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Title: Making Collections Count – The lessons learnt for museums and the developing Leicestershire County Council Collections Team from the Community Heritage Initiative

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Source: Holmes, C. (2009). Making Collections Count – The lessons learnt for museums and the developing Leicestershire County Council Collections Team from the Community Heritage Initiative. *NatSCA News, Issue 17*, 60 - 67.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/149>

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**Making Collections Count –**  
**The lessons learnt for museums and the developing Leicestershire County Council**  
**Collections Team from the Community Heritage Initiative.**

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**Background**

The Community Heritage Initiative (CHI) was a five-year programme to help Leicestershire and Rutland residents, of all ages, learn about, appreciate, explore and conserve the area's natural and wider heritage.

The programme was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant in October 2003, with a programme team commencing at the start of February 2004 and ending at the end of November 2008. The Historic and Natural Environment (HNE) team was also formed in October 2003, and the CHI team worked within the wider HNE function. At the same time the work of the Biological Records Centre – a previously museum run function – split from the natural history collections and became part of the HNE team.

The HLF grant award was for £516,000 towards the predicted programme costs of £598,000. CHI also received financial support from Leicestershire County Council (LCC) and Rutland County Council.

Within the Community Heritage Initiative project application forms and supporting documentation, it was stated that the project would:

“Develop an innovative approach to collections, with training into collection preparation and use of natural history specimens. By generating greater use of the collections, it is hoped to break down barriers and misconceptions. Training will include why collections are necessary and highlight their value. It is also proposed to develop opportunities for collection of more commonly found natural history specimens (often used at handling sessions and training days) thus developing interaction with collections that should be truly accessible to everyone.”

The CHI programme saw many new approaches to work with the collections for our authority, and it was this that has helped inform the developing work of a new Museums Collections Team, brought together in August 2008, as part of a wider structure review of Environment and Heritage services within the County Council. 2009 saw further significant changes with the retirement of Dr Anthony Fletcher, the Keeper of Natural Life, after a long and dedicated career with the collections.

Background to Leicestershire and its museum service

- Rural area 77%
- 32% of Leics population is rural
- fast growing population of pensionable age

The programme worked across the county, which has a diverse landscape and is often, often over-looked as having a rural nature with the associated issues of transport and access to services. CHI, activities were run across county, at LCC sites, village halls, and tourism venues, but the programme did not extend to the urban area of Leicester city.

Leicestershire County Council's museums service includes a Snibston Discovery Museum and Park, three community museums in large towns, Bosworth battlefield and an historic house, plus the Records with its collections housed at the Collections Resources Centre. It worked in partnership with the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland and with the Biological Records Centre, part of the HNE team.

There are no dedicated galleries for the Natural Life collections, but the collections underpin and introduce many of the displays in the service's community museums. This will be made more significant with the

current development of a new gallery exploring rural life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century at the Melton Carnegie museum.

### **The Community Heritage Initiative**

HLF now use the project as a best practice benchmark for other programmes, particularly with regard to evaluation, performance tracking, and community engagement (for which LCC won a national Sustainable Communities Award commendation). The programme worked with many partners, such as, the Rural Community Council and the local wildlife trust, as well as community voluntary sector and local experts.

Work was focused on encouraging volunteer activity at the local level, linking to the developing place shaping agenda and stronger communities strand of the Local Area Agreement. The project aimed to make local heritage and natural studies relevant and to empower communities; special interest groups and individuals through:

- provision of comprehensive information
- support and training, as well as advice and signposting (all of which helps add value to their records)
- fast-tracking information into formal conservation and heritage processes

Core strands included:

- working with younger people
- access to information
- skills development at community level
- engaging with older people
- volunteering



**Fig. 1.** A volunteer working with the entomology collections

Making connections and links was vital. The team provided support and new networking opportunities for many of the specialist interest or community groups.

CHI developed platforms for involvement with regular Heritage and County Recordors' conferences, and re-invigorating panels, such as, the Nature Conservation Forum, which were open to the wider public and attracted between 60-100 people. Collections were always promoted both through presentations and being physically present at such events.

Over the five years, CHI promoted and supported the development of museum collections for use by members of the public, young people, and natural history groups. The Natural Life collections had been assessed as being under-used by community and recorder groups. CHI worked to use them for inspiration, identification training and practical training in collecting. Over £24,000 was invested in enhancing and developing the Natural Life collections over the five years of the programme.

### **Working with local naturalist groups**

The CHI team worked with eight natural history groups to recruit new recorders, develop skills and generate data of relevance to both the local Biodiversity Action Plan and the Biological Records Centre's data users.

