

The Yahoo Hijack - Intercepting potential audiences by stealth (an interim report)

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Introduction

In contrast to the more rigorous academic approach used elsewhere to assess user needs (see previous paper), the SHAZAM! project has adopted a very simplistic solution in an attempt to discover what people might want from an on-line database of Surrey museum collections, if indeed they want such a thing at all. This is very much work in progress and is just one of several lines of enquiry being pursued as part of the SHAZAM! Feasibility Study. Although conceived as a quick and dirty sampling of user expectations, it has proved rather more protracted than originally envisaged and useful results are only just beginning to emerge. Perhaps the most novel aspect of the survey has yet to deliver any positive data.

The Need for Evidence

As Pat Reynolds has already mentioned, despite all the fuss about on-line access to museum data, it would seem that very little hard evidence concerning user needs and expectations has been published to date. Indeed, our web searches (surely the most obvious place to publish such material) produced only papers describing the well known pioneering work of Ian Morrison and Helen McCorry of the National Museums of Scotland¹. We are still convinced that we must have missed something. Surely the museums-on-the-web bandwagon is based on more than just gut feelings? However, it was clear that in order to justify further progress with the SHAZAM! project, the feasibility study had to come up with more information concerning user needs.

SHAZAM!
Surrey Heritage Information Access and Management

What do you want to see here?

What kind of objects particularly interest you? (select as many as you like)

- Art (paintings and sculpture, but not photographs or textiles)
- Photographs (including historical photographs)
- Costume & textiles
- Local history
- Archaeology
- Geology
- Ethnography (the scientific study of different races)
- Medical
- Natural history
- Science & technology
- Transport
- Military

How would you like to be able to search groupings?

Would you like to see more or less groupings of objects than the subject headings available?

Less OK More

Would you like to be able to search for individual objects?

Least Needed		Most Needed			
1	2	3	4	5	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By object name (eg "cup" "bus" "cat")?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By materials used?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By the name of the maker/artist?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By the place they were made?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By the date they were made?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By the names of people associated with them (owner, etc.)?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	By events with which they were associated?
Other attributes (please specify)?					
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All those I have indicated, in various combinations (e.g. only cups made by Bloggs and Co., or only butterflies collected in Guildford)?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do you want to combine searches (eg photographs of Guildford taken by Fred Bloggs, or computers made by Olivetti)?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do you expect to need complex combined searches (eg. tools made of iron and bronze)?
How many classifications might you want to search by?					

Timescale

It may be some years before all museum objects in Surrey are catalogued by computer, so an on-line database would be incomplete for a while. Would an incomplete listing still be of value to you?

Yes Limited value No

It will also be a while before pictures of all these objects are available on-line. Would you always want to see a picture? Please indicate how important this would be to you.

Essential Very desirable Not important

Do you have any other comments or requests?

Do you want to be kept informed of developments?
If so, please enter your e-mail address here.

Would you be willing to answer further questions which will help us develop this site?

Y

Submit Reset

Many thanks for taking the trouble to answer our questions. Your replies will help us to tailor this new service to meet the needs of users.

Figure 1: Questionnaire

Assessment Options

Canvassing the views of some of the potential partners in such a scheme would be reasonably straightforward. As part of the wider study of existing documentation (particularly the availability of computerised data and images), the views of curators and other possible content providers could be gathered during site visits. From their direct contact with existing museum users, we could expect to derive anecdotal evidence of the needs and aspirations of at least one potential audience, existing museum users. We could expect discussion with educationalists to reveal something of the particular needs of students of all ages. But what of ordinary people outside formal education and with no prior experience of using museum collections to further their interests?

User feedback from established museum web sites which incorporate on-line databases would be an invaluable source but this information is not yet emerging into the public domain. The first UK museum to put substantial amounts of collection data on the web was probably Hampshire County Museum Service as recently as 1966. Since then others have followed but so far as I am aware, none of these sites have published the results of user surveys, if indeed they have undertaken them.

An extensive opinion poll of a large, random sample of the general public was beyond our means. It is to be hoped that such a study will be undertaken before long, perhaps by one of our larger museums or a centrally funded agency. Instead, we decided to opt for canvassing the views of existing Internet users. We recognised that they were not representative of the full potential audience but felt that Internet usage had reached levels where existing users represented a significant, albeit incomplete, cross-section of our society and would provide the user-base for early SHAZAM! prototypes. We accept that we are not taking account of the views of latecomers to the Internet but feel that provided the

limitations of our study are recognised, results are still valid. This was, after all, conceived as just a quick dip in the water. We hope and expect that others will gather further data and extend our body of knowledge to cover those who do not yet have Internet access. They represent a potentially very important group, as people with lower expectations and opportunities for getting "connected" may also prove less likely to make conventional use of museum collections.

