

Social History Curators Group

formerly Group for Regional Studies in Museums

SHCG NEWS 1

Winter 1982/83

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Group news

The Group's most dramatic news will be obvious from the banner above: 'The Group for Regional Studies in Museums' has become 'The Social History Curators Group'. The change was suggested because the old name seemed to be failing to attract members to the Group. It was discussed at the last AGM, which instructed the Committee to ballot all members. The result of that ballot was a substantial majority in favour of change, and a clear preference for 'Social History Curators Group'.

This seems a good moment to review the Group's work. We have at present 135 members - a sadly small proportion of those involved in social history in museums. But Helen Clark's efforts as Membership Secretary have brought in 57 new members in the last few months, and we can look forward to rapid growth if we offer members a lively programme and worthwhile benefits.

The first 'Journal', successor to the old 'Newsletter', appeared before Christmas. We have heard many favourable comments both on its contents and on the new offset-litho format. The next issue is already well advanced - copy to Sam Mullins as soon as possible, please.

Over the years the Group has published some fifteen bibliographies on a wide range of subjects, from cheesemaking to charcoal-burning. These are to be reprinted in a special Bibliography edition of the Journal which will appear as soon as finance allows.

Members working on any subject are invited to send their book-lists for publication in the Journal and additions from other members.

SHCG News will continue to appear quarterly, and to contain news of the Group's activities, notes, letters etc.

The Group's programme of meetings - described in this issue - promises variety and high standards. Members who have not been to Group seminars and conferences will find that they are very enjoyable and professionally valuable. All members are particularly urged to book for the Annual Study Weekend, where they will find many colleagues who share their problems and ambitions.

Training is probably the most urgent problem in our field. The joint SHCG/ National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland seminars are going on well, but progress in England seems much slower. The need, though, is clearly there, and we hope the coming months will see a number of such programmes launched. Offers of help from individual members would be very welcome indeed.

This issue of SHCG News includes news of two major developments promoted by Group members: SHIC is going to bring about a quiet revolution in social history curatorship, while the Collections Research being pioneered in the West Midlands is something that generations of curators have dreamed of. In another generation's time it will have been largely completed; do we know what the effect will be on the role of museums?

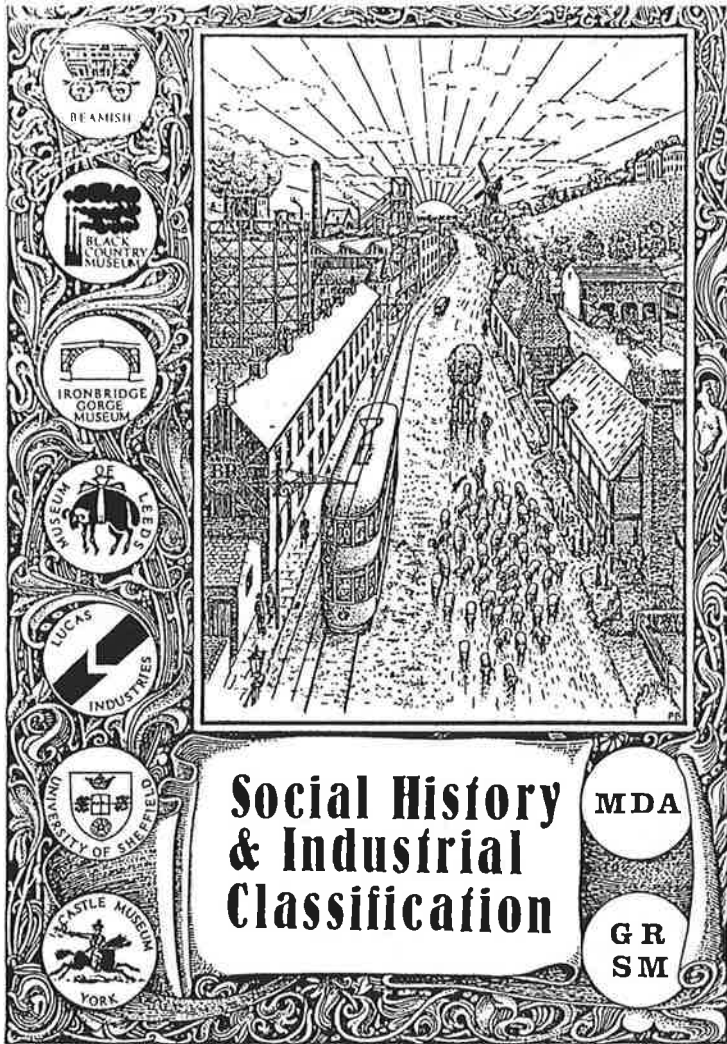
Large areas of Britain are still not served by any satisfactory social history museum service. What should SHCG be doing about this? Should we take on a more campaigning role? At its next meeting the Committee will be considering a suggestion that we should, and that we should start with a thorough-going survey of social history museum provision in Britain's largest cities.

