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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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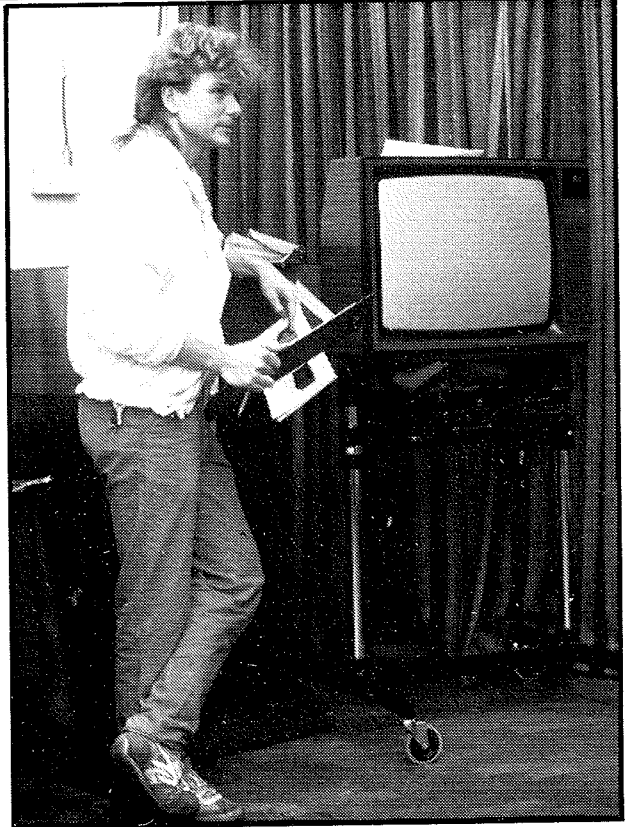
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Our Committee meetings are always very busy and I could not possibly list everything which is under consideration, but major projects in the pipeline include a Manual of Biological Curatorship (probably the most important publication that we shall ever produce), a meeting on live animal displays in museums at Coventry in the autumn, a new membership drive and a 'Beetle Down' campaign as the first phase of a national drive to publicise our services. Couple all of this with the publication this summer of the Bernice Williams Report on Biological Collections in the United Kingdom, and you can see that the Biology Curators' Group will certainly be very busy striving to further the cause of biological services in museums.

I hope that you will all support the Group enthusiastically in the future because a strong BCG (and GCG) is surely a vital step towards achieving the higher status and funding for natural sciences in museums which we all desire.

Steve Garland  
Acting Chairman



AGM 87: Derek Whiteley, organiser of a very successful meeting.

#### Secretary's report

It has been a busy year for the Committee with five meetings since the last AGM: in May, September, November, February and March. Two meetings were held at the British Museum (Natural History) and three at the Department of Zoology, University College London. The Committee is most grateful to these institutions for their hospitality (particularly the latter for generous volumes of tea and biscuits). Meetings now last about four hours.

Penny Wheatcroft (who did not wish to stand for re-election a year ago) continued as a caretaker Secretary until September when she formally resigned the post. Penny has worked hard as Secretary since 1983, and we are all grateful for her energy and enthusiasm. Her involvement with BCG was not always encouraged by the authorities at the BM(NH). We wish her luck and support her campaign to maintain free enquiry and research facilities at the BM(NH) and we draw attention to her trade union's campaign against entry charges.

I have been Acting Secretary since November. The Committee has been represented by Phil Collins at the Museums Association's Specialist Group Meetings, and a very useful dialogue is developing. The appointment of Graeme Farnell as Director General of the MA seems to have created an enlightened active attitude towards the Specialist Groups. Amongst other things the MA have allocated BCG ten free places at this year's conference, and are keen to support our initiative to run a five-day training course for biologists in November.

Peter Davis represented the Group at the 1986 MA Conference in Aberdeen, and gave a very

inspired paper, which has since been published. The committee has also been represented by various members at GCG Committee meetings and Diana Smith reciprocates for GCG at our meetings.

