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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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We hope for records of various ferns and other plants as a result. So far we have resisted a field by field survey, although we did undertake a pilot survey of one 10 km. square to test such a scheme. This is because at present we feel it is best to concentrate on areas of greatest need.

In planning our surveys we have had much help on techniques from various members of the N. C. C. and it is quite clear that methods are becoming increasingly sophisticated. A recent survey of Norfolk woodlands, for instance, was a model of its kind. We do not expect to match their expertise but by keeping abreast of these developments we can at least take them into account and use them where practical.

Norfolk is not, of course, unique in being involved in activities of this kind. Museums in many parts of the country are engaged in such work yet before the war this would have been considered unusual. It is perhaps an area of our work which has changed more than most.

Peter W. Lambley

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#### WOULD YOU BELIEVE IT ?

No doubt there are many of you who anticipate with pleasure the chance to read an account of how in 1856 Rear Admiral Sir Marmalade Brittlethrop, R.N. (retired and deceased), brought back the first specimen of Pavolv's Dribbling Shrew (Sorex slobberychops) into this country. That the specimen was a stowaway in an erotic West African gourd is no discredit to Brittlethrop. (His collection of erotic gourds in another matter).

The shrew was found by Brittlethrop's butler who, being an intelligent and good-natured fellow, fed it to his cat. Unfortunately the cat was sleeping at the time and the shrew, upon hearing a dinner bell, proceeded to eat most of the cat's nose. This proved too much for the butler who gently stamped it to death and took the specimen to the museum. The curator at that time was not a taxidermist, nor was he studying for the Museums Diploma, so the shrew was put on display without preparation. After a few days' hectic visiting (you know how it is), the public lost interest in the exhibit and no more seems to be recorded about the shrew itself. However, a few weeks later, several blue bottles (Calliphora sp.) were found flying around inside the showcase. One of these was pinned and placed in the General and Municipal Insects Cabinet, where it lay as the only material evidence of Brittlethrop's shrew.

Then in 1938 a Norwich teacher was giving her class a pre-war lesson on 'Death and Decay'. The schools loan service was only able to offer her a bluebottle by way of visual aids. In the 'Loans Out' book is an entry which reads 'One bluebottle fly from Dribbling (possibly near Shrewsbury)' etc. For some reason the museum did not consider it worthwhile to keep a 'Loans Returned' book. We do not know, therefore, whether the specimen ever came back, but in the collections at present there is only one bluebottle which appears to have been passed around a class of eight year-olds. That was accessed in 1978, as the result of a public health enquiry concerning a foreign body in a slice of spam.

To all of you who were not looking forward to the story of Brittlethrop's shrew, I really am most awfully sorry. But, you know, one has to keep to some sort of format for these B. C. G. articles; and what with recent issues being full of wombats, unpronounceable molluscs and GOS (I suppose they mean goshawks), I felt that the editor would be quite miserable without some ... some HUMAN INTEREST for this East Anglian special. Really I wanted to write about packing biological material for the post, you know - cross pinning insects, what to do about air holes for venomous snakes - all that sort of useful stuff which we poor assistant keepers have to find out for ourselves. But Keeper says he's going to write some esoteric account of the herbarium collections in Norwich. Which means he'll write down some names from the accession registers, then look them up in that fat green book he keeps on his desk, you know - a 'Dictionary of British Botanists and Horticulturalists and Irish Florists and Poets'. I suppose I could do the same for the insect collections, but we can't afford Pam Gilbert's 'Dictionary of the Bibliographies of Obituaries of Deceased and Dying Entomologists and Irish Poets'. So I would have to struggle through mountains of obscure correspondence between all manner of men and Bishops, half of whom can't write and some of whom write in two different directions on one side of the paper! And even then, I've only spotted the word 'moth' four times, while I now have a complete account of the curate's back troubles and several essays on whether or not Britain will enter the war. WHAT IS THE POINT OF IT ALL?

I know several, if not all, of you are thinking "That's just the sort of defeatist negativity we come to expect from an Irishman living in East Anglia". Well, it's no joke living so close to all these cruise missiles at this time. Can you imagine what it's like doing fieldwork here? One moment, I'm delicately plucking spring flies off the blackthorn blossom, and the next, some 40 ft. (sorry, 12.192147m) alloy monster full of plutonium crashes through the hedge - and my net! Well, they do fly quite low.

Anyway I've already written an article about the insect collections in Norwich (Antenna, vol. 2, p. 73), so those of you who are really interested will already have seen it. Next issue I'll try and jot down some thoughts about posting biological material. (How many of you are still packing specimens in polystyrene?). Incidentally, the bit about the spam is true and Norwich Museum did receive a shrew a few years back - perfectly preserved in a bottle of Guinness, but I couldn't write an article about that - you just wouldn't believe it!

Tony Irwin  
Norwich Castle Museum