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## The Biology Curator

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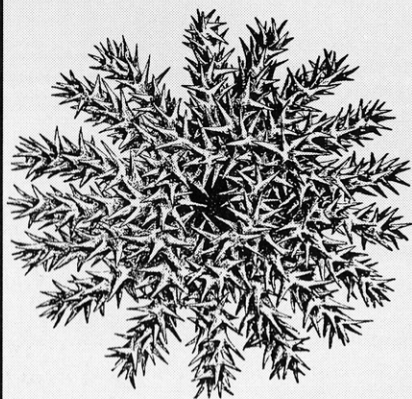
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*D. M. O'Grady*



# THE BIOLOGY CURATOR

ISSUE 5 FEBRUARY 1996

BIOLOGY CURATORS GROUP



## BCG IS 20 YEARS OLD

The 20th birthday meeting of the Group was held at Bolton Museum on the 4th and 5th of September, 1995. Fifty-three members came to enjoy both the varied and interesting programme and also a nostalgic wallow at the dinner on the Monday evening.

After a welcome from John Gray, Director of Bolton Museum, Steve Garland gave us the low-down on the Natural History section of the Museum. Consultancy work came next, first the legal pitfalls were outlined by Trevor Grundy from the Bolton MBC Solicitors dept, and then a plethora of ways to make consultancy pay were presented by Mr LiveWire himself, Derek Whiteley from Sheffield.

After the statutory liquid lunch (most) members reconvened for parallel sessions; one or two speakers flowed through the door just as the sessions ended!. The one on live animals will be reported on later by Mike Graham (he promises!), brief notes are given below on the one on freeze drying. Following the tea break two more parallel sessions took place, on biological recording and on education in the gallery; both are reported more fully below.

Then we switched to nostalgia mode at a *Conversazione* in the main gallery of the Museum, after which we swam through a torrential downpour to the Chadwick campus to prepare for the Birthday Dinner. Afterwards Steve Garland treated us to an entertaining

discourse of his memories of the first two decades of the Group. Following this A.N.Other from somewhere in Yorkshire was prevailed upon to resurrect the alternative brochure to the Beetle Down campaign – the Bugger Off conspiracy; in the best traditions of investigative journalism your editors are republishing this leaflet in the next issue so you can all confirm how reprehensibly unethical it was – of course none of us would even think some of these things (we wouldn't, would we?). Finally the bibulous throng gave a raucous accompaniment to a scurrilous slide show over which a merciful veil of alcoholic amnesia has since descended.

The next day an unsurprisingly quiet group reassembled to hear two



*Still smiling after 20 years. BCG members at Bolton*

papers on documentation, from Rob Huxley of the NHM and from Alan Howell of Guernsey Museum. After coffee Kate Andrew, now of Ludlow Museum, gave an informative and salutary paper on the perils and rewards of freelance conservation. She was followed by Chris Collins from the Sedgwick in Cambridge who discussed the research needs of conservation (a resume of the latter talk should appear in BC6).

Lunch led on to Ian Wallace taking us through the case for regional collection stores, and finally Paul Richards from Sheffield showed us all how truly to make a virtue of a necessity, regaling us with tales of the cornucopia of funding generated by Sheffield in novel and very laudable ways; an example to us all!

The assembled Accession of Curators then wended their various ways back to their own museums, and it only remains to thank Steve, Kathryn, Patricia, Trisha and John for a splendid meeting, a fitting milestone in the life of the BCG.

Resumes of all the talks except where noted above are presented in sequence later in this issue of *The Biology Curator*. Steve Garland's after dinner speech follows.

### REMINISCENCES : SPEECH MADE AT BCG ANNIVERSARY DINNER.

The Biology Curators' Group has been in existence for 20 years now. It began in 1975 with a membership of seventy. This didn't include me as I was still struggling through University.

I thought that I would try to say a few words to you tonight about BCG and life as a curator in the 90s. I can't personally reminisce about those early years, but, out of interest I did a "where are they now" examination of the founder members!

12 are classed as whereabouts unknown.

