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Papers from the Conference

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“WORKING IT OUT—COLLECTIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS”

Renaissance for sciences in the North East? Regional Hubs and the rise of the Great North Museum.

Alec Coles, Director, Tyne and Wear Museums.

At the recent NatSCA meeting in Glasgow, I was asked to talk about the health of Museum Natural Sciences in North East England and also about the Great North Museum; two subjects that are inextricably linked.

North East England is a small region, in terms of both area and population. It has a correspondingly small number of natural science collections and associated specialists.

Changing Landscapes

It is some 16 years since I ceased being a specialist natural science curator; 8 years since I left the Hancock Museum. As a former committee member of Biology Curators Group, the NatSCA conference served to renew old acquaintances from those times. In many ways, it might have been like ‘coming home’ – but it was not, because the museum landscape is so different from that which I inhabited as a natural science curator: so what has changed?

Over this period there have been some great leaps forward, not least through two major initiatives which have impacted significantly on the ‘museum ecology’ of the North East (indeed, of the whole country). These are the advent of the Heritage Lottery Fund and, in England, the Renaissance in the Regions programme. Through both, the natural sciences have enjoyed a belated injection of both resources and interest.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has been largely responsible for an unprecedented refurbishment programme in The UK’s museums. All around the nation, we have seen spectacular improvements to museums – none more so than Glasgow. In many ways, of course, museums were ‘first out of the blocks’, to use an Olympic metaphor: just as well, given what is happening now.

It is true that in the early days of HLF, museum natural sciences projects found little favour; thankfully, times have changed. All those years ago, as I cleaned out the aquaria in Sunderland Museum’s dated wild-life gallery, I could barely have imagined that Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens would not only be transformed, but that it would also become an exemplar in terms of demonstrating what can be achieved with HLF funding.

The English Renaissance, 2000

HLF really got going in 1996: four years later came one of the most significant reports in the recent history of England’s regional museums: Renaissance in the Regions. The ensuing Renaissance programme, as it is now called, although never funded at the expected level, has provided millions of pounds of additional revenue to museums in England through a range of initiatives.

The major area of investment has, of course, been through the regional museums Hubs, but the total funding for Renaissance has been greater than this. The non-Hub spending has been split between programmes delivered through the, soon to be wound-up, regional agencies, predominantly to support learning and educational work, and the national Museums Libraries and Archives Council to support work such as the Subject Specialist Networks and the Diversify positive action traineeship programme.

Obviously, the creation of regional hubs has not been without its critics: the concept of Hubs and Hub-nots was invented, however, there has been a long-standing, some would say wilful, misunderstanding about the

purpose of Renaissance – many saw it as a Government Handout to support ailing museums: it was of course never anything of the sort. Despite this, I am proud to say that the North East Hub has worked with every registered museum in the region.

Natural Science Collections in North East England

The North East Regional Museums Hub comprises Tyne & Wear Museums, as Lead Partner, with the other Hub Partners being Beamish, the Bowes Museum and Hartlepool. This is significant in several ways: Firstly, in having TWM as the lead, 12 museums and galleries are already bound into the Hub: adding the partners, gives a total of 16, i.e. 20% of the 80 registered museums in the whole of the North East Region. In this respect, the North East Regional Museums Hub can claim to be more representative of its constituency and its users than any other region purely on the basis of mathematics.

Secondly, although all the Hub partners have some natural science material, only TWM and Hartlepool have significant natural science collections, and only TWM, specialist Natural Science Staff. Even if you then add in significant collections elsewhere in the region, with the exception of Middlesbrough Museums, collection are mainly small and often ephemeral.

Thirdly, there has, historically, been limited investment in natural science collections *per se* in the region (although, of course there has been some as part of large museum schemes); furthermore, there has previously been little recognition by destination marketers, of the role of museums in the social and cultural regeneration of the region. You will have seen plenty of promotion of the major arts schemes in the area: the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art; Sage Gateshead; MIMA etc.. You will see less about, for instance, Discovery Museum – our headquarters building that attracts more visits annually than Baltic; or the Hancock Museum, which has higher recognition on the streets of Newcastle than any of the other museums or galleries.

Early on in the development of the Hub we wanted to foreground collection care, so we created **curatorial needs projects** which considered collections knowledge. Because we had a very few large collections, but many distributed small and ephemeral collections, we took a region-wide approach. The programme included surveys of mollusc collections, herbaria and other botanical material, and natural history collection audits of specific museums.

