

The Scottish transport and industry collections knowledge network (STICK)

A rede escocesa de conhecimento sobre coleções de transportes e indústria (STICK)

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Abstract

The Scottish Transport and Industry Collections Knowledge Network (STICK) brings together a range of organisations and individuals who share a common interest in transport and industrial collections and promoting their care and enjoyment. While a multi-disciplinary steering group drives it forward, STICK is its members and their passion and knowledge. STICK facilitates shared learning and knowledge exchange through projects, events and active communication that have drawn on the knowledge and expertise of participants to achieve the aims of the group. STICK's engaged membership and the success of its projects demonstrate the network's strengths but, as an informal body, it faces various challenges as well. It is looking to use learning from its work to date, along with the combined experience and needs of its steering group and members, to address these challenges and continue to bring people together and achieve good outcomes for the sector in the future.

Resumo

A rede *Scottish Transport and Industry Collections Knowledge Network* (STICK) reúne um conjunto de organizações e pessoas que partilham o interesse pelos transportes e coleções industriais e que promovem a sua manutenção e usufruto. A STICK define-se pelos seus membros, o seu entusiasmo e conhecimento, estimulada por uma direção multidisciplinar. A STICK facilita a aprendizagem partilhada e a troca de conhecimentos através de projetos, eventos e comunicação ativa, baseados no conhecimento e perícia dos participantes, para alcançar os objetivos do grupo. O empenho dos membros da STICK e o sucesso dos seus projetos demonstram os pontos fortes da rede, mas como órgão informal, enfrenta também vários desafios. Para enfrentar estes desafios, a STICK procura utilizar os conhecimentos adquiridos do seu trabalho, conjuntamente com a experiência e as necessidades da sua direção e dos seus membros, para continuar a reunir pessoas e alcançar no futuro bons resultados para o sector.

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

The Scottish Transport and Industry Collections Knowledge Network (STICK) was formed in 2006 after work by the Scottish Museums Council and National Museums Scotland identified a need for greater collaboration in the Scottish science and technology heritage sector. It was agreed to form a network to increase public engagement with Scotland's transport and industrial heritage, to improve information about these and to work together to develop higher standards of care for collections. In other words, a network that would encourage members to work together to safeguard industrial and technological heritage [1].

The network was formed by some of the most prominent figures in the industrial heritage sector in Scotland, including representatives from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and Historic Scotland. However, while the founders and steering group members may have included some well-known names, from the beginning, the network was intended to support anyone with an interest in the subject matter, and all were welcome, whether they were from a large museum service or heritage organisation or were an individual with their own collection.

Despite being an informal network, STICK did have a clear purpose and key aims from its early days, with the minutes from a very early meeting stating that:

The STICK network aims to promote Scotland's rich technological and industrial heritage and work together to establish confidence, skills, good-practice and innovation in the care and enjoyment of, access to and engagement with technological and industrial collections across Scotland. [2]

The meeting also set out the following objectives [3], which remain part of the constitution:

- Develop opportunities to advance acquisition, care, development, research and interpretation of transport and industry collections in Scotland.
- Identify key issues facing the long-term stewardship and development of transport and industry collections and work together to tackle them.
- Promote, encourage and advance access to Scottish transport and industrial collections through a variety of mechanisms.
- Support informed, efficient and confident decision making in the acquisition and long-term care of transport and industrial heritage across Scotland.

These objectives have remained unchanged throughout STICK's life, as has the informal ethos.

There has never been a membership fee or need for formal registration as a member. STICK has a mailing list that can be subscribed to – or unsubscribed from – as people wish, and the subscribers are loosely considered to be the membership, although STICK also engages with an audience through Twitter, and being on the mailing list is not a prerequisite for attending events.

The number of subscribers to the mailing list has been around 200 for most of the course of STICK's life and these have ranged from big museums, as mentioned, through academics, to tiny volunteer-run organisations and private individuals with an interest. At the time of writing, there are 243 subscribers.

The diversity of the membership, combined with the dedication and enthusiasm of the steering committee, are the things that have kept STICK going for so long, and it is an excellent example of collaborative working. STICK has achieved a lot, but this has only been done by a variety of people – with complementary skills and a lot of good will – working together (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The STICK committee at an early meeting (c. 2006).

Projects

Some of STICK's key achievements to date have been its funded projects, undertaken as a partnership and involving many of the network's members.

