



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

EDITOR'S NOTES

Membership

Please note that membership subs have to be paid this month. The form is waiting for you inside this issue, so please pay promptly. I know it's so easy to forget, but the group can only operate with sufficient funds, and it is only seven pounds, less than the price of a decent haircut!

Abolition of G.L.C. and M.E.T.S.

You may remember that we planned to review Social History provision one year after abolition, (News 11). After consulting various people I believe that a year is too short a time to formulate a serious evaluation. With a general election in sight things could change. The News would be pleased to hear from anyone who has been affected by abolition. (for good or ill).

Disposal of Museum Collections

This joint seminar with M.P.G. was an important event, attracting an audience of over a hundred people. It will be reported in full in M.P.G. News as it covered far more than Social History.

As usual the problems of Social History as a (lack of) discipline reared its head. Stuart Davies presented the Social Historian's point of view, advocating a pragmatic approach. Disposal does not mean destruction or selling off through auction houses or other art grocers. Nor does it mean a midnight creep to the "good old skip" to "rationalize" what is currently unfashionable to make way for new trendy material.

Disposal is part of curatorial work, part of actually taking decisions. Stuart left us with a sentence that could well crop up on a future Diploma paper, "If you are arrogant enough to collect for posterity you also need the arrogance to dispose for posterity".

Discuss .....

(The Editor would be delighted to see your views on this subject).



COMMITTEE REPORT

Committee met on December, 8th 1986 at the Castle Museum, York, and on February, 16th 1987 at the Science Museum, London. Ten and twelve members respectively were present at the meetings.

1. M.A. Conference 1987

S.H.C.G. has been offered 10 free (accommodation only) places at the Association's Annual Conference in Bournemouth. Details are available from the Secretary.

2. M.A. Council Minutes

As part of a new policy, copies of these will be sent to each of the specialist groups. As they are quite extensive, the Chairperson and Secretary will be perusing them and bringing important issues before the Committee.

3. Annual Study Weekend, 1987: Sponsored Places

The full programme for a very exciting weekend has been produced. Committee agreed to extend the sponsored place scheme to provide two free places, covering fees, accommodation and meals. Members of S.H.C.G. who are new to the profession, have never been to A.S.W. before, and are unlikely to receive sponsorship from any other body are invited to apply by letter to the Secretary, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, West Midlands, CV1 5RW as soon as possible. The successful applicants will be informed soon after the May 19th meeting of Committee.

4. Manual of Social History Curatorship

This is being progressed by David Fleming, Crispin Paine and John Rhodes who are now working to a detailed brief and considering possible contributors.

5. Cogges Farm Museum

This museum is under threat following a decision of its governing body, Oxfordshire County Council, to sell off the lease to a commercial company, notably a private company headed by Dudley Russell, theatrical impresario and husband of Pam Ayres. This company plans to develop Cogges, currently a museum of agricultural history, to include a conference venue/banqueting hall for medieval banquets, garden centre and restaurant. It plans to retain some museum use of the building, and hopes to make use of museum objects alongside these other functions.

S.H.C.G. wrote to the leaders of the political parties represented on Oxfordshire County Council, and to individual councillors, in an attempt to prevent the original decision to sell being taken. We stressed our concern at the loss of a public institution with a history of service to, and support from, the local community, in favour of a commercially based tourist attraction which is intended as an inappropriate magnet for

visitors heading for the Cotswolds. We also deplored the risk to collections if used in this environment and the loss to the local community if the County Museums Service is forced to protect those collections by withdrawing them from Cogges.

This issue obviously has grave implications for other publicly-funded museums, and is being pursued by Committee in consultation with SHCG members in Oxfordshire who will be affected by the future of Cogges Museum.

Rosie Crook  
(Coventry Museum) (Hon. Secretary)

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PREVIEW: SHCG STUDY WEEKEND 1987

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'You Really Can't Do That?!' -  
Problems of Interpretation in Social History.

Interpretation is still the Cinderella function in most museums. According to the Museums Association's current definition it is one of the five key activity roles alongside collection, documentation, preservation and display, without which an institution cannot legitimately call itself a museum. In practice, few curators seem to take this particular role very seriously. The old adage of 'letting the objects speak for themselves' is still adhered to in social history museums all over the country, where unlabelled mystery artefacts languish in display cases or act as set dressing for dubious period room reconstructions. In displays where every object is dutifully labelled there is still a strong curatorial preference for supplying information that is essentially descriptive rather than interpretative. Even those curators who do attempt to put their artefacts into a broader historical context regularly fall into the quagmire of novel length text panels couched in complicated language that many visitors cannot understand. The average museum display is a very poor vehicle for the communication of knowledge and ideas, largely because curators are incompetent at the art of interpretation through their chosen medium. Conventional Leicester-style training does not equip the curator to be an interpreter, and even that weighty tome the Manual of Curatorship offers little useful guidance.

This year's Study Weekend at Nottingham (9th-12th July) will look at various ways and means of interpreting a range of social history themes. The areas we have chosen have one thing in common: they are all subjects which are often either badly treated or traditionally considered 'difficult' subjects unsuitable for museum displays. These themes include military and religious history, politics, race and imperialism, costume and personality museums. Problems of interpretation in the broader areas of art, design, industry and technology will be taken up in discussion groups. Remember, museum artefacts have no meaning without interpretation, and the curator who cannot fill the role of interpreter is failing in an essential part of the job. Yes it's that serious, folks. Book now and those four days in Nottingham could change your entire outlook.

Oliver Green  
(London Transport Museum)

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PREVIEW: MPG ANNUAL STUDY WEEKEND

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This year's Annual Study Weekend will be held in Hull on 10th-14th September. The theme of the weekend is entitled: 'Tourism: Museum Dream or Nightmare?'