Major issues spawned this year, which will occupy much of our time and energy next year include the 'Bernice Williams Report' - we need to comment on the draft before publication and we must take action on the findings of the Report when it comes out. Also curatorial training, a "watchdog" on the disposal of collections, and collections at risk, and our own "Beetle Down ..." campaign.

Despite the fact that FENSCORE and NFBR are taking leading roles in two fields which BCG has traditionally administered (collections research and biological recording), we are still active in these areas. However we are also spending more time covering other topics such as displays and galleries, live animals and plants, education, enquiries, use of collections and others. Some of these have been neglected by BCG in recent years.

General interest in the Biology Curators Group seems to be on the increase, as today's turnout (75) has demonstrated. We have a hard-working committee, a good membership and I hope we can continue receiving your support during the coming year.

Derek Whiteley  
Acting Secretary

Editor's report

The change in format of the Newsletter initially took a considerable time to organise, at a time when I was heavily involved in exhibition work, and volume 4 part 5 was very late in distribution. Part 6 followed after a more acceptable interval, but I am still behind on the publication schedule; I apologise for this and will try to rectify it in the coming year.

I hope the new style meets with approval from members. The retyping of articles and photo-reduction of typescripts means we are now using space more efficiently, and printing by offset litho gives a much more polished product. The Newsletter is now close to the standard I was hoping to achieve at the beginning of the year and I think it has improved the image of the group both to the public and within the profession.

The changes have not proved expensive. Production costs of the new style Newsletters are significantly less than those of their photocopied predecessors.

It is traditional at this time of year for editors to appeal for copy and I am no exception. Style can be arranged by the editor, but content is very much in the hands of the members. I need contributions from as broad a section of the membership as is possible and as regularly as possible; even single paragraphs are welcome. The production method now used for the Newsletter allows photographs and illustrations to be printed to a high standard and I would particularly appreciate illustrated contributions or illustrations which can be used in their own right.

The leaflets for the proposed Journal of Biological Curation are currently being produced and will be distributed with the next Newsletter. They will be self explanatory when they arrive so there is no need to go into details now. I just want to say that the Journal should be seen in conjunction with the Newsletter and Special Report Series as providing a broad publication base for the Group so that any length or 'weight' (if that is the correct term) of manuscript submitted can be published in the most appropriate format.

The Manual of Curatorship project started with a meeting of the organising sub-committee; an outline now has to be fleshed out so that outside organisations can be approached for grants or sponsorship towards production costs.

John Mathias  
Editor

AGM 87

Report of the Working Party on Natural Sciences Collection Resources (The Bernice Williams Report)

Background

The Working Party on Natural Science Resources began life in June 1981 as the Working Party on Taxonomy under the chairmanship of Janet Chamberlain. It had been convened following papers by Phil Doughty and Geoff Hancock on the state of natural science collections at the 1980 Museums Association Conference, and following promptings from the Museums and Galleries Commission who had asked for various facts on natural science collections in the UK which neither the Museums Association nor BCG had been able to supply. Geologists had the Phil Doughty survey and report to quote; biologists clearly needed a similar in-depth survey.

At its first meeting in June 1981 the appointed group changed its title to 'Working Party on Natural Science Collection Resources' and its aims were reported in the MA Bulletin: to identify all natural science collections in the UK and to seek funds to appoint a specialist to achieve that end; to explore how collections gathered in the process of research could be assimilated into public institutions.

Official indications of progress then seem to dwindle. The Working Party is mentioned in the 1982 MA Yearbook and again in 1983 at which time a new chairman was named, Fred Dunning, and there were one or two changes to the composition of the group.

Dr Bernice Williams was appointed to gather the facts and in 1983 she sent out a substantial questionnaire to all museums and other institutions thought to hold collections. The replies were collated into a draft report and circulated to Working Party members and one or two others something over a year ago.

