Museum Closure in the UK: Themes, Issues, and Trends

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Abstract

Museum closure has received little attention within museum studies. In this article I set out some of the main themes and issues that pertain to museum closure, with examples drawn mainly from the UK. Closure is difficult to define precisely, and in some cases it is also hard to date with accuracy, but I present a way of defining closure that focusses on museum sites. I also outline a typology of closures, distinguished using differing levels of impact and loss of access. Recent data makes it possible to analyse the trends of opening and closing in the sector during a period of over sixty years, and shows that, partly due to increasing closures, the sector has shown signs of stasis, if not shrinkage.

Keywords: Museum closure, access to collections, heritage loss, sectoral trends, mapping museums

Introduction

Hundreds of museums have closed in the UK since 1960. Those closures took place across the UK and affected museums of all kinds. They were of many different sizes, some receiving little more than a hundred visitors a year while others welcomed up to a million. They covered a wide range of subjects, from the most common, local history, to some of the rarest museum topics including the supply of gas and the cultivation of tomatoes. And they were of all types of governance, from private museums to national museums funded by the government. Museum closure is widespread.

But although individual museum closures have occasionally been discussed within museum studies, as yet there has been scarcely any attempt to develop an overview of closure. The discipline has tended instead to focus on museums that are open. The situation is summed up by Steven Lubar and others in an introduction to a special issue of *Museums History Journal* on 'Lost Museums': 'We know a great deal about how museums are born and how new collections come into being, but not nearly enough about how these fragile institutions pass out of existence' (Lubar et al. 2017: 2). The authors' complaint concerning how little is known of closure is borne out by the literature. To take a few examples, the anthology *A Companion to Museum Studies* briefly mentions potential causes of closure such as lack of funding, but does not discuss closure per se (Macdonald 2011). A recent history of museums by John Simmons, predominantly focussed on the US and UK, does not discuss closure (Simmons 2016). That pattern is continued in the *International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, none of which contain substantive discussions of the topic (e.g.: Coombes et al. 2015; McCarthy et al. 2015).

It is unclear why the discipline has not taken account of the numerous closures. It may be that museum studies has tended to focus on museum practice and development, as the origins of the discipline were in training museum staff to carry out their professional roles. Another significant strand of museum studies analyses museums – such as how they display and interpret collections – and again this will naturally lead to a focus on museums that are open.

The absence of much discussion could also be explained by a lack of data that would present the phenomenon clearly enough. Museum databases have had a faltering history in the UK and until 2020 the most recent effort was DOMUS (the Digest of Museum Statistics), an annual survey of registered museums conducted by the Museums and Galleries Commission, which ran between 1994 and 1999.[1] Publications based on DOMUS did not list closures and the database did not keep longitudinal data of this kind. Closure was therefore impossible to track. With thousands of museums in the UK, comprehensive data and focussed monitoring would be essential to track museum closures with any accuracy.

However, that lack of data has been addressed in recent years by the Mapping Museums project. Initially conceived to investigate the so-called museums boom, the rapid rise in the number of museums in the late twentieth century, one of the project's aims was to compile a database of all museums in the UK open since 1960. The criteria were broad, including private museums as well as the accredited museums more usually included in surveys. And as the dataset includes both open and closed museums with opening and closing dates, it enables large-scale analysis of museum closure in the UK since 1960.

Whatever the reasons may be for museum studies not considering the phenomenon of closure in any depth to date, it is clear that at least as far as the UK is concerned, with around 20 per cent of museums having closed since 1960, the scale of closures means that the discipline is out of step with one reality of the museum sector.

Closures often result in loss of access to collections. This can be a result of sales of private collections, but access to public collections can also be made more difficult due to items being transferred into storage or away from the locality. When the local authority-run Burton Museum closed in 1981, some of the items were transferred to Shugborough Hall, twenty miles away, although others remained in the town (Anon 1981). Some areas can be left without a museum altogether. By 1993 the London Borough of Newham had two museums devoted to its history, between them encompassing natural, social, and transport history and receiving tens of thousands of visitors each year. The Passmore Edwards Museum closed in 1994 and the North Woolwich Railway Museum followed in 2008. The borough now has no publicly-run museums and the collections were either dispersed or placed in storage.[2]

As well as raising issues of access, for museum studies, closure poses methodological questions. There are difficulties in defining closure and sometimes in dating it accurately, and closures are of varying types with different effects. Broadly, examining closures can reveal issues such as the effects of policy and changes in funding, including the ways in which they can be affected by decisions that may not be designed to bring about closures, such as land redevelopment; attitudes to museums, such as those highlighted by protests; and unevenness of museum provision.