Having accepted the limitations of using the Internet to canvass opinions, there remained the question of how this could best be achieved. One approach would be to look at the questions people were already asking via the Internet. Our attention focused on the search engines. We found one (AskJeeves) which listed recently asked questions but despite repeated visits (only a limited number of questions could be retrieved at any one time) no questions which could sensibly be answered by accessing museum object data were seen. Whilst a direct approach to one of the search engine providers might have resulted

in more data being made available, without some sort of prior filtering it is suspected that analysing this would be a massive task. Pat had already proposed a novel method of harnessing existing search engine methodology to intercept relevant queries and, despite reservations about our chances of success, I felt that this was well worth attempting and could form part of a two-pronged attack.

The Hijack Plan

Pat's idea was to set up a conventional on-line questionnaire on the Surrey Museums Consultative Committee (SMCC) web site. The questionnaire would be linked to an introductory page which illustrated some objects from museums in Surrey and outlined the plan to create an on-line resource based on Surrey museum holdings. The text of this web page would include the names of these objects and in addition the hidden HTML metatags which search engines use to identify web site content would be seeded with appropriate keywords. Details of the

SHAZAM!
Surrey Heritage Information
Access and Management

Explore Surrey Museums

There are many fascinating museums and galleries in Surrey. They offer you the chance to see an amazing variety of interesting things. Who knows what you might come across? A Viking sword, an Egyptian mummy, a London bus, Florence Nightingale's Crimean carriage, perhaps, or even a racing car.

You can also search a map to locate museums in Surrey.

From dark prehistoric times to the wonders of the present day, the events, arts and discoveries that shaped our history and culture are portrayed in museum exhibitions where you will find working models and interactive displays helping you to understand the objects on display.

This web site will enable you to discover more about the museums in Surrey - what sort of collections they have, when they are open, how to get there, what facilities they can offer, even links to more detailed web pages for some of them. It also offers you an exciting opportunity to help us develop new services over the Internet.

Surrey museums are looking after many more exhibits than they can display at any one time. They also have additional information about many of those exhibits which are on display. The World Wide Web offers an opportunity to make this wealth of hidden information easily available to everybody with an Internet connection, even if they cannot travel to the museums in person. This is your chance to tell us what you would like us to provide on the Surrey Museums web site in the future.

To make sure we give you the information you want, please spare a few moments to complete our short "What do you want to see here" questionnaire. Your answers will help us to decide the way in which this site should develop.

If you would prefer, first look at what we have already about Surrey museums. (This site is being developed by the Surrey Museums Consultative Committee.)

Surrey Museums Consultative Committee Homepage
[Questionnaire] [TOP]

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Figure 2: Introductory page

site would then be submitted to the leading search engines in the hope that when anybody requested information about the type of objects featured on the SHAZAM! questionnaire site, they would be led to it by the search engine. Once there, they would be offered the chance to look at a larger image and explanatory text concerning the object in which they were interested, together with contact details and opening hours of the owning museum, and a link to its web site if available. First, however, they would be asked to complete the simple on-line questionnaire.

The number of featured objects would have to be limited and consequently the number of people who might be lured to the site would also be restricted. However, it was felt that if popular subjects were chosen, the sheer scale of Internet usage might ensure a reasonable number of hits. Once at the site there was always the danger that searchers would feel aggrieved at having been "hijacked" and so it was decided to include an option to bypass the questionnaire. The introductory text would stress the opportunity the questionnaire gave searchers to shape future museum information provision and it was hoped that this would encourage people to travel to their chosen object via the questionnaire.

In addition to "hijacking" object enquiries made via search engines, the questionnaire page could also be visited via links from other sites (such

as the SMCC home page), in response to postings to relevant newsgroups, etc.

The Questionnaire

It was felt that if we were to persuade as many people as possible to complete the questionnaire whilst on-line, it would need to be kept as simple as possible. We decided to ask just six main questions:

- What kind of objects particularly interest you?
- At what level do you want subjects grouped?
- On what attributes would you like to be able to search?
- Do you want to search for combinations of attributes?
- Would an incomplete listing be of value to you?
- How important are images?

We did not explicitly ask the fundamental question "Do you want to be able to consult an on-line database of Surrey museum collections?" We felt that the response to other questions would make this obvious but perhaps with hindsight we should have made it easier for respondents to say that they were not interested before moving on. We may be missing out on negative responses as a result of this. The actual questionnaire appears in figure 1.

