



22 September 2011

## A conservation appeal too far: Sophie Dahl's public relations disaster

We had to laugh – and exult a little: for once in the museum world, Conservation PR was not King. When Sophie Dahl launched an appeal on the BBC's Today programme for a cool half million pounds to “conserve” the shed in which her grandfather, Roald, wrote his best-selling children's books, it backfired to an extraordinary degree: in a Guardian [opinion poll](#), 89 per cent thought that Ms Dahl should “stump up for it herself”.

The debacle was encapsulated by the 2009 winner of the Roald Dahl Funny Prize, [Philip Ardagh](#), in the Guardian Review:

“So when the Roald Dahl Day came round again on Tuesday [September 13th] there was the annual challenge to be newsworthy. And what better way than by announcing the plans to restore ‘the hut’ and to move it to the museum in a specially designed gallery? Only, of course, it was a PR disaster. Never mind the details, the Dahl family's contribution, the corporate sponsorship, the charity work. The message that came through loud and clear was that the model and writer Sophie Dahl, Roald's granddaughter, was asking people to cough up £500,000 to do up an old shed. Today programme listeners didn't know whether to roar with laughter or outrage, but they knew how to tweet. Then came the bloggers. All else was forgotten. £500,000 for a shed? That was a bit steep wasn't it? This isn't a golden typewriter or a villa on a Greek island. It's a shed. Many of us have sheds. We know how much they're worth. So that became the story.”

The [Daily Mail](#) reported that arts journalist Matthew Sweet had joined the chorus of criticism, saying: “Have I got this wrong? The international model and TV star Sophie Dahl is asking US for money to restore a shed?” The idea to move the shed to the museum had come from the author's grandson, Luke Kelly, who was inspired by relocation of Francis Bacon's studio to the Hugh Lane gallery in Dublin.



Above, Fig. 1: Sophie Dahl.



Above, Fig. 2: Sophie Dahl and her husband, the jazz star, Jamie Cullum.



The Daily Telegraph's Anita Singh pointed out that Ms Dahl is a millionairess who is married to a millionaire, and the Telegraph's blogger, [Andrew Brown](#) asked "did they just dream up a neat round number?" It was a good question. Neat numbers are common in the conservation business: for restoring the interior of a cathedral, £10m; for restoring an entire cathedral, £40m, for restoring a church off Trafalgar Square, £25m. Sometimes, with very high profile restorations, rich individuals or image-building corporations stump up all the money that is needed, but, on this occasion, the well-heeled Dahl family are looking to "grant-making trusts" to raise money for the Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre.

This family [museum](#) in Great Missenden is both a registered charity and a limited company. Its entry charges are £6 for adults and £4 for the disabled and for children between 5 and 18. Online visitors are advised not to confound the museum with the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery in Aylesbury which is run by Buckinghamshire County Council - and which also charges £6 for adults and £4 for children.

After seeing the "fun and fact-packed biographical galleries" at the Great Missenden Museum and its "fantabulous interactive" Story Centre, visitors can **shed more money in the Café Twit and the museum shop.**

The purposes of the charitable museum are "to further the education of the public in the art of literature by the provision and maintenance of a museum and literature centre based on the works of Roald Dahl." The purposes of the limited company (Dahl and Dahl Ltd) are to manage Roald Dahl's copyrights throughout the world and to maintain the official Roald Dahl website. The literary estate made an operating profit of almost £300,000 last year on a turnover of just under £1m. The estate gives 10 per cent of those profits, after expenses, to the museum and to the Dahl family's charity. As Stephen Bates put it in the [Guardian](#):

"It may have been a bit optimistic of Roald Dahl's relatives to expect an outbreak of public philanthropy when they launched an appeal to raise £500,000 to renovate the contents of the author's dilapidated Buckinghamshire garden shed, when the books he wrote there continue to sell at the rate of 12 a minute every day."

Responding to public outrage, the chairman of the Roald Dahl Museum, Amanda Conquy (who is also the chairman of the limited company Dahl and Dahl), told the [Guardian](#):

"It seems like a lot of money but filleting and removing the contents and renovating them to put



Above, Fig. 3: Roald Dahl, who in 1988 (two years before his death) told a [family friend, Todd McCormack](#), "I have worked all my life in a small hut up in our orchard. It is a quiet private place and no one has been permitted to pry in there."



