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WOODHORN

MUSEUM, ARCHIVES
AND COUNTRY PARK

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THE AUTHOR:

Deborah Tate, a chartered member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, has worked with Northumberland County Council for twenty years. During that time she has dealt with many aspects of marketing and PR, from leisure and tourism to economic development and regeneration. Woodhorn is without doubt the most fulfilling project she has worked on, not least because she is passionate about the place, being the fourth generation of her family to work on the site.

Roger Wilkinson is an architect with Northumberland County Council.

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WOODHORN

MUSEUM, ARCHIVES AND COUNTRY PARK

ROGER WILKINSON

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about Woodhorn Museum, Archives and Country Park, the biggest project Northumberland has done in many years. We intend to deal with the project's design and development as well as its marketing as a visitor attraction.

WOODHORN

Woodhorn was originally a pit and after it closed in 1981 Wansbeck District Council decided to make a mining museum in some of the buildings but over a period the buildings began to degenerate and were put on the English Heritage Buildings At Risk Register. Meanwhile the County Archives facility, based in an ex-World War II fighter control station in Gosforth, (not actually in Northumberland), also needed a new home as damp, cold World War II buildings were poor environmental conditions for archive storage.

Northumberland County and Wansbeck District Councils formed a joint project team to deal with both issues and the team decided to commission a unique new combined archive and museum building, there being no other such building in this country. The new building would also provide a home for many and varied mining artefacts including the Ashington Collection, the work of a group of miner painters, and the collection of miners' banners held by Wansbeck, sixteen of the twenty-three banners in existence.

EXTENT OF PROPOSALS

The scope of the project became:

- museum
- gallery
- community archive
- community workshops
- parkland

The development of the project was to comprise the following phases.

- Conserve the existing buildings
- Stabilise the construction
- Create a new world-class building
- Create a memorable landscape setting
- Maximise access for all

SCOPE OF PAPER

The paper will cover in detail the historic investigations and site development, site and building usage, machinery, building condition and marketing the completed development.

HISTORIC INVESTIGATIONS

This relatively recent aerial view, from before we built the project, shows the remaining pit buildings and the lake, trees and woods of the Queen Elizabeth II Country Park in Ashington.



This is a closer aerial view of the pit layout prior to construction.



The 1955 site plan provides a key to the various building uses.



That is an aerial photograph taken somewhere between 1917 and 1929.



This view of the mine shows a working steam train on the adjoining line, the screens over the mine's own sidings and beyond them the pithead and winding gear.



The next three slides show how work underground changed over the years.

The first is an early shot of a miner hewing coal with a pick,

dark, dirty, messy, hot work. The second shows early mechanisation and the third the most recent sophisticated coal cutting equipment and hydraulic props. The work became much cleaner as time went on.

The brief history of Woodhorn mine is that the first shaft, the Morn shaft, was sunk in 1884 and is 800 ft deep. The second shaft was dug in 1916 and an explosion underground killed 13 men. In the mid-1920s the pit employed 2,500 men and was one of the smaller pits in the North East. The pithead baths were built in 1930 and the pit closed on February 28th 1981.

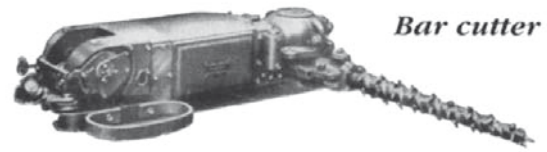
The buildings available for the project and the winding gear were in poor or desperate condition and initially much structural survey work had to be done followed by a lot of building work just to stabilise the buildings for the next few decades.

INFLUENCES

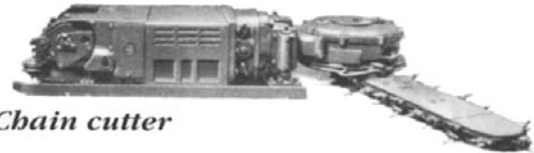
The drawing below shows the main architectural influences for the new build taken from three Scandinavian libraries and one from Oregon, USA and that is the radial plan to reduce the impact of the major archive storage use of the building and to provide a focus on the search room, the main study centre at the centre of the wheel.