It was decided not to ask open questions but to present respondents with pre-defined options to facilitate a quick and controlled response. In places text boxes were included to allow further qualification or alternative responses to be given if desired. Respondents were also encouraged to e-mail a more detailed response if they felt so inclined (and several have done so). It was not necessary to answer every question before clicking the submit button.

It is apparent from feedback via the text boxes that several of the museum professionals who completed the questionnaire think that we offered the wrong options in response to the questions "What kind of objects particularly interest you?" and (How) "Would you like to be able to search for individual objects?" The phrases "It reads a bit like a simple irgma card" and "your approach starts from a SPECTRUM documentation point of view" cropped up amidst comments that the choice of options was too jargon ridden and out of touch with real people's requests (which "tend to be things like 'I want to see all pictures with dogs in them' or 'all portraits of Victorian mayors'"). There are undeniably similarities between the questions on the form and the data categories in the MDA Data Standard or SPECTRUM, but I would like to think that this is because the standards are based on analysis of the kind of things people want to know about museum objects rather than that our judgement is clouded by professional standards. Whilst we did not specifically mention related objects (which would include dogs) or the role of related people (such as mayors) we gave the option of adding extra attributes if respondents wished. Admittedly, our choice of object categories is based on traditional discipline based divisions which are familiar within museums but broad subjects like art, archaeology, medical, military, etc. are also well understood by the public.

In contrast to the comments of a few professionals, non-museum respondents were not at all critical of the structure of the questionnaire.

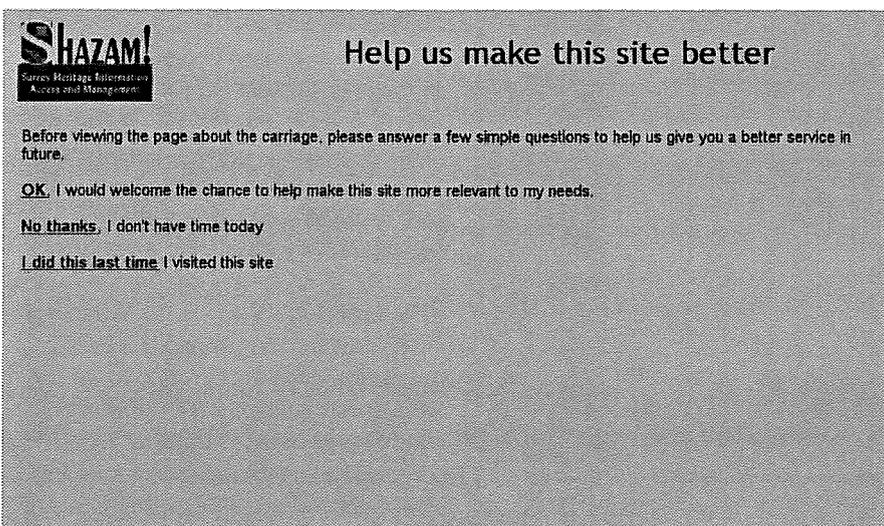


Figure 3: Options to bypass questionnaire

Perhaps this was because they knew nothing of IRGMA cards or SPECTRUM so they didn't feel intimidated by echoes of their structure or perhaps they were just too diffident to criticise us. It is probably true that the pre-defined answers could have been better chosen (for example, a category for picture content might have better handled the dogs and mayors type of query, even if it does correspond to a family of SPECTRUM units of information) and the questions about combined searches are perhaps rather too complicated. However, it was only a first attempt and has already yielded useful results despite any shortcomings in design.

We were particularly keen to obtain opinions on the value of incomplete databases. It is clear that it will be many years before details of all the objects held by Surrey museums can be made available over the Internet and even longer before digitised images will be available for them all. In view of this, it is important to know whether people would consider searching an incomplete database worthwhile and whether they need to see a picture of every object which might be of interest to them.

Finally we wanted to keep track of respondents if possible. Whilst it was possible for people to complete the

questionnaire anonymously, we asked them to give their e-mail address if they wanted to be kept informed of developments. Most did and consequently we are building up a list of contacts that we know to be interested in the concept of on-line access to museum collection data and from whom focus groups could be drawn in the future.

The Site

The web site (which is virtually independent of, but sits within, the main SMCC site) was designed so that the questionnaire could be visited in isolation. There are no direct links to the rest of the SHAZAM! site. Visitors directed to the questionnaire from links in other sites or via newsgroups, etc. see it as a standalone page. If they arrive at the introductory page via a search engine, they access the same questionnaire page but the object of interest is remembered and on pressing the submit button they are passed on to the page concerning that particular object.

