

Study Name: How do ethics influence the development of policies for accessing public collections which are essentially restricted by law: A case study of the Royal Armouries.

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Interview Transcript: Katie Robson – Registrar (Royal Armouries), 7/2/2023

SB: Hello Katie. Thank you for speaking to me again, and this time on the interesting subject of access and weapons collections. To start off with how would you define the term access in your capacity as a member of the Royal Armouries collections staff?

KR: Okay, my role is facilitating access to objects by assessing the risk, the risks plural, so to people, the objects themselves and then advising about the appropriate controls for those risks, so that could be for events or display. There's the physical access to objects and then also, digital access in the sense of documentation, documentation of those objects and some of the procedures around that, and then that information is fed to collections online on the website. They're the two strands that I get involved with the access really.

SB: Yeah, that's really interesting that idea of physical access, but digital access has its own unique requirements and hopefully that's something we'll get on to a bit later. What is your role in reconciling the need for access with the need for, say, safety and security that the Armouries is required to uphold?

KR: Yeah, it's a balancing act because we've got to get that balance and because if we didn't give any access, we'd be keeping everybody safe and the objects would be safe. But that just wouldn't be fulfilling our role and the whole purpose of the collection. It's trying to get the right amount of risk to take, so you can't eliminate risk, it's just trying to work out how much risk we're happy with, what feels the right level of risk to take. It's cost-benefit analysis, so it's very case by case. When we looked at the Collections Security procedure and we reviewed it, we decided that actually we couldn't make a blanket set of rules that we could use for every time we wanted the collection to be accessed. That actually we can have some rules which we do have that apply in all instances such as the collections access form and making sure we've got contact details for people. But actually, for events, it's got to be quite bespoke, a risk assessment taking into account all the different factors and so that's how we do it. I think it's these different strands again, so we've got objects on display in the galleries and we've got a fairly static set of features and procedures that manage those. We're not thinking case by case, we've got our rules such as we don't open display cases during visitor opening hours unless I agree it. Unless there's a real

particular exception and a need, and then I'll do a risk assessment and I'll think, is there a Section 5 [prohibited firearm under the *Firearms Act 1968*]? No, we can't. If there's not a Section 5, I'll be looking at the types of objects in the case. But the blanket ruled baseline is there's no need to take that risk, we do it when it's closed. So we've got all those onion of security features for the case objects, which is more static: CCTV, 24-hour security presence, invigilation when we're open, key procedures. Then the events is where it's more case by case and that's a risk assessment for each one, so that's where I get involved. I've created a form that I get staff who are running the event to provide me with information so I can do that assessment. I can talk to them and negotiate, so we come out with something that we think that is a suitable risk management of it.

SB: Yeah, that seems to be a really important idea and principle on which actually I was going to speak about at some point, so thank you for raising it for me. Could you just explain a bit more how the risk management approach works on a broader level? How it guides the Armouries' approach more holistically, perhaps?

KR: In a broader way we want to make our objects accessible. Other departments will have ideas or programmes, and then it will come to me and they'll say, do you think this is possible? Is it a crazy idea to have a weapon at this event? Overall we want our collection to be as accessible as we can, and then we have to look at the risk and see, can we do it, is it possible, or is it too much risk? Or how could we adapt it? I'm not involved in the first bit, but I'm part of the process where somebody else has had the idea, and then it moves on to me and colleagues to discuss. I suppose it's like a mathematical sum: idea plus the risk assessment equals and then we get the outcome. It's quite fluid because the museum isn't static. There's changes in the other departments, there's digital strategy, there's lots of ambition and wanting to do things in different ways. So we're trying new things and then we need to think through the risks of that new thing rather than doing things as we've always done them. We're trying to always think, what is the risk? Because it would be nice if we could do this, but can we?

SB: Yes, it's breaking new ground and trying to work out in practice on the ground, how that's going to play out and what factors need to be considered. Thank you, that's really interesting. Another principle that you mentioned is the onion principle, a very well-named one. Could you

just speak a bit more about what that entails and how the Armouries across all three of its sites implements this policy?

