I want our children to see them. I’m so interested in the shirts because there’s no beadwork on them. You see beautiful beadwork now with designs, but look at what our people did before beadwork. Show them that—to have some pride in their ancestors. That’s why I want these shirts home. This is for this community to see these things. That’s my whole idea.

FRANK WEASEL HEAD

The Blackfoot Shirts Project was a truly international collaboration, involving two universities, three museums and four First Nations, across three countries. The global and cross-institutional nature of the project meant that there were many logistical and conceptual challenges and everyone involved had to be flexible in order to make it happen. A project of this scale is also expensive: the cost of crating, shipping, insurance, courier and other fees for the shirts’ transport, for instance, was estimated at CDN$30,000. Putting the project together required
the support of many people, and it took six years of planning and writing funding applications before the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council approved a grant of £183,000 (almost CDN$290,000) to take the project forward. In the following sections we discuss how the project happened at a logistical level, as a case study to encourage future projects and to highlight the many practical issues that must be addressed in such “homecomings” of heritage objects.

Blackfoot spiritual leaders worked closely with the UK-based team from the start. Their guidance was crucial for shaping the project and determining how and even if it should proceed. This is because three of the shirts are considered to be living beings, and there are cultural protocols for handling and talking about such powerful persons. The leaders who committed to the project did so because it offered an opportunity to share knowledge about the shirts that would help to sustain traditional Blackfoot ways. As Allan Pard explained, “We are in a dilemma now, because if we continue the way we are, we’ll lose our culture.” He added:

I want to deal with the issue of the printed/recorded/photographed situation against our oral tradition. Times have changed in that regard. We have to look at various ways and means to preserve, to look to the future, to help our youth. And the way to capture their interests is through these ways [books, websites etc.]. That’s why we’re doing it; that’s why we’ve allowed ourselves to be photographed and so forth. Because we’re doing something that’s against our protocol. A lot of people want to criticize traditional people in that regard—“They’re selling out again”—but to me it’s not that. It’s just that our circle of traditional people is getting smaller and smaller. And if we want to reach out to our own communities, we’re competing with the interests of our youth to help preserve our identity, by whatever ways and means we have to try and preserve our ways. So that’s why I’m involved in this project. That’s why I was supportive of the shirts coming over. It was all for our young people. Hopefully it will stimulate some interest or some ways they could start thinking, “It’s okay to be an Indian; our ways are okay.”
Everyone involved was sensitive to these goals, and we worked together to ensure that cultural protocol was addressed as we planned the funding applications and the different elements of the project. We emphasize that none of us is blind to the unequal power relationships inherent in a project of this nature. Despite our best efforts to ensure that cultural protocols would be taken into account, we were always aware that the project involved a loan of the shirts and that ownership of them would remain with the Pitt Rivers Museum for the foreseeable future, as we explain in chapter 10. The loan status of the shirts was made very clear from the outset—and yet it was our Blackfoot colleagues, rather than ourselves, who had to explain to the wider Blackfoot communities that the shirts’ visit was only going to be temporary. They also had to justify why they had supported the project knowing that this was the case. This opened them up to some criticism, and is an example of the kinds of tensions that were manifested across the project as different perspectives on how it might be managed were expressed.

Reflecting on this point several months after the shirts had returned to the UK, Frank Weasel Head expanded on the difficulties he had experienced as word spread about the shirts and their impending visit during a meeting at the Pitt Rivers Museum:

You had a lot of struggles [in relation to getting the loan approved]—but we had struggles. Not having the rights to talk about the shirts, the rights to handle the shirts; convincing our people that it was a good thing. And the other struggle was being on your side. Our people wanted to keep them there [in Alberta], but we convinced them at least this is a loan. This is the first part of the project. . . . And convincing people that the project is going to keep going, they’ll come for a visit but it’s not going to end there. There’s going to be a lot of questions asked of me. When are the shirts coming home? And I have to say well, yeah, that’s what we went for, the project is going on . . . but the majority of them understand that there’s a possibility that the shirts are not going to come home, ever again. This is the hard part for me. And although I’m very anxious to go home, on another level it feels as if I’m being pulled to stay, that I’m leaving somebody behind. Happens at all museums I visit; when I walk out I keep looking back.
There is no easy way to respond to heartfelt words such as these. Whatever the personal views of the staff involved in such projects might be, they are constrained by institutional policies that reflect particular mindsets and are often slow to change. It is our hope that projects such as this one can contribute to wider shifts in museological culture that are more responsive to concerns such as those raised here.