Surely all of us should welcome the prospect of our galleries awash with eager and inquisitive visitors. But can Museums rise to the challenge of tourism? Can we compete with all the other glitzy attractions? Will the scramble to attract visitors distort curatorial priorities? These and many other issues will be explored by eight speakers who all represent different standpoints. Speakers include Christopher Jennings from Thames and Chiltern Tourist Board, John Brown from John Brown Tourism and Leisure Advisory Services and Terry Suthers from the Yorkshire Museum. The case studies chosen for critical examination include Wigan Pier and Woodspring Museum at Weston Super Mare.

The Study Sessions will be balanced by a wide selection of trips to local museums as well as an afternoon visit to the tourist attractions of York and another to Scarborough where delegates will be given the choice of visiting the museums or studying the sea-side amusement arcades and tea shops. The AGM and Annual Dinner will be on Saturday 12th September.

Accommodation will be at the Humberside College of Further Education. The total cost inclusive from Thursday lunch until Monday breakfast is £103.60 for members and £109.20 for non-members. Membership subscription is included in the non-member's rate. MPG is sponsoring a free place to this year's Study Weekend. To be eligible you need to be a member of MPG, unable to obtain sponsorship from your employer and attending the Study Weekend for the first time. Any applications should be sent to the Conference Organiser (address below). As usual the Federations have been approached by MPG asking if they will sponsor a place to the Study Weekend and many have said that they will consider any applications from their members.

Booking forms, to be returned by 31st July, are available from Julia Arthur, Hon. Conference Organiser, Guildford Museum, Castle Arch, Guildford, Surrey GU1 3SX. Tel. (0483) 505050 ext. 3542.

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SURVEY OF HISTORY CURATORSHIP

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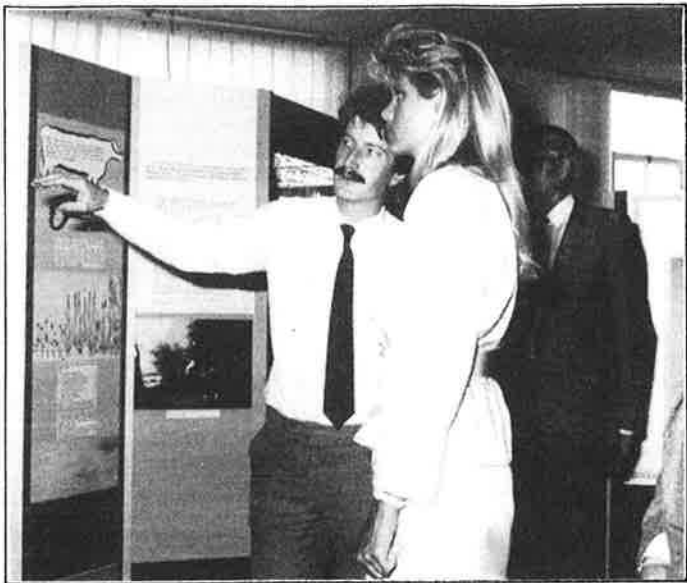
Gaynor Kavanagh of the Department of Museum Studies at Leicester University wishes to thank all those who have returned their questionnaires. Please remember that the closing date is March 16th 1987. Gaynor would prefer all of them to be returned by that date, but if you are unable to meet the deadline she would still welcome late arrivals.



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 SHCG JOURNAL - YOU CAN BUY A THRILL!
 

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 COMPETITION TIME
 

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Just what is going on in the picture above? Why is Miss World in the Harborough Museum and why is she talking to Sam Mullins? (ex-journal editor of this parish) I don't know either, the photograph arrived in mysterious circumstances in a plain brown envelope.

Anyway, its a good excuse for a competition. If you think you know what Sam is saying to Miss World, or what she is saying to him please let me know. Prizes? Who knows, an evening of free drinks at the Nottingham ASW? A pair of the chairpersons socks?

All entries to Mark Suggitt at York Castle Museum.

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 SHCG AND THE 1984 DATA PROTECTION ACT
 

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A new computer listing of members names and addresses is now maintained by the committee in order that labels may be produced for the distribution of the groups journal and news, plus any other information relating to the activities of the group. The information comprises name and address only and is used solely for the above purpose.

Under Section 33 paragraphs 2(a) and 2(b) of the Act, SHCG can claim exemption as an unincorporated members club holding data only for the distribution of articles or information if it consists only of names and addresses. The Act requires the group to ask all Personal Members whether they object to this information being held on computer and used for the purposes described above.

Any members wishing to object to his or her name and address being held and used as described is asked to notify the Membership Secretary in writing at the address below by May, 31st 1987.

It would also be appreciated if all members would check the accuracy of the address label on the envelope bearing this issue of the News and notify the Membership Secretary if corrections are required.

Janice Murray  
 SHCG Membership Secretary  
 Dundee Museum and Art Gallery  
 Albert Square  
 DUNDEE  
 DD1 1DA

Booked your summer holiday? Packed the "Kiss me Quick" hat, mosquito repellent and Hawaiian shirt? What to read on the beach? Forget Fay Weldon and Gore Vidal, how about a back copy or two of SHCG Journal/GRSM Newsletter? The perfect holiday present, they also make inexpensive sun hats.

Still available are:

Volume 7 (1979, 24 copies) - once submitted for the Booker Prize, the stock of the proceedings of the GRSM Conference at Gloucester is dwindling at the rate of one every six weeks. Includes sections on the care of historic buildings with information on legislation; the development of Gloucester docks; and other pieces on urban history. Price £2.00

Volume 8 (1980, 5 copies) - yes only five left. The Pinto Collection, the Nordic Museum, Stockholm, recording and moving historic buildings, and the famous "Editor's Space-Filler", already a literary legend. Price £2.00.

