

Window on Wiltshire's Heritage: A View of Heritage Website Sustainability

Helen Shalders

English Heritage National Monuments Record
Swindon, United Kingdom
helen.shalders@english-heritage.org.uk

Abstract

The British National Lottery's New Opportunities Fund (NOF) Digitization Program funded Window on Wiltshire's Heritage (WOW) for three years to improve online heritage resources. WOW consists of 22 heritage organizations' websites linked via a portal (www.wowheritage.org.uk). Partners included volunteer and professional bodies. The progression of these organizations since the program's closure is considered. Steps taken before the program closed to ensure WOW continued to thrive are assessed. A comparison between the web statistics from the active phase of the program and those from 2005 is assessed. Techniques used to boost return visits are considered; assessments of the most popular content are made. Conclusions are drawn from the available evidence and means of avoiding future problems are considered. Assessment of the current situation was achieved using a questionnaire, interviews, and web statistics.

1 Introduction

Following the completion of two highly successful digital heritage projects, "The Millennium Tale" and "Timescape Wiltshire," Wiltshire County Council won funding from the British National Lottery's New Opportunities Fund (NOF) to act as lead partner for a three year program to build or expand websites for 22 of the county's heritage organizations. These websites can all be accessed via a portal site but are independent. At the end of the active phase of the program, each organization had achieved a degree of digitization of their holdings and had a thriving web presence. The program's commitment to NOF extended to ensuring that all the websites would remain available until 2007 (NOF-Digitize Terms of Grant, 2002). To this end, steps were taken to provide skills and support for the partners during this period. A year after the end of the program, an investigation into the health of the partners' web presence has been undertaken in order to learn whether the steps taken were the right ones and, if not, what could have been done differently. The results of this investigation along with the web statistics harvested and provided to the Big Lottery Fund (BLF), the successor to NOF, form the basis of this paper.

2 A Post-Project Support System

During its active phase, Window on Wiltshire's (WOW) Heritage was staffed for the most part by two full-time workers. This program team had expertise in information and project management, as well as British history and archaeology. As more of the partner websites went live, it became apparent to the program team that the staff in the various organizations owning the websites wanted ongoing support as they began on the path to being successful webmasters. Many were enthused by the process of setting up a website and wanted to see their web presence grow, recognizing the power of electronic communication to take their

information to the world. A variety of steps were taken to support the partners after the program staff's departure.

2.1 Training

Both organization-specific and pan-program training were used to enhance the digital skills of the partners with the intention that, as more material could be digitized, the websites could be expanded.

Support in using Content Management Systems. Four of the partner organizations opted to have custom-made content management systems built so that they could update and expand their websites. The program team provided one-on-one training for a member of staff in each of these organizations. The custom-made CMS applications provided by WOW all have inbuilt "Help" sections to provide an aide memoir where a site has not been updated for some time. One of the museums opted to buy Adobe Contribute software to provide a means of website expansion. The program staff provided the necessary training for one member of the museum team to learn how to use this program.

Learning Digital Skills. An informal survey of the partners prior to project closure indicated that learning some practical digital skills was desirable to most in order to bolster confidence. The subjects most desired to be covered were the following: how to get the best from a digital camera; using Adobe Photoshop; and writing for web audiences. Expert tutors were engaged to provide the training; the imaging workshops were run by the Higher Education Digitisation Service, and the writing seminar was conducted by Giles Turnbull, a respected web journalist. Additionally, a web-accessibility workshop was organized with the Royal

National Institute for the Blind. Of the 22 partner organizations, 19 took part in at least one of the courses offered.

URLs and Hosting. In addition to funds to develop a web presence and digitize material, the program paid for partners' URLs and hosting for the first two years. A commitment to fund these at the least until the end of 2007 was achieved from each partner.

Support Contract. With the program to be left without dedicated staff from April 2005, and a commitment to gathering web usage data for the Big Lottery Fund (BLF), NOF's successor, it was decided that the company that had built the Program's portal site, Boston Media, would be paid a retaining fee. This would ensure that not only were the required statistics harvested but that the partners could access assistance if needed. The initial contract ran from May 2005 to April 2006 and provided four hours work per month, equally divided between portal maintenance and web statistics harvesting on behalf of Wiltshire County Council and partner support. Partners could ask for assistance via Wiltshire County Council Heritage Services.