“Old Tools, New Uses”

The early committee members were particularly interested in carrying out collections mapping and “master cataloguing” work that was a natural follow on from work many of them had been involved in previously that identified Scotland's Distributed National Collection. This audit, carried out by the Scottish Museums Council (now Museums Galleries Scotland), worked on the theory that many star objects of significance to Scotland's heritage were held in collections outside of the designated national collection and aimed to signpost them for researchers and the public. The STICK committee felt that there were various collecting areas within the interest of the network that would benefit from a similar national audit approach, and it was from this idea that the “Old Tools New Uses” project emerged and became the defining piece of work of STICK's early years.

The collecting areas chosen for the project were hand tools, typewriters and sewing machines. They were chosen because many museums and individuals across the country held examples of these sorts of objects, and it was suspected that hidden treasures would likely come to light.

The Museums Association's Effective Collections scheme awarded STICK £25,000 to employ a project officer to carry out a nationwide collections review of these objects, produce a

master catalogue showing what objects were held where, and create learning resources that would enable anyone working with similar objects to identify and care for them [4].

As well as discovering important sewing machines and typewriters in collections of all sizes across the country, the collections review highlighted a large number of duplicates. The project then supported the owners of these duplicates to make decisions about whether they wished to retain or dispose of them. If they wanted to go down the disposal route, they were supported through the process, which can often be a delicate and complicated one for museums.

In addition to this work, STICK built a partnership with a charity called Tools for Self-Reliance. It identified typewriters and sewing machines that were still of practical use and sent them to artisan communities in Africa. In this way, many of the objects disposed of by Scottish museums went on to serve a useful purpose elsewhere (Figure 2).

The project left a legacy of written work that is available on the STICK website. There are master catalogues showing where hand tools, typewriters and sewing machines can be found in collections across Scotland. These are useful resource for curators who care for these collections, but who may not be specialists, as it allows them to quickly identify what items are held in other institutions. This can be a key stage in the acquisition process. Guidance was also produced as part of the project about how to identify and care for these kinds of objects. Again, this is very helpful legacy for curators and other collectors who may not have specialist knowledge or skills.



Figure 2. Items disposed of by Scottish Museums as part of the “Old Tools, New Uses” project were repurposed for use in the developing world, with assistance from Tools for Self-Reliance.



Figure 3. Where possible, machine tools were demonstrated as part of the “Machine Tools” project.

“Machine Tools”

The next major project that STICK undertook, in 2015, built on the success of the master cataloguing element of the “Old Tools New Uses” project. This time the focus was on machine tools and, again, a key aim was to research what was held where in collections across Scotland. This time, in addition to cataloguing the national collection, the project aimed to use machine tools as a resource for understanding basic engineering principals and processes. This was done through a series of events that were open to museum curators, engineering students and professionals as well as the wider public. These included talks by engineers, curators and conservators, and also demonstrations of machine tools where possible (Figure 3) [5].

Again, the main legacy of this project is another catalogue that maps where machine tools are held in museums and other collections across Scotland. This was originally available as a searchable database on a custom-built website, but following issues around the maintenance of the website, it was moved and became a simple PDF on the main STICK website.

“Industrial Object Conservation Training”

The last major funded project that STICK ran was in 2017 and was an industrial object conservation course, funded by Museums Galleries Scotland. It was the result of a skills audit of the STICK membership which revealed that only 45 % of members who cared for industrial collections had access to specialist conservation advice and, for many of the 45 %, access was limited. For example, advice might come through external contractors and require funding. In addition, conservation work was frequently carried out by volunteers with engineering skills but with no training in conservation approaches. 82 % of the membership felt that engineering conservation training would help them progress the aims of their organisation. Respondents also indicated a need for training in assessing risk, recording conservation processes, and understanding conservation ethos [6].

STICK was able to meet some of these needs by running a three-day training course aimed at non-specialist museum staff and volunteers tasked with caring for industrial collections with complex needs. The intention was to upskill and give confidence to these individuals, enabling

them to better care for their collections and manage and document preventative conservation projects in their organisations.

