



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

---

Title: Pastoral Care and Co-operation Between Devon Museums

Author(s): Boot, K.

Source: Boot, K. (1979). Pastoral Care and Co-operation Between Devon Museums. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 2 No 4, 130 - 131.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1707>

---

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.

## PASTORAL CARE AND CO-OPERATION BETWEEN DEVON MUSEUMS

There are at least 30 museums in the county of Devon. Although the majority have some biological material, only three have collections of any size. Those at Exeter are the largest followed by Torquay and then Plymouth. As with most museums, staffing levels bear no relationship to the size of the collections. Exeter has two members of staff wholly concerned with the natural sciences, Plymouth one and Torquay none. It should be noted that Torquay is administered by the Torquay Natural History Society, and is financed by subscription and grant aid. Exeter and Plymouth are administered by their respective District Councils and receive finance from public funds.

There are advantages in having only two museums and three curators active in the biological field. In particular the division of the county for the purposes of data collection and specimen collection is facilitated. The disadvantages however, far outweigh the advantages. The large size of the county (2591 sq. miles) contributes to the problems and coverage is far from complete, North Devon is especially isolated. The lack of a county service and the locations (all in the south) of the larger museums have produced an imbalance in the facilities available to resident and visitor alike. This situation has been further aggravated by the parochial attitudes of the major museums in the past, coupled with a lack of staff and money. Ever dwindling finances and no increases in staff are likely to stay with us in the near future. Parochial attitudes are breaking down however, and it is in the area of neighbourly co-operation that much progress is being made.

Exeter Museum has always been regarded as the 'County Museum' and as such is often asked for advice on problems of care, storage, documentation and display by the smaller museums. Such advice should be and is given where possible in order to protect and enhance the forgotten collections. The Area Museums Council for the South-West (AMCSW) has always been aware of the lack of expertise available to the smaller museums and has encouraged co-operation at all levels. Recently AMCSW has made available a sum of money to offset travelling expenses incurred during visits for the purposes of 'pastoral care'.

It should be stressed that at no time is Exeter Museum regarded as 'Big Brother'. Such an image can only be detrimental to the end product - good museums in Devon. Exeter Museum is looked upon as a parent museum, not interfering but there when needed. Information and assistance is only given when asked for, in the form of suggestions.

Initially the image of museums, as far as the public are concerned, is largely determined by the displays museums have to offer. In the context of natural sciences, the area of common ground in Devon is the local natural history gallery. These of course vary from a major gallery down to the corner of a room containing other materials. Close contact between museums is a way of realising the full potential of what are often extremely limited resources, thus minimising unnecessary duplication. The results of such co-operation are becoming evident in Devon. Rather than attempting to cover all aspects of the county's wildlife individual museums are concentrating on items and areas of particular relevance to their visitors.

Exeter was the first museum in the county to 'modernise' its displays. Areas chosen to illustrate the natural history were Eastern Dartmoor and the Exe Estuary. A similar project was planned at Plymouth Museum by David Curry - the areas chosen being Western Dartmoor and the River Tamar. Unfortunately cut backs have prevented this display from progressing past an advanced planning stage. Thus, the first two pieces of the jig-saw were in hand, if not in place. A unique opportunity to give this idea a boost presented itself in 1978. Torquay Museum received grant aid to re-display its natural history gallery. As a result of the enthusiasm of the president and the curator of the museum, finance was obtained from Torbay District Council and the AMCSW. Design staff were appointed under the JCP and STEP schemes operated by the Manpower Services Commission. The Committee of TNHS requested that Exeter Museum should supervise the project from its inception. The gallery is to be completed in two stages, the first phase of which, dealing with geology, is almost completed. The second phase includes the biological material and will cover southern Dartmoor and the River Dart.

By means of direct help and co-operation with colleagues the area of South Devon has been split up between the major museums. Each display will stand on its own merits as being representative of the county as a whole whilst still maintaining a local identity. Work at Exeter is complete, the project at Torquay will finish at the end of the year. It is hoped that Plymouth will commence their re-display next year.

Some of the smaller museums in the county also look towards Exeter for a positive display theme. The most recent case is that of the Fairlynch Museum and Arts Centre at Budleigh Salterton. This Museum had the all too familiar assortment of faded and dilapidated birds along with some specimens from other groups, but wanted to create a modern display with decent specimens, however small this might be. After discussion it became apparent to all concerned that in order to make the best use of the resources available only a small part of the natural history of the area should be chosen. Budleigh is situated at the mouth of the River Otter which has within its estuary a text book example of a salt marsh. Here was the ideal opportunity to present a small but useful display about a local habitat whilst at the same time adding to the awareness of the threats to wetlands in general. Exeter Museum has agreed to help with this display in any way it can, including acquisition and loan of specimens as well as the more detailed writing of scripts etc.

The importance of display in relation to other curatorial duties, especially outside our own institution, is debatable. It is my opinion that the experience we gain, the contacts we make and the knowledge of other collections we amass is ample return for the small amount of time we spend. In my own case this time amounts to approximately one day per week. As far as the museums in Devon are concerned consultation of this nature has produced more relevant displays, and hopefully a better service. A further spin-off is the interest shown by local people. In particular the District Council at Torquay is taking a far greater interest in its museum, to the point of increased financial aid.

Kelvin Boot  
Ramm, Exeter.