



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

The Biology Curator

Title: Orphan Collections Meeting: An Overview

Author(s): Thompson, S.

Source: Thompson, S. (1995). Orphan Collections Meeting: An Overview. *The Biology Curator, Issue 2*, 3 - 4.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/569>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

meeting from Birmingham to Chester (see diary dates above); holding the 20th anniversary meeting at Bolton; letter of protest sent to SEMS over the closure of the Natural Sciences Conservation Unit; offers of assistance to Leicester in the form of extra speakers for evening talks to complement the course; and next years M.A. Conference. The Linnaean Society received the support of BCG in the face of their potential eviction from Burlington House. BCG members are also to be involved in the planning of Madrid 2 - which will be held in Cambridge in 1996.

The nature of the venue prompted discussions on the BCG constitution, Registration Phase 2 and the M.A. annual report to be held over until the next meeting. This will be held in Chester on Sunday (that's dedication for you) 19th February.

As this meeting covered the agenda items in record time, it was suggested that we hold all future committee meetings on board ferries - with an option on trains and airliners. The idea of holding one in a mini going along the M1 is perhaps less than practical.

ORPHAN COLLECTIONS MEETING: AN OVERVIEW

On 12 September this year BCG and GCG held a meeting before the MA conference in Brighton, which looked at the problems faced by orphan collections, ie collections with no qualified curator to care for them. This was the first important result of a working party set up to look at this problem.

The meeting was split into four sections. The first section looked at the current state of such collections in this country, as represented at this meeting by surveys and by work done in the North East, North West and South East regions, as well as the state of Archaeological collections in the West Midlands. Between them they gave what is probably a typical, and generally depressing, picture of the country as a whole.

The second section looked at the enabling side, with accounts of the setting of standards, so far in Biology, Geology and Archaeology, of registration, collections research and the potential of collections. This gave some idea of the background against which a strategy for the care of these collections might be developed.

The third section looked at ways in which the problems identified are

being or might, in the future, be tackled. This section concluded with a summary of the findings of the working party. As this also served to run quickly through the topics covered by the meeting itself, I shall give an even briefer version, consisting of the headings of this summary, here:

A) Aims of the working party:

- 1) To review activities to date.
- 2) To organise the Brighton meeting.
- 3) To try and develop strategy for the future.
- 4) To promote useful action on these collections.

B) Findings:

- 1) Efforts to date have tended to be short term projects.
- 2) They are often based on voluntary efforts, or
- 3) Based on the goodwill of institutions and/or individuals.
- 4) The efforts of the AMC's are stretched very thin by chronic underfunding.

Results of the above:

- 5) There is a lack of the necessary continuity and, often, consistency.
- 6) Goodwill is welcome and necessary, but is also irregular, variable, provides no guarantee of good workmanship and no recompense against poor workmanship.
- 7) After many short term projects, collections may be abandoned again, providing no long term benefit and wasting the resources that were put in.
- 8) Finally, no more than a small part of the whole problem can be dealt with on this basis.

As an adjunct to 6) above, I should say that poor workmanship is now very rare, but any activity based mainly on goodwill will always have this potential problem, which should not exist in a professional environment.

C) Factors for consideration:

- 1) Registration II. Will it have teeth, and what will the responses be.
- 2) DNH policy review. A possible opportunity for improvement.
- 3) Local Government reorganisation. Will certainly have effects, some good and some bad.

- 4) Cultural attitudes. The spending of (relatively) large sums on art collections but not on NH collections is still seen as justified.
- 5) Cessation of Natural Sciences Incentive Funding, just as its value was beginning to be appreciated.
- 6) Value and Valuation of Collections conference, 1995. This will give an airing to many of the relevant issues.

D) Possible options:

- 1) Employment of a professionally trained curator.
- 2) Shared curatorial services.
- 3) Use of freelance curators/conservators.
- 4) Use, (paid), of curators from neighbouring institutions.
- 5) Programs of voluntary work.
- 6) Transfer of collections.
- 7) Disposal of collections.

The issues and factors above were all discussed at some length during the meeting itself, either by way of the papers or during the discussion period, and much of this will be published in the near future. The working party did not feel able to discuss strategy at any length until after the Brighton meeting, although a couple of very general ideas were proposed at the meeting, to wit, the establishment of regional collections centres and schemes following the NWCRU/NWMS model, which has already achieved some modest successes.

The last section was a forum for discussion in which many points were covered and general support for the aims of the working party was established. With a few exceptions people were unable to commit themselves to direct support, though this was expected. No conclusions were drawn as to strategy, and it would have been misplaced to hope for any such conclusions. However two further main steps were decided upon. The first was to gather together the papers presented at the meeting with the aim of publishing them as the main theme of an issue of the *Museums Journal*. This should have the result of presenting the situation as it stands at present to the wider museum community, which we feel to be essential if anything meaningful is to be achieved in the long term. The second step is to develop the working party, by bringing in a wider range of participants, (eg MGC, MA, AMC's

etc), and encouraging some of the well established members of our community to sit on it. It would have the aims of developing strategy, generating support, especially financially, and initiating action. To this end a report will be presented to MGC, who will hopefully be able to provide direct support for the working party. I hope to be able to bring further news before long.

