Unlocking the secrets behind the treasures of the Wallace Collection

Exhibition Report

By Emma Bryant and Edwina Mileham
Foreword

This unique project between a brilliant school and an inventive museum learning department has been inspirational. It began with regular interaction between the children and the Wallace Collection staff, led by the Learning team, and included curators, conservators, exhibitions and press and marketing officers, to grow over a year into a creative, exciting and hugely successful exhibition. What pleases me most is that it confirms a cherished notion of mine that great works of art can engage and thrill young people as much as anyone. These children were especially responsive and rewarding in their appreciation of the objects and in their desire to communicate their passion to audiences of all ages.

Dame Rosalind Savill, DBE, CBE, FSA, FBA
Director

“I learnt about art, the history behind the objects, how to research, and that there is always a story behind any object. I have learnt how to speak confidently to the public and people. I have also experienced how hard the job is for becoming a curator. Although it was hard curating an exhibition by children I think our hard work has paid off!!!” Billy

“This was a creative journey of discovery, a reminder that when children are given a voice and listened to, they are able to rise to challenges, be imaginative and succeed.” Lola Gardner-Sharp, Learning Mentor, St Vincent’s RC School

A view of the middle gallery showing ‘secret compartments’
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This report is accompanied by a DVD featuring the Young Curators and the objects they chose.
Overview

‘Shhh… It’s a Secret!’ was a family-friendly exhibition which explored the secret symbols, compartments and stories behind some of the most enigmatic pieces from the Wallace Collection. It was curated over the period of a year by twelve children aged 9-11 and staged in the main Exhibition Galleries of the Wallace Collection. It was on show for 54 days and visited by over 14,000 people.

It was the very first time a national museum ran such a sustained project where school children selected works of art from the main, internationally-renowned, collection, created a theme and were involved in every aspect of the exhibition. It was primarily their creation, although the Learning Department was on hand to support and guide them throughout the project. It was a very public-facing, and therefore a comparatively high-risk, project, but the children proved that, when trusted, they could deliver something high-quality and amazing.

The curators were all Key stage 2 pupils from the local state school St Vincent’s RC Primary. They worked closely with Emma Bryant, Learning Officer, Edwina Mileham, Assistant Learning Officer, from the Wallace Collection and Lola Gardner-Sharp, Learning Mentor from the school, to create this ground breaking show.

“What a brilliant exhibition and warm opening. You and your team are to be thoroughly congratulated on such pioneering, inclusive and imaginative work. To have ten year olds talk with such passion and knowledge about Dutch paintings and French ceramics is extraordinary. Other museums have a great deal to learn from your project.”

Dea Birkett, Director, Kids in Museums
The Exhibition

Starting with a Wallace Collection secret, a snuff box with a button concealing miniatures of the French philosopher and playwright Voltaire and his mistress Madame du Châtelet, the exhibition uncovered secret stories, unravelled symbols and discovered compartments behind some of the most enigmatic pieces. There were objects from across the collection: paintings, furniture, sculpture, armour and porcelain. Each piece had a text panel and activity which revealed its secret.

In the exhibition galleries, the three rooms explored different sub themes. The sense of mystery was enhanced in the exhibition design: the wall colours and lighting went from dark to light, as the exhibition progressed, symbolising the act of discovery. The exhibition ended with an object about which nothing is known and visitors were invited to write suggestions on postcards to solve the mystery.
The Project Framework

Responsibilities

Responsibilities were set out at the beginning of the project.

• **The Young Curators** were to be available from March 2009–March 2010, to attend meetings and workshops, to behave appropriately when at the Wallace Collection, to complete tasks given in the time set and to listen to and be respectful of their peers’ opinion. They and their parents signed a letter of agreement.

• **The Wallace Collection and its Learning Team** were to manage the project, provide a safe environment for the children whilst at the Wallace Collection and to organise the project in a way which suited all parties.

• **St Vincent’s School** was responsible for selecting pupils and supporting them with their work for the project, to promote the exhibition within the school and its community and to inform the Wallace Collection of any problems arising which may affect the project. (See appendix I)

Beginnings and Process

At the beginning of the project pupils learnt about what an exhibition is and what a curator does. They were asked to think of ideas for the exhibition whilst considering the needs of their audience as well as the museum’s. To help achieve this goal the children were given work books and homework. Their first task was to visit a museum/exhibition with their family. The findings were fed back to the group and were revisited as the project evolved.

Meetings were held every Wednesday afternoon, during term time usually at the Wallace Collection, but sometimes at school. Agendas written before each meeting helped guide the pupils and structure the project. This was important as there was no, and there could not be, a preconceived plan for the project. This approach meant it was possible to respond to different issues as they arose and allowed the children’s voices to be heard throughout.

The Young Curators were introduced both to the Collection and its staff. They had several tours around the galleries with different curators, who shared their expertise. They met staff from the conservation department, retail and press and marketing. They also met freelance gallery educators and guide lecturers to learn more about the Collection and how to interpret it to different audiences. As their knowledge increased the tasks set became more ambitious allowing them more independence to develop their own ideas.

The exhibition budget was £10,000 including £1000 for marketing.

![Working as a team on selecting final objects](image1)

![Working as a group on the exhibition schedule](image2)
Pupils’ Roles

The young curators, whenever possible, were included in the decision making process of the exhibition. From choosing the theme of the exhibition to writing the text panels, they worked closely and consulted everyone in the collection who helped on the project. This level of involvement became crucial to ensuring that the pupils retained ownership of their exhibition.

All of the pupils were curators, choosing the objects and writing text panels for the exhibition, but they were also divided into four teams who were all given additional assignments. Each pupil was asked which team they would like to join by applying in writing explaining why they were suitable for that team. Not all children were successful and consequently there was a difficult adjustment period.

Below are extracts from two application letters:

“I would like to design because I am good at drawing and have already got a lot of imagination and ideas for the gallery and I have also gone to the Wallace Collection to see how the background and wallpapers or paintings match together, so that it looks nice. I am very creative as I draw at home and when it is wet play. I hope you agree with my suggestions and good luck!”  **Billy**

“I consider myself very good at English, this includes persuasive writing. I have (if you excuse my immodesty!) the perfect character to be able to persuade people to advertise our exhibition and I will be prepared for any surprises this job might have in store for me.

If I get this job I will give 101% to this project, before it was just 100%.”  **Lola**

The teams were:

1. Design Team considered the aesthetics and design elements of the exhibition, for example the colour of the walls and arrangements of the objects in cases.
2. Interpretation Team considered different ways to tell the stories of the objects to a family audience, for example writing trails, fact sheets and interactive exhibits.
3. Finance Team was responsible for researching the cost of interactive exhibits and overseeing the costs of the opening party.
4. Press and Marketing Team worked with the Wallace Collection’s Press and Marketing Manager, creating promotional material for websites and journalists.