KR: Yeah, I find the onion a really helpful way of looking at it, that there'll be layers of security. That if you put all your eggs in one basket and you were dependent on one feature, that's too weak an approach because if that failed you're vulnerable. The idea is to have these layers so that if the outer layer is penetrated, you've still got six more layers to get through. So in terms of the different physical sites, I mean they do vary and the physical fabric of the building is different to match the collections in the space. The NFC [National Firearms Centre] has enhanced features that the other sites don't have, due to the nature of the objects there. Each site, because we've got different types of weapons and different spaces, there are different features which were put in consultation with police and discussions with the [National] Security Advisor. So it is tailored, the physical fabric of the building, the security is tailored, so doors may differ, metal detectors. There's lots of physical features like that, the 24-hour on-site presence. The Tower's [of London] interesting because Historic Royal Palaces operate that site, so we're working with them and it's one of the major visitor attractions in the UK. It has its own security features there because the Crown Jewels are there as well, so we do very well out of that. There's all these different layers which do vary. It's tricky. Yeah, it's an interesting one because I'm not used to talking explicitly about it. In fact, I don't talk explicitly about security features, for that very reason.

SB: Which is fair!

KR: I'm hedging around saying what the specific features are because that's one of the layers of security that we don't discuss the security.

SB: No, that's fine. Yes, don't worry, I'm not going to press for any details or anything. That would not do. But yes, thank you for the overview. Another thing that you have already mentioned a bit, but I wouldn't mind a bit more explanation of documentation and how that underpins the use of the Armouries' collections in public programming.

KR: Yeah. It's quite an interrelated web. It's quite a difficult question because it comes up in so many ways really. I mean EMu [collections management software], as you know, our objects database is a central point of capture for the documentation of weapons. So that's got all the locations on it. We're using it in so many different ways because it's got serial numbers, it's got

the things that the police are interested in if they check us, that we're complying with our licences. It fulfils that function that we've got to be able to say where everything is, what the serial number is, details about it, what the firearms licensing category is. But then we can also use it to put narratives about the objects, which then goes on the website for visitors. That documentation hub is used in different ways for the public programme, to facilitate, to manage the collection. Yeah, if you take any elements of it, we will be using EMu to facilitate in the background to make things happen.

SB: Yes. I suppose collections management systems are central to any form of collections management really, certainly in the digital age. It's so interesting see all those different facets.

KR: Because actually when we had the cyber-attack, and we were without the database, you realise how much you use it without being aware almost, because it's so central. We did lose the database. How do you know where your objects are? You might do if a person has knowledge of an object, but if they don't, there's a lot of objects. So it shows how vital the database is for lots of different functions, and just basic bread-and-butter work, really.

SB: It's that idea that you need to keep track of your objects all the time, especially weapons collections, because, as you say, there's a whole added level of difficulty around them. You need to keep track of them for licensing purposes in addition to regular collections management best practice.

KR: Yeah, that's right. The good thing is we do say to the police, the level that they want is a level we want for museum collections anyway, so it's good that the two do work. That's something where they work well together because, whatever the collection, all collections managers would want to know where everything is. But yes, it focuses the mind more if it's a Section 5 and you don't know where that is. That's more of a problem.

SB: Yes, I can imagine. That's probably at the top of your to-do list if that happens. I can imagine it's a very rare, if non-occurrence.

KR: Yeah, it's not something you want.

SB: No. Moving on a bit to more the specific uses of weapons collections in programming and the processes that underpin them really. The first one I'd like to look at is direct engagement with

collections, so that includes handling, but also demonstrations and things like that. What additional procedures does the Armouries put in place to ensure that these forms of access can take place safely?

KR: When we have people interacting with objects, it's a very defined group, so it won't be an open session. I mean I have to be careful because, as I say, we're looking at things all the time, so nothing's ruled out. But generally, the things we've done, they've been defined groups of people, so people book on and we have their contact details. We've got that audit trail and that is checked, so we are asking for ID, a photo ID, and proof of address, and we keep that on file for three years. That's one check, so that we know who is interacting with the objects and for certain groups we're verifying that the person is who they say they are. That's one feature. They're quite controlled groups with limited numbers. We'll look in advance when we're going to do an activity, one of my questions for the people who are running the activity is how many attendees will there be? Who are the attendees? What space is the event going to be in? So generally, it's easier if it's in a closed space for handling sessions and events, behind a swipe door. Then we're taking out of the risk equation, other people being able to wander in that we've not got their details, we've not planned for those ratios. So they tend to be in defined spaces that we've got control over the access to. We'll look at what objects are going to be in the session, so if somebody wanted twenty edged weapons that would be really different to than wanting two edged weapons. If there were more weapons that we thought could cause immediate harm. There's different levels of risk with some of the edged weapons are more dangerous to handle, it's easier to cut yourself or cause immediate harm than others. So we look at the actual objects that are going to be in the session as well. It's that mix, the different factors really of all those things I've said, so then we would work out what is a reasonable ratio for staff that are leading that session, who are all trained. What's an acceptable number of people for them to have control of that session, a) to protect the objects from harm, but also a safe ratio for the people. There's always potential for the unknown, somebody falls ill in the session, somebody needs to know where the toilets are, so have we got enough people to cover if something unplanned came up? That's why we've decided we'd do it case by case rather than putting specific rules in, because you could say, if there's eight objects, we'll have this many people. But it does differ, it does depend on what the objects are, so it seems to be working. It's a fairly new thing that we implemented when we reviewed the Collections Security procedure that people would submit

