

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

#### EDITOR'S NOTES

This is the last time I have to think of something to fill this column. After two years of editing the News it is time to hand over to another. I wish Ian Lawley every success as the new editor. The only thing that worries me is that he actually offered to do it! Despite this Ian is a man of style and taste who is bound to improve things.

Finally this is the right time to thank all those who have helped me to produce the News. Special thanks must go to the following at York Castle Museum; Lynne Spence, who typed it all up, Grahame Berney who pasted it all up and Richard Stansfield who printed most of the photographs. A final thanks to Helena Suggitt for living with it, not to mention sticking up the envelopes!



*The Editor realises he does not have to produce the News anymore*



#### AGM REPORT

The Annual General Meeting of the Group was held on Friday, 10th July at the Town Hall, Ilkeston, and was attended by a record number of members.

Business dealt with in reports and general discussion included the following:

##### 1) Membership

This now stands at 335 and has been up to 350 during the year, with 61 new members joining in 1986/7.

##### 2) 'Social History in Museums' (Manual of Social History Curatorship)

There should shortly be an agreement regarding the publication of this manual. Detailed outlines and possible contributors have been considered and it is hoped to publish in 12 - 18 months.

##### 3) 'Disposal' seminar

The Museums Association is to publish the proceedings as one of their series of monographs.

##### 4) Report to the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art.

S.H.C.G. has received a discouraging response from the Committee. Members present felt that we should pursue the issue despite this.

##### 5) Cogges Museum

The private company which had tried to buy the lease of this museum from Oxfordshire County Council has withdrawn because of some of the conditions of the lease. The good news is that the Council has decided to fund a Development Officer for the museum and has found some extra funds for it, so the museum's short term future at least is more secure.

##### 6) Elections

New officers were elected to the posts of Chairperson, News Editor, Seminar Organiser and Membership Secretary and there are also two new Committee members.

##### 7) 1989 Museums Association Centenary

Following a request from the membership, the new Committee is to consider how S.H.C.G. might take part in these celebrations.

##### 8) Finances

The Group's finances are in a pretty healthy state. Members asked that the new Committee should consider ways of using any large surplus of funds to the Group's benefit e.g. in publications.

9) 1988 Annual Study Weekend

Following a kind offer by the National Museum of Wales/Welsh Folk Museum, the venue for the 1988 A.S.W. will be Cardiff.

Rosie Crook  
(Hon. Secretary)

NEW COMMITTEE 1987-8

<u>Chairperson</u>	Jenny Mattingly, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry.
<u>Secretary</u>	Rosie Crook, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry.
<u>Treasurer</u>	Lesley Colsell, Museum of East Anglian Life Stowmarket
<u>Seminar Organiser</u>	Peter Jenkinson, The Grange Museum, Neasden
<u>Membership Secretary</u>	Judith Edgar Castle Museum, Nottingham
<u>Editor Journal</u>	Steph Mastoris Brewhouse Yard Museum, Nottingham
<u>Editor News</u>	Ian Lawley, City Museum, Stoke on Trent
<u>Ordinary Committee Members</u>	Dieter Hopkin, Erewash Museum, Ilkeston
	Karen Hull, AMSSEE, Bury St. Edmunds
	Mark O'Neill, Springburn Museum Trust, Glasgow
	Liz Frostick, Wilberforce House Museum, Hull.
	Mark Suggitt Area Council for Yorkshire and Humberside, Leeds

ANNUAL STUDY WEEKEND 1988

Open the diary, it's time to pencil in the date of the next A.S.W. The proposed date is 7-10 July 1988 at the Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans.

The working title is "A Teddy Bears Picnic? Childhood in Social History Museums." Most of us have "childhood" material in our collections, do we use it properly? Do we understand the concept of childhood? Does the world need another Edwardian nursery?

Full details in News 16.

ANOTHER NEW MEMBER

Sue Underwood, Keeper of Local History at Scunthorpe, is pleased to announce the birth of her son, Callum. Born 17 June 1987 while on holiday in Scotland. Quite a holiday present! Congratulations.

REVIEW: PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD

A meeting of WHAM delegates took place at Dewsbury Museum on Saturday 9th May, to discuss 'Perspectives on Childhood'. This was an interesting and pertinent topic in light of the emergence of a number of new museums about childhood. Stuart Davies, Principal Officer (Museums) at Kirklees, welcomed the group.

The new displays at Dewsbury focus on the history of childhood in Kirklees. The compact permanent displays include galleries dealing with 'Children at Work' and 'Children at Play' and a 1940's classroom.

The displays were intended to be for children and not just about children, so the text was refreshingly simple. The austere colour scheme adopted by the design, however, was inappropriate. I felt that the 'Children at Play' area showing more conventional collections of dolls and toys worked better in terms of organisation.

