



<http://www.natsca.org>

Journal of Biological Curation

Title: Reminiscences of a Museum Assistant (1926-45)

Author(s): Parkin, D.

Source: Parkin, D. (1994). Reminiscences of a Museum Assistant (1926-45). *Journal of Biological Curation*, Volume 1 Number 5, 19 - 27.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1055>

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.

Reminiscences of a Museum Assistant (1926-45)

Doris Parkin,

10 Castle Mount Crescent, Bakewell, Derbyshire DE4 1AT

Preface

In 1982, Steve Garland, Derek Whiteley and myself collectively wrote a series of papers featuring Sheffield City Museums (*Biology Curators Group Newsletter* 3 (2)). Amongst them was an account of the museum's present and former staff and their work, which was inevitably less complete for our predecessors. Fortunately a former museums assistant, Doris Parkin (nee Downend), has now written a sequel to help remedy the situation.

Doris worked at Sheffield City Museum from 1926 to 1945. Thereafter she continued to live in Sheffield until the retirement of her late husband, and their move to Bakewell. Today, Doris is still involved with museums, as a warden at Bakewell Museum, and with the Derbyshire Wildlife Trust as Secretary of the Wye and Upper Derwent Group.

Whilst many of the persons referred to by Doris are largely unknown to present-day curators, the circumstances and pattern of her employment are still of general interest, and a more than parochial reflection of those times.

Tim Riley, Sheffield City Museum

Reminiscences

The date was 20th March, 1926, a Saturday morning, when I entered the portals of Weston Park Museum, Sheffield for an interview for the post of student assistant. I found five other hopeful applicants but, to my delight, I was chosen for the position and asked to commence duties on the following Monday morning. This rather shook me as I was officially still at school. Before returning home, I called in at the school (there was Saturday morning school at Notre Dame High School in those days) - to inform the headmistress of my appointment, and to collect my books and other belongings. After all, the headmistress had suggested I try for the post - although she really hoped I would stay on for Higher School Certificate and go on to University to read Botany. This I would love to have done, but my father was unemployed, and at 16 I thought it was time I was earning to help the family finances. Grants were not so readily forthcoming in those days, and since my father was self-employed he had no unemployment pay at all, and was paying the cost of home and family, including my school fees out of his savings. So, although I left school with a heavy heart, I was walking on air by the time I reached home to announce my good fortune - and the handsome reward of £40 a year.

So began my 20 years connection with the Sheffield Museums. It was all very strange at first. The official staff comprised the Curator - Mr. Elijah Howarth, Assistant Curator - Mr. J.W. Baggaley, and Assistant - Mr. Alfred Walker. I was the shy little schoolgirl launched into this man's world. Mr. Howarth was a benevolent looking gentleman, almost a Father Christmas figure with his white hair and beard. Mr. Baggaley, who was to be my tutor, was kindness itself and most considerate of my shyness. Mr. Walker tried not to be too 'soft' with this girl intruder, but at heart was as kind as Mr. B.

I was soon to discover that Mr. Howarth was to be antagonistic towards me on principle. His opinion of females was that their place was solely in the home. A typical Victorian patriarch - women were, to his way of thinking, incapable of anything but domestic chores. I learned from Mr. Baggaley that he had had several young men to train, but all had failed to satisfy him, as they were more interested in the new-fangled hobby of making 'wireless sets' than in studying zoology. It was his suggestion that a young lady might prove a better appointment, and with some reluctance, Mr. Howarth agreed on the experiment.

I was selected from the six candidates because I had already matriculated and had studied shorthand and typing. This meant that, in between my training in zoology and museum work, I was to be Mr. Howarth's secretary. He was a man of very mixed personality. However, I quickly came to appreciate the quality of his literary talent, but as he had (I learned later), only recently acquired dentures, his speech was not always very articulate, and as he used exceptionally long words which were entirely unknown to me, I was often in great difficulty transcribing my shorthand. This was when Mr. Walker came to my aid. He had been acting as secretary before my advent, and was familiar with the Chief's vocabulary, so that between us we could usually make a reasonably satisfactory transcript of the shorthand. As the typewriter I was using was a rather ancient Monarch and very heavy, this part of the job I did not really enjoy, but was quite prepared to take the rough with the smooth.

The part that I found quite fascinating was the zoology which I was learning, and the mounting and cataloguing of specimens. It was just the right time of year for collecting pond life, and Mr. Baggaley had installed an aquarium in the office where I placed the results of my pond-scratching expeditions. Although I had studied botany at school, and revelled in the subject, zoology was new to me - I did not even know of the development of frogs from spawn to tadpoles and adult frogs, it was all a wonderland to me. Our office windows were at tree height, overlooking a well wooded lane at the back of the Museum, and we could watch the birds among the branches without their being aware of our presence. There I saw my first Greater Spotted Woodpecker - a real thrill.