Volume 9 (1981, 72 copies) - proceedings from the first museum meeting I ever attended, held at MERL in February 1981 on agricultural museums, looking at collecting, conservation versus restoration, use of museum objects etc. Also includes a controversial editorial, an offensive letter, and an early article on the work of the West Midlands Social and Industrial History Collections Research Unit. A bargain at £2.00.

Volume 10 (1982, 74 copies) - an important publication which marked a shift in the pattern of social history in museums. A series of stimulating articles on Twentieth Century Collecting, Sport and Museums, SHIC and other subjects. Giving it away at £3.00.

Volume 13 (1985/6, 60 copies) - last year's Journal, not received by members who have joined since April 1986. Your only chance to buy something with "Fyffes" on it and still be proud of yourself. Price £6.00

These Journals are available from Steph Mastoris at Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham.

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 PLASTICS - PREVIEW
 

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This SHCG Training Seminar will take place at the Science Museum on 15th June, 1987.

Plastics are one of the most widely used materials in the world today. Once seen as cheap and nasty they now dominate the home and manufacturing industry. The fact that plastics have a history may come as a shock to some. How can a material that seems so essentially 20th century and one that is so much associated with cheap, disposable products have a history at all? Science Museum staff will examine that history. Dr. Morris Kaufman will look at past plastics, Sue Mossman will talk about the growing collections and the problems of identification. Robert Bud will describe the philosophy behind the new Plastics gallery. Ample time will be allowed to view it.

All adds up to a day that promises to be cheap but certainly not nasty.

WIN SOME, LOSE SOME - INDUSTRIAL HISTORY  
IN MUSEUMS

SHCG Training Seminar, held at Armley Mills  
Industrial Museum, Leeds  
28 November 1986

On a crisp morning late last November, some 30 people gathered at Armley Mills to grapple with the problems of interpreting industrial history in museums and in particular with whether the interests of technologists and social historians overlapped. Both creeds were represented, whilst an interesting programme augured well for a day of illumination and clarification. However, those in the crowd who hoped that the following six hours would create some overlaps were doomed to disappointment. Generally, the Technologist's XV seemed uninterested in taking up the opposition's challenge of an open, running game.

Peter Brears, director of the Leeds City Museum Service, kicked off, by outlining the political background behind the purchase of Armley Mills. In the early 1970's, the industrial collections were small, so a policy was introduced to try to salvage something from the collapse of local industries and preserve it at the site. The achievements of the museum are certainly very impressive considering that only two curatorial staff are employed.

Sara Craggs from Kelham Island Industrial Museum in Sheffield described her work at that project. In a well researched piece she ran through industrial developments in Sheffield: the changes from water to steam power, the growth of large steel works with their attendant collieries, and the emergence of the famous armament manufacturers. She dealt with the organisation of the metal trades, the role of women workers and the survival of the "little meisters" with their specialist roles in the process of production. She also talked about the housing conditions of Sheffield workers.

The type of displays in Kelham Island were covered in a series of slides. As well as the usual reconstructed workshops, and large engines, the museum has two self employed little meisters who make enormous hunting knives for American export in front of the visitors, and an education department strong on role-playing, grinding, casting and file cutting. Social history displays are planned at Kelham Island to round out the industrial base which exists at present. This was something that the 'fairly extreme left' Council was keen on. There seemed to be a fair bit of antagonism between the Councillors and curators over the emphasis of the museum, which even manifested itself over things like the label to the Grand Slam Bomb on display.

Much of the afternoon - perhaps much too much - was taken up with the tour of Armley Mills. The programme promised ample time for this exercise; it abused the privilege of running  $\frac{1}{2}$  of an hour over schedule. The museum is housed in what was once the world's largest woollen mill, an impressive fireproof building built in 1806. It focuses on the development of Leeds' major industries, particularly textiles, heavy engineering, optics and clothing and includes a woollen mill, a clothing factory, a re-constructed tailoring suburb, picture hall and a collection of engines, locomotives and cranes. The nature of the interpretation varied from an almost 'book on the wall' exhibition on optics, to static machinery, with the implication that display was sufficient interpretation in itself. Throughout, the emphasis was overwhelmingly technological and although humans did sometimes sneak in, the class differences of the past were heat-sealed onto the present. The entrepreneurial and engineering heroes beamed out; the workforce and their working conditions seldom imposed their presence.

We had in fact been made aware of the nature of Armley Mill's approach to industrial history before embarking our tour. The keeper, Ron Fitzgerald, who conducted us around the museum, outlined in a forthright manner and with self-confessed Yorkshire candour (there was ample proof of the latter throughout the afternoon) the philosophy behind it. Curators convinced of the necessity of social history could have found little solace in his words. 'Armley Mills' he declared, 'is unashamedly a technological museum because we live in a technological age'. He went on to assert that we would find no social history, and nothing on trade unions, that afternoon - a statement later substantiated by a vain attempt to find the Armley Clothiers Friendly Society banner featured in the museum's handbook.

In many ways the commentary during the tour marred an appreciation of the museum and perhaps it would have been better if we had been allowed time to explore it on our own. There was an aural overinterpretation which concentrated completely on the technological value of the exhibits. Some thought that they felt like undergraduates, not professionals; others said the labels, where they existed, were too long and that opportunities had been missed. Certainly the detail given by the Keeper contrasted markedly with the paucity of the interpretation of machinery and technology available to the public. Perhaps the most telling commentary on the tour, through, was the high rate of AWOL among the ranks during its course.

