

By Endurance We Conquer

Scott Polar Research Institute

Stakeholder Evaluation Report
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1 Introduction

This is an evaluation of the *By Endurance We Conquer* project at the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI), part of the University of Cambridge. In the centenary period of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, this project aimed to develop the SPRI's collection of Sir Ernest Shackleton related material. The Institute received £500,000 for the project from the National Heritage Lottery Funded Collecting Cultures programme. The project ran from 2014 to 2019.

The evaluation was commissioned by Charlotte Connelly, the Institute's Polar Museum Curator, to enable the SPRI to assess the success of the collecting elements of this project. It explores if it is good to conduct targeted collecting in a market with a strong collector base, during a significant anniversary period.

The following areas were identified for exploration:

- What were the advantages and disadvantages of this collecting project coinciding with a significant **anniversary period**?
- What were the challenges of collecting in this **particular market**, which has a community of well established, active collectors and a limited quantity of available material?
- Which **approaches to collecting** were the most successful for this targeted collecting project?
- Was the **choice of materials** targeted for collection influenced by SPRI's remit to support researchers as well as to support museum visitors? If so, did this have an impact on the success of the project?
- How do stakeholders feel about this university collection being developed with this **targeted approach, using public money**, in this particularly strong market?
- Did the project achieve its **initial aims**?
- Were there any **other benefits** to doing this project, apart from growing the collection?
- What **recommendations** can be drawn out from this project, which might help improve similar collecting projects in the future? What lessons can be learnt for allocating resources/ energy for future projects?

2 Methodology

The research was conducted with eight stakeholders identified by Charlotte Connelly and Archivist Naomi Boneham. The individuals were selected to reflect a range of perspectives across the project both internally and externally. Some stakeholders had been working on the project for a number of years whereas others had only minimal involvement. There were:

- Five members of the SPRI staff,
- Three external stakeholders (holders of private collections and an auction house representative).

The fieldwork consisted of:

- individual face-to-face interviews, on site at the SPRI (five internal stakeholders),
- individual telephone interviews (three external stakeholders).

The semi-structured interviews took place in September 2019 and lasted an average of 22 minutes, ranging from 11 to 50 minutes. A discussion guide was used to steer the research, with questions being selected to suit the role and involvement of the stakeholder. The interviews were recorded for report writing purposes. The data was transcribed, collated and categorised according to the aims of the research project. Patterns and themes were drawn out, as well as individual remarks, to illustrate responses from stakeholders. Quotes are given verbatim in the report, with occasional grammatical tweaks to facilitate reading. All responses, as well as certain references to individuals, have been anonymised.

3 Executive Summary

3.1 Context: Collecting within a significant anniversary period

The project coincided with the centenary anniversary of Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. This context was advantageous because it:

- Raised the public profile of Shackleton,
- Increased the number of items available for purchase,
- Raised awareness of the SPRI,
- Raised the SPRI's awareness of other relevant activity.

However, the major disadvantage was that the anniversary was seen to have a significant impact on raising the prices of items for sale.

3.2 Context: Collecting within a challenging market

In this particular market, there is a community of active collectors and a limited quantity of available material. Wealthy collectors, both well established and new, were enthusiastic bidders putting pressure on the market and increasing prices. It was hard for the SPRI to judge the potential success of each bid, and difficult to purchase items at auction.

As a public body collecting in this context, it was important for the SPRI to follow ethical guidelines, and not to disclose which materials it was interested in acquiring. This helped avoid artificially inflating prices. However, it could become problematic if the SPRI unwittingly found itself bidding against either:

- Private collectors who might ultimately intend to donate or lend the item to the SPRI,
- Another public institution such as the National Maritime Museum.

3.3 Approaches to collecting

There were four approaches to collecting Shackleton related material for the SPRI collection.

- When **purchasing at auction**, the SPRI often found itself outbid, partly due to the heightened interest in Shackleton and the challenging, enthusiastic market. This was compounded by the funding regulations, which stipulated that valuations were required for items above £5,000 and that bids must be in line with the valuations. Stakeholders did, however, agree that these regulations needed to be in place to ensure public money was well spent and the market not artificially inflated. There were some issues with questionable valuations. Bidding at auction was seen to be a time-consuming, stressful and demoralising process for staff.
- **Purchasing from dealers** was quite successful and a relatively easy approach to collecting.
- **Negotiating private treaty sales** was preferable to attempting to buy at auction and could be mutually beneficial for the SPRI and the vendor.
- **Converting long-term loans to acquisitions** was seen to have been successful in a range of scenarios, including one where SPRI's request to buy an item prompted the offer of a donation. Since other approaches had been exhausted, converting loans was now being proactively pursued.

3.4 Choice of materials

The SPRI has a remit to support both researchers and museum visitors. It was said that some acquisition choices were particularly shaped by the need to support researchers, for example:

- Not acquiring original diaries if transcripts were already in the collection,
- Acquiring an example of a particular photographic process, even though the actual image was already represented in the collection.

The need to support researchers was balanced against the benefit to museum visitors, with items ideally having both a scholarly and storytelling value. The project was seen to have been more successful because it had not just focused on iconic, commemorative items, but had successfully sought to purchase things which supported research needs and added new information to the stories being told.

3.5 Using public money to develop this collection

It was agreed that developing the university collection in this particular way with public money was appropriate. It was a way to safeguard items of national importance in an accessible way for the public. However, some staff were uncomfortable with the large sums of public money involved with this particular area of collecting and were concerned that it could inflate the private market. This made it particularly important to have a clear, relevant collecting policy.

