

SKILLS THE NATION NEEDS

It takes years of training to become a qualified microbiologist like Dave Roberts. His work enhances our understanding of biodiversity and some of the smallest living organisms on our planet

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I'm not a number...

I'm a
microbiologist

a job worth doing, not a cash saving

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The science behind our living heritage

MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES are custodians of items held in public trust. But once a collection exceeds a few hundred objects we need a system of organising them, otherwise we can't find what we want.

That is my job. I work on classification systems of microbes. It's a unique quality of museums that items are not held in isolation, but in context with other related objects and literature. Only when all these things come together can we understand the significance of any one object.

No matter why an object was collected, as our knowledge advances, people find new ways to use the information it represents. If we have catalogued the collections well, then assembling the items needed to tackle a new question will be straightforward.

Of course, researchers cannot do this alone. I have colleagues who specialise in the care of objects and others in display, education and outreach. Between us we make sure that material is conserved and can be recovered and displayed from



our collections when it is needed.

These days access to collections is most commonly driven by the web. We are moving to an era where we can mount digital images of collected objects over the internet. In the UK, our museums hold objects from all over the world, accumulated during more than 1,000 years of international trade and acquisition.

The collections we hold are in global demand. A big part of my job is to promote use of our collections in an international context. To that end, funded by the European Union, I manage projects that promote virtual research environments. These facilitate specialist groups from around the world, linked by interest in a particular group of objects, location, or period in time.

To most of the outside world, museums and galleries are simply exhibition centres. But the objects they exhibit would mean little without the skills that people bring to research, curation and display.

■ **Dr Dave Roberts, microbiologist,
the Natural History Museum**



“The objects that our museums and galleries exhibit would mean little without the skills that people bring to research, curation and display”



Is 17p a head too much to pay to preserve our national heritage?

THE V&A, British Museum, British Library, Tate Modern, National Gallery, Science Museum, Natural History Museum.

Each year these famous institutions help to draw 30 million visitors to the UK, contributing £115bn to the UK economy. Sixteen million people visit our national museums and galleries every year.

They come to admire

our collections of works of art, books and historical artefacts – products of the remarkably high scientific, curatorial and conservation skills maintained by the heritage sector.

But that record is in danger, because of programmes of economies and efficiencies that will make access to the collections more difficult in many ways. The 15%





- cuts announced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will:
- increase unemployment
 - result in a less vibrant arts and heritage environment
 - shut down many smaller organisations altogether
 - reduce tourism
 - threaten standards of care for our collections.
- In the process, the job prospects of the specialist staff who enable our heritage organisations to function will wither. Already low levels of pay

have been frozen; jobs are being shed; and training opportunities cut back.

All this will affect the public offer – shorter opening hours; fewer major exhibitions; more static collections; programmes curtailed. Income will reduce despite the efforts to raise money by museums and galleries who have almost matched government funding with self-generated income.

It all adds up to a serious blow to a sector whose total cost to the

UK taxpayer works out at 17p per person per week. Looked at another way, it consumes 7p in every £100 of public spending. And that funding is an investment – for each £1 spent on the heritage, an additional £2 is generated from private and commercial sources.

Some bodies, like English Heritage (cut by 32%), the Design Museum (cut by 65%) and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (abolished) are feeling pain right now. For

others it will be spread over the next few years.

Many of these bodies regulate, advise on or protect the UK's built environment and heritage. If ever a spending cut was a false economy, this is it.



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