Cold and tired, participants drifted back in small groups in search of a cup of tea. The ensuing discussion was a failure. Six or seven stabs were made at various subjects, like sponsorship from industry, the fascination with steam machinery, and technology as a liberator or creator of unemployment, but all seemed to end in dead ends. We chewed away at the workers v machines issue, with almost complete lack of communication.

Yet ultimately, perhaps the discussion did clarify the exact relationship between social historians and technologists but it did so by accident, rather than intention. As such, its results were wholly negative. For, judging by the day, there seems to be very little overlap between the two. Moreover, there was often a strong impression that unlike the former, technologists did not seem prepared to investigate the possibility of common ground. If anything, their attitude towards social history was almost contemptuous - well illustrated by the keeper of Armley Mills' failure to give information of interest to social historians and even more so by his refusal to join in the discussion beyond a dramatic and unhelpfully dismissive exit. This attitude raises wider issues, and perhaps explains why the traditional approach to the interpretation of large industrial objects is often narrow, barren and fetishistic.

The ultimate goal for regional history museums (be they industrial or social history) must be to interpret the recent history of their area in its entirety. This means displays (in the same place) on trade and industries, working conditions, housing, health, leisure and people's organisations, from brass bands to trade unions. The most successful museums are those that have moved in some way towards this goal. It is hard work chasing people for bits of scruffy paper, humble artifacts and half-forgotten memories, but those museums that take care with this stand out. The attitude of curators, then, and their ability get the best for their museums out of their local communities and politicians is crucial.

Nick Mansfield  
(Cyfarthfa Castle Museum)

Bill Jones  
(Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum)

SHCG Training Seminar, St. Helens,  
20th February, 1987

The seminar provided one of those rare opportunities for concentration on just one subject - glass. It's history, production, use and conservation were all covered in a very full but fascinating day.

Charles Hajdamach told us a brief history of glass making, and the many and varied methods of decorating glass objects. He even explained one of the mysteries (to me anyway), that is how the twists of air bubbles are put in the stems of wine glasses. The increasing fragility of glass over time was emphasised by Velson Horie, who also made some very sensible recommendations about the conservation of glass in museum collections.

The advances in glass packaging from the seventeenth to the twentieth century were shown by Janice Murray using examples from St. Helens Museum's fine collection of bottles. Roger Dodsworth's talk on table glass took us from glass vessels in 1500BC to the Victorian period. The latter was illustrated by nineteenth century catalogues showing the many different types of glasses essential on the well laid dining table.

The afternoon's guided tour around Pilkington's float glass plant gave an invaluable insight into the modern method of flat glass production. This could then be compared with the earlier processes shown in Pilkington's Glass Museum, along with many examples of the applications of glass.

S.H.C.G. training seminars are designed to be low-cost high value events. It is unfortunate that such a good seminar was only attended by about a dozen people, it deserved many more.

Judith Edgar  
(Nottingham Museums)

Note: A bibliography is available on request from Helen Jackson at St. Helens Museum and Art Gallery.

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DESIGNS ON YOU  
Design and the Consumer.  
Manchester Polytechnic/Cornerhouse Arts Centre  
5-6 December, 1986

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Let's talk about Design. Well, why not? Everybody else seems to be. "Design" is well on the way to becoming one of the most abused words in the English Language. It's everywhere. An aid to the Thatcherite "recovery" of industry on the one hand and on the other "rejuvenator" of the left (Designer Socialism?) as it struggles to come to grips with consumerism and consumption.

Into this melee falls Design History, a crucial parallel to Social History. Crucial, because if we are to understand the material culture of the 19th and 20th centuries we have to have at least a passing knowledge of Design History. After all, most of the objects in our collections began life on the drawing board and are the results of an organised method of production, usually within a factory. Design History can be seen as too "Arty" for the Social Historian, it's history written as a catalogue of "Great Designers", its public image that of earnest young men in Paul Smith suits discussing architect designed kettles as art.

Armed with a cynicism for "art design" and owning up to a penchant for architect kettles I attended this two day conference in Manchester. Would I emerge a better informed curator/consumer?

About 200 of us trooped into the Poly on the first day. A quick look around revealed a predominately young audience, lots of black clothing and some interesting haircuts. Very few manufacturers turned up, which speaks volumes. Perhaps the organisers didn't advertise in the right journals?

The first session began with John Hewitt (Head of Design History, Manchester Poly) taking of good design in the market place; the Rise of Habitat Man. He laid down a universal problem that was to recur throughout the weekend - "What is good design?" Is it good because it sells well or is it that it sells well because it is good design?



Hewitt then proceeded to explore the history of the good design aesthetic as seen through the pages of Design magazine. From the early 1960's it saw the aesthetic of production give way to that of consumption, style, taste and desire. The move from a Gordon Russell arts and crafts "strictness" to the realization that design, like advertising was a hand maiden of the capitalist system. Hewitt noted that despite this, the role of worker hardly ever appears in Design History, which he saw as a development from an art historical perspective, concentrating on "things", citing Bayley & Banham as "sheep in Tom Wolfe's clothing". His journey through the pages of Design led inevitably to the doors of Habitat and Next where taste and lifestyle walked hand in hand with marketing and neat ways of avoiding obsolescence; classics and complementing ranges.

The rise of "Habitat Man", that aspiring ABC 1 has grown alongside the rise of 20th Century advertising. Next came Kathy Myers (St. Martins, City Limits, Channel 4) who considered "Selling By Design - packaging and advertising in the market place" Drawing from her book "Understains" she looked briefly at the recent history of advertising, concentrating on the introduction of new concepts like guilt (germs are another) aimed at the housewife. This led through to the growth of the industry and its skill in identifying target markets and then creating them - the teenage market in the 1950's, and more recently a market for an essentially useless commodity, Impulse body spray. Here a new market was created from two glutted ones. Myers looked at a wide range of adverts, showing that each one was loaded with coded messages, waiting to be read by the different types of consumer. They spelt out class, guilt, aspiration, association, power, desire and sex. All human life is here! She concluded by looking at the problems the Left has had in advertising and consumption, using the GLC campaign against abolition as an example of having to use the same tools as the opposition.