information to me and we would assess it case by case. It's been a test, a new thing to try, and if I've got queries, I escalate it up if I think I'm not sure about the risk. The more we've done, we've learned there's some things that we do regularly, like photography sessions, so we get a good sense of our risk management for that. But events can really differ.

SB: So how did you go about the Weapons in Society conference, for example? Because there was the handling component. What things were you thinking of? What was your thought process? Without going into too much detail.

KR: As I say, I have devised a form now that's got set questions just to information gather. The good thing is we're all learning together, so I share my thinking, I discuss with the people who are running the event, so Mark [Bennett, Research Manager] runs a number of events. We've worked together on them to talk through different scenarios. That was one where we said we can't have too many people, we don't want all the delegates necessarily in the space with the objects, so we then have to look at how we run the event. Do we split it? There's quite a few events where we split them into two, so half of the attendees will be with the objects and then half of them will do a gallery tour, and then that allows us to manage the risk better rather than having an unmanageable number of people in the room. So again, it was checking what physical space we were going to use for the session, that we've got control over it, it's not too open a space where we can get other people in the space. Looking at the objects that were selected, so the number that could cause immediate harm to people was a small proportion of the selection, rather than have it full of what I'd deem to be more immediate risk objects. So we're looking at the composition of the objects that were there. Discussing what's going to happen in the session because you could do it differently. Sometimes you could say the objects will be present, but the delegates won't handle them. It will be staff only that are handling them, so that gives us more control. We talked through that. We looked at the staff ratios and we also checked with the staff to make sure they're comfortable, because that's a really important factor. People will differ if they've not done events before or they're less familiar with an object, they may feel my maximum of people I'm happy to oversee is this. Even if people were comfortable we'd put a limit on it because what's easy to forget is if something was unplanned and somebody needed assistance, it would be easy for things to be left unattended. I think they were the factors we went through with Weapons in Society.

SB: I suppose it depends on the group as well. You're going to do something very different for a school group than for a group of academics,

KR: Yeah, that's right. We do look at that, who are the delegates? Because there's such a range of people. They might be people that are already familiar, that work with collections. All the groups bring a different, it adds another factor into it. Definitely something to take into account.

SB: I'm very intrigued about the internal conversations that were had about that because obviously access is something that everyone takes part in and everyone within the museum contributes to, even if it's not necessarily obvious to an outside observer. It's something that I'm trying to work through.

KR: Yeah. What are you thinking with that, say a bit more on that.

SB: Yes. Well it was more of an observation than a question, the classic conference question that you don't want to hear. But more generally what relationships do you build with colleagues in other departments, beyond specifically the registrar department, and how do you go about working with them when you're facilitating access to the collections?

KR: Yeah, there's lots of interaction with the departments. I suppose the biggest relationship, there's lots that happens within collections [department], so the way it's been structured, the majority of my conversations about access are with colleagues in collections. But increasingly I am talking to staff in other departments. For example, [the audience] development [department], having increasing conversations with development, where they want objects to be present at an event, because they manage membership schemes, members want to see objects. So I'm having conversations with them where they're saying this is what we would like to do, do you think that's possible? What would we need to think about? Talking about taking objects offsite, I've had conversations with people at that site and gone through what their security features are. We're both working on it from our different perspectives. Colleagues who are programming events in the learning and engagement team. I think that's going to increase, I've seen a marked increase in that in the last year, of much more [collaboration]. It's probably a post-COVID factor as well, the Museum's opening up again and, which is great, so much more of a varied programme of events. We can get people into the building again. I'm sitting in meetings with different hats on, but they look to me to advise about what's appropriate in terms of risk, and that

will be my role in the group in a multidisciplinary meeting where you've got representatives from different departments. They will ask me what's possible and what we need to do.