The Young Curators’ achievements:

- Visited and researched museums and exhibitions with their family
- Came up with increasingly sophisticated themes and ideas for the exhibition
- Created a timeline for the project to set deadlines
- Selected objects to fit the “Secrets” theme
- Researched objects and explored ways of interpreting them for different audiences
- Came up with ideas for activities
- Thought of a story to lead the visitor through the exhibition
- Wrote the text panels and other interpretation material
- Fundraised for the opening party
- Came up with ideas for the design of the exhibition including the colour and lighting scheme
- Wrote letters to journalists promoting the exhibition and gave interviews to journalists
- Planned the opening party and helped with the guest list
- Hosted the opening evening party
- Learnt how to speak to the public and gave guided tours to the public and their school
- Trained the guide lectures to give tours
- Supported and helped with drop-in family activities
- Evaluated the project

Working with a freelancer designer on the display of text panels
Practice Sharing

A practice sharing afternoon for museum professionals took place on 12 March 2010. During the seminar the Young Curators gave a tour of the exhibition and held a question and answer session. There was a plenary session to discuss how museums and galleries can meet the needs of family audiences.

There was considerable interest from other institutions, for example the Royal Collection education department, the Royal Armouries learning department and Museology students from the Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam, all of whom came to see Shhh... and meet the Learning Department.

‘I enjoyed the session enormously, and thought the children were touching and brilliant. What was most striking was that they were quite ordinary children who became extraordinary with the right sort of stimulus.’

Press and Marketing

There was a great deal of positive media coverage due to the charm and professionalism of the three-strong press team, guided and supported by the Press and Marketing Manager, although initially the museum was unsure of how this unique and unusual exhibition concept was going to be received.

The Press Team had several meetings with the Press and Marketing Manager who explained the requirements of their team when marketing an exhibition and developed a marketing strategy with them. They worked hard at school on their presentation skills to give a flawless briefing in front of about 40 journalists in the lecture theatre, at the Wallace’s annual exhibition launch in November. They met the press again in February to promote the exhibition giving interviews and also tours of the show.

The team wrote press packs for the BBC Newsround website and letters inviting journalists to attend. These proved very persuasive and reinforced the exhibition’s unique selling point. Journalist and Director of Kids in Museums, Dea Birkett, attended as the result of one such letter and has since become a Wallace Collection convert and written a piece extolling our family friendly virtues.

Working with a very limited marketing budget of £1000, a lot of good humour, creative thinking, hard work and targeting were relied on. Hand-leafleting a flier to families queuing at family friendly venues – the Natural History Museum and Science Museum was extremely well received.

Coverage was across a range of media; from pieces in the Times Educational Supplement and Country Life; to top 5 things to do in the broadsheets, websites, the Russian and Chinese press & TV; London based papers (The Evening Standard, West End Extra, Wood and Vale) and most impressively, three slots on BBC London news, where the press and marketing team of young curators and Emma Bryant were interviewed. (See appendix II)
Access

It was essential that the pupils understood that their audience may have different needs. To help them they were given training from the Learning Department. The pupils were asked to think of potential obstacles in museums for visitors who may be hard of hearing, visually impaired or wheelchair users. The children brainstormed ideas of how to make the exhibition more accessible to these different audiences. During a role play session pupils worked in small groups to experience what it would be like to manoeuvre around a gallery in a wheelchair, to be hard of hearing and in need of guidance from the information desk and to experience having a visual impairment and to be guided by a sighted companion. This workshop had a strong impact on the pupils as the barriers that they had discussed in abstract terms became real. Consequently they were eager to make the exhibition as tactile and interactive as possible and to provide specially designed family workshops for people with visual or hearing impairments.

Interpretation

The Young Curators worked with the Learning Department to think about different ways the objects could be interpreted for a family audience and devised workshops to complement the exhibition.

The following interpretation, devised by the children and made by the Museum Conservation Technician and other freelance craftspeople, under the instructions of the children, brought the exhibits alive:

- ‘Feely’ box to guess which part of an armour was inside
- Two hats to try on in order to show the purpose of a ‘secrete’ (metal cap hidden inside the lining)
- Flaps on the text panels which lifted to reveal the secret about the object or an answer to a question
- A cape to try on and a mirror, allowing visitors to replicate a scene from Maes’s *The Listening Housewife*
- Mannequins to be posed like the characters in Jan Steen’s painting *Merry Making in the Tavern*
- A ‘story’ tree painted on the wall for people to leave messages to someone they loved, inspired by Fragonard’s *The Souvenir*
- A Wallace Collection mystery object where people were asked to guess what it was
- A book for people to open and read the life story of Madame de Serilly.

The Interpretation Team wrote a trail of other objects with secrets to encourage families to explore the main galleries of the Wallace Collection.

There were three family drop-in workshops assisted by two or three Young Curators. Every pupil helped with at least one workshop. During the workshops they gave tours, explained and helped with the art activity and kept a tally of numbers of participants. 157 children and 92 adults attended these workshops. They also supported our specialist workshops designed for children with visual or hearing impairments. These workshops were a response to their Access training and their growing awareness of the needs of others.

As well as giving public talks the Young Curators trained the Guide Lecturers to give tours around the exhibition. It was important that the Guide Lecturers heard the pupils’ account of the exhibition and what they loved about the objects.

They wrote text panels which were edited by Emma and Edwina and then by the curator responsible for each object. Text about objects, written by anyone in the museum, are always checked by the curator concerned. The final panels were proof read by other KS2 children from the school. (See appendix III)
The Pupils’ Perspective

Cecilia, Beatriz, Billy, Chelsea, Dylan, Khuslen, Lola, Joe, Jonathan, Isabel, Robbie and Sarah

Initial Responses

When I was told by Mrs. Gardner-Sharp that I was one of the 12 out of 230 people in this school to curate an exhibition I felt so lucky and eager to get started. I soon found out that we had a huge responsibility on our hands.

Joseph

On our first Wallace meeting I was surprised that the adults talking to us were going to let us choose objects around the museum. Billy

I felt very excited about curating this exhibition. I had no idea that this magnificent opportunity would pop into my life. Beatriz

I joined [the exhibition] team several weeks in, I was part of the Press and marketing team. We all know that it is very hard to fit in when a project has already started but I did and it has been a brilliant journey. There were 2 girls in my group and one boy, I thought that the girls would have different ideas from me being a boy... but it was great we all supported each other. Robbie

Developing the Exhibition

In our early meetings we were let loose around the Wallace to see if we could come up with theme ideas and objects to put in. There was some quarrelling about the differences between what the girls and boys wanted. If you looked in my book on the day we were discussing themes you would see (not very clear notes!) Lola

One of my first tasks was to research a gallery, I went to the British Museum with my parents. We thought that the good things were:

• the objects were displayed well;
• They used lighting well to display the objects.