The other main influence was the shape and layout of the

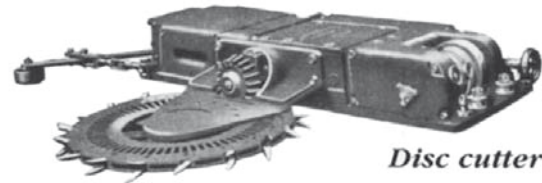
various types of coal cutting machines that were probably used in this mine.



Bar cutter



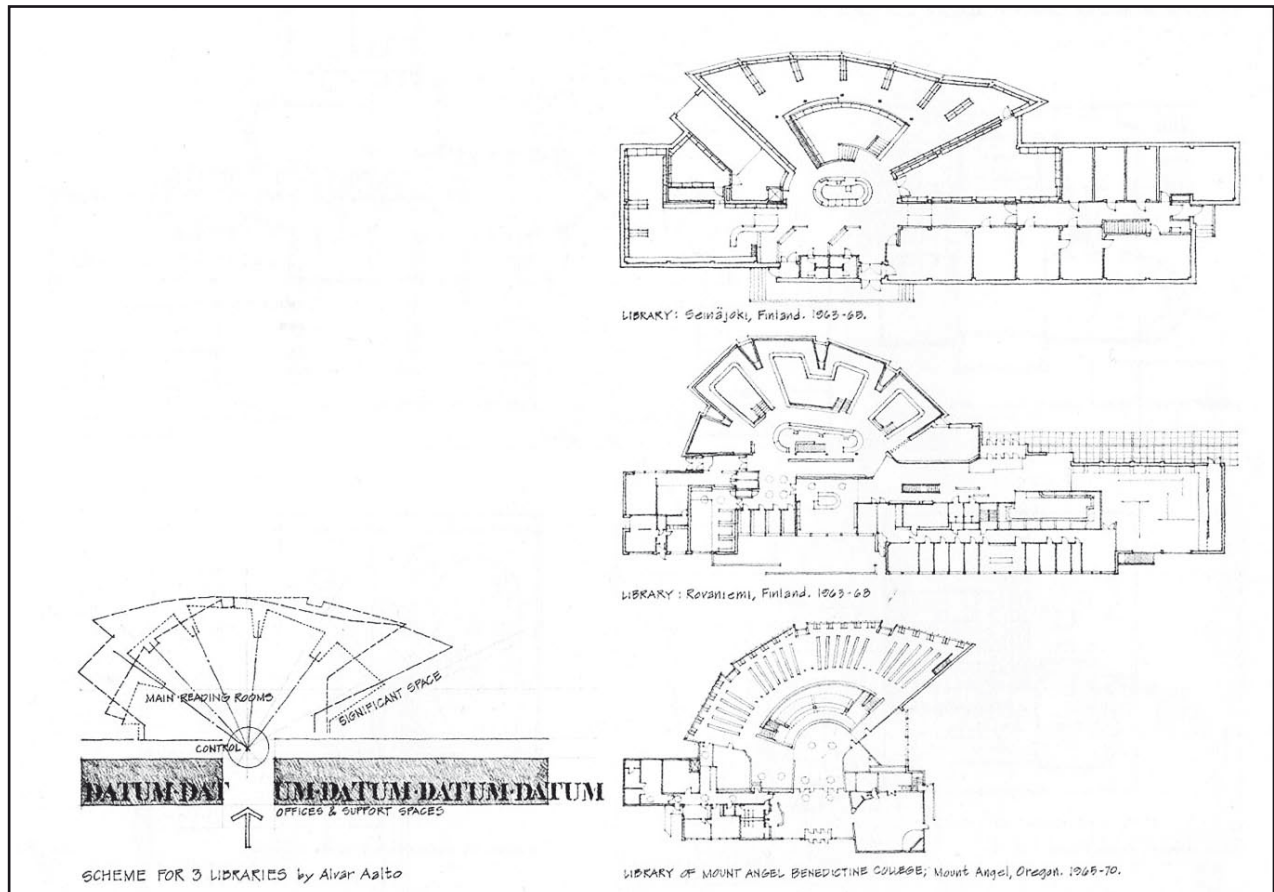
Chain cutter



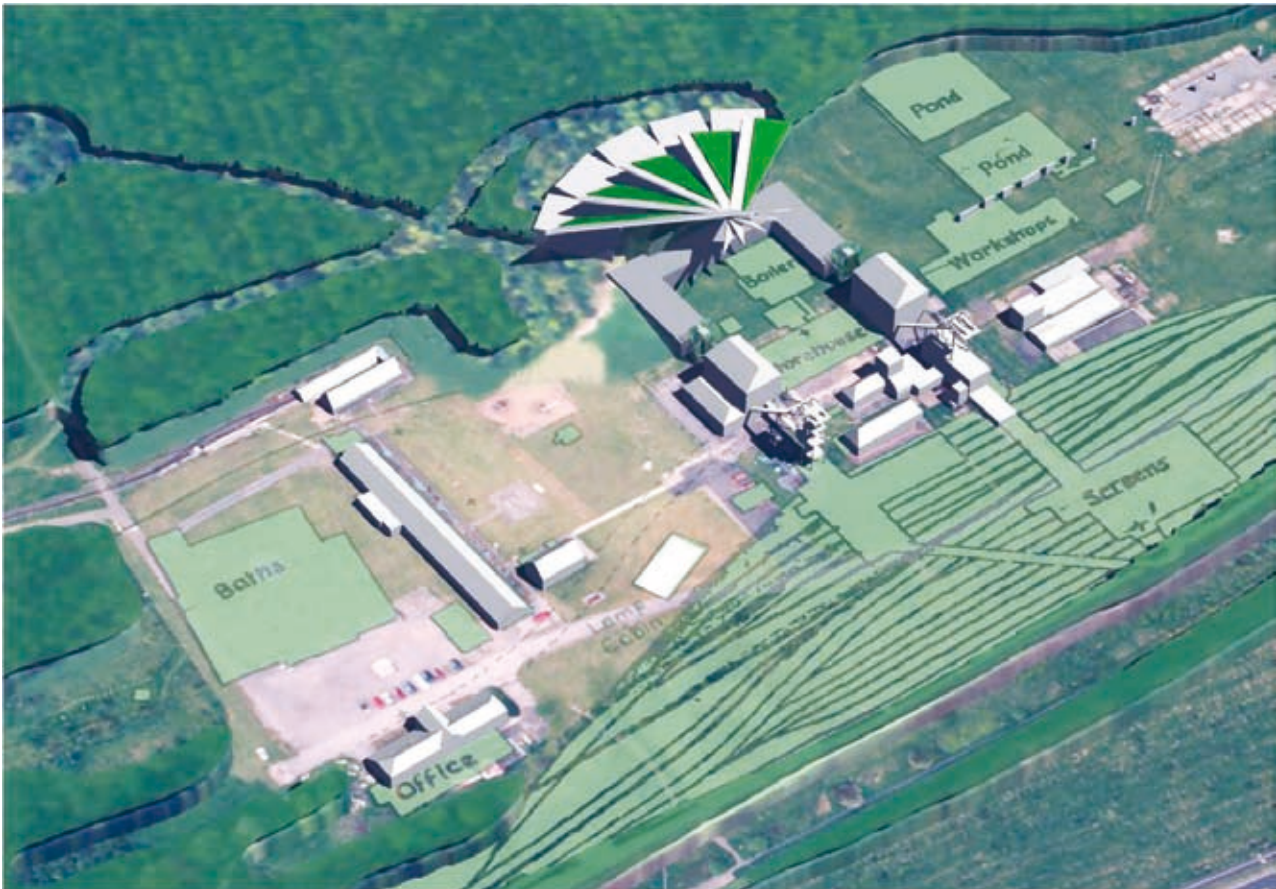
Disc cutter



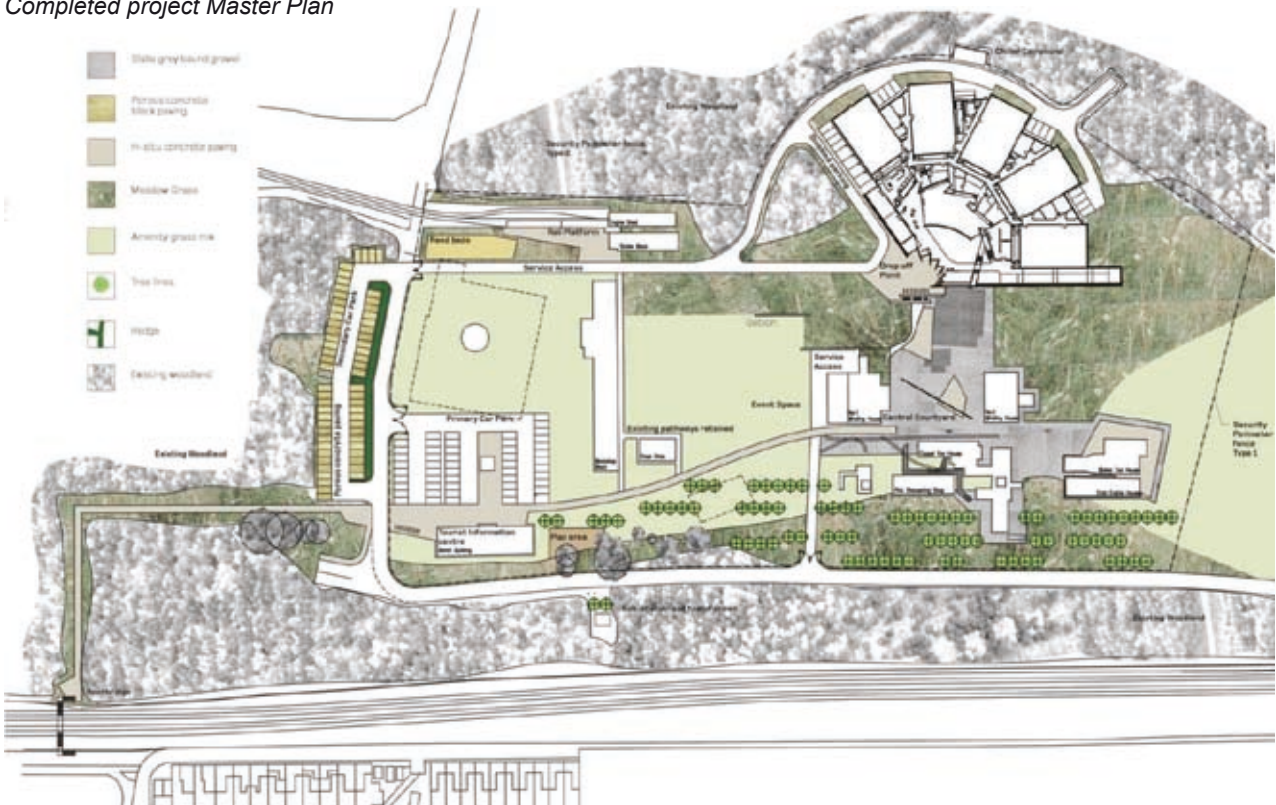
Meco-Moore cutter-loader



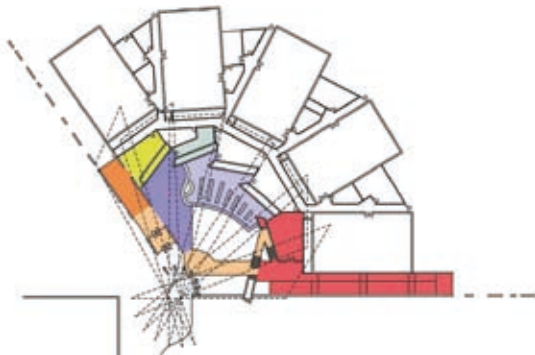
This composite layout diagram, based on the original aerial photograph shown earlier shows the remaining original buildings, and in green the areas and buildings that no longer exist, and the new build.



