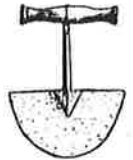


Social History Curators Group

SPRING 1986

SHCG NEWS

11



 Editor: Mark Suggitt, York Castle Museum, York, YO1 1RY

 EDITORS NOTES

By the time this issue lands on your desk the GLC and the Metropolitan Councils will no longer exist. As I stated in News 9 the situation that a number of us now find ourselves in needs to be monitored. The full impact on museums will appear in the coming year. This News hopes to illuminate the passing of these authorities with two articles which illustrate the inconsistencies that abound. Both writers give personal views and acknowledge that things could change later on. It is planned to review the year after abolition in the Spring issue of 1987.

 Sponsored Place

There will be a sponsored place on the Annual Study Weekend. The successful applicant will not have to pay any fees or accommodation and meals charges. To qualify you need to be

- (i) A member of SHCG
- and (ii) Unwaged, or unable to obtain sponsorship from your employer
- and (iii) A first time attender at a SHCG Annual Study Weekend.

If you qualify please apply to the Secretary, Sue Kirby, Carlisle Museum and Art Gallery, Castle Street, Carlisle, CA3 8TP, by Friday 30 May 1986.

 COMING EVENTS

May 30: Interiors Day in Kensington and Knightsbridge; Blanchards 187 Sloane and Leighton House - The Textile Society. (Contact Sarah Levitt, 49 Hamilton Road, Southville, Bristol BS3)

September 25-28: Annual Study Weekend - Social History Museums and the Media at Portsmouth. See preview in this News.

October 16: Contemporary Documentation: philosophy or fad? - Scottish Museums Council/University of Leicester at the Royal Museum of Scotland.

Is contemporary documentation through the collection of objects just another phase through which social history curatorship passes, or does it represent something more? This seminar will explore the issues and problems and consider to what degree it offers a major test for modern curatorship. Speakers will include Gaynor Kavanagh (Leicester University), Peter Jenkinson (Weybridge Museum) and Elspeth King (Peoples Palace, Glasgow).

(Bookings - contact Michelle Adams, Scottish Museums Council, County House, 20/22 Torphichen Street, Edinburgh EH3 8JB).

 COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee met at the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery Coventry on Friday 21st February 1986.

The nine members who attended were joined by Stella Bellem and Peter Jenkinson co-opted onto committee until the AGM.

The main topic of discussion was the Annual Study Week-end to be held in Portsmouth from the 25th to the 28th September. With social history and the media as the theme the programme has been devised to cover the philosophical issues involved, to look at all types of media, to include visits to the major historical sites in Portsmouth and to involve speakers from outside museums. It promises to be a very interesting week-end.

Our programme of Training Seminars continues with a meeting on Iron being planned for 12th September at, appropriately enough, Ironbridge and a session on Industrial History fixed for 28 November at Armley Mills, Leeds. Those on Glass and Documentation are still to be re-arranged. Other planned meetings include one on Domestic Life at the Castle Museum, York. Committee is always pleased to consider members ideas for future activities.

Sherri Steel has been representing the Group at Specialist Groups Meetings where the main topic of debate at the last meeting was the Museum Association's Membership Paper. At present there do not appear to be any firm suggestions as to how links between the MA and specialist groups can be strengthened. A second draft is in preparation.

The Group's finances are in a fairly healthy state but the forthcoming journal will of course account for a large proportion of the £1,582 in hand. It is vital that members keep their subscriptions up to date. Please pay up if you haven't already done so.

Finally, members will be pleased to know that news of the Group's activities is travelling far and wide. In the last few months I've had enquiries from Switzerland, Finland and Australia.

Sue Kirby (Hon Secretary)



MET. COUNTY ABOLITION IN WEST YORKSHIRE

The Local Government Act 1985 is an unusual piece of legislation. Rather than aiming to make something positive occur, its objective is totally negative. This is most clearly evidenced by section I of the act which occupies just seven lines and states that on 1st April 1986, the six Metropolitan Counties and the GLC shall 'cease to exist'.

The rest of the act deals with some consequences of section I, in particular the setting up of joint boards to deal with police, fire and public transport and of 'residuary bodies' to handle such matters as pensions and the disposal of surplus assets following abolition. The other consequences have been left to the local authorities concerned to decide for themselves or to be decided by orders issued from time to time by the Secretary of State for the Environment.

In the run up to the passing of the act in July 1985, most metropolitan county and district councils and the staff unions adopted a policy of opposition to the bill and of non-compliance with the spirit of the legislation. All of the local authorities involved continued their operations unchanged until forced to do otherwise by the act. In the atmosphere of uncertainty which prevailed as the debate over the proposals continued there was little practical alternative to this approach.