The BCG Committee for some time has been concerned over the lengthy delay between the deadline for questionnaire receipts (January 1984) and production of the final report - despite the fact that Peter Morgan reviewed its findings at the 1986 Museums Association Conference (reported in Museums Journal vol 86 no 3). The data it contains are now at least three and a half years out of date. Some BCG members have also expressed reservations about certain parts of the report, so a discussion on it was scheduled for the 1987 BCG AGM meeting in Sheffield at which all views could be aired and an initiative to the Chairman of the Working Party could be formulated.

The following is an attempted summary of a very wide-ranging discussion.

## Discussion

Several members had seen the full report or the summary chapter in its draft form; Geoff Hancock was the only member of the Working Party present. The main criticism voiced was that the report contained so much data, albeit fully analysed, that the major considerations tended to get lost in a mountain of detail. It was felt that a short, cogent addendum to the report, or perhaps separately produced back-up papers for the media and scientific press, should be produced for circulation at the same time that the full report is released. It is understood that the published report will be available in limited numbers only, simply because of its size, and that NERC had offered printing facilities.

Concern was expressed that the report was now so late that many entries were out of date (by about three years) and, of course, the longer the report is delayed the greater this problem becomes.

The role of BCG in the instigation of the survey and its involvement in questionnaire formulation and general progress were discussed. It transpired that although BCG had been instrumental in starting the whole process, once NERC became the financing body through the agency of the Museums Association, the Group had been comparatively little involved. Geoff Hancock was the permanent link between the Working Party and the BCG Committee, but he had been called on to do very little; the Working Party had met on three occasions and the content of the questionnaire had been discussed at length. The last Working Party meeting had been some eighteen months previous to this discussion. Since then Geoff had received a copy of the draft report for comment, and had returned it to the National Museum of Wales. It was understood that editorial corrections from all members of the Working Party were now being incorporated into a pre-publication version. Those present hoped that this version would be returned to the Working Party members for approval. It had recently been agreed between the BCG chairman and the Director General of the Museums Association that BCG committee should see this pre-publication version of the report for detailed comment.

A number of members present who had seen the full report expressed severe reservations about some of the statements it contained - for example in the area of pest control, use of insect deterrent chemicals and their effects on people. As these comments were based on the first draft only, which had been of only very limited distribution, it was felt that detailed comment of this kind should be reserved until the next version was available and the BCG had been invited officially to express its views.

One major deficiency of the report seemed to be a lack of any proposals and recommendations resulting from its findings.

It was unclear as to who should be making comments of this kind. Members generally felt that a series of recommendations should form part of the published report, but if this proved not to be the case, then BCG should immediately produce a series of recommendations itself, arising from the data made available in the report. Whichever way this worked, members felt most strongly that recommendations should be made available for presentation to the Museums Association, Museums and Galleries Commission, and individual museum governing bodies.

The following letter was sent to the Chairman of the Working Party on 8th May 1987, putting forward the resolution agreed by all those members present at the discussion in Sheffield.

Dear Mr Dunning,

The Biology Curators Group (BCG) is very concerned that the draft Report on the Natural Science Collection Resources (the 'Bernice Williams Report') includes some comments and conclusions which are highly subjective and probably incorrect.

At our meeting on 4 April the progress of the Report was discussed in open forum and whilst most members welcomed the Report and looked forward to its publication after much discussion the following resolution was carried unanimously by the 28 members present:

'The Biology Curators Group strongly urges the chairman to reconvene the Working Party and that the draft Report is carefully examined and edited by the Working Party; with recommendations added before final publication'.

We hasten to add that we feel the Working Party is well qualified and competent to do this job without interference from BCG.

Generally BCG welcomes the Report and we look forward to its publication and to taking appropriate action on its findings in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Garland  
Chairman

## AGM 88

1988 AGM at Bolton Museum

The committee have two suggestions for subject matter for the next AGM meeting at Bolton Museum: pest control, particularly by non-chemical means or biological publications. The former would, hopefully, break new ground in a complex and rapidly developing area of relevance to us all; the latter would encompass all aspects of museum-based biological publications.

If any members have suggestions for different subjects for the 1988 AGM meeting, or indeed for any other meetings, please let the Chairman know. Otherwise, suggestions (or offers) for speakers on either of the proposed subjects or suggestions for specific topics to be included in the programme should be sent to the Chairman as soon as possible.

