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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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NEWSLETTER



November 1990

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Natural Sciences Curatorial Course, 1990

The Tutor's View

The decision to run this year's course in association with the Continuing Education Department of Sheffield University provided two main benefits, firstly the services of Bob Toynton who did an excellent job in administering the course as well as teaching on it, secondly the provision of accommodation close to Sheffield Museum (where as usual much of the action took place) in Earnshaw Hall. Although many of the facilities in Earnshaw were much of what might be expected for a hall of residence, the catering proved to be a revelation (vide Thompson and Nicol, 1990).

The twelve students on the course brought with them a variety of experience and opinions, a good mix for the lively discussion sessions. It was particularly pleasing to have two students from overseas, Sandy Gautier from the University of Natal Geology Museum, and Robert Stephens from the University of St John's, Newfoundland. Both had found out about the course late in the day, but managed to find the resources to attend at short notice. There must be a message here - the course is of value to the international museum community, but we need to advertise it well in advance to capitalise on this opportunity.

There can be no doubt that the course was much improved as a result of lessons learned during the pilot course of 1989. The number of museum visits was cut dramatically, and the time gained was used to good effect, giving visiting speakers more time, making longer discussion sessions possible, and

making the social scene a livelier one. Field work sites were chosen close to Sheffield, cutting travelling time and giving more opportunity for students to try out some of the techniques which were demonstrated. I felt the course was much better structured and the quality of handouts had also improved dramatically from 1989.

There can be no doubt that there is still room for improvement; the practical/participation element deserves more emphasis, more student involvement might mean less straight lecturing and note-taking, some demonstrations (especially anything involving computers and video monitors) can only be effectively demonstrated to small numbers at once. However, ... we're getting there.

Like all courses this one had its highlights. For me they were Kate Pontin's refreshing talk on education and the natural sciences, and the visit to Buxton Museum. Dorothy Harding had really gone to a great deal of trouble to make our visit to the Museum not only a very informative one, but a really splendid social evening - thanks to her and to David Sorrell and Mick Stanley.

Finally, my thanks to everyone else who helped on the course, making my task as resident tutor a real pleasure.

Peter Davis (resident course tutor)
The Hancock Museum

The Organisers' View

This course was designed with one main aim: to allow those in Natural Science within museums to gather and to exchange knowledge and experience. The best people to teach are those involved in the day-to-day practise of the subject and therefore the tutors were drawn from within the museum world. A great deal of gratitude is owed to those who volunteered, or were volunteered but gladly agreed to contribute to this course.

The course was structured with great care, though hopefully this manifested itself in smooth-running and sensible progressions rather than contrived juxtapositions of topics. Through the six days over which the course spread, the tasks of the museum curator were traced through a general sequence. After an introduction, this progresses from collection and acquisition, through enquiries, conservation, preparation and identification, recording, storage and display, to the problems of old neglected collections, and finally to the use of objects in education.

For those who would like to spot the deliberate mistakes, identification would have been better before conservation, and education before the objects became too old and neglected. On the other hand some constraints were imposed by the availability of tutors!

Of great importance within the programme was the outdoor work. This took the form of sessions on field techniques in Botany, Geology and Zoology, and the morning of outdoor interpretation.

A secondary aim of the course was to provide an atmosphere conducive to a free exchange of experience. No one person can be an expert in every field of Natural Science and yet in the small museum where there may be only one natural scientist, or with the approach of the diploma exams, the need arises to at least appreciate the scope and some of the basic techniques of areas of the discipline previously a mystery.

To paraphrase an apocryphal proverb: 'ask a question and you may feel a fool for five minutes; don't ask, and you may be a fool for life'. What we tried hard to do was to provide an atmosphere in which no-one would feel foolish even for a moment, and thereby the students could learn what they wanted and needed to know rather than what we thought they might want to know.

The final question has to be 'was the course

worthwhile'. From our perspective, we enjoyed it, and that is usually a good sign. For a less biased answer, questionnaires were sent to those who had attended the course. These are the views that matter, and will be fed into the next course.

Questionnaire replies

These percentages are rather 'blunt', since numbers were deliberately low.

1 How useful did you find the course?

very	100%
OK	0%
not at all	0%

2 Are the course fees (£175)

too low (very good value)?	12%
OK (good value)?	75%
too high (poor value)?	0%

3 How would you rate the accommodation (including food)?

excellent	63%
OK	37%
poor	0%

4 How would you rate the hall facilities (lecture room etc)?

excellent	12%
OK	88%
poor	0%

5 Regarding the course content was there (you may tick more than one):

too much practical?	0%
too little practical?	12%
too much lecturing?	0%
too little lecturing?	0%
too much group discussion?	0%
too little group discussion?	12%
a good balance?	88%

6 Would assignments during the course have been

a good idea?	12%
OK?	50%
a bad idea?	25%

7 Was the course content

too biased towards zoology?	0%
too biased towards geology?	0%
too biased towards botany?	0%
well balanced	100%

8 Should these subject disciplines have been separated into different courses altogether?

yes	0%
no	100%

9 Were the subject areas covered in enough detail?

yes	75%
no	25%

10 Were any subjects unnecessary?

yes	0%
no	100%

11 Are there other areas of Natural History Curatorial training that you would like to have seen included?

yes	63%
no	37%

12 Was the week

too intense?	0%
OK?	100%
too easy going?	0%

Comments on the questionnaire .. from the participants

1 Course content

'I was impressed and relieved that the skills and experience of the course members was recognised and used by the majority of the tutors. I felt that I could ask any question and that the answers would be helpful and not patronising. I really enjoyed the practical sessions and the lectures were good.'