This article examines existing discussions of closure, before proposing a definition based upon museum sites. I distinguish different types of closure with reference to their impact in terms of the effects on access, and lastly analyse chronological data from Mapping Museums to show how closure has affected the size of the sector.

Records and discussions of closure

There is a lengthy but patchy history of discussing museum closures in the UK, predominantly in grey literature. Closures are alluded to as just another feature of the museum sector, and reasons for closures are rarely examined in detail. It is not always clear why a given report or survey has chosen to mention closure, although some are more explicit than others about the circumstances prompting them to consider the issue. Altogether, reports on the sector that mention closure appear only sporadically.

Of the themes that emerge, the most dominant one is funding. Writing in 1938, in *A Report on the Museums and Art Galleries of the British Isles (other than the National Museums)* (Markham 1938), S.F. Markham set out to show 'the difficulties which prevent the development of museum services' (Markham 1938: 11). In his view these included a lack of forward planning and inadequate funding, both of which had contributed to museums closing (Markham 1938: 15).

Ten years later Markham published a *Directory of Museums and Art Galleries in the*

British Isles (Markham 1948). Markham claims that 160 museums had closed since the 1938 report and gives three main reasons for the closures. Apart from damage from enemy action and temporary occupation by government departments as a result of the war, Markham argued that museums were 'badly financed or poorly staffed and have died a natural death' (Markham 1948: viii).

Reports on the sector published in the roughly forty years after Markham's directory do not discuss closure, possibly because of the widely reported boom in museums in that period. However, when the Museums and Galleries Commission produced a survey report of the UK museum sector, *Museums Matter* (Museums and Galleries Commission and Greene 1992), they saw fit to comment on the financial pressures upon museums and the possible consequences. Perhaps because the report was produced not long after the early 1990s recession in the UK, much of it argues for increased funding for museums and greater recognition of the value they provide to society. It also noted a trend of increasing numbers of independent museums closing each year, many of which were said to be for financial reasons, although financial circumstances were thought to vary from one type of governance to another (Museums and Galleries Commission and Greene 1992: 44).

A subsequent report, *Towards a Government Policy for Museums* (Museums & Galleries Commission 1994), hereafter *Towards*, continued some of the same themes. Highlighting the problem of adequate core funding, *Towards* again suggested that there may be a limit to how many museums could be sustained financially (Museums & Galleries Commission 1994: 8).

Two years before *Museums Matter,* the consultant Victor Middleton had published the first of two reports on independent museums, *New Visions for Independent Museums in the UK* (Middleton 1990). Commenting on the rapid growth of the independent sector up to that point, Middleton suggests that the capacity of the sector may be outstripping demand, especially when sources of competition for museums, such as theme parks, were growing in number. He anticipates a number of closures due to financial problems brought on by that competition (Middleton 1990: 39-42).

Middleton related that increased competition to the need for higher standards in his next report, *New Visions for Museums in the 21st Century* (Middleton 1998). Highlighting the continuing growth of the sector, he also saw risks of closure in the failure of museums to reach standards that would enable them to compete for visitors with the growing number of other leisure attractions (Middleton 1998: 76). To reinforce his point, in this report Middleton provides closure data, stating that 124 museums had closed between 1990 and 1997 (Middleton 1998: 21).

Insufficient funding is sometimes presented as a consequence of there being too many museums. Financial pressures on museum budgets were presented as a consequence of branch expansion in the report *Renaissance in the Regions* (Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries 2001). Taking a broader view, *Museums Matter* suggests that the number of museums then open, said to be 2,500, 'is probably too many', although it does not offer an alternative number (Museums and Galleries Commission 1992: 53).

Towards repeated *Museums Matter's* view that there were 'probably too many museums' in the UK, and recommended acceptance of closures and mergers (Museums & Galleries Commission 1994: 8, 27). It also added a note concerning top-down planning for the sector – that no new museums should be created unless there were clear benefits in subject or geographical provision (Museums & Galleries Commission 1994: 16).