3.6 Achieving the initial project aims

The project was said to have successfully met its aim to **purchase Shackleton related items for the archive, library and museum**. Collecting for the museum had been somewhat limited by the range of items available to collect. At the time of the evaluation, there were still some unspent funds. This was attributed to the challenges identified earlier as well as to wise spending and generous donations.

The project had intended to expand the collections which specifically related to **Shackleton's life outside the expeditions**, such as his family life. This had been achieved to some extent, through letters and material connected to wartime activities; however, more work was still to be done in this area.

The project aimed to develop a **procedural manual** giving guidance on purchasing at auction and buying by private treaty in order to develop skills in the organisation and sector. Despite various challenges, there was now a series of working documents to support and guide staff through the process of purchasing at auction and by private treaty. This would ensure that the procedures were appropriate and thorough both now and in the future, and that staff had the relevant, transferable skills.

3.7 Benefits beyond growing the collections

Beyond growing their Shackleton collections, the project enabled the SPRI to:

- Develop and strengthen new and existing **external relationships**,
- Develop **internal relationships** by working together and learning from each other across the museum, library and archive departments,
- Develop **skills and expertise** including specialist subject knowledge, museum acquisitions, bidding at auction, conservation, and managing volunteers and large projects,
- Develop and share **procedures** to support current and future work,
- Develop **other aspects of their work** including future collecting, organisational promotion, the existing Shackleton displays, outreach and access activities.

3.8 Recommendations for future collecting projects

Stakeholders identified recommendations, based on their experiences of this project, which could help similar collecting projects in the future.

- **Choosing the subject matter:** It could be preferable to choose a subject which was less competitively collected, and to think carefully about the timing of the project.
- **Choosing the material:** It could be beneficial to focus resources on preserving, caring for and cataloguing items which are already in the collection or on loan to the organisation. It might also be preferable to consider converting existing loans to acquisitions sooner rather than later.
- **Staffing:** It could be useful to encourage cross-departmental team working. Careful consideration should be given to project staffing structures to ensure that staff are in place until the end of the project and that the appropriate skills and resources are in place for tasks.
- **Connecting with others:** It was recommended that projects should put resources into connecting with others who can share knowledge, expertise and connections.
- **Making time to plan and manage finances:** Good financial management is important to make the project realistic and viable. The time required to do this should not be underestimated.
- **Recommendations for funders:** Funders may want to consider a more flexible approach to valuations and other aspects of the project. It was recommended that funding which develops collections continues in the future.

4 Context: Collecting within a significant anniversary period

This collecting project coincided with the anniversary of Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Delivering the project within this context brought with it a range of advantages and disadvantages.

4.1 Advantages

4.1.1 Raised public profile of Shackleton

The anniversary raised the profile of Shackleton amongst the general public. There was an increase in press activity, making the collections feel more relevant and generating more visitors to the SPRI to see related collections. This gave a positive context in which the SPRI could develop this part of their collection.

The Shackleton name was very much in the public's mind. I think it was appropriate to make a bid for this money and to develop the collection. And I imagine that we've had more people coming in to see material, in line with commemorating the centenary, so that's great.
(Internal Stakeholder)

4.1.2 Increased the number of items available for purchase

It was suggested that the increased interest in Shackleton created by the anniversary resulted in more items being available for sale. This was due to:

- Individuals being reminded that they owned Shackleton related items,
- Individuals and collectors feeling that it would be a buoyant market in which to sell.

Around 2000 to 2002 there had been a surge of interest in Shackleton, coinciding with a television series featuring Kenneth Branagh, and renewed attention from collectors in the USA. During the centenary period, some of this material was now reappearing on the market.

Centenaries tend to flush things out of the woodwork. You know people suddenly think, "Oh well I've got that in my cupboard and maybe I could make some money out of it". Things do tend to emerge during periods of high publicity if I can put it that way. And the auction houses, I'm pretty sure they inflate prices for those occasions as well, which makes things doubly attractive for everybody.
(External Stakeholder)

4.1.3 Raised awareness of the SPRI

The increased interest and activity around Shackleton during this period were said to have raised awareness of the SPRI. Around the anniversary period the SPRI held a touring exhibition and programme of events. There were also connections to other activities such as the national act of commemoration for Shackleton and his men at Westminster Abbey.

There was a service at Westminster Abbey that hundreds of people came to and we were a partner. People did come and chat to us and said; "Did you know I've got this," or "In due course I expect this to come to you," and those conversations might not have happened without that centenary being there.
(Internal Stakeholder)

Individuals, collectors and auction houses were also potentially more aware of the SPRI as a collecting organisation. They had an understanding that the Institute had funding to spend on specific Shackleton collecting and would therefore want to make acquisitions. Connections were forged or rekindled with families of descendants. It was noted, however, that not all auction houses were aware of the funding. Those that were aware of the project could possibly have directed individuals to the SPRI if they specifically wanted to sell to a public institution.

4.1.4 Raised the SPRI's awareness of other activity

For the SPRI, the Shackleton anniversary raised awareness internally of other things going on in the field. The Institute was able to view the increased interest in Shackleton in a positive light, safe in the knowledge that they had the funding and capacity to respond positively and collect should the opportunity arise.

*I think we were able to be slightly more aware of what was going on and could make people more aware that we were perhaps looking to add to our collection.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

4.2 Disadvantages

4.2.1 Raising prices

A major disadvantage of the project coinciding with the centenary period was the increased market prices. Families and collectors would have anticipated that prices would increase around the centenary and could have waited for prices to rise before selling their material.

The high-profile centenary and associated increased prices were seen to encourage new, wealthy collectors to enter this already buoyant market.