2 are certainly dead.

21 have retired or left the profession.

13 have moved to jobs in other museums and a depressing 22 are still at the same place!

Incidentally, eight are here today. Of all these people we are most proud of the Founder Chairman 'cos its been 29 years and he's still a curator - Geoff Hancock.

If you want to be bored to tears by reminiscences and stories of olden

times then speak later to a selection of them: John Gray, Geoff Hancock, Anne Hollowell, Clem Fisher, Peter Davis, Howard Mendel, Peter Morgan and Kath Berry.

For my sins, I spent about five or six years as Chairman of this illustrious organisation. Before me came Tony from Norwich, but he had to retire after a short time due to health problems. Before Tony came Peter Morgan.

As Chairman, one major role is the chairing of committee meetings. In those days we had about six committee meetings per year. In recognition of his achievements as Chairman I would like to award Peter the empty chair award for the worst attendance by a chairman in our history - 1 out of six!

When I retired, Mike Graham took over. Mike is a really nice bloke, who had the misfortune to work at Bolton in the past - so I've heard a few stories about him, but we can go through those later over a pint. However, as Chairman, one of the other jobs is to give the group a sense of direction. In recognition of this I would like to award Mike with the Mark Thatcher navigational award for taking over an hour and a half to find his way back to the hotel on the BCG trip in Amsterdam. Or at least - that's his story.

Now BCG has fought against job cuts and has stopped the disposal of or damage to many collections. Politicians have often been seen as the major problem for curators. However, over many years working in museums I have learned that the most terrifying creature on earth is the enquiring member of the public.

No matter how common, boring or mind-numbingly dull a creature is when brought to the curator for identification, you have to dredge up something positive to say.

Oh how tempting it is to be honest! Therefore I thought I would provide a few translations of "curator speak" for the uninitiated:

Good Morning - nice to see you  
*means:* Oh my god - not you again.

This looks unusual  
*means:* You don't expect me to identify this do you?

It appears to have escaped  
*means:* There's nothing here pal - you must be nuts.

What exciting creature have you brought in today?  
*means:* If this is another bleeding elephant hawkmoth

caterpillar I'm going to remove your genitals with a rusty scalpel.

Thank you for the offer, but it falls outside our collecting policy  
*means:* It is an elephant hawkmoth caterpillar.

I'll release it later  
*means:* We'll have it mounted and on display by Friday.

From the other side - the enquirer doesn't always say what they mean:

I won't keep you long  
*means:* Have I ever told you my life story.

I thought this might be useful to the museum  
*means:* The wife says she's leaving if I don't get shut of it!

I just thought I'd pop in and see if it was of interest  
*means:* I saw one on Antiques Roadshow - please, please, please let it be worth a fortune!

I've travelled all over the world and never EVER EVER EVER seen anything like this  
*means:* It's an elephant hawkmoth caterpillar.

Every curator has experiences with enquiries that leave a scar on their lives:

Your first delusory parasitosis case - for those who don't know - this involves trying to get the name of someone's doctor while watching them gouge imaginary parasites out of various parts of their body - or even from passers by, with your forceps.

Trying to work out the best way to tell someone that the partly-eaten dried apricot that they have brought in is actually a sun-dried baby mouse with no head.

Trying to hold down your lunch when the bag of vacuum-cleaner contents you have been asked to examine for biting insects has just spewed a huge curly set of toe-nail clippings across your desk!

Identifying a 6 foot live snake -

Curator 1 (with book in hand) - "How many scales between the eyes?"

Curators 2 and 3 (struggling to hold down snake) - "Ten"

Curator 1 - "That narrows it down to either rat snakes .... or cobras"

Curators 2 and 3 - "Oh shit."

Despite the fact that its all now business plans, corporate identities and customer care policies I sincerely hope that over BCG's next twenty years there is still time for some fun.

How would life be if entomologists had to stop teasing their genitalia out; botanists could no longer create psychedelic colours with a few chemicals and a lichen collection, and taxidermists no longer mounted anything that comes their way. And