Perhaps following the lead of those reports, *Renaissance* made connections between the numbers of museums, the lack of revenue funding to maintain provision and quality, and the desirability of a reduction in the numbers of museums in order to maintain what already existed at a decent standard. In terms of planning, it went further in suggesting that rationalization, i.e. closure of museum sites, might be desirable in order to reduce the need for funding, amongst other factors (Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries 2001: 60). Taking note of the number of closures around 1990, Middleton also made policy recommendations, suggesting that a code of practice for dealing with closures should be developed as a matter of urgency, as well as discouraging new museums without robust business plans (Middleton 1990: 39-42).

Some years later the Museums Association began to pay more attention to closure

as a phenomenon. Although the *Museums Journal* had been reporting individual closures for many years, in 2012 it produced an overview of the closure of 42 heritage sites, many of which were museums, between 2004 and 2012 (Steel 2012). Funding cuts were cited as the main reason for closures. The Association also published an undated online map of museum closures since 2005, including 76 institutions,[3] although not all were museums. More recently, a focussed survey by Bethany Rex and Peter Campbell on the effects of austerity on local authority museum budgets found that some museum sites had closed as a result, although the sites are not identified (Rex and Campbell 2021: 4).

Recent reports have drawn on the comprehensive Mapping Museums data. In 2018 the various estimates of closure provided by the Museums Association were significantly updated and extended by the first results from the Mapping Museums project. In a blog post, 'Mapping Museums: Preliminary Results on UK Museum Closure, 1960-2017', Jamie Larkin discusses the problems of obtaining accurate data, especially for historical closures of smaller, less established museums.[4] He acknowledges the difficulties of defining museum closure, for example when museums merge or when they gradually fade from existence. Larkin also points out that the Mapping Museums data includes unaccredited museums, which had not been included in other surveys. The Mapping Museums data that Larkin reported gives a figure of 200 museums closed since 2010, which contrasts significantly with the 64 museums reported by the Museums Association as having closed in the same period.

In 2020 the Mapping Museums project published a report of their findings on the UK museum sector between 1960 and 2017, *Mapping Museums 1960–2020: A Report on the Data* (Candlin et al. 2020). It includes closures, analysed by the categories of governance, subject matter, size, accreditation, and UK nation, and further analyses England by the standard Office for National Statistics regions. The analysis also combines those divisions to include, for example, analysis of the numbers of independent not-for-profit museums closed in each country. This report presents the most comprehensive picture of the sector to date and makes it clear that closure is a significant feature of the museum sector in the UK.

Most recently, an overview of the Mapping Museums project presented data and trends between 1960 and 2019 (Candlin et al. 2023). Noting that 870 museums have closed in the period, it observes that small museums are most likely to close; that 23 per cent of local authority museums have closed, resulting in a reduction in their numbers; and that 36 per cent of private museums have closed, which is the highest proportion of any type of governance covered by the data (Candlin et al. 2023: 13-5).

The main themes that emerge from the grey literature are those of funding and the quality and extent of museum provision, the latter seen as related to funding and therefore to closure. Another possible category of reasons for closure is noted by Lubar et al., who suggest that 'museums live only as long as they are deemed useful', where usefulness is a measure of staying up-to-date (Lubar et al. 2017: 8). This raises the question of who judges a museum to be useful and what the criteria might be, but museums also close – or die – for reasons beyond funding or a notional failure to stay relevant to their times.

They may have their lease terminated and be unable to find a new property, as happened to the Cornwall Aviation Centre in 2022.[5] Similarly, National Museums Wales agreed to sell the land on which the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum stood, but was then unable to find a new location nearby (Welsh Affairs Committee 1999). A museum may be destroyed by fire, as was Ramsgate Museum, housed in the town's library, in 2004.[6] Or the building may be deemed unsuitable, as was the case for Angus Folk Museum.[7] These examples point to the variety of reasons for museums to close beyond those most commonly cited.

These varied reasons for closure also touch upon some of the ways that collections come to an end, as highlighted by Jardine et al. (2019). They note the disastrous national museum fire in Rio de Janeiro in 2015, but also natural disasters such as earthquakes or the deliberate destruction of museums in conflict zones (Jardine et al. 2019: 8-9).

