



<http://www.natsca.org>

The Biology Curator

Title: Money For Old Collections! The Sheffield Museum's Shows

Author(s): Richards, P.

Source: Richards, P. (1996). Money For Old Collections! The Sheffield Museum'S Shows. *The Biology Curator*, Issue 5, 21 - 23.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/813>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

being threatened with total dissolution to other museums, the collections now support a Curator.

Finally, this paper might give the impression that Regional Stores are a novel idea. The Fine Artists in the North West have reached the stage of a discussion paper currently being circulated. Regional Stores for archaeological excavated material are already in existence and some are full or nearly full and having to decide on rationalisation – what a surprise!

MONEY FOR OLD COLLECTIONS! THE SHEFFIELD MUSEUM'S SHOWS

Paul Richards, Sheffield Museum.

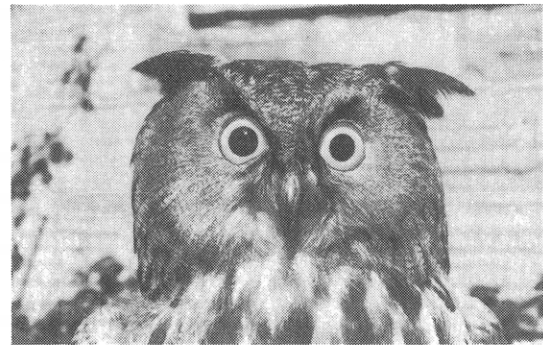
In recent years Sheffield Museum Service has faced a variety of cumulative budget reductions, spending freezes, increased income targets and staff cuts. In response to these, the Natural History Section has chosen to take the path of income generation rather than accept further cuts to the service and manpower. The role of environmental consultancy contracts has been discussed elsewhere (D. Whiteley, this issue). The other major source of income for the section has been the presentation of temporary exhibitions during school half-term holidays, for which a small charge is levied. These are known locally as "nine day wonders!" They are based on the principle of bringing a discrete section of the collections out of storage so that the public are able to see what they perceive as our 'hidden treasures'. Specimens are augmented with information panels, practical activities and children's events.

The initial impetus came from the BCG ~Beetle-Down" week in July 1988. An attempt was made to imitate on a small scale the Liverpool Natural History Centre. Specimens were brought out from behind the scenes for visitors to view and handle. Microscopes, computers and quizzes were used to enhance the experience and all members of Natural Science staff were available to answer enquiries, demonstrate equipment and protect specimens. Admission was free and the whole event was an enormous success.

As a result of the following BCG campaign, "Biology Collections in Crisis: The Sunflower Campaign" money was made available through the Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council for work on entomology collections. The RECAP grants enabled Sheffield Museum to employ two lepidopterists to amalgamate, rehouse and catalogue the entire British Lepidoptera collection of over 20,000 specimens. Upon completion a leaflet was produced outlining the history and strengths of the collection, to be used as an entrance ticket for the "Big Butterfly Show". The main aim of the show was to generate income for the section and provide the matching money for the RECAP grant!

The Big Butterfly Show was held over the February half-term period and cost £1 for adults and 50p for children and concessions (under 4's free). The entire Lepidoptera collection was brought into the museum lecture room and visitors were free to look through it as they wished. Supervision was provided by museum staff and the original RECAP employees. To save the voices and sanity of the demonstrators, information panels were produced to answer the most basic questions. Microscopes were available showing 'the microscopic beauty of butterfly wings'. The biological records centre RECORDER data-base was accessible to look up local Butterfly information. The Human History section put together a small display of related artifacts and the Education Services section ran a variety of craft activities for children. Along with quizzes, gallery

DON'T MISS YOUR ONE AND ONLY CHANCE TO SEE HUNDREDS OF BIRDS FROM THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION THIS HALF TERM AT THE



BIG BIRD SHOW



- * Children's Activities Included.
- * Birds to study, Birds to handle.
- * Computer Identification * Birds Eggs.
- * The beauty of birds under the microscope.
- * Wheelchair access * Deaf-awareness Staff Available.
- * Hundreds of British, Tropical and European birds from the Museum's collection specially dusted down and brought out for you to enjoy.