Political power in West Yorkshire Met. had moved in 1981 to a Labour Party committed to a policy of increased spending on recreation and the arts. From 1978 to 1985 revenue spending by the Recreation and Arts Committee increased from £0.3M to £2.3M per annum. Before 1981, the committee's main museum related activities had been the operation of a county archaeological service, maintenance of the sites and monuments record and membership of joint committees for archives and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. The new committee, however, was soon examining plans for increased involvement in countryside interpretation, in restoration of the county's historic canal system and in active involvement in the development of the three museums, one based on a water powered heavy grinding mill in Leeds, a colliery based mining museum and a museum of transport. Work on each of these projects has continued, each in its different way, since that time and sizeable commitments in terms of staffing, cash and collections development have been made. The transport museum, for instance, now employs eleven permanent and 21 Community Programme staff creating a new museum on the outskirts of Bradford. In this project, the County Council has worked through a trust which holds the funds devoted to the scheme by the council.

During 1984 and early 1985, perceptions of the abolition issue changed from an awareness of a vague manifesto threat to a realisation that abolition would actually come about. In July 1985 the bill became law and this left the ludicrously short time of nine months for implementation (In 1974 almost twelve months longer was available.). In practice the co-ordinating committee of districts which was to organise the arrangements met for the first time in September. Since then progress has been painfully slow. Organising the new joint boards and the other major functions such as highway management and waste disposal has absorbed much of the negotiator's time. Those functions which are optional (for there is nothing in the legislation which requires districts to undertake functions previously carried out by the county) have had to take a back seat.

Plans were conceived by the co-ordinating committee to pass museum functions to joint committees of the five districts. In the case of archaeology, these have recently come to fruition and it would appear that the future of the archaeology unit

is assured (albeit on a reduced budget). Oddly, museums were to go to a separate joint committee. However, the relatively small Thwaite Mills museum was felt by the districts to be better placed with Leeds and the mining museum and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park are to continue under modified versions of their existing joint committees. This leaves only the transport museum, physically located in Bradford but with a countywide brief and collection policy. The nascent joint committee for museum services has never really got off the ground and Bradford itself, with its own priorities and constraints on expenditure generally and museum budgets in particular has recently made it clear that it has no funds to devote to the museum.

Government, through the Museum and Galleries Commission, has made available 'challenge funds' for museums affected by abolition. In practice, this sum, totalling £1.5M has been substantially soaked up by the larger, more established museums and the London historic houses whose successor bodies were specified in the Act. The funds have been available only to successor councils who are prepared to commit themselves to the future funding of the museum and are intended to provide a diminishing sum over a two to three year period to 'ease' the transition.

At the time of writing, one month exactly before abolition, the situation is at last beginning to clarify, but the scene is grim. The county council is left with a choice. Bradford are considering, if given control of the transport museum's trust to take the permanent staff onto the city's payroll and to pay them from interest arising from the trust's funds. The future of the MSC staff remains unclear. Bradford have declared that they would be unable to fund the further development of the museum, however, and it is difficult to see how the staff will occupy their time, other than in disposing of the museum's collections. The alternative is for the county council in its remaining days to assist the trust to become an independent museum employing its own staff and directing its own affairs. This superficially attractive option is rendered more complex by the likelihood that the museum's premises and equipment (as opposed to the trust-owned collections) will fall into Bradford's ownership and their attitude in this situation is as yet unclear. What is clear, is that in neither case is government funding likely to be forthcoming. Bradford will be ineligible as they are not prepared to make a funding commitment and the trust likewise because it is not a local authority.

Elsewhere in the county, Thwaite Mills' future is still in the balance. There is a very real prospect that April 1st will see two substantial museum developments cease and their collections dispersed. In both cases, dispersal may well mean the scrapping of unique transport and industrial artefacts.

In 1983 Lord Gowrie reassured the museum world that abolition was not intended to result in a reduction in public funding for museums. Yet it is the abolition of a county committed to funding its museum projects and the inability in a period of financial stringency of successor bodies to step in to the breach that has brought us to the situation in which we find ourselves today. We await the next few weeks with interest.

A J Scott
(West Yorkshire Transport Museum)

**AFTER TYNE AND WEAR - A PERSONAL VIEW OF THE
PROGRESS OF ABOLITION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE COUNTY
MUSEUM SERVICE**

Following the local government act of 1972 responsibility for local authority museums within Tyne and Wear passed to the County Council. Thus nine establishments of varying sizes and specialisms were amalgamated to form the nucleus of the new County Museums Service. It appeared that few of the existing curators favoured this change and that the creation was a result of bargaining between the districts and the county to ensure that the latter had control of some function slightly more glamorous than that of waste disposal or control of the Tyne Tunnel.

The control of libraries remained at district level, which is relevant as 3 of the existing museums had been part of library services and thus these links were severed, though Sunderland Museum and Art Gallery has continued to share buildings with the library. The buildings and the collections were leased to the County Council.

During the past ten years there has been a sensible rationalisation of the collections between the buildings. The natural science collections and staff are now mainly based at Sunderland Museum whilst the collections of costume and accessories have been moved to the Laing Art Gallery, where they are cared for by the applied art staff. Furthermore, the service expanded, adding new buildings to accommodate the administrative and technical services staff as well as the greatly enlarged collections of science and technology.

Perhaps the two thoughts uppermost in the minds of staff when it became clear that the government was determined to scrap the metropolitan Counties, were the future of the collections and their job security. The thought of having to undo ten years work of cataloguing and rationalisation was a bitter pill to swallow, along with the possibility of collections reverting to buildings where there would be no specialist staff to look after them.

