The Biology Curator

Title: Products, Problems, Pictures, & Priorities: Using Computers to support Natural History Collections in Leeds Museums & Galleries

Author(s): Norris, A. & Pedley, M.

Source: Norris, A. & Pedley, M. (2001). Products, Problems, Pictures, & Priorities: Using Computers to support Natural History Collections in Leeds Museums & Galleries. *The Biology Curator*, *Issue 20*, 29 - 32.

URL: http://www.natsca.org/article/856

---

line in the form of a 'virtual store' both in the galleries and on the existing web site. The project would concentrate on the general collections using existing computerised information, digital images and GIS mapping. More detailed information would be available for two specific, important collections. John Ward (fossil fish) and the William Hill (molluscs), are examples of local collectors who have made important contributions to our understanding of the natural history of the Potteries area. Their collections are already documented to a detailed level on computer but would need complimenting with digital images as part of a second phase. Gallery computer hardware already exists and a customised storage unit is in place to display a selection of the objects from the collection. Upgrading of the hardware and a workstation table (in the form of a leaf) would form the second phase when matching funding has been identified. The project would benefit the rest of the service by acting as a **model and stimulus** in putting collections databases **directly on-line** using what is now tried and tested technology and demonstrate the use of digital map-based information to all disciplines.

Products, Problems, Pictures & Priorities

Using computers to support Natural History Collections in Leeds Museums & Galleries

Adrian Norris and Maggie Pedley
Leeds City Museums

How Leeds Museums have responded to pressures to make information accessible to public through use of IT and look at local and National initiatives which provide opportunities to get collection information

Introduction

Over the last seven years the acquisition and use of ICT to support collections management in Leeds Museums and Galleries has at last started to quicken its pace from a gentle stroll to a steady jog. The races we prepare ourselves for, offer many cash prizes - However our strategy is to ensure that we don't run off in different directions - to coin a phrase "cheque chasing" which at present can be difficult. We are driven by the need to ensure that any investment of time and resources continues to deliver on the aims of the service and the wider objectives of the City Council.

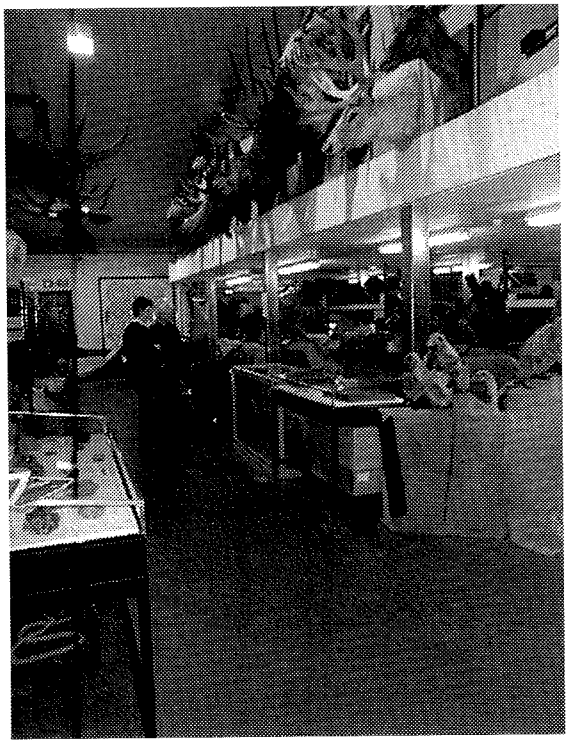
In 1993 like many museums responding to the requirements of MGC Registration, Leeds Museums Service acquired hardware and software to help improve its collections documentation. A Museums Council Grant provided a budget of 15K and three months for the selection process. (January to end March 1993).

The Museum Service documented its collections using a variety of card cataloguing systems including **mda** cards and colour coding. It soon became very apparent that the system would have to accommodate all these differences.

