

Social History Curators Group

SHCG NEWS

Winter
1986
13



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

EDITORIAL

It may have escaped your notice that this has been "Industry Year" but News readers should have noticed that this was certainly the year of Social History and the Media, from Radio 4's Museum Choice and phone in, BBC's House and Home Series, Channel 4's Changing Times for Museums, Neal Ascherton quoting "On Living in An Old Country in the Observer" to the "Monocled Mutineer" controversy. Finally our own ASW which helped put some things in perspective and raise other values for consideration. It was our highest attendance ever, evidence that we are serious about becoming Janus-like curators (see David Flemings article).

The Media, whether printed or visual is often perceived as truth, though we know it can distort as much as a museum display. We are part of the media, probably more so than the academic world we need to associate with. Yet another question of balance.

So, how do we shape up? Channel 4's "Changing Times for Museums - Museums in the Community" should have been great television, a combination of two essentially progressive media?

My hopes faded with the first programme's opening sequence, twee music and cliched framed visuals; through the past, sweetly. From then on we got views of the museum and the society it served but they seemed distant, distinct. Times seemed to be changing out of the museums but the producers didn't ask the leading question of how relevant the museum was to them, not once in the four programmes I saw (I missed the last one on the Peoples Palace).

Of the episodes I saw only the programme on The Grange Museum at Neasden got close. The Grange fared better because the Television Company was round the corner and filmed over a long period rather than descending for a few days. In other words the curator had more of an input and a better programme appeared, actually relating the holdings of the museum to the history of the area outside. It was also a joy to see a curator on television doing the important and ordinary; answering a potential donation over the phone!

In this case I felt the museums portrayed were better than the film makers who failed to make the right connections. On our own terms we need to take on board the exciting tools of the other media groups to give our users a stimulating experience, hopefully a better experience.

A.G.M. REPORT

A well-attended Annual General Meeting was held at Rees Hall, Portsmouth on Saturday, 27th September, 1986. Below is a summary of discussions (members will, of course, receive full Minutes before the 1987 A.G.M.).

Matters arising

Export of Works of Art

Graeme Cruickshank had written a report on the export of local and social history items and this had been submitted to the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art, and also the M.A. Council for endorsement. Due to a misunderstanding at the M.A. this had not happened, so SHCG was proceeding with the Report alone.

Officers' Reports

Chairperson

The Chairperson especially thanked the Secretary, Sue Kirby, and Treasurer, Sherri Steel, both of whom were retiring from Committee after 3 years of hard work for SHCG.

Treasurer

An apparently health balance shown in the accounts was discussed. Due to SHCG's having changed its accounting year to fit the financial year, we would have to pay for an extra Journal out of the current year's budget. The former Editor (Journal), David Fleming, highlighted the difficulties of producing a high-quality publication like the Journal within the budget covered by existing subscriptions.

Membership

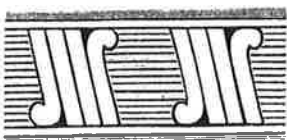
This stands at 310 (76 institutional, 234 personal). 52 members had been removed from membership after two years' arrears, but an exactly corresponding number of new members had been recruited.

Increase in subscription rates

It was proposed from the floor that individual subscriptions be raised to £7 a year, with the following corresponding increases:

Joint membership	£10
Institutional membership	£15
Overseas personal membership	£10
Overseas institutional membership	£15

These proposals were all carried. Please note that the new rates will apply from April 1987.



Training

The Curatorial Board of Studies is considering proposals from the Museums Association on a new structure for training. Members expressed disquiet that papers for the meeting which was to discuss this issue had not been circulated in advance, to enable our representative to discuss them, at least with the Committee.

Social History in Museums (Manual of Social History Curatorship)

Crispin Paine circulated a draft outline, which was welcomed and supported in principle by the meeting. Committee is to continue its liaison with Crispin over the project.

NEW COMMITTEE

- Chairperson : David Fleming (Hull Museums)
- Secretary : Rosie Crook (Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry)
- Treasurer : Leslie Colsell (Museum of East Anglian Life)
- Journal Editor : Steph Mastoris (Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham)
- News Editor : Mark Suggitt (York Castle Museum)
- Membership Secretary : Janice Murray (Dundee Museums)
- Seminar Organiser : Jenny Mattingly (Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry)
- Ordinary Members : Oliver Green (London Transport Museum)
John Williams-Davies (Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans).
Dieter Hopkin (Erewash Museum)
Peter Jenkinson (Weybridge Museum)
Karen Hull (Slough Museum)

COMMITTEE REPORT

The new Committee met for the first time on October 23rd 1986, at Brewhouse Yard, Nottingham. Ten members attended.

1. Export of Works of Art

Graham Cruickshanks Report to the Reviewing Committee has received a second and more encouraging response from the Committee's Secretary. SHCG is to re-submit the Report to the Museum's Association's Council for its information.