The latter had been a significant reason for the poor condition of some of the collections prior to 1974.

The government's initial proposals for museums in this county were received with some incredulity. The Laing Art Gallery was to be controlled by the Tate Gallery in London. The outright rejection of this move by the Trustees of the Tate was probably responsible for the flurry of activity that resulted in the visits of two Ministers of the Arts, Lord Gowrie and then Mr Richard Luce to the Museum Service within the space of several months. The Northern Federation of Museums lobbied strongly for the retention of the County Service and proved an admirable vehicle for such work when other means of communication were prevented by the County Council and NALGO. Other organisations such as the Friends of the Museums, the Durham County Conservation Trust, the Nature Conservancy Council and many others wrote to the office of Arts and Libraries to support our case for the retention of the County Service. The Area Museum Service lobbied the government strongly, pointing out the waste of their money that would ensue from such a division.

The numbers and distribution of staff had radically altered since 1974 and a reversion to separate district museums would have been a nightmare. Any dissolution of the service would inevitably have removed many of the administrative staff and probably have reduced the curatorial and support staff who, centrally based in Newcastle, felt particularly vulnerable. The uncertainty of our future made me at least think how fortunate we have been for so many years, compared to many other groups of employees who had never shared in such job security.

We now know that the service will be retained as a unit run by a joint committee with Newcastle as the lead authority. After fifteen months of suspense the agreement in principle to retain the service was taken by the co-ordinating committee in November 1985. To many this was the best possible news. There is little doubt that this would not have happened if the government had not offered an annual grant of £750,000 reviewable after five years, as an incentive to keep the service together. Thankfully, museums in Tyne and Wear were not a concurrent function so that there was no pre-existing structure to receive them back into the districts, though some heads of section within the districts would have relished their return.

Given the almost impossible timetable set by the government to ensure abolition by the 1st April 1986 we are perhaps fortunate in Tyne and Wear that the five districts are all Labour controlled and whilst little love is lost between them and the Metropolitan County, they are at least of one complexion and have followed the lead given by the Labour Party National Executive decision in September 1985 to co-operate on abolition. This has probably resulted in a smoother handover of services than might alternatively have been the case.

The future seems brighter than it has for a long time. Formulations on budget contributions to the joint committee have been agreed by the districts and the block transfer of staff to the joint committee is now taking place (March 4 1986). The last two years have put intense pressure on staff. Some have been in position to help the campaign to retain the service whilst others have had to wait in the wings. Not surprisingly much of the conversation during tea and coffee breaks, and at other times, has been taken up with the debate about our future. Since the passage of the Bill virtually all the discussions have been handled by the senior officers and members of the five districts and there has been little direct involvement in these by members of the Museum Service.

How the service shapes up in the next ten years remains to be seen; many administrative details are still to be worked out. Much will depend on the ability of the district representatives of the joint committee to act in harmony. There will be changes, but perhaps fate has been kinder to us than some of our colleagues in other departments with whom we have worked closely for ten years and who now face redundancy.

A fuller account about abolition and Tyne and Wear County Council Museum Service, written by the Director, Mr J M A Thompson will appear in NEMS News issue II available from North East Museum Service, 27 Sutton Street, Durham.

John Bainbridge
(Senior Museum Officer, Natural Science,
Tyne and Wear County Museum Service.)

**THE FORCES OF FASHION:
HERBERT ART GALLERY & MUSEUM, COVENTRY**

This recent temporary exhibition of costume at Coventry looks at costume in a refreshing way. For social historians the exhibition is a rare treat because clothes are dealt with not as pieces of fine art, of interest largely because of their cut and surface decoration, but as a part of everyday life.

The exhibition looks at clothes as one of the expressions of the arts of self-decoration and attraction and specifically it reviews the way the human body has been slimmed, padded, moulded and disguised to conform to the popular shape of the day. It comes right up to date by showing how, in our super health-conscious society, the emphasis has moved from clothes which alter the body underneath to the body as a frame on which

clothes are draped and the concomitant emphasis on the perfect body. The story concludes with a review of what fashion has done to the human body from the crushed livers and ribcages caused by the Victorian corset to the anorexia of the present day.

The opening sequences are intriguing; one approaches through a corridor of veiled bodies before drawing up sharply before a mirror which reflects your own shape and size (which only proves, I thought, that historically the maternity silhouette can hardly have changed at all!)

Inside the exhibition, the treatment of the objects, as I have said, is fascinating. However, I thought clarity had been lost through a confused layout and some nice display ideas lost through poor execution. Two particularly effective techniques are the use of silhouettes alongside dummies to highlight the essential shape of the garments; and the intermingling in the displays of other clothes together with shape-forming undergarments. However, the silhouettes on the outside of cases do not immediately relate to the case contents and the idea is not continued throughout the exhibition (largely lack of space, I suspect); while the display of underwear is jumbled so that an eighteenth century stay-busk is displayed in a case together with a 1906 'S bend' corset and a 1920s bandeau, without a clear exposition of the links between. An alternative layout might have been to have had the period silhouette, outerwear and underwear grouped together so that the effect of one on the other could have been better appreciated or perhaps to have divided the exhibition into sections headed 'Bosoms and Busts', 'Bottoms Up' etc!

