

# Resistance in the ranks

**Bridget Wellwood** has a soft spot for our 'micro' museums. Urging those in the better-resourced museums to take them seriously, she argues for greater co-operation from museum professionals to allay her worries about their futures.

## OUTPOSTS OF RESISTANCE

New Zealand's smallest museums, despite all the great help and advice they receive, are remarkably resistant to planning. There are many reasons why this is the case... I have heard all the excuses. There is a definite 'resistance' movement within our museum sector – a gulf emerging between those that do plan, do take on board change and new ideas, and those that do not, or will not. Mention the words 'strategic' and 'planning' to some museum people and it falls on deaf ears; they do not even want to know and they think it just does not apply to them. Why is strategic planning such a bitter pill for some museums to swallow? For many, they just don't want to know.

According to Museum Aotearoa's data (2007), up to 60% of New Zealand's museums employ no full-time paid staff. These are defined as 'micro' museums. It is important to clarify that there are, of course, some great micro museums that do plan. The results are evident in the number undertaking new projects, restructuring, rethinking their missions, their visions, and finding practical solutions to get to where they want to be. We often hear about these museum success stories, but not so much about all the other little museums out there which remain static, barely sustainable organisations, with collections at risk. Is nothing happening in these museums other than dust gathering? If so, why are they not planning? I have come to think of them as the sticklers. Sadly, even in this age of 'museum development', there are still many of these staunch small town museums. This is not meant to be a derogatory term, just one which describes a stoic resistance to anything new. Here are some sweeping generalisations to describe what museum



Figure 1. A corner of the Eketahuna Early Settlers' Museum, one of Bridget Wellwood's favourite micro museums. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BRIDGET WELLWOOD

development is up against.

## FAILING TO PLAN

The sticklers just are not interested in planning. A few profess that they do plan, but only for next week. Others still are not sure who is supposed to 'do' the plan, as if it is some kind of compliance issue, like a fire escape plan. Some might have a plan, but it is either such a loose arrangement or tired plan, that they may as well not bother. Other museums are hindered by governance issues where the dynamics of their museum trust board, historic society or museum committee leaves them unable to move forward because they are too busy conferring amongst themselves. Often strong personalities decide what goes on the agenda and what does not. They would not even consider a strategic planning process – as far as they are concerned strategic planning is something major companies undertake, not small-time museums.

Individuals often find it hard to work together on something as nebulous as a plan. Get them to turn up on Saturday morning to paint a tractor red, no problem, but to sit around thinking, talking and then writing is a harder ask. Many do not want to have to think about the big picture. They are solely interested in restoring traction



Figure 2. The Old Schoolhouse of 1884 houses the Eketahuna Early Settlers' Museum. Very few micro museums have purpose-built premises. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BRIDGET WELLWOOD



Figure 3. Visitors can explore eclectic displays of social history material at the Eketahuna Early Settlers' Museum, open 2.00 till 4.00 pm on Sundays. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BRIDGET WELLWOOD

engines, or making the tea or just sitting on the door taking the \$2, not thinking it is their place to be involved with planning. These folk are generally very good at what they do, but why do they not want to do more?

These enthusiasts do not want to involve the community – “if the community wanted to be involved they would be involved already!” And besides, there is a great deal of pride and satisfaction in the way they are doing things already – why should they change? The dominant stick-in-the-mud attitude stifles forward thinking, new ideas and community development - they like it the way it is.

## ENTHUSIASTIC ORIGINS

Many of these small museums were established twenty or thirty years ago, perhaps when the local school had its jubilee or the local historical society started collecting bits and bobs. However, in the 21st century, they find themselves guardians of a community's social history, often unaware of the implications. The museums have ever expanding collections as troves holding real treasures, sometimes objects of 'national significance', alongside the usual moustache cup, lacy shawl, butter pats and gig wheels. These collections (usually quite large) can be found overwhelming micro museums across the country. Objects are piled up randomly. We may find a label scrawled on a little card, but there is rarely any interpretation or documentation. The majority of these museums are only open between 2pm-4pm on a Sunday, staffed by elderly volunteers, who wait for the few visitors to come by.

## PLANOPHOBIA – IS THERE A CURE?

How did these 'sticks' get like this? It cannot be because of lack of useful guidance as there are heaps of free resources readily available. There are step-by-step guides to the strategic planning process and to almost every aspect of museum practice, including workshops, booklets, internet articles and advice on how exactly to do it. As well, there are many people more than willing to help (National Services Te Paerangi's museum development officers for a start....) and yet so many micro museums still just do not want to know about it.

Mention 'planning' and many museum people shirk from this responsibility - rather focusing on the problems of leaky roofs, cluster flies and who has the key to the back room. Or else they are all so exhausted, over spent, or maybe they are elderly with little energy left for anything other than the ordinary routine. They lump the entire decision-making process on the chairperson, or the honorary curator, or someone who can do that sort of thing.

Meanwhile they are all getting older and there is no one coming through the ever-diminishing museum ranks to take over the micro museum reins, let alone someone to inherit the mantle of knowledge that accompanies the collection. What will happen to the collection, all that knowledge and local history when everyone has gone? There is no plan for that either. All over the country there are museum committees meeting monthly to share a cup of tea, worry about the small stuff, the petty cash, who is going to change the light bulbs or spray the hay paddock out the back. Why does nobody seem to be addressing the big issues? How do we get the message across that running a museum has serious responsibilities as the guardian, not only of the collections, but of local history on behalf of their wider communities?

