

'England expects': Nelson as a symbol of local and national identity within the museum

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Abstract

When Admiral Lord Nelson died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 his lifetime achievements and his agonizing death elevated him to the status of a national hero. While his reputation, significance and influence have waxed and waned his importance to British national identity has rarely been questioned. When, in 2002 a new Nelson Museum was founded in Great Yarmouth, a unique opportunity was offered to examine Nelson's contemporary influence on the public imagination and his importance in the articulation of identity, both personal and communal. The research which is reported here was undertaken in 2004 and during 2005, the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar and Nelson's death. It focused on the key players at the museum, the founders, the Curator, volunteers and visitors, using primary source documents and qualitative interviews. The findings suggest that Nelson was, without commemorative reminders in 2004, an important symbol of identity that has for most become disassociated from his military triumphs. The bicentenary reminded people of his naval exploits and his role in the defence of Britain thus re-enforcing his importance in history. This research also suggests that for some Nelson has become symbolic of English rather than British identity.

Key Words: Nelson, hero, museum, identity, nationalism, Englishness

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the role of individuals as representatives and emblems of some elements of national identity was debated in ten BBC television programmes, *Great Britons*. In November and December 2001 the BBC invited people to vote for their greatest ever Briton. Subsequently in 2002 the BBC broadcast ten programmes on the top ten nominations: Elizabeth I, William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, Isaac Newton, Horatio Nelson, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Charles Darwin, Winston Churchill, John Lennon and Diana, Princess of Wales. This paper considers the way one of these characters, Nelson, is used to articulate identity in the twenty-first century in a new museum in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, dedicated to his memory. It has been postulated that Nelson's 'career as a British hero.... shows few real signs of fading' (Deuchar 1995: 144). The *Great Britons* poll certainly appeared to confirm this, as did the nation-wide Trafalgar bicentenary events in 2005. However, the interpretation of Nelson as a hero and symbol of what 'we most value and admire' (Harrison 2002: 10) by the state, the public, educational establishments, museums and the media has changed over time.

While the television series indicated that Nelson still stood for something important to a large number of British people almost two hundred years after his death, the way individuals and communities of interest interpret and understand Nelson is less clear. In 2002 a new Norfolk Nelson Museum opened in Great Yarmouth and this provides an opportunity to investigate the multiple layers of meaning Nelson has for individuals and groups and, in the process, to discuss the ways in which national historical characters and their actions are interpreted and incorporated into personal and local identities as well as national ones. This museum also acts as an illustration of the way in which members of an elite group¹ seeks to confirm its attachment to a place, (Norfolk, rather than Nelson), and uses this symbol of national importance within a museum setting to demonstrate pride in a local area.

This paper investigates the reasons for the founding of the Norfolk Nelson Museum, examines the way in which it presents Nelson to the public and why. It also considers how visitors interpret the Nelson story for themselves. In so doing it attempts to understand how the museum is an arena in which Nelson and his legend is used and interpreted to foster different types of identities. It considers whether, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Nelson story has a role in making explicit some idea of English as opposed to British identity. It draws on interviews² which were conducted in August and September 2004 with two Trustees (T), volunteers (V), the Museum's Curator (C) and visitors (v). Further interviews were conducted with visitors and volunteers in September 2005. In addition I had discussions with the Trustees during the development of the Museum. Respondents are identified by letter and number in the text, with m and f distinguishing male and female volunteers and visitors. (The Trustees were men).

The Norfolk Nelson Museum, UK museum trends and nationalism

The creation of a new museum is not a surprise as such. That it is based on a long dead English male hero celebrating military prowess and national pride, is more unusual in today's climate. Weil argues that whilst history museums were once founded primarily as celebrations of 'great man' this approach is now less dominant. Moreover, those new museums which do celebrate heroes are as likely to look to the more recent past as to the 'golden oldies' as, for example, does the museum on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and other leaders of the African National Congress were held prisoner (Weil 1997: 263-264). Museums have proliferated in Britain in the last forty years but they tend to be associated with places, (interpreting the geography, natural history and general history of a town or area), with a discipline or object category, (fine and decorative art, textiles, stamps), with a lost or changing occupation or industry, (agriculture, mining or fishing), or with social life, (domestic life, in particular changing methods of living over time). In the twenty-first century the focus on one man and his view of the world is unusual, though there are other examples, such as the new Churchill Museum in London that opened in 2005.

Nor do most museums in England usually make explicit overtly nationalistic themes. While Scotland, Wales and Ireland have museums that claim to be about distinctive national identities, the English have contented themselves with institutions such as the Imperial War Museum (Britain fights for freedom), the National Maritime Museum (Britain as a maritime nation) and more recently the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (Britain comes to terms with its empire and colonies). English heroes, such as Nelson, are celebrated more usually as Great Britons, not great Englishmen.

It is not the purpose of this paper to re-examine definitions of the nation, nationalism and national identity. However, the discussion touches on some key ideas which require some explication. The first of these concerns the view of nationalism as expounded by amongst others Gellner and Anderson. Their perspective has been challenged, for example, by Hastings for its tendency to see nationalism as a 'modern' construction – that is, as the mere expression of eighteenth-century modernization (Hastings 1997: 2). Gellner postulated that nationalism was the imposition of high culture on society (Gellner 1983, 1994:65). He argued that it is essentially the substitution of a shared culture, in place of a multiplicity of local folk cultures. Anderson has argued that nations come into being when they are 'imagined' and that certain tools such as the museum help make explicit that imagining (Anderson 1983). Smith points out that according to this model 'history fulfils various social and political purposes' and that it 'serves as a quarry of cultural materials for didactic and illustrative goals, as a series of moral exemplar virtutis, as an arena for the rhetoric of nationalist politicians...' (Smith 1999: 52). However, like Hastings Smith challenges the idea of the nation as an entirely modern construct, dependent on specific conditions such as the rise of print and literacy. He champions instead the idea of the ethnic origins of nations, which emphasizes the importance of collective memories, myths and symbols of a nation that are used by modern nation builders, but which exist independently from them (Smith 2004).

The case-study offered below suggests that the Nelson story in the service of nationalism is both modern (articulated through the museum) and dependent on visitors' collective

memories that allow them to interpret the Nelson story to suit their own national needs. At the same time the case of the Norfolk Nelson Museum also illustrates the relationship between local and national culture at a time when globalization has led to a re-examination of the role of local culture and its relationship to nationalism and identity. Hall postulates that the rise of 'capitalist globalism... has not necessarily resulted in the destruction of these specific structures and particularistic attachments and identifications which go with the more localized communities which a homogenizing modernity was supposed to replace' (Hall 1999: 36) and this case study suggests that national symbols are often filtered through local loyalties.

Identity

Identity is sometimes perceived to be essential and immutable (Woodward 1997: 11). However, some theorists have claimed that this perception of identity is of a piece with the western modernity that matured in the eighteenth century; contemporary social change, it is argued, has put essentialist notions of identity as a stable, bounded and enduring entity into question so that there is now a crisis of identity. The very idea of the individual as a unified subject is seen to be anchored in a modernity which is now passing. The proponents of this non-essentialist perspective on human subjects conceive of identity as fluid and as changing in response to political, social, religious, economic and personal factors.