2. New "group" in Scotland

A new group for contemporary documentation and the production of travelling exhibitions has been set up in the wake of the 'Recording Society Today' seminar in Edinburgh. SHCG hopes to be represented on the group by John Shaw. Further information on the group's activities will be reported to SHCG members as soon as it is available. This will be a loose association of museums, not another specialist group!

3. Specialist Groups Meeting

Peter Jenkinson is the Group's new representative on this body, which provides a forum of discussion between the Museums Association and the specialist groups. SHCG has asked that the Report on export of social history items (see 1 above) be put on the agenda for the next meeting.

4. Annual Study Weekend, 1987

This will be based in Nottingham. Suella Postles has been co-opted onto Committee as Annual Study Weekend local representative, and Oliver Green is to undertake co-ordination of the programme. A provisional theme of 'interpretation' has been considered, with emphasis upon those subjects which social history museums frequently do - and do badly.

5. Manual of Social History Curatorship

David Fleming, Crispin Paine and John Rhodes have produced a detailed outline, with provisional ideas for contributors. It would be an SHCG publication, planned possibly for 1988/9. Watch this space!

6. Curatorial Board of Studies

Committee considered the proposal on a new structure for training: a two tier system of Curatorial Certificates in the specialist subject, leading to Licentiate status, followed by a Diploma, which would include Management training. Committee warmly welcomed this initiative, and the inclusion of non-graduates under the Licentiate qualification but expressed some doubt as to the value of the qualification in subjects such as design and conservation, and also some disquiet at the apparent exclusion of the Leicester Museum Studies Department from the proposals. Jenny Mattingly will represent SHCG at the CBS meeting in December.

Rosie Crook (Secretary)

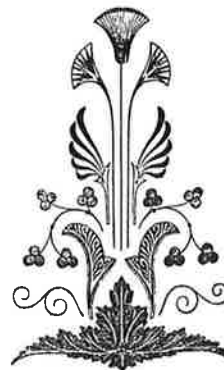
AND WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?

Perhaps it is time someone asked.

In an effort to disentangle and chart the various strands of opinion and perspective to be found in history curatorship today, Gaynor Kavanagh at the Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, will be sending out to members of SHCG and other groups a questionnaire on attitudes towards history in museums and history curatorship. This should be dispatched towards Christmas time. The questionnaire will give members ample opportunity to express their views on what they think history curatorship is all about. A good response is hoped for, and full and candid opinions will be welcomed.

A separate survey on history museums will be sent direct to a wide selection of museums throughout the U.K.

The information gathered will contribute to research on history curatorship and will be used in teaching and publication.



The SHCG Study Weekend aimed to "examine and question the representation of social history by the media, to look at the role of museums in this process of representation, and to consider possible alternative strategies for communicating social history to a mass audience." Well, did we?

Theoretical discussion about the nature of the past was an appropriate place to begin. Patrick Wright's paper, 'The National Past in the Era of the Welfare State' addressed the question of how to appraise the increased public consciousness of 'the past'. He accused us of looking at history as 'heritage' rather than as a "critical way of forming meanings that take us forward. By extracting values from the past are we in fact living in an "anti-modern age"? He asked whether the sinking of modern resources into the past and the preservation of an historical identity was symptomatic of a "culture of decline"?

He went on to describe the particular 1980's perception of 'the past' which has developed as a complex response to the growth of the welfare state since the war. The relevance for social history curators, is whether in collecting 'fragments' they are unknowingly bolstering the social inequalities of the past; celebrating the old survived rather than the new triumphant. The challenge for curators is to transcend the past as an image of decline, to challenge the dominant value system of the day. Plausibility rather than 'truth' is a legitimate aim for the social historian.

In his not-easily-comprehensible paper, 'Populism, Spectacle and Social History', Tony Dunn called for a return to 'the word' in our culture after a 10-year concentration on 'the image' as the primary means of communication. He argued that we are surrounded by images and visual symbols that we often fail to understand. With specific reference to social history museums, he argued that the trend in current displays to exhibit objects within a series of period rooms or 'spaces' excludes a structural explanation. "What model in your head do you bring to this separated series of spaces?" He complained of banality in displays and asked what instruments of analysis were offered to determine what is significant and what is banal. I don't think he was actually criticising 'the banal', and I think he raised two vital issues not really taken up at the meeting: (1) the need for museums to include the structures within which objects have meaning (social structures particularly) and (2) the need for social history curators to determine WHAT IS historically significant. Dunn is right in stressing that images are perplexing; impressionism should not and need not exclude analysis.

The first of many chances (3 hours) to watch the magic box came with a film about women dockyard workers during WW1, produced by a women's video co-op. The deliberate exclusion of narrative, 'an authoritative and male device' was replaced in part by 2 songs. A modern song obscured in period form must be questionable practice for museums, but the film was free from the media tendency to interview the articulate and 'nice'.