One person also suggested that auction houses could have been proactively looking for material. This may have encouraged vendors to sell items at auction in the hope of achieving high prices.

*One disadvantage is that when you have a well-marketed, publicised centenary auction or something like that, and all the increased public awareness and press coverage, it tends to push the market up and increase prices. And the factor about the market is that there are quite a lot of relatively new players in it and deep pocketed new players. So they've been competing in a fairly heated market.
(External Stakeholder)*

It was noted that factors other than the centenary might have also contributed to the higher market. For example, Shackleton currently features on the school curriculum and is popular in American leadership literature.

The impact of these inflated prices was that the SPRI was often priced out of the market. Having a pot of funding readily accessible was very useful as the Institute only had one chance to obtain the material at auction. However, it was suggested that there would be advantages to collecting outside of the centenary period where prices might be more reasonable.

5 Context: Collecting within a challenging market

This particular market is known to have a community of well established, active collectors and a limited quantity of available material. These factors presented a range of issues for the SPRI.

5.1 Active collectors

There were said to be many enthusiastic, wealthy collectors in this market. In addition to the more established collectors, there was also a group of people who were relatively new to this market and were excited by collecting in this field. This put pressure on the market and increased prices, making it particularly difficult for the SPRI at auction. It was hard for the Institute to compete in the heat of the moment against wealthy collectors and overseas institutions, and difficult to judge how successful each bid would be. It was said to be preferable to negotiate by private treaty if possible, rather than to attempt to purchase at auction.

*A lot of the collectors out there have really deep pockets, and both can and will keep going up in an auction scenario.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

5.2 Limited quantity of material available

Compared to a decade ago, there was seen to be little coming to market, making it harder to find appropriate things to purchase. However, it was noted that the SPRI had an advantage as it was looking to acquire items which were not necessarily the high value, iconic items sought by many collectors, but the more obscure material beneficial to researchers (see also section 7).

5.3 Ethical considerations

There were ethical issues for the SPRI when collecting within this challenging market. As a public organisation, the SPRI must abide by strict ethical guidelines, meaning that it cannot disclose which material it is interested in acquiring. Bidding for items at auction has the potential to inflate prices. This was seen to be particularly problematic if:

- A private collector was attempting to buy items which they intended to later loan or donate to the SPRI,
- A public organisation, such as the National Maritime Museum, was also bidding for an item with public money, which would ultimately be saved and available for the public whichever organisation won the bid.

*As a museum, you want to act ethically, so you're not going to go around telling people what you are and are not bidding on, because you're in danger of forming a cartel at that point. If National Maritime Museum would have bid on something we were bidding on, obviously we're competing against each other, when ultimately, we don't really mind where it goes as long as it goes into the public domain. They've got an excellent Polar gallery, there's a good argument for it to go either way.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

6 Approaches to collecting

This project explored four different approaches to acquiring material for the SPRI collection:

- Purchasing at auction,
- Purchasing from dealers,
- Negotiating private treaty sales with descendants of Antarctic expedition members and other known collectors,
- Converting long-term loans to acquisitions.

Stakeholders discussed the different approaches and considered which had been the most successful for this targeted collecting project.

6.1 Purchasing at auction

6.1.1 Outbid

The SPRI was often unsuccessful and outbid at auction. Even from the positive position of having funding in place, the SPRI was ‘a relatively frequent under bidder.’ This was said to be, to some extent, because of the heightened interest created by the anniversary and the challenging market. It was easy for prices to significantly escalate when there was competition from wealthy, private individuals.

6.1.2 Valuations

The funding regulations stipulated that valuations had to be obtained for any item above £5,000, and the SPRI bids could not exceed their valuations. Given the market context, these restrictive valuations were problematic in themselves, but there were also issues with some valuations which were described as ‘really strange or partial’. For example, one particular item within a set, had been given a low valuation as the valuator felt that it would not be valuable if that collection was broken up. However, at auction that particular piece went for about £50,000, whilst others in that collection sold for even more.

In another case, an institution was selling an item which they had been left by one of Shackleton’s team. The SPRI had initially approached the organisation with an offer of a private sale, but ultimately the item went to auction. In the competitive bidding, the museum was ‘left behind pretty quickly’.

*We went to the effort of getting it valued, making a really good case for support, and got to auction and it went for twice, three times, and sometimes five times the upper estimate. It was just not a viable option in the end which was a shame.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

Whilst these issues were seen to be problematic, particularly in such a competitive market, stakeholders understood why the rules were in place. Everyone agreed that it was important to ensure that public funds were responsibly spent and that prices were not artificially inflated. Interviewees were not able to offer alternative solutions to this issue.

*I understand the rules completely and I understand that they’re put in place to protect the waste of Lottery Fund money from over-enthusiastic bidding for things that go through the roof. I accept it. When you’re dealing with things that are almost always going for much more than what their ‘conservative valuation’ would be, it makes it impossible for us to compete, and that is exactly what has happened. For things that are scarce and highly valued by collectors, [this approach] really doesn’t work very well.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

6.1.3 Time-consuming process

The SPRI invested many resources into preparing to bid for items at auction, often for the material to then be sold for many times the upper valuation. This was a steep learning curve for the staff, as they navigated the way in which the auction houses and university systems worked together under high pressure timings. One member of staff described this process as a ‘little bit soul destroying’.

