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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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volumes. Details from Plant Protection Service, PO Box 9102, NL-6700 HC Wageningen, Netherlands.

## Newcastle Course commences

The new Museum Studies course at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne takes its first students in October for either a Diploma or MA qualification. Peter Davis has been joined by Andrew Newman to provide a course which should have a strong natural sciences bias and which is expected to appeal to graduates wanting to enter the museum profession and to those who are already working in it who can choose to take individual course modules or pursue a 'fast track' option to the MA. Contact Andrew Newman on 091 222 7419 or Tony Rylance on 091 222 6067 for further information.

## MUSEUM PEST CONTROL SUBSTANCES APPROVED

Some substances normally used as pesticides by museums have been approved for use. The approval - given by Ministers following recommendations by the Independent Advisory Committee on Pesticides - is made under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986.

The approval includes the following substances:

- white spirit
- tetrachloroethylene
- formaldehyde \* (for the control of flying and crawling insects and fungi)
- ethanol (includes IMS) \* (for the control of flying and crawling insects and fungi)
- ethyl acetate \*(for the control of flying and crawling insects and fungi)
- isopropanol (propan-2-ol) \*(for the control of fungi on specimens)
- thymol
- 4-chloro-m-cresol \*(for the control of fungi on insect specimens)
- camphor \*(for the control of fungi on insect specimens)

\* = nominated by BCG

These substances can be used for the treatment of specimens in museums and related buildings.

Full details of the conditions of use and authorised areas of use of the newly approved substances were published in the March issue of the Pesticides Register published jointly by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and the Ministry of

Agriculture, Fisheries & Food (MAFF), and available from HMSO and booksellers.

The use for fumigation of Carbon Dioxide has also received approval in respect of public hygiene and wood preservation use.

*Mark Simmons*

## NEWS FROM BOLTON MUSEUM - a brief summary

What has been happening at Bolton? 1992 was a busy year. We are currently entering the final year of a three year old Urban Programme funded project to produce a gallery display on local wildlife. New displays are underway with a significant part of the budget devoted to educational materials and an activity centre for use by our visitors. Construction work has all been in-house (we have an excellent museum joiner) and it should be open in the summer of 1994! We have attempted to maintain the highest affordable standards throughout. After much deliberation we decided to use fibre-optic lighting. This is relatively expensive but has several advantages. One 150 watt power unit costs about £400, one 9-tail bundle of fibres about 2 metres long costs about £200 and replacement bulbs cost £45! This set-up will light two or three cases (depending on their size). The power units sit on top of the case and the cooling fan is very quiet. Bulbs can be changed without entering cases (oh bliss!) and if a unit breaks down it is replaced with a spare and sent away for repair. The only breakdown we have had was due to a thermal cut-out fuse blowing because the fan's dust filter became clogged - cost negligible. The light is cold, virtually UV-free and by moving the tails it can be positioned anywhere at any time! You can even fit colour filters, diffusers and mini spot-light lenses if necessary. By varying the number of tails used you can easily achieve 50 lux, 100 lux or whatever. We are very pleased with the system. It is also environmentally friendly because we now use less Watts of power for the gallery than before!

We have also used a 'Touch and Tell' touch-sensitive tape loop with a blackbird song recording on it. This was an experiment but is always the first thing that children run to use in the gallery! When we have installed the videos,

video cameras and computer it will be even better - we'll see how fund-raising goes.

1991/92 saw our staff involved in collections survey work, firstly at other museums and then on our own collections. A revised NW Collections publication is planned and the North West Natural History Collections Research Unit is also involved in producing a regional report on natural history collection needs for the future for the NW Museums Service.

This period also saw the significant acquisition of natural history collections from Salford Museums Service. They have transferred all of their natural history to either Bolton or Manchester (neither of us could take it all!). Sadly, natural history museums are now extinct in Salford.

Documentation of all our collections is on MODES and we have so far processed only about 20,000 of the 300,000 items. We recently acquired MODES PLUS, but are still evaluating it.

On the negative side we have had to convert an area of our displays into storage space. Work is being grant-aided by the Area Museums Service and should be completed by early summer 1993. This should enable us to achieve adequate environmental conditions for all of our collections, something that seemed a joke five years ago!

This year we will be improving our recording system for treatment and movement of collections. We have the pest beetle *Anthrenus sarnicus* - a new animal which we think came in with a touring national exhibition. The larvae were discovered when it was dismantled - they were feeding on the felt case linings! We now have a problem, but have so far kept it under control by freezing and some fumigation with Vapona. Freezing definitely does work if performed correctly; see the latest paper by Tom Strang in Collection Forum (SPNHC). One lesson learnt in Madrid will be applied this year when we begin to put as many as possible of our storage units on legs to eliminate breeding areas for pests in detritus beneath them. Six inch legs make cleaning easy and make it more difficult for larvae to get into the cases. They also reduce flooding risks as most floods are less than 3" deep unless you live in Perth! We are also evaluating paint-on contact

insecticide that we may be able to use underneath cases in 'out of reach' areas. One thing has been highlighted - when you start treating large numbers of drawers or specimens, accurate record-keeping is essential. A storage unit numbering system is vital - 'I think that those are the drawers we had them in last time', is not adequate! More on this in future. (Has anyone got a system that runs well? Please let me know).