National heroes are particularly interesting and significant in the light of the above because, of course, heroes are often fixed in the collective imagination as authentic beings who embody enduring national characteristics. However, my own research suggests that the way heroes are interpreted as national symbols changes over time as concepts of national identity change. It also suggests that individuals and groups mould their understanding of the life and significance of a national icon according to their own personal needs that may include elevating the significance of the area in which they live. In those respects my work might seem to endorse broadly 'post-modern' ideas about the mutability of identity in the twenty-first century. However, I would argue that it points rather to the inadequacy of one-sidedly non-essentialist perspectives on identity. I discovered that Nelson's identity in the contemporary world is best understood as a matter of both stability and change. My findings, which suggest that individuals may adopt an essentialist view of identity when they feel under threat from those they perceive as outsiders, suggest that icons such as Nelson exhibit both essentialist and non-essentialist elements of national identity. In what follows I explore the way in which the museum is a place in which these changing concepts of identity are both implicit and explicit within a public space. My case-study can be seen within the wider context of state heroes and their role in supporting local and regional identities such as the museums commemorating the 1789 rebellion against Portuguese rule in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil (Dickenson 1996). It also relates to the considerable literature about the role of local museums and identity ranging from Crooke's studies on museums in Northern Ireland, where they are part of the politics of contested identities (Crooke 2005), to specialist regional museums such as those in the United States that support the identity of Hispanic minority communities (Marzio 1991).

The Nelson legend in British history.

In order to understand the role Nelson plays in the nation and Norfolk today we need to explore briefly how his story came to be elevated to national importance in the past, who told it and why. Nelson and his death at Trafalgar have been firmly placed within the context of the conscious creation of 'an ostentatious cult of heroism and state service' by the British elite (Colley 2003: 178).³ Sacrifice, duty, honour and death celebrated in paintings, monuments, commemorative souvenirs and ceremonies such as Nelson's funeral, all formed part of a development of national identity that did not focus on the sacrifice of the ordinary soldiers or seamen but on their commanders (Colley 2003: 180). Nelson's death came at an appropriately opportunistic time for manufacturers who both responded to, and helped, create a demand for a wide range of commemorative items such as prints and ceramics, textiles and woodcuts. Such items also celebrated other naval heroes and British sea power generally and these, along with monuments, ceremonial swords presented to successful naval officers, 'contributed vividly to the public's

sense of belonging to a maritime nation whose destiny was linked to mastery of the seas' (Lincoln 2002: 1). Indeed recent research has underlined the importance of the promotion of maritime characteristics in forming and sustaining British identity particularly during the Napoleonic period and after (for example, Lunn and Day 2004).

Yet it was Nelson's image that was disseminated above all others into thousands of homes in the form of cheap prints and souvenirs. Many representations of the hero drew on religious iconography and reinforced Nelson's status as the saviour of his people who feared a French invasion (White 2005: 15). Makeshift displays were set up in towns and cities allowing everyone a view of the hero as long as they could afford the entrance fee (Deuchar 1995: 153). His reputation as a humane man as well as a deeply flawed character increased his appeal. Nelson was both godlike and subject to human frailties. People could admire him and empathise with him. However, it was his death, while defeating the French (and Spanish) that immortalized him. Unlike Wellington, Nelson did not live to be an unpopular politician (Deuchar 1995: 158). His role as national hero was commemorated not only in ephemera but also in place names. In a survey of the number of streets listed in www.streetmap.co.uk named after each of the ten most admired Britons in the 2001 poll, Nelson was the second most popular name at 17 per cent after Newton at 20 per cent and just ahead of Churchill at 15 per cent (Cooper 2002: 167). There are many more streets, squares, parks and public buildings bearing the name of one of his battles. Monuments such as that in Trafalgar Square also perpetuate his name. Commemorative rituals such as Trafalgar day dinners and the flying of the 'England Expects' signal on 21 October, the day of the battle of Trafalgar, all ensure that his place in national and local memory is kept alive although these are not so much real memories, but more a duty to remember a common past (Misztal 2003: 135).

Nelson's popularity was based on a type of hero that goes back at least as far as Homer and the Iliad with the story of Achilles (Hughes-Hallett 2004). Such a hero is an exceptional individual, flawed but charismatic, standing alone, a rebel yet responsible in some way for the safety or honour of others and embodies virtues worthy of emulation by the rest. Promoted by popular lectures and books such as those delivered and written by Thomas Carlyle,⁴ the public accepted hero worship 'with open mouths and flashing eyes, welcoming a new gospel of enthusiasm and a new passion of transcendental virtue' (Gosse 1911: xii).

Nelson was popular not just for his personal heroic qualities. Like all those invested with greatness by a nation he was symbolic of some national characteristics and achievements. He came to represent Britain's strength abroad, a powerful image of British national identity. Hitler, in anticipation of a successful invasion of Britain, planned to take Nelson's Column to Berlin because Nelson and his monument stood as a symbol of British power (Fraser 2005: 131). Nelson was 'the totem and talisman of a state fighting for survival' (Lambert 2004: 316) and his monument would have been a great prize in the Third Reich.

However, even as the British in 1940 faced the most serious threat of invasion since the Napoleonic period, Nelson's role in the British popular imagination was changing. Nelson's image and his exploits were less frequently promoted than the contemporary navy, seen as a bastion against German invasion (Balfour 1979, McLaine 1979). Churchill, who was personally very attached to the Nelson story, drew on it in several key speeches, such as his broadcast to the nation on 11 September 1940, when German troops appeared to be about to cross the Channel. He compared that week in September with those times when Drake and Nelson both defended Britain against invasion (Gilbert 1983: 778), but this was one of many references to historic events with which he illustrated his oratory. Nelson's exhortation on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar, 'England expects that every man will do his duty' (Hibbert 1994: 366), found echoes in stories told of courage and determination in battle but these often drew parallels with more recent World War One heroes rather than Nelson.⁵ The Second World War was the people's war (Calder 1971). Everyone was a hero. Everyone had done their duty, as Churchill had exhorted them to do.⁶ The Second World War prompted a more thorough and far-reaching examination of British national identity than at any time between the formation of Great Britain in 1707 and the start of devolution in 1997⁷ (Weight 2003: 23). National character was depicted in film⁷ and radio broadcasts, in the cartoons of Punch and in newspapers and posters as the courage and self-deprecating heroism of 'the little man', the ordinary woman, everyone.

This shift in the conceptualization of national character, along with post war events such

as the retreat from Empire, the rise of other super powers and the entry of Britain into the European Economic Community have inevitably led to a change in the way Nelson and his achievements are perceived. While it is recognized that interest in Nelson has fluctuated over the years⁹ it has been argued that he retained his role as a popular figure throughout the twentieth century, his 'modern image ... becoming multi-faceted indeed: tactician extraordinary, symbol of British courage, monument to the dead, Navy patron saint, morally flawed genius, matinee idol' (Deuchar 1995: 163). White has argued that 'since the war the Nelson legend has continued to grow in strength' (White 2005: 29). Certainly, even before the bicentenary celebrations no one could deny that Nelson remained a well-known figure. In popular literature Nelson retained his position as England's saviour: '[w]hen England was in great danger, Lord Nelson saved his country' (Pooley 1998: 1). His heroic status was upheld in the Great Britons programme. He was portrayed as 'Britain's first and greatest, who became the prototype for all our heroes to come' (Moore 2002: 85).

