

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: Laura Bell – Director of Collections (Royal Armouries), 7/2/2023

SB: Good morning. Hello again, Laura.

LB: Hello.

SB: Thank you for speaking to me once more. Today, hopefully, covering access and all its various ramifications for the Armouries' weapons collections. So just to get started, what does access mean to you in your capacity as a member of the Royal Armouries collection staff?

LB: It can mean a whole host of things really. Initially, you always think of the physical access that people require, particularly when it comes to our collection, because that's what causes some of the challenges that we face. But there's also intellectual access, and even more than that, access before even one thinks about the opportunity to request access. In terms of thinking about the collection as something that they could and would want to find interesting and accessible for them. It comes even before you even consider the physical access, we've got our whole audience that is fully engaged with the collection, regularly engaged with the collection, but then there's a whole other part of society that doesn't even think about this being a collection that they would want to access. We on executive board talk about that a lot and how we get wider access to the subjects, our collection and what we do. Even before you think about a request for access, are there enough people out there that would even want to access the collection?

SB: You'd hope so, it's that idea of spreading knowledge about the collection.

LB: Yeah, it's about awareness and understanding, making it relatable to more people in society. But generally, when you think about on-the-ground collections management, access tends to be the physical access that you have to manage on a daily basis in terms of the challenges and risk assessments you have to do. There is the digital access and what type of information we provide about what types of weapons, what's acceptable and what's not, and there aren't many rules about that. But we try to think morally and ethically about what we should be sharing, even just from an information perspective. So there's two sides when it comes to collections management, as I say, specifically. But for the wider organisation, it's much more than that.

SB: What role would you say you play in the provision of access at the Armouries? Whether that's more high level, operational or day-to-day.

LB: My role's strategic with the executive board and that's why I was talking about other parts of society who don't even think about accessing our collection. I do sign off some of the risk assessments, sign off the loans, that sort of thing. On an operational basis that does require my sign off, but I don't manage it on a daily basis.

SB: That was my impression, but thought I'd clarify. Obviously the Armouries is a national museum and its requirements are set down in law. How does the Armouries go about translating the access requirements that are set down by the *National Heritage Act* [1983]? How do you translate that into practice?

LB: Specifically, the *National Heritage Act*, or just any statutory or otherwise legislation?

SB: I think particularly the *National Heritage Act* because it gives the Armouries, specifically, a list of things that it needs to do. But if you wish to speak to the other pieces of the legislation, by all means.

LB: Well, we'd be here a little while. Yeah, the NHA [*National Heritage Act*] all starts from the top in terms of who governs us, who the Board of Trustees are, then who's required to fulfil those roles and executive board will use it as something that underpins our corporate plan in terms of we need to ensure that we're doing all these things because that's our statutory obligations for holding a national collection. It tends to be much more around the public programming and the collections management side though, because it specifically talks about tasks related to those two areas. It's within our policies and procedures, this is how we are exhibiting a collection. This is how we're undertaking access and lending collections. It's all within our policies and procedures, but it does always start from the top. We know when we're writing the corporate plan what our obligations are, and what we can and cannot do. Some of the impact of that, of course, relates to disposal of these items and you might have seen recently all of the changes in charity law, potential changes in charity law that didn't come in, and the impact of that. At the moment, we have to put in a very good case to dispose of something. It would have to go to another collection, ideally, which is in the codes of ethics. There's all sorts of ways

that it has an impact, and it's reviewed within our policies and procedures. I think that's best way of describing it, unless there's any specifics you want to pick out.

SB: No, that was what I was looking for. The issue of disposal, especially in relation to charities law, I suppose that comes down to access as well because the theory is that the public is losing access to those collections.

LB: Yes, exactly that. Especially when it comes to a national collection, we're not doing it because of the whim of our experts. We have to think about what our public obligations are and we do that, constantly, and not just because of the NHA, but because we get a significant amount of public funding. It's our moral and ethical decision making, is this good for the public? Should we spend this money? Will this do the public good? It's in everything that we think about really.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you. That moves on nicely to my next question which is, what strategies and principles underpin the Armouries' use of its weapons collections in public programming?

