

The Biology Curator

The Publication of the Biology Curator's Group

ISSUE 11

MARCH 1998

Diary Dates

BCG AGM and Seminar

Legal Eagles?: Wildlife Collections and the Law

30 April — 2 May 1998, Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh

Contact: Steve Thompson 01724 843533. See Insert.

Notice of the 1998 AGM

The 1998 AGM will be held at 12.30pm on Thursday 30th April at the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh. Items for the Agenda must be put in writing to the Secretary by 16th April.

Committee would welcome nominations for Committee posts and are particularly interested in someone to co-ordinate campaigns. Nominations for Committee, proposed and Seconded by BCG members, must be put in writing to the Secretary by 16th April.

The minutes of the 1997 AGM were printed in The Biology Curator, Issue 9, July 1997.

BCG News Committee Report

We have had two committee meetings since my last committee report, so this one is going to be rather longer than usual. (Wake up at the back). Attendance continues to be good but I still live in hope of getting the entire committee to a meeting.

The meetings were held on the 28.7.97, with Steve Garland taking the helm once more due to Jane's . . . unavoidable absence, and on the 27.10.97, following the launch of the Collections at Risk Action Packs at the NHM. Not particularly well attended, but with a number of key people there, and reported in the Museums Journal.

Collections monitoring has taken up a good deal of committee time, particularly in the last 18 months or so, with the production of the action packs. However, this is one of our most important roles, and the packs have come out very well. This is not to say that they should be necessarily seen as the final word by any means and your observations are most welcome. We will not be surprised if the next version of these packs comes out noticeably different to this first one.

Our list of museums to worry about is getting ever longer, and includes Bristol, Leicester, Nottingham, Glasgow, Paisley, Inverness, Scotland in general, Lincoln, Portsmouth, Birmingham, Sheffield, Ipswich and the Horniman. Some of these it, should be said, are probably a passing concern for issues such as the refilling of recently vacated posts. Mike is to be thanked for the work he has put into this area.

Contents

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| BCG News..... | 1 |
| News..... | 5 |
| Collections Research..... | 6 |

Deadline: All items for next publication to reach Editors by 8th May 1998.

Orphan collections are still on our agenda, and I have recently met with both Barbara Woroncow and Val Bott regarding options for progress in this area.

Steve Garland continues to promote museums as biological recording centres, and to raise their profile within the drive to establish a national biodiversity network.

Our links with GCG and NSCG continue to be close and, despite a little confusion over the possibility of another joint AGM, we continue to enjoy each others support. BCG also seeks to liaise with other bodies, including UK Systematics Forum over their strategy for systematics research, SMA at the 1997 MA conference, MAGDA (disability forum) at the 1998 MA conference and DoE over licensing for the use of taxidermy specimens, where we gained a major concession for any registered museum that makes use of such material. Our thanks to Jane for getting on to that very promptly, not to say successfully.

Our conference sessions have attracted between forty and sixty people, and Robert Anderson, (BM director), who chaired our last one, was full of praise for it, so we are clearly hitting the right notes there. The 1998 session is to be about the use of museum objects in the future.

Our other meetings continue to be succesful, with attendances of between forty and seventy people. The AGM in Cardiff, jointly with NSCG, went very well and the Vienna trip was fully booked. I believe a jolly good time was had by all. Silly me for not going, but there we are. Future overseas trips are planned for Belfast, Leiden and St. Petersburg, and I don't intend to miss those. The next meeting is to be in Edinburgh, so we expect to see a full complement of curators from the frozen north. See insert in this issue. These meetings all take a great deal of work, and we try to provide the best and most relevant possible events for the membership, so please make every effort to support them.

The August issue of the Museums Journal contained a substantial (cover) article on natural history, and a number of our concerns were aired. We are pleased that we do appear to be raising our profile within the profession. You may rest assured that we will continue to promote this trend. Our web page, currently being created, will no doubt help towards this.

The last edition of The Biology Curator (TBC) came with Paul Brown's special paper on the care of microscope slides, which contained a great deal of useful information. We will be happy to publish similar works should the opportunity arise, so, any offers?

Maggie Reilly has had to stand down from committee, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the recent arrival of another pair of tiny feet. (Congrats to Maggie). John Harrison has come onto committee and we feel very strongly that Scotland should continue to be represented, particularly at the present time. To this end, Shona Allen has agreed to see if the role fits, but, ever flexible, we are hoping to be looking at the practicality of joint representation from Scotland, to ease the burden on any one individual or institution.

As you can see, we are pretty busy, but never too busy to respond to feedback from the membership. Let us have your

comments, ideas, criticisms, letters for TBC, whatever. We hope to see you in Carlisle and Edinburgh.

Steve, the Sec.

BCG Foreign Trips

As you are well aware, the Committee has organised very successful study trips to Europe for the last few years. Future trips are likely to include a return to Leiden in 1999, to look at new developments there, and one to St. Petersburg in 2000.

At present, one for 1998 has not been organised. Suggestions have been Belfast, Spain or Portugal, though the practicability of these has to be investigated. If anyone has any suggestions to make for possible destinations, we would like to hear them, especially if they have connections in the appropriate places.

Steve Thompson

Collections Monitoring Cell News

Collections at Risk Packs

The two *Collections at Risk* packs namely, the *Action Pack for Curators* and the *Information Pack for Museum Governing Bodies*, are now out and available following their launch at the Natural History Museum on 27th October by Professor Steve Blackmore. Contrary to the short note in December's Museums Journal, the packs are available from me on a request basis (address at the end of the section).

The *Curator's Action Pack* contains both direct information aiming to improve the way in which the Group deals with specific cases of collections at risk and also support information designed to assist curators with their ongoing role of collections advocacy. Contents are as follows:

1. *Introduction*
2. *BCG Policy Statement for Safeguarding Collections at Risk*
3. *Checklist for Curators with Collections at Risk*
4. *Outlines of BCG Approaches*
5. *Arguments in Support of Biological Collections*
6. *Prevention is better than Cure*
7. *Useful Contacts*
8. *Useful References*

The *BCG Policy Statement for Safeguarding Collections at Risk* is published further on in this edition of the Newsletter. The *Checklist for Curators with Collections at Risk* provides a listing of the type of information the Cell from curators who feels their collection is either currently at risk or may become at risk in the near future. It also emphasises the importance of early notification and the need for curators to ensure that the Cell is kept informed as the

situation develops. One point I would like to add to this section is the usefulness of receiving copies of any local newspaper reports or AMC newsletter covering collections at risk, so please send in any cuttings you come across.

