



NEWSLETTER

February 1993

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Editorial – Happy New Year !

In the last issue I intimated that in future issues of this newsletter there would be a short diatribe from the Editor on a matter of current moment. In the run up to the deadline for this issue I pondered on the possibilities – taxonomy, training, university collections, the national structure for biological recording, curatorial standards, green issues, the role of BCG etc. Then quite suddenly and quite literally all these were swept away when on Sunday 17 January, after heavy snowfalls and a sudden thaw, the River Tay (flow greater than Thames and Severn combined) burst through the flood banks and filled half of Perth with water. The museum stores on the ground floor were filled to a depth of 22 inches in the worst flood since 1814 (which was of course pre hydro scheme and dams on the river system). I cannot possibly describe the feeling of watching water spreading through the stores, rising up the storage units both new and old and lapping around for twelve hours before draining away as the waters receded. There are no previous records of flood water entering the building.

And now the good news! Our natural sciences collections escaped largely unscathed if a little disordered. Six mollusca drawers were soaked but specimens and labels have been stabilised, and as I write there is a lingering smell of decomposing turtle (from a specimen which was I suspect more of a souvenir than a museum specimen and which had, I now realise, not been properly prepared).

The museum is currently closed to the public as the display areas are needed to work through the social history and fine and applied art collections which were damaged but normal services will, as they say, be resumed as soon as possible. So why the editorial? Well, the point is this. If I had needed more specialist advice, where would I have got it? Where are the colleagues with experience of flood-damaged biological collections or the manual containing well documented and researched techniques for stabilising wet specimens? As I watched the teams of conservators from the Scottish Museums Council, National Galleries of Scotland, National Museums of Scotland and the Scottish Record Office all beavering away it did cross my sceptical little mind to wonder what would have happened if the natural history collections had been seriously damaged? So the point is ~~this~~ (trainers, researchers, writers and publishers please take note) we need more readily accessible sources of information, we need people who can be mobilised in an emergency, we need checklists of emergency procedures and we need proven recovery procedures. And if your museum has no disaster plan get one drafted. Experience of some form of incident is the best way of honing your own disaster skills but I hope that none of you ever get that experience and I earnestly wish that this will have been the only major disaster in my career. Thankfully events on this scale do not happen often and so most recent attention has focused on the problem of slow attrition of natural history material by neglect. It's easy to be wise

after the fact so let's start compiling information before the next disaster strikes. After all, it could be your turn next.

Correspondence on the topic of disaster control – or anything else for that matter to the editor please. And in case you're feeling down – a belated Happy New Year to you all !

Diary Dates

March 28 - April 4

Taxonomy and biology of parasitic hymenoptera – A week-long residential course at Sheffield University.

This will be the fourth in a successful series, initiated in 1989, run jointly by Mike Fitton of the Natural History Museum, London and Donald Quicke of the University of Sheffield.

The difficulties of identifying this most fascinating group of insects are well-known to museum entomologists. This course aims to give a broad overview of the parasitic Hymenoptera, especially their biology and systematics. It comprises an integrated combination of lectures and practicals emphasising identification and techniques. Participants on past courses have included curators from museums abroad, but so far none from Britain! Only a moderate background biological/entomological knowledge is assumed.

The full fee for the course is £550 (which covers tuition, the course manual, course notes, accommodation and all meals, except lunches) but we are able to offer bursaries to offset some of the cost to students and others (like most BCG members?) with limited finances. For more information please contact Donald Quicke, Dept. of Animal and Plant Sciences, PO Box 601, Univ. of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2UQ. Telephone: (0742) 768555 ext. 4628. FAX: (0742) 760159.

April 3-4

Natural History in the Field – British Society for the History of Science Meeting at Lyme Regis. Further details from Dr Janet Browne, West Grange, Church Street, Great Shelford, Cambridge, CB2 5EL.

April 16-19

Mammal Society Easter Conference and AGM at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Details from the conference secretary on 091 374 3348.

April 21

Caring for your natural history collections – Insect collections. Ipswich Museum. The first of three workshops organised by the Area Museum Service for south east England. Free to AMSEE members and limited to 12 places.

April 29-May 2

Glasgow. SHNH Scottish Conference dealing with Scottish Natural History and celebrating the bicentenary of John Hunter. Contributions from several BCG members. Details from Dr J. Gibson, Foremount House, Kilbarchan, Renfrewshire.

May 14

Conservation and the Herbarium – aimed at curators and conservators responsible for the welfare of Britain's 17 million herbarium sheets. Venue Liverpool, fee £40 for non-members of the Institute of Paper Conservation. Contact Nicola Walker, IPC, Leigh Lodge, Leigh, Worcs., WR6 6LB or further details from Tel 051 207 0001 ext 491.

May 19

Caring for ... Vertebrates. Booth Museum, Brighton. AMSEE workshop.

