



# A Moving Story

Is there a case for a major museum  
of migration in the UK?

**A discussion paper by the Migration Museum Working Group**

July 2009

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## Foreword

It was back in November 2003, in a speech to the Social Market Foundation, that I first issued a challenge to the cultural sector to back the idea of a national Museum of Migration for the United Kingdom. My commitment to the idea stemmed from my own family background, my time as Minister for Immigration, and from visiting similar museums in other parts of the world, notably Ellis Island in New York. I made the point then that we do have institutions devoted to the subject, such as the exceptional museum at 19 Princelet Street in London's Spitalfields, but they are small and are often struggling to survive. There was no dedicated cultural space devoted to conveying the importance of migration in the narrative of this country.

More than five years on, we are no nearer to establishing a museum of migration, while in France, despite the fact that immigration is if anything a more contested issue than it is here, such a museum opened in 2007. It is high time we made progress, and I hope this short report from the Migration Museum Working Group, which I chair, will not only be a contribution to the debate on this subject, but also a spur to action.

Our recommendations for next steps have drawn on the experiences and initiatives of others in this country and abroad. A lot of good work has been done in this field and we can learn from that and build on it. Our ideas therefore are imaginative and innovative, but also realistic and reflective of best practice. We acknowledge that establishing a large national museum in its own permanent home will certainly not happen over night. We need to take a step by step approach to achieving it. However, we do think that this should be the ultimate goal.

The establishment of a Museum of Migration, and indeed the journey towards it, would be a powerful signal that the UK has embraced the centrality of migration in our national life. Emigration and immigration are bound up with what it means to be British. As one of the working group members, Robert Winder,<sup>1</sup> put it in his excellent book on immigration – ‘we are all immigrants: it simply depends how far back you go.’ If we could understand, accept and celebrate that, we would have a stronger society and a brighter future.

### **Barbara Roche**

Chair, Migration Museum Working Group

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1. Robert Winder: 'Bloody Foreigners', Little Brown, 2004

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## About ippr

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## About the Migration Museum Working Group

The Migration Museum Working Group was formed in late 2006 after a meeting held at the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) to discuss what more could be done to represent migration issues within the UK museum and heritage sector. It consists of the following people who share an interest in these issues and a passion for seeing migration more appropriately represented in cultural life in the UK:

- Barbara Roche (Chair), former UK Minister for Immigration
- Zelda Baveystock, Newcastle University
- Dr Gareth Griffiths, Director of British Empire and Commonwealth Museum
- Dr Jill Rutter, ippr
- Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, formerly ippr, now Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society
- Ratan Vaswani, Museums Association
- Ian Wilson, National Trust
- Robert Winder, author of *Bloody Foreigners*

Members of the working group serve as private individuals and do not represent any organisations.

The working group was supported by the Baring Foundation, National Trust and the Stone Ashdown Trust whose backing allowed the commissioning of independent research on what already exists in terms of representing migration within the UK museum and heritage sector, and on what more could be done.

This research was conducted by Dr Mary Stevens, an expert in this field. Her PhD thesis is on the French national museum of immigration (*Re-membering the Nation: the Project for the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*, University of London, 2008) and she is currently a post-doctoral research associate in the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies at University College London. Dr Stevens's report, published as a companion to this discussion paper, looks at the many and various ways that museums and other institutions in

the UK and around the world have covered migration. It is an excellent contribution to the debate on the merits of museums of migration. The working group has drawn on some of her ideas. And it is our hope that we may be able to commission more research of this nature in the future.

ippr has served as the hub for the working group. This report has also been designed and published by ippr, and the working group is particularly grateful to Georgina Kyriacou for overseeing this process.