The display tries to avoid the usual over-concentration on female dress, although the constraints of the collection means that the male half of the story is still under-represented. Lighting is always a problem with costume and the bright lights and reflections of the outer corridor have the unfortunate effect of making the exhibition room with its fixed lights and low light levels needed for conservation, appear dingy.

One of the major problems in staging temporary exhibitions of costume is the availability of suitably sized display cases. Like many other museums, the Herbert possesses only one or two costume cases in the permanent galleries. They have cleverly surmounted the problem by building simple wooden boxes with sheets of perspex screwed to the front. The whole exhibition has cost less than £1,000 and the bulk of the cost is made up of perspex which will be re-used in other galleries after the exhibition closes.

Altogether the exhibition had plenty of original ideas and deserved a longer run.

A free leaflet accompanied the show and anyone wishing to receive a copy should contact Rosie Crook or Jenny Mattingley at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordanwell, Coventry.

Janice Murray
(Dundee Museums)

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

Annual subscriptions for 1986-87 are now due and you will find an official invoice enclosed with this edition of the news.

Unfortunately a large number of people and institutions have still not paid their 1985/86 subscriptions. In case people are unsure whether they have paid or not we are listing the names of those with outstanding subscriptions below. You must, of course pay your 1985 subs if you wish to be a Member in 1986!

Apologies to those who have paid up since this list was compiled (1.3.86). Those who sent their 1986/87 subs along with the last reminder are thanked and should ignore both invoices.

Unpaid Membership Subscriptions 1985-86

Rosie Allan, Beamish Museum
Ann Balfour-Paul
Janet Balcar, Helena Thompson Museum
(I) Birmingham City Museum
(I) Black Country Museum
Val Bott, Grange Museum
Stalla Butler, Manchester Museum, Science & Indus.
Bev Bytheway, Rochdale Art Gallery
(I) Castle Howard Estate
Tim Caulton, Kelham Island
Linda Coleing, Macclesfield
Brian Curzon, Bass Museum
Yvonne Dean, York Arts Association
Harriet Devlin, Loughrigg
David Dewing, Museum of London
(I) Derbyshire College of Higher Education
(I) Dick Institute, Kilmarnock
Johanna Donahue, Sussex Archaeological Society
Barbara Dugard-Craig, Stockport
Rosemary Ewles, Plumstead Museum
John Gall, Beamish Museum
Jim Garrets, Manchester
Bernadette Gillow, Museum of Labour History
Rosemary Gilmour, Chichester Museum
Helena Graham, Birmingham
J W Griffin, Broomfield Museum
(I) Guildford Museum
(I) Gunnersbury Park Museum
Camilla Hampshire
Jeremy Harris, Macclesfield
Nicola Harris, Oxford
John Harrison, Bunratty Castle
Maggie Heath, Spondon
(I) Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry
Stuart Holm, MDA
Ken Howarth, Clitheroe Castle
Elaine Hudson, Dumfries
E M Humphries, Sale
Rachael Illiffe, Ironbridge
Jane Insley, Science Museum
Rowan Jakes, Bath
Catherine Johns, British Museum
Andrea Kerr, Kirkcaldy Museum
Kelvin Lake, Telford
E R Lewis, Wickham
(I) Museum of Lincolnshire Life
Sandra Lord, Manchester Jewish Museum
Deborah McIlveen, Oxford
Denise Melhvis, Ashton-U-Lyme
G Moore, Trustees of Daventry Museum
Jill Morgan, Rochdale Art Gallery
Alan Morton, Science Museum
Catherine Needham, Leeds
Chris Newberry, Museums & Galleries Commission.
Elsa Phelps, Belfast
Joy Price, Stamford
Stephen Price, Birmingham Museum
Catherine Rickman, Whitworth Art Gallery
Sally Rousham, Loughborough
John Rumsby, Tolston Memorial Museum
(I) St Albans Museum
Elwyn Scourfield, St Fagans
Charles Searle, Whitehaven
Ruth Shringley, Manchester Jewish Museum
Charlotte Sing, Manchester
Lyn Stag, London
(I) Stoke-on-Trent Museum
S M Stone, Verulamium Museum
(I) Association for Suffolk Museums
(I) Swansea Maritime Museum
Claire Tarjon, Bruce Castle Museum
Ken Teague, Homiman Museum
Lyn Teather, Ontario, Canada
(I) Ulster Museum
Jenny Vernon, Gainsborough Old Hall
Judith Walker, Staffordshire County Museum
Pamela Walker, Bristol
Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans
Denise Westbury, Ashley Hall
Elizabeth Wright, NMAS, Edinburgh

MAKING EXHIBITIONS OF OURSELVES: The Limits Of
Objectivity in Representations of Other Cultures

Symposium at the British Museum on the 13th, 14th and 15th February 1986 organised by the Museum of Mankind, the Association of Social Anthropologists and the Museum Ethnographers Group.