My parents thought that these things would not work well in our family exhibition and so I shared these ideas with the group:

• The information not being child friendly.
• The writing being too small. Robbie

It was very difficult to come up with a perfect theme for the exhibition and it was also very difficult to choose the objects for our exhibition. There were so many wonderful things to choose from. Isabel

We were put into groups like in professional museums and asked to research the job. At that stage we were doing homework like watching the film of Marie Antoinette and looking for six objects to put in each sub-theme on the Wallace website. Lola

The hardest part was finding the type of exhibition it would be. First we thought of armour meets jewellery and then it soon became tremendous traditions. But after a while we came with our best ‘Shhh... it’s a secret’. Jonathan

I had to ask my family lots of questions when I was doing homework and coming up with ideas. When my grandma came round I asked here if she liked all my great ideas. I showed her my book (so far) and everything we had been doing. Joseph

You cannot imagine how thrilled I was when I started seeing our ideas and designs coming to life. We had to research them and see how they could help our exhibition prosper. Chelsea

Even though we were not at school we were still learning how everything works in a museum. We were learning what goes on behind the scenes and how much work it takes to make an exhibition. We were still using our writing skills for tours and workshops as well as the objects that we had to research. We were still using our maths and working out our budget and how we could find good bargains and good products. Joseph

I think our exhibition is a great success and we thought a lot about the visitor’s point of view such as disabilities and the ideas we came up with are excellent and really creative! Sarah

Working in the galleries with a freelance educator on different ways to interpret the collection
Teams

I got put in the design team and was quite pleased about it because it was the job that I wanted. Our role was to do most of how it would look. We all also got extra jobs; mine was drawing a portrait of Madame de Serilly, which I was really proud of... Our role was very important because we had to decide on the layout, colour, lighting and much more. Jonathan

Sometimes it was quite hard being in the finance team because there were only two of us. Khuslen

I was put into the design team I had volunteered for... as I knew that I like art and I have lots of creative ideas. My team mates were Isabel and Jonathan I think we worked well although Isabel had different ideas to Jonathan and myself her ideas were strong and we used some of them. Billy

Being on the design team allowed me to design the tree and to help make a difference when it came to lighting and colour choices for the walls. I also got to design a child friendly fact file template. Isabel

First I wanted to be in the finance team with my friend Joe but because people believed that I had good ideas and would be good at it I joined the interpretation team. I think it was a very good choice because I did come up with good ideas like having a tree to go with The Souvenir painting and having a fact file. I liked writing it, I put the facts in a fun way. I was amazed, I was proud to see my ideas being used. Dylan

My role in the exhibition was interpretation which I had to find out the information on the labels and how we were going to set it out. Sarah

In my team we got the job of going to our community’s local supermarket, Waitrose. We had to ask the manager if he could sponsor our drinks for the party... We had an agreement that Waitrose would put us forward as one of the candidates for Community Matters... We raised £300 and Waitrose presented the whole group with a huge cheque. I felt quite amazed that this was a lot money that people had helped raise and I was proud of our idea and the community. Joseph

I really liked working with everyone else and listening to different opinions. Cecilia

Each team had a talk with someone from the Wallace about what they would be doing and it didn’t seem too hard. We in the marketing team had to think about leaflets, posters, adverts... It wasn’t that easy to think of something real persuasive and just well written for the Press release speech. Lola

One of our main tasks was to each write a letter to a prominent critic or journalist telling them about our exhibition and asking them to publicise it. We had meetings and talks at school to discuss how we could make the letters very exciting and we learnt how to write persuasively - how to persuade by using humour, historical facts and presentation. We also had time at school to think about our speeches and our presentation to the press and we practiced and shared ideas with each other and our class. Chelsea

I was in the interpretation team and I really enjoyed being in this team... I was able to use all my ideas and make things work well. Cecilia
Pros and Cons

I found it a bit difficult to remember to my books every Wednesday and having meetings at school to check we had done our work and to see how we were getting on. *Isabel*

One of the most annoying things I found was missing lots of fun stuff in school but it was worth it. *Jonathan*

It was great being able to do a workshop as I knew I would be good working with younger children and taking them around the exhibition was great as I knew that I had to change my style of speaking to make it fun and interesting for them. *Billy*

The hardest parts of creating our exhibition were when we had to complete all the homework in a short amount of time and to bring in our books every week. Having meetings with Mrs. Gardner-Sharp when we wanted to play. *My favourite bits of the exhibition were seeing it finished and giving tours to everyone because I love telling people about the objects we chose. Dylan*

I found it hard working as 12 because if you have an idea and no one else likes it, it’s hard to argue when it’s 11 to 1, but it also meant that you got feedback so you can improve, also having lots of ideas means there’s lots to talk about. *Joseph*

I liked it when my teacher came to the opening party and asked me to give her a guided tour. Because she was new to the school she was always wondering what we were doing out of the classroom and she was astounded and really impressed at what we had achieved. *Cecilia*

The hardest part was to prepare a speech for the press, I was very nervous because I had never been interviewed by the press and they only interview famous people like the Prime Minister. I sold the exhibition by using my skills, humour, presentation, facts and confidence. Also my new skills in persuasive writing helped me when I had to write a letter to an art critic to visit our exhibition. *Robbie*

This journey has been fascinating but journeys can’t be journeys without bad and good aspects, so I have listed them and what I would do to improve our exhibition.

**Bad aspects:**

- Homework: Year 6 had to balance S.A.T.S revision and curating.
- Bigger gallery: there are so many still undiscovered objects.
- Exhibition time: I’d love for more people to see our work.

**Good aspects:**

- Being on the news! And talking to a whole lot of journalists.
- Doing workshops.
- Being toured by Wallace Collection Staff.
- Being a tour guide to my family, friends and the whole school as well as the great workshops helping younger children and sharing our experience with adults. *Chelsea*

Homework was hardest because when you had adult help it was easier but on your own it was difficult, I found I did more when we had to complete our work at school with Mrs. Gardner-Sharp’s help and that I was not the only one and it was good when someone in the group offered to help. *Cecilia*

I liked pretending to be blind and have a guide with me it was really fun to do it and experiencing how to guide someone disabled. The most hardest part was to choose the objects because everyone had different ideas. The boring thing was when we had to write about the object. *Khuslen*
Speeches at the opening party

Young Curators tour at the opening party

Opening the exhibition
What Was Learnt

I thought that the Wallace Collection asking children to curate the exhibition was a life changing experience for me as I gained new knowledge of the past. Billy

I loved being on the Wallace team after the exhibition opened, it made me feel proud of the exhibition and the work that was done. I learnt to talk about the objects to strangers which helped me not to be shy. I have taken many people on tours of the exhibition and also volunteered to do weekend workshops. At the workshops I got to give tours and share my skills that I had learnt...I know now that I can contribute to these events and bring my talents to share. It was one of the best experiences of my life and I will always remember it. Isabel

I have learned many things from this exhibition; I learned how to speak and listen to a wide audience and give guided tours to both children and adults and to make sure that they feel good to ask questions. Robbie

- I have learnt how to create an exhibition and how to advertise an event.
- I now know that it is not easy to do what you like with a small budget.
- how to get sponsors.
- how to design and use your imagination.
- that when you are working you have a lot of responsibilities like getting things done on time, giving accurate information to people, taking adults and children on tours. Dylan