Yet before the bicentenary of his death in 2005, which prompted large-scale commemorations and celebrations, the role of Nelson in the public and popular imagination was less clear than the authors above suggest. Britain has not faced invasion in the last sixty years. Heroes who protected the nation and developed the Empire, as Nelson did, are not such obvious exemplars. In the last thirty years Nelson as a hero and a symbol of British or English national identity fell out of fashion in schools and popular histories. In 1965 a children's book *A Pageant of History*, followed a tradition of telling national history using the stories of great leaders, interspersed with a few chapters on topics such as the 'rise of democracy'. Nelson had an illustrated chapter to himself entitled, 'Horatio Nelson, the terror of the seas'. He was depicted falling fatally wounded on the deck of the *Victory* and with reference to the usual myths: 'How Nelson lost his arm and his eye'. In case any child missed the point of the narrative the chapter finished thus:

Nelson was laid to rest in St Paul's Cathedral, where a monument was also erected; Nelson's column was erected in Trafalgar Square, so named after the battle; the *Victory* lies as a constant reminder in Portsmouth Dockyard; Trafalgar Day is observed every year; and Nelson holds a place in the esteem of most people. These remain a fitting tribute to a national hero. (Purton 1965: 205)

Two years later in 1967 a school textbook *Nelson's Navy* sums up the new approach to history in its introductory chapter:

This is not a book about Nelson. There are plenty of books about him and he no doubt deserves them. But Nelson could not have achieved his great fame without the ships and the men that made up the Navy of his day. This book is about them. (Richardson 1967: iv)

Nelson's death is mentioned briefly. It is illustrated with a detail from a painting by Arthur William Devis (1763-1822) and supported with this caption: 'The death of Nelson: a detail from a rather emotional reconstruction of the scene' (Richardson 1967: 99). The battle of Trafalgar is illustrated not with a written account of Nelson's death but with stories of 'the desperate bravery that was a feature of the men on both sides' (Richardson 1967: 98). The approach is indicative of the great changes that the teaching of history was undergoing during this time, in particular the interest in 'history from below' (Bentley 2006: 5, Evans 2000). The story of the charismatic individual became unfashionable as economic and social concerns took centre stage.

Nelson was further dethroned from his place in the centre of national consciousness in 1988 by the introduction of a National Curriculum that did not focus on Nelson or the Napoleonic wars. In 2004 and 2005 when I conducted my interviews at the Norfolk Nelson Museum his absence from the school syllabus was mentioned on several occasions by visitors and by volunteers. Their awareness might have owed something to regular criticisms of the History National Curriculum in the national press where Nelson is said to have been the most featured 'loser' (Brocklehurst and Phillips 2004: 391).

In the latter half of the twentieth century some of those commemorative practices that helped to keep Nelson in collective memory faded⁹ in Norfolk. For example in Great Yarmouth, Nelson's Monument closed to the public in 1995 and Trafalgar Day was no longer honoured with

the flying of Nelson's 'England expects...' signal. The closure did not prompt any protests to the Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, hitherto responsible for the Monument.¹⁰ Only when the Monument's physical decay became more apparent towards the beginning of the twenty-first century did one or two local people begin to ask why the Monument was not repaired.¹¹ Focus group work undertaken in 1998 to explore themes for the new Castle Museum redisplay indicated that there was little public support for Nelson material being displayed in the planned £12 million refurbishment.¹² Nor did focus group research commissioned to inform the redisplay of museums along the Quayside in Great Yarmouth in 1996 and 1997 uncover any interest in Nelson amongst the target groups (local people, seaside tourists and heritage minded visitors), except amongst a handful of local historians who were aware of Nelson's visit to the town (Fisher 1996, Watson 1997).

However, interest in Nelson remains strong amongst some individuals. In 1990 'The 1805 Club' was founded for the purpose of 'conserving and maintaining monuments, memorials and artefacts associated with Admiral Lord Nelson and the Royal Navy in the Georgian Era' (Anon [undated], frontispiece). The Club exists alongside the older Nelson Society founded in 1981 whose aims 'are to advance public education in the appreciation of the life and character of Admiral Lord Nelson' (Mason 2005). The Great Britons programme also suggests Nelson remains an important symbol for large numbers of people. 1995–2005 was named 'The Nelson Decade' (Ormond 1995: 7) to commemorate the bicentenary of Nelson's great decade of victories with nation-wide celebrations planned for 2005 to mark Trafalgar. SeaBritain 2005, 'an initiative of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, in partnership with VisitBritain, the Official Nelson Commemorations Committee, Sea Vision UK and other organizations, with the support of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport' (Anon 2004: 1), marked the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and the death of Admiral Lord Nelson as well as celebrating Britain's relationship with the sea. Academic interest in Nelson has resulted in the publication of several important new biographies in the last few years (for example, Knight 2005, Lambert 2004, Sugden 2004). Finally, the opening of the Great Yarmouth Norfolk Nelson Museum in 2002 and the award of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant in 2003 to repair the town's Nelson's Monument for the bicentennial of Trafalgar in 2005 suggest a revival in the role of Nelson as some kind of important symbol.

Museums based on one person's life are usually located in buildings once inhabited by the individuals whose lives are celebrated, and it is the routine of their lives as well as their actions in life that are remembered. However, the Norfolk Nelson Museum is housed in a Grade 2 listed merchant's house that has no association whatsoever with Nelson (**Fig. 1**). Nelson did visit Great Yarmouth on three occasions, most notably when he was given the freedom of the Borough in 1800. Nelson's Monument in Great Yarmouth, completed in 1819, predates the memorial in Trafalgar Square but this was far more a tribute to his Norfolk birthplace (**Fig. 2**) and associations with North Walsham and Norwich (where he went to school) than to Yarmouth itself (Yarrington 1988). Nelson is arguably more associated with his birthplace Burnham Thorpe, his old school, Paston School North Walsham, and Norwich School than Great Yarmouth (Pocock 2005: 109).



Fig. 1. The Norfolk Nelson Museum on the Quayside in Great Yarmouth



Fig. 2. Places most closely associated with Nelson in Norfolk

However, these places have not promoted their connection to Nelson in an overtly commercial manner. A guidebook remarked on this when describing Burnham Thorpe: -

There is no Nelson Café selling Trafalgar buns to the curious There are no shops selling little china Horatios or prints of the Death of Nelson – no picture postcards.... As Nelson was, after Shakespeare, the greatest Englishman, this is either very strange - or else a comment on the East Anglian character (Seymour 1982: 213).

In 2004 little had changed. There were no commercial references to the Admiral in the village except in the Lord Nelson public house. There were some leaflets and three text panels on 'Nelson, Norfolk and the Navy', erected by the 1805 club, in the church. The visitors' book indicated that people came because of the Nelson connection.¹³ In North Walsham the school allowed visitors, subject to appointment, to view the room where the young Nelson had his lessons. Norwich had a statue and a few portraits in public places such as Blackfriars

Hall and in Norwich Castle Museum there was a sword Nelson presented to the city. In 2004 only Great Yarmouth with its Monument and Museum provided sites of significant commemoration to Nelson. Nor, surprisingly, after the two hundredth anniversary celebrations ended, were there any additional permanent memorials or commemorative sites, except perhaps in all the county signs which now read 'Welcome to Norfolk, Nelson's County'.

If we accept that 'museums..... are significant sites at which to examine some of the claims of identity transformation' (Macdonald 2003: 6), and that museums 'are the edifices through which communities of all sizes and types represent themselves, both to themselves and to others' (Jones 2000: 4), then we may wish to explore the significance of Nelson at the new museum to the Norfolk community. At the same time, if we agree with Proslar that when museums deal with nationally important objects and characters 'the task of the museum is to preserve this national heritage within the course of time, handing it down to the succeeding generation' (Proslar 1996: 35), we can ask which communities does the Norfolk Nelson Museum, in celebrating a national hero, represent? Is it the national (British or English), the regional (Norfolk), the local (Great Yarmouth) or communities of interest and, if the latter, which ones? Does it tell us anything about identity and museums?