May 28-29

BCG AGM Inverness. Theme – Valuing Collections. Final programme in next newsletter but contact Steve Moran, Inverness Museum, Castle Wynd, Inverness, Tel 0463 237114, if you have any queries meantime.

June 2

Caring for ... Herbaria. Herbarium, RBG, Kew. AMSEE workshop.

April 20-22 1994

The development of International Communication in Natural History will be the theme of the next SHNH conference to be held in London.

Madrid

Yes finally, an account of the much talked about conference which is likely to affect the philosophy of biological curation for some time to come. Apologies to the writers of other accounts which seem to have been mislaid in the great flood of Perth.

The International Symposium and First World Congress on the preservation and Conservation of Natural History Collections was held in Madrid on 10-15 May 1992

Billed as an attempt to meet the challenges of preserving Natural History Collections for the next 500 years this symposium promised to be a significant event in the future of all Natural History Museums. In actual fact it was rather difficult to work out from the initial literature just what the content would be. The three main components seemed to be a 4 or 5 day conference with an associated collection care training course followed on the last day by a World Congress. This certainly seemed to be a unique opportunity, but how did it live up to the participants' expectations? This is not an easy question to answer since the ambiguous preliminary literature led many people to a variety of ideas about what they were in for.

On the whole I would suggest that few people were disappointed overall by the week in Madrid (not least because of the weather!) because a great many wide ranging issues were covered. The disappointed were mainly those expecting a rather more specialised week covering practical preservation methods – quite justifiably considering the conference title. However, what we got was far more general in content and global in outlook. I think it is fair to say that those from a national museum dealing with taxonomy and having global collecting policies will certainly have taken more from this symposium than the average UK conservator.

Much of the discussion in the general sessions reflected the need for more work and resources into biodiversity studies and their attendant collection and taxonomy problems. Much time was given to exploring the role that major western (First World) museums play in promoting

collection care in the places where many of the specimens are taken, the Third World. In this context, restitution of cultural and natural heritage was frequently raised – albeit minus the controversial contribution from Jonathan Haas of the Chicago Field Museum (the cause of an unfortunately complex final voting session on the Friday).

Another frequently raised point was the sheer enormity of our job of cataloguing the natural world, provoking the coining by Bob May of the expression 'quick and dirty' for new means of effectively covering the task of describing our biota. Solutions to this ranging from systematic collections management to the training of so-called field para-taxonomists.

These wider global issues were rather more than many of us had expected from the conference. Many wanting more discussion of the how's of preservation than the why's of collection management. This said, however, the standard of presentation was very high, with addresses from many leaders in their field leaving us in no doubt of the importance and enormity of our task. Not only of preserving but promoting the preservation of natural history collections.

Some personal highlights were the talks by Phil Doughty on collections assessment and long range planning; Lord Dainton with his outsider's view of the secret garden (!); Ron McGinley on planning for and managing collection growth ("for they don't know what they are doing . . ."); and Cliff McCauley's honest look at the role of ICOM.

The general sessions were held in the main hall of the Superior Council of Scientific Research but each afternoon delegates were transferred to the Institute of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. Here were held discussions of the morning presentations, meetings of special interest groups, large numbers of poster presentations and the training workshops. This was also the base for the resources centre which contained a wide range of references, data bases and conservation materials for delegates to get their teeth into.

The training workshops were certainly the reason (and justification) for the presence of many of the technical conservation staff. They gave an opportunity to catch up with the present state of play in natural history conservation and to obtain information that is quite simply not yet available on conservation techniques. Each session was led by recognised experts and from the experience of the sessions which I attended were of an exceptionally high standard.

The main problem in the afternoon and evening sessions was that of timetabling. Whereas several of the general morning sessions covered the same topic, each of the concurrent workshops were one-off and attendance at one meant missing another. Equally due to traffic, late lunches and other organisational flaws, attendance at the timetabled sessions left little or no time for viewing the posters, doing justice to the resource centre, or attending special interest meetings. For example, one discussion session had to be missed in order that the UK reps could get together to discuss the formation of a national natural history conservation group.

Tighter time-keeping all round would have made life a lot easier. With more than a 60 hour week it certainly cannot be said that there was nothing to do. One can only imagine what the Spanish organisers made of 12 hour days with no siesta!

The World Congress on the final day was an attempt to sum the week up and produce resolutions which among other things could be put before the 'Earth Summit' (UNCED) at Rio in June. These outlined many of the pressing issues related to natural history collections care and use which had been discussed throughout the week. These included recommendations for research and development in conservation techniques; the training of systematists and collection managers; promotion of collections through public awareness; and the establishment of museums in developing countries. The resolutions look impressive and summarise the importance and plight of natural history collections well but whether they are given the attention they deserve at Rio or elsewhere remains to be seen. It will be interesting to see if things have moved forward at

all for the second congress to be held again in Spain in 4 years time. Unless Mr Clinton recognises that even Americans will benefit from understanding the world they live in, I suspect not!