Steve Thompson, Scunthorpe Museum

REVIEWS

CONSERVATION AND THE HERBARIUM - CONFERENCE REPORT.

"If an extreme caricature were to be painted between the attitudes of botanist and conservator, the conservator might be seen by the botanist as a come-lately to the field, ignorant of the 400 year tradition of botanical curation. The conservator might paint an equally black picture of the botanist as thoughtlessly following out-of-date practices without any understanding of conservation principles and modern methods." Angus Gunn, Conservation and the Herbarium Conference Report.

The Institute of Paper Conservation's conference took place at Liverpool Museum on 14th May 1993 (see BCG Newsletter, Vol. 6, No. 2.). Its aim was to bring together botanists (i.e. curators/researchers) and conservators, both in terms of speakers and delegates, to air their views and experiences on a topic of common interest and so dispel any hint of the above stereotypes. Angus Gunn concluded his paper with a request for more dialogue and that is exactly what this report represents. 41 pages of curatorial points-of-view and conservational experiences introduced and edited by Bob Child (Head of Conservation, N.M.W.).

The order of papers in the report is at variance with that of the day and so, in keeping with this, this review pays attention to neither. There are two papers from Cardiff. Firstly, Bob Child's "Environmental and Pest Control in Herbaria" provides a marvellously comprehensive and yet succinct account of exactly what the title suggests while Vicky Purewal (conservation officer, N.M.W.) details how a wide range of conservational parameters and a variety of specimen material were combined to carry out a

"Collections' Condition Survey of Herbarium and Non-herbarium Material in the National Museum of Wales Botany Storerooms".

Curatorial perspectives are put forward by Angus Gunn (curator of the Extra-European Herbarium, N.M.G.M.) and Rob Huxley (Head of Curation Division, Department of Botany, N.H.M.). In "Past and Current Practices: The Botanist's View" Angus Gunn provides a brief history of herbarium methods and weighs up the need for information retrieval from the specimen versus their preservation, stating a museum fundamental - "herbarium specimens are collected to be used". Rob Huxley continues this theme in "Aspects of herbarium Conservation and Management at the Natural History Museum", identifying conflicts between use and conservation and describing his departments attempts to minimise these. Brief mention is also given here to a means of indicating the state of collections and identifying priorities for conservation by formatting data on specimen and label condition into a matrix.

The remaining three papers constitute case studies of ongoing conservation projects. Kate Edmondson (senior paper conservator, Kew) describes "The Conservation of Botanical Prints and Drawings at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew" through the establishment of the Preservation Unit, its consequent preservation programme to stabilise the collections and the particular hands-on conservation techniques employed. Returning to Liverpool, N.M.G.M.'s under-construction Conservation Centre heavily underlines its interest in developing conservational expertise. Two papers relating to current project serve to illustrate this. Firstly the conservation of one of Liverpool Museum's most important collections, the 10,500 strong Royle Herbarium, is described in detail (complete with photographs) by conservator Donna Hughes and senior paper conservator Nicola Walker. This exemplifies a joint project between the Paper Conservation and Botany Departments with the collection being simultaneously conserved and re-curated. Secondly, organics conservator, Tracey Seddon catalogues the range of equipment and materials (including saliva!) experimented with and ultimately used in the conservation of Liverpool Museum's mixed-media anatomical plant model collection. Two means of

transporting such large, and yet delicate, specimens are outlined.

Having read the report two things have stayed with me. Firstly, the balance, conciseness and readability of the papers and secondly, the amount of conservational equipment and material referred to, complete with lists of supplier addresses. My only question mark was to why the abstracts appeared at the end, and not at the beginning, of the papers.

The report (ISBN 0 9507 268 6 9) is available from The Institute of Paper Conservation, Leigh Lodge, Worcestershire, WR6 5LB priced £10.00 Members, £15.00 Non-members.

Mike Palmer, Natural History Centre, Liverpool Museum, NMGM.

CATALOGUE OF THE BRAMBLES OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND in the collections of the Liverpool Museum (LIV), by Michael Palmer, edited by John Edmondson. Published by the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside as Liverpool Museum Occasional Paper no.8 on 3 Nov.1994. Price £12.00 net (ISBN 0-906267-70-0). Copies available from NMGM Enterprises Ltd, PO Box 33, 127 Dale Street, Liverpool L69 3LA.

This publication is taken from a much more extensive computerised database of the *Rubus* collections at Liverpool Museum. However it is not merely a list of data extracted from specimens as it also includes additional information provided by a great many people.

The 223 species of bramble in the catalogue, whose collection dates span over 160 years, are arranged in alphabetical order and are brought up to date using classification from Edees & Newton (*Brambles of the British Isles*, Ray Society, 1988) and Kent (*List of Vascular Plants...*, BSBI, 1992). In advance of publication, confirmation and redetermination of specimens were made, notably by Edees and Newton who during preparation for their own publication, examined *Rubus* specimens in many herbaria, including Liverpool.

Geographical accuracy is also brought up to date with the addition of a National Grid Reference on each entry. These were all checked with the vice-county recorders of the Botanical Society of the British Isles, enabling about 40% of the specimens to be given grid references to an accuracy of 1km.