Those are extreme examples, but as Lubar et al. also point out, closure more generally can entail the loss of collections, whether that is loss of access or the loss inherent in disposals. Considering the loss of heritage more broadly and the abiding view of the desirability of preservation, Harrison and DeSilvey observe that some loss is probably inevitable (DeSilvey and Harrison 2020). This is particularly so when climate change is taken into account, but

they also note that loss has both the potential for making way for something new to emerge and a political dimension. In asking 'Who decides what gets lost and what to save?', they hint at the possibility of protest when losses are anticipated (DeSilvey and Harrison 2020: 3).

The level of protest is one way of gauging the effects of closures on communities. When the closure of the Passmore Edwards museum was proposed, Newham council was presented with a petition signed by approximately 4,180 people in protest.[8] Five years after North Berwick museum was closed, a local petition gathered more than 5,000 signatures from a population of around 6,000. This prompted East Lothian Council to conduct a feasibility study for a new museum.[9] Such protests can indicate a level of feeling and loss that may result from a closure, but not every closure prompts widespread protest. When The Way We Were in Wigan was scheduled for closure, there were just a few letters of protest in the local paper (for example: Wigan Pier Volunteers 2004).

As Harrison and DeSilvey point out, loss can be a prelude to new things. Replacing one museum with another is typically an occasion for such a renewal, although responses may be mixed. For example the Timothy Hackworth museum in Shildon was closed, to be replaced by Locomotion, a new branch of the National Railway Museum. While the original museum had focussed on Hackworth himself, who had lived on the site, Locomotion told a much bigger history of the development of rail. However, some complained that Hackworth's history was no longer being told.[10]

Altogether, the existing literature makes it clear that although closure has received attention, that attention has been sporadic and patchy. In grey literature, closures may be mentioned but not identified, and the most thorough analyses of the phenomenon in the UK are the Mapping Museums report, which ends its analysis in 2017, and the subsequent article describing the project, which extends the coverage by two years. Other scholarly discussion is largely limited to single case studies and, given the scale of closures, there is scope for much more research.

Defining closure

The complexity and variety of the museum sector can make it difficult to define closure precisely. One complexity is that individual museum sites are frequently part of larger organizations, whether this be a museum service run by a local authority, or a group of museums such as Tate. For some museums then, a distinction can be made between sites and organizations, where each site is an individual museum. In attempting to define closure, I take a site-based approach. In the simplest case a museum's organization can be identified with a single site, as is the case for many independent private museums. In more complex cases, such as Tate, an organization may have a number of museum sites within its portfolio. More broadly, local authorities are just one type of organization that run museums while also undertaking non-museum activities; others include private businesses, military regiments, and – more common in the earlier part of the twentieth century – scientific clubs. In many cases an organization frequently continues operating after the museum site closes and may continue to care for some of the collections. But even when collections are retained for public access, visiting them may require an appointment; not all of the collection may be publicly accessible; and even when public access is retained, the collections may well be dispersed quite widely. With those complexities in mind, it is simpler to identify closure with sites than with organizations.

A site-based approach includes the closure of standalone museums, of branches of larger museum organizations, and indeed of any museum site that has closed and to which the public no longer has access. But sites are not always to be identified with locations. Museums may close in one location and reopen in another, but this should not count as a closure unless there are other significant changes. An example is the National Cycle Museum in Lincoln (1979-1996/7). This was established as a collection at Belton House, near Grantham, in 1978. It moved to Brayford Wharf, Lincoln in 1984, then to Lawns Hospital, Lincoln, in 1994, where it closed in 1996/7 (the exact date is unclear).[11] Despite having three different locations, the museum can be viewed as one continuous entity until it definitively closed.

It can be difficult to define closure precisely. Just as museums in the UK (let alone the rest of the world) do not fit a single model or pattern, closure can take diverse forms and

some examples are less clear-cut than others. Probably the most straightforward case is that of a museum closing permanently and transferring its collections to one or more museums elsewhere, as the Barnes Museum of Cinematography did, discussed below. But there are numerous possibilities when museums close, depending on circumstances.

A museum may be absorbed by a non-museum organization which retains its collection, the status of which then becomes uncertain. If the collection does not appear to be cared for, is it still a museum? This question can be asked of the period after the Royal Architectural Museum was taken over by the Architectural Association (AA) in 1902. The collection, which predominantly consisted of plaster casts, was reported to have become dusty and neglected after the transfer, and some years later the AA disposed of it (Bottoms 2007: 132). The period in the museum's life between acquisition and disposal therefore raises questions about whether it was closed in practice, if not publicly so (its name was still used on letterheads during that time).

