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displays. There are real tree trunks where bark rubbings can be made; a large cartoon panel representing the Bolton area incorporating lift-up doors with questions and answers about pollution, and a large floor game which can be used to explain food chains and webs and also helps form a link between all the species represented in the gallery.

The Wildlife Study Centre, adjacent to the new gallery, is an informal classroom in which school furniture, which is attractive but very resilient, has been used to create an environment which is familiar to children. It contains the more highly technical, interactive areas including a sealed unit containing a video-camera with a self-focusing macro-lens which allows instant magnification onto two television screens of all sorts of objects from the natural world. These objects are available in 70 clear, perspex-lidded plastic drawers as well as specimens on open display about the room. A touch-screen computer provides details on local sites and species and is complementary to the habitats displayed in the gallery. Notice-boards and a small display case are available for local societies, voluntary groups and museum staff to display details of field meetings, wildlife surveys and other events.

Both the gallery and the study centre opened on 17 August 1994, winning the North West Museum of the Year award in June 1995 for the category "best, new, innovative display."

#### **WILDLIFE ON YOUR DOORSTEP GALLERY – EDUCATIONAL USE.**

*Trish Harper, Bolton Museum.*

School visits are regarded by the children as time off school, and we try to make the session as different an experience as possible. Teachers must feel that the visit has been worthwhile educationally so we try to tackle each subject in some depth, covering material that would take several lessons in a normal classroom situation.

Lessons are planned to relate closely to the gallery collections, and research in the galleries plays a key part in all lessons. Children are encouraged to be active – to go and look, to ask questions, to find a book, or to try things out for themselves.

The introductory part may be organisational information or, as in the case of 'On the Rocks', a short talk on which to build the session's activities. This is given to the whole class, and then the children are divided into smaller groups so that they can carry out a series of different activities. The activities are planned in a sequence, but the children can start at any point and complete a circuit – which means that no-one is kept waiting, everyone is busy. The concluding activity may simply be a showing of the work completed, or a reporting back session by the children.

While obviously in the natural history galleries and the aquarium we are dealing with National Curriculum Science, we find that we are covering a very important part of the English National Curriculum, that of speaking and listening. Most of the workshops and lessons are geared to Key Stage 2, this age group being the bulk of our visitors.

#### **COPING WITH THE NUMBERS – NATURAL HISTORY DOCUMENTATION AT GUERNSEY MUSEUMS & GALLERIES**

*Alan Howell, Natural History Officer, Guernsey Museums.*

Although the scale of our documentation 'challenge' is somewhat smaller than that of the Natural History Museum,

it does none-the-less present a challenge, given the resources which are available. Any situation is a product of history and a short resume of the museum story in Guernsey will help to clarify this. The Museum's natural history holdings (estimated at 35,000 items) essentially come from two Victorian collections:

1. *The Lukis Collection* – amassed by members of the local Lukis family during the nineteenth century and bequeathed to the States [government] of Guernsey in 1907. The material includes geology and conchology. A contemporary manuscript mineral catalogue lists 901 items and some of the 5000 or so specimens bear numbers relating to this – some others have data labels. The shells are mostly without data but include the first living *Triton* specimens recorded from British waters – a matter of some controversy at the time.

2. *The Guille-Alles Collection* – the contents of the Guille-Alles Museum, founded in 1885 (but incorporating older material) and deposited on long loan to the Guernsey Museum & Galleries service in 1978. The Guille-Alles Museum had strong support from the local natural history society and amassed considerable natural science holdings in most of the traditional areas of collecting. It includes the insect collection of William Luff – estimated at 20,000 specimens in 1910. The only documentation for the collection as a whole consisted of display labels and an inventory made by contracted (non-specialist) labour just before the museum was packed for transfer to Guernsey Museum's main storage premises. The Guille-Alles Museum had been run by a succession of honorary curators, with no permanent full-time staff. Guernsey only appointed a full-time and professionally trained curator in 1972 (despite having been responsible for the Lukis Collection since 1907) and the modern States administered service has developed since that date. The first natural history specialist was appointed in 1986, bringing the curatorial complement to three. With the other behind-the-scenes staff (Director, education officer, three general technicians and two administrative staff) the service supports eight museums at three sites. There is no separate registrar or documentation specialist, although experience has shown, and continues to demonstrate, that this would be desirable.

Given the poor state of documentation relating to the natural history collections in 1986, improvement of this was seen as something of a priority for the newly appointed Natural History Officer. The task was part of the overall need to assess and curate these two Victorian collections. The physical curation of the collections was largely deferred, pending removal to a new storage facility. Although the scheme to provide this facility (as a separate entity) has latterly been shelved in favour of a revised service-wide storage solution, the situation did provide an environment where some concerted effort was possible on the documentation of the collection.