This seminar was billed by its organiser Brian Durrans as being as far as he is aware the first to seriously consider the various roles of exhibitions of other cultures in relation to the societies in which they are presented. Indeed this is not an area we have yet tackled in SHCG except at the Women, Heritage and Museums meeting of April 1984 and in the course of informal discussions. I was pleased therefore to be able to attend the event, especially since it allowed a taste of the work and ideas of our colleagues in other fields.

The programme threatened to overwhelm. Seventeen speakers were billed for day one, twenty one for day two and fifteen for day three. Even taking into consideration the fact that papers were circulated in advance, that each speaker was to be limited to ten minutes and that discussion was to follow each group of papers, it seemed designed to test the concentration of the most dedicated audience. In the event most of the speakers responded well, managing to present their ideas succinctly within the allotted ten minutes. Unfortunately only one or two introduced themselves, some background information would have been appreciated. The theoretical sessions created problems too as some speakers made no allowance for those participants not familiar with the language and concepts of structuralism.

My biggest criticism is of the handling of the discussion sessions. The layout of the lecture hall and the large numbers (up to a hundred delegates) were not conducive to an easy exchange of views. Moreover, they were not chaired but rather taken by discussants (all male although the balance between the sexes was otherwise even) who rather too often used a major part of the time allowed to present what was in effect a second paper. Those who had given papers tended to dominate. I feel strongly that smaller groups are needed for discussion but failing this it would have been helpful if the speakers along with a chairperson had formed a panel at the front.

To turn to the papers themselves. Day one was entitled 'CONSTRUCTING THE EXOTIC'. Session one, 'National Imagery', examined the presentation of other cultures at international exhibitions. Jonathan King (Museum of Mankind) looked at Indian shows in London from the 1820s to the 1920s charting the changing British conception of the Indian from 'Wild Man' through 'Noble Savage' to the attacker of European settlers, dressed in Plains clothing even if non-Plains. Most papers looked at C20th World Fairs. Burton Benedict (University of California, Berkeley) contrasted the French and British views of their colonies as shown by the Exposition Colonial of 1921 and the British Empire Exhibition of 1924. Although both nations presented a view of their cultural superiority, the French, unlike the British who saw the colonies almost entirely in terms of the economic advantage to the 'mother country' did at least acknowledge the qualities found in other cultures. Holm (University of British Columbia) and Quartermaine (University of Exeter) pointed to the obstacles in the way of minority peoples making their voices heard in two contemporary exhibitions still being planned, Expo '86 and the Australian Bicentennial, whilst Durrans (Museum of Mankind) and Kattenhorn (India Office Library) showed that the Indian government had been able to exert some influence on the Festival of India held in Britain in 1982.

Session two 'Other Uses and Interpretations' was more varied and included Leacock (City University,

New York) on Mead, Freeman and Samoa and papers on Siberia, 'convicts and cold', as seen by travellers 1850-1945; Primitivism and the development of Abstract Expressionism, the display of Benin 'art' and the exhibition 'Buddhism Art and Faith'.

Day two, 'INTERPRETING THE PAST' began with 'Theoretical Perspectives'. Bann (University of Kent) showed how C18th antiquarians set the tone for the museums of the C19th and echoed Pearce (University of Leicester) in his stress of the personal investment made by curators. The treatment of Plymouth, Mssts., with its now carefully preserved rock housed in a 'Greek temple' and its 'character impersonators' illustrated Lowenthal's (University College, London) thesis of the museum as distorting mirror whilst Hooper-Greenhill (University of Leicester) applied Foucault's theories to museum history, an exercise, so it seemed to me and other participants, of somewhat limited use on that particular occasion.

Session four, 'Evidence and Interpretations of the Past' dealt particularly with attempts to impose classifications on other races. Arrangement of collections at the Horniman in the early C20th and photographic records deposited at the Pitt Rivers show racial stereo-typing. Stapp (Smithsonian Institution) further undermined the idea that photographs have an intrinsic authority with his examples of the manipulation of images shown by Gardener in his 'Photographic Sketch Book' published after the American Civil War and by the catalogues of Indian tribes and castes published as text books for new recruits to the Indian Civil Service. Nueberg (North London Poly) stressed Mayhew's contribution to the understanding of C19th working class life, a contribution only recognised since the second world war whilst Rydell (Montana State University) looked at 'the science of racial improvement', eugenics, as presented in the US between the wars.

After the papers it was pointed out that academic specialisms can distort the real world. For example it is only recently that human beings have been seen as part of the natural world and portrayed in natural history museums. A subject such as hunting is split between two types of museum. Another distortion creeps in when hunting is portrayed as an exclusively male occupation when the findings of both archaeology and anthropology show that women were and are small game hunters and trappers and that there has never been exclusive reliance on big-game hunting.