Outlines of BCG Approaches serves to provide curators with some idea of the ways in which the Cell may proceed once a collection has been reported. The underlying message of this section is for curators not to wait until some form of action is required before contacting the Cell. The *Arguments in Support of Biological Collections* provides a pool of information to assist curators in putting forward the best possible defence of their collections as and when required. This section, however, is by no means complete. I would like to receive suggestions for further *arguments* and also more examples with which to *illustrate* them. *Prevention is better than Cure* highlights the potential causes of collections becoming at risk while emphasising the need for ongoing curatorial advocacy on behalf of collections. The pack also provides a comprehensive listing of useful references and useful contacts including the recently established network of *Regional Collections Monitors*.

It is probably a truism to say that the usefulness of the pack will vary from curator to curator, however, it is the ambition of the pack to become as useful as possible to as many curators as possible. Achieving this ambition requires your help. Its publishing now provides scope for consultation on a wider front. The pack comprises of loose sheets held within a folder making it easy to revamp individual sections or to add completely new ones. Your comments, suggestions and ideas are, therefore essential in strengthening this pack.

The *Information Pack for Museum Governing Bodies* is largely based on the *Action Pack for Curators* and promotes the value, significance and relevance of biology collections to the museums that house them and the organisations that fund them while encouraging museum governing bodies to make better use of the Group's knowledge and experience of the management, care and use of biology collection through greater consultation (long sentence I know). Contents are as follows:

1. *Introduction*
2. *Working with the BCG*
3. *BCG Policy Statement for Safeguarding Collections at Risk*
4. *Arguments in support of biological collections*
5. *Useful Contacts*
6. *Useful References*

As with the *Action Pack for Curators* I would like to hear any comments and suggestions you have for future improvement and inclusion in this Pack.

If you would like copies of either pack or have any comments and suggestions to make on their current and future contents please contact me at *The Natural History Centre, Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN. Tel: 0151 478 4281, Fax: 0151 478 4390, e-mail: mikep@nmgmnhc.demon.co.uk*

New EC Regulation Affecting Taxidermy

By now everyone should have received a letter from Roy Pitt of the Wildlife Licensing and Registration Unit about EC Regulation 338/97. This regulation concerns the use of specimens of certain wildlife species for commercial purposes as detailed in the last *Biology Curator*. Zoos, museums, botanical Gardens and other scientific institutions may apply to the DoE for a one off exemption certificate from this regulation. Thanks to a combined effort of your BCG committee, MGC and the DoE, museums registered with the Museums and Galleries Commission are automatically eligible for a certificate. If you have not received a letter, or have any queries, please contact:

Roy Pitt, Wildlife Licensing and Registration Unit, DoE, Room 821, Tollgate House, Houlton Street, Bristol, BS2 9DJ
Jane Pickering

Policy Statement on Safeguarding Collections at Risk

As part of the *Collections at Risk Initiative* the Committee have formulated a policy statement of the above title. This is included in both Packs, but in order to ensure all members are aware of its existence and content it is also published here now.

Biological collections represent a unique and irreplaceable scientific resource of enormous proven value and unknown future potential. They contain material and information of immense environmental, historical and cultural importance and so provide the basis for a wide and popular range of educational and public services. In recognition of this the Biology Curator's Group is committed to safeguarding these collections for present and future use by both the local and wider communities they serve.

Accordingly, the Group seeks to gain assurances from bodies responsible for the care of biological collections that they:—

- ***acknowledge the unique and irreplaceable nature of biological collection;***
- ***understand their full scientific, environmental, historical and cultural value for providing a wide range of services both for the local community and wider audiences; and***
- ***accept that specialist knowledge, skills and experience are required for their ongoing care, accessibility and effective use by the public.***

The Biology Curators Group, in turn, recognises the financial constraints facing many museum governing bodies and seeks to help provide the best possible solution for these irreplaceable collections within these constraints. In order to achieve this the Group requests that any governing bodies proposing changes that are likely to have impact on biological collections should:—

National Biodiversity Network Seminar

Working Through Local Record Centres

Arranged by the NBN Local Advisory Group and targeted at those running, contributing to, or using Local Record Centres (LRC's). The plans to develop a national network, work already underway and the role of LRC's in Biodiversity Planning and how recorders can get involved will be looked at. There will also be an open discussion session with plenty of opportunity to comment on these proposals and input into future developments.

Contact: Sandra Skipworth, Seminar Organiser, NBN, c/o The Wildlife Trusts, The Green, Witham Park, Waterside South, Lincoln, LN5 7JR

Tel: 01522 544400, Fax: 01522 511616, E.Mail: nbn@wildlife-trusts.compulink.co.uk

- provide the Group with details of the proposals and of plans for their future care and usage;
- allow the Group to submit comments to any relevant body, committee or working party regarding such plans and proposals; and
- keep the Group fully informed as to the ongoing situation.

The Biology Curators Group are always pleased to offer advice on all aspects of the care, use and access of biological collections.

For further information please contact:— (Chair & Secretary contacts given)

The new, improved Collections Monitoring Cell

Since taking on the role of Collections Monitoring Officer in 1993 I have witnessed a marked increase in the Cell's workload. While this is undoubtedly due, in part, to an increase in the number of collections becoming at risk, it is also a reflection of the Cell's ambition to monitor collections more comprehensively and at an earlier stage.

Consequently one of the first needs to be identified as part of the *Collections at Risk Initiative* was to expand the Cell. To this end we have increased the population of the Cell as follows.

Collections Monitoring Officer — The main point for all matters relating to collections at risk. If, for some reason, the Collections Monitoring Officer the Groups Secretary or Chair may serve as back-up contacts.

Two Assistant Collection Monitoring Officers — Responsibility for monitoring delegated collections at risk and providing comment on others.

Fourteen Regional Collection Monitors — Responsible for feeding any local concerns on the well-being of biological collections within their area to the Collections Monitoring Officer, both from within and without the curatorial profession e.g. county nature conservation trusts, local natural history societies and the plethora of other collection user groups. This should not dissuade any curators from contacting the Cell direct.

Volunteers still wanted!

