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"Curation of Palaeontological Collections" Ed. M. G. Bassett. Special Papers in Palaeontology No. 22 p.187.

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A NEW BIRD DISPLAY AT THE HANCOCK MUSEUM

"Incidentally the cheque is for twenty thousand pounds....." the voice at the other end of the telephone was that of John Sisson, a senior partner in a local firm of chartered accountants. He had been explaining that his aunt, Miss K. M. Hancock, for whose financial affairs he was responsible, had just asked him to send me a little something to help with a project to redisplay her great-great uncle John's collection of birds. "Aunty Kitty" an elderly little lady, now living on the south coast, had recently visited her relations in Newcastle and the Sissons had brought her down to the Museum to see the collection and meet me. I had told her of our plans for the modernisation of the displays and how we had a little money from the University Development Trust to spend on the Bird Room. I knew that the Hancock brothers had not been rich and had no reason for believing that their descendants were otherwise, nor indeed that there were any who had any real interest in their illustrious forbears' activities in natural history - I did not even know of the existence of Aunty Kitty. There is a small wonder then that the size of her gift came as a huge and splendid surprise. The immediate question was what to do next?

At that time a major project was being undertaken in the Geology Room, funded by the University Development Trust with staff provided by the Manpower Services Commission. This had demanded the closure of this room and it was decided therefore, to delay the refitting of the Bird Room until it's neighbour was finished and available to visitors. The Manpower Services Commission looked healthy, with every expectation of a long life, so why rush in and reduce even further the value received for the entrance charge by placing yet another major display area out

of bounds? Events however overtook this decision and rumours began to circulate that government were having second thoughts about the M.S.C. and its programmes.

Smoke implies fire and the decision of October 1976 was reversed two months later. A successful application was made to M.S.C. for more help under the Job Creation Programme. By this time a "close-down" date of September 1977 had been announced for the J.C.P. Two zoology graduates were to provide the raw data to two '3D' designers who would produce working drawings for 4 joiners. The displays would be created by 2 graphic designers. This team of 9 would be supervised by the Curator, and the museum taxidermist would, of course, be a vital member. In hindsight this was a ludicrously small team, but M.S.C. was subsequently reprieved and the day was saved. A S.T.E.P. scheme which began in 1979 numbered 17, comprising 7 joiners, 8 graphic designers, and two zoologists.

Interviews and appointments began in January 1977. By this time a few basic targets and philosophies had been worked out - first let me explain a little of the background.

John Hancock and his brother Albany had been lifelong supporters of the Natural History Society of Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle upon Tyne. John, after his brother's death in 1870, had driven the movement which culminated in the present building. Into it he moved his magnificent collection, all superbly mounted in glass-fronted boxes built to a modular design and stacked on shelves from floor to ceiling. John was one of the first great taxidermists and his collection was slowly increased by subsequent workers employed by the Society. In 1977 there was little room for expansion and no attempt to present anything but a vast series of birds, frequently duplicated, in the main from Europe but with a substantial number from many other parts of the world. For birdwatchers in the region, the Hancock was a Mecca where field-notes made at the thrilling sighting of a new rarity could be compared, not against a myriad of pictures, but against the real thing - this a role of the museum. It was determined therefore, that this facility should be preserved and the gallery level of the room should present a straightforward no-nonsense systematic series of European birds in as many different plumage stages, sexes and ages as was possible, with tidy labels which gave a precis of the kind of information to be found in, for example, a field guide. Birds are, in addition to ticks on a bird-watcher's list, beautiful, fascinating and often medodious creatures which have exploited almost every corner of the globe.

The rest of the area available was to present "essence of bird"; and at a very early stage, ideas were being drawn together and lists of 'topics' prepared. Although presentation within a topic would be sensibly logical, no attempt would be made to relate one topic to another in a strictly didactic sequence. In this way the un-committed visitor could "bounce"

around areas full of interest until they were fixed by one and then perhaps by another - and another - and so on. The alternative, a logical text book maze could easily bewilder and depress them. Displays called 'birds and man' would include an introduction to bird-watching and bird identification, somehow we would try and relate this physically to the systematic panorama on the gallery (first floor) level.

The field was enormous, the space inadequate, and the room barn-like. An architect was commissioned to suggest ways of increasing the available floor-space, retaining the 'airiness' - and providing additional storage rooms. His solution was to build a 20ft. mezzanine 'shelf' at each end of the room, connected with the ground floor by a circular steel staircase and with the gallery level by orthodox timber steps. Supported by four concrete-block walls, this arrangement provided two store-rooms, a small a/v theatre and 5 new separate display 'alleys' each about 10' wide. All these major structures and the completely new electrical installation were done by teams of previously unemployed young people, provided with supervisors by Community Industry, backed by funds from local and central government.

Into these 'alleys' and into new fittings in the central area between the shelves, the 'topics' were slotted.

At the time of going to press, Phase 1 (1st floor - 'Birds of Europe') is virtually complete, Phase 2. (ground floor) is about 75% complete and Phase 3. (mezzanines) is about 50% complete. Major display structures will be completed (hopefully) by the end of 1979. An application will have been made to M. S. C. for a short extension to ensure completion. After this, a part of the 'Aunty Kitty Hancock' gift remains to ensure that sometime in 1980 some birdy notable will be able to reveal, again, to an astonished public, the beauty that is bird.

T. Tynan
Curator
The Hancock Museum

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COLLECTION SURVEY IN CANADA

Following a short note I sent to Antenna (the Bulletin of the Royal Entomological Society of London) which mentioned the North West Collection Research Unit's work on collections and collectors, I received a letter from Dr. H. V. Danks of Ontario. This was to point out that the Secretariat of the Biological Survey of the Insects of Canada had been commissioned by the Canadian Government to carry