Museums can also close and be changed into museum displays elsewhere. For example, the Clockmakers Museum was initially at London's Guildhall before being moved to the Science Museum in 2015. As it now resembles one display amongst others in a larger gallery, the Clockmakers Museum is closed, on the basis that it no longer exists as a distinct site.

In a similar case, a branch museum may be shut and its collections transferred to another museum nearby, which may at a later date put some of them on display. To some extent access remains possible, so is this a closure? This was the case for the Theatre Museum in London's Covent Garden, a branch of the V&A just three miles away from the main museum. Although some of the theatre and performance collection was eventually displayed in dedicated galleries at the V&A, there was an angry response to this closure, as the museum was situated in the heart of London's theatre district.[12] In a site-based approach this counts as a closure, and that is not altered whether collections are redisplayed elsewhere or not.

Some types of closure should not be counted. The first is planned temporary closures, because there is an expectation that the museum will reopen. At the same time, temporary closures can be extended in ways that may not have been anticipated. The Museum of Bath Architecture closed in December 2019, and the closure was unexpectedly extended by the Covid-19 pandemic and other factors until March 2024.[13] Notwithstanding the sometimes lengthy duration of temporary closures, closure is understood in this article as likely to be permanent.

Along similar lines, closing a museum for replacement by another should not normally be counted. The Museum of Liverpool Life, for instance, could not accommodate all those who wished to visit. It was closed in 2006 to allow building works to begin for its replacement, the much larger Museum of Liverpool, which opened five years later.[14] That closure was part of a preconceived plan for replacing one museum with another. But not all replacements are clear-cut. The Swansea Maritime and Industrial Museum was eventually replaced by the National Waterfront Museum, which incorporated the former museum's building. In one sense this could be considered a replacement and the new museum a continuation of the old one, but there were significant changes. The redevelopment of the building was extensive, with a large modern extension to the existing structure (Keen 2005). There was a complete change of name, indicating a new national purview, and this reflected a change of governance, from being run by the local authority to a joint arrangement with Amgueddfa Cymru, and the new museum presented as part of that organization.[15] Moreover there was a change in emphasis and displays, from maritime and industrial collections to a wider remit that includes social and natural history with significant displays of national collection items. The new museum is so different from the old one that it is more fitting to regard the old museum as closed and the National Waterfront Museum as a new endeavour on the same site.

A further problem lies not in defining closure but in determining precisely when it took place. In some cases this is simply due to a lack of information, but some museums seem to fade away gradually rather than closing at a clearly defined time. The Royal Architectural Museum was one case of uncertainty, and two American museums provide further examples. At the Jenks Museum at Brown University, collections were gradually moved from public display to storage, diminishing the museum's public orientation, and raising a question in the process about when the museum ceased (Duffy 2017: 40). In the case of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, the purpose of the site gradually changed to the point where collections

were used merely as decorative displays on the walls of a conference centre (Conn 2010: 184). Had the museum effectively closed by that point, was it perhaps when the whole building was permanently closed, or sometime in between? All of these examples present problems of pinpointing the date of closure, but nevertheless at some point in each case the museum did unambiguously close – the only uncertainty is when it did so. There are many examples in the Mapping Museums database of museums whose closing dates (and, in some cases, opening dates) are in doubt.

The examples discussed above highlight some of the many variations of museum closure. Where numbers of closures are discussed in this article, they draw upon the Mapping Museums data, which broadly uses these criteria for deciding whether a museum has been closed or not. The criteria for a museum's inclusion in the database are that it should have an intention to care for objects in the long term, a public orientation (e.g., advertised opening hours), and a threshold that clearly demarcates it from its surroundings (Candlin and Larkin 2020: 124-5). Some or all of those features are likely to change upon closure. In the simplest terms, this is when sites have closed permanently and were not part of a clear replacement plan with a similar museum as an end result.

Types of closure

Closures are of various kinds, and some closures are more final than others. In differentiating them, I introduce the terms soft closure and hard closure to indicate the level of potential impact or loss.

Soft closures include the replacement of one museum by another, which can happen in a process of amalgamation or expansion. The Timothy Hackworth Museum mentioned above, for instance, was absorbed into a new larger museum, Locomotion, which has the same site and broadly similar subject matter, so although the original museum has closed in one sense, most of its collections remain available.

