

Debs I will be looking at this occasionally, just in case the battery runs out or it stops recording, but I'm not trying to rush you.

Okay, so how much you understand about the research study from the information sheet I sent a little while ago?

Stephen It would be best if you just recap.

Debs The PhD is about curators, designers and visitors, and the relationships between those in order to get an interpretation project to the visitor. Now, in my experience, and in other people's experience, quite often what's in the initial concept doesn't necessarily end up being the one that the visitor sees.

Stephen The final version, yeah.

Debs Now, the research is really about how that is, what's happening, and what's the process? Each one of the people involved have external influences: the stakeholders, time, budget, technology, etc, and also internal influences. So your personal interests, how you're brought up, your cultural background and everything else. So the same project could go through a team and be completely different, depending on who's involved.

Stephen Yeah, agreed.

Debs That's good, that's handy! ((laughs)) So I'd like to find out a little bit about your background, and then talk about the visitor interpretation at Beaulieu Abbey, and also, from my understanding, you are Visitor Attraction Chair, Tourism Chair, on various other organisations.

Stephen Yeah.

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- Debs            So my questions to you, as opposed to the others, will be much more about measuring, measuring experience or capturing the user engagement, and how you get people to come here in the first place. Is that okay?
- Stephen        Yeah.
- Debs            So the initial bit is about your background and how you came to be here.
- Stephen        Do you want the truth? ((laughs)) My background has always been marketing. I studied a Business Studies Degree where I specialised in marketing. After that, I did the Chartered Institute of Marketing Diploma – too many years ago now! My career started off in construction and house building, on the marketing/sales side. And as we all can recall, if we're old enough, there was the huge downturn in the late '80s/early '90s, which I didn't quite get through and I left my then company in the early '90s. I had a couple of stopgap appointments, but was always keen to get back into another industry that I saw was growing, where you could engage with people, etc. I came across tourism and started in tourism in about mid-1994, and I've been in it ever since.
- Debs            So that's a long time.
- Stephen        Yeah, but albeit only within a couple of organisations, but, because as you were saying, because of various chairmanships, I've got involved with Destination Organisations, other organisations, so I'd like to feel I've got a wider viewpoint, rather than just a narrow focus on companies within the industry that I've worked for.

- Debs            The breadth of the other things that you do must all feed together via any one of those areas as well.
- Stephen        Absolutely.
- Debs            Because you've got an insight to lots of other areas, which has got to be useful really.
- Stephen        Yeah.
- Debs            So you say you did marketing, but were you really wanting to do marketing, or did you get steered by parents or something?
- Stephen        No, not at all. I was going to be an accountant, got in an accountant's office between the two stages of A-levels, for six weeks, through parent contacts, which cured me of ever wanting to be an accountant, I have to say! I didn't know what I wanted to do, that's why I did the Business Studies course, because I knew I didn't want to be an engineer or anything like that, and it was on that course I discovered this thing, marketing, which appealed to my creative side, and not being structured on a day-to-day basis, etc, etc. So it was a late but conscious choice on my behalf, I wasn't being steered into it.
- Debs            Slightly off topic, but I've just had an email from somebody who's applied to do business studies – this is from a lecturer – and they haven't been able to get whatever they need to do this. And so they've gone back to the prospective student and asked, 'It looks like you're not going to be able to achieve Business Studies, have you another interest?' And he's come back and said, 'I actually quite like design and design media.' So that's now why I've got him coming to me! ((laughs)) But all his background is all business;

everything that he's done has been steered to business, so it's that flip, it's difficult to know where his real interest is going to be.

In doing your marketing, have you seen something that's really inspired you to do things in a particular way?

Stephen In a design sense?

Debs Yeah, a design sense, or the way that you approach things.

Stephen Yeah, as you would expect a marketer to say, and we're all trained this way, but actually I find very few do it, is putting to one side your own personal preferences and solidly thinking about, 'Actually, what is it that your customer wants?' That sounds so corny. It does so corny, but I've always made it clear, for example, to design organisations, and I've worked with many marketing organisations, etc, over the years, indeed, my own staff, I'm not interested in awards, absolutely got no interest in it whatsoever. If it's a by-product, that's fine, but, at the end of the day, we've got to be delivering experiences, products, services, etc, what the customer wants, because I want the company to succeed, because if the company succeeds, they pay me, my mortgage gets paid, thank you very much. So an award is fine if it happens, but it doesn't turn me on.

Debs Because there are some people who will go for the award and all else gets slipped along the side of it. That's good, that's how I am! ((laughs)) But you've got lots of different roles here?

Stephen Yes, I go under the title of Commercial Director, which means I am responsible for the day to day running and, indeed, the profitability of this site, and I have a wider remit as well within the organisation.

So, if you like, the buck stops here, so everything from front of house, the services that we provide, and the service we provide through our front of house people, through to quite long dialogues about the museum, although, as you are aware, Deb, I know, the museum is a separate independent charitable trust, so there are – as I think I've used the word before to you – tensions about what is deemed correct from a musicological curatorial point of view, and actually what the visitors want for a good day out. And sometimes it doesn't mix, that doesn't mix, but we always find a way around it, and it is a series of compromises, quite clearly. But it also makes the job interesting, having those kinds of debates. And as a commercial animal, the best thing I could do is let people sit in ((Bluebird ?)), for example, but there's no way I'm going to let that happen because obviously I recognise we need to conserve and preserve, but it's finding the checks and balances to make sure they're of an appropriate nature, etc, etc.