The Great North Museum

Perhaps the Great North Museum is the main antidote to the lack of regional investment in the natural sciences and recognition of the potential of natural science collections and museums? This project sees the redevelopment of the Hancock Museum and its amalgamation with two other museum collections: Newcastle University's Museum of Antiquities and the Shefton Museum. It is a complex project, the result of a partnership between Newcastle University, Newcastle City Council, the Natural History Society of Northumbria, the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne and Tyne & Wear Museums.

The project has a value of over £26 million and the Museum will open in early 2009. The new museum will feature the designated natural sciences and the world cultures collections of the Hancock, as well as the extremely significant archaeology collections of the Museum of Antiquities which include the most extensive collection of artefacts associated with the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site anywhere in the World, as well as a unique collection of prehistoric rock art from northern England. The Shefton Museum has a small, but extremely important collection of Greek and Etruscan material.

As part of the arrangements for managing the new Museum, Tyne & Wear Museums will also take on management of the University's Hatton Gallery.

The new Museum will foreground the Hancock's natural science collections in galleries featuring world biodiversity, wild Northumbria, geological history and North Pennine mineral treasures. There will also be a major gallery about Hadrian's Wall, its history and landscape, featuring a wonderful new interactive model of the Wall.

Then Hancock's ethnographic and archaeology collections will be augmented with loans to consider world cultures as well as life and death in Ancient Egypt: the Shefton collections will provide the basis for a gallery about Ancient Greece.

There will be an interactive 'discovery centre', enhanced public facilities and three things that the old Hancock never had: a comfortable (!) lecture theatre, a well-designed education suite and a dedicated temporary exhibitions space.

The project has been generously funded by, amongst others, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the European Regional Development Fund, One North East's Single Programme, the Tyne & Wear Sub-regional Partnership and the Northern Rock Foundation. Seed funding has been provided by Newcastle University and Newcastle City Council.

Explore Your Environment (EYE)

Concurrently, thanks to funding from Heritage Lottery Fund and Northumbrian Water, we have reinvigorated a moribund environmental database to create a truly interactive public participation project. The EYE website (<http://www.eyeproject.org.uk/>) uses wiki technology, combined with interactive Ordnance Survey mapping and Google Earth to allow the remote entry of environmental data by anyone who registers with the site.

In addition, a major programme of environmental education events has been developed to stimulate interest in the project. This is a powerful partnership with Newcastle University, Natural England and Northumberland Wildlife Trust.

The EYE project and its development are inextricably linked with the ethos and development of the Great North Museum.

The Future...

I still believe that museum natural sciences face serious challenges both now and in the future. There is a dearth of new natural science curators and conservators being either trained or employed. There are relatively few natural science displays being developed and there is a real danger of our sector losing interest in the natural sciences, which is ironic given the ever-increasing public interest in the natural world as demonstrated by the popularity of media-based natural sciences experiences such as Springwatch.

Meanwhile, museum-based environmental recording is hardly thriving as budgets for such activity diminish and the hard truth about impossible financial models dawns.

It is in this context that projects like the Great North Museum, the EYE project and the Hub's curatorial needs work in the natural sciences become so significant. Of course, they address long-standing issues of collections management, building fatigue and under-used databases. More significantly, however, they will create superb new visitor experiences, encourage public engagement, provide research linkages with higher education, and will contribute to environmental understanding, health and sustainability.

So, in what are undeniably difficult times for the natural sciences in English museums, we can point to unprecedented investment in this area in North East England. This investment has been secured on the basis of the heritage merit and research potential of the collections, on the degree of public participation planned, and on a demonstrable contribution to the regional tourism economy.

Huge investment; demonstrable public support and enthusiasm; identifiable research potential; recognition of the social, economic and environmental value of our collections: perhaps the future for the natural sciences in our museums is brighter than we thought...

Wildlife Crime Unit, West Yorkshire Police

Sally Smart, Force Wildlife Officer, West Yorkshire Police

I was delighted to be asked to speak on Partnership Working by NatSca as my experience in working with Clare at Leeds has and is invaluable. Although I have the role here with West Yorkshire Police as Force Wildlife Officer, my expertise is with the enforcement of wildlife legislation, the gathering of evidence and liaising with CPS and I believe that I can accomplish this from my training over the years as a police officer.