Strength in Numbers:
The Development of the 24 Hour Museum

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The 24 Hour Museum was officially launched on the 13 May 1999 by the Rt. Hon. Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. This initiative was achieved through partnership and will depend on continuing partnership for its further development. It is the result of collaboration between **mda** and the Campaign for Museums, and each organisation brought its own experience, expectations and expertise to the project. **mda**'s involvement in the 24 Hour Museum can be traced back to the **mda** SPECTRUM Workshop held at Churchill College in September 1997. The success of SCRAN had long established the need for Web portals to museum information, and **mda** had been exploring the issues involved through its participation in CIMI and European projects such as Aquarelle. The standards issues involved were all too apparent, with further development and consolidation being required in a range of areas from metadata schema through to controlled vocabularies and lists of people, places and events. The development of such standards can only be justified in the context of their use. Although **mda** knew that such resources were required, and many museums were calling for such developments, it was felt that by developing a high profile project requiring such standards it would be easier to demonstrate the need for them to potential funders.

During the SPECTRUM Workshop it was suggested that **mda** should be talking to the Campaign for Museums since they were already responsible for the Museums Week website, which is aimed at promoting museums and activities organised to coincide with this event. An initial meeting took place at the Campaign for Museums in October 1999, following which an
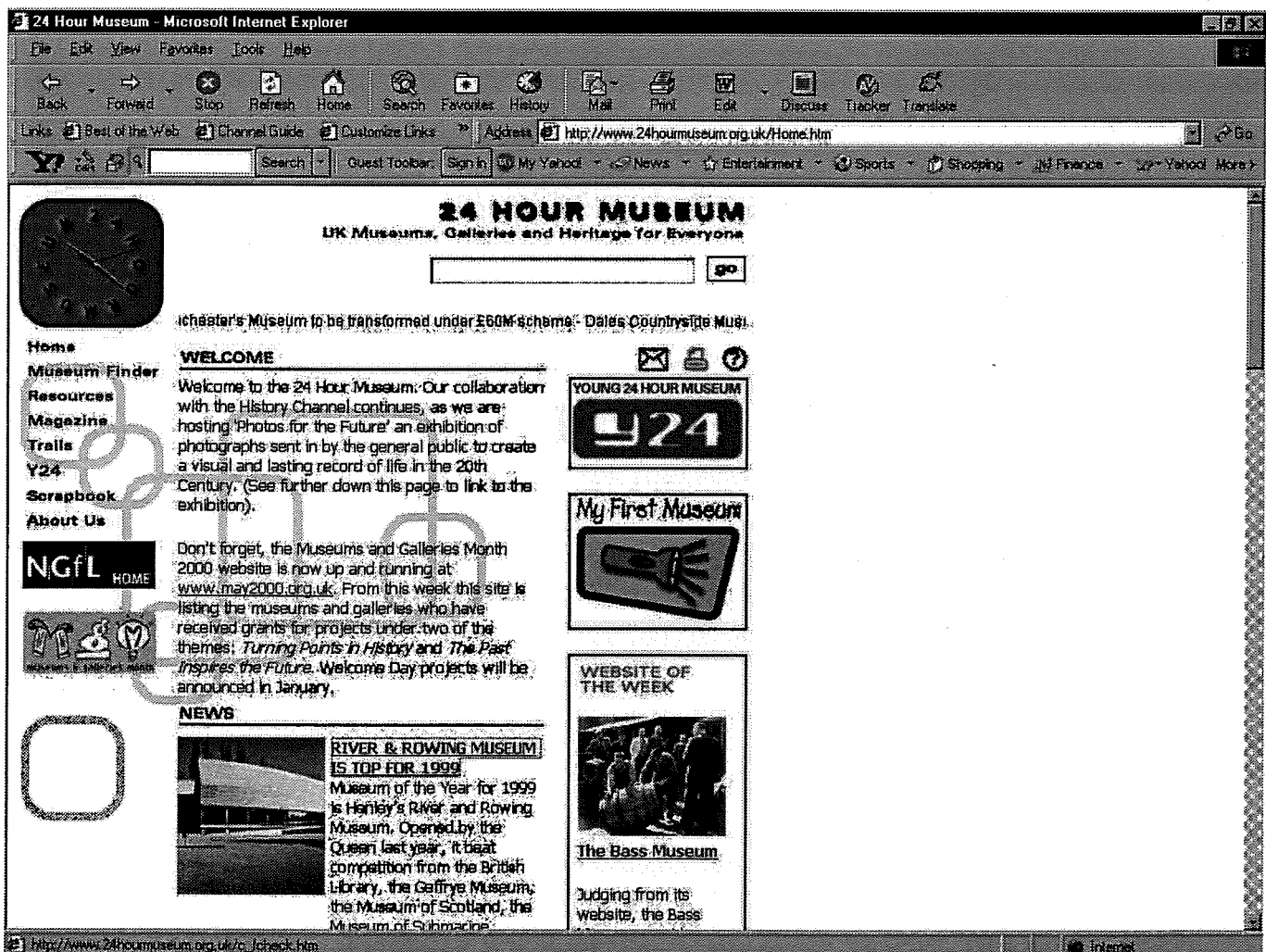

