



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

NatSCA News

Title: The future of Natural Science in the context of a large regional museum

Author(s): Arthur, J.

Source: Arthur, J. (2004). The future of Natural Science in the context of a large regional museum. *NatSCA News, Issue 3*, 13 - 16.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/386>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Collections as national assets worthy of national access alongside other elements of the framework - whether through partnerships with Hubs, National Museums and others, through the sharing and uniting of expertise via subject specialist networks, or the management of a growing bank of knowledge available through a national collections advisory service.

In return, we believe we can deliver substantial, measurable benefits based upon the kind of progress achieved so far. For people - those who visit, or work with museums - we believe this will mean, by 2008:

- 14000 community groups engaged (0.3m people) often from the most disadvantaged and hard-to-reach communities
- 25000 schools engaged (1.5m pupils)
- 1400 Registered Museums supported by Museum Development Officers benefiting 58m users
- 30000 volunteers involved
- 500 local community development programmes engaging 150,000
- 17000 -strong workforce with its eyes on a stimulating future

Through a properly resourced, integrated framework of institutions and interests working together we can see a genuine collaboration that does justice to the potential natural and cultural wealth of museums, for audiences across England, summarised in a nutshell as follows:

- Nine Regional Hubs – providing regional excellence
- Regional Agencies – leading regional strategy
- National Museums – bringing world class resources
- Designated Collections – developing national assets
- Subject Specialist Networks – uniting expertise
- National Collections Advisory Service –sharing knowledge
- Museum Development Officers – tailoring all the above to local need

As part of MLA's five-year vision for museums, libraries and archives - Investing In Knowledge - Renaissance will play a crucial role in collaboration across the sector, connecting people to knowledge, learning, inspiration and creativity, whatever the source. The collaborative spirit of Renaissance is infectious. Closer partnership between the whole museums domain - from the mightiest National museums to the humblest independent community museum - is also emerging with the publication in March of 'Manifesto for Museums' a campaign document to show how additional Renaissance funding must sit alongside new money for the National Museums - if they are to be able to fully work with Renaissance partners as they would wish. Collaboration is proving productive - museums are indeed finding their voice. The Renaissance is coming.

The future of Natural Science in the context of a large regional museum

Jayne Arthur, Head of Curatorial Services, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

BM&AG is the largest local authority museum service in England with an operating budget of £7.2million. There are 6 sites (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Aston Hall, Blakesley Hall, Soho House, Museum of the Jewellery Quarter and Sarehole Mill), 1 scheduled ancient monument (Weoley Castle), the Museum Collections Centre (a £4.1m capital project to develop improved access to stored collections) and 2 offsite stores. BM&AG is the lead partner of the West Midlands Hub Partnership (with Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, the Potteries Museum Stoke on Trent, Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Museums and Coventry Museum Service). Through Renaissance in the Regions the WM Hub has received £10.25 million over 3 years to March 2006 to develop and improve our services.

Natural Sciences Collections at BM&AG

The development of a natural history collection bore fruit in 1910 after much lobbying of the City Council by individuals and interested groups. At this point the scheme for a natural history museum was officially adopted by the City Council. W H Edwards was appointed Assistant Keeper and was responsible for the displays of three galleries at the Museum & Art Gallery including the Chase bird collection and numerous specimens of zoology, entomology and herbaria. The collections were to be a stimulus to the visitor on the diversity of natural life on earth. In the 1930s proposals for the development of Centenary Square included

both a natural history museum and a planetarium. However World War 2 put paid to any further investment in the square and the scheme was never completed.

The collections developed quickly with major donations:

- Robert Chase collection - Robert Chase (1852-1927), a Birmingham manufacturer of brushes, was three times president of the Birmingham Natural History and Philosophical Society. His collection of British birds, eggs, nests and nestlings with original documentation includes over 300 cased specimens
- The Auden collection of mounted birds includes 30 specimens of the Hastings rarities
- The Kenrick collection of foreign butterflies and moths, especially from Papua New Guinea.
- The South collection of macro-lepidoptera contains 17,000 British specimens with collecting details.
- The H Overton collection includes some of the earliest examples of the freshwater mussel *Pseudanodonta* found in Britain.
- Notable collections of gemstones are those of William Bragge, Bernard Senior and A. S. Wainwright.
- Of historic importance and significance is the collection of around 2,000 minerals formed in the 18th century by Matthew Boulton
- The collection contains a comprehensive range of specimens illustrating the geology of the West Midlands