An active afternoon was spent at the 'Heritage Area' of the dockyards. The Mary Rose is quite an impressive 'fragment', impressive was blatant sponsorship advertising. The HMS Victory uses 'costumed interpreters' from the Navy and gives ghastly stereo-typed versions of life at sea with Nelson. The low ceilings allowed delegates to 'experience' the cramped conditions...and to look ridiculous. I'm afraid I didn't make it to the Royal Naval Museum.

The much discussed video at the D-Day Museum (Dan Chadwick) demonstrated the power and authority potential in the moving image/narrative medium... to be handled with care. Without wishing to detract from a superbly produced AV, an introductory note stating author's intentions might have been appropriate, such as was given to delegates themselves.

Sian Jones' examples of good/bad radio interviews again highlighted the need for curators to assume responsibility for press coverage. Ensure that interviewers know the subjects, stop them talking more than you and avoid those who liken oral history to "oil exploration..." Features allow better coverage than news items.

Sharon Gould (producer) treated delegates to the TV History Workshop film about women workers and London Transport. The group established to present "less authoritative history" and represents quite a challenge to museums. The film embraced a coherent philosophy of history as a continuing process, using the past to enhance our understanding of the present. The producer had a clear grasp of the limitations of oral history; the problem of nostalgia and bias in memory etc. Difficult to do the film justice here, watch it if you can; the women who continue to work cleaning in the tunnels at night (Fluffers) were a revelation. Being critical, the film was rather long. Leading questions were at least explicit. Much research/interviewing was done though sadly they are guilty of selecting the people who make good TV. This was a tremendous example of potential co-operation between museums and image makers. The museum here received copies of all transcripts of the film although not directly involved in production.

The 'Stranger than fiction' film about the Mass Observation movement and archive was enjoyable even if basically an excuse for the director to make a surrealist film. The film was preoccupied with images even though dealing with a written archive...I began to understand what Dunn had been talking about...Arguably the surrealist influence upon the movement justified the presentation, although as someone interested in the movement itself it was not very informative. The archive, however, contains a wealth of information about life from the 30s, covering deep and personal issues.

I was reminded of the motive 'to entertain' so apparent with TV and film but wondered whether this wasn't finding its way into museum displays. The knowing distortion of facts must be indefensible...mustn't it?

The evening session, 'Fact or fiction: social history and the press' convinced me that museums do need the press and 'media' generally. The mass audience reached by papers, TV and radio, at both local and national level is a resource that museums can not ignore. Richard Harrison (Mary Rose) outlined some useful strategies; e.g. timing of press releases, stating objectives etc, although few museums enjoy the high profile associated with a royal tudor ship; Prince Charles is unlikely to be seen diving for domestic servants in Newcastle. However, the Mary Rose Trust have learned to manipulate the media and are to be congratulated. Maggie Beddoes from the local press unwittingly acknowledged all the criticisms levied at press reporting; that they want 'good stories', 'people stories', 'odd happenings' and that they are as likely to report a burglary as the opening of a gallery. "You are competing for space...", realistically it is not going to change.

The press are guilty of distortion, but are museums free from bias? (See MPG News for a report of Bias in museums).

 NEW PUBLICATIONS

Staffordshire Figures by Amoret and Christopher Scott (Shire Publications £1.25).

Old Cooking Utensils by David J. Eveleigh (Shire Publications £1.25).

Faith in Fakes by Umberto Eco (Secker and Warburg £15.00).

Too Much : Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960 - 1975 by Robert Hewison (Methuen £14.95).

The Past is a Foreign Country by David Lowenthal (Cambridge £9.95 paperback £27.50 hard covers).

Archibald Kenrick & Sons Catalogue 1886. Reprint. (Tharston Press £5.50).

The Great Days of the Country Railway by David St. John Thomas and Patrick Whitehouse (David & Charles £13.95).

The British Film Catalogue by Denis Gifford (David & Charles £45.00).

The Countryside at War by Sadie Ward (David Charles £10.95).

Backstairs Life in a Country House by E. Balderson & D. Goodlad (David & Charles £7.95).

Harmonium - the history of the reed organ and its Makers by Arthur W. J. G. Ord-Hume (David & Charles £20.00).

The Official Badge Collector's Guide 1890's to 1980's by Frank R. Setchfield (Longman £12.95).

Longman Guide to Pub Names by Leslie Dunkling and Gordon Wright (Longman, to be published in 1987. Probable price £12.95).

Cap and Apron - An Oral History of Domestic Service in the Shires, 1880-1950. by Samuel Mullins and Gareth Griffiths (Leicestershire Museums £4.50).

Objects of Desire - Design and Society 1750-1980 by Adrian Forty (Thames and Hudson £7.95).

Mary, After the Queen: Memories of a working girl by Angela Hewins (O.U.P. £3.95).

1966 and all that! Design and the Consumer. 1960-1969 Whitworth Art Gallery (Trefoil Design Library £8.95).

The Grammar of Ornament by Owen Jones (reprint of 1856 Design Classic) (Studio Editions £14.95).

