

## **Energy and enthusiasm: John Durant, 12 July 2012**

I think the 90s, you might say – and somebody should say somewhere and challenge me – I would say this, wouldn't I? But I think that they were good years for the Science Museum and that we did a lot of really quite interesting things. We didn't do them anything like in the way we imagined or anything like as fast as we would have wanted. A favourite metaphor for us around the EMC table in the early 90s, that came up every now and again, but it was the metaphor of the big mill engine in the east gallery, which in those days at least, and maybe it still is, was painted bright red. And the mill engine was put in steam occasionally, but it has this enormous flywheel, and we used to talk about how trying to do what we were trying to do in the Museum felt a bit like trying to get something like a mill engine started: there was an enormous inertia, you had to apply an awful lot of energy to get this heavy thing moving. The other more familiar metaphor for the same thing is the proverbial oil tanker – it's very hard to get it to change direction for similar reasons. Our perception was that the Museum had been chugging along in a certain direction, or the engine was running at a certain speed. We wanted this thing to do more than chug, but getting it to do more than chug turned out to be quite a challenge.

We started this thing called Science Box, and the idea was to put on small, relatively inexpensive exhibits about current topics in science and technology, and to turn them over every few months. So the phrase Science Box came out of a particular exhibition development process which led to the design of a reusable exhibition system on the proverbial Space Shuttle model.

But I remember one we did on passive smoking which was really interesting, and an interesting process as well because we got into hot water with both the smoking lobby and the anti-smoking lobby. I remember that.

Neil was very keen, I think he'd been partly responsible, maybe even principally responsible, for this new brand of the National Museum of Science & Industry, NMSI, which he would talk about at every possible opportunity. Every time he stood up to open an exhibition, 'Welcome to the Science Museum,' and then the next thing he said, hardly a comma, was the National Museum of Science & Industry.

I remember somebody, but fortunately for me I don't remember who, saying that the problem we had in Yorkshire, in a way, was that we had a brilliant museum in a terrible location and a terrible museum in a brilliant location. And I think that's a very significant thing for when it was said in the early 90s, because I don't think history then bore that out.

The Science Communication Division became, to a degree I think, the sort of organisational base for some of the new things we wanted to do. So, for example, I certainly thought that one should take the process of communication seriously. Which meant that you weren't just preoccupied with what you the Museum wanted to say, and thought was important to say, you wanted to also take account of what the visitors might think or feel when they walked in, what they might be interested in hearing about and the extent to which they did or did not get or enjoy whatever it was you were doing.

**An Oral History of the Science Museum Group, 1973-2000**