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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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The new senior curator is Dr Darryl Mead, an industrial historian from the Powerhouse in Sydney. Six posts for science curators grades (i)-(iii) are presently allocated of which five are occupied by existing staff, the former keepers and assistants. The vacant post will be filled once all the dust has settled. The former deputy keeper of natural history, Fred Woodward, has taken early retirement leaving a large gap catering for the marine environment and the phylum Mollusca. As Scotland has a lot of the former and the museum has large collections of the latter this is a loss already being felt.

The Dodo and the Bonfire – A Myth Laid to Rest

The tale of the Oxford dodo is a celebrated museological story concerning, as it does, subjects dear to a curator's heart: ie. the perils of deaccessioning and interfering trustees. The traditional version of the story has it that in 1755, at the annual visit to the Ashmolean Museum of the trustees and Vice-Chancellor, the Museum's stuffed dodo was ordered to be burnt as, in its dilapidated state, it was considered not worth preserving. At some time later, when the specimen was put on the bonfire, a brave curator rushed in and pulled out the head and foot from the flames and the dodo was saved from complete destruction. This story seems to be beloved of lecturers; I heard it most recently twice at a conference in sunny Spain. Although I have often day-dreamed about my heroic predecessor and wondered what the equivalent action today might be, I felt that Oxford University was being unfairly condemned. Therefore it was good to see a more accurate picture published in a paper by the former Librarian of the Ashmolean Library, R.F. Ovenell, in *Archives of Natural History*.

Ovenell suggests that the true story, as far as it is now possible to discern, is not nearly so dramatic. The Vice-Chancellor and the trustees did indeed make their annual visit to the Museum and ordered that decaying specimens be removed from exhibition. The dodo fell into this category and the curators at the time carefully preserved what could be saved. It was not by heroics or a lucky accident that the head and foot survived to be listed in the 1756 catalogue of the zoological specimens. There

is no documentary evidence for a fire; the idea of the fire was introduced during the nineteenth century when the concept that the dodo was destroyed as an act of vandalism took hold.

It is hardly surprising that over the hundred years between the donation of the dodo to the University and the fateful visit in 1755 that the dodo had rotted – we still have considerable difficulty keeping specimens pest-free! Although the head and foot were preserved it was another hundred years before the Oxford dodo became truly immortal in the pages of Alice in Wonderland.

Ovenell, R.F. 1992 'The Tradescant Dodo', *Archives of Natural History* **19** (2): 145-152.

*Jane Pickering, Assistant Curator of Zoology,
University Museum, Oxford.*

Return of the Warrah

Another extinct species, the Warrah or Falkland Island Fox *Dusicyon australis* was the subject of an idiosyncratic piece of writing by Rear Admiral Sir Christopher Layman no less in the MoD Conservation Magazine 'Sanctuary' (no.20, 1991) which has recently been brought to our notice. Having found that the only known mounted specimen of the species was in the Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique "it was then an interesting exercise in bureaucratic manipulation" to get the specimen returned to the Falklands to "John Smith's marvellous museum in my old Falklands home, Britannia House, where (it) clearly ought to be". Really? Apparently the Falklands military mafia came in handy as it "turns up in surprising places and can usually get things done". I bet! Watch out for loan requests accompanied by stun grenades and large gents in red berets. I wonder if MGC registration applies in the Falklands and what environmental conditions are like in Mr Smith's museum? Bet the security's good though!

Proposed BSBI Study Group

Watch out for a note in BSBI News suggesting the formation of a Study Group for the History of the Discovery of the Vascular Flora of the British

Isles. Surely a move to be applauded if it helps to focus the attention of active field botanists to their often neglected (scientifically and sometimes curatorially) local herbaria.

Information Wanted

Barry Constantine, 4 The Green, Skipsea, East Yorks YO25 8SZ, is wanting to compile reference material of coleoptera, synantropic insects and ectoparasites to assist his researches into the remains of faunas in archeological sites. Barry is particularly interested in acquiring specimens of saproxylic beetles, aquatic beetles and bugs, pests of stored products and bird, animal or human ectoparasites especially any European species no longer found in Britain.

Any information on the whereabouts of any spirit preserved material or manuscript material from the family of the late Basil Bunting (1900-1985) would be welcomed by Colin Simms, Low Woodhead North, Bellingham, Northumberland.

Numbers and distribution of muntjac in Britain is the subject of research by Professor Stephen Harris at Bristol University Zoology Dept., School of Biological Sciences, Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UG. Please contact Prof. Harris if you can help with distribution data or survey work.

Publications

'Standards in the Museum Care of Biological Collections 1992' – now available from the Museums and Galleries Commission, 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA price £6 including p&p (£10 outside the UK). This important document *will* affect you in one way or another. Short critiques would be welcome for the next newsletter.

'Horse Power: a history of the horse and donkey in human societies' by Juliet Clutton-Brock. £19.95 from the Natural History Museum.

Also from the NHM are two publications to mark last year's centenary of Sir Richard Owen. A 'Richard Owen Commemoration' by Jacob Gruber and John Thackray (£29.95) and 'The Hunterian Lectures in Comparative Anatomy May and June 1837' (£15.95 pbk).

'Scottish Bats'. This new serial is available from South-east Scotland Bat Groups, 9 Brunswick Street, Edinburgh, EH7 5JB. Volume one contains distribution maps of all Scottish species and other articles. Price £3 including p&p.

The 'Checklist of the Plants of Perthshire' by RAH Smith et al is the first account of this superb area since the 1898 'Flora'. A complete flora is planned but meanwhile this annotated checklist will fill you in with the summary distribution of all local species. Price £5.00 pbk.

At last! – a letter to the Editor.

Dear Editor,

These are difficult days. We read and hear about problems at what we previously considered stalwart natural history museums e.g. Bristol, Glasgow, Sheffield and even the Hancock Museum, Newcastle.

Yet interest in natural history, biological recording, collections, natural history exhibitions and the demand for our services have never been greater and continue to increase.

It is all a question of £££ and image. BCG can continue to play a key role by campaigning and lobbying for both. Every letter and every targetted leaflet helps. BCG's watchdog activities and ongoing campaigns continue to notch up notable successes. It is more important than ever to keep the heat on.

It is the long term security of collections, records and biological archives which worries me most. I sometimes get the feeling that only BCG is out there able to help with an independent voice. I wish the BCG Committee the very best of luck. I shall be with you in spirit if not in body. I think it was Bill Pettitt on the Isle of Man who suggested that we adopt the old Hill Street Blues slogan "Lets do it to them before they do it to us".

Derek Whiteley, Sheffield, (ex Secretary BCG)