You have to put in quite a lot of effort as a museum, to make a purchase ethically in addition to getting the dispensation to go to one seller. Obviously, you can't get three competitive quotes, there's only one person selling a unique item. Then we had to secure the independent valuation itself, which isn't cheap. Then you need to circulate the story of it around everyone who works in the collection and the Director so that it's transparent and we're all on board that we want to go for it.
(Internal Stakeholder)

It was suggested that in the future, purchasing at auction could be done in a more systematic, proactive way - for example skimming through future auctions on a regular basis to identify areas of interest.

6.1.4 Generally unsuccessful

Purchasing at auction was therefore seen to be a relatively unsuccessful, 'high risk strategy' for the SPRI. Furthermore, whilst former employees at the SPRI had more experience of buying at auctions, current staff found it to be a stressful process which they did not enjoy.

Going to the auction houses, is always a bit of a last desperate measure to be honest. It's much better if you can save things up by treaty sale or with the families, or with the collectors before they go to market.
(External Stakeholder)

6.2 Purchasing from dealers

Only two interviewees passed comment on this approach. An external stakeholder said that this approach had been 'pretty successful on the whole.' An internal stakeholder felt that 'dealing with dealers' was probably the easiest way to acquire items for the collection.

6.3 Negotiating private treaty sales

The SPRI generally had a preference to acquire items by negotiating private treaty sales rather than auction. This approach was seen to be 'significantly more successful than bidding at auction'. It worked for both parties as it avoided the additional costs and commissions of selling and buying at auction. This approach had been successful in cases where the SPRI already knew the vendor and where they were making new contacts.

That's generally been quite successful because we've had clear steps and a process on how to do it, and we've had budget which is really exciting because it doesn't happen that often.
(Internal Stakeholder)

I thought the project was greatly successful. A lot of the families and collectors have gone straight to the Institute rather than bothering with aucioneers. It's enabled the Institute to short circuit that market process in a lot of instances, and I think that the more we can do that the better.
(External Stakeholder)

It was said that individuals often wanted their items to go to a public institution such as the SPRI, whilst also wanting some financial compensation. Negotiating sales in this way with individuals meant that everyone's needs could be met, in an equitable way without the need for entering into an uncertain bidding war.

From the perspective of one donating family, the experience of working with the SPRI in this way had been smooth and 'pretty positive', although communication could have been more effective. The SPRI had been clear on the material which they wanted to acquire from the family's larger collection.

The museum made one successful private treaty sale, where the seller had contacted the museum directly. The item had not met its reserve at auction, and the seller was willing to negotiate on price. The highest valuation obtained by the SPRI met the vendor's lowest selling point, and the sale was successful.

In one instance, the SPRI negotiated the price with vendors, based on the funding restrictions that objects over £5,000 needed an independent valuation. This encouraged the vendor to drop the price to under £5,000 to avoid the associated risk and costs of the independent valuation.

6.4 Converting long-term loans to acquisitions

The approach of converting long-term loans to acquisitions has had a mixed success rate to date. Interviewees gave examples of lenders agreeing to sell their items, or even offering them as gifts. However, this approach has generally been seen as 'a last resort' for this project. The organisation already had access to the loans, so it was felt that it should focus on finding *new* material for the collection. It was also thought preferable to wait to see if any larger items came up for auction. However, by September 2019 when evaluation interviews took place, there was still money for purchases, so attention was being turned to converting long-term loans.

One lender had already been thinking of selling a loan item, which gave the SPRI the opportunity to develop their relationship with the lender and consider buying the item. In this case, the SPRI was interested in buying just some elements of a large collection. The elements of interest happened to have a relatively low valuation compared to the vendor's other items. The vendor was aware that the other part of their collection was 'likely to go through the roof' at auction. A fair price was discussed and offered to the SPRI.

This project gave the SPRI the impetus to contact existing lenders. In one case, when asked if they would consider selling their item to the Institute, the family offered to donate it.

They loaned it to start with because the family was still quite attached to part of it. Since we've had it, I think they've grown less attached to it and more used to not having it. I think they've reassessed – I think they had to let go gently.
(Internal Stakeholder)

The SPRI is now tracing and approaching more individual lenders. However, it can be difficult to trace some lenders, for example with a historic loan from the 1930s, the SPRI may have lost contact with the family, and have no address, phone number or email to track them down.

One individual suggested that it may have been beneficial to start this particular collecting approach earlier in the project. From the outset, the Institute could have potentially purchased items on loan which were known to be useful to the SPRI, making the most of the existing positive connection with the owner.

7 Choice of materials

The SPRI have a remit to support both researchers and museum visitors. This research explored whether this remit affected the choice of materials targeted for acquisition and whether this had an impact on the success of the project.

7.1 Supporting researchers

Some interviewees felt that the choice of some materials had been clearly influenced by the SPRI's remit to support researchers. One interviewee explained that, as a university museum, they were conscious of giving value back to the university by providing access to collections for research purposes. As a research collection, it was felt that acquisitions should focus on telling a wider story rather than duplicating existing material. For example, it was thought unnecessary to acquire original diaries if their transcripts were already in the collection and if the originals would not add anything new to the story. There was also a place for telling the stories of those people who were less well known, but still played a critical part in the expeditions.

We hold more of the documentary material than anybody else, and our collection is fantastic. I think that where we have been able to open it out a bit, is in terms of the so-called lesser lights of the expedition, of course everybody's important on these expeditions, and I think that there we've actually done quite well.
(Internal Stakeholder)

It was important for the SPRI to thoroughly understand what was in their collection in a detailed way from the start of the project. This knowledge informed purchasing decisions – for example, the SPRI chose to acquire an example of an image which was already represented in their collection, because they did not already hold an example of that particular photographic process.

