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THE NEW KINGSLEY NATURAL HISTORY GALLERY AT THE GROSVENOR MUSEUM, CHESTER

Steve Woolfall Keeper of Natural History Grosvenor Museum, Chester

Introduction

The new Kingsley Natural History Gallery at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester was officially opened by Kelvin Boot, presenter of Radio 4's Natural History Programme on 28th November 1994. The opening was the end product of two years thought and worry and nine months blood and sweat. The gallery, however, has much deeper roots and is the pinnacle of a varied history for natural history in Chester. For those of you who do not know the story there follows a brief resume...

History

The Grosvenor Museum was opened in 1886, founded on the collections of the Chester Natural Sciences Society. Between 1892 and 1914, under the curatorship of Robert and Alfred Newstead, the Museum developed into "a first class Museum of Practical Nature Study". In 1915, the collections were sold to Chester Corporation, although the Natural Science Society retained control and use of them. However, by 1939 the finances and activities of the Society had seriously declined and Chester Corporation had to take on responsibility for the Museum. The natural history library was removed to the City Library where it was left to decay and the collections fared little better. In 1942, 400 fossils were transferred to Liverpool Museum, while other parts of the collections were dispersed (no records remain) and the remainder left to deteriorate with no curation.

By 1946, the Museum's natural history was run down in favour of Roman archaeology. Three years later, the state of deterioration of the collections led to talk of a Natural History Assistant being appointed. However, this post was not filled until 1954 on short-term contract. In 1962, the post of Assistant was made permanent with a remit to create a new Natural History department. During the 1970's much of the Natural Science Society's library was returned to the Museum and progress continued on the collections and displays. In 1979, the post of Assistant was upgraded to Keeper, an indication of the importance attached to the department.

In 1981, the situation took another turn for the worse. The last Keeper left and in a report to the Amenities Committee, the Curator recommended that the collections be dispersed to other institutions, the post of Keeper not be refilled (for review in two years) and that a part-time Education Officer be appointed instead. These recommendations were approved, but over-ruled by the Personnel Committee and the post of Keeper was deleted.

In 1982, following urgent requests from the Museums Association, BCG and GCG, a survey of the natural history collections was undertaken, a report written and a meeting held at the Museum in October 1983 to discuss the future of natural history at Chester. The outcome of the meeting was that all material of known scientific and/or historic importance should be transferred to other museums on ten year loans. The remaining material suitable for educational use would be left at the Grosvenor Museum. Under the supervision of several part-time Natural History Assistants between 1984 and 1989 the major collections were transferred on long-term loan between 1984-86. With a new Department of Leisure Services in 1990, the full-time post of Keeper of Natural History was reinstated.

Planning

I arrived at Chester in August 1991 to find a large empty room and a remit to open a new gallery. The old gallery had been completely demolished six months earlier in preparation for structural work throughout the building. It had been a leftover from the 1950's; dark and dusty, full of tired and depressed creatures in tired and depressed dioramas. It had left a bad impression of natural history throughout both the City and Council which was to prove the main hurdle we had to overcome.

The collections at Chester are primarily Victorian, collected by

members of the Natural Science Society, founded by Charles Kingsley in 1871. Many specimens are sadly without data but make excellent display and educational material. There are also the collections on long-term loan which could be brought back for display. Therefore, we had a good historical base to draw from and the celebration of Kingsley and the Victorian collectors was a story begging to be told. However, it was important to show Councillors that the collections were still relevant today, given the widespread and increasing interest in the environment. In trying to resurrect ten years of neglect it seemed sensible to encompass what was happening outside and plug the museum into the local environmental network. Finally, with interactive, hands-on now becoming the norm for modern museum displays and with the National Curriculum, Science breathing down our necks we produced our coup-de-gras. No longer a dark gallery with rows and rows of "dead, stuffed things" but a light, airy, fun-filled gallery with things to do.

Our four areas were defined:

1. Victorian story 2. Local wildlife groups and collections 3. Local/national environmental projects 4. Activity centre.

I was also keen to have fluid, evolving displays so that the gallery did not become static. Therefore, sections three and four have been designed to change on a regular basis (every 3 to 6 months).