## Introduction

Over more than two millennia migration has continuously shaped and reshaped the people of the British Isles. The Celts, the Romans, the Vikings, the Normans, Huguenot craftsmen, Irish labourers, Jews escaping Nazism, Somali seamen, West Indian nurses, Indian textile workers, Kosovan refugees, Russian billionaires and Polish plumbers have all woven their way into our rich national tapestry. As popular television programmes like the BBC's 'Who do you think you are?' have shown, even the most apparently 'British of the British' often have immigrant backgrounds. The growing interest in tracing our family trees shows that the native and the exotic are intertwined and that we are not so deep rooted in the British soil as some of our national myths make out. Indeed, go back far enough and we are all incomers of one sort or another. As the late Earl Russell, the Liberal campaigner, put it, in an article lamenting xenophobic attitudes: 'As someone whose ancestors came here in 1393, I welcome my fellow immigrants.'

Immigration, however, is just one part of the story. People have come, but they have also left. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, there were significant emigrations from Britain to the 'new world', which have shaped the history of the United States, Australia and South Africa, among many other countries. The twentieth century saw the 'ten pound Poms' and the 'semi-grants' to the Spanish Costas and 'Chiantishire', as Britons searched for places in the sun or new economic opportunities. Most British families have relatives who live somewhere overseas. In all, some 5.5 million British nationals are estimated to be living abroad (roughly the same number as foreign nationals living here) and some 60 million people around the world claim British ancestry (Sriskandarajah and Drew 2006).

So migration is an important part of our history and of contemporary society. But while we have major museums on most other aspects of our national life, devoted to everything from war and science to transport and the media, there is no major museum of migration.

It is true that there have been admirable efforts to showcase the importance of ethnic and religious minority communities in the UK, as well as excellent temporary exhibitions or festivals celebrating cultural diversity or commemorating particular aspects of migration history. But nowhere are these strands pulled together to show the whole picture of migration in and out of Britain on a scale befitting the importance of the issue. There is no national institution to which families, school parties, tourists, casual visitors and serious researchers can go to find out about the antiquity, complexity and centrality of migration to British life and society.

It was in this context that the Migration Museum Working Group was formed in late 2006. The group's aim was to look at the following questions:

- How should we represent the national migration story?
- How is the heritage sector presently representing the migration story and what are the key gaps in the UK?
- What can we learn from the experiences of other heritage sector migration initiatives, both in the UK and overseas?
- What should be the aims and objectives of a new heritage sector migration initiative?
- What form should any new initiative take?
- How do we proceed from here?

And hovering above all our deliberations on these questions was the big one:

- Is there a case for a major Museum of Migration in the UK?

The research carried out by Mary Stevens, and published in her accompanying report *Stories Old and New*<sup>1</sup>, was an important resource to inform our discussions. We also used the opportunity of a workshop at the Museum Association 2007 annual conference to discuss options for greater heritage sector involvement on migration.

We were conscious throughout our discussions that the sector has certainly not neglected migration completely. There have been many varied, interesting and innovative initiatives and Mary Stevens's report explores these in some depth. A number of institutions and individuals have fought long, hard battles to highlight migration, and our aim in championing ways forward is to build on their excellent work, not to eclipse it.

At the time of this report's publication, Britain is in an economic recession, while the idea of a new Museum of British History, which had the backing of the Prime Minister, has been put on the back burner. So we are under no illusions about the difficulties of any major initiatives leading to the setting up a major Museum of Migration.

With this in mind, the recommendations set out in Section 3 of this discussion paper focus on a 'step by step' approach to building up the representation of migration in our museums and heritage sector. We acknowledge that we need to do much more work to bring together all those who have an interest in this issue, as there are many perspectives that need to be taken into account.

We do think that the long-term, ultimate goal should be to try to establish a major museum of migration. That said, we do not regard this as an 'all or nothing' project. There are many initiatives that could be taken that would be highly worthwhile in their own right. If a museum does not materialise, the work will not have been wasted.

In the end, the important thing is not particular buildings, exhibitions or collections – it is taking steps to enhance this country's ability to represent its migration story through its museums and heritage sites. This is the story of all of us, not just of minority groups or recent incomers. So while a better telling of the story would celebrate our diversity, it would also help to bind us together.