The course was delivered by Jim Mitchell of Industrial Heritage Consulting, and it took place at the National Mining Museum Scotland in Newtongrange, just outside Edinburgh (Figure 4). Some of the time was spent in the classroom discussing the meaning of conservation, ethics, hazards, safety and techniques, among other topics. However, the majority of the course was spent in National Mining Museum Scotland's large object store where the group got hands-on with several different items from the collection, applying learning directly, receiving direction from Jim and documenting their work on paper and through photographs and film.

Legacy was, again, important for this project, so films of the processes and techniques were made available on the website, along with template forms for correctly documenting conservation, and the slides from Jim's presentations.

This course was one of the most popular projects that STICK has ever run. Only a small number of people were able to take part due to space and resources and, as soon as the course was over, requests were received to run it again. Frustratingly, the STICK committee did not have the capacity to do this as the fundraising and the logistics had been time consuming. Fortunately, however, the Industrial Museums Scotland federation was able to use the success of the STICK training course to make a case to fund further, similar training [7] and the first of their courses took place in 2022, following a delay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 4. Jim Mitchell works with a course participant in the National Mining Museum Scotland's stores.

Conferences and events

As well as funded projects, STICK runs short conferences and other events. The conferences are usually one day events and have become popular among the industrial, transport and engineering heritage sectors in Scotland. The themes of the conferences have been quite diverse over the years, tending to focus on history and curation rather than conservation. Themes have included: “Steam Engines in Scotland”, “Form or Function: What is more important?”, “The Scottish Diaspora: International Mobility of Industry, Technology, Ideas, Products and People”, “Unsung Heroes of Our Industrial and Technological Heritage’ and ‘Old Heritage: New Uses” [8].

In 2019, STICK marked the centenary of the Women’s Engineering Society by holding its conference at the Glasgow Women’s Library. The theme was 100 years of women in engineering and, as well as looking at women’s engineering roles historically, women who currently work in engineering were invited to attend and to speak. These included Alison Nuttall, an assistant chief engineer with BAE Systems, who reflected on how the contribution of women in engineering had influenced and changed her industry, and how technology influences working lives, providing both inclusion and division in the workplace [9]. This was quite a different approach to the traditional STICK conferences and attracted a new audience while still retaining many regular attendees.

The 2020 and 2021 conferences were held online due to COVID-19 and, while this approach undoubtedly presents some challenges, STICK benefitted from the reach of these events, drawing audiences of over one hundred for the first time, and being joined by people from a diverse range of countries. The theme of the 2020 conference was ‘Art and Industry’ and the 2021 theme was “Photography and Industrial Heritage”. Being very visual, these themes lent themselves to being online and, again, were a departure from STICK’s usual subject matter so continued to broaden the audience. This was reflected in an increase in people signing up to receive the newsletter and following STICK on Twitter.

Another very successful online event held in 2021 was part of the AGM rather than a conference. As the AGM fell on International Earth Day, the theme of the event was the future of fossil fuels in heritage. The event explored justifying, offsetting or sustainably running engines, navigating new climate regulations at local and national levels, funding partnerships, and the future of running heritage engines. It also explored the role of industrial museums and collections in STEM and environmental education and how learning outcomes can balance emissions. A summary of the discussion was uploaded to the STICK website, and STICK intends to pick this theme up again at future events [10].

Communication and networking

While all these events bring people together and have a lasting impact and legacy, possibly the most important elements of what STICK does are communication, networking and making resources available to the membership and beyond. This is done through a mailing list and Twitter. A monthly mailout serves as a roundup of information that the committee is aware of and think would be of interest to members. This can include, for example, job adverts and information about publications, conferences and other events. The newsletter can also be used to highlight issues of concern within industrial and transport heritage. STICK does not claim to be the one stop shop for information about industrial and transport heritage in Scotland, and there are other networks that do similar things, but STICK has become established as the Scottish network with the broadest scope in terms of interest and content, and the majority of people working in the sector in Scotland are aware of STICK and subscribe to the newsletter.

The Twitter account currently has over 1000 followers, so is one of the most efficient ways of sharing information and engaging with a wide audience. STICK made particular use of

Twitter using the COVID-19 lockdowns to demonstrate that the network was still active, and to provide entertainment and interest.

While the STICK website does contain information about upcoming STICK events and some news items, its most useful function is hosting all of the resources that have been produced by STICK projects and, in recent years, an effort has been made to ensure that there is a legacy from conferences and events. A good example of this is the write up of the fossil fuels event which included a summary of the discussion and a link to the recording. This is something that has been much easier to produce in the “Zoom Age”.