Although this was an excellent symposium, I would suggest that the next one should concentrate more on the specifics of collection management or invite a different type of delegate and try preaching to the *unconverted*.

My attendance in Madrid was made possible by generous grant aid from the MGC Conservation Unit.

Paul Richards, Sheffield Museum

Annual Meeting of Herbarium Curators

During a recent visit to Missouri Botanical Garden I was able to join an informal meeting of herbarium curators which is held every year during the Annual Plant Systematics symposium at St. Louis. Readers of the ASC newsletter will know that American curators face many of the same problems as ours, and it was interesting to hear how they propose to solve them.

The longest discussion was on the subject of charging for access to information derived from specimen data. Particular problems have arisen from the reluctance of environmental consultancies to deposit summary data arising from their studies in institutes which have supplied some of the raw data. This has prompted a move towards the development of written policies governing the use of information, so that those having access to specimen data agree in advance to let the supplier have access to the finished product.

Other uses for which greater consistency on charging policies was being sought included artists/illustrators, some of whom are able to persuade their publishers to offer benefits in kind in exchange for access; loans for display, particularly where charges are needed to cover the costs of conservation assessment; and "data leasing", a rather novel concept whereby consultants can use the data for a specified period

after which the agreement lapses. This creates a category of "time-expired" data which are no longer in the public domain. It is intriguing to think that data might be accessed rather like loans of specimens, to be handed back after a specified period, but I can't see how one polices such a system. Most curators agreed that the biggest task was to educate the market to expect charges; in this respect, non-profit organisations are less inclined to accept charges than are commercial concerns, most of whom pass them on to their clients. Computerisation of collections data has led to a notable increase in the levels of requests, as users begin to appreciate the value of information held in databases.

The second major topic of discussion was on conservation concerns, with particular reference to the pro's and con's of deep-freezing. The feeling at the meeting was that the risks of causing cracking of specimens glued directly to paper had been over-stated in a recent article in *Taxon*, and that control of humidity fluctuations during freezing was sufficient to avoid such problems. Double-dip freezing, however, was becoming more common, except where large volumes are handled in walk-in freezers.

There was a short discussion of the latest developments in on-line access to databases. Many American herbaria are linked through INTERNET, a network analogous to JANET, and a number of new services are now freely available for the price of a call. Jane Lowry (New Mexico) maintains a directory of plant taxonomists on-line through BITNET. Missouri Botanical Garden is linked to several members of the Flora of North America editorial committee, giving them access to the TROPICOS database as well as e-mail facilities. The Grey Herbarium Card Index, a new world equivalent to Index Kewensis, has now been entered on computer and will be available from Jim Beach (Harvard) as a completely free downloadable service. This contrasts sharply with Kew's plans for a CD-ROM version of Index Kewensis; alarming rumours were circulating about the prices of the original data and updates. One of the most valuable aspects of the whole meeting was the chance to discover that one's problems are indeed shared by fellow curators. It

was uncanny, indeed, to hear people's experiences of seeking advice from government offices on the application of the CITES regulations; sounds familiar? It is a pity that BCG meetings do not yet attract a high percentage of herbarium curators in Britain, and I hope that this issue might perhaps be tackled soon by way of a special meeting. To make this a practical proposition, I would suggest that herbarium curators should have an informal get-together in Liverpool during the forthcoming conference on "Conservation in the herbarium" on the 14th May, 1993. Contact me for further details.

*John Edmondson, National Museum & Galleries
on Merseyside, Liverpool Museum, William
Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN.*

World in our Hands

Five years ago the Natural History Department debated ideas for new permanent exhibitions and top of the list was the environment. The next step was to plan it out. I discovered that although previous exhibitions had focused on individual environmental issues no-one had attempted to deal with the problems worldwide. Environmental problems effect us all, where ever we live, and this was the line I wanted to take. But how?

Agonizing over this problem one morning a solution suddenly came to mind. There would be five sections in the exhibition:

- (1) *a dramatic introduction* to orientate visitors;
- (2) *single species extinctions* showing extinctions through human activities;
- (3) *habitat destruction* showing why habitats are more important than single species;
- (4) *why wildlife matters* explaining why we need plants and animals for our survival;
- (5) *what can be done* describing how environmental problems can be solved.

After a long process of discussion and refinement the plan gradually took shape. We linked up with various outside environmental projects such as the Programme for Belize, which is creating tropical forest reserves and is featured in the exhibition.

Eventually our feasibility study was given the green light and we started to look for sponsorship.

IBM UK Ltd offered to help with computers and the Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund offered to provide up to half the costs. With this help and our own money we moved to the next stage – production.

The team putting the exhibition together grew and with the script finalised we worked out production schedules leading up to the opening day, 27 July.