Now for the smut (unless you're a mycologist). This winter saw us achieve a long held aim - an elephant erection (so to speak). It could not have been achieved without outside help but has drawn the crowds! Eric (the head of an African elephant) had languished in an external store for nearly 30 years. He had suffered damage and required urgent conservation. 1992 saw funds become available and work proceeded at NWMS to prepare Eric for exhibition. His erection was achieved by employing scaffolders to winch him into place. The special frame was what is known as 'overdesigned for safety' in the trade and involved new wall ties to strengthen the building. He now hangs proudly from the end of the gallery, accompanied by an Indian elephant skull and a fossil mastodon skull cast (our stores are relieved!). Eric had a mystery past, now solved due to peak time exposure on Granada TV - he even made it into the Daily Express. His TV appearance resulted in extraordinary scenes in the Museum the following day as over a thousand people came for a look.

Conservation facilities have improved due to a 'windfall' enabling us to purchase a new Heto freeze drier with a 1 metre long, 60cm diameter chamber. If you require work done, please enquire.

Biological Recording has taken a leap forward with the acquisition of the Recorder package. We have paid the Lancashire Wildlife Trust to enter Bolton's Phase I survey data and have a couple of volunteers poised to enter our huge backlog of information. The database currently holds only 700 sites and 8,000 records.

The Aquarium was threatened with closure in 1992, but a concerted effort by staff, external organisations and individuals has guaranteed continued free access for its annual 90,000 visitors. We aim to enlarge some tanks this year

to enable us to keep our four large red-tailed catfish in one tank - a display which is unique in the UK! (recently featured in a national aquarists' magazine). We are also looking into other developments and possible sponsorship schemes.

The next twelve months look exciting as we should complete the new store, open the new gallery and make great progress in biological recording, collection documentation, preventative conservation etc. - all in line with the Business Plan! The only negative side is that we still have no geologist. The post is still there, 'not dead - just resting', and is a high priority for development in the future.

*Steve Garland*

## STILL MADRID

Yes, a Madrid story that surfaced (so to speak) after the Great Flood of Perth and which is presented here, despite being hopelessly after the fact, as a sad memorial to all those who still can't stop talking about it:

By now, those of you who didn't get to Madrid will have heard about it from those who did. Those who did go will now be sick of being ignored at tea-breaks and shunned at parties. Facts will have become irrelevant detail; rumours will have become libel actions and unsubstantiated stories will have become legends. So wherein lies the truth? What were the **really** important sessions and events? Where was the chicken's beak? Who is Elvis O'Horne? The truth can now be told.

Madrid in May is a tremendous place to be, 33° and never a cloud in the sky. The nights are warm and lively and San Isidro kicks off her shoes and celebrates her birthday (what!?). Tremendous that is (violins maestro) unless you are attending an international symposium for 6 days. The statistics speak for themselves - 64 hours indoors working backed up with 30 hours sleep (the remaining 50 hours I leave to your imagination). There's little wonder that we came back so pale! Rest assured that those returning with tans must have been skiving ("What? - Davis you're fired! - oh yes, you already are")

Obviously in such an intensive week the delegates must have learned a great deal. We certainly did. The ability to say "excuse me, the black ball

seems to be stuck" in Spanish can prove invaluable - in a variety of circumstances. As can knowledge of the complete works of Lennon & McCartney, as Simon Moore admirably proved. Are you sure they wrote the Marseillaise?

An ongoing study of chicken anatomy throughout the week proved particularly rewarding. Not least when on the final day of the Symposium, awards were given by the King's nephew for 'the most complete chicken'. Those of us who had been collecting various parts during our stay gleaned much pleasure, not only from the search for limbs, but from the final construction on Thursday evening. How we all cheered when Chris Collins located the missing beak behind our interpreter's ear! The thrill of seeing the final wing sticking out of the paella! the excitement of finding the crushed synsacrum at the conference lunch! And who could forget the plate of chicken bottoms served so beautifully on the first night? It was this kind of attention to detail by the organisers which really made it a pleasure to be there!

The catering was especially organised for the Symposium. The soup provided a real brain-teaser for the botanical taxonomists and the bread amused many a geologist. We were delighted to discover that the custard finally plugged a few gaps in studies on pre-Cambrian life-forms but were devastated by the news that three species in the main course had become extinct before the meal arrived (due to an unexpected diversion caused by roadworks outside Paris). After all of this the final banquet at a castle was eagerly awaited. Unfortunately the reenactment of the loaves and fishes miracle didn't come off! Times were hard; many turned to the evil drink and one Swiss delegate was seen scratching a meagre existence on bat-droppings. It emerged later that the evening's event was a plot to undermine taxonomic research by encouraging starving delegates to throw themselves from the battlements. We were all underwhelmed.

### What of the programme?

The facilities were big - and over two miles from the dining hall! The air-conditioning could do an impressive 80 to 0 in under ten seconds. Someone gave us all a personal stereo (for translations) but all the programmes we tuned in to were foreign!