**EARLY CONSULTATIONS**

Following Frank Weasel Head and Andy Blackwater’s challenge to the Pitt Rivers Museum to bring the shirts home, consultations for the Blackfoot Shirts Project formally began in 2005 when Alison Brown was in southern Alberta working on a book about First Nations collections in British museums (Brown 2014). During this time, she met with ceremonial leaders to ask their views on how the project might proceed. Staff from the (then-named) Ethnology section of Glenbow participated in some of these meetings.

Meanwhile, Laura Peers initiated dialogue with colleagues at the Glenbow and Galt museums about museum requirements: exhibition venues, security and environmental conditions within display areas, and schedules. Our first application for funding was submitted in 2006, and though it was unsuccessful we were invited to resubmit a revised application after undertaking further consultation with a wider range of Blackfoot people. The following year we received financial support from our respective universities for this purpose, and visited southern Alberta and northern Montana in the spring of 2008 specifically to meet with ceremonial leaders and educators and with Galt and Glenbow staff to discuss the aims and logistics of the project in more depth. These meetings were informed by how each of the Blackfoot nations negotiates relationships with outside researchers, as well as according to cultural protocol regarding ceremonial authority. Over a two-week period we met with a wide range of groups and individuals in all four nations. These included the Elders Advisory Committee and the management team of the Interpretative Centre at Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, Siksika Nation; Allan Pard and Jerry Potts Jr., both of whom are
ceremonial leaders from the Piikani Nation; the Elders Advisory Council of Red Crow Community College; the director and head of language at the Kainai Board of Education, and the Mookaakin Culture and Heritage Foundation at the Kainai Nation. At the Blackfeet Nation John Murray, the tribal heritage preservation officer, arranged a meeting with elders from his community, and we also met with educators from the Blackfeet Community College and the Piegan Institute.

In these early meetings colour photographs of the shirts were used as a starting point for discussion. Older people often said that they had heard about hairlock shirts but had never seen them, while some younger people told us that they had never seen quillwork. It was apparent that there were significant gaps in the knowledge that people had about historic Blackfoot clothing and a need and desire to learn more about it.

The consultation process was crucial to developing support within the communities and host venues, and in establishing the goals of the project for all involved. Despite there being no guarantee that the necessary funds would be secured, most Blackfoot people with whom we spoke during these early meetings were extremely supportive, though it would be disingenuous to suggest that all the consultation meetings were fully positive. There were certainly occasions when we were informed that it was not unusual for well-meaning museum staff and other external researchers to approach community leaders with what they thought were good ideas, ideas that, for a host of reasons, were viewed quite differently by the leaders themselves. Concerns were also raised about how cultural protocols would be respected, given that many people with whom we spoke were unhappy about the fact that the shirts were in a museum at all. Conflicting views within and between each of the nations regarding the appropriateness of working with ceremonial items also raised questions for us and for our advisors, and these had to be aired before we could proceed further with our discussions.

All this said, most people we met with saw tremendous possibilities for cultural and educational activities that would benefit their communities, and in particular, would help younger people connect with their Blackfoot heritage, and in turn, with their elders. Because of this, they were prepared to look at ways to address the very real concerns that were expressed regarding how access to these living beings might be achieved. Herman Yellow Old Woman, for example,
The people from the museums and the people from the Blackfoot Confederacy who are involved in this project and in previous projects, such as repatriation, are the risk-takers. People who are willing to take that risk to balance or breach protocol or bend protocol to achieve a certain goal. And that goal is to benefit people. . . . We've had to learn how to be collaborative. But everybody that has been involved in this project should be acknowledged as one of those risk-takers. For example, people such as Frank [Weasel Head] who is a leader in this regard. If it wasn’t for him taking those risks . . . things like this wouldn’t be happening. And all along the road in this project we have been supported. You had to get the support of your colleagues; we have also had to have the support of our people.