Months of work are at last producing results – the AV show in the Biodome that introduces the exhibition, the Planet in Peril interactive devices, specimens from giant pandas to butterflies, the Coral Reef display, the reconstruction of dolphins trapped in a net and the touch-screen computer games.

The exhibition offers visitors an opportunity to become better informed about important environmental problems and what can be done to solve them. At the heart of the exhibition is an explanation of how living creatures all over this unique planet contribute to its vital life-support processes. We're confident that 'World In Our Hands' will be a success – come and see it!

*Graham Rotheray, Curator Insects,
Royal Museum of Scotland. Copied with thanks
from 'Museum Reporter' No. 26*

Training at Leicester

If the Newsletter is undergoing punctuated equilibrium, perhaps the provision of natural sciences training is the living embodiment of Plate Tectonics? We have seen the subduction of the crusty old MA Diploma, the MTI orogeny and now a northward shift in the British Isles has sent Geoff Stansfield spinning down to the Big Smoke and me to Leicester. Ironically, through all this our BCG/GCG Curatorial Course hotspot, the least institutionalised element in natural sciences training, has remained steadfast. Okay, that's enough of the pretty naff geological analogies but if you will appoint a geologist as Editor!

So how does this affect training at Leicester? That's a good question! As I write this I've hardly got my foot in the door – perhaps it's a bit too early to say. However, changes are already in place which affect the two special subject modules covering the natural sciences. These have now been merged with last year's Science option, a course essentially for those interested in science and technology museums and science centres, taught by Graham Durant of Hunterian Museum and Glasgow Dome of Discovery fame. Strangely, the merger mirrors that taking place in Glasgow Museums hinted at in recent issues of BCG Newsletter.

The new Sciences option will obviously place some constraints on teaching but I'd don't believe natural scientists should be overly concerned. Museum scientists do share a lot in common, particularly in trying to communicate their science to others, and there is much that can be learnt from developments in each discipline – after all the Natural History Museum was one of the first in Britain to adopt science centre technology (but that's another story!). One thing is certain, the Department is not going to produce a new cross-breed of curator – a sort of green techno-scientist; it will continue to supply curators in the traditional museum disciplines. The merger reflects the shortage of scientists wanting to be trained for a career in museums compared to the overwhelming numbers of historians and archaeologists. This is one area that perhaps BCG and GCG should be concerned about; how many of us saw museums as a possible career when we were undergraduates? I know I didn't.

Leicester's strength has always been in allowing curators and others to escape from the frontline of museum work, to examine broader issues, new techniques and developments. I don't see that role changing. Obviously with my background and interests, collections are going to remain the central thrust of training; the next generation of curators must not only be informed about standard techniques but also equipped to deal with neglect and sell the natural sciences to masters who may not be informed of their potential; the ethos of BCG and GCG. That's the aim anyway! The first courses will give equal weight to biology, geology and science but the next few years will

undoubtedly be a period for experimentation and change, to which I hope BCG and its membership will contribute.

*Simon Knell, Department of Museum Studies,
University of Leicester, 105 Princess Road East,
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523653.*

Hounded to extinction and beyond?

A few years ago I wrote a short note in the Newsletter pointing out that the market in rhino horn had placed a value on museum specimens that might warrant more stringent security. The Guardian (16.9.1992) recently reported that thieves had broken into Oslo Museum smashed an elephant skull and taken the tusks. While this may be a freak occurrence it is worth noting that Oslo is no nearer the centre of the ivory trade than Cleethorpes. With the dehorning of rhinos in the wild, a continuing decline in their numbers, military protection for many of those that survive and an implied death sentence for poachers, museum collections which are protected by relatively weak laws may increasingly be seen as a soft option for those desperate to acquire this material.

Simon Knell

People and Places

Scunthorpe shrinks!

Scunthorpe Museums Service is the latest in a long list of British museums to be affected by cuts in local government funding. After five years of expansion the Museums Service looks set to shrink back to its former self. Cash shortages have meant that some redundancies were likely but in response the museum staff have left like lemmings – Keeper of Natural Science post is temporarily frozen, Curator (deleted (in effect)), Exhibition Officer (frozen), Conservation Technician (deleted), Museum Assistant (deleted)... the list goes on. Of these posts it is expected that the natural science post will be filled in the new financial year provided the British economy doesn't plummet any further – and who can predict that! The Natural Science Department

remains for the time being the responsibility of Kevin Leahy, the Principal Keeper, with temporary trainee Museum Assistant (Natural Science) Sue Rainton keeping things ticking over. (Now the good news, this important post was advertised in December – Ed)

Peter Davis has been appointed Lecturer in Museum Studies attached to the Department of Archeology at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. A Masters Degree in Museum Studies will be launched next year and there will be a marked increase in the museological content of current undergraduate teaching. If anyone has promotional materials etc that may be of interest to Peter he will make good use of them.

