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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: On Wenlock Edge: a new Permanent Display at Much Wenlock Museum

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Source: Mee, J. (1994). On Wenlock Edge: a new Permanent Display at Much Wenlock Museum.
Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 6 No 3, 34 - 35.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1088>

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On Wenlock Edge: a New Permanent Display at Much Wenlock Museum

Much Wenlock Museum is a small local museum with a pleasing ambience, airy and light (UV filtered!), not too overwhelming or sophisticated, with a considerable number of objects on open display.

It is situated in the Shropshire town of Much Wenlock not far from Ironbridge and towards the north-eastern end of Wenlock Edge, a famous limestone escarpment - famed not only for its beauty but known to geologists throughout the World as a 'type locality'.

When £6,000 was allocated by the Leisure Services Committee (in August 1992) for the refurbishment of displays at Much Wenlock Museum, it was decided that the geology and natural history in particular required attention. The displays were old (1970's), captions and specimens in some disarray and the arrangement of cases and panels created a rather gloomy atmosphere at one end of the museum.

A Natural Starting Place for a Visit to the Edge?

The re-display of the natural history and geology presented several exciting opportunities.

The first of these was to interpret Wenlock Edge, using the County's collections, and to promote the museum as a visitor centre for the area

Secondly, to work in partnership with the National Trust (Mercia Region), the major conservation organisation active on Wenlock Edge

The immediate benefit to the Museum Service of collaborating with the Trust was seen as access to National Trust staff, familiar with the locality, and archives (photographs, biological records and management plans); of mutual benefit, the promotion of each others sites - the National Trust directing visitors to the Museum for more information, via on-site interpretation panels and leaflets, and the Museum display pointing people in the direction of places they could visit on the Edge to see for themselves the evidence of Wenlock's geological past, the relics of lime-burning, the National Trust's efforts to restore woodland, etc. In addition the Museum would provide the National Trust with an interpretive facility to explain their work in the area.

Once National Trust involvement was established, action was taken to increase the size of the budget available. Both the Countryside Commission and English Nature were approached with success (presumably success due in part to Wenlock Edge's status as an Area Of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the number of SSSI's on the Edge).

The display was sold to the Countryside Commission as an interpretive facility that would enhance access to the countryside. Our case was somewhat strengthened by the location of the Tourist Information Centre in the museum foyer and a letter of support from the National Trust. Selling the project to the Countryside Commission was hard work, and then the conditions so readily agreed at the moment the offer was made, became extraordinarily exacting as deadlines approached.

Eventually the budget was raised to £10,000 with further financial support provided by the West Midlands Area Museum Service.

At this stage, and as the storyline was developing, we did contemplate the services of a designer for the project. However, it soon became very obvious that we could not afford one! So the display was designed and built in-house - down to the layout of the panels.

The theme was largely dictated by the Edge itself and the Much Wenlock Limestone of which it is made; its geological past - tropical, clear, shallow sea in which coral reefs flourished; how the escarpment was formed; wildlife and habitats - the influence of the limestone, exploitation of the limestone - quarries and lime-burning; the work of the National Trust to conserve Wenlock Edge and provide access and information for visitors.

Throughout, the emphasis was on displays that would encourage visitor participation and enhance a visit to the Edge. I was very keen to avoid gratuitous button-pushing, my colleague Nigel Nixon (Senior Curator) to provide displays that incorporated seating.

The display was designed for families visiting the area and although not directly geared to schools and the demands of the National Curriculum it provides a good introduction to several 'attainment targets' (particularly if used in conjunction with Wenlock Edge itself).

A Watery Past

McKerrow's book "*The Ecology of Fossils*" provided inspiration for what became the central display of the exhibition. It didn't take too much imagination to transform the line drawings of the Wenlock coral reef habitat (which existed in the Wenlock Edge area some 400 million years ago) with fossilized remains exposed as a rock shelf alongside into a 3-D model; into a 'living' sea; (behind glass and with dappled lighting effect) and fossil shelf, mirroring the 'living' scene, incorporating real fossils that can be touched (casts of the fossils were used in the living scene).

