



# NEWSLETTER



May 1991

Vol 5 No 7

## Select Committee on Science and Technology to investigate Systematic Research in the UK

The House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology has appointed a Sub-Committee, under the chairmanship of Lord Dainton, with the terms of reference 'to consider systematic biology research in the United Kingdom'.

BCG has been invited to give oral evidence to the Sub-Committee and to submit written evidence on any matters relevant to their terms of reference. The following issues have been listed in the initial communication, not all of which are strictly pertinent to the role and interests of BCG.

- 1 What is the utility of systematic biology research?
- 2 Does the need to specify particular organisms in connection with eg intellectual property rights, regulatory provisions etc, impinge upon your work?
- 3 Is the level for UK research appropriate. If so, how does one determine an appropriate volume? How does it rank with competing biological and other disciplines?
- 4 Is UK research in the right areas? Are there guiding principles which could help a 'national policy' within which the existing facilities would operate eg importance in ecological/economic terms of groups of organisms; existing spread of expertise within the country; quality of resources available?
- 5 What is the extent of our need for reference collections including foreign material (type collections, living culture collections, etc) as a base for systematic research? Is provision for their storage and their curation adequate? Do we have particular responsibilities to the world scientific community as a consequence of the historic circumstances of our holdings?
- 6 What new methods are there and how will this affect future UK research? Is the availability of information technology (computerised databases) to systematic research being adequately exploited? Is UK research taking cognizance of the full range of new developments in this field?
- 7 Is the current 'institutionalised' base of much of the research appropriate? Is their funding base secure? Should OAL or DES be responsible for the NHM?
- 8 If research is to be continued who pays?
  - (i) Should burdens of expense be shared with other countries - eg a UN programme? Can ESF help to rationalise activities?
  - (ii) Within UK, how much more should Government pay for and how best can budgets be protected?
  - (iii) What role can industry play?
- 9 Is teaching adequate?
- 10 What can we learn from abroad, especially the USA?

Clearly, BCG will be commenting primarily on points 4 and 5, which appear to arise directly from the 'Biological Collection UK' report and the Cardiff conference which highlighted the need for it. As is usually the case with these investigations there is a rigorous timescale for presentation of evidence (by 10th April 1991) so BCG committee cannot canvas

the opinion of the whole membership. However, the chairman will take into account the views of a cross section of the membership in formulating the evidence to be presented, and it will be published in a future edition of the Newsletter.

The deliberations and final report of the Sub-Committee are of great concern to BCG members, so the committee will try to keep everyone informed as to progress and results through the pages of the Newsletter.

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## News

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### North East gets first Travelling Biology Curator

'The region's first Travelling Biology Curator has joined the North of England Museums Service.

Mark Simmons, 27, aims to make the region greener by putting a halt to the damage which has been caused to north east biology collections from years of underfunding and lack of expertise. £10,000 will also be spent by the North of England Museums Service on improving the conditions of the collections. The project is joint funded by the North of England Museums Service and the Museums and Galleries Commission.

The new two year post and the £10,000 is welcomed by the region's museums and others who have campaigned for this injection of expertise and cash into the region's biology collections. Still seeking funds for this project, Sue Underwood, Director of NEMS says: "this, like all aspects of our work aims to improve both museums and the quality of life for people living in the north east".

Editor's comment. The above is quoted from the press release issued by NEMS. The creation of this post is the direct result of the 'Biological Collections UK' report and the Sunflower Campaign, both key elements of BCG's work over the past few years.

### Ecology - a new gallery at the Natural History Museum

The British Petroleum sponsored Ecology gallery at the Natural History Museum was opened by HRH The Princess of Wales on 11th March. This is the first of a series of permanent exhibitions to be constructed as a direct result of the success of the Natural History Museum Development Trust Appeal which was launched in October 1989 and has already reached its £5 million target. It is claimed to be the first permanent exhibition on global ecology in the world.

The editor has not yet visited this exhibition, so here is a quote from the press release:

'Housed within a towering 'greenhouse', this massive exhibition steers away from doom and gloom environmental stories, and concentrates instead on building visitors' understanding of the delicate balance that exists in nature. Presented with a true picture of the underlying principles of ecology, they can make up their own minds about what should be done to conserve our fragile planet'.

This is clearly a major development and the editor would be pleased to receive any comments from members who have seen the exhibition.

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### Derbyshire County Council Expelled from Museums Association.

The Museums Association has expelled Derbyshire County Council from membership - the first time an institutional member has been expelled in the Association's 100 year history.

The expulsion follows Derbyshire County Council's decision to sell off part of its museums' collection to help contribute to the Council's funds rather than specifically to the museums.