Using the Support Hours- Wiltshire County Council. In the 11 months that the contract has been in place, all the available hours have been used up. The largest proportion of these has been used by Wiltshire County Council Heritage Services. While this was partially the anticipated work of harvesting web statistics from each partner organization, unanticipated work to alter all the WOW Portal references after a major redesign of the Wiltshire County Council website was also done under the Boston contract.

Using the Support Hours- Partners outside Wiltshire County Council. The next greatest proportion of hours was used to provide assistance to two of the smallest volunteer-run museums. Mere Museum, whose staff have struggled to master the Adobe Contribute software provided by the project, have received extra training as well as having immediate help over the phone. Difficulties with the renewal of Market Lavington Museum's hosting and URL required Boston Media's assistance to be resolved. These matters took seven and four-and-a-half hours, respectively, to be resolved.

Assessment of the Value of the Support Contract. It is notable that outside the management of web statistics, the majority of the support hours (11 hours 30 minutes) have been spent working with volunteer partners (Turnbull 2006). These partners sought Boston Media's help. None of the professional organizations have requested help. Despite this, some nine hours were spent on redirecting links to the Wiltshire County Council partners' content following a redesign of the County Council website. Boston Media has recently requested a website changes report from each of the partners in order to maintain portal linkage. At the

time of writing, none of the partners reported any changes even though these can be found across the partners' websites. Further discussion of the origins and resolutions of the issues dealt with by Boston Media are explored later in this paper.

The Future of the Support Contract. The option to renew the contract with Boston Media for 2006-2007 has been approved, ensuring support for the final year that Wiltshire County Council is obliged to ensure that all the websites remain available. In addition, the County Council Heritage Services manager has agreed to a separate contract with Boston Media for the ongoing management of the WOW Portal.

3 Post-Program Review

Nearly a year after program closure, it is appropriate to consider whether the steps described above were enough to keep all the partner sites live and possibly allow expansion. An assessment of the types of difficulties encountered was also conducted to ascertain what measures might be taken by future projects to alleviate or prevent these issues.

3.1 Are You Still There?

With the exception of Market Lavington Village Museum website, which was temporarily offline, all the websites have remained live. So far, only five have renewed either their URL or their hosting. In the case of the website that was offline, Market Lavington Museum, the cause was renewal difficulties. The situation at Market Lavington represents many of the difficulties confronting small volunteer-run museums. As with many museums of this type, the enthusiasm and collection knowledge of those involved is outstanding, but all progress is hampered by circumstances. Market Lavington Museum has no running water, much less a phone line; all the web work is done from one of the volunteer's homes. New to most IT, not just web matters, when confronted with a URL renewal notice, the process of online renewal seemed daunting, especially as there were issues relating to the association of the URL and the hosting that needed resolution. Boston Media was able to get the website back on its feet, but regrettably, the URL has changed. The WOW portal has been updated to reflect the change of URL and acts as a means of redirecting users.

3.2 Forced Changes to Websites

Ten of the WOW partner organizations have their web content held as part of a larger website. This makes the navigation to and management of the content less easy to control. Nine of the partners in this category have had their web content reorganized by web managers: the six county council based partners, Athelstan Museum, the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust Museum, and the Stonehenge World Heritage

Site Interactive Map.

Restructuring of Wiltshire County Council's Website.

In October 2005, the Wiltshire County Council website was totally restructured, altering the navigation and the URLs of the WOW partners within the council pages. A drop from 25,038 Heritage Services page views in October 2005 to 10,927 page views in November 2005 (Boston Media 2005) demonstrates the effect these changes had on visits to the affected content. Discussions between Boston Media and the owners of the content reveal a lack of progress in consultation with those responsible for the Wiltshire County Council website who claim that they are fulfilling national government obligations and that nothing can be done to improve the situation. The defense that these pages are unpopular has also been used; however, the monthly figures showing an average of 20,000 page views per month during 2004-2005 do not substantiate this claim. It is worth noting that none of the Wiltshire County Council partners who responded to the questionnaire issued for this paper reported any changes for the URLs of their content even though the address of every page had changed. The implication is that despite the training given and the support contract being available, partners did not necessarily realize when something was wrong with their website, particularly if it is not in the sole control of that partner. The value of the support contract with Boston was very evident in resolving this problem as Boston Media amended all the linkages from the WOW portal site.