This was done through supporting training in identification or habitat recording, publications, assisting with the creation of websites and developing new surveys such as Butterfly Bounty and Ladybirds – linked to the national harlequin project.

CHI funded work to re-order the VC55 local Lepidoptera collection into the current checklist, and following on from this worked with the Leicestershire Entomological Society to develop a Lottery bid based around the national specimens we hold and a lot of recently donated but un-accessioned material. HLF were aware of, and at the time would have welcomed, this project from a community group. In the end it was not submitted as the group were concerned about the financial management aspect of such a large project.

Sometimes help for these groups was as simple as setting up recruitment events, or publishing a community wildlife survey to gather information from a wider audience. One of the most successful projects was working with the local bat group. CHI helped them bring in funds for a new programme of village bat training, recording bat roosts (with new ones being found during the sessions). Osteological specimens were used at these training events, plus a travelling case sent to libraries with related material and ephemera from the entire museum collections was used within this project.

In the review period we ran the new ladybird survey looking of the harlequin ladybird and associated training with the collections. This provided national recording schemes with crucial information about the spread of this new species. Just over 3,300 for the ladybird fact sheets and nearly 2,500 ladybird identification keys were downloaded from the CHI website. Over 3000 Leicestershire and Rutland records of ladybirds were returned. The team's work was nationally recognised by the national recorder in providing crucial information.

Finally, CHI celebrated this work with societies and key county volunteers through the production of a display on the work of local naturalists and in developing a new archive of oral histories of over 30 county naturalists about their work and inspiration from the natural world. This new archive is held within the personalia files of the Natural Life Collections and includes notes about collecting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Spreading the word about collections**

Providing new opportunities for recording and collection of data was essential, but the key to the success of the Community Heritage Initiative was new ways of marketing and training, particularly raising the profile of the natural history collections.

Promotion was essential with over 350 media releases issued in the five years. Monthly talks were given to community groups and all included the collections, even just as a reference.

### **Projects that worked!**

#### **Parish based network of Heritage Wardens:**

Heritage Wardens are parish-based community volunteers, who help gather information about the natural

and landscape heritage of their local area. Their role is supported by the local parish council. Heritage Wardens help monitor and conserve the heritage of Leicestershire and Rutland's countryside and biodiversity.

A Heritage Warden's most essential qualification is that they genuinely care for their local environment and its heritage and cultural distinctiveness. No two wardens are the same!

The network is recruited via local press; community newsletters; word of mouth and via parish council's doing their own local recruitment. They are not the same people as key county naturalists 'though many have become important local naturalists.

CHI worked with Heritage Wardens in 67% parishes, leaving an active network in 53% of Leicestershire and Rutland parishes with 200 volunteers.

Wardens work with local heritage groups in many cases. These groups see themselves as "Victorian collectors in the 21st century". This was a key new development for the work of the museum service and collections. Parish Wardens used collections, for example at village exhibitions, talks and direct work with their own community. This is an area we are continuing and developing our offer. This could include developing new curiosity cabinet type projects, small table-top displays, "nature tables" at events and diaries of what has been seen locally.

A number of Wardens are now coming forward to volunteer with the museum collections, and increasingly we are being requested to go into heritage groups to talk about our plans – and for them to come to us and visit the Collections Resources Centre and the Natural Life collections.

### **Training**

Over the five years CHI ran 162 courses/lectures on heritage and natural history topics, with nearly 2,200 attendees. This free training was promoted through a CHI tailored publication/programme, departmental events guide and the local media and was held across the two counties, at various times of the day and week to allow maximum opportunities for uptake.

Topics were often developed following feedback, which always asked people to identify new skills they would like to develop, or ideas of topics that could be cascaded throughout communities. Sixteen of these sessions specifically used collections. CHI also specifically paid for work on the collections; to prepare specimens for training purposes (for example soldier beetles and butterflies) along with new id guides for the county.

One unexpected outcome from the training has been the role of community trainers.

CHI did not just pay our trainers and leave them to it. It offered a support package, which included loan of equipment, preparation of materials and their own training. The first of a 'Training for Trainers' course was run for five of our trainers, which gave them the opportunity to both learn new things and refresh their skills, thereby adding to the quality of the training experience that the programme offered.

Many of these trainers, or those they cascaded this training to, now support our new Natural Life Collections Team "Discover Like Darwin" programme. This is 19 specific collections-related courses with topics, such as, Plant Bug ID (a request from past CHI participants).

Interestingly the Creative Nature programme of arts-based workshops, taking inspiration from the natural world and natural history collections, was the CHI opportunity that we received most feedback on. Many people who attended these went on to further learning in the arts, creative writing and digital photography – as well as Microsoft courses. Most of the project participants indicated that the project had provided them with a valuable opportunity to develop a hobby or interest/passion in wildlife and to improve their skills.