The Museums Association noted that Derbyshire had failed to follow accepted procedures for disposal of museum items and refuses to use funds raised for the purchase of additions to the collection. These actions are contrary to the Museums Association Code of Practice for Museum Authorities.

The Association attempted to obtain from Derbyshire a written assurance that the items would only be sold in accordance with the Code of Practice. This they have failed to do.

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## Developments at Sheffield Museum

Tim Riley has accepted early retirement from his post as Principal Keeper of Natural Sciences at Sheffield City Museum and he left the museum on 1st February 1991. Derek Whiteley has taken over as Principal Keeper and his old post of Assistant Keeper (Zoology) is now frozen. Derek is, of course, Secretary of BCG, so he will need to take a sabbatical from these duties until he has settled in to his new job. The arrangements for this will be discussed at the AGM and reported on in the next Newsletter.

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## BCG takes Steps to Safeguard Uncurated Collections

Stickers are now available to help safeguard uncurated collections and individual specimens. Self-adhesive for glass, cardboard boxes, wood etc., these labels are available at £1 (stamps, cheque, P.O.) for 200 (including postage) from:  
Biology Curators' Group  
Derek Whiteley  
City Museum  
Sheffield S10 2TP

This is a prototype. If there is a demand we will produce other designs and other adhesives. Hopefully these labels may prevent future authorities 'burning their Dodos', 'doing a Barnsley' or assigning scientific collections to the skip. So if you visit a museum with no natural history curator, take some stickers with you to mark collections you think are of value and which could come under threat.

THIS COLLECTION/SPECIMEN  
HAS SCIENTIFIC VALUE  
DO NOT DESTROY/DISPOSE  
WITHOUT CONSULTING AN  
EXPERIENCED CURATOR  
BIOLOGY CURATORS GROUP

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## In the Press

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**Conservation News** (44, March 1991) has an interesting short review by Chris Nicholson of the production, properties and composition of Shellac. This is an insect product (species *Laccifer lacca*); some 75,000 individuals are involved in producing the raw material which goes into one kilogram of the finished material. It has traditional uses in taxidermy and as a bottle or jar sealant, but the main interest of the article is in the processing of the 'lac' and the farming of the insects.

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The Systematics Association, in conjunction with the Linnean Society and CAB International, have produced an attractive and informative leaflet: **Systematics - the Study of Biological Diversity**. It covers the role of systematics, the contribution of systematics to science, the relevance of systematics and the need for more resources. The leaflet is probably not suitable as general museum give away, but it is useful for handing out to specific enquirers or to those who say 'what's it all for' - and this includes many councillors. Copies are available from: The Systematics Association, c/o International Mycological Institute, Ferry Lane, Kew, Surrey TW9 3AF.

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Controversy on the use and value of herbarium specimens raged for a time in **Nature** last year. In **Nature** of 16 August, it was suggested by Clifford, Rogers and Dettman that taxonomists might usefully dispense with existing large herbarium collections, instead relying on type specimens and published descriptions of species. The response was massive and a read through the reply letters published in **Nature** of 20 September provides an overwhelming array of arguments, with examples, of why we should retain our herbaria in perpetuity. They cannot be repeated here, but these arguments form the bricks and mortar of the defences we are called on more and more frequently to construct in the face of uninformed criticism from 'busy administrators and politicians seeking quick remedies to immediate ills' (to quote from one reply).

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Another defence of museum natural history collections came in **Nature** of 27 September with Jared Diamond reporting on current research using the polymerase chain reaction to extract, amplify and

sequence DNA from museum specimens. The example he quoted involved 43 study skins of Kangaroo Rat held at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, collected between 1911 and 1937. The genotypes of these were compared with genotypes of 63 modern rats from the same sites, and the same subspecific differences observed today were present over half a century ago. The point of this is that the DNA of the museum specimens had not altered with time, and DNA can be extracted 'not only from dried leaves and dried skin but also from hair, feathers and eggshells'. Thus 'old' specimens constitute a vast, irreplaceable source of material for directly determining historical changes in gene frequencies, which are among the most important data in evolutionary biology ..... museums with large, well-run collections of specimen series large enough for statistical analysis will be at the forefront of research in molecular evolution'.

In *New Scientist* (no 1759) of 9 March, there is a beautiful description of the Museum für Naturkunde in what used to be East Berlin but what is now Germany. When Berlin was divided in 1960, the East got most of the museums. The big, famous ones like the Pergamon have the usual late twentieth century trappings, and are on the tourists' routes, but the natural history museum has remained in its 'natural' state, uncorrupted by post war influences and exhibition fashion. Two quotes: 'Where the Museum für Naturkunde really gleams, though, is in its collection of stuffed animals. This is the pure, original museum. The air is quieter here than the outside. Visitors move silently around beeswaxed wooden cabinets that display the best taxidermy I've seen. Occasionally a child's delighted exclamation echoes from the next room.' 'This museum does not teach; it can, at least for the right people, inspire.'

