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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: How scientific collections lost out? Comments on the proposed abolition of Metropolitan counties

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Have scientific collections lost out?

Comments on the proposed abolition of Metropolitan counties.

In order to keep members informed, this is a summary of the statement prepared by a BCG/GCG working party. This was done in the knowledge that while effective lobbying on the behalf of the arts was being carried out, little comment on the affect this legislation may have on the scientific collections has been forthcoming. Indeed, the paper "The Government's proposals for the Arts" (note title) which was the basis of any development, omitted mention of such collections. The presentation of the facts regarding the total range of holdings and services provided by museums in Metropolitan counties was seen as a priority. The full report has been sent to the ministers responsible, the Office of Arts and Libraries, Museums Association, the Commission for Museums and Galleries and other bodies.

Services affected

Four institutions are directly affected - Merseyside, Manchester, Tyne and Wear and the Horniman. Four more disparate types of administration would be very difficult to find. Similarly, staffing levels, size of collections and range of services offered to the public differs. One factor does unite them - they all have a significance beyond that of any one metropolitan district. (Here it should be noted that there are other museums in metropolitan counties currently run by their respective districts, which, by various reasons, are not part of county systems, yet have collections of some significance. These are not mentioned anywhere but undoubtedly will be affected if these proposals are carried through, though precisely how is unpredictable at the moment).

The Government have stated their intention to reassess the block grant provision and the grant-related expenditure for museum services to ensure that District Councils can bear the cost of taking over responsibility. The groups have grave doubts as to whether the reassessment will be sufficient to maintain the existing services. Even if the Districts were to receive enough after reassessment to run the museum services at their existing level, there must be reasonable doubt as to whether they would spend it on museum services in circumstances where priorities may be directed towards housing, social services and education. In Tyne and Wear especially, but also elsewhere, it will involve a high degree of collaboration, which we fear may not be forthcoming.

It appears to the Groups that a large funding gap will emerge, and it seems most unlikely that other neighbouring districts would feel inclined to contribute or that voluntary contributions and other funding sources would make good the deficit.

Bearing in mind the differences in the services offered and the doubts expressed above, the Groups feel that an outline of the services in natural sciences offered by each museum may lead to a better understanding of the problem. These are detailed in the attached paper.

Conclusions

It is the view of the Biology and Geological Curators' Groups that the Metropolitan County Councils and the GLC have provided a sound basis for the funding and administration of museum services with more than local significance.

In Tyne and Wear a series of small museums have been grouped together to form a coherent service. In this way they can share the services of curatorial and conservation staff which, as individual museums, they found difficult to justify. Clearly, as there is a responsibility to safeguard their collections and make them available to the public, the most sensible and cost effective system is through a county-wide service.

The Government has recognised the importance of the Horniman Museum, but to make the museum the responsibility of the trustees of the British Museum, where there is no expertise in natural history, is to disregard the significance of the Horniman's natural history collections. In view of the existence of other museum services in the Greater London Council area it seems sensible that a unified structure should be established for their administration. We therefore commend for serious consideration the recommendation of the Area Museum Service for South East England that a Joint Board for Museums, Arts and Recreation in London be established.

The Merseyside County Museums and the Manchester Museum are two of the country's most outstanding museums and the two Curators' Groups find it astonishing that the consultation paper does not recognise them as of national importance. The size and importance of their collections, together with the nature of the services offered, extend beyond, not only the local authority districts in which they are situated, but beyond the administrative areas of the present Merseyside and Greater Manchester County Councils. Indeed, on a European scale they are two of a small number of institutions recognised by the European Science Foundation¹ as having collections of national importance. Furthermore, the Advisory Board for the Research Councils made it clear in their report² (Recommendation 6) that resources should be made available for their curation. In view of their importance to the nation, it would be quite unfair to give this responsibility to local authorities at district level, and these museums should be recognised as institutions of national importance and receive appropriate central government funding.

The Groups have refrained from making detailed comment on present or future financial provision for a number of reasons. However, we feel that county-wide services should not be administered or financed by a single District and museums such as the Manchester and Merseyside County Museums with national significance, should receive additional funding from Central government. In this context the Museums and Galleries Commission would appear to be the appropriate body to negotiate and channel such funds to the museums concerned.

References

1. Heywood, V. H. and Clark, R. B., eds. (1982). Taxonomy in Europe. Final report of the European Science Research Council's ad hoc group on biological recordings, systematics and taxonomy. North Holland Publishing Company.

2. Smith, E., chairman, (1977). Taxonomy in Britain. Report by the Review Group on Taxonomy set up by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. HMSO.

Biology Curators Group
Geological Curators Group
November, 1983.

(The joint statement then followed with an appendix describing the collections, staffing levels and services provided by the museums in question).

Natural Science Curators' Course

New Course at Leicester

NATURAL SCIENCE CURATORS' COURSE
30 April - 5 May 1984

This one week course will look at the special characteristics of natural science museums and aspects of the practice and collection management in them.

Planned in consultation with the BCG, GCG and with the generous co-operation of Leicestershire Museums, this will provide a refresher course for those concerned with natural science curatorship and be particularly useful for Museums Association Diploma students taking natural science as their special subject.

Course Tutor: Geoff Stansfield
Course Fee : £152 plus accommodation