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improving their procedures. But has SPECTRUM reached its full potential? Whilst aiming to provide a standard for all museums, does SPECTRUM meet all its targets? Does it address all its audiences? If not, how can it develop further to be of even greater value to the museum community?

In essence, SPECTRUM is the crystallisation of the skills and expertise of the UK museum community, brought together through a series of working groups that addressed various areas of activity. And the museum community can be rightly proud of SPECTRUM. It is a world first in a number of important ways. It takes a procedural approach; looking at what actually happens to objects in a museum context, and then dealing with how to handle the information associated with those procedures. By identifying twenty discrete procedures it covers all aspects of collections documentation, and is not limited just to cataloguing items. However, the most important aspect of the co-operative origin of SPECTRUM is the fact that it is accessible and relevant to all museums, regardless of their size or type, or what systems they use to document their collections. This is achieved by defining standards for museums to attain, without being prescriptive about how to achieve them.

This universality of SPECTRUM can be seen as its greatest strength, allowing everyone to use it on equal terms. However, to include options to deal with every occasion does tend to make it appear a little unwieldy. For most of the individuals using SPECTRUM this is not a problem. It is well suited to their everyday requirements, and even to their less common ones, and where there is too much detail, they can make their own selection of what to include. On the other side of the coin, the value of SPECTRUM to the generalist, needing to know a certain amount about most things, can seem to be a limitation for the specialist, with requirements that are so specific to his or her area of interest that they are not included. The fact that SPECTRUM works well for the majority of its users does not mean that it cannot be further developed for the benefit of specialist groups. Natural historians certainly have specialist needs and requirements.

SPECTRUM only has value if it is useful, so it is essential that it

continues to progress and develop to meet the demands of the museum community. Feedback from users of SPECTRUM is essential to steer change in the right direction. At MDA's Workshop in October 1994 a number of discussion sessions gave natural scientists a chance to look at how SPECTRUM could be extended to meet their needs. One conclusion was that there would be value in developing a set of guidelines to SPECTRUM for natural scientists. It was envisaged that any guidelines would give a natural sciences interpretation of SPECTRUM, giving extra or natural science specific information where appropriate, and selecting out other material not relevant.

Now that the museum community has acquired some experience in using SPECTRUM, Louise Smith, MDA's Assistant Director, is setting up working groups to begin to look at such subject-specific guidelines to SPECTRUM. She would welcome hearing from anyone interested in contributing to this process, or with any other suggestions on the direction of SPECTRUM's future developments.

Another area where there is a growing demand for standardisation is that of terminology for the natural sciences. It is well understood that consistency and accuracy are needed in any record keeping, and that this is of particular value in any subject-specific guidelines to SPECTRUM. Whilst questions of terminology are beyond the specific remit of SPECTRUM, it is a truism that no matter how good procedures are, if you put in poor data, you can only get poor information out.

Natural historians have an advantage over many other curators in having internationally accepted sets of names for the things they deal with. Added to this BCG has been active in promoting good practice in managing biological collections. Where does MDA, with a role to promote excellence in documentation in museums, fit into this framework? MDA does not have the expertise in individual subject areas, such as botany or zoology, to produce thesauri and termlists. Nor would it seek to. It can much more usefully serve the museum community by helping those with the knowledge to share their knowledge, and help make the resources produced as widely available

as possible. This way of collaborative working successfully produced SPECTRUM and is the model that MDA will follow in developing terminology resources.

In all these developments, MDA is dependent on feedback from people actually using the resources at the "dust face" in museums. Comments made at MDA's Workshop have already influenced the way SPECTRUM will be taken forward, but more views and observations are welcomed. The larger the number of individuals contributing to the process, the more closely SPECTRUM and terminology resources will meet the needs of their users. Another conduit for feedback is MDA's proposed network of SPECTRUM Advisors. These would be individuals well versed in SPECTRUM prepared to be the first point of call for others trying to get to grips with the subject. While it would be preferable to have an even geographical spread of Advisors, a full coverage of all the different subject areas in museums is more important, so that, for example, biologists know there is someone who understands their particular needs to talk to about SPECTRUM and its implementation. By being in closer touch with day-to-day users, the Advisors will be an important link in ensuring that grass roots views are heard.

