

Tales of The Sea: Connecting people with dementia to the UK heritage through maritime archaeology (innovative practice)

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Dementia

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Abstract

This paper reports on a pilot study evaluating the impact of a series of interactive and educational maritime archaeological sessions for people with dementia. A typical archaeological approach was adopted including excavations, recovery and reconstruction of artefacts. Findings from this study demonstrate the importance of providing information, delivering alternative activities, enabling educational opportunities and offering support to and for people living with dementia. Our findings further illustrate that people with dementia can be included in maritime archaeology and that including people with dementia in heritage-based initiatives is possible.

Keywords

maritime archaeology, heritage, dementia, inclusion, activities

Background

The role of the UK's heritage sector has become increasingly recognised for its potential to promote health and wellbeing in people with mental health problems, those with cancer, people who experience learning difficulties and people who live with dementia (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013). Since the introduction of the Health and Social Act 2012 (Department of Health, 2012a), which identified an overall consideration towards health and wellbeing, the heritage sector has seen a change in its service. This has resulted in the role of the heritage

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sector shifting from the showcasing and housing of cultural artefacts, to becoming venues actively promoting involvement within the community, for example, by offering health improvement programmes.

Despite current policy directives (Alzheimer's Society, 2013) for the heritage sector to become more inclusive as part of the drive for Dementia Friendly Communities (Department of Health, 2012b), initiatives including people with dementia remain limited but are becoming increasingly popular. Whilst the heritage sector as a whole is gaining recognition for the benefits people with dementia can experience by accessing heritage, less is known about the role and potential impact of maritime archaeology within this sector.

Maritime archaeology

Maritime archaeology is an important part of the UK's national heritage and has been the driving force in the discovery and recovery of some of the world's most valuable and historic artefacts. However, people with dementia may be excluded from accessing this heritage due to the nature of the archaeology and that much of this work is exhibited in environments that people with dementia have limited access to. Providing access to this sector offers the potential for people with dementia to remain connected to this aspect of UK heritage.

This paper reports on a pilot project: 'Tales of the Sea'. A typical archaeological approach was adopted including excavations, recovery and the reconstruction of artefacts. This work demonstrates how people with dementia were engaged with an archaeological initiative and illustrates alternative methods for engagement and stimulation.

What we did

The Tales of the Sea project evaluated the impact of a series of interactive and educational maritime archaeological sessions, designed and delivered to 87 community-dwelling people with dementia. Five South of England day centres were selected to host the sessions. Three two-hour sessions were delivered in each venue over three consecutive weeks. The sessions were facilitated by two maritime archaeologists (who led the sessions), a researcher who provided dementia support and who was responsible for data collection, two maritime archaeology students (who assisted the research team) and a media student (who documented the sessions via video recording). During the sessions, data collection included ethnographic field notes, end of session discussions and evaluation forms (completed by people with dementia and professional care staff). Data collected from these methods were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A coding framework was developed by one researcher and verified by another to enhance the authenticity of the analysis. Nvivo 10 was used for data management purposes.

The sessions

The sessions were designed to provide an archaeological experience and demonstrated three key stages of the archaeological processes: research into the area of interest; the excavation of the researched artefacts; processing of the findings including reconstruction and documenting the excavated artefacts.

Session one set the scene. Music, paraphernalia (flags) and model ships were displayed around the rooms to provide atmosphere. Activities included a brief introduction to

maritime archaeology through a presentation made up of pictures and music; interacting with artefacts such as pipes, bottles, ceramic bowls; sensory activities such as smelling of tar (used to coat the ships floor); sharing stories and a diving equipment demonstration.

Session two included a mock excavation. Fish tanks, filled with sand, coins, pottery, tile and other artefacts made the basis for the excavation. Each participant was provided with gloves, trowels and a disposable camera. The participants received a demonstration on how to excavate the objects in the tank and what to do when an object was found (photograph in situ, excavate, bag and add an identification number).

Session three included the reconstruction of tiles, which were to be photographed; the identification and photograph of coins, this included discussion of where the coins came from and what this might tell us; the reconstruction and photograph documentation of pottery and what these may indicate. These sessions were designed to be as close to the archaeological process as possible, from which conclusions could be drawn to stimulate conversation about maritime archaeology, heritage and history.

Benefits for people with dementia

Four main benefits were identified (access to information; access to activities; access to education and learning; access to support).

The first benefit, access to information, enabled the participants to ask questions about their locality and to engage in interesting discussions about archaeology. Inclusion in activities where information can be offered is seen as important for the inclusivity of people with dementia (Innes, 2009).

Having access to activities was the second benefit of these sessions. This highlights the importance of having activities for people with dementia to engage in (Phinney et al., 2007). These sessions enabled the participants to have fun, be mentally, socially and in some cases physically stimulated and challenged, to have enjoyment, opportunities to reminisce and to think of activities to do at home with grandchildren.

This programme also offered the opportunity for people with dementia to learn as the sessions promoted, encouraged and enabled uninterrupted periods of concentration, where the participants were able to take their time and focus on one activity. Learning and education has been highlighted as a significant area for people with dementia as it can lead to a sense of empowerment and wellbeing (Alzheimer Scotland, 2009).

Access to support, the fourth benefit, was enhanced through 1–1 encouragement between the research team members and participants. An informal atmosphere and knowledgeable facilitators were also a benefit for the participants as some reported a sense of inclusivity. Sessions such as these have been noted as a successful alternative method of engaging people with dementia and supporting them to live independently (Moniz-Cook et al., 2008). These sessions also noted that whilst many participants enjoyed the maritime archaeological sessions and found these interesting, it was what the sessions allowed the participants to do which was important; social interaction; mental and physical stimulation; the ability to reminisce and the opportunity to engage in a 'different' activity they could learn from.

Concluding thoughts

The Tales of the Sea project reported briefly here has identified how engagement in a distinct topic such as maritime archaeology can promote feelings of empowerment and inclusivity.

This project may provide ideas for others to deliver and evaluate alternative activities for people with dementia and demonstrates one way people with dementia can be stimulated, engaged and included in a heritage activity, maritime archaeology. This project provides initial evidence that including people with dementia in heritage-based activities is possible and that this is one way that the Prime Ministers challenge (Department of Health, 2015) of creating Dementia Friendly Communities may be enacted.

Authors' note

Anthea Innes is now affiliated with the University of Salford and the University of Stirling.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biographies

Clare Cutler is the Research Skills Development Officer at Bournemouth University having spent three years as the Project Manager of the Bournemouth University Dementia Institute. Clare's research interests include public engagement; obtaining the voices of marginalized

groups; veterans and dementia; leisure and recreation in dementia; heritage; history and archaeology (for which she holds a BA Hons and an MSC). Clare's doctoral research investigates the benefits of a technology group on the quality of life for community dwelling people with dementia.

Paola Palma is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Science and Technology at Bournemouth University. Paola's research interests include monitoring the degradation and the preservation of the Underwater Cultural Heritage; Outreach and making underwater archaeology accessible to all, which involves working closely with local museums to fuel public participation and ownership of the local heritage.

Anthea Innes is the Coles-Medlock Professor of Dementia and Director of the Salford Institute for Dementia at the University of Salford. She is a Senior Researcher at the University of Stirling. She is a social scientist who has been researching dementia for nearly 20 years. Her work focuses on the views and experiences of those living with dementia. She has been actively working to raise awareness of dementia through creative means and to address the stigma that is often associated with dementia.