No communication from the Collections Monitoring Cell would be complete without a request for more help. Although the Cell has expanded, the current trio responsible for active monitoring of collections at risk still have their hands more than full. Consequently, I would be grateful to hear from any members who feel they could help out. It is important to remember that by stepping forward you are not letting yourself in for a humungous amount of work. The amount you undertake is entirely up to you — even if you take responsibility for just one collection that is one less for the rest of the Cell to work on and thus allowing more time for dealing with other collections. If you would like to offer your services or find out more, please give me a ring (0151 478 4281).

SEMS University Collections Survey

SEMS Western Region have secured funding to undertake a survey of the collections held by universities and specified colleges in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Hampshire. The aim is to identify existing collections, to assess their importance or significance and to raise awareness of them within the higher education sector. The survey will result in the publication of a 'gazetteer' of collections as well as individual survey reports and key collection management recommendations where appropriate. Kate Arnold-Foster has been contracted to undertake the project which will run from October 1997 to December 1998.

SEMS are keen for specialist assistance from BCG members in the following area:—

- Notification of any collections held at universities or colleges within the Western Region.
- Help with specialist assessments of key collections. Although all collections brought to the project's attention will be surveyed by Kate, there may be cases where she feels that specialist input would be particularly beneficial.
- Providing advice on organising and documenting biology collections for individual organisations.

While there may be some money available for specialist help and documentation work the project's budget is fairly constrained. Accordingly, SEMS are hoping to rely on the goodwill of museum professionals to make the funding stretch as far as possible.

As yet I do not know how far this survey will go towards providing new information beyond that published in *Natural Science Collections in South East Britain*, Bateman, McKenna, and Timberlake (1993), however, any project aiming to increase awareness of collections is worthy of our support.

For further information from *Sophia Mirchandani (Museums Officer)*, SEMS Western Regional Office, Chilcomb House, Chilcomb Lane, Winchester, Hampshire, SO23 8RD. Tel: 10962 844909, Fax: 01962 878439.

Mike Palmer

Collections Monitoring Officer, January 1998

Good news from Scarborough's Wood End Museum from Jane Mee

The collection of over 100,000 items in the natural history collections at the Wood End Museum are to receive funding of £98,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund for storage, documentation and conservation work. The improvements will transform access to these collections, making them available for use, both by the public as well as Museum and Gallery staff working on exhibitions etc. for the first time in over ten years.

Councillor David Thompson, Chair of the Leisure and Amenities Committee, comments: "Natural History is extremely popular with children, making Wood End Museum a popular venue with families. The work on the Natural History Collection is the first step in preparing it for display, use in loans boxes and workshops as well as for reference and research. We are very excited about the potential of this Collection for education and entertainment and are looking forward to involving the local community in the project as it develops over the coming months. The support of the Heritage Lottery Fund will make all the difference."

Jane Mee says that this will include a two year contract for a project manager (natural history curator). She says that the project resulted from a Collection Assessment Survey carried out by Derek Whiteley and Paul Richards at Sheffield; nice one guys!

Bad news from Buckinghamshire

Buckinghamshire County Museums Service is having to slash its curatorial workforce. It seems that most posts will go under savage cuts, including the Natural Sciences post of Nick Gordon and even that of the Director. BCG has been active in Nick's support, and I understand from Nick that there are moves afoot to try to save the biological recording post.

Bad news from Derby

A recently received letter from Nick Moyes at Derby City Museum informs us that his post, Assistant Keeper of Natural History and Records, will be deleted. Nick will probably not be sacked, merely redeployed somewhere else within the Council! There will then only be one post left in the Natural History Department in Derby.

Please keep Mike Palmer informed of any further bad or good news.

Steve Garland, Bolton Museums, Art Gallery & Aquarium

Wolves in Scotland

Does anyone have any information about wolves in Scotland (other than noted in the books by J. E. Hartig and J. Richie)?

I am particularly interested in a wolf killed by Sir E. Cameron in 1680 which was stuffed and was still around in 1818 when it was offered for sale in the disposal of the London Museum.

Please contact: David Mackenzie, 52, Crewys Road Childs Hill, London NW2 2AD

Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust

*Les Augrés Manor, Trinity, Jersey, JE3 5BP,
Channel Islands
Telephone 01534 864666 Fax 01534 865161*

SURVEY OF SKELETAL MATERIAL FROM GORILLAS

In collaboration with colleagues I am carrying out a survey of skeletal material from gorillas in museums and other collections in Europe. This study is a continuation of the research started in London in April 1994, when my wife and I had been evacuated from the war in Rwanda. While the mountain gorilla remains the particular focus of interest, our work has now been extended to include lowland gorillas.

The purpose of this survey is two-fold:

a) to list existing collections of gorilla skeletons and bones with a view to compilation of an inventory of such specimens. In due course it may be possible to catalogue gorilla skeletal remains on a world-wide basis.

b) to describe and diagnose pathological lesions e.g. healed fractures and osteostrophy, in the specimens examined — and thus develop a database of skeletal disease in gorillas, both free-living and captive.

Your collaboration in this work would be welcomed.

Prof. John E. Cooper FRCPATH, FRCVS
Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust

LATEST RESULT, JUST IN!!!

Natural History 1 Social History (Weapons Div.) 0

If you are running a major new national museum dedicated to arms, weapons and war, but are visitorially challenged, what do you do? The answer is to put on a natural science exhibition!! The Royal Armouries in Leeds are showing a Dinosaur exhibition to bring in the public; is there a strange irony here? Maybe natural science collections are good after all; if only museums did not have all those terrible animals, plants and fossils to look after. If dinosaurs can be used to justify the maintenance of a weapons collection, why on earth do we have such a problem justifying the maintenance of natural science collections?