The introductory page (figure 2) mentions (and illustrates) five specific objects which can be found in Surrey museums:

- Viking sword.
- An Egyptian mummy.
- A London bus.
- Florence Nightingale's Crimean carriage.
- A racing car.

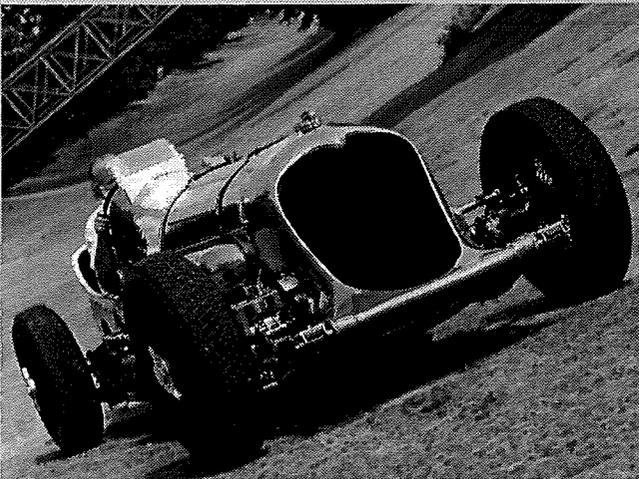
These were chosen because they cover a range of popular subjects and object types, one has an association with a famous person, most are already used in SMCC publicity material and most are featured in existing web sites maintained by the parent museums.

The introductory page also includes a brief explanation of the SHAZAM! project and the background to the on-line questionnaire, a map of Surrey with image mapped links to corresponding entries in the museum listing elsewhere on the SMCC site, a simple text link to the museum list and



John Cobb's 24 litre Napier-Railton.

This unique car was commissioned by the Brooklands driver John Cobb and was designed with the Brooklands Lap Record, 500 Mile Race and the World's 24 Hour Record in mind. The chassis was designed by Reid Railton at Thomson and Taylor Ltd at Brooklands and the car took shape in their workshops in 1933.



The magnificent vehicle, with its immensely strong girder construction, powered by a 12 cylinder Napier Lion aero-engine, won fame not only as the fastest car at Brooklands but twice took for Britain the 24 hour record in 1935 and 1936 (150.16mph).

The Brooklands Outer Circuit lap record of 143.44mph taken in 1935 by the Napier Railton was never beaten.

The car is now on display in the Speed Record Exhibition in the Motoring Village at Brooklands Museum together with an excellent contemporary scale model of the Napier Railton and many photographs of the car and the people involved with it, including John Cobb, Reid Railton, Thomson, Taylor and the workshop engineers. Records at Brooklands were electrically timed and the Museum also has the original 1933 timing apparatus in the collection.

Holder of both standing start and flying start lap records, winner of the fastest short and the fastest long distance races ever run at Brooklands and creator of the highest speed measured officially there, the Napier Railton may be said to be truly the ultimate pre-war British Racing Car.

Brooklands Museum Trust was recently given the opportunity to purchase the car, by the owner, Lukas Hóni, who wished the Museum to be its permanent home.

Brooklands Museum
Brooklands Road
Weybridge KT13 0QN
Phone: 01932 857381
Fax: 01932 855465

Visit the Brooklands Museum web site: <http://www.motor-software.co.uk/brooklands/index.html>

 [Surrey Museums Consultative Committee Homepage]
[Questionnaire] [Find Surrey's Museums] [Sword] [Mummy] [Bus] [Carriage] [TOP]

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Figure 4: Sample object page

a link to the SMCC home page. However, it is expected that most people on arriving via a search engine will select the object of their choice which will display a short menu giving them the chance to bypass the questionnaire if they have no interest in it (figure 3). If they click on OK the questionnaire is displayed (figure 1) and on completing this and pressing the submit button, they are passed on to the page about the object of their choice (figure 4). If they want to pursue this further, there is a link to the web site of the museum that cares for the object (if available) and contact details, opening hours, etc..

Newsgroup Postings

Since we are unsure how effective the "hijacked query" approach will be, a number of newsgroups, mailing lists, etc. are also being targeted. A posting is made to the group suggesting that on-line museum data might be relevant to its members, pointing them towards the questionnaire, requesting e-mail responses and encouraging a public debate via the newsgroup. To date just three groups have been targeted in this way:

- uk.culture.museums
- alt.genealogy
- uk soc.genealogy.britain

These have proved quite successful and by notifying groups at intervals it has proved possible to get some impression of the response obtained from each, since most responses are received within a few days of posting.