 ANNUAL STUDY WEEKEND 1987

This ever wonderful cultural feast will take place in Nottingham. The provisional date is 9-12 July, 1987. The theme is a matter of interpretation, literally! covering the difficult subjects Social History Museums have to confront. Full details will appear in the next News.

 ORAL HISTORY

The current issue of the Oral History Journal is devoted to museums and oral history, and contains articles by SHCG members. Worth your support and money!



Ghosting over the grave of Mary Rose. The U.S.S. Iowa glides past Southsea Castle.

The final session was reserved for members contributions. Stuart Davies spoke of Kirklee's recent experiments with Museums in Parks and Country parks, concentrating on Image and Promotion. Local media certainly had a role to play in this aspect of their management.

Mike Day told of learning to live with T.V. Companies, reviewing the use of Ironbridge by T.V. and the use of T.V. by Ironbridge for promoting its activities. From the "Worlds Strongest Man" to coverage of transporting ships!

Steph Mastoris laid bare the secret life of his pantry and shopping bag, describing how Brewhouse Yard Museum in Nottingham set about collecting contemporary packaging. They have produced an excellent simple name list in the process.

Sam Mullins compared his latest tape/slide presentation; "Cap and Apron" based on the research project on domestic service in Market Harborough. The tape/slide show formed part of a recent exhibition.

The final paper was from David Stockdale who previewed the next Harborough project on shops and shopping in that town. There's another good book there as well!

To conclude, I have deliberately concentrated my report in which it is impossible to do justice to people and ideas: We looked at the media and we looked at some examples of fruitful co-operation between curators and film/radio/press. We didn't discuss the limitations/strengths of exhibition v T.V. v sound etc. Should museums be encouraged to work with outside groups? Generally I felt that without tight chairing or smaller discussion groups we probably missed out several ideas and contributions. However, the support and encouragement towards new members is much appreciated. Thanks to all Portsmouth museum staff (a personal thanks to Dan).

Elizabeth Frostick

 FOOT NOTE

Tom Craig of Ironbridge wrote to thank SHCG Members and Committee for allocating him the Sponsored Place at this years A.S.W. Thanks Tom! See you next year.

 THE DISPOSAL OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS - PREVIEW

A major MPG/SHCG seminar will be held at the Yorkshire Museum, York, on Thursday, 12th March, 1987.

The subject is the disposal of museum and art gallery collections, a contentious issue which crosses all disciplinary boundaries, which the profession - and particularly social and industrial history curators - has to confront. Bulging stores full of ill-documented, duplicated, deteriorating materials are the symptoms of an oppressive problem which has yet to be solved. Do we need to dispose of collections, and if so, how do we go about it?

Over the years, ethnography and natural history collections have suffered from so-called changes in taste and from depredations by museum staff - what lessons are to be learned from this, and how are curators in these disciplines coping? Are art collections really as well cushioned as most of us tend to imagine? What are the archaeologists going to do when they run out of space as, inevitably, they shall?

Other issues to be considered include cultural restitution (national and regional), the legal framework for disposals and other forms of de-accessioning, the adequacy of the Code of Conduct, regional co-operation and 'rationalisation', the possible provision of centralised stores.

Speakers include Ian Robertson, (Curator, Passmore Edwards Museum and President of the Museums Association, addressing the problems confronting archaeologists); Julian Spalding (Director, Manchester City Art Gallery - art); Barbara Woroncow (Deputy Director, AMAGSYH - ethnography); Penny Wheatcroft (Exhibition Developer, British Museum (Natural History) - natural history); Stuart Davies (Principal Officer, Kirklees Libraries, Museums and Arts - social/industrial history); Michael Loynd (Director, AMAGSYH); David Fleming (Principal Keeper of Museums, Hull City Museums and Art Galleries and Chairperson of SHCG).

The fee is £4 to MPG and SHCG members, £6 to others. Please contact David Fleming, Town Docks Museum, Queen Victoria Square, Hull for details. A booking form is enclosed in this issue of SHCG News.

 SOCIAL HISTORY AT GREATER MANCHESTER MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY: A POSTSCRIPT

The last issue of SHCG Journal contained an article by Dr. Greene, the Director of the museum, explaining our plans to encompass social history in future displays. However, we are aware that members of the public may not know of these developments and would not immediately associate the museum with social history. Consequently, we are unlikely at present to receive many offers of artefacts of a social historical nature to supplement our small existing collection. We would therefore be grateful if social history curators, particularly in Greater Manchester, would refer surplus offers of any suitable objects to us.

Pauline Webb,
Curatorial Assistant (Social History)

(It would also be useful if Museum Directors in Greater Manchester really got to grips with Social History Collecting and interpretation at last! Collecting policies and agreements really are needed here. Editor)

 ON THE BOX

So come on Channel 4 give us some Social History programmes! (Adopts whine of video box stars). Alright, here are a few scheduled for 1987.

Victorian Values

ITV, Spring 1987

6 programmes of 30 minutes

PUBLICATIONS: wall-chart, tracing the origins of the Welfare State; programme booklet; book of the series by Bamber Gascoigne.

