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View From The Chair

I am sat at my new desk on the third floor of the new Iconic Darwin Centre (phase 2) at the Natural History Museum at South Kensington. This is only the sixth home I have had here in the last 30 years so moving should be becoming second nature to me (as stressful as divorce they say?) The job of unpacking into the new 'open plan' office working area will take a few days yet, and I am catching up on NatSCA and other jobs in between bouts of crate emptying. There are still very few of us moved in as yet and I have no close neighbours but I must ensure I do not start taking over the whole floor! My colleagues will arrive variably over the next six months. New collections furniture is being erected in the collections storage 'Cocoon' mostly on compactors by our contractor C & D metals of Belvedere, Kent and our collections will start to move next month with items from the Botany general herbarium moving via a suit of three large minus 35 degree container freezers situated in the back carpark and loaned by Maersk of Felixstowe. In Entomology, the Hymenoptera collections presently housed in our Spencer gallery will move at a similar time. We hope to resume 'normal operations' as soon as possible.

The latest issue that NatSCA is addressing is the situation at Bristol City Museum. NatSCA has been aware of a steady erosion in staffing levels due to natural wastage over the last couple of years. As reported by Gary Noakes in the Museums Journal (January 2009 issue) there is a current Service Review of Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives brought about by a funding crisis which is causing some concern in NatSCA and GCG and with former Bristol curators and conservators. A number of curatorial posts across the Bristol Museum service (9 out of 26) and conservation posts (8 out of 13) is projected with inappropriate merging of the two roles and redundancies and restructurings of security and 'front-of-house' posts. This may well reduce Museum opening hours and has already much reduced the effective Museums service to Bristol and the South West

Bristol has enjoyed '*Renaissance in the Regions*' funding for innovation and expansion of the Museums service and not for the subsidising of the existing infrastructure. If the reported principal funding crisis has been precipitated by the projected harbour-side Museum of Bristol which corresponds with Renaissance criteria, this should not be at the expense of existing staff and existing service and most importantly the Natural Sciences and other collections which are of national and international importance. The projected new emphasis on 20th century and contemporary visual arts also would further increase cuts in resources away from the care of the core collections and their future development.

NatSCA and GCG have both written letters of concern to Bristol City Council and Avon RIGS (Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites) Group are planning a coordinated petition to key decision makers in Bristol City Council and to the local papers to highlight their concerns about the geology curator post and the fate of the collections. NatSCA hopes for the resumption of effective curatorial and conservatorial staffing levels at the Museum and that the Natural Science collections will remain at the City Museum and be effectively cared for, displayed and be available to academic institutions for future education and research. We hope that Bristol Council will reconsider their priorities and that they take seriously their responsibilities to the Collections and for the whole Museum service and their audiences, both locally and nationally.

Paul A Brown, Chair NatSCA, 16.iii.2009