LB: In the past, we have tried to get what you would call our permanent collection, or what is often called permanent collection, whatever that really means in this day and age, out into the public. We've had the Alien Pulse Rifle, for example, at the town hall. In order to do that, we have to ensure there's a risk assessment in place. We have to make sure we put precautions, provisions, and all sorts of things: extra staff, insured security at the venue if it's not at ours. It's just making sure there's lots of controls in place and if we can do it, we would do it, because it's important for the public to see the real thing. That's why we're a museum. But, in general, we tend to use our handling collection, which are examples of types of weapons in our collection.

SB: Yeah, that all makes sense.

LB: We've got something which we call the M Class collection, which you'll know about having worked for us for a little bit, which is miscellaneous class and ultimately our items that are used in handling that have been checked to make sure that they're safe. Not just, say, from a weapons perspective, but from a health and safety perspective, because it tends to be children and the education programmes handling them. So again, that comes with risk assessments and other things. But we at the museum definitely know the importance of seeing the real thing and what that means to people. That's why we have various jousts, we don't just pretend to joust, people

are actually pointing lances at each other, so that brings all sorts of risks that we have to deal with and make sure there's emergency services and other things nearby are on site. We don't let it stop us. But in general terms, when it comes to handling weapons collections, we've set aside an M Class handling collection that tends to do that. But by exception, we do allow access to our permanent collection.

SB: Yeah, thank you for making that distinction. Would you say that this approach then is characterised by risk management throughout and what does that entail in practice? How does that operate?

LB: Yes, it is characterised by risk management, it has to be to a certain extent. Past the point of our legal obligations, it's definitely risk management. In terms of how that is undertaken, whoever is running the event, whoever's access request has come about, they're the ones who provide the context. Then they provide the risk assessment that's gone through our registrars team, particularly if it relates to something in the permanent collection. Then it's signed off by various parties, including myself. A good example of that is the What Is This Weapon weekend that's coming up, where we've got a real grenade that's going to be shown to the public audience, and we've just signed that off. It does happen, but it just means that we've got to make sure that there's lots of controls in place. For example, we've got extra staff on so that Jonathan [Ferguson, Keeper of Firearms and Artillery] doesn't have to leave the stage and someone else can take the grenade back into store whilst he's still talking or answering questions. It's working through the various steps and making sure there's a control at every stage.

SB: Yeah. That leads on to the idea of the onion principle and you've mentioned some of the constituent elements of that. Could you speak a bit more about what that entails?

LB: Of the actual risk assessment?

SB: What are the layers that the Armouries puts, in general, not just for specific events, but for operations in general.

LB: We have 24/7 security, not every museum does that. We ensure that there's always someone available on site. We have CCTV, we have a control room that watches that CCTV and that's again across all of our sites. We have the right and appropriate staff, we believe, with the right experience to manage the various elements of security and access to our collection. From

executive board and the Board of Trustees right down to our assistant registrars or trainee registrars, everyone has a role to play in ensuring that the collection is safe and/or accessible, or safe when accessible. We've got the storage requirements. We make sure that we meet the security requirements of the National Security Advisor and any specifics that were given from him, including meeting the accreditation guidance and the Government Indemnity guidance. We've spoken about this before, a lot of what museums do is enough to a certain extent because protecting any national property or any collection that's in the national realm is so important that security needs to be of the best standard, and so meeting those standards tends to be enough. But as I say, we've got 24/7 security. We have our CCTV that operates outside the Store 2. We've got the National Firearms Centre that has extra layers. Yeah, I would say that's the main points, unless there is anything specifically that I've not quite picked up on that you're thinking about.

SB: No again, just looking for a general overview really. With that all in mind, how do you go about facilitating access in relation to that series of measures?

LB: It comes out to those risk assessment side of things and making sure that we're not going against some of those controls that we've put in place or if we do, that's by exception, and then there's another control that we put in place. For example, if someone doesn't bring an ID, does someone know them, can we send a couple of extra staff with them? Can we double check that they're always watched? While we've got all of this in place, there are sometimes exceptions where we can sign off and say, well, if we can't do this today, by exception we'll put this other control in place and allow that access to take place because it is important to us, as we've spoken about before, to grant access where appropriate.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense.

LB: Because there are the forms as well, I'd forgotten about that. The forms that we make sure that anyone coming in has to sign off.

SB: Yeah, I've definitely signed a few of those in my time. But something that you mentioned in passing earlier, how does the Armouries ensure that these principles are observed uniformly across all three of its sites? Because obviously there are very different challenges at, say, Fort Nelson to the Tower [of London] and then in comparison with Leeds.