Much has been made recently of the importance of re-establishing Victorian values in our society - law and order, water and sanitation, education, health, municipal power and charity. The series looks at the Victorian record on, and attitudes to all these themes, and always with a sting of contemporary relevance in the tail.

Granada.

Victorian Houses

C4, Spring 1987

6 programmes of 30 minutes

PUBLICATION: book Victorian Houses published by Sidgwick & Jackson.

Over half the British population own their own houses - for many, a Victorian house. This series is aimed at those who live in Victorian houses showing both the hidden history and offering advice on maintenance and appreciation.

Programme 1: General Introduction; 2: The Structures; 3: Internal Decor; 4: External Decor and Garden; 5: How to Modernise; 6: How, Where and What to Buy?

C4/Telekation International

At the Works

ITV, Spring/Summer 1987

7 programmes of 30 minutes

PUBLICATION: booklet planned.

1987 is the 80th anniversary of the publication of 'At the Works' by Lady Florence Bell, the wife of a Middlesbrough iron master, in which she describes the working and living conditions of the mass of people in the town.

In this series, a female Teesside writer will examine Middlesbrough 1907 through the eyes of Lady Bell, but with her own critical perspective. She will then carry the graph on to 1987, from boom town to unemployment black spot.

Tyne Tees



REVIEW: INTO THE INTERIOR

S.H.C.G. Seminar. York Castle Museum,
29th October, 1986

Should I really admit to having enjoyed a day spent, with around 70 others, in a darkened room with no windows in the centre of York Prison, sorry, Castle Museum? I think I did, for the four talks were good and amongst the 70 were some old friends, and, of course, we also had a chance to see the excellent new display of household gadgets put together by Mark Suggitt and opened in April 1985 (see S.H.C.G. News No. 12). The Castle definitely needs such displays to balance those streets.

Mark Suggitt gave the first 45 minute talk entitled "Every Home Should Have One? The Gadget Revolution". He told us of the reasoning behind the new gadget displays and how he saw the exhibition - visually exciting and based on department store display techniques. His discussion of the philosophy behind the displays ranged over a number of issues. Have gadgets really liberated women, or indeed anyone who uses them? Do they in fact merely save effort rather than time? Mark is interested in the advertising behind them in which, for example, washing clothes becomes an act of love by a mother for her family rather than a household chore; and may the mother who fails to do her washing feel forever guilty. Advertising also shows the change from gadgets as luxuries when first introduced to everyday items later on.

Rosie Allan then took us through the reconstruction of Ravensworth Terrace at Beamish. This was a fascinating project in which a section of a post 1830 terrace (13 houses, I think) was moved to the museum and fitted out as it might have been in the 1920's. Rosie outlined the research involved both into the history of the chosen terrace, which came from Gateshead, and into the make up of the interiors in order to establish, for example, the correct designs of wallpapers, colours of paintwork, room arrangements, and smells. In the reconstruction interest has been added with the conversion of one house into a solicitor's office and two houses into a dentist's surgery, workrooms and home - complete with magazines in the waiting room and cards of false teeth in the workshop. Surprisingly nobody questioned the justification for moving the terrace to its new and inevitably unnatural site in the museum - perhaps this has been talked about enough at other S.H.C.G. meetings.

The afternoon session started with an excellent talk, "Furnishing and Decorating the Small Urban House - 1880-1950" by Mark Turner of the Silver Studio Collection, which is housed at Middlesex Polytechnic. Mark has recently revived interest in this massive collection of catalogues, samples, photographs and other material. He showed us slides of some of these as he gave us a brief summary of changing house decoration from the rather bare rooms of the 1850's to the start of D.I.Y. in the 1950's. On the way he showed us catalogues, for example, of drapery which the Victorians used as curtains even over the fireplace and along the back of the upright piano. Other catalogues illustrated the revival of country cottage designs in the 1920's. The talk was full of detailed points such as noting that the elaborate Victorian sideboards which were bought originally as expensive status symbols, often in the 1920's appeared in the houses of the poor as they bought up cheap, out of fashion, Victorian furniture.

The last talk was by Gareth Griffiths on the Gunnersbury Park Museum Project. This was, I think, the most controversial talk as Gareth's project of recording kitchens as they exist today in his area of West London is twentieth century collecting brought right up to date. Gareth is using around 30 photographers and an oral history group to photograph kitchens and record how they are used. Somehow photographs of modern home interiors look unnatural in a museum (reminding me of the double glazing firm's before and after shots) or perhaps it is just that the whole project seemed to need a historical base to put our modern kitchens into context. Some of the audience feared that the coverage would be inadequate, as the homes of the better off would be favoured and that the information from many different collectors would be hard to interpret.

This was another successful seminar and anybody who is planning to do a room setting in the near future should have been there. If you missed it, a good consolation prize might be a visit to the Silver Studio Collection.