Another concern of the Committee is the export of antiquities. Everyone knows of the container-ships full of antiques of every sort that daily leave our shores, but no-one seems to be doing anything about it. Our first step is to talk to the Reviewing Committee on Works of Art.

To argue effectively we need facts. Please send the Editor details of any loss abroad of significant social history objects or collections, especially ones lost to your museum.



Gertrude Jekyll by Lutyens, about 1896: see p4.



Social History & Industrial Classification

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TO ALL CURATORS

Have you got any objects, photographs, archives, machines, shop contents or tape recordings in your collections? You need SHIC - the Social History & Industrial Classification.

With SHIC you can classify all of them using a system which will give compatibility between institutions right across the country.

WHAT IS SHIC?

This is the Museum profession's answer to Dewey - a comprehensive classification system specifically tailored for curators, which orders, arranges and collates all information in the field of human history.

Conceived over 3 years by a group of curators from the country's best-known museums of social and industrial history, SHIC comes in 2 volumes for only £5 the pair. Volume I is the Classification running to 120 pages and covering all aspects of man's activities, while volume II is an 80 page index.

TO ORDER

Copies can be ordered for £5 each plus £1.20 p & p from:

The Museum Documentation Association
Imperial War Museum
Duxford Airfield
Duxford
Cambridgeshire CB2 4QR

Cheques should be made payable to 'Museum Documentation Association'.

Folk Life Studies

Stuart Davies of Birmingham went to the Annual Conference of the Society for Folk Life Studies in Durham in September. He reports as follows:

The Society for Folk Life Studies is one of those societies whose aims, activities and membership have much in common with the Social History Curators Group. It aims to further the study of traditional ways of life in Great Britain and Ireland and to provide a common meeting point for many people and institutions engaged with the various aspects of the subject. *Folk Life*, the only Journal dedicated solely to British Ethnological Studies, is published annually by the Society and issued free to all members.

Each year a conference is held at various centres in Great Britain and Ireland. This year the venue was Durham and the conference was brilliantly organised by Rosy Allan. Three themes were explored by an impressive group of guest speakers: coalmining, maritime history and farm buildings. In each case one lecture concentrated on the North East whilst the other looked at the same theme, but elsewhere. For example, Trefor Owen and Norman McCord examined mining communities in Wales and the North-East respectively. Both attempted to define exactly what should be meant by the term 'mining community'. Mr Owen suggested that it should only include those communities exclusively supported by coal, and would exclude many important market towns on the coalfield. Professor McCord brought out the important point that a 'mining community' includes all ranks of the industry, including the owners and managers, and that any assessment of the social history of these communities is inevitably a balancing of a great number of variables.

Other particularly memorable moments included Gefaint Jenkins combining scholarly research with personal observation and family history in a masterly survey of the maritime heritage of the Cardiganshire coast; Adrian Osler leading us skilfully through the intricacies of the boats of Northumbria's fishermen and watermen; and some of us enjoyed the experience of a trip down a drift mine. Finally, last but certainly not least, the entire conference was treated to a 'Peter Brears' Special' meal at Beamish.

Membership of the Society for Folk Life Studies is open to all those who are interested in the subject and the subscription is £7.50 per annum. Details may be obtained from the Secretary, c/o Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra Manor, Holywood, County Down BT18 0EU, and subscriptions should be sent to the Treasurer, City Museum, Nottingham NG1 6EL.