The fifth session, 'Interpreting the Past in the Present', was very varied. Townsend-Gault (Halifax, Nova Scotia) showed how official portraits show the nature of the institution endorsing them rather than the nature of the individuals themselves. Salzman (University of Texas) gave a new perspective on the General Strike as 'festival' for the elite whilst Boyes (Bretton Hall College of Higher Education) showed how traditional customs have been seen as being outside mainstream culture with roots in pre-historic fertility ritual even when there is no documentary evidence for them until comparatively recently. Vanags (British Museum) sketched the male view of society as portrayed on Greek drinking cups: the male seen in the gym or at war; the female housewife seen spinning at home; the prostitute, slave entertainer or courtesan; and the Amazon fated ever to lose her battle with the Greek warrior. Sexually-explicit images are hidden away in the stores. Kavanagh (University of Leicester) and Miller (University of British Columbia) stressed that curatorship is, like writing history, a creative act. We should aim to represent material in a variety of ways, to provoke questions.

The final day, 'PRESENT PRACTICE', began with another look at 'Theoretical Perspectives'. Shelton (Museum of Mankind) indicated the persistence of classicism in western culture and the tendency to display ethnographic exhibits out of context. The venue of the symposium itself, so

aptly described by Burton Benedict as the 'Temple of DeContextualisation', is a prominent example. Hiller (University College, London) took this one step further when she pointed out that the west has imposed its own values on the material. Thirty years ago cultures other than western were not considered to have art. Hiller maintains that there is no primitive art outside museum showcases. What we in the west see of other cultures is addressed to us and for us whether presented as art or as information. Exhibitions of other cultures comprise 'fantasies of knowledge of the other'. When western societies acknowledge how they obtained the objects in their museums they should recognise that what is in fact on display is their own history.

In discussing the work of David Medalla, a Phillipines born artist who in the 1960s and 1970s used the museum whilst at the same time mocking it. Guy Brett outlined one way forward where the artist gives an idea which is continued by the viewers. In A Stitch in Time participants embroidered a large piece of fabric as each saw fit. In Eskimo Carver they constructed fantasy knives from rubbish which were then displayed and labelled in a parody of the ethnographic museum. Medalla himself endorsed Hiller's views and cited an exhibition toured in Germany on the Phillipines which had neglected the political and social realities of the islands. One of the German organisers pointed out that following increased public awareness of the nature of the Marcos regime the exhibition was in fact modified and augmented. In contrast, 'Hidden Peoples of the Amazon' remained unchanged despite the criticisms from Survival International.

A short session 'Ethnographic Problems and Opportunities' showed that not all minority peoples are on the point of extinction or are preserved in a time warp. The minority point of view is emerging as groups seek to write their own history.

The final group of papers 'Wider Contexts of Cultural Representation' included Lon Fleming (Middlesex Poly) speaking on the way women are constituted as 'other'. Carol Puncan (Ranapo College, New Jersey) drew out the parallels between modern art and advertising in a world where the individual is conceived of as powerless except in a private sense. Putnam (Middlesex Poly) indicated that technology museums like art galleries have taken their material out of its human context, presenting the development of machinery as one long march of progress. We saw how nature has been re-interpreted for human consumption by Walt Disney Studios, the folk singer Bill Lloyd selectively presented Songs from the 1840s Miners' Strike to bolster his own political viewpoint and the different versions of events recorded by police and residents after the Broadwater Farm riots of October 1985.

In conclusion, I summarise some of the main points to emerge from the discussions. The subject matter of the papers was diverse but all clearly showed that representations are socially constructed. Objects do not speak for themselves except to those who already speak their language. Objects have been and are being expropriated by the powerful. Concentration of one aspect of an object, its aesthetic value for example, leads to a subversion of its full meaning.

We should recognise that the work of a museum curator, like that of a historian, is a creative and subjective activity. We should move away from a didactic approach and aim to stimulate debate, placing our work in a broader context, rather than always shying away from conflict (natural historians thrive on it!). As an example, the Childrens' Museum of Indianapolis currently have on display an exhibition which shows past historical errors and points out areas where we have little or no knowledge. It is proving very popular. We should be sensitive to the interests of those who are represented or their descendants and to the way in which women, past and present, are shown.

And finally, and here is something SHCG has been saying loudly and clear, we should show more of our own history.

Surprisingly the conference barely mentioned the restitution of cultural property debate. Nor was the crucial area of the affects of sponsorship tackled. It is to be hoped that the MPG Conference this September will do that.

Sue Kirby
(Carlisle Museum & Art Gallery)

TOURISM VERSUS MUSEUMS?

The Changing Role of Urban Museums was the title of a seminar organised by the Centre for Urban & Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham (27 Feb 86).

The audience were of two types: museum professionals and leisure/recreation/arts officers. Throughout the day, but especially during the discussions of the afternoon, it became clear that the museum profession thinks very differently from its leisure service bosses. Most of the museums represented on the course were in Recreation or Leisure Departments of a local authority. Most felt they had little in common with the rest of their department - sports centres, parks, baths and cemeteries!

Some non-museum officers had museums in their care but were in a haze about their function or how they should be run. Are Area Councils not taking a close enough interest to help a Leisure Services Officer who has been given a museum but no museum staff?

These departments put tourism high on their list of priorities. Museums can be tourist attractions but tourism should not be their sole reason for existence. Many of our lords and masters seem to think differently. Maybe we should talk to each other more often!