Steve Garland.
Bolton Museum

The Botany Collections of Oldham Museum

The Nield Herbarium

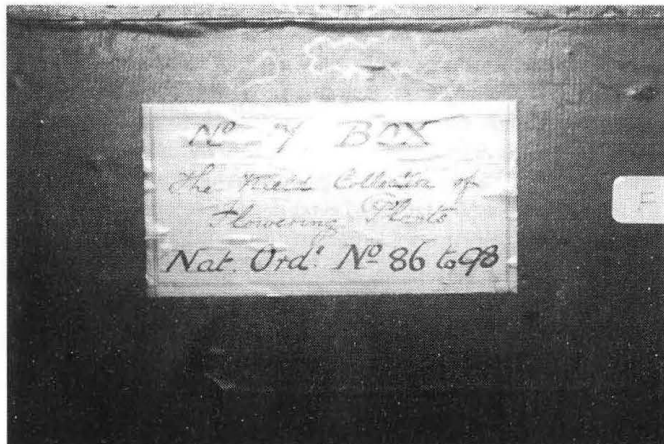
In 1995, Oldham Microscopical Society formally donated a 10,000 specimen strong herbarium to Oldham Museum. Named after a nineteenth century Oldham print worker, James Nield, it contains a fascinating history of the changing face of not only Oldham's flora, but also of other areas of the British Isles. Considerable documentary work has recently been completed on the vascular plants in the collection, and research has been undertaken on the lives of many of the collectors. This article is intended to present a summary of this work and outline future development plans.

Background

Oldham is a metropolitan borough of over 220,000 people situated to the north east of Manchester. A place of little significance 200 years ago, Oldham rapidly became one of the biggest cotton producing towns in the world during the nineteenth century, transforming a moorland, scrub and pastoral landscape into one dominated by smoking mill chimneys and dense terraced housing. It was in this climate of intense change that the study of botany in Oldham became popular amongst the working classes, a phenomenon that can also be seen in the surrounding industrial towns of south Lancashire, such as Rochdale, Bury, Bolton and Ashton under Lyne.

The seeds of growth in the study of botany in Oldham were first sown by a local handloom weaver called John Mellor, who began holding Sunday botanical meetings in pubs in the 1770's with fellow artisans such as James Crowther and the Australasian explorer George Caley. The first Oldham Botanical Society was formed in 1775, and this led to the formation of a plethora of more localised societies in the 1800s.

The originator of this herbarium, James Nield, was born in Oldham in 1825. An early advocate for nature conservation, Nield built on the botanical legacy in Oldham by being a founder member of the Oldham Microscopical Society in 1864, a society which still meets regularly today. According



Nield Herbarium Storage Box, Oldham Museum, February 1998. Photo Peter Fox.



Storage of Nield Herbarium, Oldham Museum, February 1998. Photo Peter Fox.

to transcripts from the Oldham Microscopical Society Annual report of 1882, the herbarium began with a donation by James Nield of 900 mounted British plants. This was added to with 300 British plants not represented in the Nield collection, and including a full set of 'Bloxham's Rubi', presented by John Whitehead.

Over 100 of Nield's contemporaries are represented in the Nield Herbarium, and several twentieth century botanists have since added to the collection. Nield appears to have been a reluctant signer of herbarium sheets, making it difficult to be certain which specimens he collected; similar problems were faced when documenting the Nield Geological Collection, also held by Oldham Museum.

Research

The Nield collection was stored in 14 large black rectangular boxes and 37 separate plastic bags. For the sake of convenience each plastic bag was numbered, and each box was given an identity letter. They were stored in Oldham Museum's Natural History stores. Sheets were stored up to 200 deep, and many of the plastic bags were very dirty. This made access very difficult, and potentially very damaging.

The Museum was fortunate to have a small but empty wooden herbarium cabinet which had been acquired from a



Storage of Nield Herbarium, Oldham Museum, February 1998. Photo Peter Fox.

local society a few years ago. Although not air tight, it did allow the most extreme of over packing of plastic bags to be addressed; up to three hundred herbarium sheets were rapidly transferred. Most natural history curators with large collections face a similar problem: what are my documentation priorities? These may be guided by strict adherence to documentation plans, by upcoming exhibitions or perhaps by the enthusiasm of a volunteer. My reasons for choosing to document the Nield Herbarium were three fold; that this valuable collection would seriously decay if left alone for several more years; that it was known to contain many notable specimens, but no-one knew exactly what they were or how to find them; and that I was very familiar with the subject of vascular plants, and would be able to interpret the importance of specimens in the collection.

Simon Hayhow, currently the Keeper of Natural History for Lancashire Museum Service, had already started documentation of the collection in 1989 when he worked at Oldham Museum; he had initiated a storage numbering system and had hand-written a brief synopsis of the contents of each plastic bag and black box. His notes helped enormously in my comprehending the parameters of the work involved, and provided a series of incentives for approaching each new box or bag of sheets.

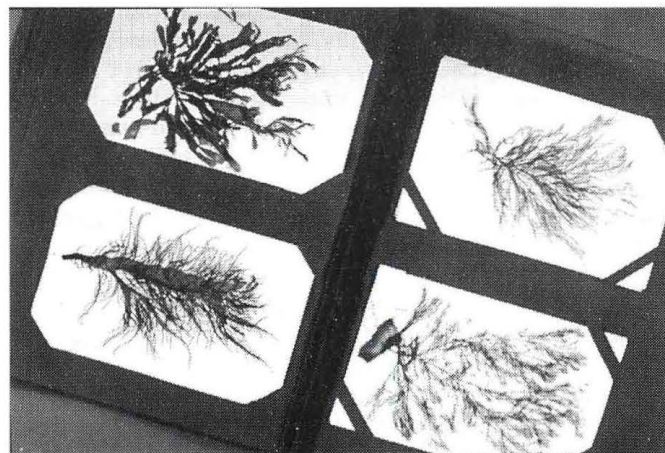
Information from each sheet was entered onto a specially tailored Smartware database. Information on common and Latin names, collector, collection location, collection date, species classification number, specimen location were recorded for every specimen, as well as occasional notes on source of the specimen, UK status of species, rarity value, composition and condition of the specimen, any literature that refers to the specimen or collector biographical detail. The names and classification system used were from the Third Edition of Flora of the British Isles by Clapham, Tutin and Moore, except for the non-British species which have largely been recorded directly from the herbarium sheet without modification.

All the documentation was done in the Museum's Natural History Store onto a lap-top computer. Sheets were recorded systematically as they came out of a bag or box. Although some sheets followed a vague order, often arranged into family groups, it was quite clear that the whole collection had never been properly ordered and that individual collections had been broken up and absorbed into the whole. This lack of order made typing in information considerably more time consuming, as precise spellings of species names were constantly having to be looked up.

Details from over 4400 specimens were computerised. It is difficult to say how long this took as I was doing other work at the same time but the whole process took 4/5 months and at times felt like it would never end. This left no time to document any of the non-vascular plants, particularly the several thousand strong bryophyte collection. There are indications that this may be an even more important collection than that of the vascular plants, but no opportunity has yet arisen to undertake this huge task.