SB: That's the benefit of taking it on a case-by-case approach, people can just come and ask you, will this work? Can we do this safely? Whereas I suppose the potential with having a set boundary is that that might put other colleagues off from approaching.

KR: Yeah, I think there's pros and cons. You could have a set of rules that you don't budge from and you could say that frees up my resource so that I don't need to have these brain teasers where I'm assessing risk. But I think with the nature of our collection and what we want to do, I don't think that would be helpful. We'd be missing out on access opportunities and I'm not sure we'd be managing the risk very well, because it's so varied because of all the different factors of where you have it, what the objects are, who are the people. I don't think that would be an appropriate level of risk. It's quite a resource-heavy way of doing it, but the outcomes from it cover a lot of the different things we need to be thinking about. There's always better ways of doing things, this is fairly new, I'm sure it will evolve. I don't know how it will evolve, but we've got to keep moving, adapting, and learning. Approaches in museums are changing all the time, so we've got to make sure we're adapting as well.

SB: Yeah, I suppose as methods of access change and evolve the processes and procedures underpinning them, likewise, need to adapt and evolve.

KR: Yeah, it's interesting. I think we're going to get more digital use of collections. We're going to need to adapt to that and we've had something recently, a loan request, where there's a question about can we use 3D scans? Or we can't lend the actual object, but they want to include a digital version of the object. I think that's something that's only going to increase probably, and then that needs potentially new procedures in place.

SB: Yeah, because that's more about rights management and things like that rather than specific risk management.

KR: Yeah, I mean it can be reputational risk. Anytime our objects are out in the world potentially our name is associated with it. Yeah, different types of risk, as you say. I mean it can be legal risks but slightly different to the ones we're speaking about.

SB: Just on that idea of different types of risks and going back to the Weapons in Society example. What sort of procedures did you implement in order to meet the legal requirements? Because we've spoken about the health and safety perspective, but what about the legal restrictions that are around some of the objects in that handling session?

KR: I mean we've got our procedures to really try and tick that box without us having to think event by event really, so the access forms that collect the details, the staff training that we have, all our bread-and-butter procedures. I don't think there's anything case by case for that one and I think they're just embedded in how we work really. The fact that we're a museum and it's accepted that we will be using these objects in the way that museums do. We use that.

SB: Yeah, so it seems to me there's a base standard and then things may need to be tweaked above that depending on the individual risk presented by the situation.

KR: Yeah, I think that's a good summary of it.

SB: Perfect. Moving onto the other aspect of the Weapons in Society conference that the delegates got to enjoy, the exhibition and the gallery. What safeguards does the Armouries implement to maintain necessary levels of security when exhibiting weapons in its public galleries?

KR: Generally, they're in cases that are a certain security specification. There are some things on open display, but they're inaccessible if they're weapons. I'm thinking about huge, heavy things that you can't physically move or use. So the actual way that they're displayed is one feature, the vast majority are in locked cases that aren't opened when the public are there. Then you zoom out from that and you've got the different features such as CCTV, that's being watched by 24-hour in-person security presence, people invigilating. In terms of the public galleries, I think they're the main features really.

SB: Would you say that there's much difference between a case with weapons collections and one without? Or is it very much a similar level throughout?

KR: Yeah, it's a similar level. Yeah, not much distinction between if things are weapons or not for us, as we have so many I guess. That's the standard, things are done for them being weapons, but we'd want a high level for non-weapons as well. So it works well.

SB: I suppose it's the principle that it's easier to have a consistent standard that's higher than doing it on a case-by-case basis.

KR: Yeah, I mean there's things to take into account. If there's lots of Section 5s – so there's hotspots in the gallery, in War Mezzanine, just by the nature of the display – in that area, when they're put in, it's looking at the security features and the positioning of those in the spaces. There are some features, the fact that they're Section 5s then there's particular care about where they're situated and what the security is in that area. It's not a set blanket across all the spaces, there are some hotspots where that's taken into account. But fairly consistent with that in mind.

SB: Yeah. Probably the most difficult part of exhibitions is when they're being installed or deinstalled. What measures have to be in place for those processes?