Whilst the questionnaire and e-mail response via newsgroups has been good, there has been little on-line debate and this has been restricted to museum professionals on uk.culture.museums. One wonders if this professional debate has inhibited ordinary museum visitors from having their say (the newsgroup is supposedly for both professionals and lay people).

Results

Although this survey is only just starting to yield results, some interesting information is already beginning to emerge. Due to problems relocating the site to a new Internet Service Provider, the search engine intercept has not yet gone live. However, the three newsgroups polled so far have elicited the following response:

- uk.museums.culture
9 questionnaire responses
2 e-mails
- Genealogy Groups (2)
10 questionnaire responses
4 e-mails
- Unattributed
1 questionnaire response

One response was discounted as it was clearly sent in error, the full response followed (from the same source) shortly afterwards. This leaves a total to date of 19 valid responses plus 6 e-mails, of which one supplemented a questionnaire return whilst the others were mostly general messages of support.

The questionnaire responses were as follows:

Q1 What kind of objects particularly interest you?

Local History	15
Art	11
Photographs	11
Archaeology	8
Costume	5
Science and Industry	5
Ethnography	5
Natural History	5
Military	4
Transport	3
Geology	3
Medical	2

No real surprises here. Transport might perhaps be expected to rise in popularity as other newsgroups are polled.

Q2 Would you like to see more or less groupings of objects than these subject headings?

Less	0
OK	5
More	11
No response	3

This looks like a clear demand for further breaking material down into classified groupings and begs the question, what groupings?

Q3 Would you like to be able to search for individual objects?

By	Score	%
Maker / Artist	71	75
Object name	67	71
Events	62	65
Associated people	61	64
Place made	60	63
Date made	57	60
Materials	42	44

Combinations of the above

Various combinations	69	73
Combined searches	73	77
Complex searches	56	59

Figures are based on the sum of the ratings given (from 1-5, no response is taken as 0). From the 19 responses, the maximum score would be 95 which is taken as 100%.

As one would expect, material is not rated as particularly important. Date is rated less highly than most of the other attributes. Although the questions about combining searches were perhaps a bit confusing, it seems clear that compound searches are seen as a desirable feature.

Q4 How many classifications might you want to search by?

One	0
Two	3
Three	4
Four	2
Five	1
No response	9

This is probably not a very significant question but appears to confirm that compound searching is desirable.

Q5 Would an incomplete listing still be of value to you?

Yes	18
Limited value	0
No	0
No response	1

Perhaps one of the most encouraging (and clear cut) findings so far. Even with such a small sample it is clear that we should not hold back simply because we cannot offer a comprehensive database yet.

Q6 How important are pictures?

Essential	1
Very desirable	15
Not important	2
No response	1

Again this is a very positive indication that, whilst we should see digitised images as a very high priority, they are not essential from the outset.

Q6 Do you have any other comments or requests?

Additional comments were received from 9 respondents. Some have been mentioned previously, others simply wished the project well. The following additional comments are of interest:

- "Searching for an object by the place where it is kept could be helpful too, especially if your projects develops and includes museums all over the country."
- "I'm interested in the history of collections, whereas most catalogues, especially the on-line variety, deal only with the objects themselves."

Q7 Do you want to be kept informed of developments

Yes	11
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More than half of those responding want to be kept informed. This is encouraging but perhaps not surprising since on the whole only those enthusiastic about the concept will have responded anyway.

As yet, the data collected is of little statistical significance but it will be seen that already some clear trends are emerging. This particular experiment has not answered the important question "how many people want on line access" but it is beginning to tell us something useful about some of the people who do. It is hoped that the project can be continued and that "search engine hijacking" when it comes on stream will add further data. Meanwhile, we already have some ideas and tentative conclusions to add to those gleaned from other aspects of the SHAZAM! feasibility study.

1 Morrison, I O, 1993, "WINDEE in the Isles" in *Scottish Museum News*, Autumn 1993, pp 16-17

Morrison, I O, 1994, "The WINDEE Survey" in *Scottish Museum News*, Spring 1994, pp 20-21

McCorry, H C & Morrison, I O, 1995, "Report on the Catechism project" (National Museums of Scotland).

The first two papers are also available on-line at:
www2.scran.ac.uk/staff/ianm

2 IRGMA was an acronym for the long defunct Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association, under whose auspices the precursors of the MDA catalogue cards were developed. The original acronym continued to be used by some curators long after the handover to MDA in 1977, and apparently still lives on!