The Vascular Plants of the Nield Herbarium

There are over 4400 sheets of dried vascular plants that include data in the Nield Herbarium, of which around 600 originate from outside the British Isles. In addition, several hundred have no data whatsoever. Using the Clapham, Tutin and Moore system of classification, 132 of the 150 British vascular plant families are represented and approximately 80% of all British species. Although there is no definitive plant list for Oldham, nor for the Greater Manchester area,



Waddington Seaweed Collection, Oldham Museum. Photo Peter Fox.

much of the local species that I know of are represented in the collection.

The earliest recorded date is 1846, and the vast majority of the collection dates from the nineteenth century, particularly between 1870-1890. Plant specimens have been collected from all over the British Isles but Oldham, the Channel Islands, West Cornwall and the Scottish Highlands are particularly well represented. These appear to be the most popular holiday destinations for nineteenth century Lancastrian botanists, and in a paper delivered to the Manchester Botanists' Association in 1875, there is a rather hilarious account of four local botanists' search for the alpine crocus, *Gentiana nivalis*, up Ben Cruban in the Grampians: accounts of their discoveries can be matched with specimens in the herbarium.

There are over two hundred specimens which can be considered to be real treasures. Apart from many species which are considered by Clapham, Tutin and Moore to be very rare today, there are many abnormal plant forms, geographical oddities, unusual aliens, county and British first recordings, and local, county and British extinctions. Highlights include several species lost to the Oldham area, such as *Pseudorchis albida*, *Gentianella pneumanthe*, *Hammarbya paludosa* and *Phegopteris connectilis*; the first recording of *Rubus rhombifolius* and *Rubus podophyllus*, and of the algae *Chara fragifera*, in Britain; the first record of *Circaea alpina* in Derbyshire; the first record of *Ranunculus tripartitus* in Cheshire, a species which may now be extinct in the county; possible Cornish extinctions such as *Filago gallica* and *Oxalis stricta*; possible Cheshire extinctions such as *Pilularia globulifera*; Yorkshire extinctions *Veronica triphyllos* and *Phleum phleoides*; Dorset extinction *Orobanche caryophyllaceae*; and British mainland extinction *Pinguicula alpina*.

In addition to these, there is already evidence that the herbarium contains valuable new site records; a chance conversation with Alan Howell at the Biological Curators Group (BCG) AGM at Bolton in 1995 led me to sending records to the botany section of Societe Jersaise, who wrote back to say they were delighted to be able to add new localities for particular species.

The status of many of these specimens may also change in light of the Atlas 2000 survey run by the British Botanical Society and I await their results with interest. However, if anybody has any comments on the species already mentioned, even if you wish to dispute some of the claims made, I would be happy to hear from you; John Edmondson of Liverpool Museum has already given his advice about the status of the *Rubus* specimens, including help with the wide variety of spelling sub-species' in the nineteenth century and the consequent mis-identifications.

Mosses, Algae, Seaweeds and Fungi in the Nield Herbarium There are up to 5,000 specimens of mosses in the collection, but just a few examples of algae, seaweed and fungi. The collection of mosses mainly come from the collection of John Whitehead, and a ticklist of this was annotated onto a copy of *The London Catalogue of British Mosses and Hepatics* in 1881, with a hand-written list of algae and fungi in the back of the book. This indicates that it is a very comprehensive collection of British cryptophytes,

dating mainly from the mid-nineteenth century, and includes a large contribution from John Nowell. In 1996, a student placement from Oldham Sixth Form College listed a small collection of seaweeds, collected by Oldhamer John Waddington in the mid-nineteenth century.

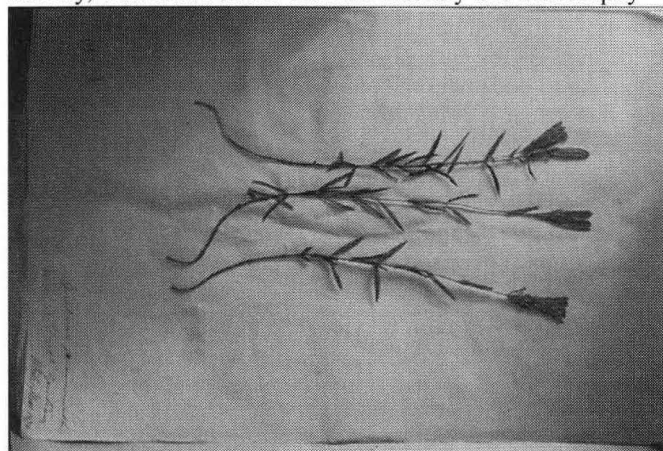
The Collectors

Over 150 collectors have contributed to the Nield Herbarium of Vascular Plants. Some collected only one specimen, others several hundred. The following is a short synopsis of the leading contributors, with place names referring to collection locations rather than biographical origin.

H. Adair (Cumberland), E. Armitage (Herefordshire), F. Arnold Lees (Teesdale), J. Bagnall (Warwickshire), A. Bloxham (Cheshire — *Rubus* sp. 1846), N. Buckley (pre 1857), W. Curnow (Cornwall), M. Dawber (Guernsey — member of Watson Botanical Exchange Club 1886-87), A. E. Ellis (Sussex/Surrey), J. Entwhistle (Surrey), H. D. Geldart (Norfolk), G. Goode (Cambridgeshire), H. Goss (Cambridgeshire), W. J. Hannan (Lancashire/Derbyshire), S. S. Haslehurst (Channel Islands), W. Heathcote (handbook of ferns from the English Midlands), W. Hind (Suffolk), G. A. Holt (Cheshire), J. H. Jenner (Sussex), L. N. Kidd (Oldham/Derbyshire 1940-60), J. C. Melville (Perthshire), J. Nowell (Co. Clare), Rev Painter (Somerset), J. T. Palmer (Manchester), J. Percival (Lancashire/Barmouth/Scotland), J. Piquet (Jersey), J. Richen Briggs (Devon/Cornwall), C. F. Ripley (Lancaster), T. Rogers (Perthshire), R. W. Scully (Co. Kerry), Rev C. Shaw (alien flora of Oldham 1940-60), J. H. A. Stuart (Isle of Wight), J. E. Sunderland (Scotland), Dr. G. Thomson (Wales), Dr. Vigers (Cornwall), M. Ward (Fleetwood), G. Webster (York), J. A. Wheldon (Yorkshire), J. Whitelegg (Cleethorpes), T. Whitelegg (Derbyshire).

