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ON THE DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS OF THE SOUTH YORKSHIRE QUERY

Whether regarded as an irritating distraction, a way of giving rate payers value for money, or a means of keeping in touch with the outside world, dealing with enquiries provides a facility which people have come to expect of their local museum.

In recent years an increase in enquiries or perhaps an increase in staff dealing with enquiries has become particularly noticeable at Doncaster Museum. On occasions when several people have been called simultaneously to the enquiry desk to deal with an assortment of queries, matters have got out of hand, occasionally resulting in a rude defrocking of the museum's cloak of dignity and poise.

With three or four 'experts' talking at once, enquirers experience a certain measure of confusion. Sensing a bit of 'action', boredom-crazed attendants home in to add their comments (usually highly colourful, though irrelevant anecdotes) to the expert prognostications. Meanwhile counter staff continue to sell model dinosaurs, answer telephone calls and direct anxious visitors to the lavatories. The mounting chaos attracts museum visitors like children to a playground brawl as first one expert then another is forced to turn on the volume to make their respective clients hear. First roman coins are in the lead, then jurassic ammonites, finally both are drowned by a multi-decibel identification of a cabriole leg! The scene disintegrates into a lunatic, though highly academic shouting match, the assembled public watching as spectators watch a tightly fought match at Wimbledon. Meanwhile, during the pandemonium the specimen brought as the natural history enquiry has either escaped or been trodden on - more chaos!

Fortunately, through improved counter facilities, these spectacular 'happenings' - worthy of Arts Council support - no longer take place.

With natural history enquiries here at Doncaster seemingly developing into a growth industry it was decided that during 1978 the frequency and nature of queries would be recorded and where possible the distribution and type of enquiries monitored. Since 1st January an enquiry log book has been kept (if on a rather casual basis), the following being a preliminary review of natural history enquiries up to 31st August - hastily compiled in order to placate the B. C. G. newsletter editor who is evidently getting desperate for material.

Probably by comparison with the enquiry services of many local museums the 335 enquiries logged during the eight months so far monitored would seem like chicken feed. This figure, however, conceals a considerable amount of work. The scope of a single enquiry may range from, say, the identification of a single insect, to producing a report on a collection of several thousand insects or from compiling a site plant list to preparing a comprehensive ecological review for a local structure plan - the latter, apart from anything else, taking many evenings and weekends of field work.

Obviously a rather longer monitoring period is required, certainly not less than 12 months, for an analysis of data to produce meaningful results. However the exercise has been an eye opener in many respects, not least in demonstrating the scale and calibre of a service we had traditionally tended to underestimate.

ENQUIRY FREQUENCY

Peak query periods were noticeable at main holiday times - around New Year, Spring and Summer bank holidays. No doubt this is when people are free to use the museum services - in the past school closures caused by local government elections, power cuts and staff disputes have had the same effect. As anticipated the volume of single species identifications rose during the year as the months fostered and nurtured the plagues of pestilential insects and crops of weeds which form the staple enquiry desk fodder. Monthly frequency of enquiries was as follows January 44 (13.1%), February 16 (4.8%), March 27 (8.0%), April 41 (12.2%), May 42 (12.6%), June 37 (11%). July 53 (15.9%) and August 75 (22.4%). Unexpectedly January started with a bang, though admittedly the novelty of the scheme induced a hurried processing of an enquiry backlog. Also during the festive period people, desperate to escape from close contact with pogostick-bouncing and toy trumpet blowing kiddies and from the residues of endless coronary-inducing meals, brought almost anything for identification as an excuse to get out of the house. Interestingly, a major contribution to this early flurry of activity was enquiries from official bodies (see table 2), no doubt making a brisk start to 1978 under the influence of new year resolutions.

It will be interesting to follow which way enquiry frequency trends move during the latter part of the year and see if the pattern of enquiry subjects changes - stay tuned folks for a further thrilling instalment.

SUBJECT OF ENQUIRY

It was something of a revelation to see, for instance, by how much entomological enquiries outnumbered other categories (see table 1), that mammal enquiries represented the second most important category and that the minority sport of arachnology featured so prominently. Admittedly Doncaster Museum does have a strong (and colourful!) entomological tradition, and to come clean the findings in table 1 could merely reflect the known interests and expertise of staff members(?), the country recorders for diptera, mammals and arachnids all working within the department.

The demand for site data is perhaps a sign of the times, with the nature Conservancy Council and local authorities making greater use of data bank facilities, and with local school children and college students requesting help with site studies. Interestingly a burst of enquiries of the latter kind was noticeable just prior to exam time, when panic stricken students, their studies long overdue, had their theses all but drafted for them.