The afternoon session looked at the links between design and industry, using the radio as an example. This time it was the Ross Radio and not our old friend the Wells Coates Ekco AD 65.

Ross Marks (Ross Electronics) told us that design was not a cure for a weak product, but he would say that wouldn't he? More interestingly he stressed that the radio was market led, not production led. They identified a gap in the market, the gap for the Ross R.E. 5050 which was launched in 1985. It sells on its looks, an envelope for an existing technology, not an innovative one. Indeed, it looks well enough, a Braun style job on a radio, for around twenty five quid.

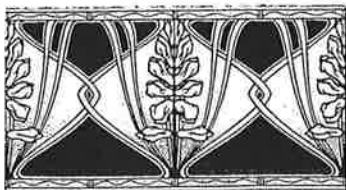
Its designer, Graham Thomson (Brand New Industrial Design Consultancy) illustrated the way his team interpreted the brief; market research into design. An example of this being that the only visible control is the on/off knob, designed with the knowledge that most people keep a radio on a single station. The other controls are hidden behind a panel. Other features gave good looks and saved production costs, such as the moulded handle in the back panel. Nothing new there, Bush did it in the 1950's.

The day ended with Daniel Weil (Designer and sometime Memphis man) talking about his de-constructed art radios, usable sculpture where speakers hang in plastic bags suspended on wire. The other side of the radio world where imagination turns current perceptions of technology inside out. Weil produced his radios in small numbers for a small number of (wealthy?) clients. He forgot to say how much they cost.

The day over I went off in a design concious mood to inspect the decor of Henry's Bar. Mancunian belle epoque anyone?

Saturday Morning promised to be interesting, a mock Design Council Selection followed by a discussion about the products. I wanted to know how they went about allocating those little triangles. Enlightenment evaporated as the morning quickly degenerated into a "lets slag off the Design Council/we're little people but we matter" session, fuelled by some rather naive politics and very poor chairing.

Undeterred, we returned for the final session and were rewarded with Deyan Sudjic (author of Cult Objects and editor of Blueprint) looking at "Style and the Consumer". He picked up from Hewitt and considered the new breed of design stars and consultancies, touted by Thatcher as the people who are going to make British goods sell. He saw them as part of the fashion system, flavours of the month giving cache by association; "names" to cling to. Whether its a hopelessly naff Pierre Cardin sweater or a Katherine Hamnett T Shirt the message is the same. The language of the design has to be de-coded by those who know and care enough. Sudjic saw that design, unlike fashion, still retained the interlectual baggage of designing "forever", although this was changing. He quoted the three year lifespan of the interiors of Burton and Top Shop. As fad followed fad we could not escape cheap historicism. As designers had to deliver the goods they'd burn out or fall from grace by over exposure, like the Scandinavian style of the 1960's. He concluded by challenging the notion that "exporting style" will save the day because it's just not enough, we have lost the will to produce. New ideas could grow better in Tokyo than London, Japan has the money to experiment, we don't and we daren't.



The final session, "The Complete Interior" featured D. Barry Ercolani (Ercol furniture) and Guy Fortescue. (Habitat) Two very different companies, Ercol producing essentially traditional furniture from a limited, established range. They see their customers as "collectors", building up furniture like an expensive tea set, paying for undoubted quality. Habitat on the other hand is a multi-million pound operation that has grown out of one man's taste(s). It "found" its target market in the 1960's and has grown up with them, captured their children and inventing new ones, Country, City, interchangeable ranges for changing circumstances, up, never down!

Peter Dorner (critic) brought things to a close, stating a love/hate relationship with the "new design". He disliked the fact that so much of it is really cosmetic, the ultimate being the re-packaging of Windscale as the user friendly "Sellafield". Style over substances?

To conclude, I learnt a lot about the current attitudes within not only the design world but outside it and it's not really good news. As a curator the final discussion had a familiar unhappy ring. Much of the design work we had seen betrayed a typically British historicism. Habitats best seller is still Conran's traditional Chesterfield of 1960. The newer 30's inspired stuff is still a bit too much. But does that make one "good design" and one not? I still don't know. I do know that museums need to consider all this. It's no good collecting contemporary material or recording aspects of recent history if you don't understand it. This conference devastated the idea of totally natural "needs" for most products. Form follows function? No chance! Design is part of the complex jigsaw of modern society that spews out material culture, and the study of that is Social History in museums. Lets talk about Social History .....

Mark Suggitt  
(York Castle Museum)

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#### PREVIEW: MUSEUMS AND PARKS

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The Social History Curators Group, in conjunction with the Yorkshire and Humberside Federation of Museums, is organising a seminar on this theme, to be held at Oakwell Hall Country Park (Birstall, Nr. Batley, West Yorkshire) on Friday May 22nd, 1987.

Many museums are located in historic houses standing within municipal public parks. These often represent the results of these buildings becoming redundant due to social and economic change in the early years of this century. More positively though they are also often part of municipal interest in the cultural and recreational well-being of urban industrial communities. Today, however, this role for both museums and the parks themselves are being challenged.

The open-air site museum has gained in popularity while the old park-based traditional museum has remained static or declined. The Victorian public park often seems no longer as attractive as the new breed of Country Parks being developed on today's urban fringes, sometimes based upon an historic park landscape but also created from industrial desolation.

