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PUBLICATIONS

Manual of Natural History Curatorship – The projected publication date is now the end of September 1994. The Manual will be 352 pages and priced at £45. The original proposal to produce an inexpensive manual in a relatively short time proved unrealistic. Individual contributions far exceeded the brief and in spite of drastic editing the manual is twice the size envisaged. Much of the delay has been caused by the increase in size, the use of free-lance editors by HMSO, and the need to cross-reference the various chapters. There are extensive bibliographies and a comprehensive index, the corrected proofs of which were returned to HMSO on August 1st.

Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts – Members might like to know that for a number of years I have been submitting abstracts of papers relating to the conservation of biological and geological collections, drawn from monographs, the *Geology Curator, Journal of Biological Curation, Collection Forum* to AATA abstracts. The abstracts are printed in the two volumes published annually, and on-line. Suggestions for additional abstracts would be welcomed.

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Flora Mesoamericana – The first volume of this seven volume Spanish-language project is now available. In this volume (Alismataceae to Cyperaceae) alone, one new family, two new genera and 104 new species are recorded, making the about 5% of the species in the volume new to science. This ambitious project is an exercise in international collaboration and further details are available in the UK from the Natural History Museum. No price given.

Hortus Eystettensis, The Bishop's Garden and Besler's Magnificent Book by Nicolas Barker – published in Nurnburg in 1613 the original book detailed the contents of the Prince bishop of Eichstatt's magnificent garden. Nicolas Barker tells the story of the 25 special hand-coloured copies of this famous book, now in collections all over the world. With 150 reproductions from the original edition. Available price £40 from Turpin Distribution Services, Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, Herts SG7 1HN or from the British Library if you are passing their shop. The BL copy is currently on display in their Exhibition Gallery. Great Russell Street, London WC1.

PERSONAL THOUGHTS ON THE LEICESTER NATURAL SCIENCES CURATORIAL COURSE

Being relatively new to the world of curation I was encouraged to attend the natural sciences curatorial course at Leicester University. My colleagues were glowing in their praise of the course when it was held in Sheffield and were intrigued to see how it had developed since.

Monday – Participants came from as far afield as Malta and included curators (4) doing the one week course or a part time diploma (2) and students (3) doing full time museum studies.

The course started with a look at the "Historical Context" of Natural History Collections; how fashions and scientific research have formed the material which is in museums today. If all that was too heavy for a Monday morning, the next task was a bit of active research. We were given a famous (dead) naturalist to research over the week and off we trundled with maps to try to find the library and more importantly somewhere to eat!

After lunch Derek Lott from the Leicester museum gave us a colourful slide talk on biological recording and protected species legislation. He made clear the talk was usually aimed to the public, however it was perhaps a little too general for the audience who were already "turned on" to the subject.

Next topic was called "Do it yourself collecting policies". We were asked to group ourselves into national, local or university museums to discuss the ethics of collecting from each view point. The ensuing "discussion" covered who should collect what and where!

Tuesday – The field work day. In the morning we visited Ulverscroft nature reserve. This was a joint effort between Derek, Simon and Stephen Grover, a botanist from the Ecology Unit. Derek demonstrated various insect trapping methods, some of which "he had prepared earlier". These included pitfall traps baited with fish heads that even the foxes were not too sure about. Simon and Stephen discussed plant surveying, habitat assessment and management. During which a large and loud JCB was carrying out some drastic looking habitat management on the reserve. Lunch was at a nearby pub with understanding bar staff. We traipsed into a posh looking restaurant area wearing muddy boots and waterproof coats. Little did they know, I had tubes of live beetles in my pockets.

The afternoon session concentrated on geology. The first site was Tilton railway cutting. The muddiness of the site was fully appreciated by the people who wore trainers rather than boots. Here we looked at geological layering and collected bags of mud (which we later discovered contained microfossils). The second site was Thistleton quarry. Donning our bright yellow hard hats once again we descended into the depths of the quarry. For the non geologists, the surveying meant hitting bits of rock and looking to see if you could find anything.

Wednesday – Preservation, Preparation and Conservation day (or the day you get to play with high tech equipment). In the morning we discussed the various techniques used to treat collected material, then we had a chance to try it ourselves. The bag of mud was boiled with an unspecified amount of caustic soda for a long time until we produced a smelly dried out mess, move over Delia Smith! From this you could extract microfossils. The Tullgren Funnel method of insect extraction "encouraged" the insects to move away from a hot lamp and into an awaiting jar of alcohol preservative. Next we attempted to card beetles. A tribute to Derek's skill and experience is how easy he made it look. Even with Derek's handy hints on how to give the beetle a natural pose, my beetle ended up so contorted it looked as if it was breakdancing. Then came a video on the preparation of animal skins. The queasy among us were scribbling detailed notes as a diversion to actually watching the gruesome spectacle. On hindsight it was less gory than I had anticipated.

After lunch we had a tour behind the scenes at Leicester museum. Grace, a geology conservator, talked about conservation problems and preventive techniques and materials. We had a go at removing matrix with an air abrasive pen. After that we had a roam around the collections to look at past and current techniques for conservation & preservation. This included caterpillars

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.

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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 History Centre, Liverpool Museum, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN.

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, plat 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.