At one stage, Mr. Baggaley introduced me to the marine collection - many of the specimens had been collected by Dr. Henry Sorby. Mr. Howarth, coming into our office, saw me sketching these specimens. He seemed quite pleased to find me showing so much interest, and proceeded to relate how he had gone with Dr. Sorby in his yacht, to collect these very same specimens. This made me all the more interested in the collection, and in the remarkable

manner in which Dr. Sorby had mounted the specimens into lantern slides, (colour transparencies were unheard of in those days - or even 35mm slides). The slides were mostly of jellyfish, starfish, shrimps, zoophytes and the like, preserved and mounted between two pieces of glass, thin enough to put into a 'magic lantern' as the projector was called. Subsequently, Mr. Baggaley designed a display frame, illuminated from inside, which we used, on special occasions, to show Dr. Sorby's slides.

Later Mr. Baggaley dropped a hint to me that I might take an interest in the geological collection. The fossils on display badly needed re-labelling, the originals, hand-written, having faded badly. I was given this task to do and thus began my love of palaeontology. I found it all so fascinating and would go into the limestone area of Derbyshire finding more fossils, mainly molluscs and corals. By this time I had joined the Sorby Scientific Society of which Mr. Baggaley was Secretary. The Geological Section was particularly strong, and I would go, come rain, hail or shine on their expeditions. I was not only the youngest member of the Society, but often the only female to attend the geological section meetings. Thus began my life-long interest in the Sorby (later to be re-named Sorby Natural History Society).

It was not until some months later I appreciated why Mr. B. had introduced me to the study of palaeontology. Mr. Howarth sent for me and informed me that what was really required on the Museum staff was a geologist, there not having been one since the demise of Mr. Bradshaw in 1917. "But", said Mr. Howarth, "no woman could be a geologist". I meekly answered "But, I have been studying geology", and showed him my folder of notes and drawings on the subject. He was, obviously, not prepared for this response, and dismissed the subject.

At this time, there was no superannuation scheme in the Sheffield Corporation, and Mr. Howarth had reached the ripe old age of 76 and still employed. Part of his unreasonable behaviour was due to his advancing years. Thus, at the September 1927 Committee meeting he was asked to retire, while my position was made secure when I was appointed to the permanent staff.

The following years teemed with interest and I was supremely happy in my post. I soon became accustomed to being handed a closed matchbox by an enquirer, with the information - "it contains something that buzzes, I think it's a hornet!". Almost instinctively, I knew it would be a wood wasp, alias giant sawfly (*Sirex gigas*), or the smaller steel blue sawfly, but these were much less common. On one occasion the Sheffield Housing Manager brought a *Sirex gigas* for identification, with the information that the tenant in a new Council house had reported a gas leak. The plumber, investigating, found this insect, with its head fitting to a small hole in the lead gas-pipe. What had happened was that *Sirex* had hatched from its pupal stage in the pine floor-board, or skirting board, and chewing its way out, came up against the gas-pipe. An insect capable of chewing wood, could easily cope with soft lead, and poor *Sirex* had thus gassed himself. On another occasion a man arrived with one of his fingers bandaged, handed me the inevitable matchbox and said this insect had stung him. I carefully slid open the lid of the box and revealed - *Sirex gigas*. I asked the enquirer whether his finger hurt badly - "Well", he

replied, "not so much now", so I enlightened him with the news that *Sirex*, although a member of the Hymenoptera (wasps, bees and hornets), did not possess stinging properties. We unwrapped the suffering digit - there was no trace of the attack, but the owner assured me that it had stuck "that sting thing" in his finger. "Oh yes", I replied "it took your finger for a piece of wood in which to lay its eggs!". He was not amused!

Another enquirer, a very respectable looking young man, handed me a glass tube which contained about 20 fleas, all hopping madly about. I looked at the young man and hesitated to enlighten him, then I thought perhaps he owns a flea circus! So, I put the usual question "Where did you get them from?" when he explained that he was the manager of a grocery shop, and these insects, in scores or more, were in the cupboard where they stored the wrapping paper. How, or why, they were there, I never discovered.

So many other enquiries came to mind. One dear old gentleman arrived, again with a closed matchbox - this contained a Puss Moth. On opening the box, I told him - "This is a Puss Moth". He looked so incredulously at me, and replied, rather indignantly, "That's no moth - look at its feathers - it's some kind of bird" - and who could say him nay!