Finance

The next problem was the money! We costed the gallery at £45,000, relatively cheap but a figure that was within the then financial limitations. However, the uncertain local government financial climate suddenly left us trying to find all the money through sponsorship. Despite an attractive and informative booklet, the Duke of Westminster's foreword and a list of target companies our success was dismal. There was a great deal of interest but no money. However, we are very grateful to BICC Cables Ltd of Chester for their £500 donation with which we launched a public appeal. Promoted with facts on the new gallery, a designer's mock up and the obligatory model dinosaur we raised £200 in two months from visitor donations.

Fortunately we had several grant applications in the pipeline. The North West Museum Service (NWMS) generously gave us a grant of £5000 for the display cases. We had also applied through our Economic Development Unit for a grant of £25,000 from the European Regional Development Fund (Mersey Basin Campaign). The gallery had been part of a multi-project bid by Leisure as a whole but we became caught up in ERDF changes so that Chester became no longer eligible for Category II status. However, after a visit to the Museum by an ERDF representative we were awarded a consolation grant of £19,800 towards what they saw as a worthwhile project.

That left us £19,600 short of the total which the City Council decided to fund in order to provide the gallery. It was a nice New Year present for 1994.

Operations

We do not have an in house designer so we asked Alan Robinson of NWMS to design the gallery. We settled on a gallery layout with Click display cases giving us maximum space for our money. We wanted to feature a mock-up of a Victorian naturalist's study and so decided on a square to tell the story from Kingsley to modern day databanks. I wanted a computer somewhere on the gallery and this seemed the logical place for it to go. After searching through the brochures I found the ideal system on the NOVUS Interactive stand at the Liverpool MA Conference trade fair. Discussions with David and Andrew Roland led to the highly popular "A Look at Cheshire Wildlife" interactive programme.

The mock-up Victorian naturalist's study was for two reasons: to break up the run of display cases and to display a lot of the old collections including Herbert Dobie's original lepidoptera cabinet and part of the Natural Science Society library. For a special touch we used Zuber wallpaper ordered from France on one wall which

looks like an oak woodland. The study has no internal labels but a numbered system from 1 to 30 so that visitors have to use their brains at least once!

To help differentiate the sections of the gallery we colour coded the cases: dark green for Victorian, light grey for local, dark grey for projects. Our trip to Click in Milton Keynes was invaluable and I would recommend anyone to go and see the supplier first before buying.

The Victorian square was to be the static part of the gallery. Therefore, we asked NWMS to design and produce the labels, graphics and internal case layouts. Having worked before both with and without a designer, I wanted the professional input! We decided to do the remaining text, graphics and case layouts ourselves due to time and money restrictions. However, with these cases designed to change regularly, in house production was the easiest choice.

We wanted a case backing that would hide the wall and heating pipes but not detrude from the objects. Alan and I were set on hand-made paper by Maggie Holland and Carole Belfield of MAPs in Manchester. Unfortunately, a failed grant application to NW Arts left us having to use cheap wood chip paper from B&Q. Fortunately you don't notice the paper after a while. We will endeavour to raise the money for the hand-made paper.

Lighting was going to be an important part of the gallery. I was very keen on using fibre optics in the cases for both aesthetic and environmental reasons. Alan recommended Giles Barrett of Fibrelight. There are six systems in the gallery, each covering a row of cases. The lighting has been highly praised as it gives the gallery a cool look and feel. It certainly brings the specimens "to life" in a way no fluorescent light could do.

The gallery needed some major building work which our Technicians took to with a relish. Apart from the Victorian study we needed to build a new partition wall across the far third of the room. This became a stumbling block as it took much longer than we had anticipated and thus delayed completion.

We had originally planned to officially open the gallery at the end of June 1994. However, a combination of unforeseen hold ups, difficulty in booking a celebrity and me being off ill for a month put paid to that. However, the gallery did open in early July, minus the Activity Centre which wasn't finished. This was a useful exercise as it allowed the gallery to settle and gave us feedback from the public, in the light of which we made some minor changes before the official opening.