Unaccounted for Changes. Neither the Kennet and Avon Canal Trust Museum nor the Athelstan Museum has notified Boston Media of the changes to navigation of their web content. The Kennet and Avon Canal Trust Museum website is nominally the responsibility of the volunteer curator. However, the material is managed by a different volunteer as part of a larger website about the Canal. This partner did not participate in the survey for this paper and has not, at the time of writing, informed Boston Media of any changes to the web content despite considerable content expansion as well as alteration to URLs.

Since the end of the active phase of WOW, the Athelstan Museum has changed from professional to volunteer status with the redundancy of its former curator. Further, the curator had no access to the web content that is managed by the leisure services team at North Wiltshire District Council. An interview with the departing curator conducted for this paper revealed that the URLs of the Museum's pages were altered without any notification to the curator or to Wiltshire County Council Heritage Services.

It is probable but unconfirmed that the changes to URLs for these partners have not been noted to Boston Media due to internal communication failures arising from the web content being managed beyond the sphere of the physical museum.

Stonehenge World Heritage Site: Well Managed Change.

The interactive map of the Stonehenge World Heritage Site

provided by WOW was also "reshuffled" in an overhaul of the English Heritage website. This website has kept its original URL, however, and its page viewing figures have remained constant at an average of 36,000 per month.

3.3 New Content

A third of the partners have added content to their websites since project closure. All but one of these have done the work themselves, with half of those undertaking expansion using software provided by WOW.

Custom-Made Content Management Systems. Three of the partners opted to use their funding to have custom-made content management systems built with the intention of adding more online galleries to their sites as well as being able to update news and events pages.

The two largest museums in Wiltshire, Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum and Wiltshire Heritage Museum, pooled their WOW funding to create a custom-made content management system. Both of these museums employ full-time, professional staff but also have volunteer workers.

While Salisbury Museum has used the Content Management Systems (CMS) to add items to their online shop, the galleries available have not changed (www.salisburymuseum.org.uk), which begs the question, "Why not?" The CMS is straight forward to use and the museum has a huge archive of digital images ready to use. The answer lies in the other two factors impacting all aspects of museums: people and money. Working with less than the full team of staff for nearly a year, the updating of the website galleries was left, as concentration had to be focused on the day-to-day running of the physical resource. Time to train a volunteer to undertake this work has not been available for the same reason. Salisbury and South Wiltshire have a service contract with Boston Media beyond that provided by WOW for general support to the partners. Boston Media has contacted the Museum to ask if they wish to deploy any of the time available, but to date, this has not happened (Turnbull 2006), demonstrating a reality for many museums—one change in circumstances will impact on many areas of work. Where resources are strained, tasks have to be prioritized.

The contrast at the Wiltshire Heritage Museum (WHM) could not be greater. At the time the WHM was in receipt of WOW funding, the museum board was already investigating from where the next round of funding might come. Having received Museums and Libraries Association Designation Challenge Funding, the WHM has added a vast searchable catalogue, with images of most artifacts on their website (www.wiltshireheritage.org.uk), which went live in March 2006.

Cricklade Museum, with no extra funding and totally run by volunteers has added several galleries to its website (www.cricklademuseum.org). This museum had already received funding to purchase a decent computer and scanner, and its staff own digital cameras; these have aided additions to the website.

