

# The Museum of Ideas

by David Fleming OBE

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Imagine a sizable British city with an important and ancient historic core, overshadowed by the remains of a glorious but now past period of industrial activity – oil and sugar refining, auto and locomotive manufacturing, ceramics, chemicals, steel.

It is a tough city, renowned for nothing in particular, though it has a football team which 40 years ago won the European Cup for two years running. The city is Grimeborough, once a British hillfort, then a Roman fort, an Anglo-Saxon and Viking settlement, a Norman military stronghold, a modest medieval town, then an industrial giant.

In the wake of the collapse of its staple industries, Grimeborough is looking for a new economic role. There is a belief that it could build a viable tourist economy, and the city authorities have been studying other post-industrial cities which have successfully transformed themselves into thriving, chic destinations for national and international visitors.

The City Council, advised by regeneration analysts and with the support of the region's Development Agency, decided that it needs to upgrade Grimeborough's national and international transport links, its retail offer, its service sector, and its cultural offer. They have been looking for a unique cultural offer, something distinctive.

The city has a range of museums (poorly-funded by the City Council) including an industrial museum, an art gallery, a museum of the chemical industry, and a city-centre museum containing ceramics, natural science and archaeology collections. In fact the collections are very important, reflecting Grimeborough's long history and its nineteenth century prosperity. Most of the museum collections are in storage. Entry to all these museums is free to all, though visitor

numbers are not high. The museum service is governed by the Council's Cultural Services Committee.

The city also boasts the remains of the Norman castle, medieval city walls, a fifteenth century cathedral, a pedestrianised historic town centre, and a number of small independent art galleries. There is also a moderately good chamber orchestra and a big university.

The museum service's big idea is that the city should build itself a new Museum of Grimeborough, covering the whole of the city's history. It argues that the history of Grimeborough is so fascinating that tourists would be drawn from far and wide, providing the scale of the venture was sufficient, and providing there were sufficient money made available to meet significant running costs.

However, there is a rival proposal. The university Department of Philosophy offers a special course on the seventeenth Dutch philosopher and theologian, Cornelis Pijnacker, who for reasons which are obscure, spent several months in Grimeborough before fleeing the town to escape a patrimony suit brought by a local baker's daughter. During his sojourn in Grimeborough, Pijnacker completed his famous treatise, "A Discourse on Women and Melancholy".

The Department of Philosophy has proposed that Grimeborough should create a completely novel type of museum, the Museum of Ideas, the content of which would be the history of Western philosophy made accessible through a host of interactive devices. The Museum would be run and governed by the university's Senate.

At first the city authorities were not enthused by the idea, but when it was put to them that the subject matter would cover witchcraft and magic



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they decided to explore the notion. One of the local legends is of the existence of a powerful coven of witches in the oak forests surrounding Grimeborough throughout the Reformation period, and it was felt that this, combined with Pijnacker's celebrated status, could give the foundations of a viable scheme.

The university argues that the Museum of Ideas could be Grimeborough's unique tourist selling point. A Council-owned but derelict 1930s cinema on the edge of the city's historic core has been identified as an ideal location for the museum. The Professor of Philosophy, Sir Ernest Emission, has said that the venture *"won't be the usual boring museum full of the material detritus of people who are long and best forgotten"* but *"will appeal to the enquiring spirit in all of us by exploring the history of ideas, which are, after all, man's greatest achievement"*.

The Professor also argues that there will be few objects in the museum so the conventional expense of display and conservation will be avoided. Indeed, all that exists at the moment to show in the museum are a couple of early editions of Pijnacker's great work, and a lock of his hair reputedly taken from him by the baker's daughter and passed down in her family.

The socialist Leader of the City Council, Councillor Winifred C Rabid, has hailed the idea as something for the city to be able to attract high-spending European and American visitors and, in the future, Chinese and Indian tourists. She believes that the project could be a key element in a new cultural and tourist dawn for Grimeborough. The local business community is said to be supportive of the scheme and has suggested that it will be interested in providing sponsorship of various elements of the content.

The plan is that the Council will restructure its cultural budgets in order to provide some revenue funding for the new Museum of Ideas. Though the business plan drawn up by leisure consultants shows that the museum, largely through having a sizable admission charge, could be self sufficient within five years (providing that Grimeborough increases the appeal and marketing of its existing cultural assets, and that other infrastructure improvements are undertaken) the Council is sceptical about this. Under the restructuring, the Museum of the Chemical Industry will close. Capital moneys for the Museum of Ideas have been earmarked by the Regional Development Agency, and through European Union tourist funding streams.

## Exercise

You are the Head of Museums.

1. Make your pitch to Councillor Rabid for the Museum of Grimeborough.
2. What would your arguments be in favour of the Museum of Ideas?
3. What would your arguments be against it?



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