2 From 'Any other comments, criticisms etc?'

'I thoroughly enjoyed the course'
'I think the course gives a lot of food for thought'
'A well organised and interesting week's education'
'Generally, an excellent course'

'A very intensive, well-planned, interesting and beneficial course'

3 There were several suggestions for 'other areas' that the participants would like to have seen included, for sets of printed notes to take away, and for more time for discussion at the end. We will bear those in mind for the next occasion, within the constraints of time and money!

4 And finally, were the subject areas covered in enough detail?

NO 'We only had one week. I don't know if we could have covered it all in a lifetime, therefore the answer is really YES - as much as it could be.'

NO '... a longer course would be useful ... there was little time to dwell in any area, particularly in practical sessions.'

YES 'For the time available.'

YES 'How about a week for Natural History specialists, one for geologists, one on geology for Natural Historians and another on Natural History for Geologists ... only kidding ... it was great to share ideas with some strange rock types.'

.... And from the Organiser

It may be a joke, but wouldn't it be nice if there was time and the finance, and a way of still mixing the groups together!

It is very gratifying to know that we got the balance, intensity and content of the course about right. There is always a need for more, but without increasing the intensity of the course to counter-productive levels, or increasing the length, and therefore the cost, of the course, rendering it unavailable to many who feel they would benefit from attendance, we can only do our best.

And finally

We would like to run this course again in 1991, taking on board the comments from this year, though keeping the length about the same and the price as close to this year as we can. It would be held in April, provisionally 14th to 19th at the University of Sheffield. If you would like further details, please contact Bob Toynton at the Division of Continuing Education, 85 Wilkinson Street, Sheffield, S10 2GJ (telephone 0742 768555 ext 4932) and you will be sent further details as soon as they are available.

Bob Toynton, University of Sheffield and
Paul Richards, Sheffield City Museum (joint organisers)

A Personal View

Dear Diary

Sunday

Arrive 5 pm. Bob Toynton wondering where we've all got to. Brian Meloy takes three attempts to get into his room. Evening meal, very nice. Peter Davies kicks off the course with a talk, snappily entitled 'History, functions, organization and current trends'. Expects us to start thinking. We think we'll conduct the first of our daily in-depth studies of the local relaxing fluids.

Monday

Peter launches into the first full day with collections and acquisitions. Or, how to have a policy which restricts your collecting to your front garden while still being able to collect from everyone else. Leicester then sends round the two Johns (Mathias and Martin) to straighten us out about enquiries, followed by Tony Fletcher, giving us 101 things you never knew you could do with a documentation system. The afternoon consists of two field work options - Tony Fletcher picking plants and John Mathias displaying the 1990 summer collection of sieves, nets and traps or Bob Toynton taking us to a quarry and explaining why hard hats are not going to help when the likely size of a falling rock is of the proportions of a bungalow. Return to be duly impressed by the size of evening meal, after which Bill Ely tells us about recording biologicals and hints at wondrous things occurring at Rotherham Museum.

Tuesday

The day of the preventative conservation hit squad. Paul Richards sniffs and coughs his way through biological conservation and Chris Collins races through the geological side, tells us we're all stupid and the best thing to do is nothing. (At least we've got something right.) Geoff Stansfield informs us (with great authority) that we should keep the windows closed. Lunch attempts to outdo dinner, then we have another afternoon with two field work options. Gaynor Boon demonstrates that the main results of geological site recording are several pieces of soggy paper and bags of powdered rock, while Gerry Firkins and Derek Whiteley show us how not to stand on rare plants while wandering around pooting insects with a butterfly net over your head. Return, to be alarmed by size of dinner. The evening practical sees Derek sticking pins in insects, while claiming he hates killing things. He also produces a bat detector with which we detect Britain's first Daubentons flying common frog.

Wednesday

Sheffield Museum witnesses the merciless destruction of various biological and geological specimens, plus the odd finger and thumb, all in the name of practical experience. After a principally liquid pub lunch, most of us forego MODES in favour of witnessing the demonstration of Revelation Recorder at Rotherham Museum, where they have taken the imaginative step of putting their computer room in a blast furnace. Return, and most of us develop indigestion at the mere thought of another dinner. However, Peter informs us that we might be lucky enough to avoid having to eat anything at all the following day.

