



# NEWSLETTER

September 1991

Vol 5 No 8

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## Peering at Systematic Biology Research

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Largely in response to the recent changes at the London Natural History Museum, the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology set up a sub-committee during 1990 to enquire into 'systematic biology research'. The sub-committee membership is:

Lord Adrian (Baron) [Cell physiologist]  
 Lord Butterworth (Baron, Life peer) [Lawyer]  
 Earl of Cranbrook [Zoologist]  
 Lord Dainton (Baron, Life peer) [Chemist]  
 Lord Flowers (Baron, Life peer) [Nuclear physicist]  
 Baroness Nicol (Life peeress)  
 Lord Porter of Luddenham  
 Earl of Selborne [involved in agriculture and food research]  
 Lord Taylor of Blackburn  
 Lord Walton of Detchant  
 Lord Whaddon (Baron, Life peer) [?Chemist/  
 Sociologist]

The Clerk to the sub-committee is Dr R H Walters, Committee Office, House of Lords, London SW1A OPW.

Initially the sub-committee requested information from the other national museums, some government bodies and a few societies etc. However, the request for information rapidly spread wider, as can be seen from the publication entitled 'Systematic Biology Research: Written evidence received up to 21st May 1991' (HL Paper 41, ii+202p., London, MHSO, £21.60 net), which contains 87 submissions in addition to eight submissions previously published. This total of 95 submissions was made up of 40

individuals (such as Professors A J Cain, R W J Keay and Ernst Mayr), 27 biological societies and organisations (such as the British Ecological Society, Conchological Society, FENSCORE, Institute of Biology, Polychaete Society, the Royal Society, and the National Federation for Biological Recording), four universities, seven research institutes or councils, two companies (Unilever and SmithKline Beecham), five museums (including the NHM), nine government bodies, and one 'trade union' (the Institute of Professionals, Managers and Specialists).

Although a number of respondents tended to concentrate on the NHM, and others emphasised the aspects that directly concerned them, still the most striking thing about all the evidence presented is the total unanimity underlying the views expressed by the very broad constituency of biological systematics users and providers represented. These views may be summarised as: biological systematics research is vitally important to society but over the past few decades in the UK it has been increasingly undervalued, underfunded and poorly taught, both in absolute terms, and in comparison with practically all our major competitor countries.

However, the sub-committee has now circulated a further letter which states, *inter alia* '... we have received a considerable volume of evidence attesting to the decline of systematic biology research in the United Kingdom; the decline of the teaching of systematic biology in the universities; and the increasing average age of the practitioners. Unfortunately much of the evidence is anecdotal. We have very little in the way of hard facts ...' The letter

is accompanied by a questionnaire of 11 questions, each asking for the relevant figures for 1980, 1985 and 1990. The first four questions ask about funding and expenditure, and the next four are devoted to manpower levels involved in systematics. Question 9 asks about the time students spend studying systematic biology, and question 10 the age distribution of staff teaching systematic biology. This questionnaire has gone to five national museums, 16 local authority/regional museums, nine university museums, two national botanic gardens, two regional botanic gardens, six university botanic gardens, and 35 universities. Questions 2 and 6 ask, *inter alia*, for figures of expenditure and manpower related to 'curation'. The return date for the questionnaire was 14th October 1991.

I believe it is important that members of BCG note the emphasis on the need for 'hard facts', and that the

BCG should be gathering the relevant information on systematic biological research in those museums not covered by the sub-committee survey. Research in this context should be interpreted in its broadest sense and would include biological recording, which is very relevant to systematic biology. We should also be gathering numeric data to support the importance of biological collections, such as number of researcher visits and research loans made.

The part of the questionnaire dealing with expenditure on systematic biology research is enclosed with this newsletter. Would all members ensure that a return is completed for their museum and send it to the address below.