The closure of museum branches, although these are relatively rare, can also be considered as soft. The Theatre Museum is one example, as is the Museum of Mankind, which was a branch of the British Museum and consequently its collections remain available at the parent institution. Although these have both closed, they were branches of museums that remain open in the same cities and retain the collections that were on show. For this reason, much less has been lost than when a museum closes and sells or transfers its collections elsewhere.

But this is not to say that there was no loss in these cases. Although some of what had been on display at the Theatre Museum was redisplayed at the V&A, much of the collection went into storage.[16] At the British Museum, the collections from the Museum of Mankind were redisplayed in significantly different ways. In the view of Ben Burt, a former curator at both museums, some of the new displays placed ethnographic objects within a framework of Western fine art values rather than the complex historical context that the Museum of Mankind had presented (Burt 2019: chap. 7).

Hard closures have a greater impact. They could be defined as one in which the museum has closed for good, with no plan for reinstatement, and the collections have been disposed of. An example of a hard closure in these terms is the Christchurch Tricycle Museum in Dorset, which closed in 1995, apparently due to financial problems, and whose collection was sold at auction a year later (Churchill 2017: 20).

The two terms, hard and soft, do not describe all types of closure; rather they can be seen as indicating the range of a broad spectrum. Closures at the harder end of the range often result in the dispersal of collections. When the local authority museum in Burton on Trent, Staffordshire closed in 1981 the collections were dispersed, although attempts were made to keep the exhibits 'as local as possible' (Anon 1981). When the closure was announced, plans were in place for most of the objects and archives to be sent to six different institutions, many of them in or close to Burton, and to local schools. One of the recipients was the privately-owned Bass Museum in Burton, predominantly a museum of brewing, which charged for admission. Another destination was the Staffordshire County Museum at Shugborough Hall, a historic house leased by Staffordshire County Council from the National Trust, which was

less local, being twenty miles away from Burton. This dispersal would have made it more difficult to view the collections, formerly gathered together in one place. Dispersals may also happen in stages. Most of the Hunday Museum's collection of tractors and farm implements was sold first of all to the museum at Stapehill Abbey in Dorset. What began as a dispersal to a single site then became more dispersed when, seven years later, the Abbey's collection was sold at private auction.[17]

An example of a private museum closure less final than the Christchurch Tricycle museum, but still at the hard end of the spectrum, is that of the Barnes Museum of Cinematography, a small private museum in St Ives, Cornwall. The museum was closed with no intention to reopen it, but parts of the collection are still available to the public in two other museums: Hove Museum and the Italian National Museum of Cinema in Turin (Robinson 2006: 249). This partial transfer of collections to other museums can be seen as less severe than a private sale of the whole collection, but the dispersals were much further afield than that of Burton's museum and it is not clear what happened to the remainder of the objects in the Barnes collection.

From these examples, a dimension of closure can be identified, namely the extent of dispersal. Collections may be dispersed quite locally, as was the case with Burton Museum, or much more widely, as were those of the Barnes Museum. This is not only a question of geographical distribution but also of the type of destination. At one extreme, the collections of a museum could end up in the hands of many different private owners, which may prevent future public access. One example is the sale of Walter Potter's Museum of Curiosities, a collection of whimsical taxidermy formerly in Bramber, Sussex, which was sold in 1984 and moved to Jamaica Inn, Cornwall, before being sold at auction in 2003 and dispersed.[18] But objects from a closed museum may also remain entirely within other museums – in the simplest cases just one museum, as when the Museum of Mankind was closed.

Harder closures arguably have more impact by reducing access to museums and their collections for those who were used to being able to access them. As the Museums Association puts it in their report *Museums Facing Closure*: 'Closing a museum denies the public access to their heritage and significantly undermines the human right to culture' (Brown et al. 2017: 3). The Association's statement refers to the recognition of access to culture as a human right under Article 27 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (United Nations 1948). The declaration mentions the rights to participate freely in the cultural life of the community and enjoy the arts, and UNESCO states that this includes the right of access to culture (UNESCO 2017). Although the impacts of closure can vary from one museum to another, closing a museum often reduces access to the collections that it held, and in those cases where collections are sold and dispersed to private collectors, access may be denied to the public forever.