Appeal

Richard Tamplin of the Dean Heritage Museum Trust writes appealing for information or objects which would help the museum interpret the heritage of the Forest of Dean. Please contact him at Camp Mill, Soudley, Cinderford, Gloucester GL14 7UG.

Collections research

West Midlands Social and Industrial History Collections Research Unit

Following a meeting held in Birmingham last year under the auspices of the West Midlands Area Museums Service, a group of about fifteen social or industrial history curators from museums in the area formed a Collections Research Unit along similar lines to those already successfully established throughout the country by Natural Historians (1).

Since then several other curators have become involved and most of the major Museum services in the West Midlands are now represented. Mr Charles Pettitt of the Manchester Museum Computer Unit who has been closely involved with establishing and servicing the natural history units, has kindly provided advice on the computerisation of data gathered and the project has the full support of the Area Museums Service.

Unit members have met several times during the past year and considerable progress is being made. The following subjects are among those considered as being within the scope of the unit: Local history, Regional Studies, Material Culture, Urban history, Industrial history, Science and Technology, Agrarian history, Trades, Crafts, Professions, Transport, Commerce, Military history, Personalalia and specialist fields such as Buildings, Costume and textiles, Decorative Arts, Numismatics etc. This list is by no means exhaustive. Collections in such fields as natural history or foreign ethnography may be briefly mentioned if they or their collectors are likely to be of interest to social historians.

It is hoped that the unit will eventually register the collections of all museums, stately homes, preservation societies, significant private collections etc within the region, and will also seek to obtain information concerning local material held outside the area. Archives and photographic material will be considered when held by any of the above types of institution. In the long term it is to be hoped that similar work by libraries and record offices might allow the compiling of a unified register of local material including artefacts, illustrative material, archives and other documentation. As an immediate investigation of all the collections falling within the terms of reference of the unit would be out of the question it is intended that work will be phased over a number of years with collections held by museum bodies taking highest priority. Although the collections investigated by the unit will normally consist of a large number of items it is felt that single objects in private hands could be registered if they are considered sufficiently important.

Security of information relating to private collections is obviously of vital importance. Private collectors' names and addresses will certainly not be entered into computer records and the current suggestion is that they will not appear in any written records held by the unit. It will be necessary to refer any enquiry to the museum in personal contact with the collector. It is hoped that this level of security will reassure collectors who will undoubtedly be reluctant for the location of valuable collections to be freely accessible.

Both the collection of data and its subsequent arrangement will necessitate the use of a suitable universal classification system. The new Social History and Industrial Classification (SHIC) appears to be the best system available and has performed well in initial trials by the unit. It has, therefore, been provisionally adopted although the final decision has been deferred until unit members have had more experience of its use.

The initial trials conducted by the unit have involved registering unit members' own collections. From this experimental work it has become clear that it is quite feasible to record collections to the higher levels of the SHIC hierarchy and obtain useful results. It has been suggested that in many areas it would be most desirable to go into greater detail and this appears to be possible. Three museums (The Black Country Museum, Ironbridge Gorge Museum and Much Wenlock Museum) have participated in a pilot computerisation project and the first results appear most encouraging. Some work remains to be done to standardise the input of data to make the computer listings of data more uniform but with the experience gained from this pilot study and following the publication of the SHIC classification the unit is ready to proceed towards registering a larger sample of museum collections. If this proves successful then the future success of the unit will be assured although progress will, inevitably, be slow since unit members have many other calls on their time.

The development of the unit is being watched with interest by observers from several other regions and by the MDA and it seems likely that if the West Midlands unit proves a success other units will be formed and the movement will grow, as it did in the case of Natural History, to cover the whole country. Anyone interested in attending meetings or receiving details of further progress should contact the unit Chairman, Stuart Holm, Black Country Museum, Tipton Road, Dudley, West Midlands DY1 4SQ.

- (1) See Hancock, EG (1978) 'The North West Collections Research Unit' Museums Journal 77 (4) p188; Hancock, EG and Pettitt, CW (1980) 'A register of collections and collectors in North West England (Botany, Geology and Zoology): first edition, March 1979' Museums Journal 79 (4) pp185-7.