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1. Available at [www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports](http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports)

## 2. Main issues around establishing a Museum of Migration

In this section we reflect on the many issues that need to be considered by anyone setting off down the road of establishing a Museum of Migration. The conclusions we come to as a result of these reflections lead us to our recommendations for next steps in Section 3 of this discussion paper. We have drawn on Mary Stevens's research.

### **What are we trying to achieve?**

It is generally accepted that migration is an important and interesting issue in our national life. It is worthy of increased representation in the museums and heritage sector for these reasons if nothing else. But in pursuing this matter we feel there is a greater goal. It is our view that the story of migration is one that can help to advance a shared sense of history and through that to create a stronger sense of shared identity and common values. Therefore a museum of migration (or much greater representation of migration) would help to break down misunderstandings between different groups, to improve relations between communities, and to build a more cohesive society.

Clearly, these very desirable outcomes are not going to be achieved by museum and heritage initiatives alone. Many other players have a responsibility (in some cases, a greater one) in this area, notably political leaders and the national media. It is true that the current environment in which migration is discussed is a negative one, but in our opinion that is an argument for taking action. Others should play their part, but we believe the museums and heritage sector is well placed to take a greater role than it does at present.

### **Why the museums and heritage sector in particular?**

The UK has a very rich and varied museums and heritage sector, with many institutions and initiatives that rank as world leaders. Since the 1960s, the issue of how to represent our increasingly diverse society, and the history and contribution of all of the communities which make up our nation, has risen up the agenda of the sector. Many institutions, big and small, have taken up the challenge – often with great success. However, a key concern expressed by some in the sector (and beyond) is that reflecting diversity leads to emphasising difference.

In contrast, migration is a theme that binds us together. It is perhaps true that the people of the UK do not see themselves as a 'nation of immigrants' in quite the way that Americans or Australians do. But our history is intimately bound up with the migration of people, in and out. We are the society we are today because of migration. Reggae and empire, chicken tikka masala and the monarchy, the dominance of the English language and the world-wide phenomenon of the Premier League: all could be said to be part of the common story of migration to and from these islands.

Some in the museums and heritage sector have recognised that migration provides fertile territory. In her report, Mary Stevens sets out a comprehensive survey of the array of initiatives that have taken place over the last forty years or so: ranging from landmark exhibitions in major museums to online networks and community-based projects. She also makes the important point that the best of these initiatives seek to 'complement and deepen rather than displace cultural diversity themes.'

### **What can any future initiatives add to what is already out there?**

In trying to answer that question, we were struck that the museums and heritage sector (and indeed the migration sector) keep coming back to the central issue of the desirability and viability of a national museum of migration. They do so because the obvious weakness of a wealth of initiatives is that while aspects of the migration story are covered, sometimes very well, the whole story is not being told. Entire periods of history, some of the most important dimensions of migration, and particular migratory waves are missed out. This is inevitable



when the subject is mainly being addressed by institutions and bodies that do not have representing migration as their primary mission. They tend to approach the subject from a relatively narrow perspective, relating it to the particular subject areas that are their speciality or to the geographical location in which they are situated.

It is to overcome this obvious deficit that major museums of migration have been established elsewhere in the world. Again, Mary Stevens provides an excellent summary of these museums in her report, showing their strengths and weaknesses, and drawing out the lessons that are applicable to the UK. It is clear that big is not always beautiful, with major museums sometimes falling into the trap of portraying dominant narratives at the expense of others, or portraying migration as an essentially a 'minorities' issue. There are some inherent problems too with 'national' museums, which are often seen to represent 'official' versions of history and society.

As well as big museums on specific sites, there have been other initiatives that have increased public engagement, promoted contacts between communities and provided information on the migration aspects of mainstream collections. In our recommendations section, we draw on some of these ideas.

What we have concluded above all is that the representation of migration in the museums and heritage sector would benefit from being more 'joined up' and new initiatives need to add real value.