Being in a different environment and not being in the classroom was great as I was still learning about History but in a great place surrounded by beautiful objects. I liked bringing information to the group and making suggestions, I am much better at telling people things and ideas than writing them down. Cecilia

I have learnt a lot but what I learnt mostly was the secrets which were hidden behind the objects and what the important word ‘Curate’ means! This is my best experience but most of all it’s how to be a curator and show off all the ideas I have in mind and meeting important people such as the Wallace Collection Staff and journalists! Sarah

I learned how to speak to the general public confidently, how to talk and write persuasively and so much more... My general knowledge of the arts was limited, but now I can talk about the arts with confidence. I know about things as complex as sixteenth century armour and the French Revolution. Lola

I have learnt how to curate an exhibition, curating an exhibition helped me with my English work a lot in school. Khuslen

When I first started this experience I didn't know what curator meant, so this has really improved my vocabulary and given me a whole new view of art and history... I am now very confident at public speaking. It is also amazing to do workshops as it’s touching to see other people’s opinions on your own work in a professional environment and it was also amazing to explore the Collection. Chelsea

When I made the speech at the opening party, I felt really nervous as there were a lot of people listening! And sometimes I wanted the speech to last and sometimes not! Doing the speech was a great opportunity for me as lots of my school mates wanted to do it as well. Sarah

It helped me learn a lot about History and how it linked to our school work like when we went to Hampton Court it was wonderful to see the portrait of King Henry and remember the story of Hans Holbein. I think it also helped me with my English as I learnt how to write in order to explain to young children and other people. It helped me get a lot of confidence and I made new friends. Cecilia

Final Thoughts

I have really loved taking people through the exhibitions and doing it professionally. Jonathan

I was guided by adults who listened to me and took my suggestions and tried to make them better. Robbie

For me this was a family exhibition because my family really got involved and wanted to help. My dad specialises in making fantastic wedding cakes and he made us 150 cup cakes which said ‘Shhh...it's a secret’ as well as a huge celebration cake that was all shared at the opening party. Billy

I think more museums should let kids create exhibitions because kids know what other kids like. Isabel
I was very thrilled to see the finale of the exhibition, all our hard work all go into one special thing! Beatriz

I think that it was a very good idea for the Wallace to use children because we know what kids want and we get a shot at doing something. Dylan

It was a pleasure working with the Wallace’s staff because we got to see what everyone’s job was and what they have to do. We also saw that there are a lot of jobs to do and if you work hard you can make a great exhibition. Joseph

I proudly look on the time when I wrote to Dea Birkett and how she was so touched by it that she came to the opening of our exhibition to meet me and my fellow curators. Chelsea

I think our exhibition was really good; it didn’t have any of the bad things we saw when walking around museums, like too low light; no space to move and too high paintings. It did have the good things like fun interactive things, low paintings and easy to read information. Lola

I personally think that all family exhibitions should be curated by children or families because how can you create an exhibition suitable for children if you’re not one? People from all over the world – of every age – have come to see this exhibition, and it just shows how children can succeed if they want to, and that we’re just as clever as adults. Shhh... It’s a Secret is a brilliant exhibition and the layout, content and artefacts are what make it special. Chelsea

I think it was a great idea for the Wallace to do this exhibition with children... we were able to tell the adults what we liked and how we liked it and I think that the family exhibition will inspire other museums and adults to ask children what they like, what they think and what are their views and most important of all about what they feel about stuff. Cecilia

Not many children get a chance to be part of something as huge as curating an exhibition in a national gallery. I was in the national papers and on the national TV and on the internet. It feels like a dream when I think that if people type in ‘Wallace’ they can see all the team and my hard work. The whole experience has been amazing... I will always remember it all my life it was the best thing that could have happened to me. Robbie

Evaluation

At the end of the project pupils were asked to give feedback to a variety of questions. They wrote on post it notes which they then stuck onto large sheets of paper, one sheet per question. The left side of the paper represented the most positive feelings, the left the most negative. The findings are represented in the charts below using the generic learning outcomes (below).

(See Appendix IV for full analysis)
The Learning Department’s Perspective

Emma Bryant and Edwina Mileham

The Learning Department was given the opportunity to stage a family exhibition after being inspired at a conference about families and museums. A speaker from Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow, spoke about their display of paintings hung at children’s height. We suggested the possibility for putting on a similar display of an individual work of art to Jeremy Warren, Collections and Academic Director, but instead he offered a whole exhibition slot! For a while we could not decide on a theme, but the project took on an exciting direction after Emma came up with the idea of asking children what they wanted and ‘Shhh...It’s a Secret’ was born.

It was a journey of discovery with the only definite the exhibition opening date. We hoped that the children would take responsibility for all aspects of the exhibition, whilst being guided and supported by the Learning Department.

There were many challenges including:

• Working with the pupils on a project which had not been done before, without any guidelines.
• Working with another institution on a large project and with whom we did not have an existing strong relationship.
• Striking a balance between maintaining the atmosphere of the collection, retaining its integrity and presenting a high quality exhibition, with interpretation suitable for everyone which was created by the children.
• To redisplay our collection making the artworks more intriguing to a family audience and to tell the story of the objects using the children’s voices.
• To show the children what an exciting place a museum is and the range of skills and experiences that the staff have.

Some of the obstacles and issues were:

• The exhibition was a new concept therefore there was no expertise at the Wallace, or in the wider museum community, to call on. We had to think on our feet and to a certain extent make it up as we went along. This sometimes meant that it took longer to take decisions and we had to be reactive to the needs of the project and the children.
• It was a long project and we needed to keep the children engaged for a year.
• The pupils had to learn to work together, share ideas, support and listen to each other’s opinions. Eventually they became a very strong team but this took time and hard work.
• Working collectively meant that it took longer to make decisions.
• The impact of the school holidays, the time lost and also to a certain extent re-introducing the project to the pupils.
• The Learning Department had to manage the extra workload the project demanded and colleagues stepped in.

Young Curators with Mrs Lola Gardner-Sharp, Emma Bryant and Edwina Mileham
The Shhh… Effect:

- The exhibition was really well received by the visitors, staff at the museum, the wider museum community and the press.
- It is the 7th most popular exhibition at the Wallace Collection in the exhibition galleries.
- A strong relationship was built between the Learning Department, the school and the young curators.
- The pupils were given control of the project.
- The pupils gained a better understanding about the needs of others.
- They grew in confidence and developed skills they didn’t know they had.
- There is a change in perception across the museum about the capabilities of the Learning Department and more particularly young people.
- The level of thought, commitment and the high standard that the children aspired to and achieved as curators is impressive.
- The museum as a whole feels very proud of the project and it has strengthened relationships across departments.
- ‘Shhh…It’s a Secret’ reinterpreted the main collection in an accessible way to people of all ages, nationalities and abilities.
- There were a variety of workshops designed to meet the needs of different audiences’ e.g. young visually impaired people.