Gordon Watson (Wakefield Museums)

THE IRON AGE REVISTED

On November, 14th a training seminar on iron was held at the Ironbridge Gorge Museum. The seminar started with a talk by Stuart Smith on wrought iron and the history of its production, physical properties and uses. This was followed by a talk by Mike Day on cast iron and its production and uses in the nineteenth century. The talks were supplemented with short videos and archive film and an all too short time for handling examples of wrought and cast iron. The session was useful in explaining the theoretical differences in wrought and cast iron and their production but I still wonder whether I would know a piece of wrought iron from mild steel!

A visit was made to Darby's original furnace and to the Museum of Iron before lunch. This highlighted a side benefit of the training seminar in providing an opportunity to see display techniques in another museum. The afternoon was spent watching the foundry in action and the various stages in the production of cast iron. The wrought ironworks which is nearing completion was also visited at the Blist Hill site as well as the resident blacksmith who now has to use mild steel rather than wrought iron.

The training seminar was useful and interesting for many reasons other than just learning about iron. It provided an opportunity to see an open air museum and to muse over/discuss the problems of moving industrial sites, the benefits of working demonstrations, sponsorship and MSC labour. In addition the day provided an opportunity to meet people from other museums and to discuss the issues raised during the day. For curators in small and/or isolated museums this was a useful opportunity to make new contacts and provided material for more than just the Diploma practical.

Yvonne Hayhurst

SMC/University of Leicester

National Museums of Scotland. 16th October 1986

Have you ever noticed that once a concept has been talked to death (without any action resulting from it), a new title has to be found under which to reincarnate it? For 'Recording Society Today' read 'Contemporary Documentation', 'SAMDOK', etc, born again to engage in mortal combat with overworked, possibly apathetic social history curators. Would this be yet another talking shop, or would something positive come out of the meeting?

Gaynor Kavanagh gave a promising start to the meeting with a thoughtfully prepared paper on the case for contemporary documentation. Having introduced a classification of curators, she went on to demolish their respective reasons/excuses for not engaging in contemporary documentation. However, this was not to be an uncritical sales pitch for contemporary documentation: the emphasis was to be on competent research into appropriate subjects, based on a two to three year plan of action with the aim of achieving realistic goals. Everything that we collect or record is 'contemporary'; the important decision is whether we only collect/record atypical chance survivals from earlier times, or include material typical of the present day.

Lars Andersson provided a participant's view of SAMDOK. For all that we have been told about SAMDOK, it was refreshing to hear the viewpoint of a local museum curator rather than the Nordiska Museum's overview. His starting point was on familiar enough ground. An assessment of Swedish museum collections had revealed imbalances - towards the upper classes, towards domestic rather than workplace, towards crafts rather than industries, towards manufacturing rather than services and towards the more distant rather than the more recent past. The SAMDOK initiative arose from these findings and the rest, as they say, in history. Initially the scheme did not meet with universal approval but, several years on, the last of the sceptics are about to join in. Centralised co-ordination has not led to centralised control. Each museum decides which 'pool(s)' it will contribute to and carries its own research, storage and documentation costs. The documentation medium is determined by the museum itself. The size of the pools varies, from six to fourteen contributing museums, each of which expected to carry out one study per pool per ten years. The zealous promotion of SAMDOK in Britain may have been counter productive in that it inadvertently suggested a larger additional workload - but one or two projects per decade can hardly be seen as such. Involvement in SAMDOK has helped to develop a taste for contemporary documentation, and additional autonomous projects are undertaken beyond the SAMDOK programme.

The afternoon session started with three case studies. Elspeth King explained the difficulties in producing exhibitions on two Glasgow council housing estates - Easterhouse and Barrowfield. By their nature, museums favour the wealthier classes who have the 'collectables' and the space to house them. Those who do not have the space, nor the 'fancy goods' identified with museums, retain little material beyond its useful life. The people of Easterhouse - with a population the size of Perth - and Barrowfield - stigmatised as one of the worst 'schemes' in Glasgow - belong to this latter category.

The curator setting out on such a project runs the risk of appearing to be an institutional voyeur - as ethnographer, social work researcher or arts council missionary. Community representatives were asked how they wanted to be presented, but even this raised problems, in Easterhouse, where the community was divided into several functions. Despite these, and other difficulties an exhibition was produced, including a living room furnished on the basis of warrant sale list and photographs, amongst them an instant seaside created with several tons of sand. The second estate, Borrowfield, already had an artist in residence - a photographer who had taken arty pictures which played on the desolation of the place. There were immediate difficulties in deciding how much - or what - could be revealed about the pictures' content - a local gang - someone who was later murdered.

Peter Jenkinson outlined the work he had done on the Birmingham Inner City Partnership project, under the City Museums and Libraries. The brief was to document twentieth century changes in Birmingham's inner city, through the media of oral history and photography. After careful consideration food and drink was chosen as a theme, with particular reference to eating out over the last 50 years. Food and drink are far subtler indices of social change than their traditional museum presentation would have us believe.