LB: Yeah, they're not uniform across the sites because they're very different sites with very different items that are held there. The Tower has its own security arrangements, so we're tenants there. We need to meet their requirements, which everyone needs an enhanced disclosure check to get a permanent card there. They check bags on the way in. They have two wardens on each floor, just in the White Tower, which we do in Leeds. They do have security on site and obviously the Yeoman Wardens on site, quite often army personnel. They have the Crown Jewels there, so that's a different level of security. We quite often operate a no-fly zone depending on the events that are happening at the Tower. That said, with it being a historic building that creates issues for us. It is very secure, but because of the heat in the White Tower, the wardens sometimes open the windows, that goes against our security requirements. That's all because of the air conditioning units, or lack of, in some of the areas. So there's different challenges that we face there. But all in all, the security's quite high level at the Tower, for obvious reasons. At the Fort [Nelson] it's quite different because a lot of the items aren't portable. So again, it operates a different security arrangement. We do have CCTV on site now that is witnessed and watched by our control room in Leeds. We have call out sheets for any issues and alarms in every one of our stores and the access requests are the same in that they would have to sign off the appropriate form to get into store. They'd have to be within line of sight of a member of staff and supervised. It's very similar there, but in terms of, for example, the salvage element, we have a list of items we would salvage in Leeds, it gets to the point where we wouldn't be able to move these items out if it came to it, so do we need a salvage list? There's slight nuances to each of the sites, different challenges. But all in all, we try to operate the same basic procedures, including the forms that we sign off, the loan requests that get signed off, the supervision of access. But the operating environment is quite different at each one.

SB: That's really great, thank you. It's the idea of we have to do things slightly differently in order to maintain the same level of security and balancing that with the access requirements. Moving on to something that you've already spoken about a little bit, how does the Armouries ensure that direct public engagement with its weapons collections proceeds in a legal and safe manner? That's speaking more to handling, as you've said, things like the demonstrations again that you've mentioned. How does that play out in practice really?

LB: Again, it comes down to, more often than not, the use of a handling collection, which tends to include deactivated weapons. They don't all have to be fully deactivated, but the pins might be removed, that sort of thing. Depending on the scenario, there might be slight changes. Again, every single show is risk assessed, every handling session is risk assessed, and there's members of staff there, there's the security, there's the people on site operating. So again, it's probably all the same principles. The only difference is if that we get a request for a handling session, like you did for the Weapons in Society [conference] where it's real permanent collection objects. It's slightly different in that we need to maintain ratios more than you would on the public floor with handling collections. We need to ensure a secure environment away from additional people filtering in, we have to maintain that ratio, that security provision, and line of sight. On the day, we let security know which rooms being used, so they're aware of what's happening, what to look out for, and any movement. People again sign off the appropriate forms, it's slightly different in that scenario. But when it's a handling session or opportunity on the gallery floor, it's risk assessed, but people aren't required to complete an access form because it isn't the same risk. It isn't an active gun or an edged weapon so sharp that they're going to cut the fingers off. So it's very much different levels depending on the scenario.

SB: When it's on the gallery floor, it's more the safety of the object, so in that they remain part of the collection, people don't walk off with them rather than this is actually quite a considerable safety concern. That's the difference in that respect. Is there a difference when there are handling sessions without any weapons included and when there are handling sessions with weapons? Or is it very much a standard approach in general?

LB: I would say it's a standard approach. Obviously, handling sessions behind closed doors with real weapons does create that situation of worrying, is this a prohibited person or not, and therefore, do we allow access? But overall, we would still get them to sign off the same form. It's just considering and reflecting on the answer to that question. But everything else that we put in place is the same: the same ratios, the same forms. The handling risk assessments are slightly different because the actual risk of hurting yourself might be slightly different. But guns without ammo are really just a lump that can knock you over the head rather than an actual firearm, so edged weapons tend to be the things that we look out for more than anything else when it comes to the risk assessments.

SB: It's that idea of bringing the standards up to the same level rather than knocking it down.

LB: Yeah, absolutely. Much easier to do it that way than having a different procedure depending on the type of object because there aren't many differences really in reality.

SB: Apart from the legal frameworks.