Mapping Museums data and closure trends

The Mapping Museums database provides the best source of data on closure in the UK since 1960, when its dataset begins.[19] It has been compiled from numerous sources with the initial aim of recording every museum open in the UK at any time between 1960 and 2020, although data collection continues and includes museums opened in 2023. Some of the patterns of closure that the data reveals are noted above but I want to focus here on observations regarding patterns over time, after sounding a note of caution about data.

Museums have closed throughout this period, although the frequency with which they have done so has changed. But the figures in this data for numbers of museums closing (or opening) at a given time need to be handled with care. As Larkin has commented, and as some examples given above demonstrate, it can be difficult to date museum closure exactly.[20] When precise opening or closing dates are not available, they are represented in the dataset using a range of years based on the best available information. For instance, the Nursing History Museum in Leek, Staffordshire, has its closing date represented with the range 2006-2008. Altogether there are 220 museums with a range recorded for the closing year. Sometimes the ranges are quite long, reflecting a paucity of data. 31 museums have a closure date range of over 50 years, with the longest at 81 years.

Those uncertainties in dating present problems when counting closures that have occurred in each year with a view to visualizing trends. The Mapping Museums database presents openings and closings for each year as numerical totals, which are calculated to take into account uncertain opening and closing dates. Closures with date ranges are apportioned equally across the years within the range (Candlin and Poulovassilis 2019: 455). As the trends presented here are based on these calculated totals they need to be understood similarly, as estimates based upon the best available data.

Figure 1 shows the trend of closures for each year between 1960 and 2023, calculated as a 5-year rolling average. The number of closures has gradually increased, with fluctuations, until the last few years.
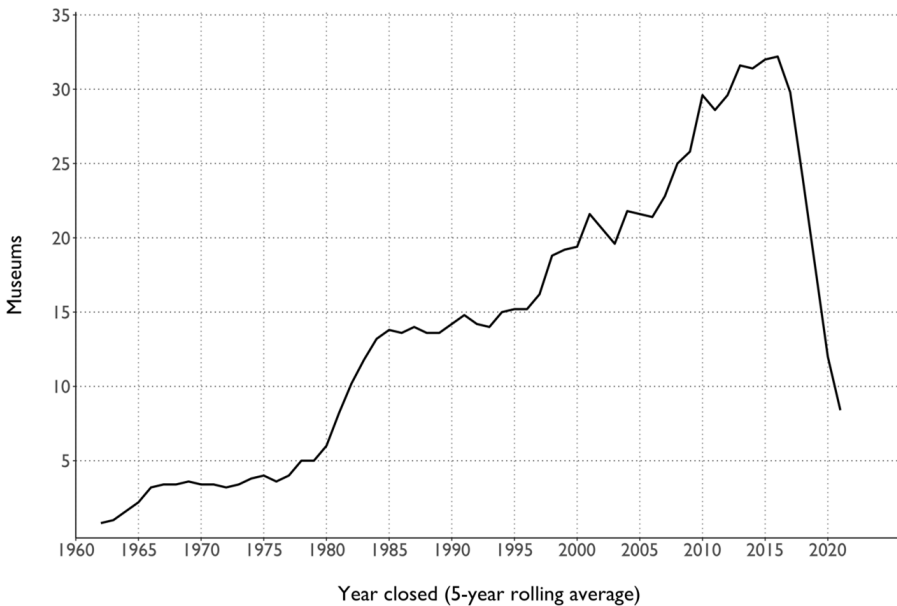

Figure 1. Closures per year, 1960-2023 (5-year rolling average)

The overall trend of closures until 2017 is that of a steady increase, although steeper rises can be seen in the early 1980s and the period post-2005. It is unclear why that trend should have suddenly declined in the latter years. By 2021 the number of closures was at its lowest level since 1979.

