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NatSCA News

Title: Werkgroep Behoud Natuurhistorische Collecties: working on group preservation of natural history collections

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Source: Brandenburg, O. (2004). Werkgroep Behoud Natuurhistorische Collecties: working on group preservation of natural history collections. *NatSCA News, Issue 3*, 28 - 29.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/392>

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Rolly Read (Head of Conservation, National Museum of Ireland) and Chris Collins (Palaeontology Conservation Unit, Natural History Museum, London) for advice on the buildings issues over several years. Museum lighting consultant Mark Sutton Vane (Sutton Vane Associates, London) has produced a detailed study of lighting issues, which is directing current work. Many NatSCA members also provided valuable advice and encouragement during the Dublin conference in April 2004.

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Werkgroep Behoud Natuurhistorische Collecties: working on group preservation of natural history collections

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The Dutch working group was originally set up in the early nineties. It's main achievement has been the development of a widely-used handbook. This handbook contains both theory and practical solutions for the preservation of natural history collections. It also gives information about best used materials and suppliers. This handbook was easy to update because of the ringband format. However after a couple of active years the working group fizzled out and the handbook has not been updated ever since.

In June 2003 a couple of enthusiastic conservators decided to resurrect the working group. An inquiry was sent out to all known Dutch collection managers working with natural history collections. Our primary aim was to investigate the enthusiasm about the working group amongst collection managers. Secondly, this inquiry was meant to set the new goals of the working group. The main subject of the inquiry was to ascertain how collection managers gained their knowledge about preservation and if their knowledge is in danger of being lost. We also investigated if they experience serious knowledge gaps.

During the first national meeting of the working group the results of this inquiry were presented. Kate Andrew was invited to speak about the recent history of natural history collections conservation in the United Kingdom. Together with a lecture of the coordinator of ICOM-CC's Working Group on Natural History Collections, Dries van Dam, this presentation was a real stimulant to get the people enthusiastic about the new working group. After a fertile discussion-forum, the goals of the working group were set out.

The working group has set itself 3 main tasks, namely

- to inform,
- to organize,
- to stimulate

The working group will *inform* conservators about publications, meetings and new techniques concerning the conservation of natural history collections.

To achieve this, the working group will *organize* workshops, an update of the handbook and meetings. It's role as a knowledge base will hopefully be attained by the development of a website later on this year. In the meantime, a two-monthly newsletter is being distributed by email.

Creating motivation amongst conservators is important to guarantee durability of the working group's activities. We don't want it to fizzle out again. Therefore, conservators are strongly involved in the activities of the working group by taking part in various specialist sub-working groups

We think that cooperation with similar associations abroad will serve mutual interests. Having close contacts with people working with similar collections and dealing with the same problems will only make daily work easier. For that reason, we would like to keep in touch with our English and Irish colleagues. If you have any news (i.e. conferences, publications) that could be of interest for your Dutch colleagues, do not hesitate to inform us. We will distribute this through our newsletter and upcoming meetings. If you would like to receive an English copy of our newsletter, which could in turn be interesting for you, please send us an email. We will also inform you about our future activities in the next NatSCA-newsletters.

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Summary of the tour of the Natural History Museum building – Sylviane Vaucheret / Brian Harding

The Natural History Museum Building

From the northern-side windows of the current museum's building, on Merrion Street, it is possible to see Leinster House. Bought in 1815 this building used to be the museum's building and the headquarters of the Royal Dublin Society (RDS). The current Natural History Museum building was purposed-built by the RDS to house the expanding zoological and geological collections, previously exhibited and stored in Leinster house. The foundation stone was laid by Lord Carlisle, lieutenant general Governor of Ireland and president of the RDS on the 7th March 1856, the work being completed in less than eighteen months (which would be impressive in Dublin today). The new Building was formally inaugurated on 31st August 1857 by the attendance of Lord Carlisle at a lecture delivered by Dr. Livingstone on his "African discoveries" on the occasion of the second meeting in Dublin of the British Association for the Advancement of Sciences.

All recent staff regard the period between the museum's opening and Irish independence in 1922 with envy: a sort of golden age for the Natural History Museum when staff were housed together with the collection in a relatively comfortable space.

A cultural building in the political heart of the Irish state

In 1922, the new independent Irish state needed to house its new parliament and Leinster House appeared to fulfil all the requirements - The building previously used by the national assembly and still nowadays known as Parliament House near Temple Bar was bought by Bank of Ireland to house its head-quarters, a very confusing arrangement for new-comers in Dublin! Following the loss of Leinster House the museum staff had to move into the public galleries which were closed to the public for a couple of years as a consequence. From this date on the Museum has suffered from the pressure of being an enclave in what is now the Irish government core. Besides having the Parliament complex on the north and west side, the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) complex was also added on the south side. As a result more space was lost in this location, although arguably we benefit from the highest level of security a Natural History Museum has ever had. The loss of storage space for the collection was partially made up by the allocation of other buildings, of which not all were particularly adequate.

Our current off-site storage building, in Beggars Bush, Ballsbridge, although not perfect is an improvement in this regard. It is an old, solid, stone-built military barracks and provides a lot of space in relatively good environmental conditions.

Inside the Natural History Museum

The interior of the Natural History Museum is divided into two main sections, the ground floor and the first floor with lower and upper galleries. The ground floor is referred to as the Irish Room containing zoological collections from Ireland (but no snakes of course). This includes a large collection of mounted bird specimens found in all counties around the island of Ireland, a small but encompassing selection of Irish mam-