This is clearly an area where developments are of significance for many well established museums. The seminar will examine these developments and suggest how museums might benefit from them in the future.

WELCOME TO THE PLEASUREDOME?  
THE MUSEUM OF CHILDHOOD, Edinburgh

In recent times, the National Heritage (Scotland) Act has changed the administration of Edinburgh's national museums, though it's local authority museums have also been under development. One in particular is the Museum of Childhood.

Several years ago, I visited a building in the Royal Mile, which was devoted to the memories of peoples' younger days. Display cases on various floors bulged with a host of delights, but there was scarcely enough room for the visitors themselves. However, a totally re-designed and enlarged Museum of Childhood was opened to the public in July, 1986 following a period of closure of eighteen months. Now there is not only more to see, but also more space to see it in. It resembles a branch of a 'Toy and Hobby' superstore, and brightly coloured signs guide scampering children (often dragging bewildered parents and/or grandparents) in and out of five spacious galleries. The cost of the revamp was £850,000.

There is an extremely large and varied amount of material on display, and so individual galleries tend to deal with specific subjects. This is very useful, especially if you happen to be an 'accompanied adult', as it means you can go to view particular sections without having to necessarily see everything on one visit. In any case, the museum is free, so you can see everything over a few days. Remember, this is Edinburgh, home of the Campaign for Free Access to Museums.

Such an exhibition does, however, bring its own set of problems, and one example is the lucid description of so many items. In this museum, a numbering system has been adopted in order to prevent objects becoming masked by labels. Panels situated at one end of each display case have an index to describe each item. This means that younger patrons who aren't too concerned with historical detail can simply look and enjoy, though for others it can be awkward not having information immediately to hand. Nevertheless, the attempt to resolve the dilemma is evident through imaginative display work, most notably where toy cars in a car park may be discerned according to their parking-space number!

The museum's founder, Patrick Murray, once stated "This is not a children's museum; it is a museum about them." I believe that the current administration is trying to amend that opinion by involving children more, without merely creating a playground. The provision of an Activity Area in one room, away from the display cases, underlies the need for distinction between what are throwaway playthings, and what are objects of historical interest and value which merit respect. That in itself is something worth learning. The twelve-page Guidebook has been produced as an informative text rather than as a picture-packed souvenir, though the latter could be an attractive publication, and certainly more fun.

The fact that the museum's original sign that hung outside in 1957 is now an internal exhibit is a testament to the museum's awareness of the need to keep pace with change. Today's toys and amusements are already being collected here so that today's generations can visit in the future and attempt to re-live their childhood days.

Jim Garretts  
(Salford Museums and Art Galleries)

PLAYING IN THE PARK? -  
DEWSBURY MUSEUM Crow Nest Park,  
Heckmondwike Road, Dewsbury

Dewsbury Museum occupies part of Crow Nest Mansion - a house of probable late 16th origin which was substantially rebuilt in the early 19th. The Mansion stands in the attractive grounds of Crow Nest Park, a public park since 1893 when both the Mansion and its estate were purchased by Dewsbury Corporation. It is now run by Kirklees Museums Service.

The Museum re-opened to the public on 14th December 1985 after a two and a half year closure which was initially due to internal structural repair. During this period the opportunity was taken to completely refurbish the display galleries and 'childhood' was adopted as the central theme.

I visited the Museum in late June, some six months after it opened. There are no apparent signposts on the approaching roads and consequently the Museum proved fairly difficult to find; I even had to ask for directions once inside the Park. The museum's entrance, at the rear of the building, is barely announced by obscure notices at ground level.

The new display area occupies most of the first and second floors of the Mansion with the ground floor being used for purposes unconnected with the Museum. Access to the Museum is via the central stairs where the childhood theme is introduced by an impressive range of photographs showing Fildesian urchins in various attitudes and occupations. While no special provision has been made for the disabled, the layout of the galleries is otherwise sensibly planned with a coherent visitor route.

The first floor comprises the permanent childhood displays, reception, shop and toilets, while the second floor houses temporary exhibitions relevant to childhood or local history, office space and a reconstruction of a 1940s school classroom. Temporary exhibitions at the time of my visit included "The Making of Dewsbury" - a series of graphic panels describing the history of the town and its industries, and "Khilone or Khail - toys and playthings from the Indian subcontinent" using material drawn from the Service's ethnographic collections. The classroom is used by schools and other groups and contains a growing collection of period teaching aids and other educational material. There is no storage area on the premises and all objects on display are from the centralised stores for the whole service.

With a few reservations, I found the presentation of the central childhood theme imaginative, exciting and of a high standard. All the design and construction work was carried out within the service and the results imply the command of enviable skills and resources. The theme is divided into two parts - work and play - with the former subdivided into rural/agricultural; domestic textile production; 19th textile industry and mining as a rough chronological sequence of the development of working practices in the locality.

In the 'work' galleries restricted space limits the display of objects and those that are displayed are not captioned. The emphasis is on pictorial and graphic interpretation and set-pieces. Although the introduction promises to show what life was like for working children the first two galleries are rather weak in this respect and do little more than list activities with scant elaboration as to what they actually involved. In the agriculture display a new-born lamb nestling in a newly-cut sheaf suggests that the space has merely been filled with 'farmy' things.

Much more convincing is the gallery dealing with the nineteenth century textile industry and coal mining. There is thorough interpretation here which includes contemporary verbatim accounts derived from Inspectors' reports and, inevitably, good photos. There is also a greater attempt to illustrate working conditions endured specifically by children and displays include a cross-section of a life-size mine roadway complete with hurrier and corve.