Congratulations to John Mathias who is (as of 21.9.92) Assistant Director of Leicester Museums.

Please note that Jane Mee's correct address is Ludlow Museum, Old Street, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1NW, tel 0584 873857 and not as published in the last newsletter.

Ann Nicol, late graduate trainee in biology at Leicester Museums has been appointed to a one year post at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow working principally on the wet collections and osteological material. Her post was jointly funded by the Scottish Museums Council, the Pilgrim Trust and the D'Oyly Carte Trust.

News from Sheffield – from Derek Whiteley

A combination of poll-capping and financial legacies of the World Student Games has created a desperate financial situation here.

My old post, Assistant Keeper (Zoology) which had existed since the early 1960's has been deleted. Some duties will be taken over by Paul Richards and myself. We are promoting self-service access to collections and operating a basic enquiry service. Many other functions will disappear with the post.

The City Museum and the Natural History Section both have severe income targets. We are resisting the imposition of admission charges, bench charges for access to collections, and meeting targets by lectures, commercial enquiries, consultancy work and mini-blockbusters such as the 'Big Butterfly Show' and the 'Big Rock and

Fossil Show'! "Stack 'em high and sell 'em (the exhibitions) cheap" is the current motto; like it or not.

On the brighter side Jean Glasscock has joined us from English Nature to take the new post of Assistant Ecologist (Contracts) to action the growing consultancy wing. In August Lucy Heath became Sheffield Wildlife Action Officer, another new post funded by a three-way partnership with the Yorks Wildlife trust and the Countryside Commission. In November Jeremy Brown re-joins us to continue the RECAP Lepidoptera project, grant-aided by MGC 'Sunflower' money. In September, fresh from her NVQ Natalie Barlow also rejoined us as part-time assistant.

At the City Museum, Paul Richards and I have been seconded into a team organising a large exhibition of rock and pop music to make ends meet. Routine natural history will suffer but at least we get to play with neons and juke boxes. There is no doubt that things are going to get worse. Sheffield City Council faces massive financial problems in 1993/4, redundancies are looming and we are tied to the same committee responsible for World Student Games debts. We currently have a total expenditure and staff freeze in action.

Still, life goes on and I am hoping to woo local commerce and industry with a Sheffield Biodiversity Research Programme to channel new resources into our work. Our logo? – the ruby-tailed wasp *Chrysis ignita* of course!

The new Staff structure in Glasgow Museums — from Geoff Hancock

Within the last year a new staff structure has been introduced which has affected everyone in Glasgow's city museum service to a greater or lesser extent. Until recently there were eight departments, each of which had a Keeper and comprised a number of curatorial staff and technical support staff and conservators. As far as Natural History was concerned these last two categories were collectively referred to as 'Taxidermy'. This title, though convenient, was often misunderstood even by colleagues in other departments. Their work was more than the traditional skills of taxidermy or casting and modelling, as most forms of preparation and

conservation of older material was also undertaken, including geological work.

Inclusive of the other sections such as design and works (but excluding administration and the directorate) the whole of the staff are now grouped in one of three units. These are curatorial, conservation and creative services. The first of these is itself divided into three – art, history and science each with a newly graded post of senior curator. Conservation includes specialists and practitioners in various materials of which one is rather loosely labelled organic. This will provide for the well-being of a variety of museum objects but will obviously have biological collections as a major 'client'. Creative services will include those involved with all forms of presentation and taxidermy is one such skill. However, the usual problem experienced in those museums which have also tried to categorise processes into functions are anticipated. Who will apply the taxidermy process to the needs of curation or conservation? Perhaps a more pertinent question would be how will the individuals' work be organised given that the application of these skills is beyond their immediate line managers remit?

According to any one project, be it the relocation of a store or a temporary exhibition, a team, drawing members from all appropriate sections, will be given the task of ensuring it is carried out professionally, to a timetable and within budget.

The science section will embrace such disparate objects as steam engines and fungi, wirelesses and wireworms. These examples are drawn from different ends of a very large spectrum of more than linear complexity. Curators who are botanists or transport historians still function as such. One of the problems at Glasgow is that the middle of this spectrum is essentially missing. New staff and policies will be needed if the museum is going to attempt to cover other scientific issues such as inventions, voyages of discovery or medical history. The material evidence for this is preserved in the Hunterian collections in the university and in the national collections in Edinburgh. Cooperation rather than competition will be required here.

The new senior curator is Dr Darryl Mead, an industrial historian from the Powerhouse in Sydney. Six posts for science curators grades (i)-(iii) are presently allocated of which five are occupied by existing staff, the former keepers and assistants. The vacant post will be filled once all the dust has settled. The former deputy keeper of natural history, Fred Woodward, has taken early retirement leaving a large gap catering for the marine environment and the phylum Mollusca. As Scotland has a lot of the former and the museum has large collections of the latter this is a loss already being felt.