Debs            It's really difficult, I think, the touching thing, and the use thing, on things that are assets, because they're seen as assets, aren't they?

Stephen        Yeah.

Debs            And they've been bequeathed to you and they have all those restrictions.

Stephen        It is the classic debate you have of, and taking the cars, obviously Beaulieu is more than just the cars but it's what we're known for. If one person touched a car, would it damage it? No, because cars are robust things, but if 100,000 people touched the same bit of the car, that eventually wears away the paint, and if you wear away the paint, yes you can repaint it, but it's not the original paint, and you get into all those satirical debates, etc, etc.

Debs                    Yeah, because I've got my Triumph, it's out there now, and it's really needing a new paint job, really! But that's fine and we'll go and do that at some stage, but there are other people who, with Stags perhaps, or other classic cars, that we park up alongside sometimes, where it's gleaming and shining, and they might have trailed it to that event rather than driven it there.

Stephen                So what's the point in owning it?

Debs                    Yeah, exactly! ((laughs)) It's nicer to do that. But I suppose I'm going into influences and restrictions and limitations and things now, but the cars that go to the museum, quite a few of them, I would have thought, have restrictions on them on what you can do with them anyway, and even whether they're shown or not.

Stephen                Yeah, I mean most of the vehicles we have we do have on show. It will come down to ownership issues, because there are vehicles which the National Motor Museum Trust own, there are vehicles which effectively the Montague family own, although they are loaned to the National Motor Museum Trust, and there are loaned vehicles, and it will come down to individual owner preference and requirement. So there is one particularly valuable car in there that I'm aware of, where the owner has said to me, 'If you want to take it for a spin it's not a problem.' There are other lesser – and they're all wonderful cars of course – but they are, in my estimation, and others would disagree with me – lesser cars in there and which it's almost put cotton gloves on before you walk within five yards, type of thing. So yes there are these different stakeholders that you've got to acknowledge their requirements and work with them.

Debs                    Difficult! ((laughs))

- Stephen            It can be interesting, yeah.
- Debs                The different organisations that you work within, I've referred to them but I don't know what they are.
- Stephen            The principal ones that I work with, I'm Vice Chairman - formerly Chairman - of the New Forest Tourism Association, which is a marketing consortium and works closely with the New Forest District Council about promoting tourism in the New Forest area. I'm a non-executive of Tourism South East, which is the regional tourist body. I have been past Chairman, but no longer, of something called Destination Southampton, which is similar to the New Forest District Council. And I'm a current manager's Chair of a group called The Treasure Houses of England, which are ten of the leading stately homes within the UK: so your Bleinhams, Chatsworths and Harwoods of this world.
- Debs                Wow, that's exciting, very nice!
- Stephen            Yeah, and a couple of other minor things which I've probably done in the past and forgotten about, but there you go.
- Debs                But you probably know from the Dunster Castle thing that you might have seen, and the Beaulieu Abbey, that I'm much more interested in the building. I'm interested in everything, but the building is my personal interest, and then the stories that a building tells. So when you say about Blenheim and everything like that, you think, 'Oh ((?)) it must be amazing!' So to be involved in all of that must be really quite nice.
- Stephen            Yeah.
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- Debs Does it influence what you do here with Palace House or the Abbey?
- Stephen Yes and no. Yes, in as much as when talking to other stately homes, as a prime example, we have a very open relationship, albeit under Chatham House rules, in any particular meeting, and colleagues may say, 'Oh, we've done x and it worked really well for us.' And obviously you're scribbling down and going, 'Okay, I need to investigate that,' not that it would necessarily work in the same way at your own property, but it gives you food for thought. And as a lot of us creative are, you need that stimulus to go, and it may not end up where you started, but it's a spark point to think about things, how you could perhaps adapt what you're doing already, or bring in new items, but in your own local properly manner, which can be a successful commercial venture, but still respect the buildings themselves. Because as we've discussed before, clearly, profits are important for the business, because that's reinvested in the estate and the estate needs money reinvested in it to survive the long-term. But in my experience, there is this tourism within the heritage sector, that owners view themselves as custodians and not as owners, and I haven't met anyone yet who I perceive doesn't actually take that viewpoint. And therefore decisions are made which in pure commercial terms may seem illogical, but you know that it's a good long-term investment for the estate, the wider estate, and continuing ownership.
- Debs So you must be kept very busy by being on all those organisations.
- Stephen Yes, but I don't need to think too much what I need to do each day!
- Debs ((laughs)) I'm very grateful for your time! Beaulieu Abbey then, I know from here and from talking to the others, is a kind of a
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different kettle of fish, in a sense, to the other attractions, the Palace House and the Motor Museum, in the sense that it's what this place was founded upon and there's not much of it there to see, or some people would say that, and so on. So it's not part of the charitable trust either, is it?

Stephen No, it's part of the commercial organisation.

Debs If you were given free reign, no budgets, no limits, what would you do to promote that to the visitor?