The speakers were varied in their approach: Patrick Boylan said he had looked back through conference papers and even 50 years ago, we were, as a profession, discussing admission charges! He argued that if we remained an inward looking profession we would never make an impact within the leisure field and fight on equal terms with sports centres and swimming pools. We do not, he argued, train ourselves as managers - a good curator does not necessarily make a good museum director. The diploma - aimed at Assistant Keepers - does not train students in management and there is no other management qualification directly relevant to museum needs. Hence the increasing trend of appointing non-museum professionals as directors of museums.

David Viner, Curator of Museums for Cotswold District Council, spoke about his part of Gloucestershire - a case study of 'comfortable Britain'. This contrasted sharply with Patrick Greene's 'From dereliction to decay' - the metamorphosis of Liverpool Road Station into the North West Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester.

This seminar could have spread over two days but the clear message to me was that museums should educate the leisure service managers and the leisure service managers should try to see museums as something more than simply tourist attractions.

'Tourism' is often held up as the antidote for an ailing economy. Leisure managers should remember and be reminded that the role of museums in this country has been founded on service rather than 'rip-off'. The needs of the museums local area should be considered before dreaming up tourism schemes that could potentially abuse the history of an area.

Hilary McGowan
(York Castle Museum)

CONFERENCE ON THE ART OF THE PEOPLE IN AMERICA AND
BRITAIN

December 7th, 1985

When the Manchester Cornerhouse planned their exhibition of American and English folk art selected by James Ayres of the John Judkin Memorial they included a full week-end of activities. Saturday was devoted to a conference on folk art, probably the first to be held in this country, while Sunday was given over to a whole range of demonstrations and performances organised in collaboration with the students of the Department of Museum and Art Gallery Studies at Manchester University.

Ten o'clock on Saturday morning found a diverse group of twenty or thirty people chatting over coffee in the basement of the Cornerhouse, a splendid conversion of a former warehouse block into an arts centre incorporating lecture theatres, galleries, performance areas, cafe and shop. The first session was presented by James Ayres, already well-known for his books on 'British Folk Art', 'English Naive Painting', and 'The Home in Britain'. It was particularly interesting to hear his views on the finer end of the subject as he explored the links between the academic and non-academic traditions of painting and their relationship with craftsmanship. He successfully argued that folk-art is not solely the prerogative of the peasantry, but exists throughout all levels of society, and can include the work of professional artists too. Although most of these points were already fully appreciated by those who had read Mr Ayres' various books, this well-illustrated lecture was extremely enjoyable and provided a thought-provoking introduction to the whole day.

Tony Lewery is perhaps best known for his work on traditional narrow-boat painting, but he is also a professional painter and signwriter. In positive and lively manner he traced the development of signwriting over the past couple of centuries, illustrating his talk both with slides and with actual specimens. Two of his themes were of particular interest. The first concerned the distinct local styles of lettering which were still to be found in this country where a single signwriter undertook every lettering job required by the surrounding community. In Whitehaven, for example, one painter took over his master's business before he had finished his training, and continued to operate for the next fifty years or so. As a result, virtually every example of lettering to be seen around Whitehaven bore his distinctive, if unorthodox and somewhat dated style. Having a good eye for such matters, Tony had been able to trace a number of similar one-man businesses and either collect or commission examples of their work. The second theme followed the development of the ornate letter forms found on road transport vehicles from the old timber-framed wagons and cattle- and horse-boxes through to the personalised liveries of today's American-style trucks. The quality of the lining, graining and lettering illustrated in his slides was truly admirable, while some of the cattle paintings he had found on the pre- and post-2nd World War stock wagons must count as some of the finest products of this country's folk-art tradition.

After lunch, I had been briefed to give a paper 'on folk art, but different from James Ayres', and so described the two main elements of the northern English carving tradition seen on knitting sheaths and stone heads as recorded from provenanced examples dating from the seventeenth century onwards. This argument was then developed by detailing the wider stylistic, geographical and chronological distribution of these carvings throughout Europe, suggesting possible common origins in prehistoric pastoral cultures.

The final paper of the day was given by Philip Pacey of Preston Polytechnic on the subject of family art. Originating in portrait painting and folk art generally, family art had become a method of enriching family life and reflecting family identity through a series of its own visual images and traditions. It incorporated snapshots and family albums, Christmas and birthday customs and decorations, home-made toys, gifts or greeting cards, and the countless ways in which a house is converted into a family home. As in so many aspects of folk-life, it was a subject area which appeared bewilderingly wide and diverse at first sight, but on reflection became much more unified, and offered an enlightening means of considering and collecting many aspects of material culture and information which would otherwise fall through the net of most existing museum classifications. One of its great strengths was that it could enrich the human associations of what would otherwise be little more than a collection of artefacts. I would advise anyone to read 'Family Art', a collection of essays and a bibliography published to accompany an exhibition held on this subject at Preston Polytechnic in 1982.

The day ended with a brief but lively discussion which centred on the great lack of interest in folk art by the majority of both provincial and national museums in England. After all, we are the only country in Europe without a national folk museum, a fact which produced one of the most comprehensive definitions of folk life heard to date: 'that which is not collected by the national museums'.