The Dodo and the Bonfire – A Myth Laid to Rest

The tale of the Oxford dodo is a celebrated museological story concerning, as it does, subjects dear to a curator's heart: ie. the perils of deaccessioning and interfering trustees. The traditional version of the story has it that in 1755, at the annual visit to the Ashmolean Museum of the trustees and Vice-Chancellor, the Museum's stuffed dodo was ordered to be burnt as, in its dilapidated state, it was considered not worth preserving. At some time later, when the specimen was put on the bonfire, a brave curator rushed in and pulled out the head and foot from the flames and the dodo was saved from complete destruction. This story seems to be beloved of lecturers; I heard it most recently twice at a conference in sunny Spain. Although I have often day-dreamed about my heroic predecessor and wondered what the equivalent action today might be, I felt that Oxford University was being unfairly condemned. Therefore it was good to see a more accurate picture published in a paper by the former Librarian of the Ashmolean Library, R.F. Ovenell, in *Archives of Natural History*.

Ovenell suggests that the true story, as far as it is now possible to discern, is not nearly so dramatic. The Vice-Chancellor and the trustees did indeed make their annual visit to the Museum and ordered that decaying specimens be removed from exhibition. The dodo fell into this category and the curators at the time carefully preserved what could be saved. It was not by heroics or a lucky accident that the head and foot survived to be listed in the 1756 catalogue of the zoological specimens. There

is no documentary evidence for a fire; the idea of the fire was introduced during the nineteenth century when the concept that the dodo was destroyed as an act of vandalism took hold.

It is hardly surprising that over the hundred years between the donation of the dodo to the University and the fateful visit in 1755 that the dodo had rotted – we still have considerable difficulty keeping specimens pest-free! Although the head and foot were preserved it was another hundred years before the Oxford dodo became truly immortal in the pages of Alice in Wonderland.

Ovenell, R.F. 1992 'The Tradescant Dodo', *Archives of Natural History* 19 (2): 145-152.

*Jane Pickering, Assistant Curator of Zoology,
University Museum, Oxford.*

Return of the Warrah

Another extinct species, the Warrah or Falkland Island Fox *Duscicyon australis* was the subject of an idiosyncratic piece of writing by Rear Admiral Sir Christopher Layman no less in the MoD Conservation Magazine 'Sanctuary' (no.20, 1991) which has recently been brought to our notice. Having found that the only known mounted specimen of the species was in the Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique "it was then an interesting exercise in bureaucratic manipulation" to get the specimen returned to the Falklands to "John Smith's marvellous museum in my old Falklands home, Britannia House, where (it) clearly ought to be". Really? Apparently the Falklands military mafia came in handy as it "turns up in surprising places and can usually get things done". I bet! Watch out for loan requests accompanied by stun grenades and large gents in red berets. I wonder if MGC registration applies in the Falklands and what environmental conditions are like in Mr Smith's museum? Bet the security's good though!

Proposed BSBI Study Group

Watch out for a note in BSBI News suggesting the formation of a Study Group for the History of the Discovery of the Vascular Flora of the British

Isles. Surely a move to be applauded if it helps to focus the attention of active field botanists to their often neglected (scientifically and sometimes curatorially) local herbaria.

Information Wanted

Barry Constantine, 4 The Green, Skipsea, East Yorks YO25 8SZ, is wanting to compile reference material of coleoptera, synantropic insects and ectoparasites to assist his researches into the remains of faunas in archeological sites. Barry is particularly interested in acquiring specimens of saproxylic beetles, aquatic beetles and bugs, pests of stored products and bird, animal or human ectoparasites especially any European species no longer found in Britain.

Any information on the whereabouts of any spirit preserved material or manuscript material from the family of the late Basil Bunting (1900-1985) would be welcomed by Colin Simms, Low Woodhead North, Bellingham, Northumberland.

Numbers and distribution of muntjac in Britain is the subject of research by Professor Stephen Harris at Bristol University Zoology Dept., School of Biological Sciences, Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UG. Please contact Prof. Harris if you can help with distribution data or survey work.

Publications

'Standards in the Museum Care of Biological Collections 1992' – now available from the Museums and Galleries Commission, 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA price £6 including p&p (£10 outside the UK). This important document *will* affect you in one way or another. Short critiques would be welcome for the next newsletter.

'Horse Power: a history of the horse and donkey in human societies' by Juliet Clutton-Brock. £19.95 from the Natural History Museum.

Also from the NHM are two publications to mark last year's centenary of Sir Richard Owen. A 'Richard Owen Commemoration' by Jacob Gruber and John Thackray (£29.95) and 'The Hunterian Lectures in Comparative Anatomy May and June 1837' (£15.95 pbk).