The 'play' gallery contains a variety of board games, dolls and tin toys as well as some 1890s high-tech specimens. An affinity between this and the preceding galleries is lacking in so far as many of the exhibits were the playthings of the relatively affluent. More emphasis on the leisure pursuits of working children would help to bring 'work' and 'play' closer together.

Over 15,000 people visited the Museum in its first six months since reopening and there is an average of four school groups attending per week. The reaction of local people has been extremely favourable and those responsible for the project are satisfied that the decision to concentrate on childhood was right. Exacting deadlines and key personnel changes at crucial times have not made the task easy and staff are very aware of any shortcomings in the Museum. An early review of the content of the interpretation and the amount of objects on display is planned and back-up material for schools and general visitors is in progress.

One of the main purposes of the project was to revitalise a failing museum and it appears to have succeeded in this aim. The overall impression is one of an innovative and ambitious small museum which is well worth inspection.

The Museum is open daily - Wed-Sat 10 am - 5 pm, Sunday 1 pm - 5 pm. Admission Free.

Robert Higginson  
(Worsbrough Mill Museum, Barnsley)

#### NEW PUBLICATIONS

Ragtime to Wartime - the best of Good Housekeeping 1922-1939 (Ebury Press £9.95)

A Peoples War by Peter Lewis (Thames Methuen £12.95).

Coronation Street 1960-1985 ed. Graham Nown (Ward Lock £7.95).

Understains - the sense and seduction of advertising by Kathy Myers (Comedia £5.95).

Myths and Memories by Gilbert Adair (Flamingo £3.50).

Houses and History by Maurice Barley (Faber and Faber £27.50).

Workers Housing in West Yorkshire 1750-1920 (Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England/West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council).

Quinlan Terry by Clive Aslett (Viking £40.00).

Electrical Heritage ed. Glennis Cooper (Elm Publications £11.50).

The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain by Ron Ramdin (Gower Publishing Group £35.00).

You'll Never Be 16 Again - an illustrated history of the British Teenager by Peter Everett (BBC £4.95).

"The Good War" An Oral History of the Second World War by Stads Terkel (£5.95).

What A Man's Gotta Do - The Masculine Myth In Popular Culture by Anthony Easthope (£3.95).

Femininity - Its Roots in History, Culture and Religion by Susan Brownmiller (£2.95).

Significant Sisters - The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1839-1939 by Margaret Forster (£4.95).

London Delftware by Frank Britton (Jonathan Horne £36.00).

The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England 1750-1850 by John Rule (Longman £8.95).

A History of Secondary Education in England 1800-1870 by John Roach (Longman £28.00).

The Making of the English Village by Brian Roberts (Longman £10.95).

York Memories at Home (York Oral History Project/York Castle Museum £1.50)

#### COMING EVENTS

##### S.H.C.G. Events

May, 22nd 1987: Museums and Parks. Oakwell Hall, In association with the Yorkshire Federation.

(Contact: Stuart Davies. Kirklees Museums Service. Tel: 0484 - 513808).

June, 15th 1987: Plastics S.H.C.G. Training Seminar. Science Museum, London.

(Contact: Oliver Green, London Transport Museum Tel: 01-379-6344).

July, 9th-12th 1987: "You Really Can't Do That?! - Problems of Interpretation in Social History. S.H.C.G. Annual Study Weekend. Nottingham. See preview in this News.

(Contact: Suella Postles, Brewhouse Yard Museum. Nottingham, Tel: 0602 411881).

##### A.I.M. Seminars

May, 15th-16th 1987: Independent Museums and Tourism. Portsmouth.

June, 26th 1987: Son of George Washington's Axe - the ethics of conservation

Museum of East Anglian Life, Stowmarket, Suffolk

October, 7th 1987: Video and Museums London Transport Museum

November, 13th 1987: Making Cheap Publications Better

Birchcliff Centre, Hebden Bridge.

##### WHAM! Seminar

May, 9th 1987: Perspectives on Childhood. Dewsbury Museum

(Contact: Clare Rose, York Castle Museum, York YO1 1RY, Tel: 0904 653611)

September 10th-14th M.P.G. Annual Study Weekend. "Tourism: Museum Dream or Nightmare?"

Hull. See preview in this News.



# Social History Curators Group

## ANNUAL STUDY WEEKEND

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

TEL. NO. (work) ..... (home) .....

Do you need creche facilities? Yes/No ... If so when? .....

Do you wish to give a member's paper ? YES/NO

Are you a vegetarian ? YES/NO

If yes, do you eat fish ? YES/NO

	COURSE FEE (non-returnable)	tick
THURSDAY 9th JULY	SHCG Members	£15.00
	Non-members	£24.00
FRIDAY 10th JULY	Bed and Breakfast	£10.70
	Coach to reception	£ 1.00
SATURDAY 11th JULY	Lunch	£ 4.40
	Tea	£ .52
	Bed and Breakfast	£10.70
	Coach	£ 1.00
SUNDAY 12th JULY	Coffee	£ .52
	Lunch	£ 4.40
	Dinner	£ 5.35
	Bed and Breakfast	£10.50
	Coffee	£ .52
	Lunch	£ 4.40
	TOTAL	
	Less course fee *£15 or *£24	
	BALANCE PAYABLE ON ARRIVAL	

\* Membership applications at time of booking will entitle applicants to member's rate.

Please return by 1st JUNE 1987 with the course fee of £15 (£24 for non-members) to:

Suella Postles, Keeper of Social History, Brewhouse Yard Museum, Castle Boulevard, Nottingham NG7 1FB.

Cheques should be payable to: SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP.