Special mention must be made of three particular collectors who contributed the bulk of the collection.

Many Oldhamers consider James Nield (1825-1896) to be the founding father of natural history study in the town. Born in Oldham's Cheapside area, he was the son of a hatter who became a printer and lithographer and town councillor. He was a founding member of the Oldham Microscopical Society, was active in the Oldham Literary and Philosophy



Gentiana pneumanthe White Moss, Oldham 1876
(Nield Herbarium) — Oldham Museum.
Photo Lee Avison, 1977.

Society and became the first President of the United Field Society. Nield discovered a fossil forest on the outskirts of Oldham town centre, was involved in the highly publicised movement of a huge erratic boulder to the entrance of Oldham's first public park, campaigned to save an 'arctic peat bog' in Oldham town centre and was one of the main instigators in the formation of the first Oldham Museum. His initial collection of 900 plants formed the basis of the Nield Herbarium, and he collected specimens from Oldham, the Scottish Highlands, and from around Tal-y-bont in north Wales, where he took up temporary residency. Oldham Museum also houses the Nield Geological Collection, a 1500+ collection of fossils, rocks and minerals. John Whitehead (1832-1896) was a working class man who gained a national reputation for his knowledge of mosses. Born in Dukinfield, Manchester he spent most of his life living around the Oldham area and wrote 'The Flora Ashton-under-Lyne' in 1888. Although he has over 100 specimens from around the British Isles in the vascular plant herbarium, it is his collection of mosses that he is best known for. When he donated his whole herbarium to the Oldham Microscopical Society and Field Club in 1892, the society's president, Mr. Pullinger, declared it to be without rival in the north of England. Whitehead made many muscological discoveries including new British and European records, and three new species to science; *Dicranella schreheri* var. *elata*, *Bryum rufum* and the liverwort *Jungermannia nevicensis* which he found on Ben Nevis in 1875.

John Byrom (dates unknown) contributed at least 720 specimens to the Nield Herbarium. A member of the Oldham Microscopical and Ashton Biological Societies, Byrom travelled extensively in search of botanical treasures. Apart from various Lancastrian localities, Byrom collected from Derbyshire, Cheshire, Cornwall, North Wales, the Grampians, Channel Islands, Norway, Switzerland and the prairies and Rocky Mountains of North America, mostly between 1870 and 1884. He gave a fascinating account of his North American travels in a paper given to Oldham Microscopical Society in 1884.

Herbarium Development

Two of the major problems with the herbarium is storage and the need for remounting. As much as 20% of the collection is composed of loose specimens, due in part to inadequate storage conditions. The Herbarium Handbook recommends that herbarium sheets are stored at the maximum six deep: some of these are stored over 200 deep. The excellent 'Herbarium For Beginners' training day organised by the BCG at Liverpool Museum in 1996 provided excellent advice on how to begin the conservation of the collection but the main barrier is, of course, finance. Several new herbarium cabinets, professional remounting, sheet numbering and systematic sorting must all be aimed for, whilst photographic documentation would be desirable.

To help contextualise the collections with particular regard to local records, detailed study of the herbaria held by Rochdale and Tameside Museum Services would be invaluable, as they are anecdotally known to contain specimens collected by local naturalists from in and around the Oldham area.

It would be desirable to have a representative of all the British vascular plant families. Irresponsible acquisition of wild plants is quite rightly frowned upon today, so a considered, responsible strategy will be needed, and members of the Oldham Microscopical Society have already expressed interest in helping, particularly with some surprising local gaps. If anybody knows of an unwanted collection that contains any of the following family groups, could you please let me know; Paeoniaceae, Aizoaceae, Amaranthaceae, Phytolaccaceae, Simaroubaceae, Vitaceae, Hydrangeaceae, Escalloniaceae, Pittosporaceae, Sarraceniaceae, Moraceae, Juglandaceae, Diapensiaceae, Buddlejaceae, Scheuchzeriaceae, Aponogetonaceae, Pontederiaceae and Typhaceae. Finally, there is considerable work to be done on assessing the importance and potential use of the 500-600 foreign specimens, which mainly come from Switzerland, Norway and the Prairies and Rocky Mountains of North America.

Uses of the Nield Herbarium

One of the major criticisms that I have heard of herbaria is that they are not very interesting to the general public. Having seen how creatively Liverpool Museum displays its herbarium specimens, I have been able to use the Nield Herbarium for a range of uses. In an exhibition about collecting and collectors called the 'People's Show', we used herbarium specimens collected by John Byrom in the prairies of Canada in 1881, alongside an account he gave of his trip there; we displayed a range of orchid species that have disappeared from Oldham to illustrate a section on biodiversity for an exhibition on sustainable development called 'The Rise And Fall Of Billy Small'; plant specimens from the five major wildlife habitats in Oldham were used for the exhibition 'Walk On The Wildside'; photographs and lists taken from the Nield Herbarium were used for 'The Wild Flowers of Oldham' book published last year, and the records proved valuable for researching the book; and plant specimens have also been used for a range of Museum based talks.

Squire Ashton Herbarium

Oldham Museum also possesses a moderately sized herbarium collected by nineteenth century Oldhamer and timber yard owner called Squire Ashton. Comprising of 491 species of vascular plants and 528 species of mosses, it is stored in 14 wooden boxes and dates from 1836-1897. It is made up of British species, with a particularly good collection of local specimens. Although the large majority of sheets are unsigned, it does include examples from James Nield, John Whitehead, James Percival and John Nowell, all of whom can be found represented in the Nield Herbarium. The vascular plants were documented shortly after the Nield Herbarium documentation was completed, but the mosses have yet to be studied in any detail.