The article continues with a comparison of this museum or 'proper' museum as the author Mike Holderness calls it, with the Natural History Museum in London. The article is called 'Down among the display cabinets' and Mike Holderness is described as a freelance science writer and 'collector of museum tearooms'.

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## Letters

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Dear Dr Mathias

### Leucistic Barnacle Geese

I have recently carried out an analysis of the occurrence and performance of white Barnacle Geese in the population wintering in the Solway Firth. These white forms seem to have become more common in recent years (there are five in the current population).

I am very interested to have information on their occurrence in the past. I am told by Alan Knox that you edit the Biological Curators' Group Newsletter and I wonder whether you would be willing to put in a notice about this. What I am interested in is information about the location of skins or mounted specimens of white (or very pale) Barnacle Geese, and knowledge of the accompanying documentation.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Myrfyn Owen  
Director of Research  
The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust  
Slimbridge  
Gloucester GL2 7BT

Editor: will members please reply direct to Dr Owen at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.

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# Exhibition Review

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## Action for Animals

### **An exhibition to celebrate the work and achievements of the RSPCA Leicestershire Museums until 22nd March, then Swansea Maritime Museum**

From my early youth, I fondly recall my pet European tortoise 'Roger' (whimsically named after Banister, the first four minute miler). Roger and I had a special symbiotic relationship. I would tempt him with lettuce and - if in a pleasing sort of mood - he would pop his head out from under his shell and eat. Cold, damp Autumn came and Roger, exposed in the garden, caught what appeared to be a cold. Worried, I took my chelonian pal to bed at night in order to keep him warm. Sadly, Roger's head failed to re-appear and my Dad organised a ceremonial burial of the corpse in our back garden, tombstone and all. This tear-stained first experience of the death of an animal left its mark on me. I was puzzled as to why Roger might have died (I dug him up twice just to make absolutely sure) and, at the time, could not conceive that I had been cruel to him in any way.

I guiltily remembered my unintentional maltreatment of Roger when recently viewing 'Action for Animals' in the Leicestershire Museum: an exhibition of images, sound, videos and interactive displays designed to celebrate the achievements of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The mass mortality of pet tortoises at the hands of an often innocently negligent young British public and the conservation implications for wild tortoise populations led, in 1984, to an RSPCA-inspired statutory ban on importation. Over the last 150 years, similar RSPCA campaigns have undoubtedly played a crucial role in promoting animal welfare legislation to prevent suffering and abuse of all kinds; and in educating the public to a kinder, civilised and more thoughtful approach to animals. The Society originated in about 1822 through a small band of activists (notably including William Wilberforce the anti-slavery campaigner), but it was not granted the prestigious 'Royal' prefix by Queen Victoria until 1840.

The RSPCA exhibition has been created in a somewhat utilitarian 'business fair' style by Graham and Gillies Communications and Henry Lowe Associates. 'Cyberdescence' provide a start framework of scaffolding, dimly illuminated by bulkhead lights. The punchy interpretation is wisely targetted at a key audience of less than 17 years of age: the people who will ultimately determine the future of animal welfare in this country (and possibly elsewhere, through the new RSPCA Eurogroup). An insistent ringing of telephones drew me away from an introductory section featuring a nice taxidermy mount of a cockerel (seized while dying in 1985 during a joint RSPCA-police raid on an illegal cockfighting den). The strident tones came from a bank of three unanswered red telephones in the 'Control Room' display. Picking up a receiver I got all sorts of interesting information about RSPCA emergency animal rescue operations. but the continued din of the two remaining phones make it difficult to absorb fully a message about snowbound cattle. I asked a hovering gallery attendant if he ever found the noise too much to bear. He smiled and said 'No', while confirming that he was personally very hard of hearing.

Near to the telephones I spied a fine display of historical RSPCA collecting boxes, all designed to tug at sentimental heart strings: three kittens stuck on a chimney top, bandaged puppy dogs, mares with foals and an assortment of fluffy bunnies. This traditional sepia-tinted aspect of the RSPCA made a sharp contrast with the full colour interactive video presentation nearby.

'Under or over 17?' the glowing screen demanded to know. Hesitating only briefly, I pressed the right button image. The first menu offered a choice from three topics: farming, animal rescue and the countryside. I tried the last item: 'Which is illegal - gin traps, rabbit snares or domestic mousetraps?'. I correctly selected 'gin traps', then switched to farming: 'How old are broiler chicks when they are slaughtered' (I guessed 20 weeks). 'Wrong! try again'.