### **So what is stopping the UK from having a museum of migration?**

It is important to point out first that the idea has been around for much longer than our working group. There has been at least one major attempt to get such a project off the ground, although in the end it came to nothing. And, as we have pointed out above, there is no lack of smaller initiatives – or of people interested in this issue, some of whom have explored growing their projects (or linking them up with others) into something much bigger. So what has stopped them? Below we look at these issues in turn.

#### **Money**

There is little argument that this has been the biggest stumbling block. In the end, funds or the lack of them often turn out to be the make or break issue. If a very rich individual, a wealthy institution or the Government put up the money to back a major initiative on migration many of the other blocks would almost certainly melt away.

Unfortunately, there is very little prospect of this happening. Indeed many in the museums and heritage sector told us that this is one of the worst times in recent years to be pushing such an initiative. We were hearing this even before the current recession began to bite. Now, all sources of funding are under extreme pressure – the public purse for obvious reasons, but also philanthropists and trusts and foundations – and it will be a few years at least before the prospects improve. We are conscious too that a lot of funding that might otherwise be available to other projects will be concentrated on the 2012 London Olympics.

This is one of the main reasons why in our recommendations we acknowledge that we are playing a long game and that in making progress will have to take small steps. An important part of this approach will be to form a high-powered fundraising committee to work with the coalition proposed in Section 3, so as to avoid problems such as securing substantial Lottery grants only to find that matched funds cannot be identified.

#### **The need to build a broad coalition of support**

We think it is fair to say that most people of good will would not object to the idea of a museum of migration. More specifically, those we talked to – who mainly came from the museums and migration sectors – support what we are trying to achieve, not least because many of them have been working on initiatives in this area themselves for a number of years. That said, there is – it must be acknowledged – quite a widespread caution about being too enthusiastic in pushing down this path.

To some extent, this is related to the funding issue. But it is about more than that. Some in the sector are veterans of these sorts of battles and wear the scars. Some, let's face it, have their own turf to protect – and that is fair enough. More fundamentally, there are many people – particularly from the museums and heritage sector – who are concerned that energy could be diverted into overambitious outcomes that will not be achieved, when the focus should be on smaller scale, imaginative and innovative ideas that have more chance of success.

This is not to say that there are no backers for the idea of aiming high. And it is the case that so far we have only canvassed a relatively small circle of people. In our recommendations for next steps we acknowledge the need to build a much broader coalition of support if we are to get anywhere with our ideas. We need 'buy in' from all the major players. At the moment, we do not have that. However, we think it is possible to build up support.

#### **Lack of clarity about purpose**

It is clear that a museum of migration is not going to materialise in a big bang. We will have to take a long-term, multi-dimensional approach to increasing and improving representation of migration in the museums and heritage sector. As a result, there is a danger that the initiative will lack coherence and a strong sense of direction – and that this could quickly lead to momentum and enthusiasm being lost.

For us, one of the attractions of a national museum of migration is that the objective is clearly defined. It is a simple 'big idea'. Everyone can 'get it'. Similarly, small scale projects often achieve success because they focus on achievable, well targeted outcomes. Again, there is clarity. By contrast, the approach we have ended up recommending could end up looking like something of a fudge.

In one sense, this issue can only be resolved by the formation of a strong 'core' group, made up of committed individuals. But even then, their efforts need to be focused on a clear mission and a set of clear outcomes.

In our recommendations in Section 3, we propose ways in which this potential problem can be faced and avoided.

#### **The problem of duplication and adding value**

This is always a potential issue in any area of life where there is a plethora of players. The current working group does not, by any means, represent all those with any interest in this subject. It is possible, therefore, that we could be proposing ideas that others have already taken forward. With this in mind, we see it as a necessity that our working group is significantly strengthened and broadened to include representatives from all the significant players in the fields of museums, heritage and migration.

Such a group should ensure that the initiative we are proposing would enhance the good work that has already been done. We believe the ideas in Section 3 set out a pathway for improving the representation of migration in the museums and heritage sector – particularly towards building greater national coherence. We hope others, particularly those who have a track record in this area of work, will want to work together on this initiative.