'Scottish Bats'. This new serial is available from South-east Scotland Bat Groups, 9 Brunswick Street, Edinburgh, EH7 5JB. Volume one contains distribution maps of all Scottish species and other articles. Price £3 including p&p.

The 'Checklist of the Plants of Perthshire' by RAH Smith et al is the first account of this superb area since the 1898 'Flora'. A complete flora is planned but meanwhile this annotated checklist will fill you in with the summary distribution of all local species. Price £5.00 pbk.

At last! – a letter to the Editor.

Dear Editor,

These are difficult days. We read and hear about problems at what we previously considered stalwart natural history museums e.g. Bristol, Glasgow, Sheffield and even the Hancock Museum, Newcastle.

Yet interest in natural history, biological recording, collections, natural history exhibitions and the demand for our services have never been greater and continue to increase.

It is all a question of £££ and image. BCG can continue to play a key role by campaigning and lobbying for both. Every letter and every targetted leaflet helps. BCG's watchdog activities and ongoing campaigns continue to notch up notable successes. It is more important than ever to keep the heat on.

It is the long term security of collections, records and biological archives which worries me most. I sometimes get the feeling that only BCG is out there able to help with an independent voice. I wish the BCG Committee the very best of luck. I shall be with you in spirit if not in body. I think it was Bill Pettitt on the Isle of Man who suggested that we adopt the old Hill Street Blues slogan "Lets do it to them before they do it to us".

Derek Whiteley, Sheffield, (ex Secretary BCG)

Mothballs, Curators and the Law

Collections managers use a wide range of substances to control pests and mould. A preventative control strategy including monitoring, inspection and risk reduction is best but occasionally an active infestation may be found. We can use a 'green' control method, such as freezing, but we may need to use chemical control methods. Are these methods as used by museums legal?

1. Legislation

Statutory powers to control pesticides are contained in the Food and Environmental Protection Act 1985 (FEPA). The aim of these controls is to:

1. Protect the health of humans, plants and animals.
2. Safeguard the environment
3. Secure safe, efficient and humane methods of controlling pests.
4. Make public information about pesticides.

The mechanism for achieving these aims is set out in regulations made under the act. This is the important bit and is called the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 (COPR). This details how a pesticide can be "approved". An "approved" pesticide can be sold, supplied, used, stored or advertised. All approved non-agricultural pesticides are registered with the Health and Safety Executive.

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1988 (COSHH) also apply to a wide range of pesticides used at work. Under COSHH employers must make a suitable COSHH assessment before starting to use the pesticide. Pesticides should only be used where the benefit from using them significantly outweighs the risk to human health and the environment. If the decision is reached to use a pesticide, then the substance used should be one that poses least risk to people and the environment, whilst being effective at controlling the pest or weeds.

2. What is a pesticide?

Under the FEPA the definition of a pesticide includes any substance used:—

1. to protect plant products (eg wood) from harmful organisms.
2. to regulate the control of plant growth.
3. to give protection against harmful creatures.
4. and to render such creatures harmless.

This means that pesticides include herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, rodenticides, and wood preservatives. Clearly a museum which uses naphthalene to protect its entomological collection from insect attack is using a pesticide.

3. Use of pesticide products

It is easy to tell if a product is "approved". The packaging will be clearly marked with an approval notice. It can be used quite legally as long as the directions on the packet are followed precisely. An example of an approved product you might be familiar with is Superdrug Slow Release Fly Killer. This product has been approved following detailed applications typically made by the manufacturer or distributor.

The approval will have been granted for that individual product and for specified uses. The exception to this rule is the use of commodity substances.

4. Commodity Substances

Commodity substances have a variety of pesticide and non-pesticide uses and are generally sold or supplied as substances rather than as pesticide products. Most of the laboratory chemicals museums buy for pest control use (eg Naphthalene or Ethyl acetate) are examples of commodity substances. From the 1st March 1991 controls came into force over the use of commodity substances. There are at present only six approved commodity substances. For example, Methyl Bromide is approved, as a commodity substance, as a fumigant in public hygiene for the control of insects.

5. BCG's involvement

In 1990 the Advisory Committee on Pesticides agreed that there should be a public consultation to obtain data on pesticidal use of commodity chemicals. BCG were one of the museum organisations contacted by the Health & Safety Executive who recognised that a number of commodity substances are used by museums to control insects and pests which had not so far been subject to the controls on pesticides. We are asked to nominate commodity substances for consideration as pesticides.

The nominations were submitted by the October 1991 deadline. Detailed information was required with each nomination including details of strength and purity, purpose and situations in which used, rates, methods, frequency and timing of applications and much more. A list of substances for nomination was drawn up by the BCG committee following a request to the membership for information which was sent to each member. This asked what substances they used for pest and mould control.

