

Institution: University of Reading
Unit of Assessment: 30 History
Title of case study: Enhancing the visitor experience and reputation for excellence at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research carried out by Dr Margaret Yates at the University of Reading has enhanced understanding of the social and economic history of the late medieval and early modern periods and the standards of living of those of middling or low social status. In particular, the findings and methodology of her work on the houses of these classes has been of major benefit to the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum (WDOAM), which specialises in the preservation of historic vernacular buildings. Through an innovative Knowledge Transfer Partnership with the University, the WDOAM has used Yates' ground-breaking research to explore the history of the houses in their care and to present the past to the public in engaging, enjoyable, informative and interactive ways. As a result, the visitor experience offered by WDOAM has been greatly enhanced and visitor numbers increased at a time of competitive pressures in the regional heritage industry.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Yates is one of a growing number of historians who are interested in changes in the standards of living of the majority of the population who are of low or middling social status, and vernacular houses (that is, those houses generally built from locally available materials and reflecting custom and tradition) are a physical expression of the living conditions, and often aspirations, of this group. In particular, as reflected in her publications, Yates' research and teaching focus on the social and economic history of the late medieval and early modern periods.</p> <p>Her methodological approach is innovative in its ability to identify and exploit diverse sources of evidence that were never intended for this purpose, but have the potential to inform us about the lives of ordinary people in the past and the places in which they lived. These include documentary sources, such as the records of the manor, of national government (i.e. taxation returns and Royal surveys) and of the Church; visual resources, such as maps, plans, drawings and paintings; standing buildings, including houses; archaeological artefacts; and excavation reports.</p> <p>The success of Yates' approach can be illustrated in her book <i>Town and countryside in western Berkshire, c.1327-c.1600. Social and economic change</i>, where she explores what life was like for the people living in the villages and towns in this area during this period. These were momentous centuries characterised by economic change and social upheavals, including the rebellions of 1381 and 1450; disease and the high mortality of the Black Death; foreign and civil wars; political and religious upheavals; and a 'golden age' of the English peasantry and artisans, some of whose houses survive from this period. Many of these events resulted in changes that are seen as laying the foundations for the modern economy and society.</p> <p>There are further and diverse applications to Yates' methodological approach, as can be seen in her article on the early Protestant Henry Brinklow and the writings of other evangelicals which assesses the validity of their polemical tracts on rapacious landlords, rack rents and agricultural change by comparison with contemporary data. As demonstrated through her work on Berkshire, Yates employs these detailed local case studies as the lens to answer big questions about the nature of historical change, including: how autonomous were the economic lives of peasants?; how influential was the entrepreneur in bringing about change?; what was the impact of national events such as the Reformation on the locality?; why were there marked regional differences in the experiences of the population? There are also applications here for local history and as Vice-President of the Berkshire Local History Association Yates is active in promoting, and helping others to undertake, quality research into the history of their localities.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>M. Yates, <i>Town and countryside in western Berkshire, c.1327-c.1600. Social and economic change</i></p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

(Woodbridge, 2007). Available upon request

M. Yates, 'Between fact and fiction: Brinklow's 'Complaynt' against rapacious landlords', *Agricultural History Review* 54 (2006), pp. 22-42; URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40276052>

M. Yates, 'Change and continuities in rural society from the later Middle Ages to the sixteenth century: The contribution of West Berkshire.' *Economic History Review* LII (1999), pp. 617-37; DOI: 10.1111/1468-0289.00140

J. Whittle and M. Yates, "Pays Réel or Pays Légal'? Contrasting patterns of land tenure and social structure in Eastern Norfolk and Western Berkshire, 1450-1600.' *Agricultural History Review* 48.1 (2000), pp. 1-26; URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40275611>

The research has been internally peer-reviewed as being of 2* quality.

4. Details of the impact

Through the vehicle of the first Knowledge Transfer Partnership* in a Department of History, Yates' research has had a major impact on the WDOAM – a museum which was formed “to stimulate public interest in and to encourage the preservation of buildings of architectural or historical interest and to stimulate public interest in ancient crafts, trades and manufactures”. It is recognised as setting very high standards in the museum sector and is designated by Government as an ‘Outstanding Collection’. The WDOAM's collection of vernacular buildings ranges from the 13th to 19th centuries and tells the stories about the buildings themselves, the occupants and their historical context, way of life and material culture. In 2003, the museum undertook an “Access Project” which aimed to address a critical need to improve orientation to visitors and facilities to enable it to retain its market position and reputation as a quality tourist destination.