KR: Yeah, recently it's been an enclosed space, so effectively a box has been built around the space, actually the past two [installations]. Very restricted access, so most other collections staff wouldn't be able to access. There's a definite list of names who are involved in that install, and only they can get into that space, so it's a locked down space within the big space. The ideal is to just isolate it, shut it down so that nobody else can get in. It was an interesting thing to think through for the installation of the exhibition on the War Mezzanine because of the Section 5s in there, about the installation of that and locking that down when objects were going in, or what point you actually move the objects or put them in.

SB: What about more on a general basis, if you just need to access a case or get something out for a loan or something like that? What are the additional precautions needed in that situation?

KR: We say do that outside of visitor opening hours, if at all possible. If you can't for any reason, you need to ask me, but we do it when the gallery's shut to visitors. We've got time at the start and the end of the day that we can use. We've got closed days that are good for us to do object moves, so that we're not opening cases and we're not moving objects when the museum is open. We want two people there, so that if there's a problem there's another member of staff there. It's a very defined group of staff that can open the cases and there's key procedures, and they've gone through training. It's on a business need who has access, so it's really limiting it to people actually need it. It's the onion again where there's different combination of features to bring the risk down. But the best one, I would say, is doing that when we're closed.

SB: Yeah. It removes any potential public intervention entirely, and that's probably the most difficult thing to predict.

KR: Yeah, and people observing. It's best not to have people seeing how to get into cases, or even thinking about that really, so to keep that protected and the systems.

SB: Yes, it's that idea that it's just part of the furniture, not even putting it in other people's heads in the first place.

KR: Yeah, you can glean a lot by observing. If you've got criminal intent, you can watch the routes that people take when they move objects through, you can look at what the staff look like, where do they put the keys. There's all this info that if you can keep that private, then it's bringing the risk down.

SB: Again, it's that risk-managed approach throughout. It makes a lot of sense. Just one thing, not unique, but one of the challenges the Armouries does face is moving objects between sites internally, whether that's for display or conservation or for whatever purpose. What precautions are needed then and how does the Armouries implement them, certainly in terms of its weapons collection?

KR: Do you mean if we've got to get objects from Leeds to the Tower?

SB: Exactly, yeah.

KR: We do have different options, but we have transport agents who are licensed Section 5 carriers. Not all of them are. Generally for museum collections we'll try and use fine art shippers who are approved and they're certified, so they're used to handling objects. But when we're using weapons, some of them are Section 5s, so if we're moving Section 5s, we'd have to use one of those. We couldn't use somebody who doesn't have a licence for Section 5s. That's one option we've got. Another thing is, are they familiar with handling weapons because it is quite specific thing. We don't have to use a fine art shipper, so we have an agent that we use for our regular inter-site runs, which is great because we know the level of expertise they've got and we've seen them in action with the collection. We know that's good risk management, we know how they handle objects and they're familiar with our type of collection.

SB: They're a known quantity.

KR: Yeah, so that's important. We can transport things. Generally, what we have done is we've, used known agents, and that pushes the risk on them to an extent rather than using our own staff. Those companies have got features on their vehicles which we wouldn't have if it was our staff in another car. We've paid more money for that, it costs more money, so it's weighing up that cost to what we're gaining. Trying to do things in a cost-effective way, but that's appropriate for the type of objects that were transporting. Rather than using cars loaded with weapons where they haven't got the security features, they're not being tracked and that'd be putting staff at risk. We've recently paid more to have that higher standard with all those features to get things between our sites.

SB: Again, it's weighing up cost-benefit but also risk-benefit as well.

KR: Yeah, it's what it is. Again, it's looking at what is the object, is it a Section 5? Is it a weapon that if it got into the wrong hands, there could be immediate harm caused to a person or not? If there isn't any ammo with it, it may be that actually the damage is being hit over the head by it rather than it being used in its true function as a weapon. So again, it is a bit of a risk assessment. Looking at quantities, if it's loads of Section 5s that might be different to a smaller number. It's always looking at the specifics. But that's tended to be how we've done our inter-site transports recently, we've used known agents and outsourced the risk a little bit.

SB: Yes, that makes sense. Thank you for explaining. That leads on quite nicely to the next theme, which is about lending collections. What are the additional safeguards required when the Armouries lends its weapons collections to other institutions?

