**Principles behind visitor experience**

**The big idea**

The American Air Museum tells the story of the collaboration between Britain and America in 20th and 21st-century conflict. It focuses on how American air power – the use of aircraft in war – has played a key part in those conflicts, from 1918 to the present day.

At the heart of the story is the relationship which Britain and America forged during the Second World War. American aircrews flew and fought from dozens of airfields, including here at Duxford. ‘I can remember the Yanks almost more than the war itself,’ said one Suffolk resident.

We have laid out the exhibition to ensure that three key themes will be encountered by all visitors more than once on their visit to reinforce the overall intellectual structure behind the displays. The three themes are:

1. Bonds forged in war: The USA and the UK have collaborated in almost every major conflict since the First World War.
2. Loss and locality: American aircrews flew, and died, from Britain in the Second World War; Duxford was one of their bases.
3. The tools of war: The aircraft in the AAM have a common purpose – to deliver success in war.

**Why here?**

Nearly 30,000 young Americans did not make it home. 5,000 rest at nearby Cambridge American Cemetery, but all are commemorated in our museum. Theirs is a story that can be told most powerfully here in the heart of East Anglia, where even today, local memories of the Americans are vivid, and the evidence of their impact is all around us. It is why the American Air Museum exists, and importantly why it exists here at Duxford: one of their former homes.

**Nearly a century of collaboration**

The story of the US-UK military collaboration, which begins in the First World War, is strongest during the Second World War. But it does not end there. The importance of the UK as a major partner in the US’s Cold War defence strategy meant that American aircraft continued to be familiar to many living in the south and east of England. The UK continues to act as a home to the US military today, with a strong – if reducing – presence in our region.

This post-Second World War relationship is one of the reasons that the American Air Museum contains the best collection of American aircraft on display anywhere outside North America. Our collection is 50% Second World War aircraft and 50% post-war aircraft. We are following the same broad calculation in our focus for the content of the new displays. The Second World War is the reason for the museum and the aspect which research indicates interests our visitors most. The Cold War and modern conflict displays will take the story up to the current day and demonstrate the museum’s ongoing relevance to people’s lives.

**Meet the people behind the aircraft**

We have put people at the heart of our interpretation: the men and women whose lives were intertwined with the machines. They are the individuals who built, flew, maintained, controlled and used the aircraft with a common aim: to help deliver success in war. They are also the people whose lives were changed by the use of these weapons – on all sides.As you move through the exhibition, at each aircraft you will meet a handful of these men, women or children. Each person has been chosen to illustrate a particular theme or subject. Taken together, they represent the story of a bond forged between two nations in the crucible of conflict; a bond that has developed and changed over a hundred years of alliance.

**Different perspectives**

This is not an uncritical story. The strength of the bond has waxed and waned. Not everyone agrees about its merits and effectiveness, nor about the use of air power in war. The exhibition presents stories from multiple perspectives, to give a fuller and more rounded account of our ‘special relationship’.

We want visitors to make **emotional connections with the people** we present in the exhibition and through them, to see the aircraft differently.

**Walk-through of the exhibition**

**Before visitors reach the AAM**, they encounter the Niemis sculpture which introduces the scale of loss suffered by the US Army Air Forces in the Second World War. It powerfully indicates the museum’s role as a memorial. Duxford’s site map and orientation panels will communicate the big idea of the AAM redisplay: meet the people behind the aircraft. Once in the building, this is a simple concept to understand and which will be reinforced by a standard, unfussy structure for the displays.

**The entrance area** will be improved to give a more powerful welcome to visitors, including a large-scale quote to bring out the theme of transatlantic collaboration in war.

Most visitors are immediately drawn to the impressive view of the space from the mezzanine balcony. A main, simple orientation panel will immediately suggest the ‘power of three’ – i.e. the breakup of content into three chronological themes. Once they move beyond this, **the introductory area and AV** establishes the exhibition’s narrative themes; reflects on the memorial aspect of the museum; reinforces again the three chronological periods; and shows how each of the displays below will demonstrate the intersection between human life and machine.

Visitors walk down the **west ramp** to the main floor of the exhibition. The wall has large quotes taken from the interviews visitors will see in the main displays to act as teasers and to reinforce the themes.

Along the main visitor route next to the south glass wall are the three **contextual displays** which introduce our three chronological periods – World Wars, Cold War and War in the Mountains and Deserts. They provide the backdrop against which the large objects can be understood, and further emphasise the main themes of the exhibition. They will be clearly visible from the foot of the ramp. The design development will ensure that these are bold, striking and visually appealing. They will display to powerful effect our emotive contextual objects (particularly the damaged and broken structures), yet will be sympathetic to both the aircraft in the exhibition and the form of the building.

When visitors reach the bottom of the ramp and look into the **main space**, they will see some of the narrative islands, oriented so that large-scale pictures of people are facing each of the contextual displays. The effect will be to suggest that the space is ‘populated’, and will reinforce the idea that they can choose to ‘meet’ one or many of them. Each contextual display will link – via further orientation information and colour-theming - to the narrative islands in the main space. The aircraft have been radically regrouped into the three broad chronological periods to dramatically improve the connection between location and narrative.. They are now effectively displayed in three bands running south east to north west, moving away from the relevant contextual display. The aircraft are also oriented to support the overall narrative flow, in an anticlockwise direction, and the suspended aircraft are displayed closer to the east and west ramps to improve visitor access. In short, they make more sense than at present.

Each large object has a corresponding **‘narrative island’** display. This showcases the story of a person or group of people whose stories relate to that of the aircraft. Sometimes the links between the two are predictable, e.g. pilot and aircraft. Others are more challenging, e.g. nuclear safety technician and B-52, journalist and P-47. Each display includes a group of small objects – usually including clothing to give a very obviously human scale to the story. Visitors will be able to view extracts from video interviews with the person, related content and extracts of footage, all of which will help to bring the large object to life as well as the person. These will be presented to a high standard using methods developed by, and in conjunction with, Digital Media.

The **Georgia Frontiere Gallery** is part of the World Wars section of the exhibition. It presents the roll of honour, using the crowd-sourced content from the AAM website to bring emotion, meaning and, importantly, faces to the names. It will explore the stories of those who died and the stories of the British civilians who came into contact with them. It draws the threads of US-UK Second World War relations together, and examines interactions on different levels between USAAF personnel and British people. It introduces visitors to the idea of researching the Americans in Britain, and provides a contemplative space to reflect on their sacrifice. This link between crowd-sourced content and in-gallery presentation has been widely acknowledged (not least by HLF) to be one of the most radical and exciting combinations of online, visitor-curated material and museum-authored exhibition space on proposed in the UK.

The display on the **exit ramp** as visitors leave the museum will focus on how the history of the Americans in Britain, particularly during the Second World War, is preserved. It will focus on the hundreds of volunteers, groups and societies that are preserving the physical remains of the friendly invasion, at airfields, in small museums and via memorials. It will encourage visitors to see the AAM as just one part of a heritage journey that they can take through East Anglia. It roots the AAM in multiple communities, both physical and virtual, and provides a powerful reinforcement of the project’s genuinely enduring legacy: not just for IWM Duxford, but regionally, nationally and internationally.

**In summary, visitors will leave with a strengthened sense of the importance of American history to shaping our region and nation; an emotional connection to the AAM as a memorial; and a keen awareness of the consequences of conflict on multiple levels.**