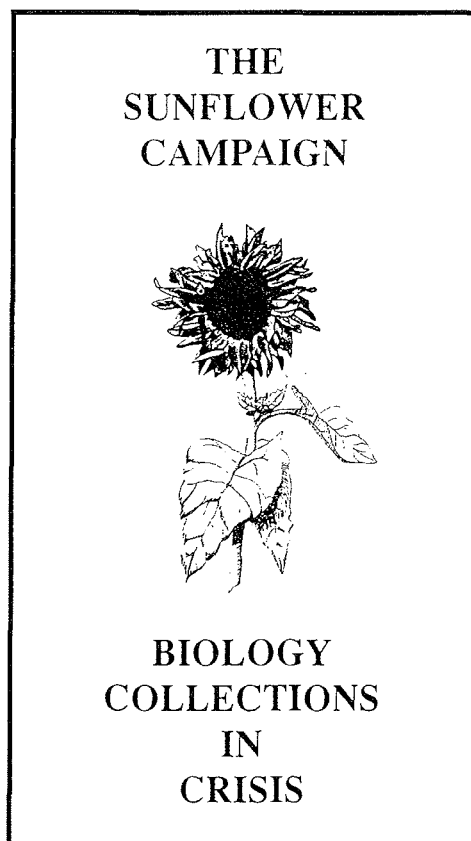
Charles Pettitt

The Manchester Museum, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

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## BCG Campaigns 1991-2

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### Sunflower 2

The revamped Sunflower leaflet is now available to all those in need of sticks with which to beat governing bodies. The sentiments of the leaflet are similar to the original, but there is more reference to our relevance in the 'Green Decade', and suggestions as to what governing bodies and local businesses should do if they want to help. In addition the leaflet has improved illustrations and is printed in two colours (topical green and sunflower yellow - our adjectives so do not ask your printers for them!).

Bundles of about 250 leaflets can be obtained from:  
Alec Coles  
Sunderland Museum and Art Gallery  
Borough Road  
Sunderland  
Tyne and Wear SR1 1PP

Please enclose a cheque for £2.50 to cover postage. Any overseas orders will be invoiced separately, but please note that the content of the leaflet is UK-biased.

Alec Coles  
Tyne and Wear Museum Service  
Sunderland Museum

## Animal Welfare and Museums

Several museums have, in recent years, come under scrutiny from animal rights groups over their use of animals and the display of live animals in particular. BCG has been concerned over this development and, as well as organising the Blackburn seminar on the Educational Role of Live Exhibits, it has produced a leaflet 'Animal Welfare and Museums' to try to alleviate, or at least explain, this highly emotive issue.

Sample copies are enclosed with this Newsletter; more are available from Charles Pettitt at the Manchester Museum, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL.



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## Museums Association

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### Support from unlikely places

It has often been suggested that the Museums Association has been less supportive of the natural sciences in museums than it might have been. In particular, the *Museums Journal* has been criticised for the relative lack of natural science content. This summer has seen the balance redressed to some extent.

The August issue of the *Museums Journal* was a 'green issue', and although this had been planned for some time, it was fortified by a number of subjects that grew out of the BCG AGM, in Liverpool, earlier this year. The *Journal* was part of a process that began with Beetle Down, and has been high on the BCG agenda ever since - self publicity; not on the behalf of individuals, nor even on behalf of BCG, but on behalf of all natural history museums and curators.

To most of us, the argument that 'we have the right policies, but are not presenting them effectively' is tediously familiar, slipping from the mouths of

government spokespersons as election-time approaches. The fact of the matter is that in our case it is true. We are doing quite a lot right, but we do not shout about it enough.

We know that our displays and exhibitions are the most popular in museums, yet we still compete for resources with the arts on grossly inferior terms. We know that, nationwide, our Environmental Records Centres affect the lives of millions through their input into the planning process, yet well-resourced centres are still notable exceptions to a depressing rule. We know that the 1990s are the green decade, yet we are still labelled by some as storehouses of corpses.

