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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Author(s): Garland, S.

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Editor's report

The change in format of the Newsletter initially took a considerable time to organise, at a time when I was heavily involved in exhibition work, and volume 4 part 5 was very late in distribution. Part 6 followed after a more acceptable interval, but I am still behind on the publication schedule; I apologise for this and will try to rectify it in the coming year.

I hope the new style meets with approval from members. The retyping of articles and photo-reduction of typescripts means we are now using space more efficiently, and printing by offset litho gives a much more polished product. The Newsletter is now close to the standard I was hoping to achieve at the beginning of the year and I think it has improved the image of the group both to the public and within the profession.

The changes have not proved expensive. Production costs of the new style Newsletters are significantly less than those of their photocopied predecessors.

It is traditional at this time of year for editors to appeal for copy and I am no exception. Style can be arranged by the editor, but content is very much in the hands of the members. I need contributions from as broad a section of the membership as is possible and as regularly as possible; even single paragraphs are welcome. The production method now used for the Newsletter allows photographs and illustrations to be printed to a high standard and I would particularly appreciate illustrated contributions or illustrations which can be used in their own right.

The leaflets for the proposed Journal of Biological Curation are currently being produced and will be distributed with the next Newsletter. They will be self explanatory when they arrive so there is no need to go into details now. I just want to say that the Journal should be seen in conjunction with the Newsletter and Special Report Series as providing a broad publication base for the Group so that any length or 'weight' (if that is the correct term) of manuscript submitted can be published in the most appropriate format.

The Manual of Curatorship project started with a meeting of the organising sub-committee; an outline now has to be fleshed out so that outside organisations can be approached for grants or sponsorship towards production costs.

John Mathias  
Editor

AGM 87

Report of the Working Party on Natural Sciences Collection Resources (The Bernice Williams Report)

Background

The Working Party on Natural Science Resources began life in June 1981 as the Working Party on Taxonomy under the chairmanship of Janet Chamberlain. It had been convened following papers by Phil Doughty and Geoff Hancock on the state of natural science collections at the 1980 Museums Association Conference, and following promptings from the Museums and Galleries Commission who had asked for various facts on natural science collections in the UK which neither the Museums Association nor BCG had been able to supply. Geologists had the Phil Doughty survey and report to quote; biologists clearly needed a similar in-depth survey.

At its first meeting in June 1981 the appointed group changed its title to 'Working Party on Natural Science Collection Resources' and its aims were reported in the MA Bulletin: to identify all natural science collections in the UK and to seek funds to appoint a specialist to achieve that end; to explore how collections gathered in the process of research could be assimilated into public institutions.

Official indications of progress then seem to dwindle. The Working Party is mentioned in the 1982 MA Yearbook and again in 1983 at which time a new chairman was named, Fred Dunning, and there were one or two changes to the composition of the group.

Dr Bernice Williams was appointed to gather the facts and in 1983 she sent out a substantial questionnaire to all museums and other institutions thought to hold collections. The replies were collated into a draft report and circulated to Working Party members and one or two others something over a year ago.

The BCG Committee for some time has been concerned over the lengthy delay between the deadline for questionnaire receipts (January 1984) and production of the final report - despite the fact that Peter Morgan reviewed its findings at the 1986 Museums Association Conference (reported in Museums Journal vol 86 no 3). The data it contains are now at least three and a half years out of date. Some BCG members have also expressed reservations about certain parts of the report, so a discussion on it was scheduled for the 1987 BCG AGM meeting in Sheffield at which all views could be aired and an initiative to the Chairman of the Working Party could be formulated.

The following is an attempted summary of a very wide-ranging discussion.

## Discussion

Several members had seen the full report or the summary chapter in its draft form; Geoff Hancock was the only member of the Working Party present. The main criticism voiced was that the report contained so much data, albeit fully analysed, that the major considerations tended to get lost in a mountain of detail. It was felt that a short, cogent addendum to the report, or perhaps separately produced back-up papers for the media and scientific press, should be produced for circulation at the same time that the full report is released. It is understood that the published report will be available in limited numbers only, simply because of its size, and that NERC had offered printing facilities.

Concern was expressed that the report was now so late that many entries were out of date (by about three years) and, of course, the longer the report is delayed the greater this problem becomes.

The role of BCG in the instigation of the survey and its involvement in questionnaire formulation and general progress were discussed. It transpired that although BCG had been instrumental in starting the whole process, once NERC became the financing body through the agency of the Museums Association, the Group had been comparatively little involved. Geoff Hancock was the permanent link between the Working Party and the BCG Committee, but he had been called on to do very little; the Working Party had met on three occasions and the content of the questionnaire had been discussed at length. The last Working Party meeting had been some eighteen months previous to this discussion. Since then Geoff had received a copy of the draft report for comment, and had returned it to the National Museum of Wales. It was understood that editorial corrections from all members of the Working Party were now being incorporated into a pre-publication version. Those present hoped that this version would be returned to the Working Party members for approval. It had recently been agreed between the BCG chairman and the Director General of the Museums Association that BCG committee should see this pre-publication version of the report for detailed comment.

A number of members present who had seen the full report expressed severe reservations about some of the statements it contained - for example in the area of pest control, use of insect deterrent chemicals and their effects on people. As these comments were based on the first draft only, which had been of only very limited distribution, it was felt that detailed comment of this kind should be reserved until the next version was available and the BCG had been invited officially to express its views.

One major deficiency of the report seemed to be a lack of any proposals and recommendations resulting from its findings.

It was unclear as to who should be making comments of this kind. Members generally felt that a series of recommendations should form part of the published report, but if this proved not to be the case, then BCG should immediately produce a series of recommendations itself, arising from the data made available in the report. Whichever way this worked, members felt most strongly that recommendations should be made available for presentation to the Museums Association, Museums and Galleries Commission, and individual museum governing bodies.

The following letter was sent to the Chairman of the Working Party on 8th May 1987, putting forward the resolution agreed by all those members present at the discussion in Sheffield.

Dear Mr Dunning,

The Biology Curators Group (BCG) is very concerned that the draft Report on the Natural Science Collection Resources (the 'Bernice Williams Report') includes some comments and conclusions which are highly subjective and probably incorrect.

At our meeting on 4 April the progress of the Report was discussed in open forum and whilst most members welcomed the Report and looked forward to its publication after much discussion the following resolution was carried unanimously by the 28 members present:

'The Biology Curators Group strongly urges the chairman to reconvene the Working Party and that the draft Report is carefully examined and edited by the Working Party; with recommendations added before final publication'.

We hasten to add that we feel the Working Party is well qualified and competent to do this job without interference from BCG.

Generally BCG welcomes the Report and we look forward to its publication and to taking appropriate action on its findings in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Garland  
Chairman

## AGM 88

1988 AGM at Bolton Museum

The committee have two suggestions for subject matter for the next AGM meeting at Bolton Museum: pest control, particularly by non-chemical means or biological publications. The former would, hopefully, break new ground in a complex and rapidly developing area of relevance to us all; the latter would encompass all aspects of museum-based biological publications.