Three drawers were incorporated beneath the display to take our best fossil specimens; friendly graphics and

trilobite handles encourage people to open the drawers and benches alongside provide seating for appropriate levels of contemplation. The accompanying text is carried on trilobite bats (imagine a chopping board - trilobite on one side, text on the other) leaving the display uncluttered with words.

Photographs, on a panel hanging above, relate the Silurian reef scene to similar habitats in the world today and to reefs that can be seen fossilized *in situ* in the cliff and quarry faces of Wenlock Edge.

A visitor-operated model demonstrates how the Edge was formed. The simplicity of the final model, bicycle-pump and push-chair wheels provide the technology, belies the amount of effort that went into its design. Mechanical difficulties and establishing exactly what the model needed to demonstrate were only resolved after considerable and sometimes heated discussion and the model is a credit to the ingenuity of our technical staff (and the impetus of a shoe-string budget). And it met with the approval of the local geologists.

It was quite an interesting experience extracting a list of about 12 plants "characterizing" the Edge (wood, meadow and regenerating quarry) from three of the local botanists; and then establishing which reliably indicated the presence of limestone and even more difficult, the presence of an ancient wood or meadow; and then to find the relevant photographs (at no cost); Hairy Violet had to go - not even the botanist who had enthused about its presence on Wenlock Edge had captured it on film.

Symbols were used to indicate the preferences of the flowers (habitats, lime-loving, ancient habitat). I thought this was a pleasingly simple way of getting the message across but the use of symbols seemed to cause our graphic designer a considerable amount of stress.

The limestone approach also provided an excellent opportunity to transform wildly exciting dot (distribution) maps (taken from the 'Shropshire Flora') into an interactive display. Dot maps for yellow-wort, pyramidal orchid and heather and a sliding geology overlay make the connection between limestone and plant distribution (and again, you can sit down to do this one).

The 'Caring for Wenlock Edge' panel uses photographs to show the National Trust in action; opening up ancient routeways, excavating lime kilns, botanically surveying the 'Pudding Bag' (Yes! - a limestone meadow); putting up fences; taking down conifers (and the subsequent transformation of the ground flora) and my favourite - pollarding Wenlock's ancient limes.

One of the most pleasurable aspects of this project was the number of people who eventually became involved; from the National Trust staff who marched me up and down the Edge in search of lime trees and lime kilns, to the quarrymen from ECC Quarries, who found a magnificent lump of limestone with lots of fossils (What clues can you find to Wenlock's past?) and lined up to have their photograph taken (for comparison with the 19th century predecessors); from the scientists of Marine Research Labs who searched slide collections for aerial photographs of patch reefs, and Shropshire's naturalists who provided images of wild flowers to the town archivist and local historians who provided images and documents pertaining to the lime-burning industry.

The display has now been open for one season (April to September). We have received positive feedback from both members of the public and schools; a teachers' pack will be available next year and better promotion should increase the number of school visits, and yes, our man from the Countryside Commission is quite right, a leaflet is needed to help visitors make that link between display and countryside.

*Jane Mee
Curator of Natural Sciences,
Ludlow Museum*

ITS ALL GREEK TO ME

Has any one else received the letter below which was sent by Treda Ltd of Athens to Kelvingrove Museum? Although a suitable subject for our amusement there is a serious side to the approach which (and apologies to Treda if I have misconstrued their letter) seems to be seeking surplus specimens for resale. Anyway, here it is:

Sirs, We have a company of import - export and we are interested to supply from you some kinds.

- 1. For insects generally (butterflies - scarabees) from all over the world, but especially from Europe.*
- 2. For spiders, scorpions etc, either salted or proplastics.*
- 3. For fishes, salted, sea born, living on the borders of a lake or river fishes European, specially proplastics.*
- 4. For proplastics of dolphins, sharks, whales etc.*
- 5. For European shells.*

In Greece are going to be founded a lot of museums of Physical History and we intend to supply them all these kinds and the museums are going to create gift shops.

Our cooperation is going to be as follows: for every order you'll send us the proportionate invoices and we'll send you immediately the money.