Improving the public perception of 'the natural history museum' (including the Natural History Museum) is, of course vital - presumably most of us spend many of our waking hours trying to do just that. The real challenge however, is to convince our administrators of our worth; the councillors heading up Arts strategies *sic*, the university chancellors seeking yet further cuts, the trustees looking for

visitor appeal, and, one has to say it, those museum directors who fail to appreciate the potential of natural science collections and exhibitions.

If we had really won the battle for hearts and minds, why is it, that within two years of the publication of Biological Collections UK, so many biology curation posts are threatened, and even lost? Why have we seen the Natural History Museum emasculated? Why is the Hancock Museum under threat of closure? It is for this reason that our increased profile in the Museums Journal is so important, because although the public will not read it, the people who sit in judgement on our futures, might just. If they read the August Museums Journal, they will find out from Bill Pettit the incredible range of potential uses of their collections. Chris Yeates and Ian Evans describe the importance of environmental recording work, whilst I urge museums to exploit the 'green decade' for their own benefit, as well as that of the environment. In addition there are a number of case histories of display and exhibition initiatives; most importantly in this context, Paul Howard tells how to get 200,000 paying visitors into your museum!

## **The Museums Association Conference, 1991**

There is no harm in reinforcing a good point! To this end, and knowing the contents of the August Journal, I was able to present a motion to the Public Affairs session of the MA Annual Conference, on behalf of BCG and GCG. The eventual wording of the motion was agreed by a small group of members attending conference, and read as follows:

'Given the current and continuing significance of environmental issues, the role of natural science collections in museums as the material evidence of the diversity of the natural world, and as support tools for environmental research and education, conference insists that the current and potential use of natural sciences collections be properly recognised by government, local authorities, museum governing bodies and museum staff, and that their proper care and development must be assured by the provision of adequate resources.'

I am pleased to say that the motion was passed unanimously, and whilst such a motion carries no formal guarantee of action, its importance should not be underestimated. It does at least affirm the support of the whole museums profession for the natural sciences.

The need to educate the wider public about our functions is understood; the need to educate councillors and trustees is recognised through initiatives such as the Sunflower Campaign; we should be mindful of the need to convince other museum professionals lest through their ignorance, and our ineffectiveness, they become the enemy within .....

Alec Coles  
Principal Keeper of Natural Sciences  
Tyne and Wear Museums

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# **FENSCORE**

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## **Collections research - the latest**

The activities of BCG and of the Federation for Natural Sciences Collections Research (FENSCORE) over the last few years have borne fruit in an increasing awareness among policy-makers of the importance of the national resource represented by natural science collections in the UK. Such awareness has been reflected in the recent Museums and Galleries Commission 'natural science incentive funding' made available via Area Museum Councils, and also in grants to FENSCORE for database development.

The national database of collections, compiled from information supplied by the various regional Collection Research Units (CRUS), had been maintained at Manchester Museum since 1980. However, latterly lack of staff time at Manchester severely restricted both the updating and the publicity needed to make potential users aware of this valuable information resource. Therefore, in November 1988, the FENSCORE committee set up a working party 'to examine the feasibility of the Museum Documentation Association (MDA) maintaining, and providing a service from, the FENSCORE national database'. That working party met in February 1989 and agreed that the proposal was feasible, and the FENSCORE committee, at its meeting in June 1989, accepted a detailed set of proposals from the working party. A successful application to the MGC resulted in a grant of £8000 in April 1990, to fund the checking and concordance of the data from three CRUs: the North West,

Yorkshire and Humberside, and Scotland. The work being done includes adding a new field to allow entries to be coded according to the period the collection was assembled. Each decade covered is coded, so that now one can select collections containing 'pre-1850 material', or those with specimens from 1909-1919.

In April 1991 a further MGC grant of £5000 has enabled the South West, South East, and, in part, the North of England data to be processed during the current year. The South East data gathering, including input from the BM(NH) and Kew, is almost complete; the South West CRU expect to complete data gathering by January 1992. A grant of £3000 is being requested to complete the North of England data, and to process the Midlands information; the Midlands *Register of Collections* should be available from November 1991.