Stephen I think my major difficulty with it is it is overshadowed by the National Motor Museum and Palace House itself. Having said that, it probably receives more visitors than if it was just a stand-alone Abbey; some of the parts do work in its favour. I think what I would personally do, and there are the families getting involved of what they want to do, is that we do tell a good story there, I think, about the history, from its origins until its dissolution with dear old Henry, but I think it's told in a manner which was probably used 20 or 30 years ago and it needs updating. And by that I don't necessarily mean fully interactive, although they potentially have their part, etc. It is, as we recognise, design and stylisation moves on, etc, expectation moves on, and in that particular part of the complex we haven't perhaps matched that, and that's what we need to do. So if money was absolutely no object whatsoever, you can think of things. And to take a step back, I could see that some people, from the really overt commercial world, a Merlin operator, would say, 'Oh we could make this into a London Dungeon, monks being tortured,' and all that kind of stuff, which is totally inappropriate for the setting that it's in and the ethos of the company. But if money was no object, one thing I would get down there is a very robust Wi-

Fi system, simply because more and more material can be delivered and layered electronically. But I think people will, if they haven't already done so, they're moving more and more to their own devices rather than anything that you may install or provide, like the good old-fashioned wands which you get. Do you know what I mean by wands?

Debs                    Yeah.

Stephen                So it's having that robustness in there. But I think at the moment there are too many entry points where you can go in and join the story, and I think we need to be a little bit smarter about not forcing you – and we would never force a visitor down a particular route, but guiding them down a route so that they get context to begin with, rather than perhaps halfway through their visit. And if you could do it – and God it would cost a fortune – but I think it would be really, really spectacular if you could throw up some kind of holographic image, and I'm not sure if you'd get permission to do this, of what the Abbey was. Because when you speak to people, they really have got no perceptions of it, until you say to them, 'Have you been to Winchester?' and if you have, and you go, 'Well actually it was bigger than Winchester Cathedral,' they suddenly go, 'Oh?' and it really brings the scale to it. So yeah, those are the key bits.

Debs                    I'm researching ((?)) reality and holographic projection at the moment for the Green Rifles, because we had a chat with Christopher Wallis, and they're cleaning the ((?)) and they were thinking about ways of telling the stories of the different parts of the battle, and so the university is getting involved in that performance slot.

Stephen Yes, I think it clearly is an exciting bit of kit, but I think again you've got to be really careful and not fall in with the excitement of the bit of the kit. One of the things is – although my children are grown up now – that really does genuinely frustrate me is how many children you see walking around attractions such as this, and they're constantly taking photos through their iPhones or whatever, but actually they're not looking, they're just looking for the next photo. They're really not concentrating on what's going on and I think that's such a huge shame, they should really be concentrating on the physical and what's there, and then taking a photo of it if it's appropriate, in my opinion, but it doesn't work like that. Because it is a real experience and we've had many a discussion internally about will people come, or they just have the virtual experience? Well, I think they will, because they will go away, in my opinion, from the virtual experience to get back to the real, but the virtual is useful to augment, but not be a substitute for.

Debs I'm perfectly in agreement with that and I think that's the way, because I know I'm digital media but I'm also a crafts person, or I used to be, and I like to go to these places to pick up the ambience of these sites, and touch a stone that somebody, King John or somebody, has touched before, and even the trees in a forest, the big old Oaks, going up to them and giving them a bit of a hug! ((laughs)) Because it's amazing what's happened around that tree at that time and things like that.

Stephen And that sense of history and destiny and all that kind of stuff.

Debs Yeah, so I don't think that's ever going to go away. The thing is, online, now, so many people can find out so much about a place already, and yet they're still visiting, so I don't know, and it's

something to do as a family, or as a couple or as whatever, add to your own space, your normal space. So yeah, the holographic thing would be good, and there's possibly a way you can do it, by putting up a huge sheet of Perspex film to halfway through the plot or something, and then project to it. But yeah, it then ruins that space in some ways, because you've got to have that Perspex constrained by something, and then it gets dirty. So it's difficult, isn't it?

Stephen It is, and as we were saying earlier, it's getting balances for what's right and appropriate, without going down the pure Merlin commercialised route, which just isn't us.

Debs And it's like the car with the paint, if you could rebuild part of the Abbey and then video the stonemasons making it, so you have that real footage as well, but build just one part of it so that that's on record, and then it's there for ever. But then that's not the space that's there already.

Stephen That's it, yeah.

Debs So it's difficult.

Stephen But it's through interpretation, undoubtedly, that you can give that sense, which is why I think electronic is important. And again, different people will consume the information in different ways. There are some people who will not go up to a guide, electronic is the perfect medium for them because they can find out what they want, when they want it, without interaction, which they don't seek with real people. There are others who will want the real person there.

Debs            It could be somebody who's gone out for the day, doesn't talk to many people, doesn't work, doesn't talk to many people during the week, so then when they go out it's a perfect time to engage with somebody and talk to them, so yeah, they're not going to want the digital experience really.

Stephen        No.

Debs            So how then, as an attraction, as a place, do you factor all of those things in? How do you think you will factor all of that in? The breadth of the interpretation that you might have to offer to capture everybody?

Stephen        Across the whole site?

Debs            Yeah.