The origins of the Norfolk Nelson Museum

Let us first consider the founders of the museum, Ben Burgess and the Norfolk Nelson Trustees. The Norfolk Nelson Museum contains the collection of a Norfolk businessman, Ben Burgess. It consists of about '550 pictures, prints, letters, books and documents, medals and artefacts directly relating to the life and times of Admiral Lord Nelson' (Fiske and Woodcock 1997). There is little primary material. 'The real strength of the collection..... is the wealth of commemorative material in all its art forms..... these..... illustrate the significance and lasting appeal of the Nelson legend' (ibid). Burgess tried, unsuccessfully, to give the collection to the local County Museums Service.¹⁴ In 1992 he donated his collection to a charitable Trust for the purpose 'of establishing and maintaining the Collection as a permanent entity for educational purposes within the County of Norfolk' (Fiske and Woodcock 1997). They set about trying to establish a museum.

In a 1997 Heritage Lottery Fund Bid to create a museum in the Royal Naval Hospital in

Yarmouth, the Trustees argued that the collection would grow and would continue to illustrate 'the life and achievements of Nelson...Nelson's Norfolk background.....the range and variety of commemorative material produced during Nelson's lifetime and up to the present day' (Fiske and Woodcock 1997). The application gave two key reasons in support of a new Nelson museum: 'Nelson occupies an unassailable place in British history, and in the British imagination, as the nation's greatest hero. But the county of Norfolk has even stronger links' (Fiske and Woodcock 1997). Yarmouth was chosen because it could offer a venue, the Royal Naval Hospital that, though not known to Nelson, nevertheless dated from 1801 – 1809. Nelson had also visited Yarmouth.

The bid did not attempt to demonstrate any particular local support for the museum apart from that offered by a few key individuals. However, in the local press the Trustees had argued that the collection of memorabilia was the sort of material that would have been owned by the general public in the past. One of them said 'for this is a true people's collection, reflecting the way in which the Nelson legend is fostered. He was, after all, very much the people's hero' (Snelling 1996). It was enough that there was a collection relating to Nelson and Nelson was linked to Norfolk and, somewhat tenuously, to Yarmouth itself.

This lottery bid failed. However, the Trustees were not deterred. They decided to raise the money themselves and find another location in Yarmouth for their museum. In this they were successful. Through the efforts of the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust¹⁵ they secured a lease on a refurbished merchants' house on the Quayside, 26 South Quay, and raised enough money to pay for the Museum's fit out by a designer and to employ a part time professional curator. Without the support of Regeneration funding, accessed through the Great Yarmouth Heritage Partnership's vision for a 'critical mass' of museums on the Quayside (Great Yarmouth Borough Council 1996), it is doubtful if the Trustees' aspirations would have been achieved in the town, though the Trustees might well have tried elsewhere. The siting of the Nelson Museum in Great Yarmouth was opportune.

Local, regional and national identities

One might assume from the subject of the museum that the prime motivation for establishing it was to promote the national Nelson story. However, it is also evident that Norfolk and Nelson's links with the county are of key importance too, as is Great Yarmouth as the location for the museum. To what extent is a national narrative important here and what role does it play? How do regional and local identities interpret this?

The Norfolk Nelson Museum exemplifies both the modernist view of nationalism and the survival of local attachments and identifications. As we have seen, Nelson was, and is, indisputably a national figure, deliberately elevated to represent the nation above all others at a time of crisis. In this he exemplifies the role of national heroes in a modern definition of nationalism. However, an examination of the motives of the Trustees suggests that local and personal factors prompted the founding of the museum. Never more than seven in number they all knew Ben Burgess personally and were all successful local businessmen. In interviews two Trustees (T1, T2) spoke of how important it was to 'do it for Ben.' The Norfolk Nelson Museum Curator spoke of this important link with the original owner of the collection. Several of them were Old Pastonians, i.e. had attended Nelson's old school in North Walsham or lived in or near the town.

Personal factors also played a role in inspiring attachment to Nelson, though it is doubtful that this attachment would, by itself, have led to the foundation of a museum. One Trustee spoke about his admiration for Nelson 'breaking the rules' and not taking any notice of orders, and how he was inspired by this in his own work (T1). Another explained that, while a phlegmatic character, reading about Nelson was the 'only time it brings a lump to your throat' (T2). The technical adviser to the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust who was instrumental in securing the building for the museum also talked about the resonance Nelson's character had for him.¹⁶

It is also clear that locality is important, not so much Great Yarmouth¹⁷ but Norfolk. Interviews with the Trustees and the Curator and reports in special interest journals, illustrate this. When asked what is important about Nelson one Trustee responded 'it's the Norfolk connection. Not many people realize he came from Norfolk. It was necessary that we identified

Nelson as being from Norfolk' (T1). He then went on to state that Nelson liked Norfolk people sailing with him, that he spoke with a Norfolk accent and 'here we are in Norfolk with not a great deal to show for it'. He quoted Nelson's words: 'I am a Norfolk man and glory in being so'.¹⁸ The chairman of the Trustees also demonstrated the same Norfolk concern. When asked 'What sparked off your interest in Nelson?' he replied, 'my prime interest is Norfolk history...' (Slope 2004: 363). In a discussion with the author he stressed the importance of the Norfolk connection and spoke of how he was proud of his county. The Norfolk connection was also stressed in the local press. In an interview in 1996 the chairman stated:

As far as British history in concerned...only Winston Churchill comes anywhere near to rivalling Nelson in terms of fame, achievement and importance. And this man was born in Norfolk, educated in Norfolk, a man who spent much of his time between commissions in this county, and a man who remained forever proud of his Norfolk heritage. Yet, there is no escaping the fact that Norfolk has not treated Nelson very kindly.... (Snelling 1996)

When these Trustees were asked 'What do you admire most in Nelson?' they focused on his character and his sense of duty. One cited the fact that he gave his life for his country (Slope 2004: 363), but the idea of Nelson as a national hero was placed within the context of the glory of association reflected in Norfolk. One stressed how Nelson's character had been formed by his Norfolk origins and stated that this was one of the reasons he admired Nelson (T1). As a hero Nelson's role in defeating the French and saving the country from invasion was understood but not articulated. The hero's local associations had transformed him into an asset for a county; his national standing was implicit and not analyzed. For the Trustees Nelson provided them with a way of expressing their loyalty to their school,¹⁹ region (i.e. county) and, at the same time, by association as Norfolk men, their sense of pride in their own identity is reinforced.

Nelson was, for the Trustees, a hero²⁰ whose heroism was unquestioned, and who epitomized everything a man could aspire to be (T1). They identified with him as a leader of undoubted courage and vision, who would challenge the status quo and 'do different'.²¹ That he was nationally admired gave him an importance that he would not otherwise have had. They wanted the museum to focus mainly on his local connections and to depict 'accurately' his naval victories (T2).