As the concordance of the data for each region is completed, it is being copied back to the relevant CRU, who then become responsible for any further updating and editing. Periodically each upgraded regional database will be copied back again to the MDA, where it will replace the previous version in the national database. A security copy of the latest version of the national database will still be held at Manchester Museum.

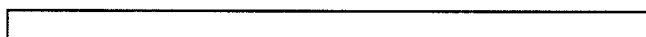
Curators should make use of this information resource, and encourage other workers to do so as well. Search enquiries should be addressed to Kate Jeary. MDA, 347 Cherry Hinton Road, Cambridge CB1 4DH,

Charles Pettitt  
Manchester Museum



## Simon Moore moves to Hampshire

After 23 years of curating at the Natural History Museum Simon Moore has moved to a brand new laboratory at the Hampshire County Museums Service, Winchester, as Conservator of Natural Sciences. He will be available, once again, to answer questions about freeze-drying and fluid preservation of natural history specimens.



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# Committee News

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At the AGM in Liverpool on 5th April 1991 the following Committee was elected (year of election in brackets)

**Chairman** Steve Garland (1987), Bolton Museum, Greater Manchester

**Secretary (Acting)**

Mike Graham (1991), Towneley Hall Museum, Burnley, Lancs.

**Treasurer/Membership Secretary**

Kathie Way (1989), Natural History Museum, London

**Newsletter Editor**

John Mathias (1986), Leicestershire Museums Service, Leicester

**Journal and Special Publications Editor**

Bill Pettitt (1991), Manchester Museum, Greater Manchester

**Education Officer**

Alec Coles (1990), Sunderland Museum, Tyne and Wear

**Committee**

Steve Judd (1990), Liverpool Museum, Merseyside

Ray Barnett (1990), Bristol Museum, Avon

Richard Sutcliffe (1989), Glasgow Museum, Strathclyde

Steve Hewitt (1990), Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, Cumbria

Mark Simmons (1991), North of England Museums Service, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Rosina Down (1991), UCL, London

Steve Maron (1991), Inverness Museum

**Co-opted**

Di Hawkes (GCG Rep)

Geoff Stansfield (Manual of Curatorship)

Subscriptions were raised from 1 January 1992 to £8.00 for individual membership and £15 for institutional membership. (Remember that as a museum professional you should be able to reclaim income tax on your subs.) There has been a 10% increase in membership, due totally to the hard work of Kathie Way.

A number of subjects have occupied the Committee this year.

Some museums have had worrying experiences because of the retrospective granting of wildlife import licences. Confiscated items have been

reclaimed by the illegal importers after the DoE provided licences applied for in retrospect. In one case the items had already been passed to a museum! We are pursuing this with the DoE and Worldwide Fund for Nature.

The idea of a seminar or debate to discuss collection valuation is progressing.

An attempt is being made to collate all the work being achieved as a result of the MGC Natural Science Collections Incentive money allocations. This subject should form part of the 1992 AGM in Carlisle.

The Curatorial Training Course in Sheffield was successfully run again in 1991, several junior Natural History Museum staff were in attendance.

The next issue (1990) of the Journal is going to press soon and a 1991 issue is nearing completion. We hope to catch up with ourselves in 1992!

Unfortunately, the impetus generated by the bird egg seminar at Tring has been temporarily lost due to the double blow of Peter Robinson leaving the RSPB and Clem Fisher's major commitment to her PhD studies. This project - with its ultimate aim to register all bird eggs and collections in the UK - is temporarily suspended, unless someone out there ....

Two BCG members, Peter Davis and Geoff Halfpenny have agreed to participate initially in the MDA Terminology Working Party - although, as yet, we have not heard any reports.