After lunch Sylvia Vannings, Curator, admitted to a museum in its 'adolescent' phase but felt the change had certainly generated new local interest. She felt that the creche area, incorporated as part of the displays, was less successful than, for example, the small book-shelf and library area.

Gill Greaves, sound archivist, encouraged delegates to consider the different ways in which a sound archive could be used for work on the subject of childhood. She rightly stressed the effect on childhood of the wider social and economic framework. The distinction between the 'state of' and 'time of' being a child was a useful one. Parveen Khan, Ethnic Minorities Officer (now Bradford Outreach) described a project on toys from India, and emphasised the need to incorporate specific research projects into collections as a whole.

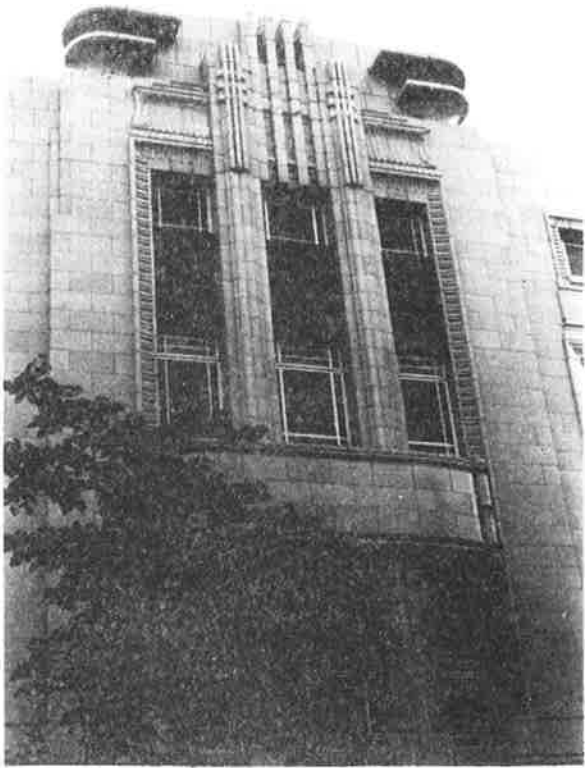
The relaxed day (it was a Saturday) not surprisingly posed more questions than it answered. There seems to be some confusion about what is meant by 'childhood'. Does it mean adult museums about children and childhood, or an attempt to penetrate the childhood world of children? There is clearly a danger in the complete isolation of childhood, - the 'time of being a child', from adulthood, as neither concept is intransitory or unrelated. Experiences clearly differ among individuals and we should be wary of simplistic Edwardian middle-class stereotypes.

Childhood is clearly a subject for further discussion. Perhaps it is no coincidence that as an ageing British culture we seek psychological nostalgia both in the past and in the concept of childhood itself. Childhood might appropriately form the subject of a S.H.C.G. seminar at some point in the future.

Finally, thanks to Clare Rose, Keeper of Costume and Textiles at York Castle Museum for organising the day.

Elizabeth Frostick  
(Hull Museums)





*A little bit of Nottingham Deco*

#### YOU REALLY CAN'T DO THAT

#### Annual Study Weekend Report

When we all gathered at Nottingham, it was bright and very warm. The weekend was set to discuss, and hopefully reach some conclusions about, the thornier subjects that museums set out to interpret. In the event, there were to be many bright ideas and on occasions a bit of heated debate to match the meteorological conditions outside.

In introducing the weekend in his opening address, David Fleming pointed out that there are no 'easy' methods of interpretation. There are good and bad ways of interpreting any subject, whether deemed 'difficult' or not. He stated that with technical advances the interpretation via audio/visual slides, video and television can swamp the objects themselves making the material culture mere adjuncts to the text. The text should inform the visitor what the objects themselves tell us about the past. He stressed that a synthesis of material culture and interpretive text were necessary to interpret the past and that a disproportionate emphasis on either should be avoided.

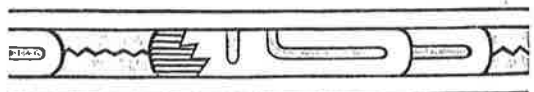
Our second trip (the first being the inspirational Trip to Jerusalem Inn!) was out to the Boots factory. Our excellent guide took us firstly around Liquids (Internal and External) and then, in fancy dress, around the pill-producing plants. One was impressed with the smooth-running of the place and also, I think, the sheer monotony of many of the jobs - though our guide did tell us that people were rotated from job to job to relieve the tedium. I was very impressed by the dedication and care that Colin Marshall and John Locke had shown in putting together Boots's museum - part personality museum (the life of Lord Trent a.k.a. J. Boot) and company history (including both equipment and packaging over the years). There were obvious omissions (little about the employees' conditions or activities) but the set-up of the period chemist's counter was imaginative and well laid-out. One hopes that the management of Boots sees fit to provide more resources. Boots do not seem to have realised the potential of their own museum not only in benefitting their present staff, but also as an aid in promoting the company to visitors, whether business people or the general public.

