

SUMMARY

NATIONAL MUSEUMS AT CHATHAM, Richard Holdsworth, The Historic Dockyard, Chatham, UK

National Museums at Chatham is an innovative partnership project between three UK museums – two nationals, National Maritime Museum and Imperial War Museum – and an independent (not for profit) regional museum – The Historic Dockyard, Chatham.

The project will deliver new museum storage for the two national museum collections of ship models, each internationally pre-eminent, but increasingly taken off display as the approach to exhibitions has evolved from technologically based displays using large numbers of models to more thematic – social history based exhibitions.

National Museums at Chatham has taken eight years to evolve and was borne from the juxtaposition of two separate needs – those of the national museums to provide better quality storage and access to the model collections and that of Chatham to find a new use for one of its ancient monuments – the semi derelict *No 1 Smithery*.

The partnership was brokered through the United Kingdom Collections Strategy (UKMCS) and initially sought to create the 'National Ship Model Collection Centre'(NSMCC) – a proposal which in 2003 also included the Science Museum's equally pre-eminent collection – and intended to create a major 'storage on display facility' for over 4500 models – the equivalent of some 5.4 linear kilometres.

NSMCC proved un-fundable as storage on display was falling out of favour in Britain and funders doubted the appeal of so many ship models in one place. In 2004 the approach was radically revised to provide accommodation for the NMM and IWM collections in closed 'high density' stores to enable space to be allocated for a permanent and temporary galleries to international standards, a collection study area and educational facilities. The name was also changed to National Museums at Chatham.

The combination of the revised approach and name change resulted in a proposal that was sufficiently attractive as a regeneration proposal to secure financial support from regional development agencies and the UK government's Department for Communities and Local Government as well as more traditional sources of cultural funding. The shift in approach has also allowed the project to become more sustainable with the model repositories constructed as passive environment stores rather than air conditioned spaces.

£12.5m has been secured to complete the works, and construction is underway – anticipated to complete in 2010. In recent months a minor problem – the main contractor going into administration – has introduced an unexpected delay but we currently anticipate completion and opening by summer 2010.