One of the project's achievements was the rediscovery of British Restaurants - a wartime public catering service which helped create a sustained demand for eating out facilities in post war years. The project created a tape and photo archive which was drawn upon for an exhibition and publication. Only one object was collected.

Mark O'Neil brought us back to Scotland, and Glasgow. His museum, at Springburn, has had four years of funding, through Urban Aid. Springburn was a locomotive building centre, of world renown. Loss of industry, wholesale demolition and motorway development have decimated a once thriving community. An important element in the museum's work has been to attempt to re-establish local identity and morale. Historical coverage has attracted a wide audience, but contemporary documentation has proved to be more problematic. A photographic survey of the last surviving loco works coincided with news of further redundancies. Much of what is happening to Springburn today is not conducive to a cheerful re-exertion of community identity. A photographic competition, on 'My Home in Springburn' brought a poor response; for many, the very idea was bizarre.

The planned workshop sessions were abandoned in favour of extended discussion. The initial response was subdued, almost pessimistic. Few of us in Scotland are in a position to commit resources for any new work. The Myles Report had had next to nothing to say about the needs of social history and the Enterprising Scot debacle (the work of an English archaeologist) had set the new National Museums of Scotland off to a bad start. Amongst those present there was, however, a will to pool the resources of local and national social history curators and it was agreed to go ahead with exploratory discussions on the scope for co-operation and co-ordination. In addition to contemporary documentation areas for consideration might include jointly compiled touring exhibitions, collecting agreements, information exchange and collections surveys. Of necessity, this would have to start off on a small scale, but if we are ever to have a better share in museum resources, we need first to show our potential. Rather than set up yet another Group, we hope to use two existing networks - the Federation and SHCG - as lines of communication. Watch this space.

John Shaw
(National Museums of Scotland)

TOMORROW WILL COME - A Note from the new
Chairperson

In these times of intense competition for subscriptions it is important for SHCG members, once a year at least, to remind themselves why they bother being members. Occasionally the Group loses a member who feels that its activities no longer interest him or her. On the other hand, the Group's membership over the past three or four years has grown considerably - and not, I believe, just because of any membership drives, but because the Group evidently has been active in ways supported by a growing number of curators: its publications must be attractive, its meetings must be useful.

In these media can be found the full range of interests and concerns of the Group's membership, from folk art to feminism, from Victoriana to video. You don't have to be a Marxist to be a good social history curator, but you don't have to wear mole-skin trousers, either. As long as SHCG's activities continue to reflect different approaches to, and philosophies about curatorship, it will continue to interest significant numbers of curators. Remember, this Group is only the sum of its membership: it has no corporate identity of its own, other than, perhaps, as a focus of attention for outsiders, giving the 'subject' of social history curatorship some identity.

The title of this brief piece is taken from the autobiography of the Russian-born novelist E. M. Almedingen, a copy of which happened to be nearby as I was wondering what to write. It seemed a beguilingly inappropriate phrase to use in a message from the Chair to a group of people whose collective living derives from looking backwards into the recesses of human history, and among whom the interest in Yesterday probably ranges from mild cynicism to total preoccupation: from Living Off the Past, as referred to by the Levenshulme graffitist quoted in SHCG Journal 13, to Living In the Past, as exemplified by members of the Seakled Knot, the Flat Earth Society and the AC/DC Fan Club.

There is, though, a point to this title, which is that social history curators need to spend at least as much time thinking about Tomorrow as they do the past. On more than one occasion (e.g. SHCG News 7, SHCG Journal 13) I have advocated that individually, in addition to collecting, conserving, researching, we must promote our discipline as best we can, and accept that we are not seen as counting for very much in the world: we are competing for scarce resources, and if we genuinely desire a healthy Tomorrow for social history curatorship, we need to secure resources Today. We have to take a higher public profile.

This means, simply, coming up with good ideas, getting involved with our communities in, for example, oral history, video, photographic projects, school/college projects - harnessing local human resources, and generally trying to be seen to be playing a relevant role in society, serving the public, whether local or visiting.

This may well mean spending more time than formerly on looking at modern history: as students of the history of society we cannot truncate our labours at some arbitrary time in the past, and contemporary society has to be as important to us as any past society, whatever our choice of method of collecting, recording or interpretation. We need to be as aware of the impact upon society of the compact disc player as of the phonograph, of break-dancing as well as clog-dancing.

There is another way in which we have to be far more rigorous about preparing for Tomorrow than we have in the past. Unless we as a profession can come to grips with the problems of duplication and full stores I am quite certain that the initiative in collecting - in cultural rescue

for posterity - will be taken away from us by museum authorities, one way or another. The time is approaching when the spectre of de-accessioning has to be faced; it is likely that a Museum Professionals Group seminar will address this during the next few months, and who can deny that social history collections will feature prominently? We have to organise our collections and our collecting so that it is worth all the effort, in contrast to much past collecting, which has been a complete waste of time and resources.

Tomorrow will come, and more than ever before the social history curator has to be Janus-faced.

David Fleming
(Hull City Museums & Art Galleries)



The New Chairperson caught in uncharacteristic pose in Portsmouth watering hole.