Derek Whiteley is relinquishing his secretarial responsibilities, but is currently looking towards another Beetle Down .... drive and maybe another printing of the beloved leaflet.

Alec Coles has prepared a revamped Sunflower Campaign leaflet. We hope to dispatch one to each member with either this or the next Newsletter. Ideal for refreshing the memories of your Committee, Trustee body, superiors etc etc.

Steve Garland  
Chairman

## **Collections at risk**

Part of BCG's remit is to monitor real or potential problems in the storage or curation of Natural Science collections and more pleasantly to record new staffing initiatives or storage developments. This work is co-

ordinated by the Committee and recent responses by the Chairman and Secretary have been influential in securing natural history posts at Oldham and in the Lancashire Museum Service.

Two North East Museum Services are unhappily under the spotlight at present. The Council of Newcastle University is considering the closure of the Hancock Museum, unless it is shown that there is sufficient support for a fund raising exercise, which will secure the future of the Museum. A further report will go to Council in November and they will consider ways that the Museum can generate additional income next financial year. Whilst at Tyne and Wear the Natural History Section might face a substantial deficit next financial year as a consequence of new funding arrangements.

If you know of any natural history collections or services that are currently neglected or under future threat and require BCG action, please forward the details in confidence to Steve Judd (address below). Good news is also particularly welcome!

Steve Judd, Curator of Entomology, Liverpool Museum, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN

## **Exhibition cases for sale**

Nine display cases from the National Garden Festival Discover Exhibition are available for sale. Their external measurements are:

height 90mm

length 150mm

width 50mm

Six cabinets are 15 mm deep; three are 42 mm deep. All cabinets are made of wood, painted green and are fitted with fluorescent lighting. Cost is about £200 each although any offers will be considered.

Interested parties please contact:

Oisín MacNamara, Higher Education Support for Industry in the North, 24 Claremont Place, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU. Tel: (091) 2226068.

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# BCG SPORT

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## Sexy Secretary in Match of the Day Nuptial flight confirmed

My life in sport. Let's face it, I've been there seen it and done it. 1991 is no exception: from winding up the W(est)indies, to Gazza's 33 second appearance in the cup final; from the world's first 4 1/2 somersault 10 m. dive at the student games to Seagram past the post at Aintree. Rat man was there. So where, I ask myself was I the day that the league (ex-)secretary, Derek Thrice-nightly turned up for his wedding with chairman in tow en route for the Tour de France? Now that I should have seen! Thankfully my photographers are everywhere. Please keep the piccies coming in. Perhaps a repeat of this year's AGM "embarrass a colleague" lecture could be arranged. Thanks for the idea Dr Rotherham!

Back to the main event now: who do we have in the transfer market at present? As I write there seem to be quite a few opportunities around. Does anyone fancy Oldham, Ulster, Ludlow, Roxburgh, Sutherland or even Oxford University? I suspect few of my readership could come up to the standards of the latter but I gather that Oldham are likely to be less fussy. The striker's position there has always been fairly tenuous but this is ridiculous; the last incumbent apparently walked onto the pitch for the first match of the season, immediately received a better offer from the "England Naturals" manager and was back down the tunnel without even touching the ball!

Elsewhere gaps have been filled in the form of World Cup Willie Milne to Peterhead CP from Kendal; Steve 'football' Woolfall, ex Liverpool and BTO (Bachman Turner Overdrive?) man to Chester and the attacking partnership of Steve Toher and Jerry Brown on a short-term free transfer to Sheffield Leps. It would also seem that Adam (son of Billy) Wright has turned his hand to commercial snake breeding (hardly far removed from life with Coventry City Council) and publishing. His first book on boxing appeared recently under the title of "British Sore-eyes".

