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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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The entire two-day programme, B&B, all meals including the Annual Dinner and a reception at the Museum costs £75 so I hope members will be able to manage to attend both days.

If you would like more details please contact me, Jane Pickering, University Museum, Parks Road, Oxford. OX1 3PW. Tel: 0865 272962. Fax: 0865 272970.

Collections Planning and Policies is the title of a joint ASC/SPNH meeting to be held at the Missouri Botanical Garden on May 11-15 1994. For those of you on unlimited budgets the contact is ASC, 730 11th Street, NW, Second Floor, Washington, D.C. 20001.

BCG Dutch Dash 94. BCG is hoping to organise a study trip to the Netherlands in late autumn 1994. It is intended that the trip would last 4-5 days and include visits to the museums in Leiden and Amsterdam. A first circular will be sent to all members at the beginning of January to gauge interest. If the response to this is not good the trip will not go ahead, so please ensure that you register your interest as early as possible.

19-21 April 1995. International Conference on valuing Natural Science Collections, Manchester University. See circular enclosed with this issue.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

SEARCH for Science in Hampshire - the background

For two or three years now Hampshire County Council Museum Service has been giving some thought to developing a more integrated natural science display policy for its network of local museums. It would be (and is in many museums I have visited including our own) all too easy to fall into the trap of approaching natural science displays as solely the interpretation of the local natural environment to a museum, in the same way that local history is tackled. Unlike local history, which by definition is very parochial, the natural environment is not constrained by parish, town or district political boundaries. It consists of far broader brush strokes and there is the very real danger of each display that is created covering the same themes and using the same examples. Or, looked at another way, it is conceivable that one display could be created which would be equally relevant at each location in a region.

This is a very real problem for us, particularly in densely populated south Hampshire, where we have three local museums within 15 miles of each other (Havant, Fareham, Gosport) together with Cumberland House Natural History Museum run by Portsmouth City Museums. What we needed then was a more strategic approach to our natural science provision.

Perhaps a blend of permanent and temporary exhibitions covering the interpretation of biological and geological processes as well as environmental and straight forward taxonomic displays. There was also a desire to encompass a broader range of biological and geological material than is easily displayed in a traditional gallery format and which can only really be achieved in a "hands on" type facility.

Another consideration has been the recent changes to education. The demands made on the service by schools and individual teachers asking for loans of biological material has risen dramatically since the introduction of the National Curriculum. Could we service this demand, and if so how?

In early 1992 the Museum Service had the opportunity to acquire premises adjoining Gosport Museum. The building was formerly a school and, more recently, offices of the Hampshire County Council Education Department. With this listed building came finance for the County Architects, not only to refurbish the building but also to reinstate lost architectural features.

Apart from one large hall most of the 6,000 square feet of accommodation was not suitable for use as traditional gallery space and, anyway, we would probably not have got the building in the first place if it was just to extend Gosport Museum. What we needed was a new initiative for Hampshire. Thus the South East Activity and Resource Centre for Hampshire (SEARCH) was born, now simply known as "SEARCH for Science" and "SEARCH for History".

The idea of providing a discovery centre for natural science (SEARCH for Science) and an active learning centre for history (SEARCH for History) targeted to a large extent at the education market soon gained political support and a steering group was established with input from myself, as Keeper of Biology, the Education Officer, the Marketing Officer and Conservation staff with Ian Edelman, the Curator of Gosport Museum, as the Project Manager. A three year development programme was formulated to commence April 1993. The Recreation Committee of Hampshire County Council have so far allocated £30,000 for capital development and £65,000 revenue funding for 1993/4. This has enabled us to appoint Ann Nicol, formerly at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow and Leicestershire Museums, as a Natural Sciences Development Officer for the project.

Ann started with us towards the end of July 1993 and already the SEARCH for Science discovery room itself is fitted out and functional as our Museums Panel of County Councillors can testify - they were the first to try out the video microscope. However, I will leave

operational details and other developments for Ann to tell you about in a future article!

I would just like to end with this plea. An initiative like SEARCH has a knock on effect in other spheres of operation, not least for conservation and collections management. For us it has meant a complete reappraisal of our acquisitions policy. We now have a particular need and use for foreign material which in the past we refused or redirected to other museums. So if anyone is responsible for good quality non-data foreign material and wishes to investigate the possibility of transferring it to a good home would they please contact Ann Nicol at SEARCH, 50 Clarence Road, Gosport, Hants. PO12 1BU (0705 501957).

Chris Palmer, Keeper of Biology and Curator of Havant Museum, Hampshire County Council Museum Service.

PARROTS at Oldham and elsewhere

Pieces of Eight, Pieces of Eight; Polly, Pretty Polly; Punch on Parrots; Monty Python and the deceased Norwegian Blue; Endangered Hyacinth - these were all phrases racing around my mind as I took up the post of Exhibitions Officer in Natural History at Oldham Museum. My predecessor, Jane Mee, had completed a feasibility study into the idea of a parrot touring exhibition before moving on to Ludlow, leaving me with copious information and an exhibition to organise!

Part of the agreement with the Museums and Galleries Commission to obtain financial assistance was that the tour should be well booked and this was one of my initial tasks. To my surprise the tour was almost fully booked within about six weeks of advertising - all this before we even began to put the exhibition together. This, in my opinion, highlights the demand and need for touring exhibitions - unfortunately the subsequent closure of the touring exhibitions unit means that small local museums like Oldham will find it virtually impossible to obtain funding to tour exhibitions in future.

Parrots was an exciting venture because of its multidisciplinary approach, incorporating art, literature and humour within a natural history framework. I was also very pleased to be organising a touring exhibition in natural history because we seem to see so few of them around.

Much of my time initially was taken up with looking into the loaning of material as Oldham had very little in its own collection relating to parrots. Our access to items for the exhibition was determined largely by money - we could not for example afford to pay

couriers to accompany items from one museum to another. However, most of the museums approached were exceedingly helpful and agreed to loan relevant material.

The exhibition eventually came to fruition; loans were completed; text written and the exhibition designed and built. It opened in Oldham on April 4th 1993 and is currently touring.

Sian Owen, Exhibitions Officer (Natural History) Oldham Museum

University of Leicester, Dept of Museum Studies Science and Natural Science Courses

For the first time, the Department of Museum Studies is inviting applicants wishing to take individual one week science and natural science modules. These modules form part of the University Diploma/M.Sc. in Museum Studies. Students wishing to go on to take the other modules which make up the course will be credited with the modules they have already taken. Other modules look more closely at the non-discipline based aspects of curation, for example, preventative conservation, documentation practice, collection management policies etc.

Sciences 1: Science Collections, 28 Feb - 4 March 1994

This course will take a wide look at science collections in museums, and is aimed particularly at students interested in the history and philosophy of science. The course will examine the nature of these collections, practice in collecting and conservation, directions for research and the basics of collections management.

Sciences 1: Natural Sciences Curatorial Course, in collaboration with BCG, GCG and Leicester Museums, 7 March - 11 March 1994

A practical look at collecting and field recording techniques, preservation, conservation, storage, documentation, taxonomy and research. The course will discuss those aspects of curation which are specific to the natural sciences. It will include field and laboratory work, lectures and seminars. It will discuss in equal measure good practice in geology and biology.

This one week course replaces the Sheffield based Natural Sciences Curatorial Course. It aims to build upon the success of the Sheffield course particularly in its continued commitment to practical work but with the added incentive of potentially contributing to a recognised qualification in museum studies. The course is also run on a firmer footing as it no longer depends on student numbers to run.