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'Irreparable damage' to national heritage by museum eggs theft

From Our Correspondent Luton

A man who admitted stealing about 3,000 eggs in four years from the British Museum collection at Tring, Hertfordshire, was jailed for two years at St Albans Crown Court yesterday.

Mervyn Shorthouse, aged 37, of Mays Lane, Barnet, also pleaded guilty to stealing 540 eggs from the museum on November 7 last. His plea of not guilty to stealing 10,000 eggs was accepted by the prosecution after the court heard that he would not dispute ownership of any eggs which the museum claimed.

He also pleaded guilty to a charge of going equipped for theft.

Mr Joseph Gosschalk, for the prosecution, said: "The result has been incalculable damage to part of the national heritage.

"The collection amounts to 500,000 eggs. As a result of this defendant's theft, not only have eggs been lost, but the system adopted was for the defendant to replace those that he took with others.

"The museum have the enormous task of not only recovering the ones he took, but of systematically examining the entire collection."

Mr Gosschalk said that Mr Shorthouse was allowed to visit the museum on compassionate grounds in 1975 after he had had an accident with electricity. Eggs were later reported miss-

ing but could not be traced until a display box disappeared last October after he had paid a visit.

In November he was arrested by the regional crime squad and 540 eggs, valued at £5,200, were found on him.

Mr Gosschalk said that Mr Shorthouse wore a large overcoat with openings to conceal the eggs. Some were put into socks. He also wore women's tights, cut open at the knee so that the eggs could be inserted.

About 10,000 eggs were found at his home. He told police he had also sold eggs to collectors.

Judge Marcus Anwyl-Davies told Mr Shorthouse: "I have heard that part of our national heritage has been irreparably damaged. It is a priceless and unique collection that has been recklessly damaged by your depredations.

"Many people devoted to science over decades have amassed this collection which, being unique, is available throughout the world for the spreading of knowledge. You, in the course of taking these eggs, have destroyed information which can never be replaced."

Mr Ian Galbraith, head of the ornithology subdepartment at the museum, said it was used by 1,000 researchers daily. He said: "This has caused enormous trouble. We were particularly worried by the loss of the information."

Crack haul of an egg thief

POLICE found birds' eggs galore when they searched Mervyn Shorthouse as he left a museum.

They were bulging from specially concealed pockets in his large overcoat and stuffed into socks.

But the officers' biggest surprise came when they

searched Shorthouse again at the police station, St. Albans Crown Court heard yesterday.

Under his trousers he was wearing women's tights with openings at the knees.

And rammed down the side of his legs were many more valuable eggs.

The court heard that the search revealed 540 eggs worth £5,200.

And when police went to Shorthouse's home in Barnet they recovered thousands more.

Prosecutor Joseph Gosschalk said 37-year-old Shorthouse plundered the eggs on visits to the British Museum's collection at Tring.

Shorthouse, who admitted stealing 3,000 eggs over four years, was jailed for two years.

Daily Mirror
1 May 1980

Missing eggs mystery cracked

A man who systematically stole thousands of eggs from the British Museum collection at Tring, Hertfordshire, was jailed for two years yesterday.

Mervyn Shorthouse, aged 37, of Mays Lane, Barnet, was said to have plundered a unique collection of eggs over a period of several years. Mr Joseph Gosschalk, prosecuting, at St Albans Crown Court, said: "The result has been incalculable damage to part of the national heritage.

"The collection itself amounts to 500,000 eggs and as a result of this defendant's theft not only have eggs been lost, but the system adopted was for the defendant to replace those that he took with others, and the museum have the enormous task of not only recovering the ones he took but of systematically examining the entire collection."

"You have done this resourcefully and by clever abstractions, aggravated by skilful substitution with spurious eggs, to cover your crime and for personal gratifications."

Mr Gosschalk said that Mr Shorthouse began stealing the eggs in 1975 after an accident in which he was electrocuted. He was allowed to make visits to the museum on compassionate grounds.

Over the next few years the museum noticed that eggs were missing but was unable to trace them. "However, the matter came to the forefront in October 1979 when he visited the museum. He was given access to part of the collection and immediately afterwards a display box was found to have gone.

Later he was arrested, said Mr Gosschalk. He was searched and found to have 540 eggs, worth £5,200 on him.

Mr Gosschalk said that Mr Shorthouse's home was searched and about 10,000 eggs were removed.

Mr Shorthouse told the police that some of the eggs were sold to other collectors, and others he kept for himself.

Mr Shorthouse admitted stealing 540 eggs from the museum on November 7 1979, and around 3,000 between September 1975 and October 1979. His plea of not guilty to stealing 10,000 was accepted by the prosecution after the court heard that he would not dispute ownership of any eggs which the museum claimed. He also pleaded guilty to a charge of going equipped for theft.

The Times 1 May 1980

Guardian 1 May 1980