From the outset it was decided to computerise the data, and in effect the natural history collections provided the pilot for the introduction of computers into the service generally. The MDA's MODES software was the chosen route, although the service did not have a history of using the manual MDA system, having used typed, loose-leaf accession sheets, with duplicate series arranged by subject and storage location. The production of these typed sheets had not progressed to include any of the older natural history material, so it was doubly appropriate to commence the computerisation effort in this area. The approach has been to

divide the overall task into specific miniprojects, driven variously by achievability, worth, opportunity and short-term requirements. In this way the overall long-term aim of developing indexable records of our collections and their storage locations is gradually being met. The psychological advantage gained from completion of these mini-projects cannot be overstated. The first of them (a computer generated version of the 901 entries in the Lukis Mineral catalogue – with donor and collection site indexes) was a memorable advance. Since then, other projects have included the Guille-Alles geology collection, various sections of the Guille-Alles vertebrate material (mammals, fish and birds) and a small collection of Blaschka glass invertebrate models. The latter was undertaken in response to an enquiry, the fish and bird projects were driven by display selection requirements.

More recently the museum has acquired the RECORDER biological recording software, with the original intention of developing site and species based records for the island. It had been hoped to develop a Biological Records Centre, in conjunction with the local natural history society, La Societe Guernesaise. Unfortunately, there has been little corporate interest (on their part) to participate in such a scheme as the Society is perfectly happy with its own recording systems. For our part, however, RECORDER looks to be an ideal tool for capturing data relating to our insect collection. It has been used effectively to record the label data from part of a lepidoptera collection, where the specimens had been destroyed by infestation. Although the remainder of the collection is in good condition, we may continue to use RECORDER in the same way for **individual specimen data**, rather than attempting a formal numbering and accessioning procedure for each and every specimen. Overall, the insect collection is catalogued in MODES; each drawer or storebox is numbered and has a separate MODES record. The taxonomic groups within each storage unit are recorded as keyword strings and it has thus been possible to generate, quite quickly, a simple 'finding aid' index.

The downside, as far as natural history in Guernsey Museums is concerned, has effectively been a reduction in dedicated staff resources. The pilot project to develop computerised cataloguing (using the natural history collection) has expanded to cover museum specimen documentation procedures in all other disciplines. Unfortunately dedicated staff to accomplish this have not been forthcoming and the end result has been a lessening of time devoted purely to natural history matters, as day to day documentation and computer support services have taken precedence. The service is committed to Phase 2 of the MGC Registration Scheme and this involves removal of documentation 'backlogs' by the year 2000. A documentation assistant with MODES experience has recently joined the staff (initially for 6 months) and we are working towards the target of a basic record for each object, on a five year time scale. However, it is anticipated that the insect collection will, in the main and for the foreseeable future, still be recorded by taxonomic group, on a storage unit rather than a specimen by specimen basis.

#### **COLLECTIONS DATABASE POLICY AND STRATEGY AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM.**

*Rob Huxley, Natural History Museum, London.*

The Museum is committed to the policy of databasing all of its collections. The objectives are to improve accessibility to the collections, to enhance the efficiency of curation and to aid monitoring and evaluation. Improved accessibility to the information contained within the collections is required to meet both internal and external needs. These needs stem from a variety of demands including those from countries working towards implementing the Biodiversity Convention, from education initiatives aimed at improving knowledge of natural history and the discipline of systematics, from commercial and environmental organisations, and from projects involving modelling and mapping of data. A further objective is to link our databases with those being constructed in other museums and relevant research institutions so as to share information in reaching common goals. A network of databases should help to improve collecting and conservation strategies, increase understanding of the diversity and distribution of plants, animals, rocks and minerals, and to make better use of limited resources.

A Collections Database Board has been set up under the Chairmanship of the Director for Science which has formulated the following policies and strategies for the foreseeable future.

#### **Software development**

It is the Museum's clear intention to develop software for collections databases in a precise and coordinated manner that will be compatible with the Museum's overall Information Strategy. It is therefore imperative for all specimen-based databases prepared in the Museum (including research databases) to conform to Museum's agreed standards. Prototype software will be developed in-house, but these will be rebuilt by professional programmers after successful trials have been completed.

The collections databasing strategy is to use the prototype Interbase Collections Core Database, as developed by Len Nunn, at the apex. Core data fields have already been decided and approved. The core database will be made available to users of the Internet who will be able to make enquiries about Museum holdings from a single file.

The Museum will work towards the development and adoption of three databases which will contain the complete dataset and support the core database. They will hold Library, Earth Science and Life Science data. At the moment many local software systems are in operation but the Museum reduce these to three systems which will all be compatible with the core database enabling data interchange.

The Library database and Earth Sciences prototype database are at advanced stages of development but the Life Sciences software needs much more development. However, the data dictionary and list of fields are approved. The development sequence of the various modules has also been approved but the timetabling needs to be updated and submitted for approval to the Collections Database Board.

#### **Data Capture**

Most Museum collections are arranged such that they act as their own index, in effect they themselves form an enormous physical database. We now need to transfer that data into electronic form to increase its availability and to maximise on its utility. All possible forms of data capture will be explored (typing, scanning, OCR, voice recognition) in order to make data entry as effective as possible. It is