7.2 Supporting both researchers and museum visitors

Whilst the choice of objects was 'very strongly influenced' by what researchers were interested in, this was balanced against the benefit to museum visitors. Museums were said to engage people who were not experts, particularly through exhibits which told good stories. Ideally items would, therefore, have both a scholarly and more general interest value. It was therefore good to have a broad and deep collection, which included items telling the Polar story beyond the heroic narrative.

7.3 Impact on project success

Overall, it was thought that the collecting project had been more successful because it had not focused on acquiring iconic, commemorative items, but had sought out material which also held research value.

We have a research type mission and a public interest type mission as well, but we don't necessarily want every pair of socks that Captain Scott or Sir Ernest Shackleton ever wore, or every single Polar Medal that was ever awarded to someone on one of those expeditions. By not bidding for those big ticket items, we've been able to have success elsewhere.
(Internal Stakeholder)

Only one interviewee (external to the organisation) specifically felt that the choice of materials collected had not had an impact on the success of the project. They felt that due to the limited amount of material available for collection, there had not been much opportunity for proactive choice.

8 Using public money to develop this collection

Stakeholders were asked to consider how they felt about public money being used to develop the university collection in this targeted way, in this particularly strong market.

8.1 Of national importance in the public domain

It was said that the collection should be developed in this way with public money because it ensured that these nationally important items were in the public domain. The museum was described as a public face of the university, a place where the general public could connect with the organisation. With over 50,000 visitors coming to the museum for free each year, it was irrelevant that this was a university collection and appropriate that public funds are used to develop the collection. From an auction house perspective, it was good that the SPRI had the resources to take part in an auction, rather than, for example, the Institute waiting for an application for an export license.

*It is of national importance. It is an important part of our history and stuff, and it all fits in with the fact that there's still a lot of ongoing research into the Polar regions.
(External Stakeholder)*

8.2 Large sums of money

8.2.1 High price of items

There were some concerns about the particularly large sums of money involved. Some internal stakeholders had not previously had experience of collecting items with such high financial value. Staff noted that exploration history had a different value structure compared with other fields such as social history and fine art.

*Safeguarding objects for the public is an admirable thing to do. I think that some of the amounts of money that are being sought for some of these items is just absurd. I'm not very comfortable about us spending significant sums of money on them. I'm not decrying it happened, just saying it's been a bit of a learning curve for me.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

8.2.2 Inflating the market

For some internal stakeholders, there was a concern that public money might inflate the private market. In this context, it was preferable to negotiate with private individuals, rather than using auction houses with buyers' premiums.

*Some people say you shouldn't do it because it puts the prices up. All the collectors knew pretty quickly that Scott Polar suddenly had a budget, so it's a bit of a Catch 22, because it means they'll go to the Institute because they know you've got money and that means the prices go up too. I don't know what you do about that conundrum.
(External Stakeholder)*

8.3 Clear, relevant collecting policy

There was a sense from some internal stakeholders that the heroic age was already well represented at the SPRI. It was therefore important to be clear on how much money should be allocated to growing this area. A clear, relevant collecting policy was crucial for ensuring that money was well spent. This includes querying the research value of each acquisition, and viewing purchases within the context of the future direction of the Institute. One interviewee felt that the museum's acquisition policy was 'relatively outdated' and would benefit from being updated with a more proactive approach to collecting in areas with gaps.

*At the moment the focus is very specifically on the likes of Shackleton and Scott. We've got other gaps in the collection areas that are more urgent perhaps today, like climate change, that we want to represent. It would be nice to revise the collection policy and then see how that affects what we do.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

9 Achieving the initial project aims

By *Endurance We Conquer* had three main collecting aims:

- To purchase items relating to Shackleton for the archive, library and museum,
- To expand the material in the collections which related to Shackleton's life outside the major expeditions, including his family life,
- To develop a procedural manual giving guidance on purchasing at auction / buying by private treaty in order to develop skills in the organisation and sector.

Interviewees explored the extent to which they thought these aims had been met.

9.1 Purchasing items for the archive, library and museum

The project aimed to purchase items relating to Shackleton for the archive, library and museum.

9.1.1 Successful

This aim was said to have been successfully met. Some important items had been acquired which enhanced the archive, library and museum collections. Resources had been focused on successfully filling gaps in the collection. It was said that the rare library book collection was already strong, so collecting had focused on archival materials and museum objects.

*It delivered what they set out to do, which was being able to save the items for the nation that came up through the centenary period.
(External Stakeholder)*

9.1.2 Successful but with some limitations

Purchasing material for the museum collection had been less successful than purchasing material for the archive and picture library. It was noted that the project had been particularly successful at acquiring items which were not considered to be highly collectable, big value items. This was partly because the high-level material was generally still sitting in private hands and was not being released to market. The museum was keen to not collect objects which were already well represented in their collection, or which did not tell a new story, such as the items of cutlery which were more commonly available.

*I think in terms of second-level things, we've done okay with that, and it's filled in our collections really nicely from that point of view, but in terms of highlight things, it's not worked so well.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

Whilst the SPRI's Shackleton collections were undoubtedly better than they had been before the project, it was said that their Scott collections were still stronger. Whilst the comparison between these collections was not seen to be a particularly important measure of success, the original funding bid had mentioned a desire to elevate the Shackleton collection to the same level as the Scott collection.