Telling the story: the Norfolk Nelson Museum displays

During the setting up of the museum the Curator attempted to convince the Trustees to agree to display a more complex Nelson story. Perhaps surprisingly, given its origins, the museum presents some less flattering aspects of the man's character. This was because the Curator persuaded the Trustees to accept some of her own views.²² However, the museum visit begins with a panel which sets out the first room's aims: 'This is the naval room where you will find out about his famous battles and his tragic heroic death'. Nelson's Norfolk origins are presented in the first museum case (Fig. 3). The objects displayed there do not justify their prominence, but it is



Fig. 3. The first room visitors enter contains displays on Nelson's Norfolk connection, his naval battles and his death

so important to present Nelson as a Norfolk man that they are included (C). The room then focuses on his great military victories and culminates with prints and a painting, *The Death of Nelson*, by Samuel Drummond.

It is in the next, 'Merton', room where the Curator's influence is most apparent (Fig. 4). Here, one text panel encourages visitors to consider Nelson's vanity and his relationship with Lady Hamilton. Different quotations invite visitors to consider his conduct and his self promotion. In another room the below decks experience focuses on the life of the sailors and recreates the sound and noise of a naval battle (Fig. 5). An interpretation which provides a wider view of Nelson than that originally desired by the Trustees was a risk taken by the Curator, but it paid off. The Trustees approved the final overall look of the museum (C) and the indications are that the public like the museum.²³



Fig. 4. The Merton Room which looks at Nelson's character and private life

Public readings of the Norfolk Nelson Museum

The question arises, given the differing aspirations of the Trustees and the Curator, what messages do the public take from the museum about the role of Nelson in national history and local and national identity? To what extent does Nelson play a key role in defining identity and what type of identity does he help to define? Over a period of three days in August 2004 sixteen interviews were conducted with visitors and six with volunteer staff. During September 2005 a further forty-seven qualitative interviews with visitors and three with volunteers were held in the same museum.



Fig 5. 'The Below Decks Experience'

There were no ethnic minority visitors or volunteers present during the research period. All except three visitors were British citizens. Two additional questions were included in 2005; one asked respondents to state whether or not they were aware of the bicentenary of Trafalgar and

Nelson's death and another queried whether or not they had seen any publicity or information about the commemorations of these events and where. The first analysis will focus on the responses of visitors before the bicentenary celebrations, the second on the findings of 2005 when public awareness of Nelson was heightened.

Views of Nelson before the bicentenary of the battle of Trafalgar and his death:

Although the 2004 interviews were conducted with a small sample (16 visitors and six volunteers) the responses were so consistent that they allow general conclusions to be drawn. The questions sought to establish what visitors knew of Nelson before they came, what they had learned and why they thought Nelson was important. They were also asked how important a symbol Nelson was for Britain, England, Norfolk and Great Yarmouth? Originally the question only asked about Britain. Four of the first five people interviewed drew a distinction between Britain and England and so the question was modified to ask subsequent interviewees about both.

All but three of those interviewed were of retirement age and this represented the demographic profile of the visitors and volunteers. Unsurprisingly all of the volunteers interviewed in 2004 were retired and the Curator is of the opinion that the vast majority of the visitors are retired too, although more family groups now visit following the opening of a special activity garden area for children. Two of those interviewed came with children (their grandchildren).

One might assume that the visitors came because they were interested in Nelson and wanted to find out more about him. However, the interview results suggest that this was not the case with the majority. Only one visitor claimed to have come specifically to the museum because he wanted to find out more about Nelson and then he was as much interested in maritime subjects as in Nelson himself (**vm9**). The rest were visiting museums generally that day and were following the heritage trail that embraces six museums within the Heritage Quayside area. The Curator and one of the most active volunteers who worked twice a week in the museum on the front desk both confirmed that the majority of the visitors did not have any special interest in Nelson (**Vm1**). Interviews with visitors thus provide an interesting perspective on the way in which a section of the public (heritage minded), and not Nelson specialists as such, regard Nelson.

Three of the six volunteers interviewed in 2004 stated that they had come to work in the museum because of a general interest in history and a desire to do something useful during retirement, and not because of any specific interest in Nelson. One volunteer was an ex-merchant seaman who wished to retain links with the sea. The remaining two volunteers were specifically interested in Nelson. In 2005 the three volunteers interviewed also expressed a general interest in history, not a specific enthusiasm for Nelson.

Most of the visitors who were interviewed found it difficult to articulate why Nelson was perceived to be a hero, though most agreed he was one (**vf1**, **vm10**, **vf12**, **vf16**). One man said 'winners are heroes' (**vm2**). Another said 'he had to be,' without explaining why (**vm13**). Two did not think he was a hero and felt the Navy and the men who serve under him were the true heroes. One of these argued that he was no more a hero than 'all those on D-Day' (**vm6**). Those who did think he was a hero did not mention his victories. They focused on his personal qualities, such as the fact that he inspired people, 'went through a lot, lost an eye and an arm' (**vf5**). One person mentioned the fact that he died in battle 'like a lot of leaders,' and asked why Wellington was not as well known as Nelson as a hero? (**vf15**). Only one man identified the French as the enemy and he related that to his feelings that 'they give us their horrible apples and still they hate us' (**vm6**). No-one else seemed interested in talking about his military prowess or the enemy he fought despite the fact they had all been through the first display room that concentrated on his battles and placed his death in the context of the struggle against Napoleon. Several visitors said they had picked up negative information about Nelson that they had not known before, particularly about his private life (**vm3**, **vf4**, **vf7**, **vf8**, **vf9**), and the way he manipulated his own image during his lifetime (**vf16**).

The four volunteers who had no special interest in Nelson were ambivalent in their appreciation of him as a hero, possibly because they had been exposed to the messages of the museum that depicted his vanity and his cruel treatment of his wife. One of them said that since

he had been a volunteer he had read about him and now thought 'he was a right sod, who knew all the right buttons to press' (**Vm2**). Another said 'people worshipped him for some reason'. However, she went on to add that she thought he might be a hero because 'he led us to victory when we were threatened by the tyrant Napoleon' (Vf3). One volunteer said he was 'sceptical of using the word hero' (**Vm5**).

Of the two volunteers who had an interest in Nelson one stated that from the time he read Tom Pocock's book (Pocock 1994) 'Nelson had a big influence on my life' (**Vm6**). He spoke of being impressed with Nelson's powers of leadership and the fact that he was 'born at the right time, when nations needed heroes'. For him Nelson was a hero because of the way he treated his men and encouraged his captains to use their initiative. The other Nelson enthusiast had a very clear sense of why Nelson was, to him, a hero. He argued that Nelson had 'saved this country from Napoleon, that he saved this country 200 years ago' (**Vm4**).

What is apparent from these interviews is that, for most visitors and volunteers the traditional version of Nelson as a hero, great warrior of noble character, (though flawed), who sacrificed his life to save his country, appears to be less understood than admirers of Nelson might like to admit. The message the museum tries to convey in the first room, that of the great admiral and his battles and heroic death, appears to be ignored. The displays, in which his vanity and abandonment of his wife are considered, do however interest people and they qualify their views of Nelson with references to his private life (**vm2, vf4, vm9**).

Visitor reaction to Nelson's character as well as his heroic status are, not surprisingly, in complete contrast to the views of the Trustees and members of the Nelson Society who lent the Museum objects for a separate display of Nelson memorabilia and associated materials in the temporary exhibition gallery on the first floor. These individuals find in his life story and character something very important for them on a personal level. One Trustee talked about how Nelson inspired him because the Admiral did not follow orders and 'did his own thing' which was how he liked to see himself (**T1**). Of those who lent material to be displayed, five out of seven cited admiration for the personality of Nelson rather than his military prowess as the reason for their interest in him.²⁴

Does this reaction by visitors and volunteers to Nelson as a military hero mean that he is unimportant and no longer a symbol of local, regional and national identity and pride? It is here that visitors' and volunteers' views appear, at first, to be contrary to their opinions of Nelson the hero.