So to return to the questions posed at the start, SPECTRUM is there and can work for all the varied users museums, but maybe needs more detail in some areas for some people. MDA is working to deal with these reservations by producing subject-specific guidelines to SPECTRUM, setting up a network of SPECTRUM Advisors and making available a range of terminology resources. These initiatives are all at an early stage, so if you would like to influence them or just find out more, please contact Louise Smith at MDA in Cambridge on 01223 242848.

Nick Goff, MDA Regional Outreach Manager

REPORT ON STUDY TRIP TO BELGIUM

or

"BRUSSELS; I NEVER KNEW THERE WAS SO MUCH IN IT"

Wednesday 8th November: Getting there. I was looking forward to this trip. Previously I had formed the impression that Belgium (like Wales)



Royal Museum of Central Africa

existed only for the purposes of comparison with the size of my museum's catchment area, Highland Region. Travel on Eurostar was a harmless enough experience with 20 minutes of darkness outside the windows indicating our passage under the channel. More impressive was the speed between Calais and Lille – 300kph – a shade faster than the BEF in 1914! On arrival in Brussels we herded together for a while to get our bearings and wait for Kathie to fight for our travel passes. Armed with these

we sallied forth to interpret the cladistic diagrams which passed for maps of the Metro. Derek Whiteley cracked the colour code first and by his ingenious method of actually reading the names of the stations soon had us literally hurtling towards our destination. The Royal Crown Hotel was a little more plush and comfortable than we were led to expect but we decided to stick it out and duly settled in. The rest of the evening was spent (or so I am told – I am entirely innocent of such things) in the highest

traditions of the BCG Eurotrip. (Yes! There have been enough of them now to constitute a tradition.)

Having got over the islander's initial shock of arriving on the european 'mainland' without seeing any water, it was time to get down to some serious museum visiting.

Thursday 9th November Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren (Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Africa/Musee Royal de l'Afrique Centrale) With a typically independent spirit the Scottish contingent travelled



Royal National Institute, Brussels



Inside the Foyer at the Royal Institute of New Sciences, Brussels, November 1995

by interesting alternative routes before joining with the rest of the party on the Tervuren tram. This was a pleasant journey through leafy suburbs and woodland.

Tervuren has had a long history. About 1200 the Dukes of Brabant had their castle there and in more recent times it was the site of a royal summer residence. In 1897, Leopold II had the Palace of the Colonies (now housing the Invertebrate store) erected on the site of a previous palace which had burnt down in 1879. The success of the exhibitions there led to the foundation of the larger Congo Museum which was not formally opened until 1910 after the death of Leopold II. The museum was to have been part of a huge complex with further museum devoted to Japan and China, a 'World School', restaurants and a concert hall.

As it stands the museum represents an immense monument to what was in effect Leopold's very own, personal colonial adventure for as explained to us by Dr Thys van den Audenaerde, the Director and Dr Michelle Louette, Head of Zoology, in their welcome and introduction, their monarchs reign over the Belgians rather than Belgium. The people were not entirely behind Leopold when, as Duke of Brabant and later as King he bought concessions to exploit the Congo Free State and so it remained his own private colony until 1908 when it was formally annexed to Belgium.

In common with many museums the world over, Tervuren is being financially squeezed year by year in a way which leaves it with less and less opportunities to justify its existence. The displays (which contained sufficient real things to satisfy my 'old-fashioned' tastes) are, by the staff's own admission, ageing and are likely to go on doing so unless more resources are acquired from somewhere. The potential would seem to be enormous given the size and quality of the collections. The Museum has passed through the hands of several government departments and has only recently arrived in the same department as the Royal Institute down the road in Brussels.

After our welcome we were able to visit the existing displays and were given a guided tour of the Masks exhibition. The displays are fairly conventionally laid out so that you could find things and follow your own interests with not many interactive computer screens in sight. I welcomed the chance to see a real Coelacanth on display in preference to casts and enjoyed the entomology room with its taste of central African insect diversity. A huge (100-seater) dugout boat was also pretty impressive.

The Masks exhibition was a high profile, high budget temporary display showing some 250 fetishes, head-rests, masks and other tribal items from west central Africa. The selection had been

made from the 270,000 items of tribal work in the collections and it really was stunning stuff – genuine hidden treasures! At the end of our guided tour of Masks we discovered a gallery full of African dioramas but lunch beckoned before we could have a proper look.

After a light lunch we split up into groups and visited vertebrate, invertebrate and entomology sections. Due to time shortages we were each restricted to visiting only two of the three sections.

Mrs Elaine de Coninck introduced a group of us to the work of the entomology section. The entomology collections are large and the academic staff comparatively small. The section curates more than 13 million specimens with a Dipterist/Administrator and a Lepidopterist and the assistance of a few technicians. Other invertebrates, if memory serves me, amount to 5 million specimens with one enthusiastic specialist in place.

We were given an introduction to work being done on biodiversity in central African lepidoptera, a project being carried out with financial assistance from German institutions. Tervuren was supplying the taxonomic expertise for an ecological study. In view of the low number of entomologists here, this was seen as the most efficient way to work with the ecological interpretation coming from the German partners.

The introductions at an end, we were allowed to wander off in search of our particular interests and I 'lost' myself for a while in the African *Saldidae* (poor, sad creature that I am). The dry collections are housed in oak cabinets of beautiful craftsmanship. The doors shut tight with what is almost a vacuum-suction action, making them pretty dust-proof. The pinned material is in small, glass topped boxes of about A3 size. The individual specimens were impeccably labelled and curated. Naphthalene is the predominant smell in all of these storerooms and I cannot say that I was overcome by nostalgia for the stuff. Spirit material in entomology is also housed in these cabinets on shelving, with the shelves not being so deep or closely stacked as to allow lowering alcohol levels at the back to be overlooked.

We were allowed to look in on the setting room where the relentless work of setting ever growing piles of equatorial forest lepidoptera goes on day after day. Here we saw an interesting variation on the fume cupboard. Freshly printed data labels were simply held out of the nearest window to be sprayed with fixative! Each section seems to have developed its own labelling solutions and documentation databases, although the databases we saw were fully interactive and flexible and not likely

to cause too much heartache in the event of some future merger with other departments.

Other groups visited the vertebrate stores which had been recently rehoused in another annexe, which they shared with some ecological agencies. The exterior is old but the building, like the entomology section, has been totally modernised within. The oak cabinet system was still in use here to house, among other things 160,000 African bird skins and 2000 skeletons. The fish collections, under the care of Dr Jos Snoeks were especially impressive and the resources for the study of these were first class.