Thursday

Today we succeed in teaching our intrepid trouble shooter, Bob Toynton, how to construct a nature trail containing 10,000 points of interest spaced at 10 cm intervals. Unimpressed, he indicates that we may have a little to learn in this area. After an early afternoon trip to play space invaders with the live exhibits at Buxton micrarium, we are shown by Buxton Museum staff how to construct brilliant displays using no money. Later, having forced food and alcohol upon us, they give us a variety of silly objects to identify, having first made up a set of answers almost as dubious as the ones we made up. Afterwards, we feel we should really sample some of Buxton's local relaxing fluids, so we all adjourn to a neighbouring pub.

Friday

Simon Knell gives a talk on old and neglected collections - had we been a little less hung over, we would have pointed out that most of our collections are old and all are neglected. Kate Pontin's talk on education and natural sciences generates considerable discussion. We all agree that education is a Good Thing and what a pity there is so little of it about.

Peter Davies wrapped up the course by asking the question 'why are we curators', and offered us his own noble attitude which was to encourage in people an awareness of their environment. Being truly noble ourselves, we agreed wholeheartedly, and went home.

Coming back down to earth, on reflection we can say that we all took away a great deal from the course. Learning from what were felt to be mistakes in the 1989 course, this year's turned out to be a thoroughly packed but always relaxed week. The speakers were well chosen and the material was presented in a logical order, and we would certainly like to thank again all those who organized and tutored the course

for generously giving their time and efforts. We hope they enjoyed it as much as we did.

(PS A special mention should be made of Derek Whiteley, thanks to whom we need no longer fear genitalia.)

Steven Thompson
Clitheroe Museum
Ann Nicol
Leicestershire Museums Service
(students on the course)

It would be a worthwhile objective to document Museum holdings of species designated as endangered within the EC, though not all these species are at similar risk on a world scale. It is also feasible to 'adopt' a species whose habitat is close at hand, and to gather information on its autecology or reproductive biology. Annex 3 includes such familiar plants as the Horned Poppy, *Glaucium flavum*, the Sea Holly, *Eryngium maritimum* and the Box, *Buxus sempervirens*. Annex 2 contains the Ghost Orchid, *Epipogium aphyllum*, and Annex 1 mentions the Bog Orchid, *Hammarbya paludosa* and Slender Cotton-grass, *Eriophorum gracile*. One could consider mounting a travelling exhibition which contained examples from these lists. The Liverpool Museum's exhibition 'Wildlife, the Law and You' had a successful tour promoting the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.

In the Press

Plants and the proposed EC Habitats Directive

The proposed **Habitats Directive**, a draft of which was published by the European Commission in 1988, is 'potentially one of the most important legal instruments ever written for the conservation of plants'. These are the views of a Plantlife report published by the WWF and the RSPB in April 1990. But what are the implications for Natural History curators?

In the 'Supplementary Annexes' to the proposal for a Habitats Directive, which were published in March of this year, lists are presented of plant and animal species whose habitats are threatened in the European Community (Annex 1, which contains a separate list for the parts of Macaronesia which fall within the EC); of species of animals and plants which are threatened in the Community (Annex 2); and of plants and animals whose exploitation should be subject to a management plan (Annex 3). A list of natural and semi-natural habitats to be protected within the Community forms Annex 4.

The intention in publishing these lists is similar to that pursued by the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which designated 62 plant species as being given special protection. Subsequent reviews have added a further 31 species to this list, some of which feature in the EC lists. If collecting (for whatever purpose) is restricted or forbidden within the EC, specimens already in Museum collections acquire an enhanced value. There ought to be a presumption in favour of encouraging work on these specimens so as to avoid having to take further material from the wild.

These are simply draft proposals; there will be a lengthy period of consultation before legislation is finalised, and (as was the case with the Wildlife and Countryside Act) we can expect pressure groups to respond vigorously in their own defence. One thing is clear: European legislation will provide additional scope for Museum curators to justify projects to conserve and document their collections. Perhaps we should also try to influence the content of this legislation, by making representations to the committee of the European Parliament which is considering these proposals. Is anyone interested in taking this further?

Copies of the Plantlife report (which has the same title as this article) can be obtained from Ian Hepburn at the RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy Beds. SG19 2DL.

John Edmondson
Liverpool Museum

Curator (32:2) has a short piece on an inexpensive apparatus for degreasing skulls - in this case small mammal and bird skulls - by F J Jannett and J G Davies. It describes a boxed unit of 36 cells for the bulk handling of 36 skulls or parts of skulls in degreasing and washing liquids. Due care is taken of the data labels, which is vital with mass handling techniques of similar material like this; the whole apparatus lasts for several dozen applications and costs next to nothing.

In the same issue there is a fascinating paper by Karen Wonders of the Department of Art History, Uppsala University, Sweden, on the progress of taxidermy through various phases of development: