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The Natural History Section of Sheffield Galleries & Museums Trust – An update

There is currently much interest and debate surrounding the concept of “Trustification” of local authority museums (“Best Value and Trusts”, *Museums Journal*, April 2001) As someone who finds himself in this position I offer this article as a “snap-shot” of what is currently taking place in and around the Natural History section at Sheffield City Museum. I offer no personal opinion to this debate, but simply present an update of where we are at, perhaps for your own comparative purposes or just to reassure you that we still exist. This article does not include details of the extensive developments to the geological and meteorological aspects of the section’s work, but simply focuses on the biology activities.

In April 1998 Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust was established to take over the management of the non-industrial museums and art galleries in Sheffield from the local authority. The Trust is chaired by Sir Hugh Sykes, Chairman of Yorkshire Bank and former Chairman of Sheffield Development Corporation. It is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. A Board of Trustees has been recruited and has ultimate responsibility for policies, plans and performance of the Trust. The formation of the Trust was supported by the Arts Council of England through a grant of £1.15m from the Arts Lottery Fund through its Stabilisation Programme.

The Trust administers the multi-disciplinary collections of the City Museum and Mappin Art Gallery, Graves Art Gallery, Ruskin Art Gallery and Bishop’s House. A series of legal agreements govern the relationship between Sheffield City Council and the Trust. The gallery and museum sites operated by the Trust remain in the ownership of the City Council but are managed by the Trust under the terms of a Collections Agreement between the two bodies. A Funding Agreement sets

out the relationship between the two bodies in terms of accountability, provision of funding by the council and so on. The buildings and collections are still owned by the city and are supported by local authority grant of £1.4m which funds the bulk of the current operational costs of the Trust.

A similar Trust has been in operation for a number of years running the industrial museums in Sheffield.

For over a decade the galleries and museums now in the control of the Trust have suffered very significant budget cuts, as a result of local authority spending controls. This led to a wide variety of strategies being implemented by the Natural history section for the generation of income (Whiteley 1996, Richards 1996) Despite the financial restrictions placed on the museum as a whole, natural history at Sheffield became a significant flagship for the public face of the museum. Ironically, an injection of cash has refocused the priorities of the service and the public profile of the museum has slipped in relation to the resurgence of the art galleries. This is to be redressed through a proposed site re-development as detailed below. Overall, however, investment in the building fabric and facilities, expansion of marketing, commercial activities and audience development are providing improvements across the board. The key challenge for the Trust during this period is to ensure that the new initiatives maximise the potential for long term benefits to the Trust and the people of Sheffield rather than short term cosmetic improvements.

During the last two years the major project for the Trust has been the development of the Millennium Galleries in the City Centre. This is a £15million state of the art exhibition space, which provides a cultural flagship for the £120m heart of the city regeneration scheme. The galleries are part-funded by a grant from the Millennium Commission and other local partnerships. They have been developed in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum. The aim is to present Sheffield as an exciting cultural centre and provincial outlet for exhibitions normally restricted to the capital. Already further partnerships have been developed with the Tate and other similar collaborations are

envisaged within other disciplines, such as Natural History.

The designated status of the metalware collection has attracted funding for a new computer-based documentation and information system ("The Museum System" by Gallery Systems) which will be introduced during 2001. Ultimately this will be the collection management system for all disciplines. It has not previously been used extensively for Natural Science collections but appears versatile enough to manage these effectively. We are currently endeavouring to determine how well it will communicate with other external systems such as RECORDER.

Further HLF funding is currently being sought for the upgrading of the off-site storage facility. This will enable a mezzanine floor and racking to be introduced to expand the physical constraints under which the Trust collections find themselves. A radio-telemetric monitoring system will be introduced to monitor and control environmental conditions from back at the main museum site. Initially this store will continue to house all the vertebrate and marine collections as at present, but the aim is to return these to the site of the City Museum in Weston Park within the next four years.

The City Museum site itself has been the subject of a successful £15m Heritage Lottery Fund bid. The Trust has been awarded £444,500 for the development of the project, with a further £11 earmarked for its implementation. The Trust must raise the remaining £3.5m from other sources. The plan is for a total refurbishment of the City Museum and Mappin Art Gallery site. These are the oldest public galleries in the city, dating from 1875 and their fabric has become increasingly difficult to maintain in recent years. The initial proposals include restoring the original architectural integrity of the buildings, the provision of state of the art exhibition and visitor facilities, a learning and activity centre, new storage facilities for Natural History and wider access to collections for the public. The aim is to create a regional centre of excellence for the people of Sheffield and beyond. The Trust is therefore entering a period of consultation about what the Museum can hope to provide

and achieve for our user groups and the collections in our care. This project is also linked to the renovation of Weston Park within which it stands, which has itself been the subject of a HLF grant bid through the historic parks initiative for a major overhaul and return to its former glory. The programme of work is likely to see the museum closed for up to two years from around March 2003 while the collections are re-housed, the building gutted, the galleries re-designed and the natural history collections returned. A current challenge is to determine how we may make the collections available to the public during this period of closure.

Staffing levels have suffered in the Natural History section in recent years. In 1995 there were 6 members of staff, including two in the City Ecology Unit, a principal keeper, an assistant keeper of Earth Sciences/Meteorology (Gaynor Boon), an assistant keeper of conservation (Paul Richards) and a curatorial assistant. At the inception of the Trust in 1998 the establishment was three (the Ecology Unit remained with the local authority). The assistant keeper of conservation became a part-time assistant curator post. The (now termed) Curator, Derek Whiteley resigned in June 2000. This post remained vacant until July 2001. In the interim, a part-time curatorial assistant, Paul Smith was appointed who has now returned to his other job of gallery cleaner! Due to the reduction in staff levels at this time, responsibility for the Biological Records Centre has now been handed over to the Ecology Unit in the Leisure Services department. Volunteer, Alistair McLean has been appointed as full time curatorial assistant for six months on the New Deal scheme until November 2001. The Curator post has been filled by Paul Richards and the next job is to fill the subsequently vacant assistant curator post.

In anticipation of the new documentation system and the potential arrival of a new Curator of Natural History an audit was undertaken in 2000 by volunteer, Alistair McLean to assess the current size and scope of the collection. The last audit was undertaken in 1977 as part of a survey of zoological and botanical material in museums, collated and

PHYLA	Count y	British	Foreign	Figured & types	Additions since 1977	Total
ZOOLOGY						
PROTOZOA						0
PARAZOA	1		85			86
PORIFERA & CNI- DARIA	1	118	940	Fifteen		1059
Actinozoa (anthozoa)		10	262			272
PLATYHELMINTHES	1					1
NEMATODA	2					2
ANNELIDA	22	43			170	235
CRUSTACEA		IUF	110			110
Copepoda		4				4
Cirripedia			10			10
Malacostraca					3	3
Isopoda	100				942	1042
Amphipoda	4					4
MYRIAPODA	115		3			118
Chilopoda					605	605
Diplopoda					1230	1230
INSECTA						
Orthoptera	120	30	100		138	388
Coleoptera	650	4370	1890		10422	17332
Lepidoptera	4800	16545	2000		5200	28545
Diptera	2400	90	10		14591	17091
Hymenoptera	990	410	300		5884	7584
Collembola						0
Ephemeroptera					240	240
Odonata					20	20
Isoptera						0
Plecoptera					270	270
Dermaptera						0
Neuroptera					1	1
Trichoptera					580	580
Siphonaptera						0