Above, Fig 4: The hut in which Roald Dahl wrote. The [Week's website, The First Post](#), reported the former supermodel, Sophie Dahl's comparison of the 1950s-built hut to a decaying tomb: "It's in a bit of a state, poor little hut, it needs help. Half-a-million sounds like a lot of money to move the interior of a little hut, but it's quite a process. It's got to be done very carefully, step-by-step, almost in an archaeological way and by archivists". In its [campaign](#) to save and transfer the hut (or just its contents?), the museum writes: "Built in the late 1950s from a single layer of bricks, insulated with polystyrene, the writing hut wasn't made to last. Roald Dahl was a highly disciplined writer and ensconced himself in the hut - which sits in the garden of his home Gipsy House in Great Missenden, Buckinghamshire - every day for thirty years. During his lifetime, he was the only person to go in and out of the hut. Since Roald Dahl's death in 1990, it has remained a private place - entered only by friends, family and visitors to Gipsy House. Now, that is poised to change and for the first time the public at large will be able to experience its magic."



Above, Fig. 5: a corner of Roald Dahl's writing hut.



on display is almost a forensic exercise.” Ms Conquy added, “I know it is only a small room but, to put it in context, recreating Francis Bacon’s studio in Dublin cost £4m.”

A snip, then, but the Times’ Carol Midgley noted:

“There is never a good time for a millionaire model who is married to a millionaire singer and whose grandad’s wondrous books have sold in their millions to ask the public to spare some change, please, for a family shed. But to do it on a day when it emerged that UK inflation has hit 4.5 per cent and that our teen unemployment is worse than Slovenia’s was unfortunate.”

This deluge of opprobrium and ridicule was achieved for... what end? The official website resorts to museum-speak:

“Moving the hut’s interior – item by item – to its new home will be quite a challenge and just the first phase of what we have planned. Once installed in the Museum, a major new interactive exhibit will set the hut in context for school groups and all our visitors. We are thrilled at the prospect of our new gallery which will allow thousands of visitors a year to experience these important historical artefacts.”

The Guardian’s [Mark Lawson](#) seemed far from thrilled at the prospect of “interactive” relations with visitors by the thousands and that pox on all places of contemplation, school parties:

“For me this goes against the spirit of studying the writers’ studies.”

Indeed it does – and perhaps especially so with an author for whom, as his close collaborator, the illustrator, [Quentin Blake](#), recalled: “the whole point of it as far as Roald was concerned was that it was private, a sanctuary where he could work where no one interrupted him.”

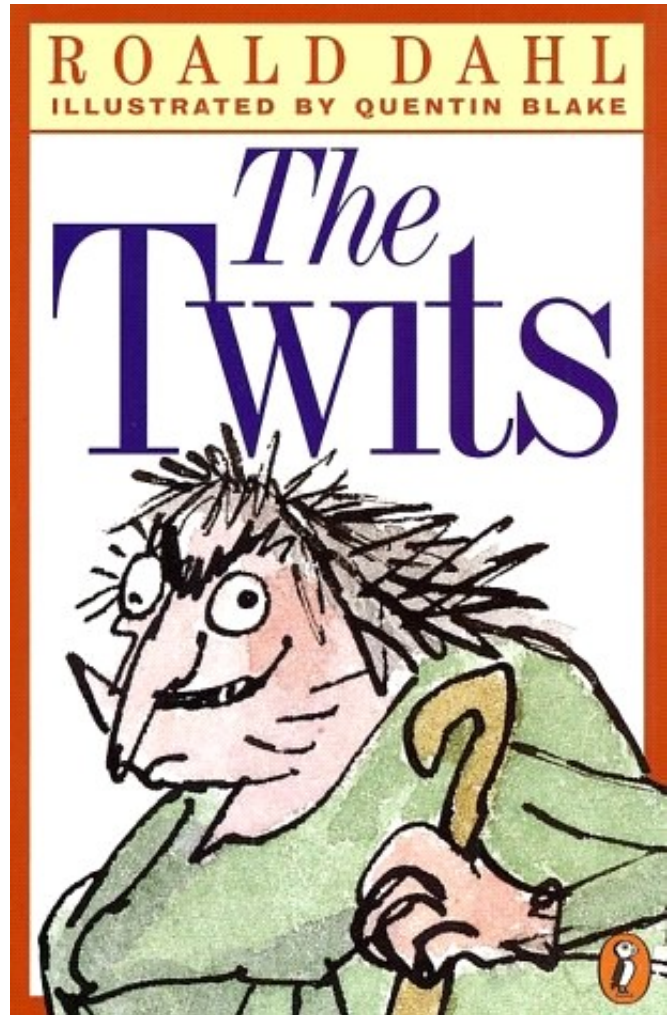
Michael Daley

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Above, Fig. 6: Roald Dahl at work in his hut.



Above, Fig 7: Roald Dahl’s “The Twits”

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