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NatSCA News

Title: Natural Sciences Conservation in the UK

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Source: Moore, S. (2003). Natural Sciences Conservation in the UK. *NatSCA News, Issue 1*, 42 - 43.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/349>

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Natural Sciences Conservation in the UK - Simon Moore: Natural Sciences Conservator, Hampshire County Museums

Appraising a conservation specialism can open up so many cans of worms that it frequently just isn't worth the effort! Assessing the quality of work of past conservators who hadn't the technological backup or experience that we all share can skew the perspective even further.

Of all the heritage-based conservation disciplines, natural sciences has always been near or at the bottom of the heap. We may have read articles about 'stuffed animals' in the *Sunday Times* (11th May, 1997) by John Harlow who pointed out that taxidermy might be seen as being 'non-PC' by HLF advisers. Two articles on the subject have also appeared in *Museums Association Journal* (1997 and 2002). The more recent by Catherine Croft, particularly reviewed the status of taxidermy in museum collections and the changing attitudes of both professionals and some of the public towards taxidermy specimens (September 2002). At least she could give a more positive, forward-looking and independent view even though she forgot to mention that these specimens could be conserved or saved.



These Cranes were mounted by Edward Hart of Christchurch in the 19th century. A time when the political correctness of actually killing specimens for mounting would not have been considered! Despite this, the birds have been well prepared and have already stood a long test of time. A record of local topography has also been preserved in the watercoloured diorama showing [somewhere over the rainbow] as it was at the time.

Unfortunately there are still those who denigrate our specialism to the care of 'stuffed birds' suggesting a lack of knowledge, or perhaps simply the desire to be controversial? What they have failed to realise is the actual situation facing natural science conservators at present. Owing to the slightly squeamish-inducing aspect and low financial value of most specimens, many have turned aside from this path with such negative comments as dealing with collections of 'pressed plants', 'nasty (smelly!) things in glass bottles', 'chunks of rock', 'dusty animal skins' and the inevitable 'stuffed birds'. However it is dressed, there seem to be few takers for this most challenging of conservation specialisms. Even more alarmingly, these people don't seem to appreciate the scientific importance or even the social history aspect often attached to such collections!

There are some excellent articles written about dust types and their effects, yet how many PhD's have been written about environmental dust degradation on feather proteins or chemical changes occurring in mammal fur when treated with preservatives? You may find them to have been written by conservators of ethnography. Across the Atlantic Ocean you can find such theses in large numbers.

How many natural science conservators are there in the UK? I can think of about 5, even though some of

them lean more heavily towards geology and one other is multi-disciplinary. There are none, apparently, in Ireland! Apart from conservators, such as myself, who else shares my burden of work? Curators have some knowledge and will perform limited tasks in this area with advice. Taxidermists invariably turn their hands to repairing taxidermy specimens and study skins but there are still many other gaps in the biological sciences along which path only a very few know how to tread.

On a historical note, some will remember the gradual drawing together of multi-disciplinary conservators, curators and taxidermists during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some were lucky enough to attend the Madrid Natural History Collections International Symposium in 1992 where a group of us met to form our own UK natural sciences conservators' group. Since its inception in 1993 the Natural Sciences Conservation Group (then as a section of UKIC) has striven to spread the word about the importance of Natural Science Conservation and Collections and has done well to promote the discipline. Now it has merged with the Biology Curators Group to become the Natural Sciences Collections Association or NatSCA. In 1996 there was another International Congress (this time) hosted at Cambridge and feelings ran high but since then, the situation with natural science conservators has gone rather quiet. Many freelancers in this specialism have either changed direction or gone into full-time employment as curators with conservation knowledge. In the meantime no new conservators have been trained, why? Following the Fast Track Accreditation no natural science conservators have applied for the PACR accreditation scheme either!

Lincoln University and de Montfort (Leicester) ran courses that were advertised at the Cambridge Congress workshops. Since then there have been so few takers (if any?) so that the courses were downgraded to distance learning and then removed from the curriculum altogether! Chris Collins initiated an MA course at Cambridge but was then tempted over to the USA. Now he is back at the Natural History Museum and, in collaboration with the V&A and RCA, is reviving the course once again. This is currently the only formal training course of this type available in the UK! NatSCA will continue to run day workshops from time to time and trainers, like myself, will continue to teach those who wish to conserve their collections in both the time-honoured and up to date traditions.

Fourteen years have elapsed since Velson Horie's Manchester Museum spirit collection day and twelve years since Bob Entwistle's second meeting of natural science conservators and curators in the UK. There was a definite buzz for natural science conservation during the 1990s but which has recently disappeared. We seem to have advanced only a little since then!

The problems seem to stem from:

- Finance - poor pay; a conservator's starting salary (of any discipline) in the USA and Canada is already 100% ahead of the UK equivalent.
- Lack of posts – how many NS Conservators' posts are there in the UK?
- Attitude – the ridiculous attitude of the outspoken few towards natural history specimens (not just taxidermy) as being non-PC, as though the 'Dodo bonfire incident' wasn't a serious enough reminder.
- Value of collections – enlightened museums and other Heritage-based organisations cry out for the services of people like myself. Others deem their natural history collections to be so poor that they are not worth saving because they have "such little financial worth" (scientific worth?) and that they just can no longer be bothered with them. So these are just hidden away and then discreetly 'binned' when they are past redemption!

I hope that this will not be seen as a rather overlong diatribe and that I am dispirited, although I am sure that I will be preaching to the converted! On the contrary I am eager to continue campaigning for our specialism and, as NatSCA unfurls its (Archaeopteran?) wings, we can get natural sciences conservation to be taken more seriously and as an essential discipline by the Heritage Community as a whole.