Completed project Master Plan



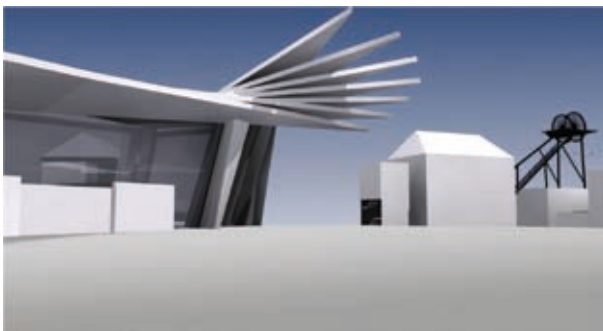
The next diagram is the plan of the upper level of the new build showing the radial storage areas, all are art house stores. The blue and brown areas are upper level circulation areas. The yellow and brown are two temporary galleries, the west gallery and the Northern Rock Gallery. The study centre is right at the focus of all the archive storage. There is a permanent gallery for the Ashington Group paintings, a large collection of paintings done by the miners in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. They show life in the mine and the social life as it was during those years.



This is the banner room where miners' banners are displayed in such a way that it is possible to walk past and see both sides.



And finally this building is actually called The Cutter because the serration on the roof is meant to replicate the shape of serrated coalcutter teeth.



DEBORAH TATE

MARKETING THE COMPLETED DEVELOPMENT



This wonderful Woodhorn product is a combination of amazing listed buildings and a fabulous new building that is quite breathtaking.

GRAND OPENINGS

We had a low-key official opening on 26th October 2006 with a royal visitor, Princess Anne. Two days later, on 28th October we opened the facility to the general public. Woodhorn is very fortunate because as a working mine it belonged to the community. It belonged to the community when it operated as a small mining museum and we have so much support and interest for our project from the local community that it still feels as if it belongs to them and this gives them every right to criticise us in the local press on a weekly basis!

VISITORS

We had a great weekend with Jack Charlton, a local Ashington lad, there all day signing autographs and making people very happy. The October launch focussed on the local community and a second one in February 2007 when we hit the regional and tourist press. By 31st August we had welcomed 116,000 visitors with over 8,000 using our function facilities for meetings, conferences and even on-site weddings, over 7,000 archive users (50% up on previous levels), over 4,000 people coming along for special one-off activities (talks, children's workshops etc), over 1500 on paid-for guided tours. The museum itself is a free entry but these paid for guided tours actually help us keep our funding going.

A total of 75,000 visitors was our first year target. We hope to reach, and surpass, 130,000 by our first birthday.

THE WEBSITE

www.experiencewoodhorn.com went live in July 2006 and we achieved 16,500 hits per day in February 2007. That coincided with a week of TV advertising in the region. We opened on the Wednesday of that half-term week and we had nearly 2,000 people through the doors. We had never known anything like it before. All staff in that day had to work front-of-house. The website had one million hits in total March 2007 and is now 1,584,445 up to the end of July, our success continues. There is a lot more development to be done and potential to link to other things. The Ashington paintings, owned by a separate Trust, are developing a website so we will be linking to that. And we intend to tie into all the other tourism attractions in the area, and maximise the opportunities for people to purchase on line.

EXHIBITIONS

Our exhibitions are about mining, and also about the best of the North East and the best of the rest of the world. We bring things in as well as just showing local things. Our aim is to bring visitors back time after time to share different things. When we started we were concerned that people might see us as just a mining museum, very heavy, and not accessible to non-miners or children. Therefore our first exhibition focussed on "inflatable fun castles" for children

inspired by Northumberland and its castles. This attracted lots of children and young mothers pushing prams, probably people who had never considered coming to a museum before and now these families are coming back time after time. Our second exhibition is different and still running and courting some controversy. The subject is Bodies, Bouffants and Boots, but mainly tattoos or body adornment. We are not making any judgements. We are just saying this is the North East, these are the people, and this is what they do.

EVENTS

A lively events programme, largely free, is similarly aimed at bringing in different people to see different things. Many people will be vaguely aware of our presence and that something is going on but may only be half interested until a single event at this venue whets the appetite and brings them in. What has worked well for us is looking at where our visitors come from and then doing leaflet drops through doors. It works! It was a fact that many local residents living within fifteen minutes of Woodhorn had not heard of us. They have now. It is essential to change the perception that we are just a heavy mining museum because we are not. We are about people and places.



