

## Does Outreach Matter? Engaging with your local disability groups?

Terry Rhodes, Chair of Gosport Heritage Open Days Inclusion Group, writes about her experience of engaging with disability groups in Gosport.



***Outreach does what it says on the tin. It's a way to reach out, beyond the traditional methods, to particular people in our community. Those people may not usually visit our heritage events for a whole lot of reasons, including disability.***

If we don't find out why people aren't engaging with heritage, what barriers they face and what we can do to improve things, then we will continue to have heritage events attended in the main by people from more privileged social and economic groups. Many of those with less standing, less income or less ability may remain on the outside.

Here are some ways that I personally have tried to reach out in Gosport to one of the under-represented sections of our community, disabled people, and encourage them to participate more in their Heritage Open Days (HODs).

The very first thing I learnt when I started speaking to local groups of people is that no-one likes to think of themselves as disabled. As a wheelchair user, I know this for myself. We are all people with differing abilities; weaker in some areas, stronger in others. But the fact is, often our impairments (physical, sensory, intellectual) can seem to prevent us from doing things. There might be ways around those obstacles. Can outreach help us to find those ways?

My first eye-opener was in 2008 when the English Heritage Outreach Team, through the Creative Landscapes project, used Fort Brockhurst (a massive Victorian fort where I volunteer) to host creative workshops entitled Hidden Battles that led to an exhibition for HODs. Caroline Cardus, a disabled artist, worked with local disabled individuals and groups. Participants worked at the Fort, or at home, or at their clubs, to create displays that were based on sensory and emotional feelings about the Fort rather than historical knowledge. These displays were shown to general visitors over the HODs weekend.

The feedback was great. It gave participants stimulation and satisfaction, and gave visitors a look at heritage from a different perspective. Over those few days I witnessed more disabled people interact with the Fort than I had seen in many years!

This spurred me to get out to local disability groups and ask what would make heritage more interesting and accessible to them. Some didn't know about HODs, even though Gosport's had an active HODs programme since 1992. Others thought events were inaccessible or impractical for them. Some just felt detached from it all, as though heritage had little relevance to them. As I listened, some of the barriers became clear:

We can't read about it.

We can't hear about it.

We can't understand it.

We can't get to it.

We don't know what's there.

We can't walk far.

We can't touch it.

It's too busy.

It's too loud/quiet/long.

It's too dark.

It's too confusing.

It's just too hard.

The saddest thing was that so many people had fascinating stories or memories to tell about Gosport in the distant and more recent past, but

felt there was no way to share them and that no-one would want to hear. Surely some of these things could be overcome?

Knowing about these barriers was the first hurdle jumped. Our Inclusion Group and HODs Committee set about trying to fix some things. Here are just some of the things we've done:

- Accessible marketing methods used, with varied formats so that a much wider range of people found out about HODs.
- Event organisers made more aware of the barriers and supported to find reasonable ways to improve access for disabled visitors.
- Content more varied, encompassing heritage events based not only on history and architecture but also culture and local character.
- Special features added to some events, like artefact handling, BSL interpretation, music and costume, activities for children.
- Accessible buses took disabled visitors around several events.
- 'Quiet time' visiting let people choose to avoid crowds.
- Disabled people encouraged and supported to put on their own events on themes that interested them.

- Disabled people made to feel welcome and given clear access information to enable them to plan visits.

And so I was able to go back to the groups and say that we'd listened to their views and put many of their good ideas into practice.

The proof of the pudding has been in the eating. Many more disabled people are now coming and enjoying our heritage events. I'm pleased to say that I recognise some of their faces from my visits.

We've made a good start at 'Outreach' in Gosport but it's still a work in progress. Disabled members of our Inclusion Group are now developing an Outreach Box containing objects supplied by various event organisers. These objects (be they an artefact, photo, model, piece of material, poem, even a flower or piece of seaweed) will represent something about that heritage event or story. We'll try to use smells, sounds and music to complement the objects that we handle.

Throughout the year, we'll take the Box out to local disability groups and support them to explore the objects, understand their meaning and relevance to upcoming events. We'll tailor this to best suit our audience (no point taking photos to blind people) and try to find things that really stimulate interest and sense of place. More recent objects may arouse memories and we hope, with consent, to record some reminiscences for sharing as part of future events. We'll be able to scan any interesting photos or paperwork that people may bring along too.

Hopefully, this will encourage people to follow up with a visit to some HODs events to find out more and enjoy the atmosphere of the full activity. However, if they are unable to visit us at our places, at least we'll have taken a little bit of heritage out to them at their places.

HOD's on wheels... In my case, wheelchair wheels!