COMING EVENTS

February 20th 1987: Glass and the Social Historian. SHCG Training Seminar. St. Helens.

(Contact: Jenny Mattingly. Tel. 0203 25555 ext. 2466).

February 27th 1987: The Whole Works - Hands on Science Centres and their relationship to Museums. GSTMC Seminar. Bristol City Museum.

(Contact: Andy King. Bristol Industrial Museum, Princes Wharf, Bristol 1. Tel. 0272-29971).

March 11th 1987: Country House Floors 1600-1800 Textile Society. Temple Newsam House, Leeds.

(Contact: Sarah Levitt. 49 Hamilton Road, Southville, Bristol BS3 1NZ).

March 12th 1987: The Disposal of Museum Collections. MPG/SHCG Seminar. Yorkshire Museum. York.

(Contact: David Fleming, Town Docks Museum, Queen Victoria Square, Hull).

March 21st-22nd 1987: Photographic Archives. Oxford University Department for External Studies.

(Contact: Archaeology/Local History Course Secretary, Oxford University Department for External Studies, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JA. Tel: Oxford 52901).

April 13th 1987: The Presentation of Military Costume and Textiles. Textile Society. Imperial War Museum, London.

(Contact: Sarah Levitt. see March 11th).

Social History Curators Group

DATE: 8 December 1986

PLEASE REPLY TO:

Helen M Jackson
Museum & Art Gallery
College Street
St Helens
Merseyside WA10 1TW

S H C G TRAINING SEMINAR

GLASS AND THE SOCIAL HISTORIAN

Friday 20 February 1987

- 9.45 - 10.15 Coffee Assemble at St Helens Museum and Art Gallery
- 10.20 - 10.55 The Production and Decoration of Glass, C Hadjamach (Senior Museums Keeper, Dudley Art Gallery)
- 10.55 - 11.30 Table Glass, R Dodsworth (Keeper of Glass and Fine Art, BroadfieldHouse Glass Museum)
- 11.30 - 12.05 Glass Packaging - its History and Industrial Development, J Murray (Keeper of Human History, Dundee Museums)
- 12.05 - 12.40 Caring for the glass in your Collections, V Horie, (Keeper of Conservation, the Manchester Museum)
- 12.40 - 1.00 Questions
- 1.00 - 2.00 Lunch
- 2.15 Visit to Pilkington Flat Glass Plant (numbers limited to 25)
- 3.30 Tea
- 3.45 Visit to Pilkington Glass Museum
- Fee: £2.00 SHCG member
£3.00 others

Cheques payable to Social History Curators Group

Please complete and send to Helen M Jackson, St Helens Museum & Art Gallery
College Street, St Helens, Merseyside, WA10 1TW.

Please enrol me/us for the SHCG training seminar 'Glass and the Social Historian',
Friday 20 February 1987.

Number of places required

I enclose £ fee

Do you wish to visit the Float Glass Plant?

Signed: Date:

Name & Address:
(in full)

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Social History Curators Group

THE DISPOSAL OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

The Yorkshire Museum, York, on 12th March 1987

The subject of this major seminar is the disposal of museum and art gallery collections, a contentious issue which crosses all disciplinary boundaries and which the profession has to confront. Bulging stores full of ill-documented, duplicated, deteriorating materials are the symptoms of an oppressive problem which has yet to be solved. Do we need to dispose of collections, and if so, how?

Speakers will address a variety of issues, including cultural restitution, the legal framework for disposal, the Code of Conduct, and regional co-operation. Specialists will assess the state of their own disciplines, and propose ways forward. Ultimately, if the profession cannot tackle the problems in a rational way, will others make the decisions for us?

10.00	—		
10.30	Coffee		
10.30	Sense or Suicide?	David Fleming	(Principal Keeper, Hull)
10.50	Legal Implications/An Area Council View	Michael Loynd	(Director, AMAGSYH)
11.10	Social/Industrial History Collections	Stuart Davies	(Principal Officer, Kirklees)
11.40	Archaeology Collections	Ian Robertson	(Curator, Passmore Edwards Museum)
12.10	Discussion		
12.45	Lunch		
2.00	Art Collections	Julian Spalding	(Director, Manchester City Art Gallery)
2.30	Natural History Collections	Penny Wheatcroft	(Exhibit Developer, BM (Natural History))
3.00	Ethnography Collections	Barbara Woroncow	(Deputy Director, AMAGSYH)
3.30	Tea		
3.50	Discussion		
4.20	Summary	Christine Johnstone	(Curator, Hackney)
4.40	End		

Cost — £6.00 (£4.00 to members of MPG/SHCG)

Please return completed form with cheque made payable to the **Museum Professionals Group**, to David Fleming, Town Docks Museum, Queen Victoria Square, Hull, HU1 3DX.

Name

Please book places at the Disposal of Museum Collections Seminar, 12th March 1987.

Organisation

Names of others attending from the same organisation.

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