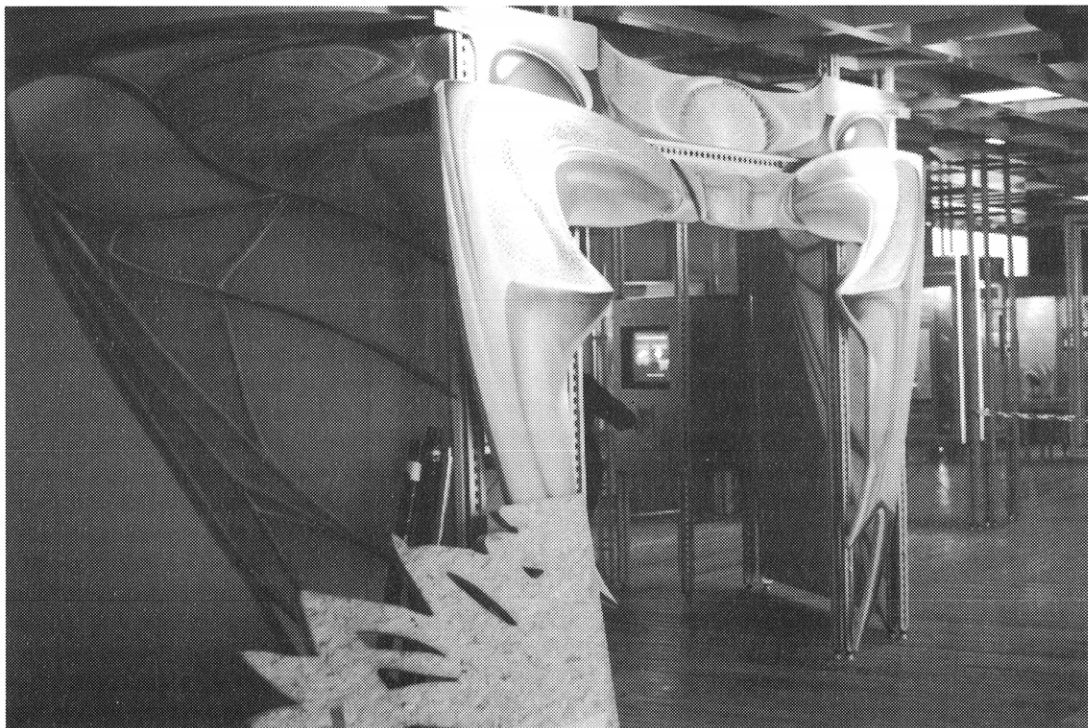
At the end of the day we drifted off towards the tram terminus very conscious of how little of this huge resource we had glimpsed during our visit.

Friday 10th November 1995
Royal Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels (Het Koninklijk Belgisch Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen / L'Institut royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique) Friday was bright and cold. The (apparently) more vigorous provincials traversed the city on foot, losing sight, for some considerable time, of our national and largely subterranean counterparts. The Institute was just off the edge of our Brussels map and gave us no real advanced warning of its presence until we were almost upon it.

It sits in a surprisingly small space in an old Brussels suburb and is an imposing, and as we were to find out later, well designed structure. The exterior is tiled and, at the front, is studded with golden Belgian royal crowns. Sitting on the front doorstep is a huge reconstruction of Iguanodon around which our scattered band eventually gathered.

We were ushered through to the museum lecture theatre and formally introduced to the history and work of the institute by members of its staff. The Museum has its origins in the personal collections of Charles of Lorraine (1718-1780), the governor of the Austrian Low Countries but it was founded formally Leopold I on 31 March 1846 as the Musée Royal d'Histoire Naturelle. By 1891, its original building, the Hotel de Nassau, could no longer hold it and with Leopold II's assent it was installed in an old convent in the Park Leopold to which an additional wing was added in 1905. At the same time the emphasis of the institution was directed at all-round scientific investigation of the national territories. The original plans for the Institute were drawn up in the 1930s and followed Bauhaus principles but the war intervened and the building was not completed until the early 1980s.

We were briefed on the days programme by its organiser, the



Royal National Institute, Brussels

dipterist, Dr Patrick Grottaerts. Again we separated into groups for our tours.

At this point the clever design of the building became clear. In effect it is composed of two towers, one of which contains store-rooms and the other the researchers and technicians and live cultures. In this way the collections were separated from the potentially hazardous humans which every museum employs to work on them. The towers were linked across landings and by interesting elevators and safer stairs.