Conclusion

This project has allowed the Nield Herbarium to grow in importance as it became more accessible and used. Indeed, there has been a definite correlation between the variety of uses that the herbarium can be put to and the level of documentation achieved. Also, the amount of conservation

work needed to improve the collection, and the storage requirements, have both become much clearer. Although time consuming, this level of documentation has been necessary to ensure the herbarium's future survival and development. If you would like to see the collection, have a full list of the collection, require information to supplement your botanical records or would even like to offer advice, I would be delighted to hear from you. I can be contacted at Oldham Museum, Greaves Street, Oldham, Greater Manchester OL1 1DN. Tel:0161-9114649/Fax:0161-9114669. E-Mail. els.museums@oldham.co.uk

References

1. Flora of the British Isles (Third Edition) by Clapham, Tutin and Moore (1989): Cambridge University Press.
2. The Herbarium Handbook (Revised Edition). Edited by D. Bridson and L. Forman (1992): Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew
3. Oldham Microscopical Society Reports 1884-1907
4. Athene: A Journal of Natural History and Microscopy 1961-1966. Edited by L. Kidd
5. Scientists in Humble Life: The Artisan Naturalists of South Lancashire by J. Percy (date unknown) — article in Manchester Region History Review.
6. Science in the Pub: Artisan Botanists in Early Nineteenth Century Lancashire by A. Secord (1994) — article in British Journal of the History of Science No. 32.
7. A Fortnight on the Grampians in Quest of Alpine Plants — a paper read by James Nield to the Oldham Microscopical Society in 1877.
8. A Botanical Excursion to the Breadalbane Mountains — a paper read by Thomas Rogers to the Manchester Botanists Association in 1875.
9. Oldham Museum: The natural history collections by S. Hayhow — article in Journal of Biological Curation Vol.1 No. 1. 1989.

Bruce Langridge

Exhibition Officer (Natural History)

Zoology Museum Insect Project (ZIP)

Hunterian Collections, University of Glasgow Zoology Museum

In February, 1997, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded £118,000 to the Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, for a curatorial and access project involving insects. The purpose of this new initiative is to create a usable resource from the extensive collections of insects which have been acquired over a period of two hundred years by the University of Glasgow. It will be accessible to all for promoting the understanding and enjoyment of the world of insects.

Background

A brief account of the collections begins with the original bequest of William Hunter (1718-1783), which was the foundation of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. Included with this were five cabinets (totalling 124 drawers) of insects which had been examined by Fabricius (1745-1808) during his residence in England. Fabricius, after Linnaeus probably the most famous of the early taxonomists, described numerous species and the specimens thus identified by him, including numerous types are still present. They are frequently consulted by modern-day systematists.

Two more recent large acquisitions complement this historic material. The large quantity of cabinets and boxes from the Thomas G. Bishop (1846-1922) bequest is very strong in exotic beetles, which he obtained mainly through dealers. At the end of the project the precise value of this collection will be established. It is essentially mid-late C19th and incorporates material from the numerous active naturalists, explorers and scientists of the day. Another local collector, particularly active in field work within the British Isles, was J. J. F. X. King (1855-1933) who left the products of his life-long passion to the University. Again the project will be able to define the true extent of his resource. Added to these major items are a variety of smaller collections and the products of the Zoology students and staff during their projects or research. These latter tend towards the economically important groups such as agricultural pests and disease vectors. Approximately half of the entomological material is already in good quality 'Hills' cabinets. This is a series of British insects (in 420 drawers) and other self-contained elements (160 drawers). In addition there are 200 demonstration drawers that have been built up during several generations of teaching undergraduate courses.

It is the rest of the collections which are in need of re-housing that the curatorial part of this project is to address. Altogether there are estimated to be nearly 1000 miscellaneous media including the ubiquitous cigar box, the far from airtight home-made store box and mixture of styles of old cabinet. The contents of this plethora of containers will be brought together into a hierarchy based on taxonomic sequence with geographical undertones! The level of identification will be variable as there is clearly not enough time within this project to identify each specimen, even if it were possible for one person to have the capability. The next developmental stage in the evolution of the collection from relative obscurity to a significant resource will be to actively seek those who will enhance it. Hopefully this will be achieved through various specialists working on the existing material, adding to it and making recommendations for its improvement as a resource for the future.

The Project

ZIP (Zoology Museum Insect Project) is funded for two years by the Heritage Lottery Fund which provides for the purchase of the specialised storage units to re-house the collection. This will provide a modern retrieval system, and is installed in a dedicated area with study facilities. A Collections Manager has been appointed on a two-year contract to carry out the work which includes appropriate documentation and the development of new museum

displays. The storage system is based mainly on the specifications established by the staff of the Natural History Museum, London. They developed a good relationship with suppliers of cupboards and drawers to their designs and generously allowed other museums to independently order for themselves using these criteria. This is an ideal situation within which collective purchasing power has the potential to significantly reduce unit costs. This applies also to strip or tray inserts for the drawers — card trays, especially, dramatically decrease in unit price as volume increases. The relative ease with which an entire storage system to modern conservation standards has been created is due to the valuable contributions of various collection managers at NHM, particularly Nigel Ferguson, and to Mike Wilson of the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, to whom our grateful thanks are due. The number of drawers purchased is 1000 and new units have been bought with the capacity to house 1120 drawers. It is the case that the existing 780 suitable 'Hills' drawers described above could be re-housed in these new units. Their dimensions are compatible, and should it be desired the entire collections would then be in the one system if funding was to be raised for that purpose.

The Public Face

To ensure the greatest possible user value from the project there are a number of interactive elements. New displays will draw on the collections to illustrate the phenomenal diversity and abundance, if not dominance, of the insects. These will demonstrate several aspects of Thomas Eisner's comment that 'Bugs are not going to inherit the earth — they own it now. So we might as well make peace with the landlord'. Incorporated in this will be on-line access to the database that will be created during the project and other computer interactivities. A particular feature within the public displays will be the incorporation of a study collection dealing with various aspects of insect biology for those who wish to delve further. It is also the intention to maintain some live insect displays within the museum.

It is also intended to develop WWW pages to promote the existence of the resource and highlight its strengths to the world community. Thus the specific content of the collection will be made known and then be available for consultation by visitors to Glasgow or through loans.

For any study involving insects, be it ecological, behavioural or systematic, a collection is a tool of immense value. Although in functioning as a university museum it provides a home for the products of research, at whatever level, it is not a graveyard for projects. Examination of a collection, probably put together for an entirely different purpose, reveals many strange morphological phenomena whose function can only be revealed by studying the living animal. So ZIP will provide a starting point for ideas and be integral to the development of teaching and research, not only within Glasgow University's Division of Environment & Evolutionary Biology but also to the community at large. It is the aim of ZIP to create an asset which will be managed for the future comprehension of the insect world — one that has a profound impact on the ecology of terrestrial life on earth including the human species.