One of the most gruesome items, though, was what appeared to be a fossil bivalve. My first reaction was to say just that, but somehow it did not look quite right, so I popped the usual question - "Where did you get it from?", and was rather taken aback by the reply - "From my kidney" - Ugh! How glad I was I had not identified the object as a fossil shell!

Early in 1930 a new Secretary was engaged to relieve me of my clerical duties. Miss Ivy Bower proved very competent and we became great friends, remaining so to this day. (She became Mrs. George Jackson).

At this time we were finding the limitation of exhibition space a grave problem. I was now attending the Sheffield University, (part-time), by the kindness of the then new Professor of Zoology (Professor L.E.S. Eastham), who came over to the Museum, soon after his appointment, to make our acquaintance. Mr. Baggaley explained that, although I was able to undertake plenty of book-learning, and had access to extensive collections of preserved specimens, I did need some practical work and, hopefully, some qualification to impress the Committee with my worth as a Zoological Assistant. The Professor immediately offered to make a place for me with his first year medical students, and I was allowed time off on Wednesday mornings to do the practical work at the University. This eventually led to the institution of a certificated course in Biology, intended mainly for teachings requiring an extra subject, and included botany and zoology. We attended on Tuesday evenings for botany and Saturday mornings for zoology. The class consisted of about 12 students and continued for two years. This fascinated me and I worked hard for my certificate. Professor Eastham was a really wonderful tutor, with a very ready wit, and his lessons were delightful. Also, I enjoyed learning about the biology of flowers and other plants, having become fairly adept at identifying them through the Sorby meetings. Following on these lectures, and mainly through the insistence of members of the Sorby Natural

History Society's Geological Section, Mr. W.H. Wilcockson became tutor of a W.E.A. tutorial class in geology, held at the University. This took care of another evening a week, for the next three years. Also my weekends became fully booked. The geological meetings were not limited to the spring, summer and autumn months but continued through the winter, and I had great difficulty in persuading my parents that, even though it was raining, and threatened to snow, the field meeting would be held.

Until 1934 Mr. Baggaley was Curator of the Museum and Mappin Art Gallery. The Museum collections were fairly static, but there were many travelling exhibitions held in the Art Gallery, and we were often employed, preparing a catalogue for the printers, until quite late in the evening before the opening day. However, after the building of the Graves Art Gallery a Director of Art Galleries was appointed and Mr. Baggaley became Director of Museums.

Because of the importance of Sheffield in the development of the cutlery trade, the cutlery collection was very special and attracted visitors from many parts of the world. This was Mr. Walker's department. He, too, dealt with the Ethnographical collection, also Silver and Ceramics. After I was given charge of the natural history collections, Mr. Baggaley concentrated his interests in Archaeology as well as guiding and advising Mr. Walker and myself in our departments, and, of course, attending to the administration.

In his early days at the Museum, Mr. Howarth had instituted a system of appointments of attendant staff which included various tradesmen. This had continued down the years, so that we had two joiners to attend to any repairs to the woodwork and exhibition cases, also making new cases when room was available for them. There was a printer with a small printing press on which he printed stationery, notices and labels. There was a painter and decorator, a plumber and a picture framer. These men filled in their time on attendant duty, but in addition, there were three 'police' attendants, as they were called. They were not craftsmen and worked 8-hour shifts, undertaking night duty as one of their shifts. Two lady attendants completed the attendant staff, they supervised the two cleaners; altogether a happy group. I thought this arrangement very good, it meant we were almost self-sufficient, and it was rare indeed to call in outside workmen.

However, when the Direct Labour Group was formed by the Socialist Council, our independent arrangement came to an end, and all the maintenance jobs had to be handed over to the various departments of the Corporation. The printer was still allowed to print labels and the joiners to do some odd jobs.

With the continuing over-crowding problems of exhibits at the Museum, we appealed to the Committee for funds for extension, but these were the austerity years of the 1930's, the economic conditions throughout the Country were appalling. Only a fairy godmother could help us, and this arrived in the person of Alderman J.G. Graves, a Sheffield businessman, already a great benefactor to the City. Alderman Graves offered, I think it was £16,000, for a Museum extension. Plans were prepared and the building

commenced. The Museum was extended by two long galleries, an imposing marble-floored entrance hall and two further shorter galleries at the front, with a wide corridor between the front and rear galleries, and lecture room at the end of the corridor. It had been increasingly difficult to conduct parties around the crowded Museum. This was especially so with the classes of school children, quite impossible to maintain the interest of 40 children when only a handful could see the specimens under discussion.