City Museum 12th - 20th February 1994
Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Weston Park Sunday 11 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. (Monday-closed)

ADMISSION CHARGE £1.20 Adults 60p all concessions

trails, leaflets, other insect specimens and setting demonstrations there was a great deal to do in a very small space. A popular feature was the addition of live tropical butterflies in a large flight case. These obligingly emerged from pupae from time to time while live caterpillars munched their way through their food via a video camera and TV link. Although popular (and possibly essential), the use of livestock presented numerous challenges. Not the least of which were getting pupae to emerge before or during the show and finding food sources for the adults and subsequent larvae during February. Devious use of fridges, incubators and Gro-lights saved the day, and most of the butterflies!

Over 5,000 people visited the show in 9 days. After expenditure on demonstrator wages, livestock and teaching equipment the show made a "surplus" of around £2,000. In addition spin off lectures on Butterflies were charged at £30 a time.

Because of continuing financial constraints, a second event was planned for October half-term period to help pay for improvements to the fossil store. The appropriately titled "Rock and Fossil Show" enabled the museum to display recent curatorial work on the fossil and mineral collections. The entrance ticket/leaflet had now evolved into an inky dinosaur hand stamp! Again the show was a great success with over £1,800 being made available to match with other grant monies.

The experience gained in presenting these events would prove invaluable during 1993 when even tighter financial

problems (yawn!) meant that the museum required a major income generating scheme in order to balance the budget. Because precedents had already been set by making a charge for temporary exhibitions (including non-Natural Science events: "Hats" and "Toytown") the way was open for a mini-blockbuster to make ends meet. All staff were involved in the major exhibition "Twist and Shout: A tribute to Rock and Pop, 1950s to 1990s". This was a very high profile, spectacular event of national interest. It was extended twice by popular demand, running eventually from January to August. Preparations took at least 50% of Natural Science staff time but the experience and income generated made up for that. A budget of £10,000 was built out of proposed income and eventual profits ran to around £20,000. The value of publicity and promotion of the museum gained through "Twist and Shout" was enormous.

1994 saw a return to the Natural History half-term shows. The "Big Bird Show" in February enabled staff to clean and sort through the largely neglected bird collection. Depending largely on the particular strengths of the collection, foreign and British mounts and skins were displayed with various simple themes such as 'bright colours', 'New Zealand', 'sea-birds', 'ducks', 'owls', 'eggs, bones and bits' etc. Fortunately a larger room with vacant display cases now meant that the shows could get even bigger. The inevitable microscopes and computers were augmented with continuous bird identification videos being shown. These proved very popular with adult visitors (partly because they could sit down to view them!). Permission is required for public broadcast of such videos. A pair of binoculars chained to the window enabled visitors to watch birds in the adjacent park. Further livestock was provided by a local falconry centre who provided several birds throughout the week in return for publicity.

Title	date	days	entry	total visitors
Beetle-Down	23-31 July 1988	(7)	Free	ca. 2000
Big Butterfly Show	22 Feb-1 Mar 1992	(9)	£1/50p	5000
Rock & Fossil Show	24 Oct-1 Nov 1992	(8)	£1.20/60p	3900
Twist & Shout	9 Jan-31 July 1993	(212)	£2.00/£1.00	27,900
Big Bird Show	12-20 Feb 1994	(8)	£1.20/60p	5000
Rock & Fossil Show	22-30 Oct 1994	(8)	£1.20/60p	3500
Big Bug Show	21-26 Feb 1995	(6)	80p	4000
(Nat. Hist. Centre)	17 Feb-14 Apr 1996	?	?	?

While on this subject it is worth pointing out the ease with which publicity can be obtained via the local media. All local newspapers have given heavy coverage to each show, partly due to the wonderful photo-opportunities with children and animals. Local radio stations have always come and broadcast live from each show. A single press release is usually all that is required. It also helps if your local sports teams have animal names: the 'Owls' (Sheffield Wednesday), the 'Eagles' (Rugby League).