At the same time, the sector has grown considerably since 1960. Starting at an estimated 1,068 museums, it reached its peak in 2015 with an estimated 3,420 museums (Figure 2). The sector has more than tripled in size since 1960, but the rate of growth has changed considerably during that time. It was fastest in the mid-1970s, peaking at 5.6 per cent in 1974. Since 2005 annual sector growth has been less than 1 per cent, and it contracted slightly in 2016-18 and again in 2020.
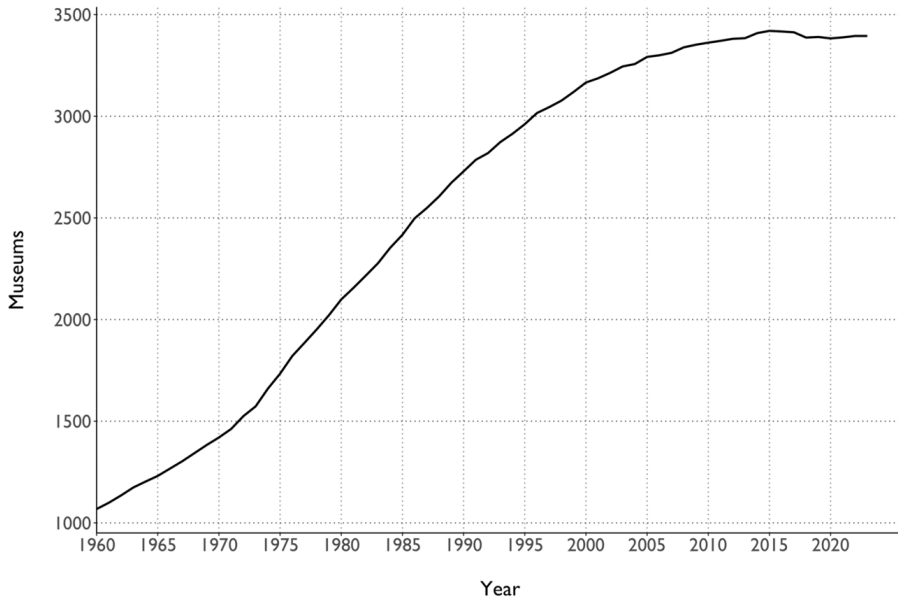
Figure 2. UK Museum sector size, 1960-2023

This slowing of growth is partly explained by the growing rate of closures. Understood as the proportion of closures compared to the size of the sector in any given year, the closure rate has grown from around 0.1 per cent in 1961 to a peak of 1.3 per cent in 2015, when annual closures were at their highest point. The more recent reductions in absolute numbers of closures have resulted in a decline in the closure rate, which in 2023 had returned to a level similar to that in the early 1960s.

Writing in *The Mendoza Review: An Independent Review of Museums in England* (Mendoza 2017), Mendoza suggested that the numbers of closures are 'neither vast nor accelerating' (Mendoza 2017: 32). The total number may not have been large in comparison with the sector as a whole but as these figures make clear the trend had in fact been increasing for decades beforehand.

The result of slowing sectoral growth and increases in closures is that the sector has begun to contract slightly. At the end of 2023 there were an estimated 3,362 museums recorded as being open, just below the 2015 peak (Figure 2). The year 2016 was the first time since 1960 that the UK museum sector began to shrink. The *Museums Matter* report suggested that 2,500 museums was 'probably too many', as if the sector might have a saturation point. The recent flattening of the growth curve may imply that point has been reached, but at a significantly higher level.

Conclusion

In this article I have set out some of the main themes and issues that pertain to museum closure, with examples drawn mainly from the UK. Museum studies has not examined closure in any depth, which means that it is out of step with one reality of the museum sector, at least in the UK, where around 20 per cent of the sector has closed since 1960.

Closure is often associated with financial difficulties, but museums can close for many other reasons, ranging from accidents such as fire to the loss of a property lease or the inability to find a new location when circumstances have changed.

It is hard to define closure precisely, but an approach that uses sites rather than organizations makes defining closures easier, as organizations that run museums can often

persist even when museums close. Closure is considered here as the likely permanent closure of a site. Where closure is part of a scheme to replace a museum, whether the museum can be seen to have closed depends upon the nature of its replacement.

Closures are also of various kinds, and a typology that ranges from hard to soft closure highlights the differing levels of loss of access that can result. The hardest closures will result in complete loss of public access, as often happens when private museum collections are sold at auction. Softer closures will have less of an effect but access is often modified, as when branch museums close or collections are dispersed more widely. Most closures will change access in one way or another.

Closures can also be difficult to date with accuracy, but this does not prevent chronological analysis. The annual number of closures has increased overall between 1960 and 2017, albeit with considerable fluctuations from year to year. Closures overtook openings for the first time in 2010, and after decades of growth the UK sector started to contract slightly in 2015. The trend of closures has dropped off markedly since 2017, and the reasons for that fall are as yet unclear. Nonetheless it is possible that the capacity of the sector, discussed in various policy documents, may have been reached but at a significantly higher level than originally anticipated.

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Notes

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