Everyone expressed their congratulations to the staff of the Cornerhouse, particularly to Virginia Tandy, Exhibitions Officer, and Sue Clive, Education Officer (Exhibitions), and to James Ayres for organising such an enjoyable, exciting and stimulating combination of exhibition and conference. From a personal point of view, I found the whole experience to be extremely valuable, particularly from the point of view of making contact with a range of friendly, lively people who all shared an enthusiastic and knowledgeable gut-feeling for English folk life. Is it significant that virtually no-one from an English folk museum attended the conference?

Peter Brears (Leeds Museums)

RE-CONSTRUCTIONALIST DESIGN?

As the George Brown collection heads towards Japan it will be accompanied by the contents of a chemists and a bakers shop. They are to fit out the three shops to be opened by the British fashion designer Paul Smith, famous for his classic English men's clothes with a subtle edge. The intention is to create an atmosphere distinct from the minimalist Japanese fashion shops.

At least the country's museums are more than well provided for with chemists shops! Let us hope that Smith's new shops do not create a demand for Social History objects as accessories. It would be truly ironic if the Japanese coveted the past products of our rapidly vanishing industrial base!





Hello Sailor! The delights of downtown Portsmouth.

SOCIAL HISTORY AND THE MEDIA

Annual Study Weekend. September 1986. Portsmouth.

We all think we understand the media don't we? Now is the time to find out more! At a time of increasing media exploitation of historical resources it is important that museums should define strategies for intervention in the media and the media process. The media shapes our perceptions and ideas. As social history curators we all have vague notions of the ideological bias and distortion of history brought about by the media but there remains a deferential attitude to it. It promises glamour and unfortold expose to the public. We will bend over backwards to allow TV and film crews, radio and press reporters access to our museums, yet rarely do we attempt to control the content of the product. Even those curators who do produce their own material are more often than not tourists in another profession.

If museums do not begin to make a more positive and structured intervention in the media they can only continue to stand by wide eyed on the sidelines as history is hijacked, marginalised institutions in an already marginalised cultural sector.

Discussion should include: How and Why the Media operates. What are the messages we need to put across? What elements of 'media' history do we want to adopt/reject? Do we benefit from being permanent institutions? Interested? You should be, so book now for what promises to be a stimulating weekend.

NEW PUBLICATIONS

The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation by Corelli Barnett (Macmillan £14.95).

Amusing Ourselves to Death by Neil Postman (Heinemann £9.95).

Uninvited Guests by Laurie Taylor and Bob Mullan (Chatto and Windus £9.95).

The Victorians Unbuttoned by Sara Levitt (George Allen & Unwin £25.00).

Love, Sex and War = Changing Values 1939-1945 by John Costello (Collins £9.95).

The Culture Club: Crisis in the Arts by Bryan Appleyard (Faber & Faber £2.95).

Dictionary of Leather-Working Tools C1700-1950 and the tools of allied trades by R A Salaman (Allen & Unwin £40.00).

MUSEUMS ON TELEVISION

It just goes to show how relevant the Annual Study Weekend is going to be. Here are two new television programmes which should be watched by all Social Historians. The first is Changing Times for Museums, (a working title) which should be transmitted on Channel 4 in April. The second is House & Home on BBC2. (Transmission details to be announced).

Changing Times for Museums looks at five Social and Industrial Museums. The producers tell us "Museums jog a nation's memory. Some still concern themselves with the pomp and circumstance of the long dead years and the lovingly polished trophies of ancient battles. Others - in whole or in part - remind us of the daily lives and expectations of our forebears, working in the fields and factories of a vanished Britain, and five of these - The People's Palace in Glasgow, the Miners' Museum in the Afan valley, near Port Talbot, Kelham Island Industrial Museum in Sheffield, the Grange Museum of Local History in Neasden, London, and the Somerset Rural Life Museum at Glastonbury, are what concern us in this series.

Each programme is seen through the eyes of people closely associated with their particular museum and also explores the very different neighbourhoods and ways of life surrounding the museums."

There will be 5 programmes of 30 minutes. A guide to museums which reflect "changing times" by Kenneth Hudson will be available in the Spring.

House & Home - A History of the small English House is a series of 8 films taking an architectural and social look at the history of "ordinary peoples' homes". It traces not only the major developments in the form of houses, but also how these developments reflected and shaped the ways they were used.

Each film will concentrate on a major house type belonging to a particular period in history and to a particular part of England. In this way, the series builds up an overall picture of English domestic architecture from medieval times to the present day, and from Yetminster to Preston (via East Anglia and London).

We'll be looking at a wide variety of homes, including: a medieval timber-framed yeoman's hall, a seventeenth century stone farmhouse, the Georgian terrace, the semis of the 1920/30s and the series concludes with a film on present day housing co-ops in Liverpool.

House & Home is presented by Nicholas Taylor, architectural historian and a local councillor who works for a housing co-op.

A fully illustrated BBC book, written by Anthony Quiney will be published (price £9.95) to accompany the series.