LB: Exactly, yeah. But in terms of the management and operations on the ground, it's very similar. The other thing is when it's objects on the gallery floor, we have to think about someone stealing it and that we have had risk assessments. This person could steal this gun, yes, it's a deactivated weapon, and yes, it's this, that and the other, but they could hold up a post office with it. What does that mean for us? There are some realities there that someone could do that, but then they could do it with a plastic painted thing off eBay. You have to realise what we have control over, and what people do once they leave the museum is another matter, and that's a whole other conversation that we've been having recently about what we're responsible for.

SB: Yes, that's more around messaging, which is, as you say, is a whole different conversation. I'm sure a very interesting one. Thank you. Speaking of the galleries but moving to the displays rather than handling collections. What additional precautions does the Armouries need to maintain the necessary levels of security when exhibiting weapons in its own public galleries?

LB: It's the Government Indemnity security and it's what everyone follows for portable items, which includes the depth of glass, the lamination, the types of locks, that sort of thing, where they're close to and where they're not close to. But for us, there's also the consideration around whether guns should be bolted, which we haven't done. We've spoken about previously, but IWM [Imperial War Museum] do and the previous National Security Advisor advised us that might be something we want to consider. We haven't because it creates a story about those items that we're not sure we'd be comfortable with, not only just the risk, but it becomes an inanimate object definitely in that scenario. If you want to create some movement which makes it look like this is how the gun could have been used, whereas if you've got something wrapped around it, bolted down, what does that say about it? We're wanting to tell the story of that weapon's life, what it could be used for, what it's done, and we don't want it to be inanimate. I think bolting it creates that situation.

SB: It probably makes you more aware that this is a dangerous or potentially dangerous object than if it's just as it is and the security is a bit less apparent.

LB: Yeah, I think it's probably unnecessary as well. This is probably a whole other conversation, but cost to the public purse for doing that, for the sake of what? Not just for us, but if we do it, for the smaller institutions, who probably can't afford to do that, and then what does that mean for those collections? We've got to be realistic about the restrictions we put in place. For example, in the Second World War display, we did put extra CCTV in the area. We ensured that we took down the previous HESCO [defensive barrier] corner, which created a situation which blocked in that corner, so people from the other side of the gallery weren't in line of sight of it. We took those down so that the wardens could be in line of sight as well as more CCTV. We added those extra precautions in which we wouldn't normally do because of the amount of licensable firearms in that space.

SB: Yeah, there's quite a lot of Section 5s [firearms], specifically.

LB: Yeah. There's no real rules out there or anything in the legislation about that, but for us we've added in some additional controls because we felt that if someone did get into one of those cases that creates a much more worrying situation than if they got into a case with just one in.

SB: Yes, that makes sense. It's that idea of concentration and appropriate response and preparation. That's really useful, thank you. Speaking to that idea of cases, thinking about the installation and deinstallation of exhibits. What additional precautions need to be introduced in that? Because that's probably the most vulnerable point in the chain.

LB: Yeah, we never take pictures of the cases opened or unlocked in a way that outlines how you would unlock them. We don't open them in public hours if they include licensable weapons. We would if they don't include licensable weapons, we just ensure there's extra staff and the wardens are aware. We try not to open them at all during public hours, but of course we have to. Licensable weapons, we absolutely would never do that and so that does sometimes create a bit of a situation for us in terms of staff hours. For example, we're talking about decanting one of the galleries to create a temporary exhibition space and because that gallery includes a lot of Section 5 items, we could plan it so that most of the Section 5s came out when the museum's closed. But we're talking about actually just shutting off the floor until the decant's done so that

we're not in a situation where we've taken something out and something happens like fire alarm. We want to ensure that that floor is empty for a few days to get all the objects across into store and into a secure space while the cases are open. So again, it depends on the scenario and the scale of it. For example, if we're redeveloping the whole museum, we would consider closing because of the security risk that poses and all the movement of licensable weapons.

SB: Although hopefully it won't come to that.

LB: Well, that was the original plan: close the museum for a couple of years to redevelop it. Some museums do that.

SB: But then that generates a whole different debate around access. How do people access the collections whilst you're doing that?

LB: Yeah, you need a loans and outreach programme, that's something we talked about. We're now talking about doing it on a phased approach, floor by floor.