Many of the software products available did not allow for this. Our attraction to Advanced Revelation centred around the fact that we could build the screens to mirror the existing index cards and manual systems– even their colour. We purchased nine PCs and dot matrix printers. In 1995 the Museum Service merged with the Galleries Service and the system was extended to support the documentation of the Galleries collections. Between 1993 and 1996 twenty one data entry screens have been developed using Advanced Revelation. A stand alone DOS based system, it continues to be used for the recording of Biological Material at the Leeds Museum Resource Centre.

Advanced Revelation & Natural History Collections

Many of you may be familiar with Advanced Revelation through Recorder, and has been used for many years by the various Biological Record Centres. The system was adapted for us for museum documentation purposes complete with the species lists found within Recorder, and has been a remarkable success to date.



Open access area, Leeds Museum resource Centre

However things have moved on dramatically over the past years, and "Advanced Revelation" has been superseded by other products

Responding to external pressures
The closure of the City Museum in 1998 and our relocation to a Resource Centre along with the entire Natural History Collection gave us a unique opportunity to reconsider our needs regarding ICT.

Many new software products are now on the market, some of which are designed for the small museum and others specifically aimed at the large museum services.

During 1999 we have written a detailed specification that describes the new collections management system we require, along with assessment criteria. We are very hopeful that we will be able to start the formal procurement process in April this year. Formal approaches to software providers will enable us to confirm the potential and possibilities and move away from the "it will do anything you want" and "we can make it do that if you want". Words welcomed by museums but frowned upon by Council IT and Procurement departments. This will take time and we need to be aware of the impact the introduction of a large system will have on us.

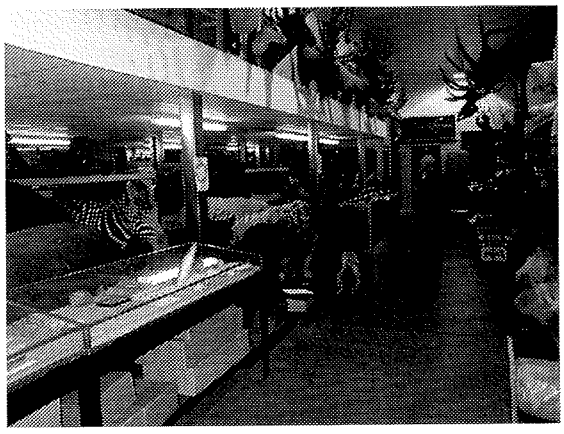
In the meantime we have had to respond to local and national initiatives. New Opportunity Fund projects in partnerships with other Leisure Service Departments are making a start putting our collections on the world wide web. A major development in Leeds is the Leeds Learning Network. that provides Leeds schools with a learning resources. As a key partner and content provider a DfEE funded project called "Making Connections" which draws from our collections to provide schools with unique learning materials, chat rooms and bulletin boards. All these projects have been test beds – with massive learning curves for us all.

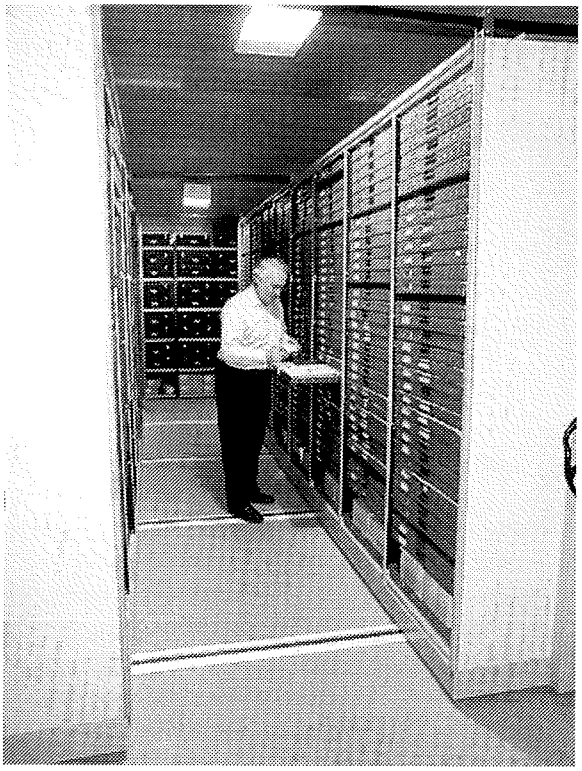
Designation Challenge Fund

The development of the Internet as one of the main avenues for disseminating information has placed new demands, and expectations on museums. We are now expected to deliver information electronically by e-mail and via the world-wide web. A few museums in Britain, such as the National Museum of Wales, have already been able to spend the time and money required to establish direct links from the web into their own institutional databases.