9.1.3 Unspent funds

At the time of the evaluation interviews (September 2019), it seemed unlikely that all of the funding allocated to acquisitions would be spent. Internal stakeholders were keen to stress that this underspend did not mean that the project had been unsuccessful. Staff were pleased that money had not been spent 'for the sake of it', and that they had been careful not to inflate the market. They noted that some of the bigger, 'splendid' pieces such as the Spencer Smith Polar medal, which they could have potentially purchased, were actually gifted to the SPRI over this period. As the project drew to a close, unspent funds were potentially being channelled towards purchasing existing loan items.

*We've approached a few people about converting historic loans to potential purchases and they've all ended up giving them as gifts, which is nice.
Let's not spend public money if we don't have to.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

9.2 Expanding collections relating to Shackleton's life outside expeditions

The SPRI aimed to expand their collections relating to Shackleton's life outside the major expeditions, including his family life.

9.2.1 Successful but with some limitations

To some extent the project had expanded the SPRI collections relating to Shackleton's life outside of the major expeditions. They had successfully collected some letters which helped to illuminate this aspect of his life story. They acquired some new material connected to wartime activities, which added new meaning to other items in the collections, helping to flesh out a fuller story. It was noted that it was hard to know where there were gaps to be filled.

*We were able to get some insight through some letters that we purchased, but we don't know what we don't know.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

9.2.2 Work to be done

No one felt that this had been a particularly strong area for the project. One member of staff said that, in their experience of the project to date, the focus had mainly been on the bigger items and that they had 'stuck much more to the expedition life than beyond.'

9.3 Developing a procedural manual

The project aimed to develop a procedural manual giving guidance on purchasing at auction and buying by private treaty in order to develop skills in the organisation and sector.

9.3.1 Challenges

This aim was generally said to have been successfully met, but it had not been smooth sailing. It was said that previously, acquisition processes had been undertaken by a single person and this had not necessarily been well documented. Originally it had been intended that the member of staff with acquisition expertise would share their knowledge with colleagues. However, a restructure at the start of the project resulted in a gap in staff expertise. This change in personnel meant that some of the anticipated training and skills sharing between staff had not happened. Whilst former staff had experience of bidding at auction and getting valuations, new staff had had to learn this 'terrifying new skill' on the job with limited support.

9.3.2 Successful

Rather than producing a procedural manual, the team had chosen to create a series of working documents to support staff purchasing at auction and buying by private treaty. Creating these procedures had been a steep learning curve, but the documents had developed organically, and were now seen to be critically important. Staff had a better understanding of what was needed in terms of timescales and university procedures. Discussions and documentation about acquisitions now followed an agreed set of processes, which included looking at *how* things were collected, as well as *what* was collected.

It was said that there was now enough training and documentation in place to support future SPRI staff. These were identified as transferable skills, which could be applied in other places of work in the future.

*I think we've also documented it well enough, and have enough training in place, that future members of staff will benefit from it as well. I think definitely everyone who's been involved in the project will carry those skills with them wherever they go onwards.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

10 Benefits beyond growing the collections

In addition to growing the SPRI collections, there were other benefits to the *By Endurance We Conquer* project.

10.1 Developing relationships

10.1.1 External relationships

The project was seen to help develop new and existing external relationships with auction houses, collectors and descendants of those involved in the Shackleton expedition. Staff identified individual relationships which had been successfully navigated, developed and strengthened. They could now put energy and resources into cultivating the most beneficial, philanthropic relationships.

I think we built some relationships with auction houses and with private collectors. I suspect there's two camps. There's those that are very altruistic and happy to supply a good deal, acknowledging that we're making this available to the public. And there are those who are just out to get as much money as they possibly can. Trying to work with people who want to work with us and cultivate those relationships is key.
(Internal Stakeholder)

The development of external relationships was also supported by other activities happening during the centenary period, such as an exhibition at Bonhams and a memorial service at Westminster Abbey. These allowed the SPRI to forge new contacts and rekindle existing connections.

10.1.2 Internal relationships

This project gave the team at the SPRI the opportunity to work together across museum, library and archive departments. Colleagues came together in regular project meetings and considered the acquisitions across their three areas. There were opportunities to learn from each other and for individuals from different departments to develop their understanding of the different wider sectors.

I think that integration is a good thing. All our project meetings were with the director, librarian, picture librarian, museum curator and archivist. One of the intangible things is that we actually met together and rather enjoyed it in a certain way, and I think that's not to be under-estimated. I'm a huge believer in the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, and I think this is one example where this is certainly true because of the breadth and depth of our collections.
(Internal Stakeholder)

10.2 Developing skills and expertise

Stakeholders were able to identify a range of skills and expertise that the SPRI staff had gained through their involvement in this project. These included:

- Developing subject specialist knowledge,
- Understanding how the museum sector considered acquisitions,
- Gaining insights and confidence in bidding at auction,
- Improving conservation expertise and skills such as making conservation boxes,
- Understanding how to manage volunteers,
- Honing the project management skills required to deliver a large project over several years.

The knowledge that we've all gained through working on this project, that we can put into our future work, is hugely valuable.
(Internal Stakeholder)

10.3 Developing and sharing procedures

The project gave internal stakeholders the opportunity to develop procedures across the organisation. These new systems were developed through trial and error, allowing time to reflect on experiences, writing up the learning and building this into procedures.

There were now clear policies and procedures for staff to follow in order to make decisions on acquisitions, and guidance on bidding at auction. These were developed together as a team, creating a clear paperwork trail which could be easily followed and implemented by staff, both now and in the future. It was noted that during the course of the project the SPRI had gained accreditation for the Archive and Picture Library, and retained accreditation for the Museum.

