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which had been blown up to twice their size, freeze dried bananas and the radioactive geological material.

Thursday – The aim of the day was to learn about systematics, taxonomy and identification. We spent the morning trying to do examples of cladograms and phenograms. Simon had provided some useful examples for us to work through to get the hang of the principles. We got bogged down in the maths and didn't have time to cover the nomenclature and taxonomy aspects very thoroughly.

The identification workshop in the afternoon was a replica of the museum diploma practical exam. John Martin provided specimens for teams to key out, identify and then discuss in hypothetical curatorial situations. The strangest item was a horse hair ball.

Friday – This morning we reported back on our historical research. By this time we had spent a week getting lost around the library and now had a clearer idea on which books were most useful. Simon then told us how we should have done it! This was followed by a video on the Natural History Museum. The next topic tackled was neglected collection assessment and restoration. Once again this was group work solving hypothetical scenarios. The course ended with a fun identification quiz.

On comparison with the Sheffield course I would say they appear extremely similar. From the point of view of a person attending the one week course only:-

* I would have liked a more comprehensive coverage of issues and situations encountered by curators. For example, environmental education was not mentioned within the one week course. The subject is covered in a separate course.

* The time could have been more packed, I would have enjoyed evening sessions. Contact in the evenings was limited because we were all staying in separate accommodation.

* The course was designed to be 1/2 biology and 1/2 geology. Personally I would have liked to course to be a 1/3 botany, zoology and geology. Not enough plants and too many rocks!

I thoroughly enjoyed this course and have learnt a lot. I would advise anyone new to natural history curation to try to get on it. The course notes were easy to follow and well organised. My thanks to all those who ran and tutored the course especially Simon Knell also

to NMGM for allowing me to attend.

*Sam Hallett, Assistant Curator
Botany Department, Liverpool
Museum*

COLLECTIONS AT RISK

The Committee of the BCG place a high priority on counteracting any downgrading of the care and curatorship of natural history collections which may lead to them being placed at risk. It is the role of the Monitoring Cell, namely myself, to collect and bring to the attention of the Committee information on any such collections. The Cell, however, relies on the vigilance of all members to monitor situations at local level and to send information to me, in confidence, as early as possible. Subsequent action may vary from discrete monitoring to strong letters of protest from the Chairperson, depending on the wishes of the member concerned.

On the reverse side of the coin, however, I would also like to hear of any good news relating to collections, "New post created", "Collections saved!" etc..

*Mike Palmer (in confidence), Natural
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LETTERS

Dear Editor – I admire and envy the initiative and energy shown by Hampshire Museum Service in obtaining £95,000 for their discovery centre for natural science and active learning centre for history ('SEARCH for Science in Hampshire – the background' B.C.G. Newsletter 6:3), but why did Chris Palmer have to introduce their new strategy for 'natural science provision' with such a string of false and outmoded arguments? I quote from his article.

Firstly, '*the trap approaching natural science displays as solely the interpretation of the local natural environment*'. Why 'trap' and why 'solely'? All local environments are unique and this uniqueness is what a local museum is pre-eminently qualified to interpret. Most people's interest in the natural world is aroused by and builds on their experience of their local environment; start there and you can take them anywhere.

Secondly, '*local history, which by definition is very parochial*'. If

'parochial' means lacking in breadth, depth or relevance to the general human condition, then I suggest that this view is seriously mistaken and out-of-date. The work of W.G. Hoskins shows, *par excellence*, to what a profound extent local lives and landscapes are affected by events at national and international level, whether changes in the pattern of land ownership, the spread of the plague or the industrial revolution.

Thirdly, '*the natural environment ... consists of far broader brush strokes*'. Even ignoring the dubious construction of the metaphor, this assertion is no more true than is the contrary for local history. It is, surely, the recording of the minutiae of the natural world which enables us to detect and interpret the affects of natural events up to global level and even beyond, whether the evolution of new organisms, plate tectonics or sunspot cycles? And, in the context of the recording of minutiae, and Hampshire, spare a thought for the founder of local natural history, Gilbert White, who was born, lived and died in that county. He must be turning in his grave!

Fourthly, '*it is conceivable that one display could be created which would be equally relevant at each location in a region*'. This not only ignores the manifest uniqueness of every part of our environment, but would also require a singular lack of imagination and foresight on the part of those responsible.

A different aspect of the case, but when Chris says '*what we needed was a more strategic approach*'; who was 'we'? Did the Museum Service in fact consult its public, the ultimate source of its funding, on, for instance, the demand for '*straightforward taxonomic displays*'?

Lastly, a more general point; why are we still pigeon-holing our knowledge and interpretation of the environment into 'history' and 'natural sciences'? We know that, in the context of most of Britain, this distinction is virtually meaningless, such has been the influence of man on the landscape. Just look, for example, at any one of Oliver Rackham's magnificent series of publications. More important, this approach perpetuates the still prevalent myth that man is in some way independent of the rest of the biosphere, rather than an integral, dependent and very destructive part of it.