When it came to associating Nelson with Great Yarmouth and Norfolk nine visitors from outside the county thought Nelson was an important symbol for Norfolk, none associated him with Great Yarmouth, and only one of the three local visitor interviewees who lived in Great Yarmouth thought Nelson was an important symbol for the town. Only one volunteer thought Nelson was an important symbol for Great Yarmouth though all the rest thought he was an important symbol for Norfolk. Even after completing their visit to the museum eight visitors were confused about the link Great Yarmouth had to Nelson and four had still not realized he was a Norfolk man. Two specifically linked him to Portsmouth (the historic naval town on the south coast of England where Nelson's flagship *Victory* is preserved).

However, all visitors and volunteers, with only two exceptions, thought he was an important national symbol. Four visitors mentioned that he was a symbol of pride, one man noting that he was 'like the last night of the Proms' (**vm6**). Two mentioned his importance to national identity (**vm13, vf16**). Six talked about him being part of 'our history' (**vf3, vf4, vf5, vf12, vm14, vf15**). All the volunteers thought he was important as part of history. Several visitors and volunteers talked about how children were no longer taught about him in school and how the museum was important because it kept this story alive.

All visitors and volunteers without exception thought it was not a good idea to lose the past and articulated this in a variety of ways. For some the past, as they perceived it, was under threat. This was on three occasions linked, by my informants, to immigration. 'It is important to remember the past because people not born here don't recognize our history and we don't want to lose it' (**vf5**). One volunteer, whose views were not typical, talked about being 'swamped by immigrants' and the importance of keeping the memory of Nelson alive (**Vm5**). In one case a volunteer talked about how Great Yarmouth itself had changed because of immigration.²⁵ 'Lots of strangers have moved in and they have no idea of our history and traditions' (**Vf3**). She went

on to say that it was important that the museum educated the newcomers, and in particular taught them about the town's past including the fact that Nelson visited it three times.

What is interesting here is the way in which commitment to an essentialist perspective on the past seems to arise as a response to the experience and flux of social change. Those expressing the idea that Nelson was important because of a perceived threat from others who might not share the same history and traditions were, I suggest, expressing an essentialist view of identity which appeals to 'the fixed truth of a shared past' (Woodward 1997: 13).

When asked if Nelson was a symbol of British or English identity there was a clear division of opinion, with most saying English. One man who said he had a Scottish background claimed Nelson was a British hero and pointed out that Scots served on his ships (**vm13**). One woman was adamant that there 'is no difference between English and British' (**vf12**). However, these were the exceptions. One man commented 'he's an English hero not British' and went on to say that 'people born in England think of themselves as English. People from abroad call themselves British' (**vm6**). One visitor said 'English' and then added 'I don't know if I should say that these days, so many people are not English...' (**vf5**). A couple stated emphatically that they were English and linked this affirmation to national pride (**vm6, vf7**). One of the volunteers said Nelson was important for 'English nationalism' (**vf3**). One volunteer, considering the question, came to the conclusion that he represented something important for the English and then added 'in the last ten or fifteen years there has been a national awakening of the English... we've been pushed into it by the Scots and the Welsh' (**Vm6**).

It is interesting to note that the museum does not anywhere make a distinction between Nelson as a British or English hero. His identity as a Norfolk man is clearly set out in the first display case and, by implication, his origins as an Englishman. However, throughout the museum the words England and Britain are used interchangeably on the text panels, England or the adjective English occurs thirteen times, Britain or British ten times. In one text panel there is a reference to the war between England and France using the British fleet as a defence. This general conflation of Britain and England which is common everywhere in England is well documented (for example, Kumar 2003: 234, Colls 2002: 377), and irritates other nationalities within the United Kingdom (Ward 2004: 141 – 142). From a study of old history textbooks it is evident that the English believed other groups benefited from English virtues and that the story of Britain and its Empire was naturally conducted through the lens of the English national story (Yeandle 2004). There is an assumption that the English are comfortable with being British in part because of this confusion of identity. Nevertheless the majority of the visitors interviewed and all the volunteers who participated in this survey expressed very clearly the idea that Nelson was English and as such a symbol of English identity and pride. The importance of this was acknowledged even though he appeared to have lost some elements of his heroic status and most visitors did not demonstrate knowledge of, or interest in, his battles or his role in defeating Napoleon and protecting the nation. They displayed a lack of interest in his heroic military status despite the fact that the first and largest room of the museum is devoted to this.

Views of Nelson in 2005 during the bicentenary year of the battle of Trafalgar and his death:

There were some important differences between the majority of the visitors in 2005 and those in the previous year. Whereas only one person out of sixteen interviewed in 2004 claimed to have come to the museum because of a particular interest in Nelson, in 2005 twenty four out of forty seven visitors came specifically because of Nelson, the rest were visiting several museums on the Quayside. All visitors said they knew 2005 was the bicentenary of the Battle of Trafalgar and only four said they had not seen any media publicity about this (with one not answering this question). When asked what they knew of Nelson before they came to the museum fifteen said they felt they had good knowledge of his story, thirty-one said they knew a little about him and four did not indicate their prior knowledge. Unfortunately it was not possible to ascertain how many of these had a long-standing interest in Nelson and how many had been enthused by the bicentenary. However, some answers suggested that the bicentenary had not only kindled new interest in Nelson but had, in some cases, revived an existing but relatively dormant one. While the majority of the visitors were retired, twelve were relatively young adults

(thirties or younger as estimated by the interviewer) and eight more were older adults but not yet retired. As all the interviews took place during the term period for state schools it is no surprise only one person interviewed came with a child (a boy aged eight). The demographic profile was wider than that of 2004.

Given that most visitors interviewed during 2005 had been exposed in some way to media coverage of the bicentenary and, presumably, had come into contact with some explanation of Nelson's role in history, to what extent were their views affected by this? Certainly the visitors of 2005 had a clearer grasp of Nelson's role in defeating the French (and in a few cases, the Spanish) than the visitors in 2004. All, that is, except one visitor who appeared not to be aware of it at all. Thirty-one spontaneously mentioned the threat of invasion, most linking this to France. Five mentioned the Spanish threat. Typical comments included the following 'They'd have come for us – Napoleon walked all over Europe' (**vm41**); 'defended us against France; we would be speaking French by now' (**vm18**); 'destroyed France's economic attacks on Britain' (**vm58**); although the complexities of the battles and the different campaigns outlined in the first museum room still eluded most of them. References to these were, with notable exceptions, (**vm51**, **vf52**), vague and confused although one man did explain that he now understood that the Battle of Trafalgar had not been fought, as he had hitherto thought, in the English Channel (**vm22**). Indeed when asked what they had learned in the museum thirty-nine mentioned either details of his private life or referred to the quantities of memorabilia and portraits produced at the time (there was a temporary exhibition on portraits). Only six claimed to have learnt something about the battles and this was couched in general language such as 'I didn't realize there were so many' (**vf60**). Along with eleven spontaneous comments that Nelson was not taught any more in school and this was lamented, there were fourteen comments about a perceived official lack of interest in Nelson and history. This was sometimes linked to a perception concerning official sensitivities with respect current British allies and European partners. 'Yes, we should remember him, I'm a little bit upset because someone decided to play it down so as not to upset the French. We defeated the French' (**vm63**). One visitor referred to the decision not to name the fleets in the re-enactment of the Battle of Trafalgar in Portsmouth in June, but instead to call them red and blue 'we are always apologizing – ridiculous' (**vf23**). Another observed that we were worried about celebrating the Battle of Trafalgar because 'we might upset the French. We don't have pride in ourselves' (**vf37**). Thirteen visitors made comparisons between Nelson and Churchill or likened Napoleon to Hitler: 'In every generation one figure towers. In our generation it was Churchill' (**vm38**). 'Napoleon wanted to rule the world – he wanted to conquer everyone like Hitler' (**vf21**). Given that 2005 was the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and this had been commemorated extensively with ceremonies and events, it is not surprising that some respondents made these comparisons.