We had a collecting policy, but this is about having a document to work through: What is this? What does it relate to? Who does it relate to? What gap will it fill in the collection? It really focuses the mind. A couple of times I've gone through the sheet and it's been an argument not to bid.
(Internal Stakeholder)

I think from a collections point of view one of the really useful things that has come out of it, is that we now have a pipeline for dealing with historic loans. We can use that format with any historic loan, it doesn't have to be a Shackleton-related one in the future.
(Internal Stakeholder)

One example of the improved systems was that, previously, the archives had relied on a basic Word document to catalogue items. There is now an archive database which links and syncs with the museum and picture library catalogues.

The project resulted in a welcome pack for volunteers, which explains how things function behind the scenes, and gives support for training and tours.

10.4 Developing other aspects of work

Staff highlighted other specific areas of SPRI's work which have been developed as a result of this project, beyond growing the Shackleton collections.

The team have been encouraged to develop their thinking around future areas of collecting. The project was said to have sharpened their mindset, as they considered areas for future proactive collecting, such as focusing on indigenous people, women and the forthcoming SPRI centenary.

The project had given the SPRI a platform to be vocal about what they do as an organisation and why they do it. They were able to explain to others why collecting is an important aspect of their work. One interviewee described this as a great 'excuse to blow that collecting trumpet'.

A touring exhibition was developed, and this travelled overseas. This was said to 'work well' and was described as a 'tremendous thing'.

The project had encouraged staff to think more about the Shackleton displays in the museum, resulting in a more rounded story. This broader Shackleton story was available to new audiences, with the Virtual Shackleton project enabling them to access stories online. The museum displays were also enhanced with the addition of new showcases.

The project included a successful strand of outreach work. It was noted that sharing the new acquisition paperwork directly with education staff had been particularly beneficial, helping to upskill this team and expand their specific subject knowledge.

There had been an opportunity to share the collection with blind and partially sighted audiences. This included staff and volunteers having visual awareness training, creating audio descriptions and tactile models. This was seen to be worthwhile, rewarding and meaningful.

It's just a nice feeling to know that you're offering something that otherwise they wouldn't have been able to get. It's so meaningful as well, often to that audience. I think that's probably the nicest takeaway for me is being able to support a different audience to get to know the stories as well.
(Internal Stakeholder)

11 Recommendations for future collecting projects

Based on their experience of this project, stakeholders were asked to identify recommendations which could help similar collecting projects in the future.

11.1 Choosing the subject matter

It was suggested that in the future, it might be preferable to choose a less collectable subject, and to consider the timing of projects carefully. It would have been easier for the project to focus on an area of the collection, which was weaker, rather than on a key figure such as Shackleton. It could be preferable to pick a subject where the organisation was not competing with a large number of competitors.

Interviewees referred to a previous Collecting Cultures project at the SPRI which focused on acquiring Inuit material. This was given as an example of a simpler project in which the material was more easily commercially available on the art market from specific sellers.

I don't know with the benefit of hindsight whether timing this project to go with a centenary period was a sensible move, because while on the one hand it probably bought things out the woodwork, I think it also elevated the prices as well. So, maybe thinking about timing and maybe thinking about what kind of project, whether it is very collectable heroic era stuff, would be a way to not repeat the same mistakes.

(Internal Stakeholder)

11.2 Choosing the material

It was said by several internal stakeholders that it would potentially have been more useful for the project to focus on items which were already in the collection or on loan to the SPRI. It was suggested that a project focusing on how to preserve and care for existing items would have been particularly useful, rather than chasing after new items. This was particularly the case for the library, which was keen to invest in looking after the existing collections.

If we were doing this again, I would be much more keen that we had money available to improve the security of the collection and the preservation of it. To give ourselves a more controlled temperature and environment in which to store very valuable books. I'd like to spend money on preserving the ones we've got.

(Internal Stakeholder)

As mentioned previously (7.1), it is important that projects have a thorough understanding of the items they already have in their collection. One stakeholder suggested that, in the future, more time could be spent thoroughly cataloguing collections, so that information is tightened up and accurate. It can be 'intoxicating' to have money to spend on new purchases, and having solid facts about the existing collection could help to support and ground decision making.

It was recommended that future projects may consider converting existing loans sooner, rather than later. Much of the material on loan had been of benefit to researchers for many years. Whilst it was good to bring in new material, there were also real benefits to consolidating existing items and converting loans to join the permanent collection.

11.3 Staffing

11.3.1 Working together

Working in a cross departmental team can help give clarity and confidence to the decision-making process. At the SPRI, staff came together to make purchasing decisions and to develop the process paperwork, including letters to lenders. Staff felt that there was a shared understanding, and that they were 'all of a mind about what's important to acquire.' This was said to enable better decision making. It gave people the confidence that they were making the right acquisition choices for the right amount of money. Working collaboratively helped people to feel part of a team, where people had the same clear priorities, safe in the knowledge that everyone was in agreement. Working together also helped reduce duplication and enabled different departments to think about their collections in a more holistic way.

*Team working has enabled us to get different aspects of this project completed.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

11.3.2 Structures and roles

The project was co-led by staff from all areas of the collection and was managed by the Librarian. This was partly due to the timings of staff recruitment at the start of the project. Whilst there was positivity about the way in which the project had been managed, it was suggested that it may have been beneficial if the person running the project had had more specific knowledge of similar collecting projects within the museum sector. This might have provided a deeper understanding of timings and context, and a clearer steer on priorities from the outset.

The project staffing structure included the SPRI archivist being seconded part-time to the project for four years. Based on learning from a previous project, it had been decided that this was the best way to structure this post, rather than having a full-time post over the course of two years. It ensured that someone was in post until the end of the project. This was seen to be a very positive decision, and one which could be replicated in the future.