PHYLA	Count y	British	Foreign	Figured & types	Additions since 1977	Total
Mallophaga						0
Hemiptera					1654	1654
<i>Total "other orders"</i>	380	170	310		476	1336
ARACHNIDA						
Opilliones					1080	1080
Araneae	155	311	53		9660	10179
MOLLUSCA (Boxes or tubes)	156	850	4000		640	5646
Amphineura						0
Gasteropoda						0
Lamellibranchiata						0
Cephalopoda						0
BRACHIOPODA			10			10
ECHINODERMATA						
Asteroidea						0
Ophiuroidea						0
Echinoidea						0
Holothuroidea						0
UROCHORDATA		10				10
VERTEBRATES						
PISCES	IUB	117	18		2	137
AMPHIBIA	IUB					
Anura		14	11		1	26
Urodela		12	3		1	16
REPTILIA						
Squamata	IUB					0
<i>Lacertilia</i>		8	59		8	75
<i>Ophidia</i>		32	103		16	151
Crocodylia			13			13
Chelonia			33		3	36
AVES Specimens etc.	IUB	1737	1263		672	3672
<i>Eggs (Clutches)</i>		2160	10		425	2595

PHYLA	Count y	British	Foreign	Figured & types	Additions since 1977	Total
MAMMALIA	IUB					
Monotremata			4			4
Marsupialia			18			18
Insectivora		61	4		59	124
Chiroptera		81	3		92	176
Primates			30			30
Carnivora		90	29		95	214
Cetacea		4				4
Edentata			16			16
Perissodactyla			2			2
Artiodactyla		32	46		6	84
Rodentia		158	32		78	268
Lagomorpha		21			29	50
TOTAL ZOOLOGY						104458
HERBARIA (No of packets or sheets)						
FUNGI	64				10	74
ALGAE		406	257	Possibly		663
LICHENS	114				208	322
CHAROPHYTA	3					3
BRYOPHYTA	375					375
PTERIDOPHYTA	90	178	243		20	531
SPERMATOPHYTA	1744	2621	1913		1475	7753
TOTAL BOTANY						9721
Column Total	12287	30691	14193	57171	57006	
TOTAL BIOLOGY						114179

published by the Biology Curator's Group (Hancock and Morgan, 1980). The report stated that the collection of Natural History specimens at Sheffield City Museum was 16th largest in Britain, containing over 70,000 specimens. In fact, this figure was something of an exaggeration, due to a simple mathematical error that had occurred somewhere between sending in the correct values and final publication. The actual figures were closer to 56,000, ranking it 18th, just above Stoke on Trent City (The Potteries) Museum.

The figures presented give a good idea of the scope of the collections and areas of recent growth but can only be considered as good estimates. The taxonomic categories reflect those of the Hancock & Morgan report. It would have been impractical to count every specimen and therefore in some cases averages were taken of store box, drawer and specimen tube contents. Some of the pre-77 figures were very rough estimates and these have been given more accurate figures where the information is available. For this reason, therefore, the figures shown below may not match those in the original report. A summary of the information shows that in the last 23 years, additions to the collection have been considerable. Where the last audit gave a figure of **56,652** specimens, the new pre-77 figure is 57171. The 2000 audit gives figures of **114,179**, an increase of 49.9%. The collection, which was started in 1880, has nearly doubled over the last 20 years.

94.4% of the additions to the collection since 1977 have been invertebrates.

69.3% of additions were insects

65.7% of the collection is now made up of insects. (62.2% of the collection belonged to insect groups prior to 1977)

Other ongoing curatorial work is currently focusing on the re-organisation of the invertebrate collections, conservation and storage improvements on the bird collection, replacing and freshening up of permanent displays and preparing for a major hands-on natural history centre to open in January 2002. In between, we are maintaining and developing our partnerships with external organisations, including the local Universities

and Natural History societies and collecting data and preparing a publication on local Dragonflies. Above all, 2 remaining part-time staff have still been maintaining an active public enquiry service, answering 540 biology enquiries (+ 2,400 in Geology/Met.) in the last 12 months. We have come through a difficult transitional period with the added pressures of staffing reductions. Now, with several major projects on the horizon and the move towards previous staffing levels, we can look forward to the future with more optimism than we have allowed ourselves for a number of years.

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