Our lecture room was to have roof-lighting, a large screen and projector which, at that time, took the large 3¹/₄" square slides. Colour photography was unknown, and I spent a lot of time preparing slides which I hand-coloured, in readiness for the great day when the extension would be completed. This was in 1936 and we had the official opening ceremony on 16th April, 1937. This was a grand affair, opened by a V.I.P. - Sir Philip Sassoon. A wonderful buffet had been prepared, and waitresses from the Town Hall, wearing smart uniform and long white gloves, came along to serve. However, Sir Philip had very little time to spare, and we were not a little disappointed when, after unveiling the plaque, (in what we thought was unseemly haste), he rushed off in the official car to catch a plane back to London from Doncaster. He never had a bite of the feast prepared, but the rest of the invited company, committee and staff did justice to the goodies!

We had worked very hard re-labelling, renovating and displaying the exhibits in their new cases. All the silver and Sheffield Plate had been cleaned and polished. The existing cases repolished, and where necessary repaired. The cutlery collection which, heretofore, had been housed in cabinets of drawers, was beautifully displayed in showcases in one of the front galleries. The other front gallery contained the ethnological collection, and the two new galleries at the back housed the ceramics, glass, silver and archaeological exhibits. I had the two old galleries, newly floored and renovated, for the zoology and geology, with part of the corridor between the front and rear galleries, for the mineral collection. Here, too, we exhibited recent acquisitions. Upstairs we had two offices, a very imposing library/Committee room, a workroom and a photographic darkroom. We had, previously, used a converted outside toilet for a darkroom. Mr. Baggaley had his Director's office, Miss Bower and I shared the second office, and Mr. Walker installed himself in the so-called laboratory or workroom. This we were supposed to share, it was provided with workbenches for mounting specimens, etc. However, the benches were usually quite crowded with specimens from Mr. Walker's department being cleaned, restored or catalogued, so I moved a small table into my office and used that for my specimens undergoing treatment.

With the increased exhibition space, I suggested having a live display in the Museum entrance hall and prepared a plan for an aquarium/vivarium which the joiners built for me. This consisted of a wooden frame-work with light oak facings, in which 8 rectangular aquaria tanks were fixed, so that the aquaria appeared like 3-D pictures in the cut-outs of the oak. In these we put frogs, newts, fish, stick-insects, caterpillars and any other live specimens that came along. We had electric aerating pumps in the aquaria and could creep through a small door at one end to attend to the tanks from inside.

One of the attendants (Horace Broad, the painter and decorator) was particularly interested in this and became my assistant keeper of aquaria. He had helped considerably with re-mounting the collection of birds, prior to the opening of the exhibition. Previously, the birds were all mounted on turned wooden stands, very Victorian. Broad and I selected the best specimens and mounted them as far as possible in habitat groups, a vast improvement in appearance and teaching value, although some of the specimens left much to be desired, but funds were too limited for the purchase of replacements. We cleaned the dirty ones, and used hair dye on the faded ones!

Occasionally, specimens of birds would be brought to the Museum by people who had found them in dying condition, or already dead. These we despatched to an old taxidermist living at Deepcar, an amazingly clever taxidermist but unable to read or write, so communication was rather difficult; we had to hope his son would be home to decipher our instructions. (No telephone there, of course).

Having found the aquaria such an attraction, I planned to have a wild flower display. Mr. Baggaley opposed this at first, thinking it would occupy too much time collecting, identifying and keeping the flowers fresh. However, I assured him I was prepared to undertake the work, and started with a small table on which I placed about 2 dozen jars, each containing a different wild flower collected from the neighbourhood. Having seen some displays in other Museums of flowers in all sorts of odd containers, from jam jars to ink or sauce bottles, I was determined to have my specimens in uniform jars, and used rectangular specimen jars of varying sizes, the small flowers in front in small jars, larger ones behind - in rising sizes. The jars tended to get knocked over by over-enthusiastic visitors, and I then designed a special display table with rising shelves. Our collection grew to such proportions that, eventually, the joiners made a double-sided display table, and on one occasion I had 112 different varieties of flowers on display, mostly collected in Dove Dale and the Manifold Valley. Each weekend I was out in the country collecting my specimens, going one evening midweek to find fresh specimens to replace any fading ones. The flower table proved a very popular feature, many visitors arriving regularly, on a Monday afternoon, when they knew fresh flowers would be in place. Always I was careful not to collect any rare flowers, nor did I encourage visitors to bring flowers to the Museum. My modest contributions were sufficient.