Hidden history

Women who were members of Stockport's 'Hidden Army' in the Second World War came together for a day of films and discussions on 4th November 1982. The event was organised jointly by Gaby Porter, Stockport Museums Service, Nikki Pattison, then a social worker with the Social Services Division, and Janice Mason of Age Concern (Stockport). It was held in order to bring together women to share their experiences of a period which was important to them, and to create some records of a previously uncharted area of local history. Discussions were recorded, photographs and items brought in on the day were copied and returned to the owners or, in some cases, donated to the museum.

The way in which women were 'hidden from history' has already been described in general and specific studies. The Ministry of Defense claimed that it took seven people working at home during the war to keep every single man fighting at the front. Many of these were women. In wartime they performed exceptional and arduous tasks as paid or voluntary workers - particularly in towns like Stockport where the engineering factories were employing women round the clock throughout the war, on traditionally 'men's work' such as operating heavy presses or riveting aircraft bodies. Yet these women were even further hidden from history in wartime than in peace. Any photographs or records of their employment became classified,

secret information; materials shortages and long hours of work discouraged people from making their own records (diaries, photographs etc); women played down their own practical and often inglorious labours as they celebrated the home-coming of the victorious troops, and they gave up their places at work to men returning from the fighting front.

Civilian workers have never formed clubs in the way in which the fighting forces have reunited since the War. Thus this event was the first opportunity for many of the participants to get together and share their memories. The recent American film 'Rosie the Riveter', and contemporary British films such as 'Night Shift', 'WVS', and 'Listen to Britain', helped to jog memories and added to the sense of enjoyment on the day. The event was sponsored by the Equal Opportunities

Commission, Age Concern, WEA (NW District) and Manchester Studies (Manchester Polytechnic).

We shall follow this event with individual interviews and collections, a small exhibition at the Pop-In Centre, Age Concern's cafe for the over-60s in Stockport, and -we hope - a more permanent exhibition in the Museum. We shall also hold a second meeting for those who attended the first, because many were anxious to meet again for a more general discussion about how the war changed women's lives. Material from these meetings and interviews will be offered to schools, many of which are already studying the period.

For a full report please send £1 (to cover photocopying and postage) to Gaby Porter, Stockport Museum, Vernon Park, Turncroft Lane, Stockport SK1 4AR.



above: a red plastic Salvage Steward's badge, presented to a WVS worker in Stockport - one of the items brought in to the event 'The Hidden Army'.

left: Chinthurst Hill, Godalming, by Lutyens, 1893-5.

Future activities

Vernacular and neo-vernacular

April 23 & 24 are the dates for an informal SHCG weekend looking at 'Vernacular and neo-vernacular' in West Surrey. The weekend is being organised by Kathy Callow of Godalming and Farnham and Matthew Alexander of Guildford.

West Surrey, with its hills and poor soil, had a strong vernacular tradition and folk life. The Victorian middle classes discovered the area, and the houses architects like Lutyens built for them gave a new style to the world.

We shall visit a number of Lutyens houses and other places of interest and museums in the area, hear talks on the vernacular and neo-vernacular buildings of the area and on its social history, and visit the Jekyll collection in Guildford Museum. Gertrude Jekyll, the famous gardener, wrote a book on the area's folk life.

The weekend will be as cheap as possible. Further details from Kathy Callow, Arts & Museums Officer, Waverley District Council, The Bury's, Godalming, Surrey. Please contact her as soon as possible - this is the only notice that will be given.

Annual Study Weekend

The Annual Study Weekend this year will be on June 23-26 at Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire. The theme will be Textiles and Museums, and the weekend is being organised by Peter Brears of Leeds, who is arranging an exciting programme of visits and talks in this exceptionally rich and interesting area. Details will be given in the next SHCG News - meanwhile please note the dates in your diary.

Other coming events

Both SHCG and MPG are planning seminars on the controversial theme of 20th Century Collecting; we hope to join forces to arrange a really important meeting.

Sam Mullins is planning a seminar on Making a Museum at the new Market Harborough Museum in the autumn.

A Group visit to the remarkable collections of the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie is under discussion.

Ideas for a SHCG meeting at the Museums Association Conference at Swansea in September are invited.

Finally, it is hoped to arrange a conference on women's history and their place in museums. Further information from Gaby Porter at Stockport.

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