



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Return of the Warrah

Author(s): Not Listed.

Source: Not Listed. (1993). Return of the Warrah. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 6 No 1, 9.*

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1071>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

The new senior curator is Dr Darryl Mead, an industrial historian from the Powerhouse in Sydney. Six posts for science curators grades (i)-(iii) are presently allocated of which five are occupied by existing staff, the former keepers and assistants. The vacant post will be filled once all the dust has settled. The former deputy keeper of natural history, Fred Woodward, has taken early retirement leaving a large gap catering for the marine environment and the phylum Mollusca. As Scotland has a lot of the former and the museum has large collections of the latter this is a loss already being felt.

The Dodo and the Bonfire – A Myth Laid to Rest

The tale of the Oxford dodo is a celebrated museological story concerning, as it does, subjects dear to a curator's heart: ie. the perils of deaccessioning and interfering trustees. The traditional version of the story has it that in 1755, at the annual visit to the Ashmolean Museum of the trustees and Vice-Chancellor, the Museum's stuffed dodo was ordered to be burnt as, in its dilapidated state, it was considered not worth preserving. At some time later, when the specimen was put on the bonfire, a brave curator rushed in and pulled out the head and foot from the flames and the dodo was saved from complete destruction. This story seems to be beloved of lecturers; I heard it most recently twice at a conference in sunny Spain. Although I have often day-dreamed about my heroic predecessor and wondered what the equivalent action today might be, I felt that Oxford University was being unfairly condemned. Therefore it was good to see a more accurate picture published in a paper by the former Librarian of the Ashmolean Library, R.F. Ovenell, in *Archives of Natural History*.

Ovenell suggests that the true story, as far as it is now possible to discern, is not nearly so dramatic. The Vice-Chancellor and the trustees did indeed make their annual visit to the Museum and ordered that decaying specimens be removed from exhibition. The dodo fell into this category and the curators at the time carefully preserved what could be saved. It was not by heroics or a lucky accident that the head and foot survived to be listed in the 1756 catalogue of the zoological specimens. There

is no documentary evidence for a fire; the idea of the fire was introduced during the nineteenth century when the concept that the dodo was destroyed as an act of vandalism took hold.

It is hardly surprising that over the hundred years between the donation of the dodo to the University and the fateful visit in 1755 that the dodo had rotted – we still have considerable difficulty keeping specimens pest-free! Although the head and foot were preserved it was another hundred years before the Oxford dodo became truly immortal in the pages of Alice in Wonderland.

Ovenell, R.F. 1992 'The Tradescant Dodo', *Archives of Natural History* **19** (2): 145-152.

*Jane Pickering, Assistant Curator of Zoology,
University Museum, Oxford.*

Return of the Warrah

Another extinct species, the Warrah or Falkland Island Fox *Dusicyon australis* was the subject of an idiosyncratic piece of writing by Rear Admiral Sir Christopher Layman no less in the MoD Conservation Magazine 'Sanctuary' (no.20, 1991) which has recently been brought to our notice. Having found that the only known mounted specimen of the species was in the Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique "it was then an interesting exercise in bureaucratic manipulation" to get the specimen returned to the Falklands to "John Smith's marvellous museum in my old Falklands home, Britannia House, where (it) clearly ought to be". Really? Apparently the Falklands military mafia came in handy as it "turns up in surprising places and can usually get things done". I bet! Watch out for loan requests accompanied by stun grenades and large gents in red berets. I wonder if MGC registration applies in the Falklands and what environmental conditions are like in Mr Smith's museum? Bet the security's good though!

Proposed BSBI Study Group

Watch out for a note in BSBI News suggesting the formation of a Study Group for the History of the Discovery of the Vascular Flora of the British