ALLAN PARD

We could not have gotten where we are without our relationship, but relationships get tested and that strengthens them. I try and appreciate your limitations and what you have been able to do given those limitations. We are subject to other restrictions that you are not restricted to.

TATSIKIISTAMIK / NARCISSE BLOOD

said, “We need to bring back the connection between the elders and youth. I have a connection to these things in your collections, but I don’t know if my children or the children after that are still going to have that connection. If we do it right, they will still have that connection.” Both host museums also identified benefits of participating in the Blackfoot Shirts Project. The Glenbow has long and well-established partnerships with Blackfoot people and saw the project as an opportunity to extend these existing relationships. The Galt, despite being located closer than the Glenbow to three of the Blackfoot nations, had fewer community contacts and less experience of outreach with Blackfoot people. As curator Wendy Aitkens explains in the previous chapter, the Galt staff welcomed the opportunity to develop new relations with the local reserve and urban Aboriginal communities and to involve Blackfoot people in the programming associated with the exhibition.

ADDRESSING CULTURAL PROTOCOLS

Over the planning process, the shirts moved from being museological specimens to being catalysts for the strengthening and renewal of Blackfoot culture. From the very start it was understood that there were many audiences for the Blackfoot Shirts Project and that these audiences represented a range of needs and expectations. Different groups who contributed to putting the project together also had their own views on how it should proceed, based on cultural and professional perspectives. Despite slightly different perspectives on what the aims of the project might be, there was consensus that an exhibition that focused on the shirts would serve to increase awareness among tourists and local people in southern Alberta of the long history of Blackfoot people in the region and the relationships they have had with outsiders. It would also be a draw for local schools, particularly those with a high proportion of Blackfoot students. Putting items in glass cases, however, limits the possibilities for close examination and we hoped to do more than just put the shirts on display. People with experience of going behind the scenes in museums like the Glenbow to study artifacts explained that looking at heritage items closely, and handling them where appropriate, not only helped...
them to better understand the construction techniques and materials used in the past, but also enhanced their sense of connection with the ancestors who made and used them. With this in mind it was suggested early in the planning that close access through handling sessions, or “visits,” should be integrated into the project and would provide an unparalleled opportunity for cross-generational learning with the shirts as teachers.

Such an innovative proposal needed to accommodate Blackfoot and museum concerns regarding the handling of fragile ceremonial items. In Blackfoot society, cultural protocols regarding who can and cannot handle ceremonial items, such as the three hairlock shirts, are taken very seriously. Only those persons with the ceremonially transferred rights to handle particular items, or who have been painted by a person with the rights to handle them, should do so. There are also protocols regarding when items used in ceremony can be shown publicly and what can be said about them and to whom. Given these restrictions, the spiritual leaders who have guided the project discussed at length the suggestion of including a handling component and agreed that the benefits of experiencing the shirts physically were so significant that some handling could take place. This decision was not taken lightly, and they have spoken candidly since of the struggles they faced when reaching consensus on this matter. They had to be prepared for criticism from some quarters because protocol was being bent; they had to explain why the shirts were only being loaned and were not being repatriated; they were also limited by protocol on what they could say about the shirts to the project team (and others) during the planning phase and subsequently. This point is an important reminder that whatever challenges may arise for museums embarking on projects like this, there are always other tensions at play, about which museum staff may have only limited awareness.

To address some of these issues sufficient funds were included in the budget to cover the travel and honoraria costs for elders who would accompany college and high school students on their visit to the shirts, and who would be able to provide guidance in the sessions for those people who might want to handle them. The cultural protocols informing how the shirts might be handled extended to the UK-based project team. During the consultation stage Allan Pard, who has the transferred rights to hairlock shirts, agreed that if the funding application
was successful he would travel to Oxford to paint the project team and Pitt Rivers Museum staff involved in the project, and to discuss treatment options with the conservation team before they stabilized the shirts for travel to Alberta.