In glancing through the log book certain seasonal trends become apparent. The phenomenon of the urban bat - usually pipistrelles, which over the past ten years or so have hit on the idea of roosting behind the weather boarding of modern semis and bungalows - is now one of the most frequent mammal enquiries. The timing of enquiries/complaints exactly corresponds with the bats breeding season. Fertilized females, mated the previous autumn, gathering in 'nursery' colonies during mid May bring forth the first wave of human reaction - very useful in plotting bat distribution! A second wave of irate phone calls during the first week of June heralds the birth of a new crop of 'pips', increasing quantities of faeces produced by growing populations betraying a further batch of urban breeding colonies! A final and usually more emotional barrage of enquiries signals that the fleshy yearling batlets are fledging - often not too successfully - with some, unable to emulate the air-ace aerobatics of their elders, ineptly floundering through bathroom and bedroom windows throughout Doncaster's 'trendy young exec' belt.

Significantly the telephone pad of the local R.S.P.C.A. inspector (a rich and largely unquarried deposit of biological data) also monitors the May-August batting season.

The serpentine caterpillars of the large elephant hawk moth, also other beasts like Aeshna dragonflies and giant wood wasps, with their large size and spectacular appearance impress themselves on the attentions of these otherwise oblivious of the 'wild world', featured prominently in the August enquiries.

The category of enquiries entitled 'miscellaneous' cloaks matters ranging from requests to give talks to queries about local societies and finding altitude data for barometer settings - and there's not much in the way of altitude around Doncaster. Requests by the B.C.G. scandal rag editor for more copy did not count as legitimate enquiries, neither did the tea-break phone calls from local factory workers enquiring, in the interests of settling bets, about the subtleties of the sexual behaviour of anything from slugs to elephants.

ENQUIRERS

Just over half of the enquirers came from the general public, an unexpectedly low total averaging just over 21 per month. From the odd occasions when a note was made of the address of the enquirer, it became possible to plot the catchment area of museum users (see figs 1 and 2). Although the vast majority were from the Doncaster Metropolitan District the scatter of more distant enquirers was, inexplicably, to the north, though some of these were enquirers referred to us by other Yorkshire museums or data banks.

The small scatter of South Yorkshire enquirers from outside the Doncaster Metropolitan Borough, no doubt, a tribute to the efficiency of Rotherham

and Sheffield Museums, though the series of enquiries from the Barnsley area betrays the lack of natural history museum representation in that exotic part of the world.

Table 2 generally requires little further explanation. The number of enquirers from local authority departments seemed rather high (12.8% of total enquirers), though predictably the department which made most use of the museum was Environmental Health, their inspectors bringing for identification a fascinating succession of cockroaches from bread loaves, caterpillars from tinned tomatoes and spiders from a local knicker elastic factory.

Queries from other museums (26 from 9 museums in Britain and 4 from 3 foreign museums) formed a surprisingly high proportion (9%) of the total enquirers though 13 visits (probably a low estimate) by raiding parties from Rotherham Museum's Job Creation-backed data acquisition campaign (see B. C. G. Newsletter 9) artificially boosted this figure. An extract from the field note book of a survivor from one such sortie reads "In they burst, the words 'Cutthroat Jake Ely Rules O. K.' embroidered across their Job Creation issue donkey jackets. We just watched, bound and gagged by the ethics of inter museum co-operation, as they pillaged the data bankthey go for the molluscs first you know!!!"