My group's first foray was into the Mollusca collections which are huge and, as we saw, are being very actively documented on computer. The store-rooms were wonderfully designed with ceramic tile floors, walls plinths to the cabinets and a double drainage sluice down each central aisle. This aisle had walk-in rooms at each side which, in the case of spirit stores, were capable of being sealed off by a heavy metal sliding door. Any cabinets in use for dry material were very familiar as being of the same highly crafted oak construction in use at Tervuren. All of the store-rooms followed the same basic layout.

In the Mollusca stores was the huge collection of Philippe Dautzenberg (1849-1935) — 4,000,000 specimens of 38,000 species (31,000 recent; 7,000 fossil). Bequeathed with the collection was his superb library of 7,967 books and reprints with many historic works in pristine condition. One member of the party became so absorbed in these (any guesses?) as to be very nearly locked in. Later the prisoner confessed that it was probably the best mollusca library that she had ever seen and that she would not have minded being locked up for a month or so.

Across in the other tower (I was never quite sure which floor I was on) we glimpsed research into dust mites and were treated to a video replay of their jumping and tumbling skills. (I never knew that dust mites could be so interesting.) We were also briefed about ecological work on weevils and Empidid flies in Papua New Guinea. The diversity of weevil species in quite limited sampling plots was quite staggering with around 600 species found so far. The department has rather more staff than its equivalent at Tervuren and, accordingly, carries out much of its own ecological analysis.

The insect collections here surpassed in numbers those at Tervuren

with an estimate of over 15 million specimens housed in 90,000 drawers. Cerambycid beetles alone accounted for 2.8 million of the numbers. Again, naphthalene was much in evidence and we were told that each box was 'disinfected' with carbon tetrachloride before its return to the shelves after examination.

After lunch in the Institute's restaurant there was an opportunity to browse the shop which was well stocked with the results of the staffs' researches. The Institute fulfils an important role as the hub of Belgian national recording schemes and the resultant distribution maps were evident in many of the guides to the fauna of Belgium.

After lunch I joined a group for a tour of the vertebrate storage with Dr Rogemans. The collection, once again are considerable — 200,000 fish, 30,000 amphibians, 13,000 reptiles, 72,000 birds and 23,000 mammals. More Coelacanth were spotted through the clear tops of some huge spirit containers in the well organised spirit storage. The mammal study skins seemed innumerable and a shelf full of Thylacines got one of our Merseyside colleagues quite excited. Two passenger pigeon mounts were pulled out for us to look at along with the institute's uniquely coloured Great Auk mount. This specimen has pale grey streaks along the side of its belly.

We were then taken to see a freshly arrived, huge heap of confiscated animal skins including zebra, tiger, leopard and lion, which had been brought in for identification and assessment. It was quite a sad sight. Dr Rogemans rounded off our tour with a demonstration of the bird ringing programme which the Institute coordinates.

At the end of the day there was plenty of time to admire the displays. Superb minerals were on view along with the stupendous 'herd' of Iguanodon skeletons from Bernissart. The complete skeletons on display made the nearby animatronic figures with their slow 'break-dance' movements pale into insignificance. There was also a good range of live and nasty looking spiders and scorpions on display which our chairman enjoyed immensely. For myself, I can never wholly approve of displays in which Orthoptera are the perpetual victims.

A new development in progress is

the Insect gallery (with interactive computer screens) which looked good and incorporated design features inspired by the local brand of Art Nouveau. We were allowed to look around as staff rushed to and fro furnishing cases and sorting out the lighting.

By now I was suffering from overload and I wandered back to the hotel reflecting on the sheer volume of what we had seen here and at Tervuren. It was very kind of the staff of both institutions to spend so much time pandering to our whims and, as was said at the end of the Amsterdam trip, I hope that they will give us the opportunity of returning the compliment one day.

I would like to put in a word of thanks to the numerous BCG members for sharing notes and observations on the bits I did not get to see. Incidentally, one member of our party had no clear recollection of anything he had seen. Was he the only one? I hope so.

Meanwhile back in Paris.....

Steve Moran, Inverness Museum