**MUSEUM PROTOCOLS AND PROCEDURES**

“When we come here we pray, we talk to these things you call artifacts. To us they’re not artifacts. They’re live; it’s a living thing. But the connection is, I speak the language to them.”

*NAA TOO TSISSI (HOLY SMOKER) / HERMAN YELLOW OLD WOMAN*

Museums also have protocols for handling collections based on their own traditions of preserving what they refer to as artifacts. It is rare for most museums to allow members of the public to handle items that are as old and physically fragile as the five Blackfoot shirts. The project team felt very strongly that if our Blackfoot partners believed the benefits of the project would be so important that they were prepared to “bend protocol” so that it could proceed, then we should try to work in a way that might challenge conventional museum practice. The support of the Pitt Rivers Museum’s conservation team, and in particular, that of Head of Conservation, Heather Richardson, was fundamental. Museum staff are deeply committed to making the collections they care for physically accessible, and a balance needed to be found that would allow for the limited handling that was considered culturally acceptable but which also met the Museum’s duty of care to the shirts. To assist in this process each shirt was given rigorous condition checks to determine the kind of handling it was most suitable for. In addition, early in the planning it was agreed that Heather Richardson should join the team in Alberta. Heather’s involvement enabled her to participate fully in the handling sessions, to undertake running repairs that were required, to install the exhibition in both venues, and to pack the shirts safely when the time came to return them to the Pitt Rivers Museum. Just as important, Heather’s participation in all of the handling sessions allowed her to get to know some of the Blackfoot people involved in the project, thus extending the relationship...
between Blackfoot partners and the museum staff, which to that point had been largely limited to one curator, Laura Peers.

Museums have especially strict protocols for loans. Objects must be packed and crated by specialists, insured from door to door and during the loan, condition-checked on arrival, and kept under secure conditions at all times. Negotiations with the Glenbow and Galt museums had been ongoing during the consultation and planning phase, and included agreeing on which rooms were suitable for the handling sessions, how the exhibitions would work, and even where the shipping crate would be stored during the exhibition phase.

International museum loans also require the enactment of immunity from seizure legislation in the borrowing country. This is a standard procedure to ensure that items will be returned to the lending institution, so that if repatriation or other claims are made they will be dealt with separately from the loan. In most nations and Canadian provinces this legislation is automatically enacted when the borrowed item enters the institution to which it is lent, but in Alberta the process requires reading the bill aloud in the provincial legislature before the item is shipped. Allan Pard, who was a senior provincial civil servant as well as a ceremonial leader, was able to assist us with this important technicality.

PLANNING FOR THE HANDLING SESSIONS

In 2009, funding for the project was finally approved and planning began in earnest. We needed to decide on the best structure and organization for the handling sessions, or “visits,” both in terms of museum guidelines for handling objects and in terms of how to invite participants, a difficult task when we were on another continent. Heather Richardson advised on the structure of the sessions in terms of handling: it was felt best that no more than twelve people attend each session so that the project team could give participants individual attention and assist participants with handling the shirts. Two or three shirts at most would be used for each session, and the shirts would be chosen specially for each group: one shirt with spectacular wide quillwork lanes was brought out only for the artists’ groups, for instance, as it was simply too fragile for much handling. The shirts
would be rotated among all the sessions to spread the inevitable wear and tear on them from even gentle handling, and based on the museum staff’s experience of working with community groups, two hours was judged sufficient to explore several shirts. Ceremonial leaders advised on the protocol for the sessions, and the Glenbow and the Galt made provisions for people to smudge and pray before working with the shirts if they wanted to do so.