Lessons Learnt

Most importantly we learnt that being ambitious and taking risks is worth it and not to assume what children like or what they want from museums. We discovered the children’s capabilities exceeded our expectations and putting trust in them can amply pay off, the exhibition is far more subtle than one we would have curated without them. We realised how essential it was that the school and the museum supported all aspects of the project. The school allowed staff and children as much time as and when it was needed, they were flexible and trusted us from the beginning. It was vital to have support of the museum, from the Director down. Staff across the museum were generous with their time and expertise, which gave us a greater insight into the role of other departments in the collection.

The Future

There are several ways in which the Wallace Collection is going to develop the relationship both with the Young Curators and St Vincent’s.

A children’s panel, made up of the Young Curators (still at St Vincent’s) and some younger pupils, will meet termly to advise the Learning Department on events and activities for their age group. Pupils entering Year 7 will be invited to join, continuing their involvement as they progress through secondary school.

The Young Curators will pass on their knowledge to the other pupils and they will then curate a termly display and give family tours. The Learning Department and St Vincent’s will practice share. Teachers will join Wallace Inset sessions and Learning staff will go to the school for any CPD training relevant to museums.
The School’s perspective

Lola Gardner-Sharp, Learning Mentor and Marina Coleman, Headteacher

St Vincent’s Catholic Primary School values the importance of learning through first hand experiences. We value a holistic approach and providing opportunities for children to develop a cross curricular approach to learning. The Wallace Collection is a fabulous local resource and we were keen to develop the relationship further. When the Wallace Collection first contacted us we were excited by the concept, especially as it tied in with our School Development Plan priorities, to develop a more creative curriculum. We have a well established, strong music focus at school and were keen to develop other aspects of the arts.

School Profile

St Vincent’s is an oversubscribed State Catholic school with 226 pupils. In accordance with the admissions criteria the intake is predominantly Catholic.

It is a multi-cultural school with 22 languages spoken. The main ones are English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. There are 56 children on the EAL register, 53.5 % children speak English as an additional language and 80.2% pupils are from ethnic minority groups.

The school serves a broad range of children from different socio-economic backgrounds covering the full social spectrum. The school has a deprivation factor of 0.29% which is slightly higher than the national average. 13.6% of children are known to be entitled to Free School Meals. 69% of children are from Westminster and the remainder of children travel to school from a range of other boroughs, including those whose families work in the area and therefore travel from further afield.

The School’s Expectations

Initially we expected the children to be involved on a small scale but as the project grew so did their involvement, as well as their enjoyment and learning. We believed that the main focus would be art and history but actually the scope of the project developed this learning across many areas of the National Curriculum.

How the expectations were met

The school expectations were exceeded and it is amazing to know that this project is an inspiration to other galleries and museums across the country. The outstanding success of the work achieved through this project confirms the school’s belief in the need for providing creative opportunities to enhance all children’s learning.

How the children were chosen

The children were chosen from two year groups as it was felt that having 12 children from one class would impact on the class as a whole (there is only one class of 30 pupils per year). Including two year groups also gave a large group of children the opportunity to participate. The children are a reflection of the wide range of abilities within the school. The pupils are from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds, they include lower and higher ability and 9 of the 12 children taking part in the project speak English as an additional language. It was essential to consult with parents and have their full support as their children missed some of the set school timetable.
The effect on the children: learning, confidence, social skills.

The children greatly enjoyed the project and have grown in confidence and self esteem throughout. They worked both independently and in groups and this involved clear communication, cooperation and negotiating skills especially when problem solving. Working with skilled professionals on a real life project made the experience; it gave the children pride in their accomplishments which was evident at many stages of the process: leading a press launch, conducting interviews, guiding tours and liaising with museum staff. The close relationship with the Learning Team from the Wallace Collection enabled the children to consider their own learning as well as the learning experiences of others, for example the general public, and to contribute to the learning process of their peers.

Meeting the needs of the National Curriculum

The project provided numerous cross curricular opportunities across the range of the National Curriculum. Some, but by no means all, of the key learning objectives met were:

English

Pupils developed effective speaking and listening skills through debating with each other, giving public tours and talking to the press. This helped them to formulate, clarify and express ideas and to adapt their speech to a wide range of circumstances and demands.

Pupils became increasingly effective readers as they had to read, analyse and evaluate a wide range of texts including museum catalogues, websites and newspapers. Their writing skills improved as they used a wide range of forms for different purposes, text panels using factual writing, press releases using persuasive writing, as well as selecting information for fact files and writing creative gallery trails.

Art

They were introduced to the work of artists, craftspeople and designers which developed their appreciation of the richness of our cultural heritage. During workshops pupils responded to and evaluated works of art. They learnt to recognise ways in which objects reflect the time and place in which they were made. The Young Curators expressed ideas and opinions, developed an art, craft and design vocabulary and used their knowledge to promote the objects that they wanted in the exhibition. Workshops included practical art sessions where they drew their favourite objects in the galleries and worked with an artist on the ‘Transformer Furniture’ theme, which was then developed into a public workshop. The design team had individual tasks, for example drawing for the frontispiece of a book telling the story of Madame de Sérilly.

History

By learning about Madame de Sérilly and the French Revolution, 18th century customs, tournaments and jousting, pupils were helped to place events, people and changes within a chronological framework and to use dates and terms that defined different periods. They have a range and depth of historical knowledge and understanding about ideas, beliefs and attitudes of people in the past. This enabled them to confidently write about and talk to the public about objects in the exhibition. By researching the objects pupils found out about their history by using many sources including catalogues, websites and newspapers.
artefacts, pictures, photographs and Hertford House itself. When giving tours pupils had to recall, select and organise historical information including dates and terms and to communicate their knowledge and understanding.

Mathematics

Pupils used and applied mathematics to practical tasks and in real life problems, for example working from a budget they used estimations, priced items, measurements to see how many litres of juice would be needed for the opening party and working out how objects and cases would fit into the galleries.

Design and Technology

Design was a key component in the project, with a team of 3 pupils working specifically on it. However all 12 children had input into the design. The Design and Technology curriculum calls for specific skills to be taught, such as generating ideas, considering the users and the purpose. Whilst planning the exhibition, pupils thought of activities based on the specific needs of the audience, for example how an activity could be designed to meet the needs of a visually impaired child or an older person with poor mobility. Pupils suggested that armour handling would be an interesting activity for a visually impaired child and thought that a feely box would work well; asking the visitor to guess which part of the armour was inside. Pupils had to consider creating a clear route around the exhibition, allowing space for wheelchair users and others with limited mobility to easily see the displays.

As the plans progressed pupils had to clarify their ideas, develop criteria for their designs and suggest ways forward. One workshop was spent discussing options for the interactive components of the show. Pupils shared their ideas and decided which ones were feasible and how they would work and be created. One pupil suggested that a ‘story’ tree would compliment The Souvenir by Fragonard, because the woman in the painting is carving an initial into a tree trunk. A member of the design team then drew a tree which was then painted onto the wall, next to the artwork and visitors were invited to write their own secret message to someone they loved on a post card and put it into one of the pockets of the tree.