The substances and uses nominated by BCG were:—

1. Naphthalene – use as an insect repellent.
2. 4-Chloro-m-cresol – use to keep insect specimens relaxed and free from mould and bacterial decay.
3. di-Sodium tetraborate (Borax) – use by taxidermists to preserve animal skins.
4. Camphor – use as an insect repellent.
5. Ethyl acetate – used as a precautionary control of pests typically for small specimens on receipt at the museum.
6. Formaldehyde – use as a precautionary control of pests (as above) and as a fixative for fluid preserved specimens.
7. Industrial Methylated Spirit – use as a liquid preservative.
8. Propan-1,2-diol (propylene glycol) – used as a humectant and mould inhibitor in Steedman's B post fixation preservative.
9. Ethanol – use as a liquid preservative.
10. Propan-2-ol – use as a liquid preservative.
11. Propylene phenoxetol – use as a liquid preservative.

Nominations 6 to 11 are for preservative liquids used with spirit specimens. These were judged by the HSE as requiring commodity substance nomination because whilst their main action is to arrest autolysis there is a secondary action of inhibiting bacterial and mould growth.

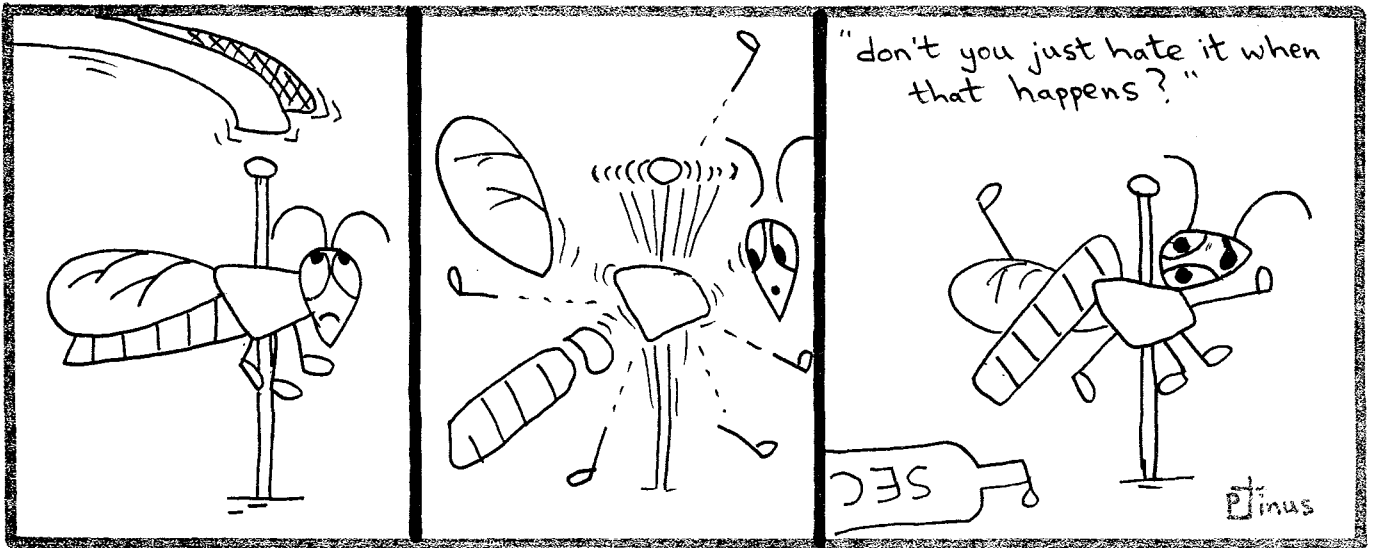
6. Nomination update

In July we received the first response from the HSE to these nominations. Applications for 4-Chloro-m-cresol, Camphor, Ethyl acetate, Formaldehyde, Industrial methylated spirit, Ethanol and Propan-2-ol are currently being processed. The nominations for Naphthalene, di-Sodium tetraborate, Propan-1,2-diol and Propylenephenoxtol can not be proceeded with. They have fallen foul of two criteria used to select commodity substances. If the commodity substance is the active ingredient in an approved product then the commodity substance cannot be approved. Naphthalene is the active ingredient in "Scent Off Buds" for vertebrate control and di-Sodium Tetraborate is the active ingredient in "Nippon Ant Destroyer liquid".

Propylene phenoxetol and Propan-1,2-diol cannot be approved as they are mixed in Steedman's B preservative and commodity substances can only be used on their own or with a dilutant. Non-approval of these substances will obviously cause some problems and these are matters which BCG will now pursue with HSE and the Museums and Galleries Commission.

As we receive any further updates from HSE we will make the information known through the newsletter.

*Mark Simmons
North of England Museums Service*



Many thanks from the editor to all who forwarded pieces for this newsletter and apologies to those whose contributions have floated away or been held back for the next issue. Deadline for the pre AGM issue is 31 March.

The views expressed in the Newsletter do not represent the views or policy of the Biology Curators Group Committee or membership except where specifically stated.

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