Sometimes unusual specimens would come to hand. The wholesale fruiterers in the Sheffield market occasionally informed us of strange stowaways amongst the bananas. We would receive outsize cockroaches, *Gecko* lizards, an occasional snake, several, (at intervals), opossums, some only mouse size, some nearer the size of squirrels, also, a few large *Mygale* spiders, their soft, hairy bodies and long, furry legs giving them a most cuddly appearance. At other times an unusual bird - for an inland region - would arrive, storm-tossed, off its normal course. One such was an immature Puffin which arrived on the afternoon of a *Conversazione*, and became No. 1 live exhibit that evening. Another immature sea-bird to arrive was a Gannet, having a wingspan of more than 5 feet. This was very weak, and I went to the

local fishmonger for suitable food with which to revive it, leaving it with a bowl of water, (and many newspapers), locked up in the Committee room, overnight. By the following morning it was completely revived, and very lively. The Committee room was in a sad state. Mr. Baggaley and I donned gloves, and between us released our captive gannet over the nearby reservoir, hoping it would reach the east coast in good health.

In 1937 the Museums Association instituted a Diploma Course for Museum Assistants, the course to occupy three years, only those assistants having three years experience thus able to obtain the Diploma. I registered for the course with the first batch of students. This entailed attending museums in different parts of the Country to take the various courses. The first one - a general studies - was held in Liverpool Museum. There were about 16 students attending that first course. I found it an interesting experience seeing how other Museums organized their work, and comparing notes with the other students. The second year course, for general natural history, was held in Bristol. By the date of the third year, specializing in zoology, the second World War had broken out. It was October 1939 and the Museum selected was Manchester. What a dismal place Manchester was in the black-out. My accommodation was appalling, and the weather likewise. The course was helpful and interesting but, otherwise, I was glad to return to Sheffield and prepare for the examination the following year.

With the coming of war all our fragile specimens had to be packed away in a safe place. We considered how best to do this and decided to acquire dustbins. We spent several weeks wrapping and packing the glass, china and silver specimens in these dustbins which were then housed in the ducts underneath the galleries.

There was one collection, however, the Blue John vases, which had to be unpacked and put on exhibition. This collection was bequeathed to the Museum by Mr. J.W. Puttrell who had spent his lifetime making a unique collection of this rare mineral, from Castleton in Derbyshire, fashioned into most exquisite chalices and vases. A friend of Mr. Puttrell's came looking for them, and objected, in no uncertain terms, because they were not "on display in one case as the Puttrell Collection, according to his Will". This we did, exhibiting them in a wall-case in the corridor.

A few weeks later, on the night of December 12/13, 1940, the German Luftwaffe made Sheffield their target, and the blitz of incendiaries and high explosive bombs rained over Sheffield for several hours. A landmine fell behind the Museum, the blast destroying most of the glass roof and damaging many of the cases. Of the Mappin Art Gallery, practically only the stone frontage remained intact. The Puttrell collection of Blue John suffered badly, the blast having travelled down the long gallery opposite the wall-case containing the collection. Many of the specimens were shattered, including all the most delicate ones. It was heart-breaking! Although I attempted to re-assemble the pieces, the task was hopeless, Blue John is a soft spa and crumbles to dust with such drastic treatment.

The Museum had to be closed, and the staff - attendant and official -

spent much of the time sweeping up the broken glass, then making temporary repairs to the cases, and restoring any specimens capable of being restored. Once the Museum was tidied up, school classes were able to attend again the blacked-out lecture room, and much of my time was engaged in this work.

Towards the end of 1940 I met the man who was to become my husband. We were engaged in 1941, (he having been mobilised into H.M. Forces in the meantime), and married in July 1942. This meant a complete change of my status in the eyes of the City Fathers. As no married woman was employed by the Council, except on a temporary basis during wartime, I had to resign my position as a permanent employee, and join again in a temporary posting. I must admit to being somewhat angered at this ruling, having devoted sixteen years of energetic service in the department, but rules are rules and I accepted my fate. It seemed a choice between a lonely, though interesting, existence as a spinster museum assistant, or married life with, as it later proved, the joy of constant companionship, a beautiful home and two lovely children, (now grown up with children of their own). So, in August 1945, the war now over, I resigned my post and joined my husband in Scotland until his demobilisation at the end of that year.

However, my interest in the Museum has never waned. I visit the place now, not without some envy at the increased number of staff members, and all the opportunities they have for field work, also chances of improving the display of specimens, and production of scientific publications. The City Treasurer must be much more generous with funds than during my 20 years on the staff.

As the meetings of the Sorby Natural History Society are held in what I regard as 'my lecture room', my link with the Museum has continued for more than 60 years.