During the project the pupils developed a clear idea of what had to be done, proposed a sequence of actions, and suggesting alternative methods of proceeding if things were unrealistic i.e. too expensive.

Information Communication Technology

During their research pupils used their IT skills to explore the Wallace Collection and other museum websites. The children used the Internet for research and emailed their work to be checked at school and to share information with others.

Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education

During the project the pupils’ confidence greatly increased. Shy children learnt to speak up, others gave interviews and appeared on TV and all of them gave tours of the exhibition. One pupil said, after having showed a St Vincent’s class around, ‘I loved giving that tour so much. When can I do it again?’ All pupils acted responsibly during the project, particularly once the exhibition was opened when they were very aware of the duty of care towards the objects. They made the most of their abilities, frequently exceeding expectations.

The young curators completed written and spoken evaluations of the project which meant that they gave their opinions and explained their views. During the evaluation process they had to think about positive and negative aspects of the project.

The project enhanced pupils’ self-esteem. They universally felt positive about their roles and their achievements, recognising their contribution to the huge success of ‘Shhh…’

All of the pupils faced new challenges positively, often doing things which they thought were beyond them. They learnt about the range of jobs carried out by people in the museum and they developed skills which will certainly add to their contribution to society in the future and their chances to play an active role as citizens. All of them now see themselves as curators. A parent reported that when they were driving past the Wallace Collection their son told his friend that this was where he worked.

Pupils used their imagination to think about how other people, for example those with disabilities might experience the exhibition and they put those thoughts into action when planning the show. They developed an extremely good working relationship as the project progressed. Initially there was some conflict within the group: a divide between ‘girls’ objects (gold boxes and inkstands), and ‘boys objects’ (arms and armour), but as the pupils gained knowledge about the objects and got to know each other there was increasingly open discussion and the gender division no longer existed in terms of preferred objects.
The relationship with the Wallace Collection

This project has strengthened the community link and made it more personal. Both school and the museum have benefited from the collaboration. The closer relationship has opened doors to other opportunities, such as helping to produce the children's audio guide which was recorded with a different group of children. Every class in the school visited the exhibition to find out what their peers had been working on; in the past it tended to be only the older children who visited the Wallace Collection. Hopefully this has reminded teachers of the amazing place so close to our school and will encourage them to continue to visit more often for a wider range of topics. (See Appendix V for Every Child Matters)

Key reasons for the success of the project

- Full commitment at senior leadership level from both the Collection and the school, supporting the project and trusting the staff delegated with the responsibility of bringing the vision to reality.
- The good communication between the Wallace Collection (Emma and Edwina) and the school was vital to achieving an effective partnership for the project to succeed.
- The ability of all the professionals that the children engaged with to communicate ideas and share creative processes at an appropriate level for the children was crucial.
- Flexibility to incorporate children's needs and abilities.
- A good rapport with children.
- Reliability and responsibility by all parties involved, including the children.
- Opportunities that broadened the children's experience and kept them motivated.
- Having regular meetings at the Wallace Collection and at school maintained momentum.

The young curators’ relationship with the school and the local community

Although the 12 children who took part are from two year groups the effect of the project was felt throughout the school. As it progressed the school community was kept informed through newsletters and the notice board. Flyers promoting the exhibition were given to everyone. The pupils reached out to local resources, for example, contacting Waitrose. The fundraising team approached the manager and put forward a written proposal for the Community Matters scheme. This was an extension to their learning, the money raised is a testament to them.

The guided tours that the pupils gave on the opening night, to the public and to every class became a talking point for all, inspiring families/friends to visit and to sign up to the workshops. This project had a very high media profile thus celebrating the school's achievement in the local and wider community. The School Governors were very impressed with the project stating, “The Governors of St Vincent’s were absolutely delighted that children from the school had worked with the Wallace Collection to develop an exhibition. We were even more delighted, even astonished, at the quality of the exhibition and the ability of the children to develop a theme and explain this through the exhibits. It is a wonderful achievement for both the school and the Collection.” Congratulations were received from the Local Authority and Diocesan representatives. The event was celebrated in the St. Vincent’s School Gazette.

Learning Mentor

The project provided a brilliant opportunity to be part of this unique journey. My role is to provide support for children, raise aspirations, promote participation and enhance individual learning. It was important for me to maintain group commitment and to encourage and build on the pupil’s potential. Although they were not considered fun, the extra meetings at school and individual time slots were beneficial in ensuring the above.

Trying to balance and prioritise between the project and my school commitments was difficult at times, but having the full support of the Headteacher and staff helped enormously. Some issues arose during the project, around the Year 6 children preparing for their SATS and visiting their prospective secondary schools. This was difficult especially for one boy who had applied to several schools and hence missed some sessions. One child missed a football tournament. It was important to explain that he had committed to the project but we would ensure that he would be able to take part another time. An early lunch was provided on the days we went to the gallery so pupils could play with their friends or do other extracurricular activities.

A part of my role is to engage and liaise with parents/carers. Getting them involved and ensuring their support was essential for the project. For one of the parents addressing their child’s shyness and low self esteem was very important. She wrote 'thank you for all your support I can’t believe what my child has achieved’. By the end of the project this positive sentiment was felt by all. For parents that have difficulty with English there was a greater need to share the importance
of the project and to work closely with them. They were encouraged to partner up to make the out of school tasks easier. Parents offered their services to support the project in many ways; a father made the cakes for the opening party.

On a professional level this has been an amazing learning curve. I believe, like the children, I have gained enormous experience and understanding about the ideas and concepts behind museum life. Being surrounded by professionals was invigorating and the knowledge I have now gained I am able to transfer to others. This was a creative journey of discovery, a reminder that when children are given a voice and listened to they are able to rise to challenges, be imaginative and succeed. It was rewarding to see the positive change in the children during the year and to recognise that they are more resilient than we give them credit for. Being able to enhance their journey was a great privilege for me.

Headteacher

I feel privileged that our school was a part of this project and very proud of the final outcomes. The partnership activity benefited pupils in aspects and in ways which could not be provided otherwise. It was essential to have a committed, and enthusiastic staff member leading the project who was not class based and who could have flexibility with their timetable. The Learning Mentor role is varied but tends to focus on supporting vulnerable children and it was great to extend the family engagement to a wider range of our families.

The effect on other members of staff

It was essential that staff were kept fully aware of the importance of this project, though they did not totally appreciate the significance until the opening night. In future it might be useful for the class teachers to attend some of the gallery sessions as well as the updates at school so they can see the development and have an improved understanding. It was sometimes challenging for them to release children from class especially towards the culmination of the project when more gallery sessions were needed or when there were clashes with other key school events such as concerts or sports tournaments.

The future impact on the 12 Young Curators

We believe that this unique learning experience will have a lifelong impact on all the children. They have improved self esteem and confidence whilst having developed a greater curiosity and perseverance and other life skills as previously detailed. This was an innovative high risk project that has proved to be a resounding success, benefiting those it had intended to target.