Stephen        I mean we are actually undertaking a project at the moment about how can we deliver better information electronically, because we do recognise that that's the way to go, and we are all having that kind of debate about should it be wands, should it be apps or whatever? But I think there is a building consensus that Wi-Fi has got to be the way. Because we do, which is not necessarily unique to us, but we have this philosophy that if we're going to deliver something, we've got to deliver it to everyone, otherwise it's unfair, and we could look through delivery and through 3G kind of stuff, except for, unless you're on Vodaphone and O2, forget it, you ain't going to get it here. So we'd rather not deliver it that way because the Vodafone owners will be really pleased, but the Orange owners wouldn't, which is why I'm saying about I like Wi-Fi, because at least you can get it to everyone then.

And I think the other debating point, and obviously there are potentially more stakeholders in some areas than others, and different stakeholders and views in some areas than others, it's trying to steer that course between factual information, which is educational, but it's not educational. They are educated by, but they don't have the educational message rammed down their throats, because again, whilst musicological colleagues always do talk about, 'You've got to educate people,' I find they mean it in the traditional sense of the word, normally. And when I'm paying £20/£30 to go out for a day, the last thing I want to do is be educated, overtly! I'm quite happy that I know it's being-

Debs To soak it up.

Stephen Yeah, to soak it up and I'll take the snippets that I want to take. So in areas here you can get, and the museum is the classic example, of course, where there could be a little item in the corner, that maybe only 2% of the visitors will actually ever see, and they will spend a whole year in groups discussing about they should read, whereas I could stick a photo and ten people will see it, and I could stick a photo of that same object on Facebook and have thousands see it with a very quick knocked-out, 'This is an X, Y, Z, what do people think?' And I think that's going to be an interesting debate, particular within the museum world, and not so much the overt commercial world, but in the museum world in the future, what are appropriate comments? And again, like everything, I think there is sometimes too much trying to do, 'One size fits all,' and just accept that some people want to graze the information, give them the basics, and then if they want more, they go on their smart phone, or they guy the guidebook, or there are other methods of communication. Even working in a museum, I find it very boring,

very quickly, that this one's got four cylinders and can do 30 miles an hour. Interesting, it is interesting, but it's not the be-all and end-all, you want to do know did a little old lady go in it to a Sainsbury's equivalent to buy her weekly shopping?

You speak to the guides and there's really interesting information, which could be a ((poca?)) form, it could be true. So, for example, why did Ford paint his cars black? A good question. Do you know why? Black paint, at the time when he was doing it, was the quickest drying paint, so he could produce motor cars in any one given day. That's why we have the saying, 'You can have a Ford in any colour as long as it's black.' What an interesting snippet of information, but it doesn't come out at the moment, unless it's delivered personally, and, of course, if that's layered it tells so much.

Debs                    Yeah, that whole era, so that's the kind of thing that I like to do.

Stephen                So those snippets, which the curatorial team may or may not deem important, but it's one of those fascinating facts, and it's a constant learning. I was down in Palace House, I happened to overhear one of the guides, straight-lace, the term straight lace, we all know what it means. Well, in the olden days, apparently there were two ways of lacing up the bodice: there was the straight-laced method, which just went right across, or there was more of the crisscross, and if it as crisscross, you could actually undo it, apparently, yourself, you ladies, but if it was straight-laced you needed help, you were ((?)), hence the term straight-laced.

Debs                    That's clever as well.

- Stephen But there are these fascinating facts that we bring out through guides, but you think, 'How can we bring that out more regularly?' Because everyone goes, 'Wow, that's interesting, I didn't know that.'
- Debs It's along those lines that I did the Dunster Castle thing, and I can't remember if I showed you that, and you could choose the character who took you round the manor, so the Lord would take you on a very proper way round and give you all the pertinent lordly facts, but if you chose the cook, then she would give you gossip, much more gossipy information because cooks tend to gossip. And she would say 'The ceiling was like two years of my wages to put that there.' And so trying to put things in context without giving much information written down somewhere, so it was the characters that I was using, and I suppose the same with Beaulieu Abbey, it's the characters that are there to tell you lots of those little snippets of things that would be interesting to all ages.
- Stephen Yeah, fascinating facts.
- Debs Yeah, fascinating facts, yeah.
- Stephen You're being educated by you're not being educated!
- Debs Yeah, exactly, tacit knowledge, is it?
- Stephen Yeah.
- Debs Because I can immediately see that if you've got a car in there that can't be touched or anything, and a little old lady used to drive it and had it through all her life, you could almost do a holographic projection of her sat in the car, driving it.



- Stephen            Absolutely, you could. And undoubtedly, with access to wider collections that the Trust have got, you can see either a QR code or whatever, and if you want to see some contemporary film of it, go to this website here, click, and there is some 1930's film of a model T Ford at that time being driven somewhere in the UK, and it may not be the one you've got on show, but you go, 'Oh right, so that's what it was like,' it gives the historical context to it all.
- Debs                And you must have some great stories with some of the cars, the individual cars that have done so much. That story would be nice, the providence of that car would be nice to be told in an original story, that then you're looking at the car, but then you can also see this happening, maybe, because we've got some little screens ((?)) So I think that it's that storytelling, snippets of information that are important for people to see, but it's interesting to hear you say that as well.
- Stephen            Yeah, but it's also obviously important, and I think again in a place like this, and I haven't actually seen it too successfully, and I'm not saying we're perfect, far from it, you can have interesting facts about ten different objects, but it's also the facts and information which pulls, if you like, eight of those ten objects together, that they make a collective sense as well as an individual sense, which I think is sometimes missed out on.
- Debs                As I was saying to Susan, a museum is very different to a building, in the sense of the building is all context, usually! Whereas a museum, it's lots of artefacts that are out of context, and so it's much harder to put the message across about how those things were being used. And I suppose with my 3D head, that's where I think you could take that, because you've got these 3D laser scanners now where you
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can take that object, put it into 3D, and then put it into its environment. You've done that really well, actually, in the Motor Museum because you've got all those little scenes set up and around, which really helps the workshop. Is that still there?