Adobe Contribute. One of the smallest partners, the volunteer-run Mere Museum, has proved to be one of the most persistent in striving to add new content (www.meremuseum.org.uk). Opting to use the WOW funding to have a well-designed site structure created along with a large interactive map feature, the remaining funding was used to purchase Adobe Contribute software. WOW staff provided training in the use of Contribute and the support contract with Boston Media has funded a refresher session for the volunteers at the museum (Turnbull 2006). It is evident that several factors have impacted the slow progress toward expansion for this museum. The volunteers do not have access to the museum, and thus their IT, at will, as the museum is housed inside the local library and can only be used during library hours. The gaps between usage of the software tended to be lengthy, resulting in fading knowledge of the software. For some time, the museum had dial-up Internet access only and found that file transfer often failed due to the slow times involved. Recently, the museum has acquired a new computer and ADSL access, which has speeded up progress considerably.

IXOS Omtree Content Management System. The partners within Wiltshire County Council, although not provided with a CMS by WOW, do have designated officers with responsibility for adding new content to their areas of the Council website using Omtree web contribution software. Instead of this being a designated task, only two of the partners concerned put aside dedicated time to update the web content. Only hours to respond to queries have been allocated by the remainder of the partners. As a consequence, the content of the Local Studies Section has expanded weekly as more out-of-copyright historic books are added as readable web resources (www.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/textimage-intro.php). The Archaeology Service, while not updating their content regularly, changes the content to reflect current archaeological projects underway in the county (www.wiltshire.gov.uk/archaeology-service.htm).

Has Software Choice Had an Impact on Addition of New Content? It is evident that of those sites with the functionality to update their websites, not all have done so. However, the provision of a content management system increases the likelihood that such websites will be expanded, or at least updated, whether the museum is run by professionals or volunteers. With the exception of WHM, none of the museums adding new content have had any new funding to do so.

3.3 Updating News and Events Pages

Not all the partners requested the option of news or events pages as part of their web content, acknowledging that these pages would not get used. Where these functions were requested, the necessity of adding items was emphasized at the time of build; a lack of updates on such pages results in a website looking stale.

News Pages. Where partner sites have the ability to update the “News” page of their site, 86% have updated this page. The organization in question produces a regular newsletter, which has been added to the website. Where a news facility is part of a CMS, new items have been added on an ad hoc basis when there is something worth saying. The longest gap between additions of news items amongst the sites with a CMS has been six months; two months is a more typical interval between updates. It is worth noting that the Wiltshire Building Record, hosted as part of the Wiltshire County Council website, no longer has a news page as part of its content—while this could be viewed as a disappointment, the content looks fresher because it is no longer displaying “dusty” news.

Events Pages. As with news pages, only a limited number of the partners opted for an events page, recognizing that this would necessitate maintenance. Of the partners who have an events page, all are making full use of it to advertise a full range of events. A greater number of partners, rather than have a formal events page, have the ability to make announcements via their home pages; this group includes all the rest of the Wiltshire County Council partners. This opportunity has been used to best advantage by the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office where, in addition to announcing changes to opening hours, this space is being used to inform clients of the changes that will occur when the WSRO moves to its new premises in late 2007.

3.5 Human Resource

Prior to the WOW project, none of the partner organizations had a website over which they had any meaningful control. Some had found funds to establish an Internet presence in the early days of the 1990s, but most of these had found themselves with a limited website with no option to change or refresh the content or even to have a functioning email contact provided. Thus, the expectation that hours would be found from amongst existing staff time to at least respond to correspondence was by no means certain to be met.

“Brochure” Style Websites. Only 5 of the 22 partner websites are in a brochure style; that is, requiring no maintenance and having no “back end” to enable them. The remainder of the sites have some means of accessing the content to correct errors or add content. Very few partners have found a need to do this. It should be stressed that this differs from the addition of new content described above and has more to do with general housekeeping such as the correction of text errors or the amendment of incorrect copyright details. Such work has not happened because, so far, it has not been needed due to the great efforts the partners put into getting things right in the first place.

Email Response Times. All the partners were provided with an email contact for their websites. General rules

of politeness demand that where an email is received, a response must be issued promptly. Of the total enquiries, 57% are responded to within five working days, and 43% are responded to within one day. There is no marked difference in response time between the volunteer and professional organizations. This clearly indicates the shift in work practices to meet expectation with regard to electronic communications.