### 3. Recommendations for promoting our migration heritage

In this section, we focus on some concrete conclusions and recommendations. These are set out step by step, each leading to the next. Necessarily, the early steps involve setting up structures rather than actually pursuing exciting initiatives to showcase migration to the UK. That is an essential discipline because there is still some way to go before we can say that all the key players, with the clout to move things forward substantially, are on board with this initiative. It is our hope that once a broader and stronger coalition of support has been built, momentum will be generated to push forward the later recommendations.

#### 1. Establish a ‘Migration in Museums’ steering group

We recommend that the present working group be established on a more permanent footing and that its membership and areas of expertise should be widened. This will support the establishment of the coalition outlined in the recommendation below. This new steering group should have as its first aim the establishment of an independent charitable trust which would seek funds to employ a small secretariat. In our view, such an infrastructure is vital to carry forward an initiative on this scale.

#### 2. Build a ‘Migration in Museums’ coalition consisting of key players

The research carried out by Mary Stevens and our own analysis has shown both that there is much interest and support for the idea of greatly enhanced representation of migration in the museums and heritage sector and at the same time no clear consensus on how to proceed. It is our view that a more ‘joined up’ approach is achievable, but only if all the key players in the heritage sector and the migration fields can be brought together to develop a joint strategy. The coalition would also need to include representatives from the major funding bodies and from government.

#### 3. Create a ‘brand identity’ to link up existing initiatives

It is our hope that a new independent trust with its own secretariat, supporting a coalition of key players, could forge a strong brand to link together existing museums, historic sites, walks, community projects and other initiatives that are central to the UK migration story. This would be similar to the International Coalition of Historic Sites. The benefits of such a scheme would be akin to those of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council’s Designation Scheme<sup>3</sup> in that it would:

- Identify nationally significant cultural assets related to migration
- Reveal the strength and geographic spread of Britain’s migration heritage
- Help to direct funding
- Enhance fund-raising ability
- Help to build a popular understanding of shared entitlement to heritage
- Encourage sites (and the organisations that manage them) to take pride in their links to migration
- Create a sense of local ownership around the history of migration
- Build momentum to the creation of the national museum.

#### 4. Establish a migration heritage web portal or ‘virtual museum’

Such a portal would be another way to link up current initiatives promoting migration to create some national coherence and establish in the public consciousness the ‘brand’

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3. [www.mla.gov.uk/what/raising\\_standards/designation](http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/raising_standards/designation)

outlined in Recommendation 3. The portal would be similar in approach to Untold London, but would cover the whole of the UK. It would help to sustain earlier web initiatives, such as Moving Here<sup>4</sup>. It would enable organisations across the UK to publicise their work and in time would result in a searchable database of all initiatives in the field, which would be useful for professionals seeking to draw on existing expertise.

Content could include listings, project profiles and digitised collections. The site should also be made available to individuals and community heritage organisations to upload their own material, on the model of some of the community archiving sites (for example, the award-winning ‘My Brighton and Hove’<sup>5</sup>). This would help create a sense of common ownership over our migration stories and work towards the Campaign for Learning Through Museums and Galleries’ goal of a ‘personal museums programme’, tailored to the experience of individuals. The model of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney should be explored in more detail.

The website should also be used to showcase the coalition of the physical network of sites with strong links to migration or migration-related collections, outlined in Recommendation 3. Such a web portal would mirror the activities of Proud Heritage<sup>6</sup>, an online museum that has been established with the aim of taking a staged approach to the eventual creation of a national museum of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender heritage.

### **5. Encourage the reinterpretation of existing collections from a migration perspective**

Many of the collections in local, regional and specialist museums are relevant to the story of migration, but at present these collections are interpreted in ways that do not make this clear. Another important initiative that the ‘Migration in Museums’ trust would seek to promote, with support from the coalition, is the active reinterpretation of key collections – or elements of those collections – from a migration perspective.

