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Introduction

This is the fourth part of our series on the Ten Agents of Deterioration; the risks facing museum collections. Compared to the previous topics covered (and I'm sure those to follow) the response has been rather slim. Possibly this is a good thing in that we haven't had to deal with too many cases resulting from theft and vandalism (as opposed to the amount of articles we received relating to 'pests').

The article from Ipswich museum relates to preventative conservation measures taken in protecting against theft and vandalism. This is an area that many of us involved in the 'conservation' of collections do not deal with directly as it often comes under the remit of 'security'.

The next topic to be covered in the series will be relative humidity and temperature. Articles would be welcome on similar 'preventative'/controlling measures and experiences of materials and products used. Also, have you conserved particular objects affected by extremes of RH/temperature? Let us know of methods adopted in particular projects; have these been dependant upon the locality of the work?

Donna Hughes

Vandalism within the National Museum of Wales

Theft and vandalism within the 'Natural History in Wales' galleries (NMGW) is not a serious problem, however through the introduction of market testing, the number of warding staff has been greatly reduced, with just one warder being on duty for up to three galleries. During this time the number of incidents of vandalism and theft have greatly increased.

The Natural History in Wales galleries replicate habitats within Wales including woodland,

moorland alpine, maritime and wetland. On entering the first gallery you are faced with a large sea cliff which juts out to form a rock platform dividing the centre of the gallery. Beneath the rocks are pools. Seabirds line the ledges of the cliff and are well out of reach. However, the platform runs closer to the floor and here birds, shells and seaweed are within easy reach and although the displays are raised, no barriers restrict access. Starfish which were adhered to the sandy floor have been removed by force, with just small pieces remaining and sea shells are greatly depleted. Six bird specimens are dotted along the floor and cliff and all are in good

condition. There are two rock pools made of perspex which have been damaged. One shows a cross section through a rock pool which has been cracked probably by someone attempting to lift the lid and reach inside the pool, breaking the seal. The second pool has been trodden on and the perspex has split. The perspex is now at two different levels.

The sea cliff then leads into the woodland gallery. An oak tree lies against the wall, half in winter and half in summer. The leaves and twigs are made of plasticised fabric and the twigs are either plastic or the real thing. The branches hang down over the gangway and these are frequently tugged at. The leaves and twigs litter the floor. At the foot of the tree are primroses made of plastic and a family of three badgers which are close enough to be touched. The flowers are in easy reach and the petals lie on the ground where they have been broken off. The plants are very misshapen. The nearest badger is frequently touched and stroked and occasionally clumps of fur are pulled out. Opposite in the winter scene is a fox and this too is frequently pulled and stroked. What makes this scene more tempting is the false snow that can

be collected in handfuls and thrown at one another, thus the snow is fairly bare on the ground.

These first two galleries experience plenty of unwanted interaction but the dioramas have managed to withstand a lot of the attention. Unsupervised, children tend to let their curiosity take control and the stepping onto dioramas and touching and stroking displays is all a part of this. This is not regarded as vandalism but as general wear and tear associated with time and children. A more worrying concern is when the displays are damaged on purpose, and not just in one area.

In June 1996 a small group of teenagers went on the rampage and pulled out specimens and material from within dioramas of all three galleries. The worst affected areas were the wetland and alpine scenes, areas farthest away from the main hall and not widely supervised. The wetland display consists of a bordered off area standing about two foot high. Beyond this is a replica lake with reed beds and several small birds and their nests. Large clumps of the reeds were pulled out, a sedge warbler nest was dropped on the floor and one bird was taken. Three small branches of the alder had been

snapped off (and later stuck back on with sellotape, which drew more attention to the breaks).

The mountain scene has a small two foot barrier and beyond this is a replica mountain with birds and flowers. The plant models were all made of wax and had been crushed, some taken out and lost, some left where they were. A ring ouzel was taken and has not yet been recovered.

Other areas that are low down, badly lit or out of view of the warder seem to be the most likely to experience vandalism and theft. A small diorama adjacent to the mountain scene had an adder curled up in the foreground. This was so frequently damaged that the conservator removed it from display. A rabbit from the same scene has now been moved to the very back of the display to prevent further damage.

The majority of displays are in glass cases, however the success of the galleries is undoubtedly due to the life-like and impressive dioramas. The fact that they are drawing so much attention, if not a little too much physical attention, indicates that they are at least getting a message across and firing

the curiosity. The mindless destruction is thankfully rare and does not go undetected. The damage made by the teenage group was quickly picked up on, but it did raise the question of putting security cameras in all the galleries. As a similar incident has not happened since, it was believed to be purely opportunist on the teenagers' part, acting on the fact there was only one warder present that day.

*Victoria Purewal
Botanical Conservator
NMGW*

Theft from Hampshire County Museums Service

The problem with complete strangers wandering round a site with the appearance of knowing what they're doing can often be a problem to staff who may not wish or be bothered in challenging them. Uniforms or official looking overalls can also discourage challenges until something goes missing. In this case it was a credit card of a member of staff. Since then security has tightened up considerably and even well-known visitors are not free to wander around the site and putting extra burdens on staff who do not feel the need to accompany their visitors to the loos or staff room for tea. Ah well no doubt the usual tight schedules mixed with the inevitable no incident apathy will mean that the usual laxity will soon return? I hope not but I do hope that our trustees will have a little more freedom!

Once of the problems of being situated near 'privileged housing' (council estate) is groups of children trying their luck at tossing pebbles at windows or loosening nuts on overnight-parked vehicles. About a year ago our site manager was physically threatened by a not

so young 'child' after he asked him and his followers to refrain from trespassing on the site and testing the 'breakability' of the windows. After some police involvement the matter has not re-occurred. However both instances show the need to stay alert!

*Simon Moore
Hampshire County Museums*

Lightning Strikes Twice?

In July 1990 a young woman walked into Liverpool Museum, smashed a display case on the Egyptian gallery with a cobble stone and removed an artefact. She put the item into her handbag but made no serious attempt to escape with it. The artefact was the mummified hand of a woman, thought to have been a high priestess, from Saqqara, dating from the Ptolemaic (Roman) period, 332-30 BC (M11438)(¹). The hand is covered with a brittle black bituminous resin partly coated with gold leaf and has four gold and lapis lazuli rings on the fingers. It has a high monetary value. It is unlikely, however, that the hand was targeted for