Thus in 2005 visitors had a surer grasp of why they thought Nelson to be important than they had in 2004. Just over half of those interviewed claimed to have visited because of an interest in Nelson. Interestingly, visitor numbers to the museum increased by sixty seven per cent in 2005 compared with 2004, indicating a general resurgence of interest in the Nelson story. Many visitors in 2005 understood the nature of the threat to Britain two hundred years before although they often did not grasp the fact that the invasion threat had passed by the time of Trafalgar. This awareness of Nelson's role in protecting Britain from France (and Spain) is in direct contrast to visitors' confusion in 2004 and can be attributed to the range of events, ceremonies, and the considerable media interest in the bicentenary.

Nevertheless there were considerable similarities with the 2004 findings. Although forty five out of forty seven visitors in 2005 agreed Nelson was a hero twenty eight of these found faults in him. Typical of the comments was this one from a woman who said:

He was a hero with flaws, but I still have a positive feeling for what he did for us. He rescued us from a French dominated life and had a colourful private life. He was very fair to his men. He was in the thick of the action. Seasick as well. A man of faults, not perfect. (**vf55**)

Another woman was more confused. 'No, he was vain but not a hero because there are so many men who come into that category. He was very brave and patriotic' (**vf33**). A male visitor stated

'Nobody's a hero to his own. He was brave. When he went into Trafalgar he could have backed off – he was what we'd call a bully' (vm41). A museum volunteer summed it up thus: 'He could be a very silly man – but he could be very brave. He ranks up there – at that time Britain needed a hero' (Vm40). One enthusiastic woman explained how difficult it was to define Nelson:

He was our greatest hero. I've been to St Paul's [where he was buried], have seen films with Laurence Olivier, been to Burnham Thorpe [his birth place], the *Victory*. Wellington and Nelson saved us from the French...these legendary figures of history – you don't stop to analyze them unless you are working for an exam... (vf49)

Many of the visitors cited his vanity and his affair with Lady Hamilton as reasons for seeing him as a less than perfect hero. However, for some such frailties enhanced his reputation. 'If he had been perfect, that would have been awful' (vf55).

The findings relating to Nelson as a hero in both 2004 and 2005 have interesting parallels elsewhere. Other studies of the public's interpretation of heroes in historic sites, such as George Wythe in Colonial Williamsburg in America, suggest that visitors accommodate negative information about their heroes if they have symbolic status in a national story. Wythe was a slave owner who may possibly have fathered an illegitimate child with a black slave mistress, Lydia Broadnax. However he was also tutor of Thomas Jefferson and signatory of the Declaration of Independence. American visitors rationalize the negative sides of Wythe's character as a slave owner, even when these are made explicit in a Christmas tour of the Wythe house where slave enactors complain about their treatment during the Christmas period. Visitors excuse his behaviour because he eventually freed his slaves (Handler and Gable 1997). Similarly, visitors to the Norfolk Nelson Museum accommodate Nelson's character flaws and his adultery because he died in defence of the nation.

When we consider the role of Nelson as an English or British hero some of the interviewees of 2005 were as certain as those of 2004 that Nelson was an English not a British hero. Indeed many of those who decided he was English did so unhesitatingly and with great enthusiasm. However, the responses were more evenly divided than those of the previous year with twenty four declaring he was an English symbol, and thirteen stating that he was British. Five stated that British and English were one and the same thing. The rest either ignored the question or focused on his local importance to Norfolk. All those who declared he was English identified themselves as English, except one Welshman. Of those who saw him as British one was South African (vf19), and one identified himself as having Irish ancestors (vm42). Those who saw him as British often rationalized their answers. One man (vm51) said that his fleet contained more 'other groups' than English and therefore he was British. Some of the responses are unclear. One or two said 'England and Britain are the same thing' (vf53) or said 'although we say Britain it is England' (vf65).

Once again the sense that Englishness was somehow not allowed was clearly articulated by some visitors. One Welshman said that he was an English hero but that 'the English back off. You can't admit to being English' (vm36). One man said 'you've got to say' he is a symbol for Britain, but in fact he is 'very important for England' (vm63). A woman argued 'we should be more proud of lots of things like that. We should be proud of the fact that we are English' (vf27). Three visitors linked this lack of confidence in asserting English identity with immigration. 'We are being watered down by too many other races. It's not part of their history.... Sikhs, Pakistanis...' (vm45).

Many visitors expressed a view that some important aspects history, of which the Nelson story was typical, were being lost to the present. This expression of anxiety about the past was displayed regardless of whether they saw Nelson as a British or English symbol:

We should remember all things that were done in dare I say, the British Empire as it was, - it should be taught. It's not taught now. The history of this country is important and we should celebrate it. (vf53).

I don't think our history should be forgotten. I know we are in multicultural Britain but we have to remember our history. (vm57)

I feel instinctively we should celebrate historic figures – we don't do it enough....I didn't learn it at school. It is disrespectful not to remember it. (vf62)

We should be proud of what we've done. (vm63)

All visitors thought Nelson should be remembered, regardless of what they thought of him personally and his achievements. Most articulated a belief that history was important and linked this to national identity: 'If you don't remember you have no history. If you don't have any history you have no country' (vf46).

Although only five visitors interviewed were from Norfolk itself eighteen identified Nelson as an important symbol for Norfolk but no-one thought he was important for Great Yarmouth, not even the three volunteers who all lived in the town and who were interviewed in 2005.

Conclusion

This study of the origins of the Norfolk Nelson Museum and the reactions of a sample of visitors to questions about Nelson and his role in history have illustrated way in which Nelson, an apparently fixed and stable historical symbol of nation and region, is regarded two hundred years after his death. The exploration of the motives for the founders of the museum demonstrates how individuals' personal affinities to the original collector, their affection and admiration for a hero, and their loyalty to their county, all influenced their decision to develop this museum. Visitor reactions to the museum have revealed a complex reading of role of Nelson today.

An examination of public responses to the museum appears to demonstrate that, not surprisingly, visitors make their own interpretations of displays and objects, and focus as much on the best and worst of Nelson's character as on his battles and Trafalgar. However, the bicentenary of the battle of Trafalgar, coinciding as it did with the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, raised public awareness of previous invasion threats and elevated his military role. Nelson's association with Great Yarmouth was far less important to visitors than either his Norfolk origins or his symbolism as a national icon, despite the fact that the museum is located in the town. However, the importance of Nelson to the county of Norfolk indicates how groups (in this case the Norfolk Nelson Trustees) use museums to make explicit pride in locality. This case study was intended to study the role of a national hero in a local museum context, but the findings of the research took it into the realm of British/English identity in a way that had not been anticipated.

