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Open Display & Handling Collections—A Conservation Conundrum

Simon Moore, Conservator of Natural Sciences, Hampshire County Council

Abstract

In these days of conditional grant-aiding and forward-looking display modules, the 'Do not touch' signage system has become rather redundant. Many curators and conservators are faced with the prospect that more of their collections are becoming part of interactive and tactile displays and conservators are facing an increasing workload of repairing fragile biological items that have been handled rather severely or have been eaten by pests who regard open displays as a natural banquet! Although this means even more work for conservation staff, the concept of looking without barriers and being able to touch, so far outweighs the increased workload.

Hampshire County Council Museums Service's newest museum, *Milestones*, was opened by the Duke of Edinburgh on the 1st of December 2000 to great acclaim. It houses the Service's significant collection of old vehicles and farm machinery, some of which has been dragged from hedgerows and restored back to a state of former glory, even working! Some of these are used in special events; other and more seasonal events are aimed at children. At *Milestones* there are shops and streets and mock-ups of relevant Hampshire factories dating back to the 1820s and where re-enactors, in period costume, will regale and inform visitors about 'The Old days'. In and around these displays are an important dressing to give a touch of realism, comprising many resin-based trees and other plants, dried insects and freeze-dried and mounted animal specimens from flies to birds, rats to cats and, inevitably a urinating dog which is, of course, the children's favourite!

These displayed specimens comprise non-accessioned material, collected from roads, cat kills, natural deaths and patio door collisions. They can mostly be touched by visitors although many are perched on chimneys and beyond the grasp of human hands. Those that are within reach are frequently stroked, patted and even a cat has been sat upon!! Wheelchairs used to shear off the aforementioned cat's left ear with some regularity and, after many repeat repairs, the cat has now been moved off the ground. The gypsy encampment is a regular haunt for pro-active displays and talks but also attracts older children whose teenage sense of humour inevitably requires some vandalism of the gypsy's game larder (a pigeon and rabbit). Amateur plucking, skinning and beheading regularly takes place – the heads ending up in the cooking pot! None of these problems are really serious; damage can usually be repaired, weighing conservation time against the cost of acquiring a replacement. However, last November (2003), a worrying comment from museum staff about the swift specimens, mounted on a house wall, confirmed my worst fears that there was a severe outbreak of clothes moth.

Open displays of biological and textile material are always on borrowed time where insect pests are concerned and those that are positioned high up (on chimneys) are usually safe from carpet beetles, since they are fairly clumsy flyers, moreover their larvae tend to prefer feeding on skin and will just prune feathers away. Clothes moth is much more serious as a pest since it is a more skilled flyer and an infestation can spread quickly among rooftop specimens; their larvae are, moreover, less particular and will ingest any protein, including feathers leaving a frass-bedecked mannequin and some feather shafts! Fumigating the large display area of *Milestones* would be impractical and inconvenient and replacing the specimens too soon would only provide a further feast for the pests. The only sure factor for removing these pests is by gradually lowering the Relative Humidity. The fine and cold weather of February and March, combined with the Museum's atmospheric regulation system has brought the RH down to 41%, resulting in a gradual decline in the clothes moth population and without affecting any of the displayed woodwork. A more recent visit showed that a pair of starlings had been attacked, rather one had been severely stripped and the other left intact. I have frequently found this to be the case – a severe infestation will, affect some specimens but others are temporarily ignored.

Early spring is always a bad time for insect pest ingress and I will be keeping a close watch on the situation at *Milestones* so that some of the damaged material can eventually be replaced. As always, we will be on borrowed time before the next pest outbreak occurs and once again we shall have to find some funding for more taxidermy and contact our road kill and cat kill specimen harvesters.

SEARCH for Science

SEARCH is situated as a separate unit at Gosport Museum, itself now faced with the prospect of becoming a Discovery Centre. SEARCH was started in 1994 as a part of the Museums Service Educational strategy to bring both social history and natural sciences closer to school parties. The idea has been most successful and despite some fairly recent media pooh-pooing about the non PC attitude towards taxidermy specimens, SEARCH has been able to prove substantially, that children, in particular are not appalled by the idea of 'touching a wild animal that was once alive' but are fascinated by being able to touch, for example, the sharpness of hedgehog spines or, by contrast, a Barn Owl and see for themselves how its ultra soft feathers enable silent flight.

Special occasions enable children to learn even more about natural sciences by becoming like the animals themselves, helping to dispel many misconceptions about animals in particular. Older children are normally careful enough not to damage specimens but those with special needs have to be watched both carefully and tactfully. The tactile approach inevitably means that some specimens become damaged and the bullfinch (and its partner) are regular casualties being so fragile. Many younger children have not yet learned about delicate touching but staff are careful to look out for a likely tail or wing pull or a head wrench and step in to inform about gentler handling before damage occurs.

Repairs

Repeated repairs cause a gradual breaking down of surrounding and supporting tissues. Japanese tissues, especially those in the 10-15 gsm range and made from *Gampi*, are ideal since they form a strong yet discreet bridge between adhesive and protein substrates. Although they have not been used for natural sciences conservation in the longer term, their thinness combined with strength and pH neutrality, combined with providing a reversible repair, augurs very well for the future.

Conclusion

The information that visitors and children can gather, therefore, far outweighs the problem of damage and provides me with plenty of work plus the challenge of increasingly difficult repairs that require much thought and even research. I hope that we can all benefit from the possibility of further refining our technical skills and knowledge.

Re-Source: The work of Renaissance and collaboration, within and beyond regional hubs

David Crowther, Project Director for Renaissance in the Regions,

Renaissance in the Regions is the national development strategy for regional museums across England. Led by MLA, but driven by the needs of audiences and the commitment of its many stakeholders, this national programme is beginning to transform England's regional museums, and peoples' expectations for what they can achieve - given the resources.

A new network of Regional Museum Hubs is bringing together key museums in common cause, creating centres of excellence through lasting partnerships that will make a difference for everyone. But Renaissance is about more than Hubs alone. They are a crucial part of a framework of mutual support that includes Regional Agencies, National Museums, Designated Collections, key university, specialist and other museums, bringing together assets, expertise, knowledge, talent and audiences as never before. By increasing museums' capacity to care for and release their wealth of knowledge, evidence and ideas in ways that engage and inspire, they and their audiences are opening up new opportunities for learning and discovery.

Why Renaissance?

Whilst it is early days for Renaissance, it's important to recall just why and how it is that a domain traditionally undervalued and under-resourced despite its latent potential has started to find its voice and be heard.

It is just over two and a half years ago - October 2001 - since *Renaissance in the Regions - A New Vision for England's Museums* was published. Following extensive research and consultation across the museums community, its arrival was widely acclaimed, not least for the lucid way it spelled out what could be done to unlock the enormous potential of museums across the country to inspire and engage people, and change