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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Eventually our feasibility study was given the green light and we started to look for sponsorship.

IBM UK Ltd offered to help with computers and the Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund offered to provide up to half the costs. With this help and our own money we moved to the next stage – production.

The team putting the exhibition together grew and with the script finalised we worked out production schedules leading up to the opening day, 27 July.

Months of work are at last producing results – the AV show in the Biodome that introduces the exhibition, the Planet in Peril interactive devices, specimens from giant pandas to butterflies, the Coral Reef display, the reconstruction of dolphins trapped in a net and the touch-screen computer games.

The exhibition offers visitors an opportunity to become better informed about important environmental problems and what can be done to solve them. At the heart of the exhibition is an explanation of how living creatures all over this unique planet contribute to its vital life-support processes. We're confident that 'World In Our Hands' will be a success – come and see it!

*Graham Rotheray, Curator Insects,  
Royal Museum of Scotland. Copied with thanks  
from 'Museum Reporter' No. 26*

### **Training at Leicester**

If the Newsletter is undergoing punctuated equilibrium, perhaps the provision of natural sciences training is the living embodiment of Plate Tectonics? We have seen the subduction of the crusty old MA Diploma, the MTI orogeny and now a northward shift in the British Isles has sent Geoff Stansfield spinning down to the Big Smoke and me to Leicester. Ironically, through all this our BCG/GCG Curatorial Course hotspot, the least institutionalised element in natural sciences training, has remained steadfast. Okay, that's enough of the pretty naff geological analogies but if you will appoint a geologist as Editor!

So how does this affect training at Leicester? That's a good question! As I write this I've hardly got my foot in the door – perhaps it's a bit too early to say. However, changes are already in place which affect the two special subject modules covering the natural sciences. These have now been merged with last year's Science option, a course essentially for those interested in science and technology museums and science centres, taught by Graham Durant of Hunterian Museum and Glasgow Dome of Discovery fame. Strangely, the merger mirrors that taking place in Glasgow Museums hinted at in recent issues of BCG Newsletter.

The new Sciences option will obviously place some constraints on teaching but I'd don't believe natural scientists should be overly concerned. Museum scientists do share a lot in common, particularly in trying to communicate their science to others, and there is much that can be learnt from developments in each discipline – after all the Natural History Museum was one of the first in Britain to adopt science centre technology (but that's another story!). One thing is certain, the Department is not going to produce a new cross-breed of curator – a sort of green techno-scientist; it will continue to supply curators in the traditional museum disciplines. The merger reflects the shortage of scientists wanting to be trained for a career in museums compared to the overwhelming numbers of historians and archaeologists. This is one area that perhaps BCG and GCG should be concerned about; how many of us saw museums as a possible career when we were undergraduates? I know I didn't.

Leicester's strength has always been in allowing curators and others to escape from the frontline of museum work, to examine broader issues, new techniques and developments. I don't see that role changing. Obviously with my background and interests, collections are going to remain the central thrust of training; the next generation of curators must not only be informed about standard techniques but also equipped to deal with neglect and sell the natural sciences to masters who may not be informed of their potential; the ethos of BCG and GCG. That's the aim anyway! The first courses will give equal weight to biology, geology and science but the next few years will

undoubtedly be a period for experimentation and change, to which I hope BCG and its membership will contribute.

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## **Hounded to extinction and beyond?**

A few years ago I wrote a short note in the Newsletter pointing out that the market in rhino horn had placed a value on museum specimens that might warrant more stringent security. The Guardian (16.9.1992) recently reported that thieves had broken into Oslo Museum smashed an elephant skull and taken the tusks. While this may be a freak occurrence it is worth noting that Oslo is no nearer the centre of the ivory trade than Cleethorpes. With the dehorning of rhinos in the wild, a continuing decline in their numbers, military protection for many of those that survive and an implied death sentence for poachers, museum collections which are protected by relatively weak laws may increasingly be seen as a soft option for those desperate to acquire this material.

*Simon Knell*

## **People and Places**

### **Scunthorpe shrinks!**

Scunthorpe Museums Service is the latest in a long list of British museums to be affected by cuts in local government funding. After five years of expansion the Museums Service looks set to shrink back to its former self. Cash shortages have meant that some redundancies were likely but in response the museum staff have left like lemmings – Keeper of Natural Science post is temporarily frozen, Curator (deleted (in effect)), Exhibition Officer (frozen), Conservation Technician (deleted), Museum Assistant (deleted)... the list goes on. Of these posts it is expected that the natural science post will be filled in the new financial year provided the British economy doesn't plummet any further – and who can predict that! The Natural Science Department

remains for the time being the responsibility of Kevin Leahy, the Principal Keeper, with temporary trainee Museum Assistant (Natural Science) Sue Rainton keeping things ticking over. (Now the good news, this important post was advertised in December – Ed)

Peter Davis has been appointed Lecturer in Museum Studies attached to the Department of Archeology at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. A Masters Degree in Museum Studies will be launched next year and there will be a marked increase in the museological content of current undergraduate teaching. If anyone has promotional materials etc that may be of interest to Peter he will make good use of them.

Congratulations to John Mathias who is (as of 21.9.92) Assistant Director of Leicester Museums.

Please note that Jane Mee's correct address is Ludlow Museum, Old Street, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1NW, tel 0584 873857 and not as published in the last newsletter.

Ann Nicol, late graduate trainee in biology at Leicester Museums has been appointed to a one year post at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow working principally on the wet collections and osteological material. Her post was jointly funded by the Scottish Museums Council, the Pilgrim Trust and the D'Oyly Carte Trust.

### **News from Sheffield – from Derek Whiteley**

A combination of poll-capping and financial legacies of the World Student Games has created a desperate financial situation here.

My old post, Assistant Keeper (Zoology) which had existed since the early 1960's has been deleted. Some duties will be taken over by Paul Richards and myself. We are promoting self-service access to collections and operating a basic enquiry service. Many other functions will disappear with the post.

The City Museum and the Natural History Section both have severe income targets. We are resisting the imposition of admission charges, bench charges for access to collections, and meeting targets by lectures, commercial enquiries, consultancy work and mini-blockbusters such as the 'Big Butterfly Show' and the 'Big Rock and