I moved from the Control Room area to see the 'Dark Side of Farming' - an RSPCA view of arguably cruel aspects of modern intensive animal husbandry such as tethering pigs in stalls. The video commentary painted a bleak but balanced picture. Battery chickens crowded in small wire cages with a floor area the size of a school jotter - and deprived of exercise, dust baths, natural food and light - certainly contradict the myth about being 'free as a bird'. Of the 38 million egg-laying chickens in Britain, about



96% are kept in these dire circumstances. The RSPCA graphically compare this confinement to expecting three people to live together forever in a telephone booth. Factory farmers argue that the battery method reduces the incidence of disease, cuts labour costs and provides a plentiful supply of eggs at sensible prices. Along with a growing band of people, I am now happy to pay that little bit more for free range eggs.

In the final section of the exhibition, a central tableau of human divers beside an inflatable boat highlights the massive RSPCA rescue campaign in 1988 to save hundreds of sick and dying seals from along our coasts - victims of a distemper virus. The disease is of unknown causation but there is a suspicion that marine pollution may have played a part, or at least in exacerbating the problem. A nearby showcase featuring an oiled seabird was -especially following the Gulf catastrophe - another grim reminder of how cruelty to animals can be brought about simply through a failure to control environmental pollution.

Overall, 'Action for Animals' is very worthwhile. It places the RSPCA in a historical context and shows just how much they have moved on from the soft 'cuddly kitten' image to tackle hard issues in animal welfare involving horrific or undesirable practices both in this country and overseas. From an organisation that twenty years ago concentrated mainly on domestic animals (and, in doing so, perhaps lost its way) emerges a more radical RSPCA prepared to act on critical aspects of zoo and laboratory animal welfare and also deal efficiently with the problems of wild animals. This last point makes 'Action for Animals' especially relevant to natural historians. The exhibition is available for touring and comes with comprehensive literature packs, including well-produced teaching notes and school worksheets. Leicestershire Museums have organised a full series of interesting lectures to accompany 'Action for Animals' and any curator wishing to provide another venue for this exhibition may similarly be able to obtain speakers through the RSPCA, Causeway, Horsham, West Sussex RH12 1HG: Tel. Horsham (0403) 64181.

Gordon McGregor Reid, 12.3.91

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## Book Reviews

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### Two softback editions of standard works from Harley Books

#### **The Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland**

Edited by A. Maitland Emmet and John Heath

Volume 7 part 1 of The Moths and Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland

Softback edition (1990) ISBN 0-946589-37-2 £24.95

#### **Grasshoppers and Allied Insects of Great Britain and Ireland**

Judith A. Marshall and E. C. M. Haes

Softback edition (1990) ISBN 0-946589-36-4 £15.95

To my mind, softback is a much more relevant description of these publications than paperback. The latter suggests tattiness, a short active life, and disposability; none of these are characteristics of the books in question. They are superbly produced and will, I am quite sure, withstand long term handling and use. Both have stitched spines and a laminated full colour cover which appears to be waterproof should one wish to take these books into the field.

Alas, there lies the rub. They are still fairly hefty works and at 20.1 x 25.3 cm, they are an awkward size for anything other than desk or bench use. Mind you, they contain far more information than one would wish for in a true field guide so they are perhaps better suited to life on the workbench than life in the rucksack. The illustrations are of such excellent quality that Harley Books might consider the viability of publishing just these with key identification characters alongside as pared down but still attractive pocket-sized field guides which could be used in conjunction with the monographs.

The text for both books is pretty much the same as for the hardback originals. 'Grasshoppers' has new records (to August 1990) noted on pages 13-14, revisions to the VC and island records on page 253, and corrigenda on page 254; there is also an illustration of silhouettes of representative species from each Order covered in the book together with a millimetre scale - presumably to be used in the field although I have stated my reservations about this above. 'Butterflies' has the same brilliant illustrations that were widely commented on when the hardback version was published, and there are a few minor text revisions.

The good news is the cost. Considering their quality, both are well priced; you save £25 by buying the softback version of 'Butterflies' and £14 by buying the softback 'Grasshoppers'. The sound guide (tape) for 'Grasshoppers' is still available at £5.75 and is an essential companion to the book.

Both of these books were reviewed when they came out in hardback. Please refer to BCG Newsletter vol 5 no 5 for 'Butterflies' and Journal of Biological Curation vol 1 no 1 for 'Grasshoppers'.

John Mathias

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## **An Atlas of the Land and Freshwater Mollusca of Northumberland and Durham**

by **Ralph Lowe**

Special publication no 4 of the Northumberland Biological Records Centre (1989) ISBN 0-95 09680-6-4. Cost £6.50 from Hancock Museum.

This is an A4, softback, plastic ring-bound book of 139 pages. Its large size belies its meagre content - by this I mean it could easily have been produced at a quarter its length or even less, simply by reducing the size of the distribution maps to more sensible proportions. There are 124 distribution maps at one per A4 page and it would, I feel sure, have been a simple task to reduce these to six per page to make a much more reasonably sized book.

As well as the maps there is a contents page, acknowledgements, introduction and six pages of habitat notes - about a line per species; at the end there is a bibliography and index. Nothing on the distribution of habitats in the area under study; no notes on the species distributions - simply a name and a map; no date categories - it is unclear when the records were made, and by my reading of the introduction they could be post 1934 (when Blackburn published his survey) or post 1965 (when the author's interests were rekindled) there is no real historical review of recording in the area. I would really have expected these to form part of any modern-day atlas.

These points aside, I welcome this addition to the mollusc atlases which are slowly emerging from the regions in the wake of the national atlas published by the Conchological Society in 1976, and under the strong encouragement and support, generously acknowledged in this volume, of Mike Kerney, the

national recorder. The coverage is good (the commonest species are marked off in all but one or two of the 10 km squares) and the species range is impressive (eleven *Pisidium* species are represented), but I would have liked some comparison between these recorded distributions and those of Blackburn in 1934 and even Alder in 1848.

In summary, this book is good as far as it goes, but with even a little more thought and effort it could have gone a great deal further.

John Mathias

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## **Big Mouths and Long Necks**

by **Michael A Taylor and John G Martin**

Published by Leicestershire Museums Service, 1990. ISBN 0-85022-287-7. Cost £1.50 (£2.00 by post)

This lively A5 booklet is one in a series of five (so far) on geological (specifically palaeontological) subjects published in association with the dinosaur gallery at the Leicestershire Museum. *Big Mouths and Long Necks* is about the plesiosaurs - what they might have looked like, how they might have lived, how their remains were found, their place in evolution, where they can be seen (a good plug for museum collections here). It is well illustrated and accessible, good for children and adults alike. As a non-geologist, I can recommend a dip into this informative and attractive little book, and suggest it would be a good seller in any museum shop where vertebrate fossils feature in the displays.

John Mathias

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## **WOT A BARGAIN! Biology Curators Group Newsletter**

Vol 1 no 1 to vol 5 no 6 (Nov 1990) (only missing vol 4 no 5). 45 issues in all plus three Special Reports.

£20 + postage or collect.

Contact Tim Riley/Derek Whiteley, c/o Sheffield City Museums, Weston Park, Sheffield S10 2TP  
Tel 0742 768588

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# Coming Events

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## Life After Death The Practical Conservation of Natural History Collections

A one day UKIC Conference to be held at the Ipswich Museums, and Ipswich School, Suffolk, on 27th February 1992

A note from the prospectus:

'In April 1990, Ipswich Museum opened its fully restored "Victorian Natural History Gallery". For this to be possible the conservation section had to conserve nearly 400 specimens, most of them dating to the 19th or early 20th century. The exhibits included mammals, reptiles, fish, crustaceans, shells and birds. There are many local museums with huge natural history collections which will at some time need conserving and yet there are hardly any specialist natural history conservators. Often it is conservators with other specialisms that have to cope. It is hoped that the conference will concentrate on the practical rather than the theoretical, and will appeal to general conservators and specialist natural history conservators alike.'

### Call for papers

If you wish to present a paper at this conference, or if you want more information, contact:

Bob Entwistle, Ipswich Museum, High Street, Ipswich, Suffolk. Tel 0473 - 213761 or UKIC 071 - 603 - 5643.

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## The History of Ornithology Joint Meeting of the British Ornithologists' Union, The Society for the History of Natural History and the Biology Curators' Group

Thursday 17th - Sunday 20th September 1992  
University of Liverpool, South Liverpool  
Conference Centre

### Programme:

#### Thursday 17th September

Visits to two libraries not normally open to the public:

**The Oak Room**, Liverpool City Libraries. Original drawings (eg by Edward Lear), copy of Audubon and other fine books.

**Knowsley Library**, Knowsley Hall, Prescot, East Liverpool.

We have special permission from the XVIII Earl of Derby to view his priceless collection of original drawings and fine bird books at this private library. The XIIIth Earl of Derby was at the centre of the bird world in the early 19th century; friend and sponsor to such important characters as John Gould, Edward Lear and John MacGillivray. The Earl's collection of birds was bequeathed to the City of Liverpool and founded the institution now known as the Liverpool Museum, part of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. His books, original drawings and manuscripts remain at Knowsley.

There will also be a linked exhibition at the Liverpool Museum, re-uniting some of the specimens with their original drawings and fine published plates. This will be open for three months around the time of the conference and may be viewed at any time during normal museum opening times. We are hoping, however, to arrange a reception at the museum on one of the evenings (probably Thursday) during the conference, during which this exhibition can be viewed. This will also give delegates a chance to see the Natural History Gallery and the award-winning Natural History Centre, where many specimens from the reserve collections are now being made accessible to the public by demonstrator staff.

The bird collections at the Liverpool Museums are the second largest in number in the country and of extreme taxonomic and historical importance; they include many types and specimens from such luminaries as Cook, Gould and Hodgson. We suggest anyone wishing to take the opportunity to look at the collections should come a day earlier; we are setting aside Wednesday 16th September for this purpose - although visitors are of course welcome at any time. Please let us know if you would like to book early for this purpose.

### Friday, 18th - Saturday 19th September

Two days of talks on ornithological history. We are still open to offers of papers but already have a substantial programme.

#### International History

Bill Deiss (Archives Department, Smithsonian Institution, Washington). The History of Oology in America.

Alan Tye (British Ornithologists' Union) and Adam Jones (Ethnologist). Birds in 17th century West Africa.



### **The Birds themselves**

Wayne Longmore (Queensland Museum). History of the Australian Night Parrot and its recent re-discovery after many years of presumed extinction (with, it is hoped, a personal appearance by the bird skin itself). Ian Wallace (Liverpool Museum). The history of the Liver Bird, Liverpool's famous emblem (complete with a distinguished specimen which for many years was in Liverpool's Town Hall).

The Liver Bird also adorns several important buildings in Liverpool, and a trail incorporating these works of art will be devised - with the added benefit of a self-guided tour of the city centre. Time permitting, a group tour will be fitted in on Sunday afternoon

### **Hunting and Collecting**

Mike Stammers (Maritime Museum, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside). The history and use of Duck Punts.

Janet Kear (Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust). Duck decoys.

Pat Morris (Royal Bedford College, London). The history of bird taxidermy.

### **Ornithologists**

Mike Thomas (Perth Museum). Drummond-Hay, First President of the British Ornithologists' Union.

Bob Ralph (University of Aberdeen). John MacGillivray, ship's naturalist and collector.

Peter Bircham (University of Cambridge). John Legg 1755-1802, an advanced ornithologist.

### **The history of Bird art**

This section is being overseen by one of Britain's most distinguished bird artists, Robert Gillmore, who will give an introductory talk on bird art. We are also hoping to arrange a small exhibition of bird art for sale at the conference.

Other talks will include:

Peter Davis (Hancock Museum, Newcastle-on-Tyne) on Thomas Bewick, wood-engraver.

Professor Bill Hale (Liverpool Polytechnic). Fine bird books.

We are trying to obtain sponsorship for a special edition of **Archives of Natural History** for the papers from this conference. We would also like to be able to support some of the foreign speakers' travelling expenses, and delegates who may not otherwise be able to attend. We would welcome suggestions or offers of sources of funding.

The facilities at the conference will also include room

for poster papers and a comprehensive book stall run by Natural History Book Service of Totnes, Devon. There will also be a sales stall run by the British Ornithologists' Union, at which their publications will be available.

### **Sunday, 20th September**

Particularly to complement Dr Kear's paper, we will be visiting Hale Duck Decoy, on the banks of the Mersey in south Liverpool. This is an SSSI and an Ancient Monument, and has one renovated pipe of the several formerly used for trapping duck. It is now a nature reserve run jointly by the Cheshire and Lancashire Trusts for Nature Conservation.

We hope that Sunday afternoon will also give us enough time for a guided tour of Liverpool's Liver Birds and interesting buildings, including the majestic tea-room of The Adelphi Hotel.

The cost of the whole conference will be in the region of £135 for the four days, including transport to Knowsley Hall, Liverpool City Library, Liverpool Museum and Hale Duck Decoy and packed lunches on those days. The conference centre is set in landscaped grounds about five miles south of the city centre and is self contained; bedrooms, lecture halls, dining room and bar are all within minutes walk.

Full booking forms will be sent out in 1992. If you wish to be included on the mailing list, send your name, address and telephone number to: Clem Fisher, Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN. Please indicate if you would like to offer a paper or poster presentation, and if you would be a residential or non-residential delegate.

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## **Stop Press**

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An attempt to steal eggs from the first floor stores at the Booth Museum in Brighton was recently foiled by super sleuth (and geologist) John Cooper. The following report from the Brighton Evening Argus says it all.

### **Butcher snatched rare museum eggs**

A wildlife enthusiast was caught by staff stealing rare birds' eggs from a natural history museum.

When police searched Anthony Coleman's home they found an illegal collection of stuffed, dead birds, Brighton magistrates heard.

Coleman, 26, of Beaconsfield Road, Hastings, admitted burglary at the Booth Museum in Dyke Road, Brighton. Coleman, a butcher, also admitted having a dead kestrel, long-eared owl and a buzzard, in breach of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Esme Grant, prosecuting, said museum staff found Coleman in an exhibit storeroom cordoned off from the public with a bag filled with rare birds' eggs. He told police he stole the eggs because he had not wanted to take them from the wild.

Anne Markwick, defending, said: "He is a wildlife enthusiast. In itself this is a very harmless hobby but he was under stress because he was separated at the time from his wife." Miss Markwick said Coleman was completely ignorant that he had the stuffed birds illegally. She said by law the dead birds should have been registered with the Department of the Environment and the owner has to show how they died.

He bought the birds, which were in cages, eight years ago from a junk shop and because he could not say how they died he had to plead guilty. Coleman was fined £250 for stealing the eggs and £75 for having the stuffed birds.

**Note from Editor:** the culprit was apprehended almost by chance on a Sunday afternoon. John Cooper happened to be walking through the museum with an attendant when they heard the floor creak above their heads. No-one should have been there, so they investigated and caught the man red-handed.

Since then, the access stairs to the stores have been enclosed to prevent anyone from climbing in and security has been tightened generally. It is also likely that the Booth Museum will be offered the culprit's illegal collection.

The only really mystifying aspect to this whole affair is: what was John Cooper doing walking through his museum on Sunday afternoon when he should have been at home watching footy on the telly!

## Have you seen a mermaid? Do you have a mermaid in your collections?

### Do you know of any mermaids in other collections?

If so we would like to hear from you., We are conducting a survey of mermaids, and mermen, and would like to know about any material (extant or destroyed) that may be known to you. References in local publications, ephemera, manuscript notes and correspondence may provide important clues to the whereabouts of specimens - if your collections include any references to merfolk we would be very interested to hear from you. Even records of specimens you may have seen elsewhere would be appreciated.

David Heppell and Geoff Swinney  
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(Please address your response to David Heppell)

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## Manual of Natural History Curatorship

**Editors: Geoff Stansfield, John Mathias,  
Gordon Reid**

At a recent meeting in the Museums and Galleries Commission of the editorial sub-committee for the Manual of Natural History Curatorship, at which most of the contributors were present, the following outline for the Manual was agreed. In fact, most contributors have now expanded this outline into a detailed breakdown of contents for their chapters, and two of the chapters have already been written. The bulk of the meeting was spent going through the details of chapter contents and ironing out possible areas of overlap between contributors. The Manual is to be published by HMSO and is being supported financially by the Museums and Galleries Commission. We are looking for publication by the end of the year.

### Outline of contents and contributors

#### 1 Function and organization of NHM's

Functions and organization of natural history museums to include national, local authority, university and private museums, their individual characteristics as far as funding, administration and functions.

Geoff Stansfield

## **2 Acquisition**

Collecting policies in relation to different types of museums and different museum functions.

Collection parameters, including geographical boundaries, taxonomic limitations, implications of wildlife conservation laws, conventions and codes. Collecting methods (field collecting, purchase, purchase funds etc)

John Edmondson, Liverpool Museum.

## **3 Preparation and preservation**

General intro to collection preservation with discussion on strengths and weaknesses of various methods. Dry preservation, wet preservation, freeze-drying, frozen collections, special techniques relating to study skins, osteology, insects, molluscs, plants.

Gordon Reid, Horniman Museum.

## **4 Documentation**

Documentation in the field, documentation on entry to museum, documentation to meet requirements of conservation laws, habitat recording conventions, species recording, transferring data to computer, computer systems. MDA.

Peter Davis, Hancock Museum.

## **5 Housing and maintenance of collections**

Housing and maintenance standards, security, storage design, storage fittings, climate and lighting control, safe handling, packing and transportation.

John Mathias, Leicestershire Museums.

## **6 Using the collections**

Discussion on different ways in which collections are used. Taxonomic support specimens, voucher specimens, specimens as a resource for exhibition, education and interpretation. Collections research.

Charles Pettit, The Manchester Museum

## **7 Biological recording**

Museum role in biological recording; advising on planning applications; standards; work of the NFBR; charging for services.

Bill Ely, Rotherham Museum

## **8 Live animals and plants in the museum**

Laws affecting use of live animals and plants  
Gordon Reid, Horniman Museum.

## **9 Exhibition and interpretation**

Exhibition policies - long-term, short-term, temporary, travelling and site. Strengths and weaknesses of natural history exhibitions. Sources of funds, sources of exhibitions.

Paul Howard, The Yorkshire Museum.