Co-incidentally, and at the same time, Yates approached the then director, Richard Harris, to suggest a collaborative project. The result was a KTP between the museum and the University of Reading (2005-2009), with Yates as Lead Academic,¹ to help the WDOAM in its efforts to improve the visitor experience. The design of the KTP was predicated on Yates' research interests and experience, and 10 houses were selected for investigation as representative of the WDOAM's collection. Danae Tankard was appointed by the University in 2005 to work on the project and applied Yates' methodology to investigate the social and economic history of the 10 houses and to present the past to the public in deeply engaging, enjoyable, informative and interactive ways. This work included the development of new visitor displays, webpages devoted to individual buildings, presentations and a training programme for staff and volunteers. Additionally, the project provided the museum with the capability to conduct this type of historical investigation for itself, providing an ongoing benefit for future development. Yates remained the Lead Academic throughout the KTP, sharing her research methodologies in throwing light on 'everyday folk' in their localities, and brought it to a successful conclusion in 2009. The project produced excellent historical information on the occupants of the buildings and their diverse contexts.^{2,3}

As a result, the WDOAM has been able to convey to the public a deeper understanding of the history of the houses, their inhabitants and the economic and cultural contexts in which they lived, thus enhancing their enjoyment of the museum. Richard Harris commented: “We are regarded as setting and maintaining high standards which people notice... Danae's research has played and is playing an important part in how we achieve this level of excellence.” The current director, Richard Pailthorpe, goes further and states that the research “has had a considerable impact in key areas of the museum's work, in particular interpretation and education.”⁵

The knowledge acquired through the KTP has been embedded in the WDOAM as detailed academic research papers, deposited in the museum archives, and provides a reference resource for members of staff. Furthermore, the methodological approach and sources of evidence devised by Yates and Tankard have become a resource in themselves for ongoing research at the museum, thus enabling it to maintain its reputation for excellence. Members of staff and volunteers continue to be trained in the new resources and are better informed as a result. This is particularly important for the stewards in the vernacular buildings, who are there to tell the human story of the house and answer visitor questions.

The museum publicly recognises the impact of Yates' work. This is seen in Richard Harris' article 'Benefiting from knowledge transfer', in which he is clear that the historian's "knowledge and experience will be of permanent benefit to us".⁶ Moreover, in *Building History* (pp. 61-2), it is stated that the WDOAM now has "a body of knowledge and the means to communicate it."⁷ In the light of the new research, the guidebook to the museum has been revised.

The visitor experience to the museum has also been enhanced and this has had a direct impact on maintaining visitor numbers in the competitive heritage market of the Chichester area. By 2011, annual visitor admissions had already risen to 140,000, an increase of 5 per cent over 2010.

The increased momentum and profile of historical research at the WDOAM, gained through its partnership with the University of Reading, has had a bearing on the financial support given to the museum by the Friends of WDOAM and underpinned several successful grant applications. For example, a project around one of the historic properties, Tindall's Cottage, predicated on the University's original research, was funded by the Department for Culture, Media & Sport/Wolfson Museums & Galleries Improvement Fund (£50,000) and The Headley Trust (£30,000).

The research has also enhanced the academic profile of the collections and work of the WDOAM and played a role in establishing important links between the museum and the Universities of Chichester, York and Reading. New educational resources continue to be informed by the research and the quality of the educational contribution made by the WDOAM was recognised when it won the prestigious Europa Nostra Award in 2011 for the historic building conservation training programme and was named a *Grand Prix* laureate in recognition of outstanding heritage achievements.

The project has also had a significant impact on the career of the Knowledge Transfer Associate, Danae Tankard, who is now a permanent member of staff in both the University of Chichester, where she is senior lecturer, and at the WDOAM, where she is employed as the museum's first resident historian.

*A KTP is a partnership between an academic team and an external organisation and aims to embed specific new knowledge and capability in the organisation. Projects are part funded by government (www.ktonline.org.uk)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. A Knowledge Transfer Partnership (reference number 7423) between the University of Reading and the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum 2005-2009. Total value of grant £260,050.
2. D. Tankard, *Houses of the Weald and Downland. People and houses of south-east England c.1300-1900* (Lancaster, 2012).
3. <http://www.wealddown.co.uk/Buildings/Focus-on-buildings>, where there is a list of the buildings. From here, detailed information on each house based on the KTP research can be accessed, for example <http://www.wealddown.co.uk/Buildings/Hangleton-and-its-Medieval-Village>
4. Director of WDOAM (2001-2010). (Contact details provided separately)
5. Statement by current director WDOAM (2011-present) (Letter available upon request)
6. Richard Harris 'Benefiting from knowledge transfer', *Magazine of the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum*, Autumn 2009, p. 5 and found at <http://www.wealddown.co.uk/images/stories/magazines/2000s/2009%2011%20WDOAM%20Magazine.pdf>
7. *Building History* (Chichester, 2010).