Table 1: Summary of recent shows at Sheffield City Museum involving Natural History staff.

The Big Bird Show was followed in October 1994 by a second 'Rock and Fossil Show' which again benefited from more space and proper display cases instead of table tops. The children's activities had now grown to a size which would have filled the previous show room on their own. The reputation for such events now meant that parents were expecting major children's activities each half-term.

For the most recent 'Big Bug Show' it was decided to make it primarily a children's event, augmented by exotic specimens from the reserve collections, the best bits of the

Big Butterfly Show, more microscopes and lots of livestock. Prices had previously been fixed at £1.20 for adults and 60p for children but a single price of 80p was introduced for the Big Bug Show – a concession to the adults! This was only open for six days but still attracted over 4,000 visitors.

The biggest disadvantage of the "nine day wonders" is the hard work that they involve. For a concentrated period before and after the show very little else gets done. Due to fieldwork commitments it is simply impossible to put these events on during the spring and summer. Having said this, it does get easier with each show (although the cabinets still weigh the same!). The Big Bird Show in fact only took a fortnight to prepare from scratch and attracted more visitors than any other show (5,000 in eight days).

The other disadvantages are those of conservation and security. So much moving and handling of specimens inevitably causes damage but this has to be weighed against the improvements through cleaning, restoration and improved subsequent storage that takes place. Obviously by bringing out the entire reserve collection, specimens are vulnerable to immediate theft and the public are able to see what we have that is worth stealing later on. In actual fact the only losses so far have been a remote control TV, small pieces from the microscopes and expendable unaccessioned samples of wings etc.

The advantages far out-weigh any disadvantages. The primary aim of income generation is achieved with ease due to the museum's existing popularity and growing reputation as an interesting and fun place to be during the school holidays. Attracting visitors is never a problem with an average of 4,000 paying to see each show. Daily maxima have reached 800 with many more uncounted toddlers.

For the Natural History Section the net profit shown at the end of the day is not of paramount importance. This may often be swallowed up in a site budget but the equipment, materials and manpower bought in for the shows are of lasting benefit to the collections. In the last 4 years alone the number of microscopes has risen from three to eleven. We have acquired two new light sources, a TV and video player, a pair of binoculars, four 10 drawer Hills units, several new reference books, a library of videos, numerous conservation materials, resins, paints, plastic bags etc, three new leaflets promoting the collections, specimens for Education Services, and around 18 man-months of extra curatorial work on the collections. We have provided paid employment for six ex-volunteers and raised the profile of the Natural History Section enormously. Such new equipment has also enabled the section to run "Identification dayschools" throughout the year, from which further income is generated.

The conservation of specimens which results from these events is of particular benefit. Since virtually every specimen in a collection is used or at least considered for a show it means that all specimens are given attention for which they may otherwise have waited years. Cleaning, repair and renovation is usually necessary and may even require major projects such as the stabilisation and re-mounting of an Ichthyosaur for a Rock and Fossil show. At the conclusion of a show it is possible to re-evaluate storage requirements and make considerable improvements to physical condition and organisation. Every bird specimen has been re-housed, catalogued, re-organised and received condition assessment subsequent to the Big Bird Show. A short-term event helps to focus attention and resources on a particular part of the collection and even provides the means to do it. By changing

the subject of the event, the whole collection soon receives attention. It would probably be possible to produce the "Large Lichen Show" and still attract visitors and resources because of previous successes and the attraction of children's activities ("paint your favourite lichen", "fungus face painting", "pipe cleaner bryophytes"!).

By providing specific projects within the collections the half-term events easily attract grant aid. There are so many benefits for public, museum and collections alike that such well defined projects delight Area Museum Councils and other sponsoring bodies. At Sheffield, grants have been used to provide the manpower for the initial curation of specimens or for new storage facilities and collections access after the event.

Despite the hard work involved in producing a "nine day wonder" it is a short lived added pressure on the curator. A month or two of planning and preparation provides the space and resources to work on the basics of curation and collection management for the rest of the year (or half year if you do two!).