SHCG Study Weekend, Nottingham University 9-12 July 1987

Title/Theme

'You Really Can't Do That?!'  
- Problems of Interpretation in Social History

THURS 9 JULY

2.00-6.00 Registration. Optional visits to Nottingham Museums

6.00-8.00 Food/Civic Hospitality, Council House

8.00-11.00 Guided tour of caves and cellars of the Trip to Jerusalem pub

FRI 10 JULY

8.00-9.00 Breakfast

9.00-9.20 Introduction (David Fleming, Hull Museums/SHCG Chair)

9.30-12.30 Coach trip to Boots Factory for guided tour and inspection of the company's own museum collection

12.30-1.30 Lunch (back at University)

1.45-2.30 Sweetness and light? Interpreting Religion in Museums

(Tecwyn Vaughan Jones, Welsh Folk Museum)

2.30-3.15 Obfuscation, Irritation or Obliteration?

Interpreting Military Collections in the 1980s (Stephen Wood, Scottish United Services Museum)

3.15-3.45 Tea

3.45-5.00 Discussion Groups

(i) Art and Design  
(ii) Industry and Technology

Delegates will divide into four groups of 10-12. Each group will spend 35 minutes on each topic, with a change of group leader at half time.

5.15 Coach trip to Erewash Museum

6.00 Evening meal/hospitality at Erewash Museum

6.00 Evening meal/hospitality at Erewash

7.00 AGM at Erewash Museum

Evening concludes with visit(s) to local

pubs before return by coach to Nottingham

SAT 11 JULY

8.00-9.00 Breakfast

9.00-9.45 Propaganda and Empire  
(John Mackenzie Senior lecturer in History, University of Lancaster)

9.45-10.30 Race and Politics

(Rachel Hasted, Bruce Castle Museum, London Borough of Haringey)

10.30-11.00 Coffee

11.00-11.45 Interpreting Costume

(Sarah Levitt, Bristol Museum)

11.45-12.30 Personality Museums

(David Newlands and Steve Newfield, The Freud Museum, London)

12.30-1.30 Lunch

1.45 Afternoon coach trip

Visits to D H Lawrence Birthplace Museum, Eastwood, Newstead Abbey and National Mining Museum, Retford

Mining Museum, Retford

6.00 Dinner

8.30-12.00 Disco

8.30-9.30 Breakfast

9.30-10.45 Members' papers (20-25 mins each)

10.45-11.15 Coffee

11.15-12.30 Summary and final discussion

12.30-1.30 Lunch

1.30 onwards Disperse/optional visits to Nottingham Museums

SUN 12 JULY

# Social History Curators Group

## PLASTICS

An SHCG Training Seminar to be held in the Lecture Theatre of the Science Museum, London on 15 June 1987.

### PROGRAMME

- 10.30 Registration and Coffee.
- 11.00 The Social History of Plastics - Dr Morris Kaufman  
- (Science Museum Fellow)
- 11.50 The Plastics Gallery at the Science Museum -  
Dr Robert Bud (Science Museum)
- 12.30 Lunch - own arrangements - and opportunity to visit  
the Plastics Gallery
- 14.00 Reassemble for discussion of Plastics Gallery
- 14.30 Plastics Collections in Museums - Susan Mossman (Science  
Museum)  
This will be a practical session with artefacts and  
will include basic identification, storage and  
conservation problems
- 15.30 Tea
- 16.00 Final Discussion - What to Collect, How to Select
- 16.30 Disperse

Fee: SHCG Members £2.00, others £3.00. Cheques payable to SHCG.  
Please complete the form below and send it with fee to  
Oliver Green, London Transport Museum, Covent Garden, London  
WC2E 7BB. A numbered copy will be returned to you as your  
receipt and ticket. Please use one form per person.

Please enrol me for the SHCG Training Seminar on Plastics at the  
Science Museum, London on 15 June 1987

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

SHCG Member ? Yes/No (delete as appropriate)

I enclose £ \_\_\_\_\_ registration fee

Signed \_\_\_\_\_



Ticket Number \_\_\_\_\_  
(leave blank)

Fee received \_\_\_\_\_

SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

and

YORKSHIRE & HUMBERSIDE FEDERATION OF MUSEUMS

MUSEUMS AND PARKS

A one-day seminar to be held at OAKWELL HALL COUNTRY PARK, Birstall, nr. Batley, West Yorkshire. Friday May 22nd 1987.

P R O G R A M M E

- 10.15 Assemble for Coffee
- 10.45 Introduction by Chairman
- 10.50 'Museums in Parks : Curse or Opportunity?'  
Stuart Davies (Kirklees Leisure Services : Libraries, Museums & Arts)
- 11.40 'Public Parks : Reappraisal and New Directions'  
Richard Brooker (Kirklees Leisure Services : Outdoor Division).
- 12.30 Lunch
- 1.30 'The Development of Country Parks'  
Nick Holliday (Countryside Commission).
- 2.15 'Normanby Hall (Scunthorpe) : Museum Interpretation in a Country Park'  
Penny Spencer (Scunthorpe Museums Service).
- 3.00 Tea
- 3.15 'Oakwell Hall Country Park'  
Jane Glaister (Senior Curator, Oakwell Hall Country Park),
- 3.55 Concluding Discussion.

Those travelling by train who wish to be collected from Huddersfield or Batley Railway Station should contact Jane Glaister on Batley 474926 as soon as possible.

FEE (to include lunch, coffee and tea) £4 for SHCG or Yorkshire & Humberside Federation Members; £6 for others.

BOOKING FORM

Please reserve ..... place(s) on the MUSEUMS and PARKS seminar.

I enclose a cheque for ....., made payable to the Social History Curators Group.

Name .....

Museum .....

Address .....

.....

Please return to : Senior Curator (East Kirklees)  
Oakwell Hall Country Park  
Nutter Lane  
Birstall, nr. Batley  
West Yorkshire