The recent 'Sports Journal' football special (Aug.) made for interesting reading. The most startling feature being that they actually managed to find 15 players that could string coherent(ish) sentences together for the articles (and even then the Swedes had to help out!). Still, well done one and all. My favourite bits were Bill A. K. A. Alias's piece justifying our existence and the lovely photo of Rosie and the boys at Ipswich, frozen in time since their 1878 FA Cup Victory. Quote of the month however is a toss-up between Ian Evans' parting suggestion that BCG become MEN (More Exercise Needed?) and Tony Tynanwear's query about the possibility of London possessing a league team! And what's all this about sticking your finger in the air? Hancock's final half hour or not, there's no need for vulgarity.

That's all folks. Catch the rag time for the truth about the Players Manual, the forthcoming Spanish Cup and life behind the fish tanks at Burnley. Place an order with your newsagent now!

Your ring of confidence,

Sir Rat



Nuptial flight of Derek Thrice-nightly with best drone in close pursuit

**REMINDER** Sir Rat has looked deep into his purse and to his shock and horror he finds his booze-money is running low. So, if you haven't paid your 1991 sub yet watch out! He will be sending his heavies round soon (rates on back page).

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# Programme

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**29th May 1992**

**BCG AGM meeting in Carlisle**

The general theme will be collections management, with special emphasis on the Museums and Galleries Commission forthcoming publication: Standards in the Museum Care of Biological Collections.

**18th - 20th September 1992**

**The History of Ornithology**

Joint meeting of the British Ornithologists' Union, the Society for the History of Natural History and BCG. To be held at the University of Liverpool, South Liverpool Conference Centre. Details in Newsletter 5(7) or from Clem Fisher, Liverpool Museum.

**1993 BCG AGM**

Invitations have been received from Inverness, Glasgow and Perth - so it should be in Scotland. The theme will be Valuing Collections.

## Coming Events

**27th February 1992 Life After Death.**

A one-day UKIC conference to be held at the Ipswich Museums and Ipswich School, Suffolk.

**10th - 15th May 1992**

**International Symposium on the Preservation and Conservation of Natural History Collections,** Madrid. Details are now available, see Newsletter 5(6) for contacts.

## Taxonomy and Biology of Parasitic Hymenoptera

A week-long residential course at Sheffield University, 5-11 April 1992.

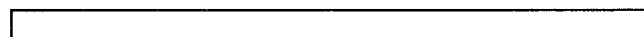
This will be the third in a successful series, initiated in 1989, run jointly by the Natural History Museum, London and the Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield.

The difficulties of identifying Hymenoptera (ants, bees, wasps and sawflies), in particular the parasitic wasps, are well-known to museum entomologists. This course aims to give a broad overview of the

parasitic Hymenoptera, especially their biology and systematics. It comprises an integrated combination of lectures and practicals emphasising identification and techniques. Only a moderate background biological/entomological knowledge is assumed.

The fee for the course is £550 (which covers tuition, the course manual, course notes, accommodation and all meals, except lunches). BCG members are eligible for a discount of 30% and, in addition, some funds are available to subsidise privately-funded participants. For more information please contact Donald Quicke, Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, PO Box 601, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2UQ. Telephone: (0742 768555 ext. 4628. Fax: (0742) 760159.

Dr Mike Fitton  
Natural History Museum



## Biology Curators' Group

**Chairman:** Steve Garland. Bolton Museum, Le Mans Crescent, Bolton BL1 1SE

**Acting Secretary:** Derek Whiteley. Sheffield City Museum, Weston Park, Sheffield S10 2TP

**Treasurer and Membership Secretary:** Kathie Way. Mollusca Section, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD

**Newsletter Editor:** John Mathias, Leicestershire Museums Service, 96 New Walk, Leicester LE1 6TD

**Journal and Special Publications Editor:** Charles Pettitt, Manchester Museum, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

The views expressed in the Newsletter do not represent the opinion or the policy of the Biology Curators' Group committee or membership except where specifically stated.

Contributions should be sent to the Editor, from whom back numbers are available on request.

Subscription rates are £6.00 for individual membership and £10.00 for institutional and overseas membership. Application forms from the Membership Secretary on request.

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