CHI aimed to attract new people by highlighting the importance and relevance of natural heritage to our daily lives, not just through the science of natural history, but also by creative and informal recording.

From May 2007 through to July 2008, 60 sessions were run, with just under 400 attendees. Events included partnerships with the Adult Learning Service and Library Services for training sessions, which encourage people to record and celebrate nature in different creative ways. Topics included digital photography, writing poetry, themed heritage trails – poetry and handling items, botanical drawing, sketching, creating in-

spired artworks from the natural environment (abstract and printing), map making, paper and book making, as well as use of ICT. Sessions were run by Heritage Wardens, first-time tutors, lecturers and creative practitioners. Collections were vital in this delivery.

Now we are making links with local Universities that offer creative design courses and with tutors as a new link to open up the collections to a wider audience.

It was hoped that the creative projects would inspire a reconnection to natural history and the collections, archives, libraries, nature diaries and other aspects of the museums that are potential points of inspiration. As an outcome of this the CHI programme developed publications "Recording Naturally" (a family based project around nature diaries) and "Natural Inspiration". These and all other CHI publications are available online at [www.leics.gov.uk/celebratingwildlife](http://www.leics.gov.uk/celebratingwildlife).

CHI also purchased Herbarium equipment for loan to groups and developed the 'Petals for Posterity' project. Training was organised and a pack developed. This will address gaps in the Service's herbarium and allow for collecting of some flowering plants. The Twycross Tree Warden subsequently supplied over 100 specimens collected from a local meadow. The project was launched in November 2007, following a pilot training session and production of an information pack. Throughout 2008 CHI offered training to local naturalists and societies in preparing plant specimens. It is hoped, in future years, to enhance and update the Museums' Herbarium handling collections through the lodging of donations created as part of this project.

### **Store Tours**

CHI didn't just do tours of the stores with the collections, but also held "Behind the Scenes" with creative writers; this work is still continuing. CHI also purchased a greater resource of table lights and microscopes for use by groups. As a Collections Team we have listened to feedback that the store was grey and a bit uninspiring, so now we are working on more information posters, reorganising it for use by groups, developing branding, and developing key resources that illustrates the breadth of our collections.

### **Community Resources for Events**

CHI worked with county recorders and members of key local naturalist societies to develop teaching trays with notes and handouts. Societies and local naturalists also got involved, for example with the moth trays, by breeding through or collecting specimens.

CHI developed trays of mosses, lichens, butterflies, pond and garden insects, bees and moths. These have been used by libraries, allotment societies, artists and a parish warden who wanted to illustrate to his parish council what could be found in their local pond.

We are now using this template to develop resources for our school loan service and volunteer teachers and students are helping develop fact sheets.

This greater loan demand has meant we are having now to develop guidance on use of the collections by groups. It also leads to more opportunities; requests have come in for training in setting specimens, and there is a possibility that written-off cabinet drawers could be given to groups to develop their own local displays or curiosity cabinets.

### **Work with young people**

The CHI programme engaged 1,600 young people, through 13 free projects, literature and events. Some of these have been smaller scale and short term whilst others, like the Wild About pack (a family based themed activity publication) has a lasting legacy. The latter is available on the County Council website and has attracted 99,000 downloads of the 13 sections.

Six of the youth projects worked directly with collections. For example the Wildly wicked photography had over 100 photographs submitted (Fig. 2). As one outcome a group requested use of museum collections as a training exercise in microscopy photography and photographing museum objects (a first for curators working with young people of this age). This was then developed as an exhibition for the local Town Hall and as an online gallery by the Charnwood Arts organisation. All images and canvases have been accessioned, including those taken of the collections.

Collecting and Connecting was about working with young people and their "shoe box collections" (most of

which were geological rather than biology based). Participants got to work with curators, were helped with identifications and given guidance on labelling, display and conservation and storage. This project is easily replicable and will be repeated into the future.



**Fig. 2.** Working with young people; imaging and the collections. Wildly wicked photography involved using the museum collections as a training exercise in microscopy photography and photographing museum objects.

### Travelling cases

These were developed to tour libraries and tourism venues (for example Oakham Castle). These brought together ephemera and everyday items with the collections. Topics included ladybirds, butterflies, bats, birds, plants, with the cases generally touring between 4-7 sites (Fig. 3).

The cases had serious messages mixed with popular approaches, for example butterflies on one side focused on recording, collecting, mentioned checklists and naturalists at work, whilst the other side included stories, folklore and cultural links from flower fairies to butterfly gardening.