GENERAL PROMOTION

Our general promotion is heavily branded (See previous page). We have maintained this throughout the first year and will continue for the foreseeable future because we want people to recognise it. The idea of the little girl is to show it is a family attraction and not just aimed at former miners. There is free admission but elsewhere on every leaflet it states that parking costs £2. I think that is reasonable but some people turn round and leave. A bus does run to site for a minimal charge as pedestrian access is not easy. We are on the wrong side of a railway and so far have been unable to overcome the issues with access.

PRESS AND MEDIA

The press and media have shown lots of interest. A professional company helped us with this for our first six months. There was a lot of in-house experience of the local market but no experience of the specialist market. The BBC has been on site, there was a whole page in The Guardian about the Pitmen Painters, and we have had visits from writers at The Independent and other national newspapers. I now do regular interviews on local radio and some strong links have been developed. It took a long time to get through that Woodhorn was more than just the Ashington area, even the Morpeth press, just eight miles away could not see our relevance even though we have the documentation for the county going back 800 years. We are winning the battle slowly.

SUCCESS?

It is important to measure success. We have monitored our progress in the following ways.

- VAQAS scheme participant. We successfully went through the Visitor Quality Accreditation Scheme. This looks at customer reception, facilities on site and the whole experience.
- Welcome to Excellence. This is a customer care course and more than 80% of our staff have been through this care course.
- We are able to cater for people with mobility difficulties and the like.
- The Museum was a finalist in the Culture Awards 2006 even though and we had only been open a couple of months.
- Also the Museum is a finalist in the Tourism Awards 2007 and next week we will discover if we are one of the winners. Our competitors include Beamish and The Discovery Centre

in Newcastle and I am delighted that we are a competitive.

- Hayley Sharp, our designers, are finalists in the National Design Effectiveness Awards 2007 for the work that they have done on our scheme.
- We have won some Heritage Lottery Fund money for a history project, recording the oral history of the county. We have got vast amounts of documentation to sort and are still looking for more as well as the oral history project. The spoken word is far more engaging and accessible. Currently we are gathering information on Bevin Boys who worked in many local collieries as their contribution to the war effort.
- We have also been chosen as a place to locate an outreach worker for the Tyne and Wear Museums Service and again that is reaching out beyond the usual museum-going public.

THE REST OF 2007/08

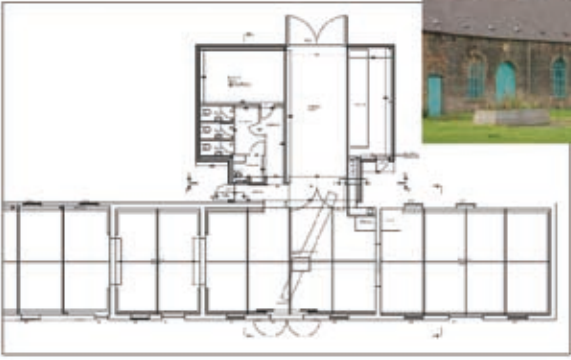

We have a few winter exhibitions and events planned for the rest of the year. We are working on further exhibition development for the galleries; Christmas activities programming; lots of functions and education promotion; promotions for coaches and groups as well as general promotion work for next year.


PHASE 2, THE WORKSHOP BLOCK

The workshop block, a long low building, has just been refurbished to house temporary exhibitions and further function facilities. It is now one long open space with an external loading bay and containing a kitchen and toilets so it can be used independently. The first exhibition is planned for January 2008. The building still houses some original machinery and the refurbishment has preserved

Phase 2 – The Workshop

- Exhibition Programme
- Functions Facilities



Targets

- 125,000+ visitors for first 12 months
- Opening of Phase 2
- Going to Trust Spring 2008



the building's origins and even the new air conditioning and other systems have been left exposed to be in keeping with the feel of the building. The first exhibition, of national importance, will feature Aardman Promotions whose work includes the Wallace and Gromit movies so we are all very excited.

TARGETS

These are our targets superimposed on an image of the new building. The image by the way is a real photograph and not an artist's impression. It really does look like that.

Deborah Tate
Woodhorn

Roger Wilkinson
Northumberland County Council

NOTES

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