3.6 Financial Resource

The majority of the WOW Partners do not have funding for web resources, beyond renewals of URL and hosting, as part of their annual budgets. It was hoped that following the closure of WOW, some of the partners would seek further external funding to add new content to their websites beyond what was possible in-house. Only Wiltshire Heritage Museum has achieved this with a grant from the Designation Challenge Fund. The lack of expansion into new web facilities reflects this lack of funding. As with other matters, such as those described in 2.3.3 above, where a museum is stretched for all resources, the website necessarily drops off the urgent list. Partner museums have received funding for more urgent work; the roof at Market Lavington Museum no longer leaks thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, for example. Post questionnaire, enquiries about awareness of web funding opportunities were made. All the partners and the county level support services actively seek funding opportunities, but since the end of NOF Digitise, the trail has gone somewhat cold, particularly for the less high-profile resources that do not meet the political agendas of the moment. Additionally, volunteer organizations are easily overwhelmed by the complexity of the grant application process as testified in an interview with staff from the Wiltshire County Council Museum Service for this paper. Where WOW proved of benefit to such a broad group of partners was in its leadership from the time of application, taking the weight off of the partners' shoulders.

3.7 Volunteer Versus Professional Status

Before considering the differences in the fortunes of the partners in relation to their volunteer or professional status, some consideration of what these statuses mean in real terms is required. While statistics from the survey conducted for this paper have been used for this section, descriptions are based upon the writer's observations over five years working in Wiltshire heritage.

Workload. While the professional heritage organizations in Wiltshire have paid staff and in some cases better IT equipment, they also have greater commitments to opening hours, matters such as human resources, and never-ending budgetary pressures. The volunteer organizations, which, in the case of WOW are all of the museums, have limited opening hours. They rely on IT belonging to members of the committee in many cases, but often suffer the

same budgetary woes as their professional colleagues. Both groups are encouraged by the county museum service to work towards accredited museum registration. All those involved in WOW had achieved this. The hours of work involved in doing this indicate the willingness of the volunteers for whom this is a choice rather than core work as it is for the professionals. All the volunteer organizations are run by retired people. This does not mean they dedicate all their time to their museum, but, rather, the same people are to be found as church wardens, parish councilors, nature wardens and the like. This makes the progress since WOW ended all the more remarkable.

The Benefits of Being a Volunteer-run Organization. Of those volunteer organizations that had the facility to expand their websites, all have done so. This fact contrasts sharply with the professional partners where only 30% of those who could have expanded their content have done so. It is evident from the applications for assistance from the support contract that it is the volunteer organizations that have made most use of this. The service is open to all partners and has been clearly billed as such. It would seem that the issue comes down to the time available. While the volunteers have needed some extra help getting going on expansion work, the professionals simply don't have the time to do this. While a volunteer may happily work on a new webpage or two at home in the evening, this option isn't open to the professional who may not have access to the IT at these times of day or may well be working late as most of the professional partner organizations run evening events.

Broadcasting News. Only one of the volunteer museums, Mere, opted to have updateable news and events pages. These pages have not been greatly used despite the museum adding a considerable amount of new content to its website and running regular physical exhibitions. This contrasts sharply with the professional organizations with a news and events page where all are making use of such pages. The volunteers prefer to use the more traditional paper means of news broadcast rather than electronic means. It is unfortunate that the web statistics don't reveal the location of users when accessing the websites. Are these local people or from a wider range? Do village communications still rely on traditional means, making web-presented news non-news?

4 Flaws in the Structure of the Funding

At its start, NOF-Digitise was seen as a wonderful opportunity to enable organizations to digitize and present aspects of their work and collections that otherwise would have a restricted audience. The time-limited nature of the grant and the constraints on how the money could be spent have lessons for the future of digital heritage funding in the UK.

4.1 Finite Financial Support

The funding from NOF was always going to be finite but there was an expectation that this marked the beginning of an era where Lottery funding would enable ongoing digital heritage projects to flourish once the expectations of the initial projects had been achieved. The Sense of the South West Consortium, the umbrella group to which WOW belonged, began researching continuation funding opportunities in 2002. At the time when the last of the projects in the Consortium closed (2005), no new dedicated funding for local digital heritage initiatives had been discovered by the team working on WOW Heritage or by others in the South West Consortium. Another unwritten expectation traveled the other direction, coming from the funding bodies: namely, that the work of the projects would be taken up as part and parcel of everyday functioning of the organizations concerned. It is evident from the survey undertaken for this paper that this has happened to some extent. Email enquiries are responded to and new content has been built by some partners. The questions remaining are those about longer-term futures. None of the WOW partners budget for web expansion in terms of hours or finance; the work continues to be done when time and money allow.