Stephen        Yeah.

Debs            So that all helps people understand exactly what it was like at that snapshot of time.

Stephen        Yeah, it is up and working. I was very fortunate to go to – what's the name of that National Trust place which they bought about ten years ago, down near Bristol? It's gone for the moment. But they bought it and they were saying 99% of the content actually belongs to the house, they're still working their way through it, and knowing that - they've bought very little in from the outside - you do look at the house in a totally different way.

Debs            Because a lot of the National Trust properties are unfurnished, specifically.

Stephen        That's right, it doesn't always necessarily belong to the house, it's been imported in, although it may be of the period, etc, this is genuine stuff.

Debs            That's really amazing.

Stephen        Yeah.

Debs            I'll have to find out which one that is!

Stephen        I should remember it.

Debs            Tyntesfield?

Stephen Tyntesfield, yeah.

Debs I thought that was higher up.

Stephen It's just below Bristol, Tyntesfield.

Debs I shall go and see that then.

Stephen Yeah, it's fascinating.

Debs Really fascinating. So thank you for that. Visitor research-

Stephen I do tons of it.

Debs You must do tons of it here. So how do you go about doing visitor research?

Stephen We do lots of research, from the planned hard data, through to just soft feedback. So, for example, we do a major study each year amongst visitors and potential visitors, which are their views of Beaulieu and what they think it consists of, what motivated them to come on any one particular day, which may have nothing to do with the cars and it just happened to be a wet day, so they were looking for somewhere and they came to us, and we accept that. So a lot of hard search around that, how they heard of Beaulieu are, what their perceptions of Beaulieu, are they car enthusiasts? And we also do some work with ALVA, and ALVA is the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, of which we're members, so we can benchmark against other like properties and organisations, through to the softer research, that we take and look and review all customer comments we have, and some are less than pleasing, sometimes, and quite rightly, I do believe the visitor has cause for complaint, because we don't always get it right, unfortunately. But we can

sometimes see consistent patterns in there, so you think, 'Right we need to change that,' through to you speak to staff, you speak to visitors yourself, and they go, 'It's really nice, shame there's not one or two more benches.' 'Right, let's go and get a couple of benches sorted out, that's a cheap fix.' We can raise customer satisfaction by that simple stuff, as well as the more detailed interpretative type of information, etc, etc.

Debs                    So therefore it's through their comments, but this is via email, via letter?

Stephen                It could be anything, email, letter, just speaking to them in the park, gathering up that information. We give everyone, effectively, a 'Welcome to Beaulieu,' which has four or five key questions on there. We supplement it in the year, and if we think there are particular issues we'll just ask people about them. For example, we've had the Bond exhibition here, as you know.

Debs                    It's been extended.

Stephen                Yeah, for this year, and then that is it, for various reasons. When we first opened it, what did they think about it, what did they think of the AV? Some good comments, but there were one or two issues so we just tweaked the AV and those comments dropped off, so that's good, we fixed that particular issue. So all the time, and I'd like to think it's real, rather than 'We think that.'

Debs                    So is it a team of people you have?

Stephen                Yes, and we will hire in professional help, as required. So the big surveys we're doing across the summer, we haven't got the expertise, we hire that in, through to training that we give staff, to

feedback this soft information, if they're aware of it, through to sometimes we will just use our own staff to do one or two quick snap surveys.

Debs So that company that you bring in, they take that away and analyse it and give you a report back?

Stephen No.

Debs They just give you the data?

Stephen They give us the data and we prefer to analyse it ourselves, because, at the end of the day, we believe, rightly or wrongly, we will understand nuances, because of what this place is and we live and breathe it. That can sometimes be a danger because you can miss things, I accept, but we can pick up on nuances and deal with them as is required, or ignore them, as is required, ((laughingly)) which an outside agency may get bogged down by.

Debs And I've got about measuring the visitor experience, so measuring the success, so that's all part and parcel of that?

Stephen Yeah, so, for example, on all the major assets and the assets within the assets, ask questions – and I can't remember exactly how it's raised – of these things, 'How would you rate them from very poor to excellent?' etc, etc. Everything from the wheels ride, the veteran bus, the monorail, the National Motor Museum, one or two of the major exhibitions, as well as the more obvious and open-ended question, 'What did you really enjoy about today and why? What didn't we do well which we can improve?'

Debs And so part of the stuff that you get, do you then use as marketing material as well, do you use quotes from the feedback?