KR: Yeah, it's looking at who is the other institution. If it's somebody that has their own weapons collection and is well versed, that's really different to somebody that isn't familiar with weapons. If they're not familiar with the weapons, it may be that it's best for them not to handle that object, we might need to send our staff who are familiar with handling it, or we provide information and we do videos to familiarise with the object and what the risks are. It's lots of factors really. We have a checklist to work through when we're lending, so it will depend again what the type of weapon is. We've had to say no because venues haven't had a [Museum Firearms] Licence, so they legally wouldn't be able to borrow the Section 5 that they wanted, and they might need to have an antique instead. It's an assessment of this particular venue. We'll ask for details all about their venue and their processes and features, and then we'll assess that.

But also, the Security Advisor does, and they will look at very case by case. They go to the level of if something's on a remote island, they know the crime rate is lower than if it was in a different place. It is very case by case and then the Security Advisor will make a recommendation, so they might say we want this weapon to be cable tied in this case. Then we will also need to check we're happy with it as well, so there's a dual assessment. But it's great to work with Security Advisor and have that expertise, it's brilliant. Do we want alarms on the case? Do they have security presence? It's all that assessment of what the onion looks like versus the risk of that particular place and what the object is. Yeah, so all that pre-work of assessment and making sure everything's in place. The transport method, which is similar to what we've discussed in the last answer. Then also the actual object handling in the install and the mounting, whether we send somebody, they don't handle the object and the case is locked and that's that, unless it's an emergency. There's a spectrum, it depends what it is and who's borrowing it.

SB: Yes, that makes a lot of sense. What would be the procedure if there was an emergency and it had to be removed by an organisation that was less used to dealing with weapons collections?

KR: We'd hope they could get in contact with us, so hopefully the first point of call would be they would be discussing with us. But it's not always possible in an emergency, and it depends what the emergency is, because there could be a flood and then we need that object out of there. We've got information on the venue, so we should know what their store's like and the features. But we can't plan for everything, so you'd hope it would be kept in the most secure option they've got. It depends whether they've got to vacate the site totally. I mean we do look at their incident management plan, so that's one of the questions for the assessment stages: can you send us your incident management plan? Then we can see if we think that's robust. That says a lot: a) have they got one? So we try and plan for that, but it's difficult with the emergencies because it's unpredictable.

SB: Yes, I suppose there's only so much you can plan for really.

KR: Yeah, there'll always be the risk and it's how far you go. How much resource? Deeming what an appropriate level is really and how much time you spend versus delivering access. It's always that balance, all the time. Are we getting that right?

SB: Yes, that definitely seems to be coming through with all these various forms of access. But one form of access that is quite different in that respect is digital access. What are the management requirements that you have to think about when managing digital access to weapons collections?

KR: Yeah, one of the features of weapons is they may have been involved in crimes. There could be murder in their provenance, they could be murder weapons. Some of them have sensitivities around them, so that's something to think about when we're putting information online, being aware of the object history. We've got data protection requirements as well, of course. But with some of the weapons, it may not be appropriate to publish all the details that we have on the object at the present time, if things are in living memory, if there's relatives of people potentially that have been killed with these objects. That's one feature you get with weapons collections, a bit different to the non-weapons really. So there's that, if things have been used in crime. That's one thing we've got to take into consideration, how much you publish. Again, it's that balance of it's the national collection, we want to be transparent and share as much information as we can, but we've got to make sure that we're not breaching data protection. But also we've got to be ethical. It's difficult sometimes with those objects, with those histories, about what you should share about them and what you shouldn't share, and at what point you can share.

SB: Yes, and it's especially difficult at the moment given the heightened sensitivity around contested heritage. The environment isn't perhaps the most favourable at the moment.

KR: Yeah, it's interesting. I feel like change seems to be happening at quite a pace in the museum sector generally, which links to society. Real interrogating about decolonising collections, the language we use online, should we have these objects in our collection? Are we the experts on these objects? There's so many different angles on access. Climate crisis, the levels we're going to make objects accessible, is that ethical? Getting crates made to keep an object safe. There's so many big questions at the minute that all feed into object access. There's lots to think through, whether we're doing things in the right way or is there a better way of doing them?

SB: I suppose these are ongoing conversations. Perhaps you'll give one answer now, but in five years or so best practice will have changed and things will have moved on.

KR: Yeah, people are interrogating them and things will change, definitely. Probably quicker, I imagine, than they have done in the past.

SB: Do you think the advantages provided by digital access outweigh the new challenges that it brings up?