As described above, the drive to create digital resources on a massive scale instigated by NOF Digitise has had no obvious successors. A lack of web-specific funding opportunities does not mean that other financial pots, such as the Designation Challenge Funding achieved by the Wiltshire Heritage Museum, cannot be investigated. It is much harder to secure funds from a more general pot, however, especially when the museum or collection in question is small and locally focused. These organizations benefit from having a web presence precisely because they are small. Mere, Market Lavington, and Cricklade Museums have received emails from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand since having websites; the nineteenth and early twentieth century rural emigrations to the British Empire left trails that lead back to these small Wiltshire villages and towns that can make significant contributions to historical understanding now that the Internet brings them together. The funding bodies need to see this as worth their attention, rather than, or as well as, grandiose schemes for interactive displays for national collections. National institutions have the benefit of the ear of corporate sponsorships to fund such projects. Companies such as British Petroleum are happy to support the British Museum; there is no glory for them in supporting Mere Museum. Surely, then, the direction for Lottery funding should be towards those without an alternative but who, none the less, are making the past real by bringing local histories to the wider world.

4.2 Constraints on Ways of Spending the Funding

The funding agreement for WOW Heritage sat uneasily within the general structure of NOF Digitise funding common to other projects. All the other projects in the South West of England created a single website; WOW created 23 including the portal. In order to be even handed and with the agreement of the WOW Partners, each partner, large or

small, received an equal share of the funding for web development and digitization.

Limits on Providing Hardware Resource. NOF-Digitise specified that money could not be allocated to buying hardware that might be used other than for that partner's digitization and website build (NOF-Digitise, 2002). Thus, we were unable to provide the Redcoats in the Wardrobe Museum with a TFT screen for their computer as this was not directly needed to digitize the militia records being prepared for the website, though we could have provided a scanner. We were able to buy a scanner, two digital cameras, and a laptop for the project as a whole. These are managed post-project by Wiltshire County Council Heritage Services, and partners wishing to use them have to arrange to collect and return them. For some partners this can involve a 100 mile round trip; in practice it is little done. At the end of any grant-funded project, it is disappointing to have to return unspent funds. We had to do this for WOW as we were unable to use the unspent funding to establish digitization tools sets at other locations in the county for partner use.

Limits on Funding Further Website Expansion. Similarly, once the formal administration of the project by NOF had ended, we were unable to provide any ongoing funding for website expansion ideas. NOF rightly insisted that all web material established with its funding must be W3C compliant and meet established description criteria such as Dublin Core. The rationale for not allowing continuation work was the fear that such work would not play by the established rules on compliance. Where a project partner has succeeded in achieving all the demands made, surely there is a case for allowing that organization to benefit from funds that otherwise will go unspent.

Not only did all the WOW Project websites meet NOF's technical and accessibility standards but one of the volunteer museums, Pewsey Heritage Centre (www.pewsey-heritage-centre.org.uk) won The Jodi Mattes Webaccessibility Award in 2005. This typifies the high standards of those working in heritage; they have no interest in producing a less than accessible website. That would defeat the point of having a website. Indeed, the provision of materials via the Internet has been seen by several of the WOW partners, whose physical collections are hard for the disabled to visit, as a vital part of their mission to provide access for all.

4.3 A Limited Vision of Website Survival

The NOF Digitise requirement for all websites built under its auspices was that these must remain live until December 2007 (NOF-Digitise 2002). There is some irony in the disappearance of NOF-Digitise in December 2004.