- Stephen Not hugely, because those kind of quotes we can't, and we've always been very careful that if we are going to make a quote, which we do do on the website, we always do so with the permission of the individual. So if we get emails which pay compliments, yes we will frequently say, 'Can we put this up and attribute it to Mrs Smith of Gloucester?' and if anyone ever challenges this, we've got it there, there is the quote from Mrs Smith of Gloucester. But if we just pick up in that wider research, 'Beaulieu is a great day out,' that's great to know, but we're not going to use it because anyone can say it's a great day out.
- Debs So do you use social media to get feedback?
- Stephen Yeah, and I've got a colleague who deal with that but we're on the principle ones: Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus.
- Debs How do you feel about all the social media in your marketing outlook?
- Stephen I think we have learnt very quickly, not that we ever got sucked into it, some businesses clearly think it's the be all and end all and all their budget perhaps goes that way - crazy, absolutely crazy - it is another form of media, full stop.
- Debs Another tool.
- Stephen Another tool, full stop, and you use it and react to it for what kind of media it is. We fully recognise that sometimes we are going to get negative comment, but when we get negative comment we will always post, whereas some don't. And obviously we think and investigate about it, and once or twice we've put our hands up, even on Twitter, and said, 'Yeah, people are right, but these were the

circumstances.’ So, for example, we recently had the character that played ‘Jaws’, Richard Kiel, here, and if you’d asked me before, ‘How many people would be queuing to see Richard Kiel at any one time?’ I would have said a dozen people. We had 2.5 hour queues. And obviously it kicked off, and we just said, ‘Yeah, you’re absolutely right, but to be absolutely frank, we did not expect this. If we’d known this, we would have dealt with it totally differently,’ hands up, fair cop.

Debs                   And why did you decide to bring that guy in in the first place, and how did you research about that?

Stephen               Purely luck, pure opportunity. I actually saw it more as, not so much what Richard Kiel would do for us on the day, although it was very good business on the day, I have to be honest, it was more we could use him to remind people that the Bond in Motion Exhibition was here, because there are no real new stories coming through and that was a new story, and it just went on us! Can’t complain at all!

Debs                   Yeah, that’s quite a story, really. So where do you track where they visit when they’re onsite? And I say observation, but do you track where they go?

Stephen               Yeah, I wouldn’t say we do observational research, track them around religiously, they spend five minutes here, ten minutes here, etc, etc. Again, through the questions we asked, one of the questions we ask is how long they’re onsite in total, but we do track in as much as, one of the questions we ask, when we’re asking how much did they enjoy, did they use it or not, so you have a sense of where they’ve gone. So we know that Motor Museum, 99% of the visitors go to the Motor Museum, not 100% but 99%, but from memory, it’s only like 65% find their way to the Domus. It is

internally frustrating, and we very occasionally – and I do mean occasionally – but it does happen where someone's leaving at the end of the day, and my staff will go, 'Did you have a nice day?' 'Yes, thank you very much.' 'Did you enjoy the museum?' 'Yeah, it's great, thank you.' 'And what did you think of Palace House?' 'What's Palace House?'

Debs ((laughs)) And yet you've got so much literature around and everything.

Stephen And signposting.

Debs It just shows, doesn't it? It's just the visitor.

Stephen Yeah, you're dealing with people, and people are, by their very nature, individualist and may not always act and react as you expect them to.

Debs Yeah, that's the biggest part.

Stephen We're not a homogenous species.

Debs And there was something else I was going to ask you then and it's gone, so I'll ask another one. With the whole flow of the site, it's obvious that the Motor Museum is the main attraction, and was the site initially arranged in that way, so that the flow was from the reception to that?

Stephen Yeah, as I understand it, because it has been like it has been for 40 years, so before my time here, it was designed, but it was always designed, it was constructed so this part, the upper part, as we refer to it, of the complex was, if you like, mechanical, historical artefact, etc, etc, and the bottom half of the complex was the built heritage



part of the complex, and when you actually look at it you can see that quite clearly. You may not realise it as a visitor, but that is very much a distinct divide between the two, so it was designed as such.

Debs                    So be that way, yeah. I've remembered the question! When you come up with an interpretation, or whoever it is that's saying 'We need to do this,' like the Bond or maybe something in the Abbey, from what I can gather so far, you all get together and work on this?

Stephen                It depends, yes and no. Obviously it depends on the magnitude of the concern, and I think it does depend on which cultural area it fits into. So again, I don't wish to decry my colleagues, particularly in the Trust, but I think their culture is, 'I'm an expert in one area, therefore I need to get all the experts around me, which may or may not impact on this particular bit of interpretation and get their input,' etc, etc, which can lead to an extremely robust resolve, but it can also be to, in my personal opinion, sometimes too many compromises and can take a month of Sundays. Whereas if we had a new element within Palace House, I'd just say to Susan, 'Susan, get it sorted.' If you need to speak to one of the members of the family about it, she knows which bit she needs to speak about it or not and I trust her good judgement, 'Just get on with it!'

Debs                    That's fair enough. And how do you ((?)) maybe in your other heads of organisations, visitors within that decision-making process of what the visitor is going to see or interpret?

Stephen                Again it depends on the magnitude of it. So, for example, when we put in Bond in Motion, clearly one of the key stakeholders was EM Productions, the film behind, so they absolutely had to approve everything, down to ((colour ways?)) etc, etc.