Within the council environment restrictions apply. We have had to work closely with them to ensure that they understand what our requirements.
We have also had to be clear about our inten-

Open access area, Leeds Museum resource Centre





Roller racking for designated mollusc collection, paid for by Designation Challenge

tions. Are we really going to give public access to our data base? – all 100,000 records? We have had to responded to this debate and the pressures of providing information electronically.

During 1999 we agreed to run a project that concentrated on improving the collections database and to look at ways of promoting the Natural History Collection via the web. It also provided the Service with a pilot for networking. Providing real data on the resources required – from additional power supply to staff training.

As we speak a network is being installed at the Resource Centre to provide the staff team with access to the City Council network and all that that provides. It will also enable the Natural History data base to be networked providing multiple data entry and access by staff.

But even this work causes problems. Recently the **mda** has carried out a research project looking at what has been made available by museums and it is clear that there are important questions to be considered. Not just those of confidentiality and security but those regarding the real the value of the information and images.

There are many other considerations, some of which will be familiar to you all. The problem that is often quoted first is the cost of such a service. Yes it does cost money, and does seem to be an extravagance, particularly when services are being threatened with cuts, or we have other priorities, such as a leaky roof.

Money is not usually the main factor preventing us placing our collections on the web. Information is usually the main problem, or should I say the lack of available information within our databases.

The following are just some of the main problems we face.

- **The size of the collection** – The Leeds shell collections for example have at the moment about 24,000 molluscan records on the museums database. This represents about 8 percent of the collection. We estimate that the total number of entries will be circa 300,000.
- **Incomplete records** - Of these 24,000, about 8,000, or one-third of the records, are incomplete. By this I mean, grid references, county names, vice-county numbers, sea-area's etc are missing from the full record.
- **The time scale required** - The time taken to input records can easily be worked out. Over the past six months this has worked out as an average of 2,000 records per month. We have an estimated 276,000 records to be computerized; at 2,000 per month this will take an estimated 138 months, or 11.5 years. As you can see from these figures, it will be many years before we can even think about linking the system in full to the world-wide web.

Pictures

- **Photography** – has been a standard tool for the recording of museum objects, for at least 100 years. The written and photographic records, however, are often stored separately, and

in some extreme cases by different curators in different departments.

- **Digital cameras** - and the data packages to manipulate the digital images have come down in price dramatically, over the past few years.
- **Modern computer and digital technology**, allows us, if not to store the image and the written record together, than to access both at the same time, through electronic links. This allows us to use the information and the images much more constructively, through the use of other media.

Priorities

We as custodians of natural science collections have a duty to make available information on our holdings, to the best of our abilities.

Many larger museums, The National Museum of Wales and the Royal Scottish Museum for example, have in the past published hand-lists of particular sections of their collections. This was always far to expensive for many of us, but the internet has opened a door into a world of cheap publications, which also have the advantage of being flexible and capable of being updated as further material and information becomes available.

We have identified a number of practical priorities for our own collections as follows:

- **Electronic Publications** - The production of selected and illustrated hand-lists, to be published on the WWW. These will highlight certain aspects of our holdings, such as our large international collection of freshwater bivalves, many of which are type of figured specimens.
- **Scientific Papers** – On the people who built and acquired the collections, and objects held within them
- **Exhibitions** – A series of exhibitions highlighting the collections as a whole and not just a few selected items. These can be standard three-dimensional exhibitions or
- **Electronic or Virtual Exhibitions** – Such as the two which are in production now with the aid of students from Leicester University Department of Museum Studies.
    - **White Gold** – A virtual exhibition on ivory, its uses and conservation, aimed at all ages and for use over the web.
    - **Going, Going Gone** – A virtual exhibition on some of our rare and extinct animals.