Figure 1

outline proposal was produced. This was submitted to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, following which discussions took place between Loyd Grossman and Chris Smith. In April 1998 Chris Smith announced an initial grant of £10,000 to the 24 Hour Museum to develop the project in the form of a demonstrator. The tender document for this was deliberately open in its structure, inviting innovation from the companies bidding for the work.

Responsibility for the project was divided between **mda** and the Campaign for Museums. **mda** was in charge of technical project management and the Campaign for Museums looked after design and marketing. Loyd Grossman took overall responsibility for the project, supported by the Campaign for Museums. The size of the budget and the timescale involved left less time for consultation with the broader museum community than could have been wished. At this stage it was important to develop a demonstration CD that would enable feedback into the project, as well as secure additional funds for its implementation. During this period the original clock motif was developed by Beresford's, a design company that has continued to work on materials for the 24 Hour Museum. The demonstrator achieved its objective of securing further funding and a second tender document was prepared in late October 1998. The contract to implement the 24 Hour Museum was awarded to System Simulation Limited and Diverse Interactive.

At the same time an advisory group was established to provide further feedback for the project. Since the budget still did not allow for the wider consultation that would have been desirable, this group acted as a useful conduit for the aspirations and concerns of the museum community. As the design developed, project staff and members of the advisory group were able to see design prototypes on a development web site. The initial range of styles produced a variant that was to set the design tone of the 24 Hour Museum.

As the appearance of the pages developed, **mda** worked with SSL to produce the underlying data structure. This was largely dictated by the sources of data available for this stage of the project. These included the Museums Week database, the ENGAGE database, URLs from the ICOM Virtual Library of Museums pages (maintained by **mda**) and most importantly from the Museums and Galleries Commission's DOMUS database. The cooperation of the MGC in providing this data contributed greatly to the initial range and quality of the information provided on the site.

A key part of the 24 Hour Museum launch was the participation of a number of museums in a pilot project aimed at providing enhanced access to museum websites. This aimed at providing direct links to detailed information on participating museums within the context of the museum's own website. The basic methodology was devised with the help of the London Transport Museum, but a meeting with other participants resulted in important changes, with particular help being given by the web masters at the Natural History Museum and the Tate Gallery.

The 24 Hour Museum has been running for nearly six months now and work is underway to develop the site further. Funding has been provided by the DCMS for the current financial year and further sponsorship is being sought. It is envisaged that the 24 Hour Museum will be established as an independent organisation within the next year, allowing it to flourish with the continued support of **mda** and the Campaign for Museums. Priorities include the development of additional content and improvement of the quality of data, accessibility and performance.

Because the 24 Hour Museum is largely database-driven, it is possible to develop an alternative set of templates with less reliance on frames, plug-ins and additional graphics. Enhancements to the data will be made by sourcing additional information from new sources,

collaborating with organisations such as the Museums Association, MGC, English Heritage and the British Tourist Authority to share data and by providing an on-line facility for museums to submit amendments and additions to their data. Additional content will also have to be provided in partnership with museums and galleries. It is hoped that the next twelve months will see the 24 Hour Museum move towards providing object-level information as records are made available and the infrastructure is developed.

The 24 Hour Museum provides a useful framework into which other independent projects can be plugged. Cornucopia, a database of collections level information being developed by the MGC, will greatly enhance the search facilities of the 24 Hour Museum and other projects such as the "Common Knowledge" proposal being submitted to the Treasury under the "Invest to Save" initiative will provide a rich context in which to place these object records. The 24 Hour Museum already links to the websites of participating organisations, and plans are being made to help museums and galleries to establish a presence on the Worldwide Web.

All of these developments depend on partnerships with a wide range of bodies ranging from content providers through to the international standards community. The 24 Hour Museum could not have happened without such support and will depend on it for its continued success.