- Debs            My memory of that conversation was it was tough! ((laughs))
- Stephen        It was interesting, but I could see where they were coming from. But also, with a bit of that, albeit only colleagues, so yes, a slightly biased sample and not statistically valid, one fully accepts, but it was trying to put Bond, just the wow factor, 'We've got a hell of a lot of Bond cars here. What do you think of that? Does that make sense?' And it was good feedback and it didn't lead to a huge amount of change, but some change in terms of not only how we view things, but just how we laid one or two things out, because the operation man goes, 'If you do that, that's going to cause that problem for me there. Can we move that?' 'Ah, right, I hadn't thought of that one,' because it's not my area of expertise, 'Yeah, fine, let's just move that over there.'
- Debs            Because one of the things that I found doing the talking walls for Beaulieu Abbey was the fact that I was talking to Susan and I was talking to Mary, and not so much you, but I didn't talk to any visitors at all in the design of it! I just put the mantle of the visitor on my shoulders and thought, 'Well, this is what I want to see, or this is what my daughter would want to see, or whoever else I know would like to see, these are their areas of interest.' So I didn't actually involve them, and you wonder whether they should be involved.
- Stephen        That's always the dilemma, isn't it? Although you need to be customer focused and there's a time and a place, it is a judgement call, at the end of the day, I think. And we've all read about the projects which research said would work absolutely brilliantly, and they never work, and the projects which research said isn't going to go anywhere, and the CEO has said, 'I don't care, we're going to do it,' and they're blinding successes. They exist, there are case studies
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on that. But I think the approach that we take is, at the end of the day, we are all consumers, so we will bounce it around the office, which can, as I said earlier, be slightly biased, but at least it gives you some feel of how the visitors will look at it. And sometimes I am brought stuff, perhaps a little bit late in the day, and it's great on one level, but I just think, 'This isn't going to go as well as it could do with consumers. Let's make some suggested amendments here, if it's not too late in the day, and it will be better if we do X, Y and Z.'

Debs                    It's the type of comment that's coming back from most people I'm talking to, is the fact that the curator designer element is because we kind of work from the consumer perspective anyway, so we're assuming that we're the visitor, in that sense.

Stephen                Yeah, but I'm sure there's the element, and again we've all seen it, the drawing, 'Here's how the QS priced it, here's how the architect envisages it, and here's how the builder builds it, and this is what the client really wanted.'

Debs                    The swinging thing and the ((?)), yeah.

Stephen                That's it, so there is undoubtedly elements of that. But again, I think it's going to be interesting how design will change in the future, as I'm sure it will, particularly as you go down more the electronic delivery route, because I think there's this belief, be it right or wrong, of when you put up a new website, actually a new website isn't tested to death, because it's always this, 'Let's get it up and we'll find out about the glitches later.' And I think there's more and more of that, 'Let's just stick it out there and see how people react to it, and if it's not particularly good we'll tweak it later,' because it's dead easy to do.

Debs But it's bad design! ((laughs))

Stephen But that's how it's done, because you've got other pressures on you. And there has to be, I think, on some instances, albeit it's a gung-ho attitude perhaps, that something is better than nothing. I can remember on the Top Gear exhibition we have here, we got permission very late in the day for that, so I had six weeks to get the whole thing in, and there wasn't anything other than big sketches, any kind of real detail. Now I could imagine in an out and out museum, like the National Science Museum, that it would have been sat down for six months to do it, whereas I just got some team together and said, 'Right, we need ground works done in there, just sort it for me. This is what I need.'

((part 2))

Debs So it's lucky for you that you're able to make those snap decisions. In the big organisations, like the National Trust, English Heritage, and various others, and the bigger museums, they're not going to have that ability to do those snap decisions because of the stakeholders or the people doing the funding, or you have to apply for funding to do it.

Stephen But I think it's an attitude of mind as much as anything, and I heard at a recent ALVA meeting, they had a woman in from, I think it was the V&A, that's where Barry was recently, wasn't it? Yeah. And she was actually saying about the ten-year journey they'd undertaken for cultural change, and as she readily admitted, ten years ago, the Bowie collection wouldn't even have looked at them for it, but because they've moved on and part of that process was keeping the curatorial team clearly involved in the process, but getting them to think differently, that they're able to do the kind of things they did.

And that's what it is, at the end of the day, it's educating everyone involved in the process and being willing to compromise, and seeing the bigger picture between what does the visitor really want, and yes we need to try and deliver that, because actually the only way that people will come and see your wonderful collections is if it's actually interesting to them. They don't care if it's interesting to you, it's got to be interesting to them because they're paying money to come in, at the end of the day. But in such a way that clearly it doesn't undermine all those really positive things about curatorial ownership of artefacts, etc, etc.

Debs                    Because I spoke – a long time ago now – to Ailsa Barry at the Natural History Museum, and she headed up digital media at the time, and I was asking her about the matrix thing with the different layers, and she said that would be really good, because most of their problems are you've got the professors and the scientists who are saying that, 'Yes but they need to know this information.' 'Yes, but they don't want to know that information.' So by giving the visitors the option to choose what level of information they want, she thought was good, and it's something difficult to do most often. Did you think that with the talking walls? I know we only ever did the one level, but did you think that was a good way?

Stephen                Yeah, and ultimately that kind of device does help you to layer it between, on the one extreme, what I would term the dry and stuffy but factual information, which has got to be put there, and in the context of cars, how many miles to the gallon, when was it built, blah, blah, blah. And some of the other things we've been talking about: why was it black, why was Ford so successful, was this car used by a little old granny? Etc, etc.