It is because the staff structures of most of our provincial museums still echo the disciplinary divisions of the more traditional of our universities and that, even now, we find it difficult to ignore or cross these boundaries? Given the opportunity, what a pity that this excellent initiative in Hampshire could not dispense with the artificial distinction between 'science' and 'history' once and for all.

I am sorry to be so 'crabbit', as they say in our new home, but unless curators can communicate amongst themselves with logic and lucidity, what hope have we of capturing the minds and imaginations of the public at large?

Yours sincerely

Ian M. Evans

Former Assistant Director (Natural Sciences)

*Leicestershire Museums Service
now Drumbeg, Sutherland*

Dear Editor – I and my colleagues at Hampshire County Museums Service feel that Ian Evan's letter in response to my item on our new natural science based education centre, SEARCH (BCG Newsletter 6:3) has essentially missed the point. The piece was intended to introduce the project in the context of our natural science display provision for our museums within Hampshire. My underlying argument was that the displays that we currently have do not generally provide a service which supports the delivery of the national curriculum in our local schools.

We have evidence for this conclusion in the form of feedback from various consultations with local education authority inspectors; a specific feasibility study looking at the development of educational opportunities in a fairly new but small natural history display in one of our local museums; and from the findings of professionally undertaken market research.

The development of SEARCH for Science is also important for us in this context. It allows us to concentrate our very limited education resources into one project with good facilities rather than spreading them thinly around nine museums cramped for space. The content and operation of SEARCH was not described fully enough for Ian to comment but the argument that in the real world "history" and "natural sciences" cannot be separated is valid, however, from a practical teaching viewpoint, the national curriculum in

England demands this is done for the ease of covering specific topics. The content and delivery of topics is being developed with the help of teachers and is currently "on trial" with several local schools. It should be remembered that this is essentially an educational facility and its survival depends on providing a service that schools want and are willing to pay for. We cannot afford to "experiment" at this stage but once we have (hopefully) gained a reputation and the confidence of the education establishment then we can look at introducing more integrated topics and begin to influence course content locally.

My note was certainly not intended, and nor was it, in my opinion, a philosophical argument (or judgement) on the current state of "natural science provision" in the museum world (all in one paragraph!). Ian should not be so keen and fast to draw conclusions from an item which was an introduction to another subject (SEARCH development) and not an argument in itself. That said I would still take issue with many of the specific points he raises in his letter.

I should state before going any further that as well as being Keeper of Biology for the Service that I am also Curator of Havant Museum which is operated jointly by the county and district authorities. It is a fairly small community museum consisting largely of local history displays (no natural history!) Since I wrote the text for and was heavily involved with organising most of the local history displays there are some days when I wish I was confined by "the disciplinary divisions of the more traditional of our universities"! In addition, I report to a Havant Museum Committee, which includes district and county councillors, as well as being heavily involved with a museum friends organisation, both of which to some degree reflect the opinions of our public.

My experience as a local curator dealing daily with enquiries from the public convinces me that the demand for local history is very "parochial" (dictionary definition "confined to a narrow area"). I would of course agree with the work of W H Hoskins, and within our own local history displays we do try to put the local example into a wider context, nevertheless, what most people are interested in is the "minutiae" of the history of their neighbourhood, their street, the house

they live in. The historical context may be the same but the examples shown in the displays are different in say Havant to that in Fareham. I admit I would be hard pressed to provide such unique examples to illustrate the topic of urban wildlife, for example, within each community, and so, I would suggest, would most other biologists. Why did I use the words "trap" and "solely"? Well it is perfectly natural to wish to interpret the wildlife habitats close to a museum without necessarily questioning whether this is the most appropriate use of the collections or whether the museum is the most relevant location for the display. For example, in the Borough of Havant the only significant broad-leaved woodland lies within a Country Park. Surely it is more appropriate for us to seek to interpret this type of habitat on site in conjunction with park staff rather than in the limited confines of the museum?

As it happens, we are planning a new natural history gallery at Havant which will deal in detail with the wildlife at the interface between land, freshwater and the marine environment. A totally appropriate subject for Havant with Chichester and Langstone Harbours on its doorstep. But it would also be highly appropriate for Fareham Museum close to the margins of Portsmouth Harbour. But what is the point of repeating this topic using the same examples when another appropriate "in depth" subject could be chosen for the very limited space available? Anyway we simply do not have the collections to be able to do similar displays in all nine of our local museums. This is what I meant by a "strategic approach" and I was certainly not advocating installing "straightforward taxonomic displays" in each of our local museums, merely that they should be considered as part of the blend within the overall provision for the permanent and temporary exhibition programme. Is Ian really trying to imply that a touring exhibition on bats or owls has no place at Havant Museum simply because we have no records for the Greater Horseshoe Bat or Snowy Owl or that such a display would have no general appeal?

In contrast to Ian's assertion that "most people's interest in the natural world is aroused by and builds on their experience of their local environment", it is my experience that it is the popular, topical and global conservation issues which fire the imagination of