ZIP is managed by Maggie Reilly, curator of zoology, Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery, Geoff Hancock has been appointed Entomology Collections Manager. Patricia Andrew, Scottish Museums Council Assistant Director (Curatorial), is the official Heritage Lottery Monitor. Supporting funding of £17,000 has been received from the University of Glasgow Trust.

Contact address for further information is Zoology Museum, Graham Kerr Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ (Tel: 0141 330 4772; Fax: 0141 330 5971) or email ghancock@museum.gla.ac.uk.

From The Observer

The text of a letter here reproduced, is a tale of such exquisite pathos that it simply demands a wider sharing. Sent from the Antiquities curator of the Smithsonian in Washington to one of the institution's more regular correspondents. It is, we are told, absolutely kosher. Read it, enjoy and reflect on that fine, fine line between tears and laughter.

Dear Sir,

Thank-you for your latest submission to the institution labelled '93211-D, layer seven, next to the clothesline post . . . Hominid skull.' We have given this specimen a careful and detailed examination, and regret to inform you that we disagree with your theory that it represents conclusive proof of the presence of early man in Charleston County two million years ago.

Rather, it appears that what you have found is the head of a Barbie doll, of the variety one of our staff, who has small children, believes to be 'Malibu Barbie.' It is evident that you have given a great deal of thought to the analysis of this specimen, and you may be quite certain that those of us who are familiar with your prior work in the field were loath to come to contradiction with your findings. However, we do feel that there are a number of physical attributes of the specimen which might have tipped you off to its modern origin:

- 1) The material is moulded plastic. Ancient hominid remains are typically fossilised bone.
- 2) The cranial capacity of the specimen is approximately 9 cubic centimetres, well below the threshold of even the earliest identified proto-hominids.
- 3) The dentition pattern evident on the skull is more consistent with the common domesticated dog than it is with the ravenous man-eating Pliocene clams you speculate roamed the wetlands during that time. This latter finding is certainly one of the most intriguing hypotheses you have submitted in your history with this institution, but the evidence seems to weigh rather heavily against it.

Without going into too much detail, let us say that:

- A. The specimen looks like the head of a Barbie doll that a dog has chewed on.
- B. Clams do not have teeth

It is with feelings tinged with melancholy that we must deny your request to have the specimen carbon-dated. This is

partially due to the heavy load on our lab must bear in its normal operation, and partly due to carbon-dating's notorious inaccuracy with recent fossils. To the best of our knowledge, no Barbie dolls were produced prior to 1956 AD, and carbon-dating is likely to produce wildly inaccurate results.

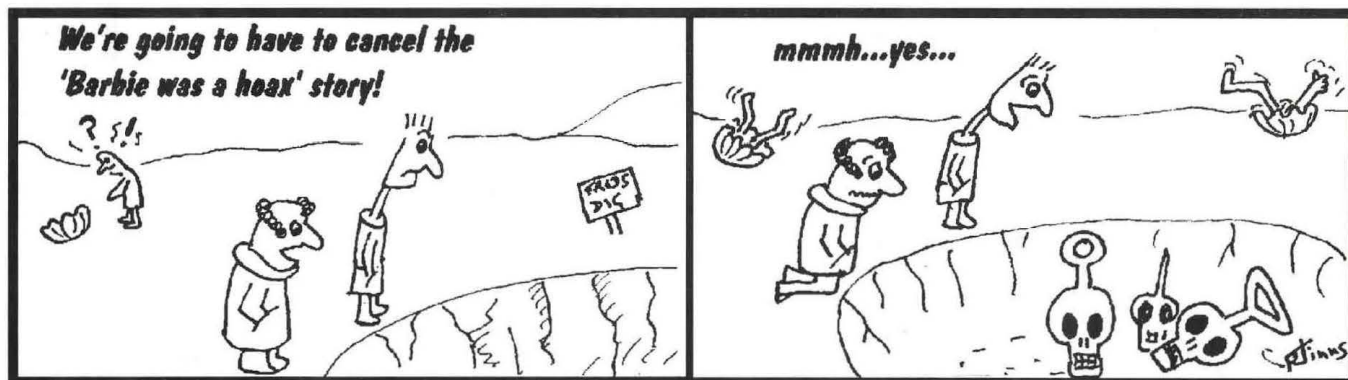
Sadly, we must also deny your request that we approach the National Science Foundation Phylogeny Department with the concept of assigning you specimen the scientific name *Australopithecus spiff-arino*. Speaking personally I for one, fought tenaciously for the acceptance of your proposed taxonomy, but was ultimately voted down because the species name you selected was hyphenated, and did not really sound like it might be Latin.

However, we gladly accept your generous donation of this fascinating specimen to the museum. Whilst it is undoubtedly not a Hominid fossil, it is nonetheless, yet

another riveting example of the great body of work you seem to accumulate here so effortlessly. You should know that our Director has reserved a special shelf in his own office for the display of the specimens you have previously submitted to the Institution, and the entire staff speculates daily on what you will happen upon next in your digs at the site you have discovered in your back-yard.

We eagerly anticipate your trip to our nation's capital that you proposed in your last letter, and several of us are pressing the Director to pay for it. We are particularly interested in hearing you expand on your theories surrounding the trans-positating fillifitation of ferrous ions in a structural matrix that makes the excellent juvenile *Tyrannosaurus Rex* femur you recently discovered take on the deceptive appearance of a rusty 9-mm Sears Craftsman autom otive crescent wrench.

Yours in Science, Harvey Rowe, Curator, Antiquities



The Biology Curator is published and printed by Northern Whig Ltd., Belfast for the Biology Curator's Group.

Editors: Patricia Francis and Kathryn Berry

Contributions should be sent to: The Editors, Biology Curator's Group, Natural History Section, Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, Le Mans Crescent, Bolton BL1 1SE. Tel: 01204 522311 Ext. 2197. Fax: 01204 391352.

E.Mail: bolmg@gn.apc.org. (If possible please send on disc using Word for Windows or ASCII-file with hard copy).

Copy Dates: 8th January, 8th May and 8th September

Chairman: Jane Pickering Tel: 01865 272962

Secretary: Steve Thompson Tel: 01724 843533

Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Kathie Way Tel: 0171 938 8892

Opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the BCG Committee unless stated.

Copyright: The Biology Curator's Group ISBN 1355-8331