SB: It's a nice compromise there. That leads us nicely onto the next theme, lending programmes. Again, what additional safeguards does the Armouries implement to reduce the risk involved in lending weapons?

LB: You've probably seen some of our procedures and what we check, but a lot of it comes down to ensuring they meet the same standards and requirements that we do. We would do that for anything in the collection, we would go through the same procedure. But when it comes to weapons collections, particularly to the licensable weapons collections, we need to ensure that it's a Section 5 carrier, that they've got all the appropriate risk assessments and controls in place, the routes laid out, and that those they're sending it to have the appropriate licence for it to be transferred. That's another debate around transferring or not transferring, what that generally means, and therefore what the Home Office requirements are in terms of notifying them. That's been a whole other debate, so at the moment we do need to let them know. We, out of courtesy, would always let West Yorkshire Police know if a significant number of items were either leaving or entering the county.

SB: I suppose as your licensing body, it's good practice.

LB: Exactly. We'd expect those borrowing our items to do the same under their licence and managing their relationship with their licensing authority. That's probably it over and above what we'd normally do for any loan request coming in in terms of how it's processed. Ensuring the narrative, I guess in terms of the information that's shared. Some items we wouldn't loan yet that come with a particular story or use. There's a different process involved I guess, when it comes to what information we share about those particular objects that have sensitivities over and above them just being objects.

SB: Yeah, that's something that I'll come back to a little bit later, that idea of you can access them, but should we access them is a whole different question. That's quite interesting. Again, it's that idea of what is enough really: what is enough from your perspective, what is enough from the borrower's perspective, and what is enough from all the various licensing parties and governance parties.

LB: Yeah, and as you know, that's different depending on the licensing authority.

SB: You've mentioned quite a lot about firearms and edged weapons. Would explosives and ammunition ever be loaned? Or is that something that you'd rarely consider?

LB: No, we would consider it. It becomes more of a health and safety rather than necessarily just security issue. What work we do with HSE [Health and Safety Executive] in terms of our certificates that we hold, the different sites and what that means to them, and what type of explosive it is. We don't tend to get those sorts of requests, but we would consider any loan request, and if we can meet it safely then we would. But to be honest, when it comes to explosives, because quite often they're within something, it doesn't tend to matter so much if they are live or not. The shell, for example, with a cartridge is enough to tell the story. It doesn't need to be live ammunition.

SB: Yeah, that makes sense. The only time where it would potentially be live is if someone wanted to research it, for whatever reason. But I suppose you'd encourage them to come to the Armouries, rather than [lending it].

LB: Yes. It would just end up being costly for all involved, it would be much easier to come look. But we do have the Indian sword rocket, I don't know if you've heard about that, that we acquired. It's the only one as far as we're aware in the world that still has the explosive material

inside and we've had it tested, it is live. At the moment, it's still with an external company who did the testing because they can hold it securely until we decide what's the best use of it. Is it better for research purposes to keep it together? In which case it needs a whole other type of storage put in place. Or is it better for us to remove it, but keep the material separately so it could still be tested, so that we can use the rocket in a public space? That's a conversation that we're having at the moment. There are times when having the real thing is very important, but the majority of displays that we get requests for tend to be ammunition associated with a type of firearm, in which case you wouldn't send it live with the firearm anyway.

SB: Yeah, self-explanatory really. Common sense. Thank you for clearing that up. Moving on again, how does the Armouries approach the management of digital access to its weapons collections and what processes and procedures are in place for that? Because it's a very different environment.

LB: Yeah. What I would say is we're not at the end of that yet, there are policies and procedures we need to put in place and conversations we haven't had. Up until now, it's really been on a need-to-know or need-to-do decision making process – this is happening, so we'll make this decision now. But there's no framework that we've put in place yet. There's standard thinking around it, so, for example, when we have our storage locations or locations on the collections catalogue online, it specifically just talks about the galleries or in store, it doesn't say which store and which location because we wouldn't want someone to be able to search for everything in the NFC [National Firearms Centre]. In terms of location, we've definitely restricted that, but then I think a lot of places would. I think some institutions do have the actual store and shelf number that's published. But we agreed that that wasn't appropriate to know how many were and in what space for our type of collection. Other than that, there's sensitive objects, objects that have just been used in recent crimes, we don't publish those. We make sure that they're accessible for researchers, but not just general public knowledge. It's all about should that be readily available? No. Can researchers find that information if they contact us? Yes, that's fine, depending on what they're going to use it for. There's always the exceptions, we don't restrict access for those researching or with appropriate reasons for access, particularly when it comes to educational purposes rather than just commercial or criminal. The items that are online, information relating to those, we share what we can, but locations are restricted and sensitive objects are taken off.