Developing Thinktank

We now jump to the end of the 20th century. During the early 1990s there were several plans to redevelop the natural sciences displays at BM&AG which had last been redeveloped in the 1960s. At the same time a bid was being put together by Birmingham City Council, the University of Central England and regeneration partners to the Millennium Commission for a major building to mark the millennium. Millennium Point was a £110million capital development and included the Discovery Centre, Technology Innovation Centre, Imax Cinema and a Hub with shops and offices. Discovery Centre – which became Thinktank – was to include collections of science and technology (then displayed at the Museum of Science & Industry) and also a gallery on how we integrate with the world around us using the natural sciences collections. Thinktank was set up as an independent charitable trust receiving an annual grant from Birmingham City Council with BM&AG collections on loan through a comprehensive Loan Agreement. The new museum opened to the public in September 2001. As Thinktank developed as the focus for the science collections so BM&AG refocused the displays at the Museum & Art Gallery on the art and history collections. This gradually reduced the natural sciences galleries on the 3rd floor until the last display was removed in 2003.

Natural Sciences collections at risk

While Thinktank provided a new gallery for the natural science collections the secondment of natural history curators from 1998 to work on the project meant that access to the collections and further research and curation on collections not part of the loan to Thinktank were severely limited. As Head of Curatorial Services with responsibility for all BM&AGs collections I was concerned about this situation and in 2001 I proposed setting up an Advisory Panel for Natural History. The panel was to have representatives from the Geology Curators' Group, the Biology Curators' Group and the Natural History Museum as well as local organisations such as the Birmingham Nature Centre.

The role and responsibility of the panel was agreed at the first meeting – to:

- Recommend a way forward for the Natural History collections at Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery
- Provide a sounding board and overview of the plans for storage, management and access to the collections
- Provide advocacy for and promotion of a vision for the collections
- Input into review of collecting policies for collections
- Advise on partnerships for the natural history collections

The Panel meets twice a year and receives updates on the collections, the loan collection at Thinktank, and discusses key issues for the collections – for example the review of BM&AG Collecting Policy 2003-2008 or the Condition Survey undertaken in August 2002.

Membership of the Panel:

Roger Lincoln, now Clare Valentine - Natural History Museum
 Dr Paul Smith – Lapworth Museum of Geology (GCG)
 Nick Gordon – Leicester Museums Service (BCG)

John Nettle – Nature Centre Manager
 Professor Ted Taylor – University of Birmingham
 Peter Shirley – Regional Director West Midlands, The Wildlife Trusts

A future for the natural sciences collections

Discussions with the University of Birmingham in 2002 led to a proposal for partnership to bring together the biological collections from the University Herbarium, Lapworth Museum of Geology and the School of Biosciences with those of BM&AG to develop the Birmingham Museum of Natural History. The aim of the museum would be:

- To provide secure and appropriate storage for natural history collections to ensure their long term preservation
- To implement a programme of assessment and conservation
- To implement a programme of documentation
- To create access to the natural history collections for students, researchers and the general public
- To implement a programme of education and outreach for natural history collections
- To promote a partnership between the University of Birmingham and BM&AG
- To provide opportunities to present academic research to the general public

The proposed natural history museum complements the displays at Thinktank. These together with the Lapworth Museum of Geology, the City and University Botanic Gardens and the Nature Centre would enable the development of a regional centre of excellence for the natural sciences in Birmingham that would be significant and unrivalled outside London.

The partnership agreement was accepted in principal by both the University and Birmingham City Council in 2002 and a “shadow board” created for the project. The project leaders are Paul Smith and myself.

Condition Survey and Collection Care Action Plan September 2002

During 2002/3 we put together a bid to Heritage Lottery Fund. Part of the preparation for the bid included a Condition Survey for the BM&AG natural sciences collection. This was undertaken by the Natural Sciences Conservation Group and co-ordinated by Kate Andrew.