KR: I don't know. It's exciting, there's a lot of potential and a lot of benefits. It's inevitable anyway, so I think whether I deem it good or bad we've got to think through it and respond because it's inevitable there's going to be change. It's a really interesting time. It's like being able to see a reproduction of the Sistine Chapel in a warehouse in Leeds. When we're used to saying, you can't beat seeing the object in person. Well that's not always possible, to see the object in person. If you think about access, so many advantages to the digital in terms of access. But we've got to come up with new procedures and think through what the different risks are. Yeah, I can definitely see a lot of benefits to it; it's going to be interesting.

SB: I suppose it's being prudent, and not necessarily cautious, but just bearing it in mind that it's not completely without difficulties and challenges. I think that's the impression that I've got of the whole thing.

KR: Yeah, I think it's learning from each other, sharing knowledge because it can be new areas for us and probably learning from other sectors who are way ahead of us. Lots of learning to do, probably from mistakes, that's inevitable. But trying to share information at conferences – not always easy to do, people can be doing their own projects. But if we can try and share as we learn. A really interesting time. So many roles in museums now that, five years ago, we wouldn't have thought that role would have existed, so it's very interesting.

SB: I think it's also reframing existing roles as well. The registrar, of course. I can imagine it's very different now than it was even five years ago, let alone twenty, or further.

KR: Yeah, it is interesting. Some things, the fundamentals perhaps stay the same, but then real differences to adapt and keep up. Things like digital collections and preservation of those, and just new sets of questions, so it's the same sort of issues in a broader sense, I guess. Carbon calculators, thinking about environmental impact, I'm sure some people were thinking about those things before, but not as many of us as should have been. Lots of new things to think about.

SB: That leads nicely onto my last question really, is what does the future hold for collections access at the Armouries?

KR: Yeah, it's a big question.

SB: Nice easy one to finish off on.

KR: I think digital comes to mind, some of the things we've said. People may not be able to or want to travel and digital seems a good solution to that. Moves to co-curation and people finding a different model rather than an expert passing on information. People finding their own narratives and their own different ways of accessing the collection. Moving away from an older model of museums, objects in glass cases has happened for a long time. So different ways of accessing, but I don't know what form that will take. VR, there's been things in exhibitions with VR headsets where people get to see objects remotely in much more detail, interact with them, perhaps digitally, I'd hope in a more sophisticated way than they can now. I think all that tech is going to allow people to access the collection remotely. But how that will transfer into physical, because I think as a society, we're putting more barriers up, partly a COVID thing, but schools have got metal detectors to get into them. How's it going to work with the physical access to the collections in the future? I don't know, but it is interesting.

SB: Lots to think about. Leading on from that, do you think that the Armouries' collections management apparatus as it stands is robust enough to meet whatever challenges are thrown at it? In the assumption that it will continue to evolve in response.

KR: In a way, we have to slow things down. We would like to do things quicker, but the resource puts a limit on that. We have to respond to things so that we have control of the risks, really. But it's hard to say not knowing what the future holds. I hope so, but we'd have to try and have that control and tailor things and do things in a way that we could manage them, so we might not be able to do fully what we want to do until we've caught up on the other aspects. But that's about where the institution puts its resource, and the strategic decisions about which areas they want to pursue. Because we probably can't do everything we want to do, so picking our priorities and then can we resource it as we want to. That's an interesting question.

SB: I think the optimistic take on it is that museums, by and large, have survived COVID, and that came out of, not nowhere, but no one was really expecting it and most museums are still here and providing access to their collections. I'd say they're pretty resilient, overall.

KR: Yeah, it's a good point. We've got to be able to change, otherwise we won't be able to fulfil our purpose.

SB: Do you think people will still want to come and see weapons collections?

KR: Yeah, I think so. I think it's about hopefully having different options and because there's so many different learning styles and I think it's about increasing but still having. I think there'll always be room for people to see the objects in person, I would hope so. But I think it will be probably more variety, different strands alongside, different models where there's perhaps in the past been fewer. I think the sector's appreciating that there's different ways of doing things and people different people want different things from museum, rather than us saying this is the way we're going to do it, and you'll either like it or not.

SB: Yeah, I think there's definitely more diverse ways of thinking and working. I think that's everything I wanted to say today. Is there anything else that you want to add?

KR: I don't think so. Yeah, I think that's probably everything.

SB: Lovely. In that case, I'm going to finish the recording.