Other incidental benefits include the sparking of visitors' interest in natural history and the generation of biological records. It can be very successful to undertake a mapping scheme of particularly well known animals during a show. Records are instantly forthcoming as pins in a map-board. The presence of a computer with the biological records database provides immediate feedback.

A final benefit from undertaking such short-lived shows at regular intervals is that they act as constant reminders to Councillors, Area Services and other museum staff of the popularity of natural history. They justify the existence of our collections within the museum. Sadly such justification is often necessary. The importance, value and fascination of natural history specimens and associated staff expertise become highlighted in a coldly economic setting.

For Sheffield Museum the next step is an extended event from February half-term to Easter 1996. Using the existing galleries as a venue and bringing in paid demonstrators to lighten the burden on the curators. It will be another step closer to the Liverpool Natural History Centre with much more in the way of interactive technology. Already the show has provided justification for the purchase of two multimedia PCs and associated CD ROM packages, another TV and video player, a 10 drawer insect cabinet, a storage unit for molluscs, a microscope and light source, and new tables and chairs.

At the time when budgetary crises could easily have put an end to any display work and outreach the temporary shows have brought new life – and money – into the Natural History section. Instead of withdrawing into our shells (!) and waiting for the inevitable redundancies the positive approach of promoting our collection assets in a simple and inexpensive way has improved both collection care and public enjoyment of the museum.

Where we were once trying to keep our heads above water we are now able to surf on the backs of our "dusty old collections"!

THE UNIDROIT CONVENTION 1995 : ITS POSSIBLE EFFECT ON UK NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

Charles Pettitt, Manchester Museum

Introduction

In Rome in June 1995 diplomatic representatives of 70

countries adopted a draft Unidroit (the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects. The United Kingdom was an official participant in this Conference. The full Convention runs to 21 Articles and one Annex; this note is just to alert BCG members to the possible significance of the signing. Judging by the amount of discussion on the Internet, our American cousins are already considerably stirred up about the Convention and its possible effects.

What it covers

Article 1 states: "This Convention applies to claims of an international character for:

- a) the restitution of stolen cultural objects;
- b) the return of cultural objects removed from the territory of a Contracting State contrary to its law regulating the export of cultural objects for the purpose of protecting its cultural heritage."

Article 2 states: "For the purposes of this Convention, cultural objects are those which ... are of importance for ... science and belong to one of the categories in the Annex of this Convention."

The Annex [Definitions of Cultural Property under the Convention] has fourteen categories and the *first listed* of these is:

"a) Rare collections and specimens of fauna, flora, minerals and anatomy, and objects of palaeontological interest."

Thus all natural science specimens (with the possible exception of petrology?) come very much within the purview of the Convention.

Article 3 (7) states: "for the purposes of this Convention a "public collection" consists of a group of inventoried or otherwise identified cultural objects owned by:

- a) a Contracting State
- b) a regional or local authority of a Contracting State
- d) an institution that is established for an essentially cultural, educational or scientific purpose in a Contracting State and is recognised in that State as serving the public interest."

[which would seem to catch most of us!]

What might it mean?

This is difficult to judge at the moment. It is unclear how soon, if at all, the UK Parliament will ratify the Convention; however, there is also the question of what the European Parliament will do about it and whether their decision would affect the UK.

At its worst this Convention will allow any country to decide that any well known specimen *or collection* was illegally exported originally and so demand its restitution. The maximum time limit quoted in the Convention is 75 years, although 50 years is the norm, and the Convention specifically includes material stolen (or 'collected' as we have always said) before the Convention is in place. However, Article 3 (4) says that "... a claim for restitution of a cultural object ... belonging to a public collection, shall not be subject to time limitations other than a period of three years from the time when the claimant knew the location of the cultural object and the identity of its possessor". I *think* this means that they can claim a collection no matter *when* it came to this country, provided they do it within three years of the Convention being adopted. Incidentally, it also applies to objects on loan that are not returned on time!