Colin Howes - said to be from Doncaster Museum

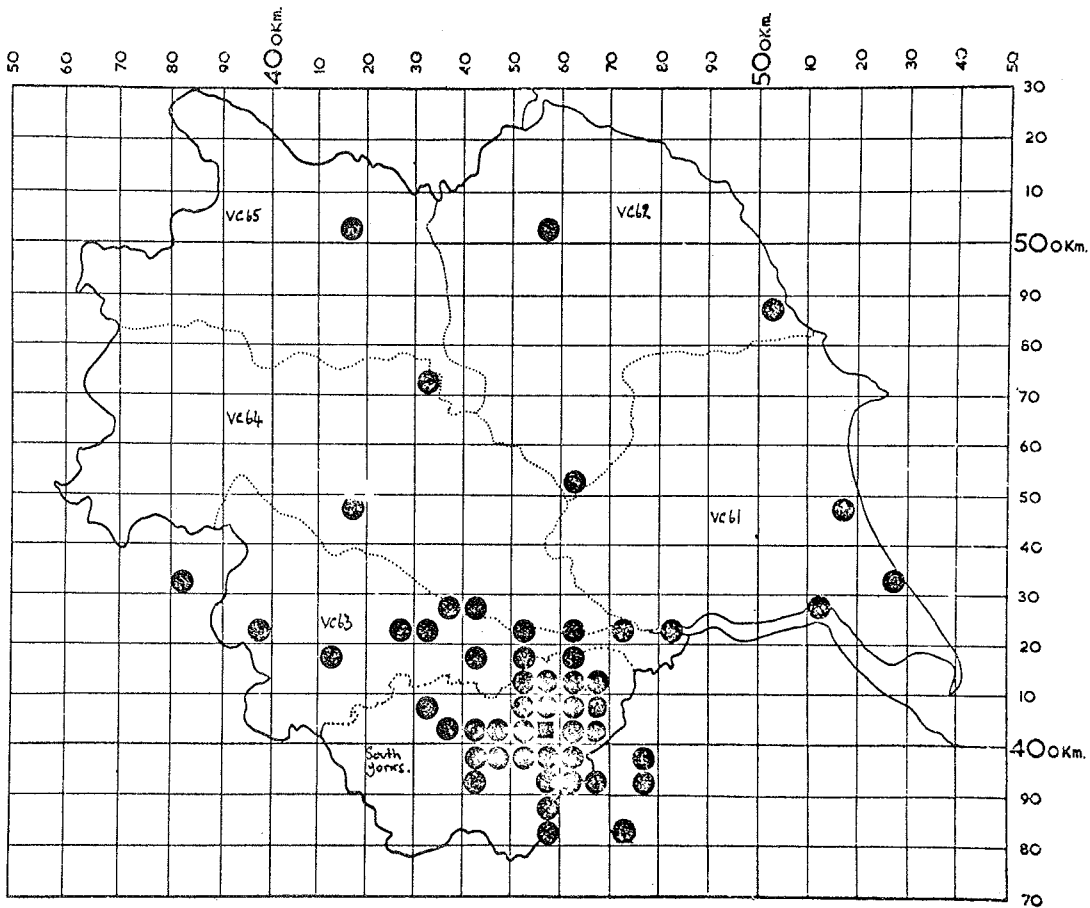


Fig. 1. The distribution of general public enquiries, Jan-Aug 1978
 ■ = Doncaster Museum

TABLE 1

Subject of Enquiry (January-August 1978)

Subject	Number	%
Entomology	101	30.1
Mammalogy	70	20.9
Ornithology	38	11.3
Habitats and sites	32	9.5
Botany	19	5.7
Arachnology	16	4.8
Conchology	14	4.2
Herpetology	6	1.8
Ichthyology	5	1.5
Marine Biology	2	.6
Fresh Water Biology	2	.6
Miscellaneous	<u>30</u>	<u>9.0</u>
	335	100.0

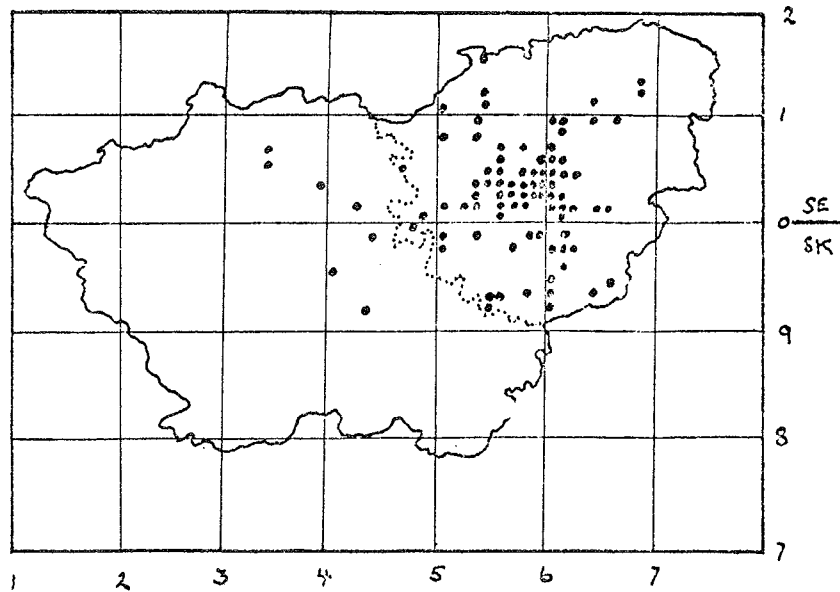


Fig. 2. Distribution of Enquirers (general public) within South Yorkshire County. Jan-Aug 1978. Right hand area = Doncaster Metropolitan Borough.

TABLE 2

Category of Enquirer

		Number	%
GENERAL PUBLIC		173	51.6
LOCAL AUTHORITY:-			
(Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council))		
Environmental Health	17)		
Amenities and leisure	6)	30	
Planning	6)		
Education	1)	43	12.8
(South Yorkshire County Council))		
Environment	8)		
Recreation	3)	11	
(Humberside County Council))		
Planning	2 2)		
LOCAL SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES		30	9.0
UNIVERSITIES		4	1.2
OFFICIAL BODIES:-			
Nature Conservancy Council	7)		
Dept. of Environment	3)		
Inst. of Terrestrial Ecology	3)		
Ministry of Agriculture	2)		
Forestry Commission	2)		
Yorkshire Water Authority	2)	23	6.8
National Coal Board	1)		
British Rail	1)		
Central Office of Information	1)		
New Zealand Dept. of Scientific Research	1)		
VOLUNTARY BODIES:-			
R. S. P. C. A.	9)		
R. S. P. B.	4)	15	4.5
Northern Horticultural Soc.	1)		
Yorkshire Naturalists Trust	1)		
MUSEUMS:-			
Great Britain	26)	30	9.0
Foreign	4)		
NEWS MEDIA:-			
Press	12)		
Local Radio	3)	17	5.1
B. B. C. Radio 4	1)		
B. B. C. T. V.	1)		
		335	100.0