SB: Yeah, it's that idea of appropriate sensitivity depending on the type of object and its history.

LB: There might be another conversation to have at some point when we're talking about our Digital Vision Project as well, in terms of how many films do we want of firearms shooting and how they work. Is that appropriate? Yes, it probably is appropriate for what we do, but I think we've got to start writing down what our policy is on this and to what level and availability we provide that information to the general public.

SB: Yeah. That's always the challenge of what's appropriate to publish and what's not. Just one question that I thought of now, is there a specific date after which you deem something acceptable to be put on public display? Thirty years for an archive is standard practice, is it set like that? Or would it be depending on the individual case?

LB: At the moment there aren't set standards of thinking around items used in crime, like there are for archives. It would be our view on an ad-hoc basis, we want to put this on display, is this the right time? Are we telling the right narrative? What PR statements have we got ready to talk about it? While I really want to say that we don't hide stuff away per se, to a certain extent we are, and we do have to be careful to not think that we know better than the public or think that we're responsible for everything the public would do if they had that information. Our role is to provide access to their collection, to the public's collection and how they use that information, we need to determine are we responsible for all of that. That's a question that's quite often brought up in the courts and in case law: at what point did someone provide too much, like the blueprints for 3D printing and that sort of thing? It's a whole other ballpark.

SB: The limits of when it's appropriate to provide access to sensitive collections.

LB: Yeah, it's very hard and I think it has to be case by case.

SB: That makes sense. Best practice and legal frameworks are always evolving, so maybe that things will be put in place in that respect. But obviously you can't foretell that. That idea leads nicely on to my last main question: what does the future hold for collections access at the Armouries? Easy one to finish.

LB: I'd love to create more access opportunities. I don't think I'd ever go as far to say, let's get everyone into the NFC, wouldn't that be great. I don't think that's appropriate, for us or for the

public. But more access opportunities, either behind the scenes, through open storage, or through use of those items, either within conservation, with the technicians, by the NFC, or with forensics. More opportunities to look at them in different lights, and not just within cases, because how they work is an important part of the story we're trying to tell. For me, I want more access opportunities, but I also want the art commissions. Different ways in which people can approach the collection to look at it, just not as something that's dangerous and could kill you or whatever. This is a part of our story; this is a part of our history. This is why it's important for you to understand how it was used, how it was adapted, how it was developed, what it meant to people who used it. The more emotional sides of the access to our collection. I think we're doing okay with the physical, other than with more opportunities, more staff to hopefully do a bit more of that and creating more opportunities to look behind the scenes. But emotional access to the collection I think is what's missing and what we've all been talking about recently. I think that's where we will get further audiences coming into the museum to understand that it's for them as well as for our standard audience that always comes in.

SB: That's probably more of the interpretation side, but I'd say there's always room for collections management to help with that, whether that's the acquisition of different sorts of objects or whether that's documenting things in different ways. I think that's a really key one. I've had conversations with Jen about the idea of the decolonising the database, that sort of thing. It's primarily interpretation, but I think everyone can play a role.

LB: Yeah. I don't see it as just interpretation at all, actually. I see it as who we are as an institution, what the culture is, what our brand is. It's everything that we are and how we perceive the collection, not just how the public perceives the collection. You just think about the way that the technicians mount the objects, how they mounted the Franz Ferdinand vest with the gun. That shows how it's used, how it's displayed in that way instead of just within a case in amongst lots of other things. I think there are many ways that Collections Services and management can provide that access or even films related to how you clean or take apart a gun. That's another question in terms of appropriateness, but there's so many ways that we can provide access to objects that people don't understand, and at the moment aren't really willing to. A lot of people aren't willing to try and understand because they think it's a bit standoffish, it's not for them. But we can be the ones to support that opportunity for access. Without the

collections management and learning teams the access won't happen, so it isn't just about interpreting the objects in a different light. It's about how they're actually moved, used, the design, the creation around them. It's the culture of the organisation as well as society.

