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A Personal View of the Conference

- Simon Moore

The new and upcoming face of Liverpool as the UK's European City is a refreshing view given the Government's gradual conversion of the Heritage Sector into an extension of the Educational curriculum. Liverpool Museum is now titled as The World Museum Liverpool with its Clore Natural History Centre and many other upgraded features. The Clore NHC was used as a role model for our own SEARCH educational facility at Gosport.

Following a very courteous welcome from Steve Judd, the Keeper of Liverpool Museum, Paul Manners from BBC Learning opened the presentations with a talk Inspiring Action. With a market size of roughly 30M people in the UK he informed us that Natural History (sic) was the second most popular interest, largely inspired by children. His aim is to inspire 1 million people and involve them. Using an early 19th century visionary's idea of creating bands of green space in an urban environment, Paul highlighted the importance of researching into understanding the audience in shaping the BBC's new project entitled Springwatch to be launched in June this year.

Suzie Fisher, as an independent consultant, viewed the setting up of new displays at the Horniman Museum blending new displays into a late Victorian gallery and in particular a behavioural study of gallery visitors. What did they want to see on display? As one young visitor aptly put it: "Stuffed animals are real and being nose to nose is awesome!" She introduced the term *Vision Byte* as a measure of information that is going to have some impact (be remembered). She concluded that having animals (particularly) mounted in informative natural habitat dioramas was what people wanted the most.

After coffee, Kevin Walsh, who is Executive Officer at Oxford University Museum of Natural History outlined the 11 year programme (from 1997 to 2008) for new displays in the central gallery and how certain tactile aspects have had a definite and positive feedback from the public. He also had to approach the dilemma of creating new displays that would not clash with the Arts & Crafts architecture of the Museum. The aim was to appeal to a more universal and less academic audience without compromising the educational aspect of display ethics.

Simon Chaplin then spoke eloquently about the Royal College of Surgeons' Hunterian Museum re-vamp. As before, he had to make John Hunter's collection and all of the other anatomical display specimens more universally appealing. With a £3.5M budget he led a small team to transform the old display area, combining an outdated infrastructure with poor interpretation, into something *au courant* and which would make the sometimes rather gruesome aspect of human anatomy less unappealing to a more public audience. The result was a triumph of design, a 'crystal gallery' of glass that cunningly used space without giving the appearance of overcrowding. The results have been reflected in the sustained high visitor figures since.

William Lindsay, formerly head of the NHM's palaeontology conservation unit and now leading RCA and V&A conservation, also talked eloquently about what the public wants, the public gets, taking into account the complex balance of ethics and authenticity in natural history displays. His first slide included an image of mice on toast (as a cure for children who wet their beds) – typical, I thought, of the present (and not-so-past) trend to use shock tactics to get public attention. He spoke of a 'Museum of Jurassic Technology' with animatronic dinosaur dynamism – that's what brings in the public but more of museum precision and less of the theme park where sensationalism can sometimes sacrifice accuracy by use of artistic licence.

Michael Harvey - Interpretation Manager for gallery development, Emma Freeman - Interpretation Manager for special exhibitions and Louise Cracknell - Interpretation Developer for the new Darwin centre (phase 2) at the Natural History Museum showed the projected new buildings and display areas and the dilemma (and dangers) of pandering to public taste – polar bears in the Antarctic was used as an example since Suzie Fisher had used such an image during her talk about the tightrope of balancing accuracy against public demand. The project of Darwin phase 2 seems to be peerless for the time being, certainly Mike Harvey's glib explanation might need a slight pinch of salt when it comes to reality; we shall await further developments.

The first day concentrated on the Museum department stores: I visited the Geology and Botany stores. Of note were the (very) mildly radioactive minerals stored in normal sliding drawer cabinets, with yellow haz-

ard labels marking the drawers. These minerals are not so much a radiation hazard or emitters of radon, else they would be in required storage. There were some most impressive collections of specimens from nearby Derbyshire's mineral rich Peak District and included a local and significantly-sized meteorite. A question about Iridium levels sparked a quick discussion about the dinosaur extinction event. The Botany collections are now in a much better curated state since my last visit and Donna Young has since completed work on the Royle Herbarium. There are still a few minor potential problems in the form of open pigeon hole storage and runners in the floor for the roller-racked herbarium cabinets. It was also good to see that they have a quarantine room for incoming material.

Henry McGhie, Head of Natural Sciences and Rebecca Smith, Curatorial Assistant from Manchester Museum started the second day's presentations. Henry stated how the term Natural Science was much less known as opposed to Natural History, judging by a statistical survey of website hits (also according to Soulé's *Construction of Nature*, 1995 and Keller's *Attitude to animals*, 1980). His role has recently been a process of elevating the gradual decline of Natural History in their Museum by addressing the changing attitudes to nature versus natural history. He also told us of the popularity of Edible Insect Days and educating the public into a much-underused food source!