The future impact on the school

This community link is hopefully one that will be sustained and will help us to develop a higher profile of the arts within the school. This has helped to embed ambition so that all pupils realise that they can achieve great things.

The developing relationship between St Vincent’s and the Wallace Collection

We would like to continue to maintain this partnership with future small scale projects and input into the development of interactive creative exhibitions which attract families to the gallery. We will continue to visit the Wallace Collection and hope to increase the number of visits by a greater range of classes. In the future the opportunity to jointly curate an exhibition with another group of children would be fabulous.
Dr. Christoph Martin Vogtherr, Curator of Pictures pre-1800, Acting Head of Collections

“Shhh has been a highly rewarding project for the entire museum and also for the curators involved. The project has initiated necessary discussions about our different audiences and about the ways our exhibitions cater for them. It was fascinating to develop the ideas with the students from St Vincent’s School. It has been a very successful experiment which will probably have a sequel. The Wallace has been the first National Museum to seriously try out this new concept which we are very proud of.”

Catherine Chastney, Learning Officer for Community and New Audiences and Acting Head of Education

My main role for ‘Shhh... It’s a Secret’ was to support Emma and Edwina as they managed the practical elements of the exhibition. I did, however, meet the children early on to explain what the Learning department does and how we try to run activities that are suitable for all sorts of people: children, adults, people with disabilities etc. We thought about the different needs that these people have and what they might be interested in.

The exhibition was brilliant. One of the most positive outcomes for me was that it significantly raised the profile of the Learning Department within the museum and has led to better communication with other departments. I believe that our colleagues are now better informed about what we do and how successfully we do it.

David Edge, Armourer and Head of Conservation

Stephen Craig, Conservation Technician, and I were delighted to be involved in this exhibition, which we think was an extraordinary success, our only regret was that it was of such relatively short duration. Having said that, of course, we probably only owe its very existence to the simple fact that the exhibitions programme had an ‘awkward’ minor space to fill in between major loan exhibitions, and that this was seen as a convenient ‘filler’. I suspect that almost no-one initially thought that the show would be so good, the children so pro-active, and it as a whole so well-received.

Stephen, in particular, enormously enjoyed the challenge of designing and constructing the various installations, which required him to be even more inventive than usual. Some of them, the ‘castle’ in particular, will continue to have a life beyond ‘Shhh’, as we will include them in the next Conservation Gallery exhibition.

Finally, I have to say that the real stars of the exhibition were the kids themselves, our ‘guest curators’. It was enormously satisfying to work with them, and to realise their ideas. It was particularly gratifying to see the initially-quiet ones come out of their shells, as they became increasingly engaged and passionate about the project. For me this was emphasized at the final debriefing tea-party, when we found out from their teachers just how much of a difference this whole project had made to their lives, and how it had boosted their confidence and interest in things well beyond their usual horizon. The whole experience was both rewarding and humbling, and everyone in the Learning Department is to be thoroughly commended for seeing it through to its enormously successful conclusion... well done!
Stephen Duffy, Curator of Pictures post-1800 and Exhibitions Curator

From my point of view the exhibition did not involve a great deal of work - essentially advising on the display and installing it. The children were a great pleasure to work with, as was the Learning Department who obviously put an enormous amount of effort into the project. Everyone I know thought the exhibition looked terrific. All in all a great success! Everyone involved should be proud of themselves for staging something so innovative, informative and enjoyable.

Dr Eleanor Tollfree, Curator of Furniture

I was involved in my capacity as Furniture Curator, and met the children once in the galleries to show them our Leleu desk, one of the items they chose for the show, and for a few meetings with Emma, Edwina and other curators/conservators. I thought the exhibition was a fantastic idea and gave the children a wonderful opportunity to get to know all about working in a museum and enabled them to take part in things behind the scenes. I thought the display and labels written by the children were very engaging and spontaneous and it was an insight, as a curator, thinking about our objects from a totally new perspective, while also standing by to give some guidance on the display of objects and on label text. I thought the press coverage was excellent and the children and Wallace staff were brilliant in their interviews! It would be great to hold another such exhibition one day, perhaps involving a different local school.

Danielle Cunningham, Marketing & Press Manager

Collaborating with a team of young children presented a totally new way of working. They changed my initial perceptions in many ways, bringing vitality, enthusiasm, and importantly, mature, well thought out ideas. This followed through into all projects I gave them, be they presented or written. The end result was a fantastic achievement on all sides, which I think has taught us all a lot about working with children and family audiences - what they really want and how we should best be communicating it.

Rebecca Wallis, Curatorial Assistant

Shhh...It’s a Secret! was an amazing opportunity to share the Wallace Collection with young people. Their creative imaginations allowed me to see the collections in a new light. From the interesting objects they chose, not the usual well-known pieces, to the way they described them in their own words, not museum speak! The highlight for me was being able to show the children the installation of the gold snuff-box containing portrait miniatures of Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet, something which visitors never get to see... they seemed to like the description of the way snuff was taken, I am a bit worried I have inspired children to start spitting to one side! I think the way the children were the driving force behind the whole exhibition and were involved at every stage was really important to show them how museums actually work and who the different staff are. Who knows maybe one of them will be a future Director!
Parents’ Perspective

“My family and I have developed a deeper appreciation, understanding and love for the arts. We will certainly continue to visit galleries and exhibitions.”

The parents of the Young Curators were universally positive about their children’s enjoyment of and opportunity for positive growth during the project. All but one of them felt that the project had been beneficial to their families. Half of the parents said that the project did not impose on their families and rest said that it had at times. One parent commented that it became too much for her daughter at one point. The remaining parents did not see this imposition as a negative experience.

All of them said it had inspired them and their families to visit other galleries and join in workshops.

There were several recommendations for the future, should such an opportunity arise. Two sets of parents recommended better communication; one suggested an initial meeting with all parents and another more formal written communications directly with them. A parent thought it would make a good after school club project and one would have liked a shorter project. Most wanted a similar project to happen again and one suggested that the Wallace Collection organise a termly child led display.

Feedback

Did your child enjoy working on this project?

- Yes, she enjoyed it immensely and it has helped her develop her self-motivation and knowledge.
- Yes, very much. Sometimes when she missed playtime she was a bit sad.
- My child loved going to the museum and seeing the people who worked with them.
- She was very excited and enthusiastic since day one to the last day on the project.
- He was very engaged with the exhibition process and was excited about the objects chosen for display.
- She learned such a lot and it was great for her confidence.

Did working with your child on this project prove beneficial to you/family?

- It did indeed. We all, as a family, got to know a lot about Mr Wallace’s Collection and details in depth about the items related to it.
- We found working together as a family beneficial as we were able to visit the exhibition with cousins and grandparents. We had wonderful days out!
- Definitely, we were all enthusiastic regarding her role and encouraged weekly updates from her.
- Yes, we gained further insight about our son and it was wonderful to see him share this experience with his grandparents, who would not normally have attended the Wallace Collection.
- It was an interesting subject to discuss at home. We were very proud of her as well!
- It was great to go to the gallery with her…. I learnt a lot.