## **10 Educational activities in Natural Science Museums**

Educational services, work with schools (including new curriculum); clubs, holiday activities, work with adults, guided walks and excursions.

Elizabeth Goodhew, Horniman Museum.

**Enquiry services, publication and sales policies, shops** (still under discussion)

## **11 Health and safety**

Guidelines to include precautions when handling live or fresh material; working with pesticides, COSH.

Paul Richards, Sheffield Museum

## **12 Working with other bodies**

Short description of the aims and activities of organizations? To include associations of natural history curators; sources of grant aid and advice (national bodies, local bodies, grant-giving bodies, special interest bodies).

Steve Garland, Bolton Museum.

**Bibliography; Appendices; Useful organizations; Index.**

GS, JHM, GR

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# **BCG SPORT**

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## **Ratty burrows sous la Manche**

Mindful of the potential delay between penning this and publication I shudder to make any mention of the Gulf, not knowing what the future holds. However, I should like to pass on one item which was overheard during a sniff round the corridors of power; 'Of course, BCG does have its own SCUD missile - Sir Rat, the one they love to shoot down!' Still, that said, I don't seem to have had too many personal suggestions involving rotating cucumbers recently. Perhaps I'm getting too safe in my old age.

So where were you? I refer of course to the Paris tournament. Four days that shook the world. Grande temps indeed. Who can ever forget the Milne mud-wrestling parties? The 'Pick-axe wielding Mendel in exploding car' shock? Or even the 'Stoke Museum in giant crystal snatch' scandal? Certainly plenty to keep your roving rat reporter out of the sewers (but

never far from the gutter). Despite the concurrent Sun headlines describing the rest of UEFA as 'grenouilles' we were given a very warm welcome on the pitch on match day (after sneaking unnoticed past the official welcome committee). Ungrounded suspicions that we weren't so welcome were initially aroused when we realised that the changing rooms were located 50 feet below the pitch. Fortunately only three of the first team succumbed to the neat Dichlorvos spread liberally underfoot! An experience indeed, but this had nothing on our tour of the new stand. The architects 1:1 scale matchstick model was quite awesome. The stuffed skins of past players really added a touch of realism and made one reflect on the stories we've been hearing about Sheffield ..... Not only were past players celebrated but also the directors who were represented by marble busts, each depicted wearing a shroud or constricting reptile. This presumably speaking of local government control to the classical mind. Thought provoking indeed.

My own lasting impression of the Paris trip through the alcohol and food haze is of the terrible damage caused to the pitch by the Venezuelan burrowing whale, now proudly displayed in the new central arena. Wielding a harpoon in those sub-terranean conditions must have been horrendously dangerous. Strange days indeed.

Back on the domestic front, the shuffling goes on. The still partially frozen pitch at Exeter sees Dave Bolton as acting skipper for the RAMs for the time being. This is not to be confused with Dave Bilton the new skipper for Reading Recorders, now playing out of Oxford. The only man in the league to have an Asian team named after him. Talking of Asia it also looks as though the ever mobile Simon Hayhow has been head-hunted by the Phillipinos. In a complicated transfer deal an admin slip seems to have sent him to Lancashire with one of their players by mistake. Where does this leave Oldham? Too close to Bury I should think.

It's all change up there with the Wanderers losing Mark Simmons to the North-East. Still claiming to be a sweeper capable of any position my scouts ask the pertinent question - 'when did you last see a Palanologist play for England?' Nice try, but isn't it time to come out of the fossil cabinet and own up? Whether F. A. Chairman (an eminently appropriate title) Steve Garland can fill the hole at the back remains to be seen.

There even seems to be movement in the green world of groundsmen suddenly. John Rose at Sheffield is

reported to have gone, seeds and all to the Midlands to abuse the land there. While Ian Evans' move at Leicester to deputy on the board of directors has left a niche to be filled there. I can't see it lasting myself, not with the lure of the highland games that I've been hearing about. Leicester's World Cup squad of '66 seems to be making all the news. Tim Riley, Owl and ex-Filbert has relinquished his captaincy for the promise of a life in the sun and the booty from his testimonials. He always was more interested in the pitches than the balls. What will Derek Whitehartlane make of that I wonder?

While on the subject did anyone catch the aforementioned on Radio 5 recently, plugging the 'B ... off' tournament on 'listen with mother'? Apparently his next move is to demonstrate his genitalia on 'Play Away'. Most peculiar Mama.

On a final note, take heart those of you whose financial position is as precarious as my hold on sanity. Take a leaf from the Burnley book of football accounting. Despite their plunge from the first division some time ago they still seem able to field a full team at international level - all expenses paid (management only!) Oops I promised not to mention that, still, it'll never pass the editing stage ...

à bientôt

Monsieur Le Rat

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