. Fortunately, the technology has also moved on, and data sharing between disparate systems is no longer an impossibility. This also enabled the project concept to broaden: from a collections management project to a heritage information management project, with a strong emphasis on access. No longer tied to Datapoint, Shazam! can include information from such sources as the listings of the Surrey History Centre (formerly the County Record Office and Local Studies Library), the Sites and Monuments Record, the photographic collections of distinct planning offices, and personal research data.

Figure 1: Surrey museums



We commissioned a feasibility study, funded by SEMS (our Area Museum Council) and Surrey County Council. Alongside the requests to look at technical feasibility, currently available content, human resource costs, and so on, I asked for an answer to the Heritage Lottery Fund's question: "how do you know that there is a need for this?"

Now I thought, and our consultant, Stuart Holm thought, that answering this question would simply involve a search of the literature into the needs and desires of users and potential users of on-line heritage information databases. But there has proved to be very little literature available, and no research at all beyond the professional knowledge of practitioners, who, with unwarranted modesty, have tended not to formally publish their findings. We therefore devised a small research programme. It lacks academic rigour, but we hope that by publishing our results, we will encourage others to share their findings, and to encourage properly funded research. We remain surprised that this work is being done by SMCC.