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The Biology Curator

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with the work which we now hope to finance ourselves or by finding other sponsors. We are currently exploring the possibility of establishing an entirely new museum in the Republic of Ireland.

If you are interested in this scheme please contact: John Ben L.I.A.S. Tel: 0115 9709076. Fax: 0115 9704852. E-Mail: John.Ben.@nott.ac.uk.

Natural Sciences Curatorial Course

Leicester University Department of Museum Studies
Summer 1996

Course leader: Simon Knell

Tutors: Derek Lott, Jan Dawson, John Martin, Grace Deeks

Outline of course

The course examined the role of the museum natural scientist in the museum environment. Those attending came from a diverse range of backgrounds ranging from full time students on Leicester University's Museum Studies Course to occasional students, from home and abroad.

The course aimed to have a practical emphasis, to be of the greatest use to those about to embark on careers in the natural science museum environment and was structured into the following six units:

- Historical and contemporary context
- Collecting and recording
- Preservation and preparation
- Identification and enquiries
- Conservation and collection management
- Systematics, taxonomy and nomenclature

A course pack for the week was provided, which contained introductions to the modules and the specific learning objectives of each, as well as a bibliography of useful texts and, where copyright permitted, specific articles of interest.

In accordance with the practical nature of the course there were very few formal lecture sessions beyond the introductory 'Historical and Contemporary Context' unit. This module explored the origin and context of natural science collections and examined current strategies for such collections and the specialist expertise needed to fulfil these roles.

The second unit looked at the role of museums in collecting natural history specimens, methods of collection and standards for recording, in line with national and local strategies. Included in this was the legal and ethical constraints of collecting.

Following on from this was an exploration of the methods of preservation for biological and zoological collections and the implications of using each technique upon the subsequent research use of the collections.

Identification of specimens and enquiries is an important component of curatorial work, so unit four was given over to this. Obviously it would take lifetime to be able to identify all the enquiries that may be brought in, however the basics

of identification of common groups of specimens was explored and there was plenty of opportunity for practice.

There are issues in collection management and conservation of collections that are specific to natural history collections. These were scrutinised and specific examples such as labelling, types of containers, mounting and hazards both to and from collections were addressed.

The course was, as previously mentioned, as practical as possible. During the week visits were undertaken to Leicestershire's Biological Records Centre, and to the various natural science departments of Leicestershire Museum Service. Field work was also conducted in some of Leicestershire's nature reserves, as well as a successful, and a somewhat less successful, batwatching trip to Foxton Locks and Barrow Upon Soar respectively. Thursday involved a terrific field visit to Dove Dale to view and identify the fabulous range of flora and, to a lesser extent, fauna of the area.

Personal perspective

I found the course and the supporting material extremely useful. Like the other modules that make up Leicester University's Museum Studies course, this is not intended to spoon feed those attending, but to encourage professional self-development, both during and after the course.

For me the course broadened and consolidated my image of natural science in museums. Coming from a largely geological background it gave me a valuable insight into the nuts and bolts of biological curatorship. I was surprised how much of it appears to be common sense identification and diligent recording, just as with the earth sciences. I feel the eclectic mix of participants also added a lot by providing a broad base of current experience and a lot of fun. Hopefully these contacts will continue for many years to come. Finally the course literature gave useful leads to papers and articles on the current 'best practice'. Wisely the course restricted itself to curatorial activities rather than attempting a dangerously shallow introduction to conservation, other than of a preventative nature.

I really enjoyed the course; the field sessions, bat detecting and biological surveying, were particularly outstanding, though that had much to do with the environment and weather. My only regret is that the course only lasted a week and only included one Indian meal....c'est la vie.

Matthew Stephens