By contrast, the dedicated outreach post was only in place for the specific centenary period, rather than for the full duration of the four-year project. The rationale behind this structure was not clear to some interviewees, others suggested it was to minimise costs. During the period of the outreach post, there had not been a 'huge amount of material' purchased. Although templates had been created by this dedicated member of staff, it was said that material acquired after the post had finished had not been fully utilised. It was recommended that learning and outreach posts run for the full period of similar collecting projects.

*We had an outreach person for a year and a half, but not the entire length of the project. Maybe it was just to keep the cost down. She did a lot of good work and it was a shame that we just had to stop and yet the project was continuing.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

It was noted that whilst there had been additional staffing resources allocated to delivering the project, there were no additional resources allocated for project management. This meant that the member of staff managing the project was doing so in addition to their other work, which had been difficult. It was recommended that, if possible, additional support or secondments are considered to alleviate this pressure on project management.

One member of staff suggested that, in general, it would be good to allocate more resources to staffing, to give permanent contracts to some key members of the team who were currently on temporary contracts.

11.4 Connecting with others

For this project it had been beneficial for the team to connect with others who could share their knowledge, expertise and connections with the SPRI. These included:

- Families with strong existing ties to the SPRI who often approached the Institute with relevant information,
- Auctioneers who could help direct the SPRI towards interesting material and keep them up to date, whilst also 'spreading the word' with collectors, enabling the SPRI to be more proactive,
- The Collecting Cultures cohort to share progress and to see what was happening across the UK, through attending the biannual meetings,
- Other museums, such as National Maritime Museum, who hosted a visit from the SPRI volunteers.

*Meeting up with other museum people in other museums every six months or so, to compare how people are progressing with their projects has been a lovely experience. It's opened my eyes to what else is happening in the UK in terms of collecting in a way that I wouldn't otherwise have got.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

It was recommended that future projects could put more energy into developing these supportive external connections.

11.5 Making time to plan and manage finances

It was suggested that future projects should make time at the outset to fully understand the cost implications of all aspects of the project. For example, it was important not to underestimate the costs of getting valuations done, and to have a good grasp of conservation needs and associated fees. It was said that this SPRI project had ‘massively’ underestimated the cost of valuations, but had been able to continue with the work due to having ‘interesting relationships’ with valuers who had been ‘very generous with their time’. Had the SPRI been charged the full commercial rate, this part of the budget would have been spent in just two valuations.

*If we were to do it again we would need to have a much bigger valuation pot, even if we then didn't spend it. I would say we were very lucky with a lot of this as valuers were very generous to us.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

11.6 Recommendations for funders

11.6.1 Valuations

The current process for the Collecting Cultures projects is that for material over £5,000, organisations must obtain valuations. It was suggested by one interviewee that the point at which valuations had to be sought could be raised to £10,000. This would help mitigate issues such as:

- Material selling for slightly over the valuation but still being a relatively low budget item,
- The timeframe for getting a valuation resulting in not being able to bid for an item.

As noted earlier (6.1.2) there could be instances where there are issues with these valuations. It was suggested that in the future there could be a route for appealing against unusual valuations, potential through the project Case Manager.

11.6.2 Building in flexibility

It was felt that the world had changed a lot in the five years since the bid had been written. If the project were to have been developed more recently, it is likely that the subjects of climate change and repatriation would have been important strands which would have been ‘impossible to ignore.’ It was suggested that projects and funders could try to build in more flexibility. This could allow for:

- Shifts in priorities and zeitgeist,
- Changes in staffing (skills / expertise),
- Changes in availability / prices of materials for sale.

*I can see why the funders aren't flexible, because you don't want to award funds for a project and then the awardee says, "Great, we're going to change it all." But for unforeseen circumstances like this [restructure], maybe there should be a process by which you can make changes.
(Internal Stakeholder)*

11.6.3 Continue the scheme

There was support for the Collecting Cultures scheme, with interviewees feeling that it was worthwhile and should be continued in the future. The scheme enabled organisations to collect items for existing collections, rather funding to create something brand new. In the past, internal and external interviewees had been involved in situations where they had wanted to collect, but the funds were not readily available. This had resulted in large campaigns to help save items for the nation. Having this pot of money readily available, to be used at relatively short notice, put the collecting organisation in a strong position.

I'm just delighted how things have changed in the last twenty years in terms of the way HLF are willing to devise their projects and I'd like to see an awful lot more of this personally.

(External Stakeholder)

It's a particularly lovely scheme because it's generally a lot easier to get money for things that are completely new, rather than for things that are already established. I think this is actually quite far-sighted. I think it's building on strengths, and I think it's really good to see that. I do like this scheme for that reason.

(Internal Stakeholder)

It's so rare to have a pot of money for buying things outside of that artsy world. It's been really valuable. It's been really good to have a dedicated pot of money for something focussed. The real benefit is that luxury of knowing that we identified a gap, and we've got the resources to fill that gap, both staffing resources and the finance to do it. That's unusual and exciting and really nice....

(Internal Stakeholder)

Catherine Mailhac

This research was conducted by independent evaluation consultant Catherine Mailhac. Catherine is experienced in developing and delivering a range of evaluation work, including stakeholder reviews, national engagement projects and city-wide cultural programmes. Clients include the Science Museum Group, the Imperial War Museums, Children & the Arts and Museums Sheffield. Catherine has an MRS Certificate in Market and Social Research, an MA Museum Studies from the University of Leicester and a BA History of Art from the University of Cambridge. She is an Associate of the Museums Association and a Winston Churchill Research Fellow.