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## **A Course on Fluid Preservation at Oxford University Museum of Natural History**

**3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

**- Lisa Conyers**

The Zoological Collections at Oxford University Museum of Natural History (OUMNH) hosted a course on the techniques required to maintain historical collections of fluid preserved specimens on 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> April 2006. The course was devised and run by Simon Moore of Natural-History-Conservation.com and the Hampshire Museums Services, sharing his 20 plus years of expertise in this field of Museum Conservation, with the local organisation by myself

Having recently started working in the OUMNH, I found myself in the unenviable position of having to 'sort out' the collections within the Invertebrate Spirit Store. Having had little previous experience I decided I better find somebody who could help, hence approaching Simon Moore. He told me he had been contacted by staff at other Museums who were also in the dark about the best way to tackle and treat deteriorating specimens. The ensuing negotiations resulted in the Zoological Collections at the OUMNH providing the venue for this course.

If you have any spirit preserved historical specimens in your collections and want to maintain their integrity, then I would highly recommend attending this course, which is specifically designed to teach the history, techniques and tricks of the trade to deal with these notoriously difficult to maintain specimens.

Attendees on the course travelled from Manchester, Bolton, Newcastle, Bristol and London and even as far as the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Each and every one of us had different backgrounds, varying responsibilities in our establishments with a diverse range of experience and knowledge, but we all were responsible for the care and curation of each of our museums' spirit preserved specimens. The diversity of the attendees also provided an opportunity to question procedures in other institutes, and whether other systems could supplement our own procedures.

The course comprised a combination of presentations and practical work, in which specimens, provided by the host institution, were supplied in various states of distress as a means of identifying problems and how to proceed with remedial treatment. The conditions we tackled included dehydrated specimens, contaminated preservation fluid, fungal growth inside the jars, damaged specimens and detached specimens. In addition to work carried out on the specimens, we were also shown techniques in glass cutting, drilling and grinding, making glass needles and polypropylene stoppers, how to make a specific gravity detector, identification of preserving fluid, celloidin repair of specimens and jar sealing.

This course has shown that the majority of specimens, no matter how dreadful they look, are capable of being treated and restored as close as to their original condition as possible.

Many institutions find the task of caring for their spirit collections problematic, as quite often jars are stored in the most unsuitable of locations, usually many deep on shelves, in areas with poor lighting and ventilation, etc. However, once a collection has been brought up to an acceptable standard of curation a maintenance programme can then be implemented, which should reduce the risk of specimens being left to deteriorate once again.

Attending this course has given me the confidence to deal with the problems the specimens under my care present to me. I have a better understanding of how the specimens will react to the treatment, and that I am not inadvertently damaging them further. I also feel confident to tackle specimens which I may have previously thought as beyond help, as they may in fact not be such a lost cause after all.