Key findings were:

Storage

- Lack of investment in stocks of appropriate packing and labelling materials and storage boxes has led to inefficient use of space and put specimens at risk.

Housekeeping

- There is no evidence of recent cleaning and rubbish removal in any of the stores

Handling and Use

- Assessors were not in a position to judge provisions for handling and use except where they had direct personal experience of working with BM&AG collections.

Environmental monitoring and control

- Natural History stores are currently not environmentally monitored, pest monitoring is not in place.
- Spot checks indicated no immediate cause for concern, in particular there is little evidence of pest infestation or pyrite decay.

Conservation

- Although most collections were dirty, very few actively deteriorating or infested specimens were located. Long term conservation needs of all the collections are largely preventative.

Heritage Lottery Fund bid

A bid for £900k was made in May 2003 to the Heritage Lottery Fund to support a three-year programme of collection care and management, relocation of collections from BM&AG to the University, and development of learning resources relating to bio-diversity and bio-sustainability. Following discussion with HLF case officers the bid was withdrawn and a project planning grant application for £50k made in October 2003 to develop:

- Audience development plan
- Access plan
- Condition survey of the University natural science collections

BM&AG and the University would develop a Business Plan following the project planning process and resubmit the full bid in 2004.

Issues for natural sciences collections in the West Midlands

While continuing to work on the partnership with the University of Birmingham, Renaissance in the Regions partnership brought a strategic view to museum issues for the West Midlands, and in my case looking at regional strategies for collections. With this in mind the Natural Sciences Collection Group for the West Midlands was inaugurated in February 2003. The group brings together all those responsible for caring for and interpreting natural science collections in the region – both subject experts and collection managers.

Key issues for the natural sciences collections in the West Midlands:

- Resourcing documentation programmes and slow rate of progress
- Difficulty of increasing access to natural sciences collections – lack of space and resources for display
- Reduction in natural sciences specialists across the region (many museums had reduced staffing in last 5 years)
- Pressures on storage space particularly for “orphan” collections and inadequate storage
- Dearth of conservation specialists for natural sciences and taxidermists
- Need to look at collecting policies. Where does collecting now happen and how are these collections preserved in the long term? Need to have a regional overview of collecting.

Opportunities

- Growth of biodiversity and environmental agenda and how this could be tied into local biodiversity action plans and geology plans (LBAPs, LGAPs, Local Agenda 21)
- Growth of interest in the history of the study of natural sciences and its impact on society
- Renaissance in the Regions potential for funding (especially education in short term)
- Collection transfers (including rescuing of “orphan” collections) and appropriate re-location
- Funding opportunities for cataloguing (e.g. BSBI funds for herbaria, NHM for high level collection cataloguing)

Conclusion

There is still some way to go for the natural sciences collections at BM&AG. The future is very dependent on the Heritage Lottery supporting the project planning grant and ultimately the main bid. However the key achievements for the last few years are:

- The Natural History Advisory Board who continue to provide support, ideas and expertise
- The developing partnership with the University of Birmingham to bring together a regional resource for the natural sciences by joining our collections
- The Natural Sciences Collections Group providing local advocacy, networking and information sharing within West Midlands museums

I continue to be the sole contact for the natural sciences at BM&AG, answering 50 plus enquiries on the collections a year and responding to the continuing public comments on the lack of natural science displays at BM&AG.

Plant Cultures: botanical collections and the celebration of British Asian heritage

Julia Steele, Collections Manager, Economic Botany Collection Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Did you know that henna can be used in traditional medicine to treat headaches? Or did you know that Britain is the world's largest consumer of tea, drinking 70 billion cups a year? However, while world tea consumption is now increasing by 1% a year, production is exceeding this with an annual growth rate of 2%.

Henna (*Lawsonia inermis*) and tea (*Camellia sinensis*) are two of the twenty-five plants featured in *Plant Cultures*, an innovative partnership project funded by Culture Online and led by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Culture Online is a DCMS funded initiative which aims to enable more people to engage in culture in a variety of new ways www.cultureonline.gov.uk. *Plant Cultures* aims to do this through combining community-outreach programmes, an Internet resource and physical trails around botanic gardens and museums. It will give families, South Asian communities, lifelong learners and schoolchildren a unique insight