Education

The gallery was designed and thought through in conjunction with our Education department. We were all keen to incorporate aspects of National Curriculum, Science despite it changing every other day! Therefore, several of the cases in the Victorian square were geared to particular topics: genetics/evolution, geological features, food chains and taxonomy. Due to the size of the Activity Centre, school parties will have to be split. Half of the group will study the gallery choosing from a selection of suggested activities. The other half will focus on one topic of their choice, supported by the Centre's resources. The groups will then rotate.

We ran a teachers' drop-in one Saturday morning to show them the gallery and push the Activity Centre as a major resource on their doorstep. We attracted the grand total of 5 teachers, but all were very positive and went away to spread the word. As yet, we have had no formal bookings for use of the Centre.

Activity Centre

The Centre is a totally new concept for the Museum and is aimed at both schools and the general visitor. It is available for school bookings, 10.00 am - 12.00 pm, Tuesday - Friday. It will be open to the public 1.30 pm - 4.30 pm, Tuesday - Saturday, 2.00 pm - 5.00 pm on Sundays. The Centre will be manned by Museum staff and volunteers.

The Centre consists of various activities including feely boxes, touch table, microscopes and build a skeleton. The major attraction is the reserve invertebrate collections for public viewing; British lepidoptera and coleoptera, with small collections of other

invertebrate groups. They are working collections in their original cabinets, in their original state. Therefore, visitors will be able to see active rehousing into new cabinets as an example of museum work.

Plans for the future include public access to the re-housed geology collections, a TV/video unit and a computer with CD-ROM.

Feedback

The public response to the gallery has been very encouraging. There is a visitors' comments book to give us some feedback and we are planning a visitor survey, to include a study of movement flow around the displays; there is a panel showing a recommended route but few people seem to use it.

I would like to thank everyone who has been involved with the project for all their help and support. It has been both frustrating and enjoyable but we now have a major new resource upon which we can build. The natural history stores can be re-developed and some of the collections on loan returned and displayed for the first time in over 50 years. Local wildlife groups are booking to visit the gallery and we have plans to develop a database for local wildlife records. Natural history is back in Chester!

BOLTON MUSEUM OPENS NEW GALLERY - WILDLIFE ON YOUR DOORSTEP

Steve Garland, Natural History Section, Bolton Museum & Art Gallery

On August 17th 1994 a new local wildlife gallery at Bolton was opened by Roy Lancaster. It marked the end of nearly five years of work. The original concept was a low-key, extremely low-cost enterprise being built slowly on a revenue budget. In 1991 the Museum successfully applied for an Inner Urban Program Grant of £50 000 spread over three years. This enabled us to speed up a little. The final cost of the whole project eventually totalled about £70,000, excluding staff time.

The Wildlife Study Centre

The theme is of local wildlife, but the idea was also to promote the use of the gallery and our collections in new ways. As we began planning, the 'flavour of the month' was Liverpool Museum's Natural History Centre. Unfortunately, in common with most museums, we could only dream of that sort of exhibit with a non-national budget to finance the project. What evolved was a whole new approach where the public and school groups get access to hundreds of specimens, a touch-screen computer and a close-up video camera without supervision. It does get regular visits from staff to keep materials topped up and to check on the equipment.

The Wildlife Study Centre has been fitted out using school bench-tops, cupboards and stools. Plastic (polythene) drawers were sourced from Yorkshire Purchasing's catalogue and a local plastics firm cut snug-fitting perspex lids. The drawers are all Plastozote lined to provide shock-resistance for the exhibits. Items have been accumulated over the last three years for this area and are generally of a robust nature and of low scientific and monetary value. A variety of techniques has been used to attach them to the Plastozote, depending on the types of object. The lids were originally riveted in place, but experience has now led us to use a hot-glue gun. It is relatively easy to remove the lids when repairs are needed although this is not something one wishes to do too often.

In addition there are a number of larger items on open display ranging from horns and antlers to pine cones and shells. A few are securely fastened, but many are not. The close-up video-camera is a simple home video unit with a close-up lens attached. The whole camera is enclosed in a specially built perspex cover and is positioned so that the auto-focus facility can cope with any of the objects in trays placed beneath it. The auto-focus was thoroughly tested to check that it still worked through two layers of perspex! The magnification levels are not as great as with other commercially available set-ups, but the costs are only a fraction.