It has been suggested that within the context of devolution and European integration 'English and British identity has reached a crisis point' (Edmunds 2004: 82). While some observers put their faith in a new form of English identity that will be less exclusionary and embrace ethnic minorities and women in the national narrative, the form of this identity is being urgently debated publicly more through the concept of Britishness than Englishness. For example, at the launch of the British government's new Commission on Integration and Cohesion, by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, focused on what it meant to be British not English and the extent to which multiculturalism fosters unacceptable separateness (Woodward 2006:7).

However, research in the Norfolk Nelson Museum suggests that a debate is taking place at a local level about what it means to be English and museums are one of the public places where symbols of English national identity are being re-examined and re-interpreted. As Woodward reminds us, identity is understood through difference (Woodward 1997). Thus, for example, it follows that construction of a national identity means defining who does not belong; historically speaking, community identities have, of course, been linked to a suspicion of strangers. A small minority of my subjects suggested that English identity is under threat from people who are not born in the United Kingdom. This dichotomy between a 'white past' and a 'multicultural present' is a common one and indicates that some members of white British society see Caribbean, Asian and African pasts independent of British/English histories (Littler and Naidoo 2004). Thus English identity rooted in a white past could be seen as being constructed in opposition to ethnic minority identity in a multicultural present. However, this is

too simple an interpretation. Within the museum devolution was also cited as a reason for an increased English self awareness along with a grievance that the English are not allowed to take pride in history if it means offending another country (here the French). The perceived threat is as much from within, from nameless and faceless members of the British establishment, as it is from relative newcomers.

I discovered a number of my English visitors privileged the Englishness of Nelson and appeared to regard the museum as a place where they could articulate this identity, at a time when they felt Englishness was not acknowledged elsewhere. This suggests that national identities within Great Britain have both a modern dimension and an ethno-historical one. The latter places emphasis on the importance of 'national traditions and experiences that often draw on long histories of ethnic memories, myths, symbols and values' (Smith 1999: 55) and which function independently of official meanings. Memory is understood to be historically conditioned, changing according to the needs of the present (Samuel 1999). Thus individuals construct their identities in response to the situations that they encounter whilst notions of Englishness are fluid and can barely be contained by people's views about national descent. The museum, that symbol of modernity, performs the dual role of disseminating the story of the British national hero and of facilitating ethnic community's evolving collective memories of one who is English.

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Notes

¹ Elite in the sense that they represented wealth and have considerable knowledge of the county and history.

² Interviews with the curator, trustees and volunteers were recorded. Interviews with visitors were conducted in the museum where recording was difficult so answers were written down by the author.

³ It is worth noting, however, that this interpretation has been challenged. Hastings has argued that Colley has underplayed the importance of English nationalism at this time and cites Nelson's use of the phrase 'England expects that every man will do his duty' to illustrate the point he makes (Hastings 1997: 62).

⁴ Carlyle delivered his lectures on heroes and hero worship in May 1840 and subsequently published a book on the subject. The book's popularity extended into the first quarter of the twentieth century (Carlyle 1911).

⁵ For example in the story of John Verrall, a messroom boy of 17 on a steamer, who 'stood at his post never flinching from duty...' who 'went on doing his duty till the ship was abandoned.' (Gee 1942: 67) the comparison was not with Nelson but with a hero of the First World War, Jack Cornwell.

⁶ Churchill echoed Nelson's last words 'Thank God I have done my duty' on several occasions but did not make overt reference to the Admiral. For example, in his 'We shall fight on in the beaches' speech 4 June 1940, he said 'if all do their duty....we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our island home...' (Gilbert 1983: 467) and in his exhortation on 11 September 1940 that 'every man and every woman will therefore prepare himself to do his duty' (Gilbert 1983: 778).

⁷ Despite the fact that *Lady Hamilton* was said to be Churchill's favourite film (Jenkins 2002: 664), and he apparently became involved in its making contributing to some of the speeches (White 2005: 27), most feature and documentary films focused on the people's achievements and celebrated the People's War. (Reeves 1999, Richards 1997)

⁸ For example, Deuchar chronicles a 'remarkable Nelson revival in the last quarter of the nineteenth century,' (Deuchar 1995: 159). This was linked to the idea that history was the history of heroes and great men.

⁹ 'Collective memory is not limited to the past that is shared together but also includes a representation of the past embodied in various cultural practices, especially commemorative symbolism' (Miszta 2003:13).

¹⁰ Great Yarmouth Museums files. I was Community Museums Officer in 1995 and responsible for closing the Monument for health and safety reasons.

¹¹ One local resident wrote regularly to the *Great Yarmouth Mercury* protesting at the decay of the Monument but this was not typical.

¹² This was despite the fact that curatorial staff were keen to include the material because it was perceived to be of national importance. Focus-group work carried out by the author and other museum staff in 1998 exists in note form only in Great Yarmouth Museum files.

¹³ Examples of the comments are, 'Great British understatement of a hero,' 'God bless England for which he fought.' August 2004.

¹⁴ The collection was refused because it consisted mostly of memorabilia and Ben wanted the collection to be permanently displayed. (Conversation between the author and Catherine Wilson, then Head of Norfolk Museums Service in 1995).

¹⁵ Memorandum from the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust to Charles Naisbett Blogg, 11 March 1999, Memorandum from the Borough Planning and Development Officer to head of Economic Development and Property, 2 February 1999, Technical Adviser's Report to the Trust on 26 South Quay, 2 December 1998. GYBC Archives. The Trust secured the funding for the building work and managed the conversion of the building.

¹⁶ Interview with Technical Adviser to the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, 19 August 2004.

¹⁷ The fact that the Trustees considered other locations besides Great Yarmouth demonstrates this point. However, Great Yarmouth provided a building and an opportunity to site a museum within a developing Heritage Quarter, supported by the local tourism, and thus the museum was sited there.

¹⁸ Spoken at Great Yarmouth on 6 November on the balcony of the *Wrestlers Inn* to an admiring crowd (Hibbert 1994: 225).

¹⁹ T1 went to the *Paston School North Walsham*, which Nelson attended. T1 talked about the way in which boys at the school were surrounded by references to Nelson in the names of buildings and the way in which Nelson's story was taught to all pupils.

²⁰ Interview with Curator, 2 August 2004.

²¹ A common Norfolk saying used to suggest that Norfolk people do not do things the way everyone else does.

²² She explained that she had persuaded them to accept some of her modifications to their display ideas by pointing out that visitor numbers were key to the success of the museum and her suggestions, (a room illustrating Nelson's private life and his relationship with Emma, Lady Hamilton, and a 'below decks experience'), would bring in families and attract more female visitors.

²³ Interviews with visitors on 2, 3 and 9 August, observation of visitors on those days, visitors' book 2002 – 2004, all suggest that the overwhelming majority of visitors like the various elements of the museum with those with children liking the 'below decks' experience and women liking the account of his affair with Emma Hamilton. Men, unsurprisingly, referred more often to the battles than the women. Some male and female visitors, when asked what they had learned, commented that they had learnt how vain he was and this surprised and interested them.

²⁴ Each individual remained anonymous but the Curator had secured interviews with each collector and had summarised why each one was interested in Nelson under a heading 'What Nelson means to me.' Of the seven lenders, two specifically referred to Nelson's military prowess. The rest referred to his personal qualities such as his bravery and leadership.

²⁵ Immigration to the town is usually from within the United Kingdom with large numbers of people coming to the town for casual employment during the holiday season. In the past a Greek Cypriot community settled in the town. More recently Portuguese workers have begun to live there.

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