Contact: Steve Garland, Bolton Museum,  
Le Mans Crescent, Bolton, BL1 1SE.  
Tel 0204 22311 ext.2211.

## In the Press

The February 1987 ASC NEWSLETTER (vol 15 no 1) features a readable description, department by department, of the American Museum of Natural History which includes the names of curators, the scope of the collections, the main collecting areas and the major named collections; a potted history of the Museum is included. There is also an advertisement for large-chamber freeze-dryers from North Star of Minnesota, suitable for the preparation of museum specimens. The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden (California) is given a similar treatment in the April issue (vol 15 no 2). This is a private non profit-making institution dedicated to the study, preservation and display of Californian plants, founded in 1927. There is a general historical account and a detailed description of the herbarium.

The March 1987 CURATOR (vol 30 no 1) contains a description by Tony Tynan of the Abel's Ark exhibit at the Hancock Museum - a novel and inspirational way of displaying big game heads out of their usual hunting context. In the same issue is a paper describing 'Watrous Trays', a storage system for disarticulated and dissected insects. Essentially, the system allows for the disarticulated bits of an insect to be stored with what remains of the original specimen in its correct taxonomic position in a tray in a standard entomological drawer. The measurements of the tray system quoted are those of the Cornell drawer system, but they can be easily modified for Hills-type or non-standard drawers.

The spring 1987 issue of the JOURNAL OF BIOLOGICAL EDUCATION (vol 21 no 1) carries an interesting description/review of the Charles Darwin memorial at Down House, Downe in Kent - a small museum maintained by the Royal College of Surgeons and not widely known. In the same issue there is a directory of biology-based audio-visual aids suppliers which gives names and addresses of organisations marketing tape-slide presentations, videos, films, posters, models, computer software and other items which may have display potential.

A brief note in HABITAT (vol 23 no 4) gives the news that a complete mapping package for use with the BBC-B microcomputer is now available for species mapping. Up to 2520 species can be handled and the package will produce standard format dot maps; other functions include the production of species lists from individual grid units. Details from Dr A.J.C. Malloch, Dept of Biological Sciences, University of Lancaster, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YQ.

WATSONIA vol 16 (January 1987) includes a brief description of the Bournemouth Natural Science Society, updating the somewhat misleading entry in BRITISH AND IRISH HERBARIA by Kent and Allen (1984). The main collections are named and described in outline and their significance is given. The 'cleaning-up' efforts of an honorary curator in the 1930s or 1940s, who apparently thought no taxon should be represented by more than a single sheet, resulted in the loss of a large number of voucher specimens collected by J.F. Rayner for his SUPPLEMENT TO FREDERICK TOWNSEND'S FLORA OF HAMPSHIRE AND THE ISLE OF WIGHT (1929). I wonder how often that story can be told!

The British Arachnological Society is starting a new spider recording scheme in conjunction with the Biological Records Centre. The organisation is described in BRITISH ARACHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER no 48 (March 1987). New record cards should be available by now. Anyone interested in contributing should contact BRC at Monks Wood for introductory literature and a supply of the new cards.

For anyone redesigning conservation laboratory workspace there is an article in STUDIES IN CONSERVATION (vol 32 no 1) by R.M. Organ on 'An Adaptable Compact Modular Bench' which describes and gives plans for a well thought out, safe (for objects and personnel) but very flexible workbench. As well as work surfaces it allows for small tool storage, temporary object storage, water, air, vacuum and electricity, facilities for removal of solvent vapours and a space for writing reports.

Volume 21 pt 2 of the GLASGOW NATURALIST carries an obituary for Charles Palmar, Keeper of Natural History at Glasgow Museum from 1949 to 1984, who died in 1986.

The BULLETIN OF THE AMATEUR ENTOMOLOGISTS' SOCIETY for February 1987 has as its 'Featured Museum' the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton. This is an excellent review of the history of the museum and includes a list of the major entomological collections it holds.