Did the project/workshops impose on your family?

- At first not, but towards the end, when there was more to do for the project and she had lots to do already (preparing for the secondary school exams), then it became too much for her.
- Yes, but in a good way. Although more notice of the homework etc would have been appreciated.
- Never. We enjoyed all the time she required and we felt it provided a great addition to her regular school work.
- Yes, it did, but in a positive way as we welcomed the challenges because we could see the benefits.
- It did at times. But we feel it was all worthwhile and a time well spent on something important to our daughter and our family as a whole.

Has the project inspired you to visit other galleries or take part in workshops?

- It has indeed. We all, as a family would love to visit galleries or take part in a project like this whenever time permits.
- It’s inspired us to visit the Wallace Collection more frequently.
- Yes, we went to see the ‘Sacred and Real’ exhibition at the National Gallery and I believe that our experience was enriched by the fact that our son had been participating in the Wallace Collection project. He was more in tune with the logistics of the exhibition, how the exhibition was arranged and the design of the cases.
- Yes, and finding the secrets behind an object.
- We visit galleries quite a lot but this has inspired us to look at exhibitions in a different way.
Do you feel that the opportunity provided positive growth for your child? Please explain.

- It has broadened her horizons and she has met and worked with other people who are different to what she is used to.
- This had such a positive impact on her. She hadn't been having the best time at school, particularly socially and this really gave her a boost.... and help her feel that she was ‘good’ at something.
- It helped her in her English. Writing persuasive writing and in her descriptions.
- ....the project needed them to be responsible, reliable, passionate and she did herself very proud, she struggled sometimes but learned how to pick herself up again and get on with it.
- He has gained more confidence in himself.
- His confidence and communication skills have improved throughout the project.
- It gave him a sense of importance and responsibility that has been good for his self esteem and outlook. It has also improved his interactions with adults.
- The opportunity provided a strong creative education for her that enabled her to have a lot of respect for history, art, exhibits and the work required to put an exhibit together.
- As parents we can say that we have seen her grow and develop in self-confidence.
- Certainly I do. This project provided a positive growth in creativity, team work, innovation....

Have you any recommendations we could take on board, hopefully for future projects?

- To grab with both arms and put the children through these projects. They are valuable additions to the main stream curriculum.
- No. All we can say is that this project should definitely be done again and we will keep this close to our minds for ever!
- Each semester children should have the chance to make an exhibit.
- You could have an induction meeting for parents so that they are clear about their role.
- You could set out guidelines on what child/parent are expected to prepare for the exhibition, in a more formal way.
- More of the same.... the staff at the Wallace were brilliant and Mrs Gardner-Sharp was incredible.
Facts and Figures

Visitor Numbers

14,080 people came to see ‘Shhh...It’s a Secret!’ over a period of 54 days. The average daily visitor rate was 261 making it the 7th most popular exhibition to be held in the exhibition galleries since 2003. In comparison the most popular exhibition had a daily visitor rate of 545 people and the least popular had a daily visitor rate of 115.

Visitor Comments

Visitors were asked to comment on the exhibition by writing on postcards, which were provided in the exhibition galleries and putting their feedback into a box. Comments were also, unexpectedly, gathered from the ‘Story tree’ and from the general Wallace Collection visitor’s book. There was also a visitor survey.

There were a total of 1073 written postcard responses to the exhibition. Of these, 191 were suggestions about what the mystery object was, 695 were secret letters and 187 were visitors’ comments.

The visitors’ comments were all extremely positive (except for 2 “it was boring” responses”). Most people thought the Wallace Collection was a wonderful place to visit, with an interesting and varied collection of objects well displayed. Visitors enjoyed the interactive nature of the exhibition; being able to touch things and try clothing on.

Below are all the postcard comments from a randomly chosen day, Tuesday 9 February 2010, to give a flavour of the feedback.

Adults

• Such a Wonderful Exhibition!! P.S. It needs to be bigger
• This exhibition is really useful and creative for children and adults. I’m from Turkey...
• It’s an amazing work. I hope one day my daughter will be like one of you with this great imaginative project.
• Thanks for this collection, it’s really impressive. I’m from Taiwan and I’ve never seen this type of exhibition before. I love it, especially as children did it. ‘Secret!!’- What a good idea., thank you.
• Absolutely great exhibition. Will you repeat it? An extremely imaginative and creative journey for children.
• We are old children (70 and 71) and enjoyed your Shhh... gallery.
• Thank you- we are a group from University of the Arts, we spent one hour with your objects and we loved it. WELL DONE! Good work.
• A really great idea! Congratulations!
• It’s good to know about old things; history has shown us many kinds of ideas. Thank you.

Children

• I wish there was a whole armour set.
• Coolness!
• I think it’s good because you can find things and see things.
• I love secrets!
• Thank you for letting us draw pictures.
• The museum is beautiful.
• ...the Wallace Collection is fantastic and nice.
Secret Tree Postcards

There were a huge number of secret letters (and drawings) written (or drawn), 695 in total. The vast majority of these were anonymous messages of love to family and friends, or secret declarations of love. Only 27 writers identified themselves by including their name. Of the secret letters, 84 were in the form of a picture and 56 were written in scribble writing.

There were 191 suggestions made about the identity and purpose of the mystery object. The 3 most popular suggestions were: a boot scraper (24), a fire screen/guard base (22) and a gun support (12). A large proportion of the suggestions were to do with the feet/shoes, to do with weapons, to do with the fireplace, or a stand of some kind. Some of the more unusual and imaginative respondents guessed that it was a “little ant house”, a “giant chopstick holder” or a place to “tie up/attach the reins of your horse – needs to be attached to a solid wall”.

Visitor Survey

The visitor survey took place on Saturday 20 March. Overall the response was very positive with 13 adults rating the exhibition as excellent, 18 rating it as very good and 5 rating it good. No one thought it was either fair or poor. 5 of the children thought it was brilliant and 4 thought it OK. None of them thought it was boring.

An exhibition planned from a “child’s eye view” and in this case, children’s fascination with secrets, has a different feeling of exploration from upstairs – excellent!

The objects chosen - great variety & fun guessing what some were - I had no idea - a real sense of having to look, think & imagine.

(For further details please see appendix VI.)
Conclusion

This exhibition was a complete experiment and an illustration of how taking risks can pay off tremendously. The Wallace Collection management team took a leap of faith by giving the space to the Learning Department for two months with no indication as to what would be displayed. In turn, the learning team entrusted twelve children aged 9-11, whose only brief was to curate a family friendly exhibition and to produce something worthy of being shown in the main Exhibition Galleries of a national museum. Nobody was let down; on the contrary the children, by virtue of being experts in what children would like, by working incredibly hard and showing knowledge, diligence, co-operation and confidence beyond their years, produced something that far exceeded what the Learning Department could have created on its own.
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Unlocking the secrets behind the treasures of the Wallace Collection

4 February – 28 March 2010

Curated by pupils from St Vincent’s RC Primary School, Marylebone

Find out how she kept her head during the French Revolution!