Strengths and challenges

STICK’s key strength since it was formed in 2006 is that it meets a need that was clearly defined then and that continues today. STICK is a body that unites people with related interests and facilitates them to work together to share information, understand and care for the objects that they look after and make those objects accessible and available to the public through improved stewardship.

STICK is supported by some of the main heritage bodies in Scotland, including the National Museums, Historic Environment Scotland and Museums Galleries Scotland. Having a good relationship with these organisations makes it easier to advocate for the importance of transport and industrial collections and to keep them on the agenda of cultural policy makers and funders. This is done more effectively as a united organisation than as individuals.

The (loosely defined) membership is diverse, ranging from large institutions to small volunteer-run museums and interested individuals. It is encouraging to note that the full range of members tend to be represented at events and participate in projects. One of the most important things that STICK does is allow people to network and share knowledge. It unlocks the skills and expertise held by all of the members in a mutually supportive and collaborative way. It provides the means for people to share their knowledge and the website is a place to deposit or signpost that knowledge.

Being an informal network means that STICK is accessible and approachable. Anyone can get in touch and come to events. Projects are open to all, and the committee welcomes anyone who has time and skills to contribute. Being an informal body rather than a constituted organisation or charity means that STICK is not bureaucratic. There is no hierarchy in STICK and it is relatively paperwork-free.

Another key strength throughout STICK’s lifetime is the commitment and enthusiasm of the committee. The committee members all care about STICK and want it to succeed because they care about the heritage and the collections at its heart. The committee members enjoy taking part in STICK events and enjoy the company of the other committee members and wider membership.

However, it is interesting to note that some of its strengths are also STICK’s weaknesses, and these have been consistently challenging since the formation of the network. Not being a formal organisation or registered charity means that it is unable to make use of the benefits that would bring. This is particularly frustrating when it comes to fundraising. STICK is not eligible to access most charitable grants, so grant funding applications must be through one of the committee’s organisations, on STICK’s behalf. This can be complicated, and places pressure on both the organisation and on STICK.

The informal membership arrangement and lack of membership fee does not help the financial situation. While charging a membership fee has been discussed on several occasions, the committee has concluded that it would cause loss of members and that it would be necessary to offer more exclusive member benefits, which would not be practical and would exclude those who were unable to pay a fee. The committee members also have other

commitments that take up most of their time, so it would be risky to commit to generating more STICK content or guaranteeing a certain number of members' events per year.

The time commitment required to run a good quality project is also something that STICK struggles with. Completing a funding application can take days or even weeks, and running a project can be a full-time job. The "Old Tools New Uses" and "Machine Tools" projects funding covered the costs of having a project officer which certainly contributed to their success. As funding is increasingly hard to obtain, running projects on this scale, and employing the staff to do so, has become harder. This is one of the key reasons why STICK has not run a large project for the last few years.

Another issue that is related to lack of committee time, and to the changeover of committee members, is the maintenance of online resources which, as mentioned, are a major part of STICK's offer. There have been issues with ensuring that the website and domain are renewed properly and on time, and not every committee member is skilled or confident in updating and maintaining digital resources. The development of meaningful content for Twitter and the newsletter is also demanding.

The future

The COVID years caused the STICK committee to scale back operations, reflect on what STICK does best and start to consider how to address the challenges. Rather than having a conference in autumn 2022, a series of tours that allowed people to come together in person to see behind the scenes at various museums and heritage sites was arranged, complemented by online talks that allowed a wider audience to participate. This was successful but organisation-heavy, so the committee is considering whether to continue this format in future.

Practical project work is more challenging to address, for the reasons discussed above. While STICK may seek funding to run its own projects again in due course, it is likely that, for the foreseeable future, it will play a more supportive role for other organisations. It will do this by, for example, sharing the learning from its successful projects and distributing publicity material.



Figure 5. Participants in the 2017 Industrial Object Conservation training course, STICK enables the care and sharing of industrial and transport heritage.

Recent changes to the STICK committee, with increased academic representation and different perspectives, combined with a new chair taking the lead in autumn 2022, mean that it will be interesting to see STICK's future direction of travel. In the meantime, the committee continues to listen to the membership and the sector, and to continually work to facilitate communication and collaboration that will enable the network to keep on caring for and sharing our industrial and transport heritage (Figure 5).

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