Over time, it is hoped that the trust would develop sufficient expertise to offer consultancy to museums and other sites in how they could look at their existing assets afresh with a view to promoting migration.

### **6. Create a database of researchers working on migration history**

This would help connect curators and museum educators with academic experts in a particular field. The possibility of this resource being hosted by the Institute of Historical Research, at least in the early stages, should be explored.

### **7. Create a schools outreach programme**

It is clear from the research we commissioned that children and young people would form an important part of the audience for a Museums of Migration initiative, given the increasing stress put on community cohesion in the schools National Curriculum.

Activities for an outreach programme could include a national lending service of hands-on material on migration that could be directed at schools. This would be particularly valuable to schools outside of large metropolitan centres. Another initiative could include the development of touring exhibitions for schools and local libraries and maintenance of a register of these. In addition, more support should be given to teacher training around migration to help teachers and other professionals develop their own skills to cover this issue and to make better use of museum collections as part of this agenda.

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4. This site ‘explores, records and illustrates why people came to England over the last 200 years and what their experiences were and continue to be’; [www.movinghere.org.uk](http://www.movinghere.org.uk)

5. ‘A living history of Brighton and Hove’; [www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk](http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk)

6. [www.culture24.org.uk/history/people+%2526+society/lgbt+history/art56413](http://www.culture24.org.uk/history/people+%2526+society/lgbt+history/art56413)

All of these ideas could be developed during the earlier stages of the project, but would form an important part of the work of a museum itself, were it to be established.

#### **8. Establish an international outreach programme to capture the stories of migration and settlement from British emigrants abroad**

This was one of the recommendations of the Campaign for Learning Through Museums and Galleries' report of 2006 *Culture Shock* (CLMG 2006). The programme could identify possible coalition partners overseas and could be administered in collaboration with the British Council.

#### **9. 'Moving Stories': a major touring exhibition for 2012**

The cultural diversity of the UK was a major factor in the successful bid for the 2012 Olympics, and it is our view that this landmark event in the nation's history provides an ideal opportunity for promoting the story of migration to this country.

The 'Stories of the World' and the 'World Cultural Festival' strands of the Cultural Olympiad both offer outstanding opportunities for an initiative around migration. The idea of a major exhibition takes forward the CLMG's recommendation of a 'Blockbuster' show on identity, culture and citizenship.

An evaluation of the success or otherwise of such a major exhibition would help in the assessment of the viability of setting up a permanent national museum of migration.

#### **10. Establish a Museum of Migration as a 'hub with spokes'**

This final recommendation brings us back to where the working party started. We believe that a physical museum, with its own collection, although very much a long-term aspiration, would be a wonderful addition to the museums and heritage sector and to the cultural life of the UK. With this in mind, below we set out our vision for a museum.

We do believe the museum should be focused on a resonant, high-profile building. It should be a major attraction, high on the list of 'must-do' things the UK. It could contain:

- A permanent exhibition
- A space for temporary exhibitions, which could then tour around the country
- A space for other events – plays, concerts, debates, readings, launches, parties and so on
- A library or archive for research and reference for scholars, students and others
- Educational facilities
- Catering facilities, which could be used to reflect the contribution of migrants to the national cuisine.

The museum should be as inclusive as possible and should be aimed at the general museum-going public, not at a niche market. It should cover migrations into and out of the UK from pre-history up to the present day.

In addition to this physical space, the museum of migration should also lead activities that form the 'spokes' of the hub. These activities should aim to bring the work of the museum to a larger audience than those who are able to make a visit to the building.

For the moment, a museum along these lines remains a distant aspiration. However, we remain of the belief that this is an outcome that all those interested in migration to and from the UK should be working towards. A national museum of migration would be a superb addition to our museums and heritage sector, but it would be much more than that. It would also represent a step forward for UK society, putting migration at the heart of our history and acknowledging its critical role in shaping our future.