Partner Websites – in for the Long Haul. All the WOW Partners signed a commitment to keep their websites live until December 2007; all expressed the intention that these

should continue beyond that date. As we have seen with Market Lavington Museum, renewal problems are but one of the pitfalls for the inexperienced webmaster. Changes in personnel, changes in emphasis from the steering committee, and limited time and resources are among the obstacles along the path of website survival. It is an oft quoted (and possibly apocryphal) statistic that most websites die within three months of going live. The evidence from WOW is that this is far from the truth, but only because considerable efforts have been made to stop this from happening. Boston Media will continue to support the WOW partners until April 2007. Then what? A whole raft of the partners will be faced with renewing their URLs and hosting just at the time that there's no one there to help them any more. There will be no support should a problem with existing content arise. Those partners, such as Mere Museum, who have battled on with adding content may stop, their confidence hit by the loss of quick and friendly support.

The Wiltshire County Council Heritage Service is keen but ill-equipped from the point of technological understanding to fill this void. The risk is that any site that runs into trouble will fail. NOF-Digitise has fulfilled their mandate; the money got dished out, collections got digitized, websites got built, and the commitment to keep it all going until 2007 was signed by all concerned. If all this effort comes unraveled in early 2008, or even before that, is there any organization outside the WOW circle that will step in to help?

Where Have NOF-Digitise Gone? One might expect the organization to step in with would be NOF-Digitise. In 2004, NOF was superseded by The Big Lottery Fund (BLF). In the early part of 2005 and henceforth, Wiltshire County Council has collated web statistics, which are submitted quarterly to the BLF as part of the BLF's function, is to monitor the websites created under NOF-Digitize.

No one from BLF has noticed that there were no web stats from the one WOW Partner temporarily offline. In light of the response received from the BLF when researching this paper, this is not surprising. A Program Manager for BLF informed me categorically that no information had been received from the WOW project since formal closure. This is despite my having received acknowledgements for the penultimate and final quarter reports from BLF, and the head of Wiltshire Heritage continuing to gather and submit to BLF quarterly reports and web statistics.

The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that once the money is doled out and seen to have been spent the funding organization loses interest. The will to survive of the seedlings created by such funding must come totally from below as there is no one above to take notice.

5 Conclusions

5.1 The Local Imperative

The enthusiasm from the partners throughout the life of WOW, which continued in communications with web audiences via email, is evident. That those sites with a CMS

or other means of updating or expanding have made use of these in the majority of cases indicate that this is a model for the future.

Connections made during WOW's active phase have survived to create a network of heritage workers that may bear fruit in shared funding and resources in the future. Local communication may still require reinforcement with paper publications, but for communities joining from across the world to discover shared histories, electronic communication must be harnessed.

5.2 The Value of Ongoing Support

Provision of ongoing support has been proven valid. The harvesting of web statistics and redirecting links from the WOW portal alone would have justified this. However, the full value of this ongoing arrangement has been indicated by the work done with Mere and Market Lavington Museums.

5.3 The Nature of Funding

Although projects such as NOF-Digitize have, to some extent, kick-started digital heritage, there remains a funding void. The evidence from Wiltshire is that the will is there across both the professional and volunteer heritage organizations, but small grants to enable local digital heritage web initiatives to maintain or undertake expansion of the websites rather than risk them fading away are needed. These do not have the same appeal as high profile projects but they are vital to enabling the engagement of people in their local past or their ancestors' pasts in order to build the web that leads to greater comprehension of how all our pasts are co-joined.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Kate Turnbull at Boston Media for her provision of data and for tolerating my endless queries; to Tom Craig, Wiltshire Heritage Services Manager for his support in the preparation of this paper and to all the WOW Heritage partners who responded so fully to the questionnaire and follow up interviews. Additionally, thanks go to Jonnie Harris for his patience while being a practice audience prior to CAA 2006.

References Cited

Boston Media, Wiltshire County Council Web statistics 2004-2005, 2005, on file at Wiltshire County Council Heritage Services.

Boston Media, Wiltshire County Council Web statistics 2005-2006, 2006, on file at Wiltshire County Council Heritage Services.

NOF-Digitise, Terms of Grant. 2002.

NOF-Digitise, Project Implementation Guidance. 2002.

Turnbull, K., Analysis of WOW Support Contract Hours for 2005/6, 2006, on file at Wiltshire County Council.