Rebecca gave an eye-opening account of sexism in vertebrate displays. How these are, or have been, accidentally (or purposely) biased towards the sometimes more spectacular male specimen whether by superior positioning or by an absence of the female and how this might relate to public opinion. For those who have been long in the Sector, somehow this has been a rather sub-conscious (or Freudian) imbalance, although it might equally reflect what is going on in the natural world!

A local team - Mike Graham (as manager), Steve Cross and Paul Finnegan each related about their various educational sectors in the Clore Natural History Centre and the Bug House and their interactions with both the public and school groups. Latterly using the Mersey Ferry service as an occasional Natural History Roadshow and bringing public awareness into the realms of planktonic sampling and other aspects relating to the cleanliness of the River Mersey. Paul also mentioned the mental condition of Delusory Parasitosis where people can experience itching or see in their mind's eye something they dislike such as an imaginary spider – some thing I often come across with dealings with spider phobias.

Paul Richards who is Curator of Natural History at Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust gave a didactic account of the soon-to-be-opened Weston Park Museum and, while the main building was undergoing this refurbishment, bringing Natural History, via an HLF Grant, to the public with an open-air Street Safari Project. This was aimed at helping people, especially those involved with local naturalist groups, to hone their identifying and other related skills. This project was also and particularly aimed at encouraging and improving biological recording levels in a significantly under-recorded area.

After coffee, Leander Wolstoneholme, Curator of Botany at the Manchester Museum, gave a somewhat hilarious presentation but which nonetheless underpinned the problem of bringing a rather dry subject into the Public Eye by cunning means. As most botanists (quite rightly) will tell you there is a woefully small amount of actual botany on display in museums that is not window dressing for dioramas. Capitalising on both Narnia and Harry Potter mania with Herbology and Potion making, he was able to introduce children and parents to botany by a much more appealing route.

Although some might rather look down on such a cunning approach yet we cannot ignore the results and the positive feedback from an increasingly demanding younger sector of the public.

Richard Sutcliffe who is Research Manager (Natural History) for Glasgow City Council gave a detailed account of the huge and multi-disciplinary project costing £27.9M, 10 years in the planning, of Kelvin-grove's new natural science (sic) displays. His enthusiasm for this project showed in his presentation and left us somewhat boggling at its enormity. The re-vamped Museum is scheduled to re-open in July this year.

The final speaker was Will Watts, the aptly-named Dinosaur Coast Project officer who has been engaged in the challenging task of adapting an eccentric building – the tower-shaped Rotunda Museum at Scarborough which was set up by William Smith in 1829. The local geology collections required a re-display programme, again combining recent display technology without compromising the unusual shape of the building and adapting its in-built cabinets. The museum is due to re-open in 2007. I was, once again put in mind of William Lindsay's talk the previous day of combining ethics, accuracy and appeal. Throughout the Con-

ference presentations, the difficulty of combining these required epithets was echoed repeatedly and how the problems had been successfully overcome.

During the afternoon, the tours concentrated around the Museum's educational facilities: entertaining and educating children into the art of Egyptian mummification using an adapted anatomical dummy. Paul Finnegan's Bug House is an ideal educational experience and tool of aspiring entomologists. The leaf cutter ant display was most impressive incorporating a suspended rope so that the ants can march to and from with cut-up leaf fragments to culture their fungus gardens, housed under glass domes. The rope is completely uncovered so that full visibility is maintained and bringing a sense of the jungle to the display.

An Introduction To The British Historical Taxidermy Society

Martin Dunne and Adrian Sailor founded the B.H.T.S. in 2004. Both founder members being keen collectors of historical taxidermy. It has been evident for many years that there was no representative body for the collector of taxidermy, particularly those with an interest in the historical aspect. The Society was soon born. Now up and running it represents the largest group of collectors of historical taxidermy in the U.K. With many members being recognized authorities in particular areas of interest. We are also proud to have Dr. Pat Morris and Christopher Frost as our Patrons, two of the most respected names in the taxidermy fraternity.

The society held its' inaugural meeting at The Natural History Museum, Tring, in November 2005 where members enjoyed a behind the scenes tour and a talk by Pat Morris on the history of taxidermy. This was a resounding success with members attending from all corners of the U.K. who found the museum staff extremely accommodating.

Whilst the Society is still in its infancy, our aims are clear; to provide a forum for collectors of taxidermy, natural history and associated subjects. We aim to promote, preserve and further our knowledge of the subject and its past practitioners. We are also in the process of forming a society library, which has acquired its first publications through acquisitions and donations.

Our aim in 2006 is to create an archive of ephemera and related material. Plans of a central databank on historical taxidermy, its practitioners past and present are also well in hand. In fact, we are accepting donations both from members and collectors, via the Internet and in traditional paper form.

Looking further ahead, we are assessing the possibilities of creating a B.H.T.S collection of historically important taxidermy. This obviously creates its own problems for a society such as ours, housing and funding such a collection being the most obvious.

We believe all our aims are achievable and with the level of support we have so far enjoyed, we feel the society will at last bring together a much overlooked fragmented pool of information, to one central point benefiting collectors and researchers alike.

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