SB: It's a holistic approach.

LB: Absolutely. It has to be.

SB: Yeah, I suppose that's the best way of enacting change. If everyone's involved in it and has a stake in it. You mentioned about open storage as a potential form of access. Would that be feasible in relation to the Armouries weapons' collections? Or would that be something for things that are less controlled in a legal sense?

LB: I think it could be feasible. It'd have to be a separate store that's specifically acted for use as an open access store, so it would have drawers that would have the appropriate [security]. They'd be like display cases within a storage design. Lots of places have done it, there's places in Sweden and other places where they're still within roller racking, but on the front of the cases, there's glass, so you can still see them as they would be stored. But there's an extra layer of security there, so I can't just go pick that up from the drawer. You open the drawer so it feels like you're in the store, but it's not a normal store for collections, people accessing it all the time.

SB: Blurring that boundary between this is a display space, this is a storage space, and there's a very clear line between the two.

LB: Yeah. It does work quite well for those people who are wanting to see what storage looks like behind the scenes but aren't necessarily wanting to undertake the research, so they don't need full access to it.

SB: It's a reasonably good happy medium. It's just getting the various licensing bodies on board with it and having the conversations with them is probably the challenging part.

LB: Why wouldn't they be on board with it though? That's the question, if it's like a display case and meets all the same requirements?

SB: True. Maybe it's the concentration, but I suppose that's not technically part of the legislation, that's more of a prosaic security concern.

LB: Yeah, it's an interesting conversation to have. The other idea is that you put windows on spaces, which you get at Musée de l'Armée and other places. The issue with that is you need to keep on top of the dusting and other things because people tend to think it's just a display case, but now it looks a mess now when you're letting everyone look inside. There are different ways of doing it. I would like to have more opportunities to have general public access to the permanent collection, but that'll come with more resource ultimately. It isn't that we don't have the procedures in place to support it, we need more people to help get it through the process and support the security of it when it happens.

SB: Yeah, that's something I think is very important. It's really important to have all the processes and procedures there. But ultimately you need people to deliver it on the ground because otherwise you can't do it.

LB: Exactly that. A lot of the noes or we can't do that come because people just don't have the time to do it, rather than that there's not a way of doing it. People just don't have the time.

SB: I can understand that. Going on from that, do you think that the apparatus that the Armouries has currently got surrounding security and access is robust enough to meet the challenges of the future, whatever they may be? Potentially changes in legislation, changes in best practice, all that sort of thing.

LB: Again, it comes down to resource. There couldn't be much more that I can think of that we could do in terms of security. But in terms of different access requests or opportunities to access, that comes with additional resource requests, needs, equipment, materials, and/or buildings. I can't think of something that's going to change so dramatically. There was one talk, maybe eight years ago, where they talked about deactivating all firearms, even in museums, until we asked for the exception for museums. That would have cost us millions of pounds, and we are not financially robust enough to deal with that. Nor would that be any good for the public to deactivate all of our weapons, so it wouldn't be a good use of public money. I guess the only thing I would say is our type of collection and the information that relates to it has the potential for challenge because of the type of collection that it is. We talk about decolonisation a lot and at the moment requests go in for material culture, which people I guess would want to remember over and above the actual conflict. Whereas the material we hold relates to the conflict itself, what was used or what potentially killed their ancestors. Would there be a moment where they

would request that back instead of a Benin Bronze, for example, that's quite ornate and beautiful? There will come a time because that is a part of their culture. That's the challenge that I worry about in the future, about how our collection is perceived and that's where we need to change some of the narrative and the thinking around it. I'm not sure that really relates overly to accessibility necessarily, there's elements of it.

SB: In the various definitions of access I've come across, it's probably that idea of cultural access in that it's sympathetic and sensitive to whoever, wherever they come from, whatever their background.

LB: Yeah, that's my worry and, more than anything, the challenge around our type of collection. I don't think we've got, what we believe the collection to be used for and useful for the public, our story straight yet. Until we do that and we're ready for that challenge, I'm not sure. Thankfully, at the moment we're not getting requests for returns, but I'm sure there will be a day.

SB: It's being prepared for that.

LB: Exactly, yeah.

SB: I think that's everything I'd like to ask today. Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we end?

LB: I don't think so, no. Thank you.

SB: Lovely. Well thank you as well and I shall stop the recording.