Owing to constraints of time and space, it was agreed that the “visits” should be by invitation only. This was simply a way of accommodating the fragility of the shirts: it was deeply disappointing to have to limit direct access to them, but placing the shirts on exhibit at each museum after the handling sessions would allow others to at least see them in cases. The project budget included the costs to hire a community liaison worker to assist with the process of inviting people to the handling sessions, but the person we had hoped to appoint—an employee at Glenbow with long-standing relationships with Blackfoot communities—was unavailable when the time came. Instead, individuals in all four communities were hired to assist with invitations and with promoting the project, or worked through tribal government or board of education staff as appropriate. In retrospect, this was a better strategy. Two of the people who took on this role—Kent Ayoungman and Rob First Charger—had held museum positions at the Glenbow and so were familiar with working with large heritage organizations. Others who assisted us worked with elders or artists in their communities on a regular basis. All of these individuals were able to coordinate some of the workshop sessions much more effectively than we could have done ourselves.

Having worked out the number and duration of “visits” that could be held in each of the two venues as part of the grant application process, we then worked with representatives from each community to draw up lists of people to invite to the sessions, taking the lead from our Blackfoot colleagues. In the case of school and college visits, we liaised with instructors and school board administrators to identify a session that would fit with the academic schedule; the groups then made their own travel arrangements and were reimbursed afterward. The sessions for elders from the Kainai Nation were coordinated by Verdun Hindbull-Morning Owl, who works for Tribal Government. She ensured that all the elders from this community who were well enough to travel from
their homes to the Galt Museum knew about the shirts’ visit, and had transport to take them to the museum. Similar sessions were organized with the help of Mari King in Browning, Velma Crowshoe from Piikani, and Kent Ayoungman at Siksika. This was not always a simple matter of making a few phone calls: at Siksika, for example, some elders live in fairly remote parts of the reserve, and as they prefer face to face visits rather than using their telephones, Kent spent several days driving around, visiting, and explaining the project to them. Using our growing network of contacts within the communities, and drawing on the advice of spiritual leaders, all of whom had some suggestions for people whom they felt should be invited to see the shirts, we did our best to ensure that a wide range of community members across all four Blackfoot nations had an opportunity to participate. These included ceremonial leaders, elders, artists, teachers, and high school students from each community. There was provision in the grant to pay travel money to every individual who attended the handling sessions: many Blackfoot people have low incomes, and should not be financially disadvantaged by coming to see their own heritage items. With the students who came, the budget covered bag lunches and snacks for return bus journeys, which were up to four hours in length each way. The funding also paid for the buses and sometimes for teachers to take a day’s leave from the classroom.

Placing the shirts on display after each block of handling sessions was necessary to provide wider access to them and for the host museums to meet their own agendas. At the same time as planning the handling sessions, we also had to develop the exhibitions. This worked slightly differently at each museum. For the Glenbow exhibition, the focus was on the shirts, accompanied only by explanatory panel text and—on a stand beside each shirt—a laminated booklet pointing out specific physical features such as mends, replaced quillwork strips, and interpretations of the painted designs. For this exhibition we curated the content ourselves and wrote and proofed panel text by email and telephone, assisted by the Glenbow staff and a graphic designer based in Edinburgh, Scotland. The exhibition was to be the Galt’s main summer show, and the Galt staff and their advisory committee felt that the core exhibition should be broadened to include material from their own collection and those of other museums in the province. As Wendy Aitkens explains above, this included displays on the
historical context of the fur trade and contemporary clothing that represents achievements.

Throughout the project planning, the time difference of seven hours sometimes complicated our attempts to arrange telephone conversations with Blackfoot partners, but often worked in our favour with our Canadian museum colleagues, who were able to edit text or work on graphic design during their working hours and have it returned to us first thing in the morning UK time. This very intense way of working meant that by the time we arrived in Canada with the shirts in April 2010 the exhibition was almost ready to be installed, with final adjustments to the torso mounts used to display the shirts being made by Heather Richardson and Glenbow conservator Heather Dumka during breaks between handling sessions there.

As the handling sessions were being planned and the exhibition designed, the Pitt Rivers Museum conservation team was doing their part to get the shirts ready for the journey home. We were almost ready to pack the shirts into their travelling crate and bring them home—but before we could do so, the shirts themselves needed some help.