## TREASURING THE TREASURE-KEEPERS

It would be easy to disregard these museums as not as important as the others (i.e. the flashy ones, the 'go ahead' places), and there is a risk that museum 'professionals' might judge the people who run these micro museums as 'amateurs', not as smart, not as 'with it', and not as interesting as 'the rest of us'. In practice, this is generally not the case, but micro museums still feel somewhat marginalised. No one likes to admit it, but there is a distinct museum hierarchy, and many of these quirky smaller museums could so easily be dismissed as 'not worth worrying about'. We see few, if any, of these micro museum people at museum conferences, thus their input is not asked for nor received, and quite often we just aren't interested.

The simple truth is, of course, that without many of these original museum enthusiasts ('sticks' and 'non-sticks' included) dotted around the country we would not have the bulk of our larger museum collections today, and while they may well be speaking a different language from contemporary museum professionals, these people are vital.

We all need to make a bigger effort to connect with these very people. Whatever it takes for the larger district or regional museums, and, dare I say it, the metropolitan museums, to actually get out to these micro museums and encourage them, is well worth doing. So much history lurks in these places, so many fascinating stories and wonderful treasures, let alone some amazing and wonderful personalities. We need to appreciate them more. We need

to dig deeper and to really talk to these people now.

## THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE

Micro museums often exist on the fringe of our museum sector and are very much left to their own devices. They have access to all kinds of assistance, but they do not often ask for it. These museum people do not like working regionally, so often it means getting in the car and driving long distances to attend meetings and workshops. They may not like driving, especially at night, and cannot afford the petrol. Fiercely parochial, they would rather stay home and put the energy into their own museum. 'Clustering' is what the flies do.

Micro museum people, however, are essential to the sector – and museum professionals do tend to disregard them. People who run micro museums represent the backbone of the country. The majority of them are not even looking for our opinions, nor do they care what 'we' think. They are on a mission (generally undefined), and I would guess they are not always so impressed with us interfering. Behind our backs, they mutter about bureaucrats making jobs for themselves – why don't we mind our own business?

Are we then, as museum professionals, trying to colonise the museum sector and boss these nice people around? Are we out to tidy up the cluttered corners and make everybody fall in step with modern museological practice? Do we really want all our museums homogenous, didactic, and predictable? I know for a fact that many people 'out there' would rather maintain what they have, than aspire to be anything like Te Papa. Surprising how many still say



Figure 4. High density display at the Eketahuna Early Settlers' Museum. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BRIDGET WELLWOOD



Figure 5. Visible storage – local treasures from the costume collection at the Eketahuna Early Settlers' Museum. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: BRIDGET WELLWOOD

they think their little museum is better than Te Papa, that Te Papa is not even a proper museum...and so on.

## THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Many may be resistant to change for a host of reasons, only some of which I have mentioned. A big challenge for all of us working in museum development is how to engage with the 'stick-in-the-mud' crowd. What is the secret to actually getting these people moving when they do not want to be told what to do?

Big museums are always telling little museums what to do - we call this collaboration. But more often the big guys are calling the shots and the little guys either go along with it, or not. They certainly do not respond well to being patronised by well-meaning museum professionals who come along and say they should change, plan, conform to the NZ Museum Standards Scheme, get museum qualifications, and so on. They will just walk away.

## RECOGNISING RESPONSIBILITY, ALTERING ATTITUDES

Should we then just walk away as well? If they will not budge then should we just leave them to it? Can we really afford to do that?

No, it is our responsibility to do more. As museum professionals, individually and collectively we need to be more proactive and supportive to encourage our smaller museums. We must get involved to assist them, mentor them, inspire them, and help them to face up to themselves. Museums do need to confront their own reality, take stock of their situations and hopefully decide to move forward on their own initiatives. This is, in effect, what strategic planning is all about: taking a good long hard look at your museum and dealing with those big questions, like "Who really cares about our museum?" and "Who's going to pay for it?" We need to lead by example, to empower smaller museums to protect our national collections. We should also treasure, not only the collections, but the micro museum enthusiasts themselves. They have every right to be the way they are, and instead of judging them, we should take the opportunity to learn something from them.

Micro museums do need to plan and they need to see the big picture. They also need a dose of reality. It is our responsibility to make these people more aware of their responsibilities. The trick with getting micro museum people to undertake a strategic planning process is of course to ensure that they are doing it for themselves and that they own the process. Micro museums do not have exclusive rights to their local history, but they do feel a duty to acquire evidence of it, and so much of our social history is left to them to preserve. In small towns all over New Zealand local history and knowledge, stories, and the provenance of collections, is at risk of being lost. Collections may end up for sale or just abandoned by a disinterested public. This is a pressing problem for those of us that do care; for those of us who can make a difference.

## CLARION CALL

Museum professionals therefore need to face up to the task of how to preserve our micro museums, especially the ones that persistently risk falling through the cracks. Go and visit them for a start. The onus is on all of us, not just on a couple of museum development officers; everyone involved in the museum sector needs to take stock of the problems out there in our smaller museums and come up with creative solutions. We all need to spend some time talking and really listening to micro museum people. Even the most staunch will open up and talk and talk and talk, if you give them the opportunity to be heard, and you are bound to learn something useful, something interesting. Put them in the hot seat; once you have their trust and they have your respect, anything is possible. A cup of tea is a great way to start the conversation. It may be inevitable that some museums will still fall by the wayside and some will always be unsustainable, but it is possible with a bit of effort to initiate positive change, to give people a much needed boost, to get them thinking, and heaven for bid, planning.

*These are the personal reflections of a recent museum development officer and ex- director of a small museum. **Bridget Wellwood** was Te Papa's first Museums Development Officer for the South Island and served five years as Director of the South Taranaki District Museum in Patea. She is currently immersing herself in history books again, pursuing her studies through Massey University.*

## REFERENCES

Museums Aotearoa (2007). *New Zealand Museum Sector Web Survey*. Wellington: Museums Aotearoa.