The uses of collections received comments like “Yuk dead birds” to “lovely to see birds up close” The case on bats was viewed by over 1,000 visitors at an open weekend, and led to the bat group getting new volunteer and membership enquiries

Future exhibitions for the future could include lichens, collectors and their topics, and molluscs.

### In summary the top achievements

- £24,000 invested in collections
- New education trays and handling items
- New oral histories and information about key naturalists
- New creative programmes using the collections
- New trainers working with collections
- Links to youth projects

### Informing the future

All of this work was fed in to a staff consultation at a restructure in 2008. This led to a new Collections Team formed at the Environment and Heritage restructuring in August 2008.



**Fig. 3.** One of the travel cases produced from the project.

The new structure offers:

- Improved relationship between frontline services in museums and the community and place agendas
- Site keepers with expertise based on communities in the districts (there is a museum in all but one district), responsiveness to audiences and local knowledge of their district including both local history and an understanding of contemporary issues such as identity and community cohesion.
- Collections and collections care specialists in a central collections team (a suggestion from the staff) – these maintain subject knowledge and collections care specialisms essential for accreditation standards. The team delivered their first exhibition on an area-based theme (A Celebration of Charnwood, displayed at Charnwood museum) in March 2009.

The new Senior Curator Natural Life, having managed outreach for 14 years with regard to natural life and recording, also brings the lessons learnt from CHI and a strategic support for the Collection Team to help develop community access, volunteering and marketing.

A significant percentage of staff within the team are externally funded through Renaissance, PAS, MLA traineeships or are project staff. Natural Life has the largest proportion of the 11 staff (2.5 permanent posts (one full-time vacant at present with a botany specialism will be advertised late summer).

As a Collection Team we are:

- Responding to a new departmental structure
- Developing new working partnerships
- Developing the collections themselves
- Meeting museum standards (legal and social) including accreditation
- Ensuring sustainability

The Collections Team's aspiration as outlined in October 2009 were

- Collections development
- More objects available through exhibitions and displays
- Develop the offer! More publications, access, and outreach.
- Increasing Collection use
- Improve documentation
- Enthuse, inspire and increase understanding
- Maintain/improve standards

**Natural Life Collection:** Collections of historical and contemporary objects and records, which reflect the landscape, geology, flora and fauna of the county and the plants and animals found in Leicestershire today, plus a large coverage of British and some foreign material maintained for study purposes. Leicestershire County Council Museums Service has over half a million biological specimens. There are a further 300,000 – 400,000 specimens in the City Museum Service and the two services work closely together, referring to and borrowing from each other's collections. Collections include significant number of voucher specimens, some type specimens. The resource includes nationally important lichen and entomology collections due to their scope.

The overwhelming majority of museum natural history collections were made by amateurs and a significant priority is to develop this relationship with county groups and naturalists in terms of contemporary collecting for the handling collections and work to unlock the data that the specimens can provide. This will assist colleagues at the BRC. Natural Life will have a prominent position in the Melton Carnegie developing rural gallery of 21st century life, so we are looking to develop more handling and display items for this!

- Our aspirations are similar to the wider teams
- Sharing interests and information (linking to the HNE supported surveys, inter discipline projects and lessons learnt from the travelling cases)
- Working with more volunteers
- New projects and new partners (bringing in more funds for the collections)
- Develop collections management and documentation
- Better collections access
- Working with new audiences to developing greater respect for collections (greater links to the universities, illustrators, costume links, and links to Creative writers such as the Write Muse project)

Natural Life Collection team is leading on developments with volunteering and to get the specimens out to communities. This will include Revisiting Collections– style projects. The idea of curiosity cabinets and nature table collecting is attracting great interest and will be an area we develop in the coming 12 months.

We have a vast amount of work to ensure we get greater information online with developing catalogues and one volunteer project identified will be to get photographs of the collections. We are revisiting our documentation procedures and making it easier and more responsive. Volunteers are also helping with getting electronic catalogues of slides and being trained in Mymysy to help with new approaches being developed on documentation.

Volunteers are being trained in collections care, cataloguing, are researching the value of the library and developing fact sheets and information. All of this will ensure the collections are more accessible. Volunteers helped identify tasks that others could help with. Many are transferable skills and a team has quickly come together.

In the future, based on the legacy of the CHI contract, the Collection Team will not be delivering in the field survey or ID training directly. We will be using the collections for ID training. This is the basis of the Discover Like Darwin programme. Events will be key to our work – due to the lack of gallery presence and we plan to run more in the coming years and link to photography and creative family and adult sessions at sites.

It is a great time of change, a new team, new curators and new approaches, but ultimately we hope to leave a legacy from our time looking after the collections with the wealth of opportunities we have identified, that the natural life collections are truly at the heart of our work in conserving Leicestershire Life.