- Debs            So it allows you to put that information in on those different areas.
- Stephen        Yeah, basic information, go to one. If you actually understand a bit about cars and want to know about Alpha Engine 5, go to two. If you're a PhD student and you're a really boring old fart, go to...' ((laughs))
- Debs            Thank you! ((laughs))
- Stephen        But you give people the options. My wife's uncle is one of those chaps, if you put him a museum, he will read literally every single word, whereas I'm more of a grazer, and if something really catches my mind, my imagination, I will go with it.
- Debs            Want to find out more about it, on the phone, Wikipedia!
- Stephen        That's it.
- Debs            So if you have a website that they can access with that information built into it, then they can go to you and they're constantly getting the Beaulieu brand with them, aren't they?
- Stephen        Yeah.
- Debs            That's what I thought anyway! Just very quickly, towards the end, the Beaulieu Abbey kiosk, the material in there, I don't know how much you used it or played with it, but did you think there was too much choice? Did you think there was too much? It was built as a website primarily, so there was probably too much information on the kiosk and I didn't expect people to be using or going into it in great depth there. But do you think visitors should have that amount of choice, or do you choose it for them?
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Stephen I think the answer to that is that in an ideal world there is a mound of information which they can get in layers. I wouldn't want to advocate you stick one page up there, so to speak, it needs to be multi-layered. However, having said that, depending on where it is and what it is about, from an operator's point of view, you don't necessarily want all the information, because someone could stay there for an hour and you've got a whole queue behind you of people who also want to access that, so that gives you operational problems. So, as always, it's that fine balance, and I suspect what will happen in the future is we will layer it up to so much, but then it will be, 'There is more information available, please go to X, Y, Z when you get home and it's all there for you.' Or 'Send us your email and we'll give you access to,' or, indeed, because the National Motor Museum Trust doesn't get any core government funding, it may be, 'There's more information and pay us a quid and you can then download it.'

Debs Yeah, that makes sense.

Stephen So you can commercialise it.

Debs 'Friends of Beaulieu' kind of membership that you pay for and then you have access to that information and it can be tailored to your personal interests as well.

Stephen Yeah, but of course it's the huge cost of digitisation of the vast records they've got in the first place, which is the real difficulty for the Trust.

Debs There is funding.

Stephen        Yeah, I know, but when you've got a million photographs, at least, that's not cheap! And you've got about half a mile of book space. You know there's copyright issues in all of that, but that's not cheap to digitise. That's the number one problem.

Debs            So that's a big project.

Stephen        That's a big funding, and if we can secure the funding, there are aspirations within the Trust, quite understandably and agreeably, that it's digitised, a lot of the stuff, but it's just the basic funding, huge.

Debs            I understand that, and certainly the amount of information I researched for the Abbey app, in order to be able to come up with the characters ((?)) obviously helped with, but all the other stuff, the build of the 3D model and everything else, a huge amount of research! And just in order to be able to understand the building and be able to put it up, knowing architecturally how things would have been placed, like the hidden staircase and everything, how that would work with the outside part of the model, and so on. So all of these things take a lot of research, full stop, and then what do you do with all that information? You want to give it out.

One last question, because I know the time's up, probably. Out of everything you've done, all the roles that you partake in, you run, which one would you like to elevate, or which do you think is elevated above all of those things that you've done or would like to do? What is Steve? ((laughs))

Stephen        Steve's number one thing he's done here?



- Debs Well, not necessarily the one thing that you've done, but if you could go forward and elevate one thing up as being the thing that you really want to do, you personally really want to do, what would that be?
- Stephen BMD? No, I don't honestly know, because I do think there is still lots to be done here, which will change over time by the nature of how time moves forward, and therefore I can't answer that because it just constantly changes.
- Debs So you wouldn't want to go and be involved more with the historic houses and things like that?
- Stephen No, I just like the whole- I mean I do think the one thing I'd like to see within the museum, and I appreciate that there are difficulties again of funding, etc, is whilst we have an absolutely superb collection in there, I'm aware, which I've mentioned many times, that one of the prime motivators of people is nostalgia. And whilst I'm absolutely not advocating 'get rid of', I do think we need to bring in more contemporary vehicles. People of my generation, I could well imagine want to see the Mark I Golf, and we haven't got the Mark I Golf from the early 80s, stuff like that. And it's recognising that, and recognising that whilst we've got an absolutely superb, unique vintage and veteran collection, actually, probably, and I haven't researched it, but I can almost reckon that most people want to see a few early cars to give context, but they don't want to see as many as we've got.
- Debs So maybe the classics.
- Stephen Yeah, more of their generation, more of their father's generation.
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Debs            Yeah, because I know my father was really interested in the vintage and veteran, but of course when I go there, I'm more interested in the classics, and there are not so many classic in there. I don't think you've got a Triumph Stage, I don't think.

Stephen        No, a wonderful car.

Debs            You can't have mine! ((laughs)) But I see your point.

Stephen        Yeah, it's moving on so that we're relevant. But I just genuinely think, because of the nature of time, there's just got to be constant changes. There's that old saying, basically, 'Adapt or die,' and if we don't adapt, we will die, which means it's got to be a constant moving forward. We're only as good as the last customer we saw. It's all trite, but it's also very true.

Debs            Yes it is. Thank you very much, I really appreciate it.