The problems of interpreting religion were addressed by Tecwyn Vaughn Jones of the Welsh Folk Museum. The Museum had developed a former Wesleyan Chapel into a museum depicting Welsh religious life. Tecwyn pointed out that modern secularity has alienated the mass of the Welsh population from the religious mores of a less secular 19th century society. This poses problems in interpretation as they face hostility from a large section of the modern public. The 19th century distinctions between chapel goers and others were vital to peoples lives and chapel bound cultural activities were a very important part of the local community. How do you display these differences and also deal with the problematic ideas of any religion such as spirituality and faith? The WFM deal with the last problem by not emphasising the difficult aspects and concentrating on more accessible social life ideas, such as the community role of religious institutions. The interpretation of the religion has to be explained as not everyone's perception of what religion is, is the same. This is difficult because religious feeling is not an easy thing to express in words. Finally, there are structural difficulties in the building which make it hard to place interpretive panels, let alone get people to read them. Perhaps the most interesting suggestion for increasing interest in the museum without relying on touristy gimmicks (which do not solve the interpretive problems) was to tap into the growing interest in genealogy. This sounds promising, but how do you make the connection in researchers's minds between the church records and the social and commercial activities that the chapel-goers were concerned with? The over-riding problem seems to be that religion covers many aspects of community life, and objects, in what they can say, tell us little about that variety. There seem to be no easy answers, but perhaps the use of oral history can fill out the interpretation to some extent?

Stephen Wood of the Scottish United Services Museum, advocated an approach to military displays that struck a balance between current prejudices towards militarism. This, he said, could be achieved by concentrating more on the soldiers' lives: diet, living conditions and social activities. As regimental museums can only depict soldiers as living apart from the population, the potential to develop this approach lay with local authority museums. He thought that it is possible to depict the military presence as not being perforce separate from the communities they are supposed to protect. Some interesting points, not to say some fiery contradiction, followed.

Elsbeth King pointed out that not all of Scotland's civilian population had had such a cosy relationship with their friendly local fighting lads who showed a propensity throughout the last two hundred years for killing those who demonstrated against the policies of their governments. Another approach, she suggested, to redressing the present bias towards displaying the militaristic side of the armed forces, was to dispense with the military items in collections and collect the icons of the peace movement instead! There is something to be said for that but as the military past actually happened the approach is surely to shift emphasis in interpretation.

It will be interesting to see if Stephen Wood can incorporate everyday non-militaristic information about the military into his displays in the future and find ways to interpret the role of service-women and service mens' wives in the history of fighting forces. Similarly, military museums must address the relationship between the imperial past and that of British contemporary multi-racial society.



Both of the discussion groups provided stimulating debate. Sara Hyde of the Whitworth Art Gallery told us how she had approached the exhibition of objects designed in the 1960's - a decade now mythologised by both left and right wing politicians. She believed that art galleries could move away from the unquestioning aesthetic approach on the right occasion. '1966 and all that' thankfully avoided being a collection of 60's icons. This and the other discussion with Sara Craggs of Sheffield Industrial Museum were useful and interesting, but were too short! Maybe the Weekend could become an Annual Study Week? The evening trip to Erewash was very welcome and the post-AGM drinks at Ilkeston were enlivened by the novelty of chips and curry sauce - haute cuisine indeed. Afterwards delegates were lucky to witness the Ilkeston 'Monkey Run'. Shades of Mass Observation!!

The next morning John McKenzie showed us many examples of the 'dominant ideology' of British material culture - the Empire and the associated images of 'superior' (white) and 'inferior' (colonial) in photographs of items from the 1870's through to the 1950's. We saw many imperial icons and heard of the work of the Empire Marketing Board. The imagery was very pervasive, reaching into such realms as children's literature. John stated that there was a dichotomy between aesthetics and function and that to display objects for aesthetic reasons without explaining the original propagandist function was to implicitly accept the dominant ideology of imperialism. The solution is to assemble these imperial icons and state explicitly what they often impart implicitly about the imperialist view of social/racial structure,

Women and black people also want their history back, Rachel Halstead stated. She is working in Harringay, with the local communities, to try and reclaim it. After all, 'ethnic' communities have lived in this country for many centuries - their past is also part of this nation's heritage and museums have a role to play in presenting diverse cultures in a constructive, non-racist, way. To do this 'minority' groups must have control of the presenting of their own past and culture. This is also true for women's history. In Harringay, they have the support of their Council to fully research and display the history of all of the local community. By familiarising themselves with the 'ethnic' make-up of the area and thoroughly researching the past of those groups, by working on equal terms with the local community, they can compile statistics and information to provide a basis for the museum's collection policies, hopefully they will employ people from these communities in the future. With the assistance of Harringay's community, research and collection can be achieved and a museum service relevant to all the community may be achieved. Let's hope so and let us hope that the excuses will end and more museums will provide a multi-cultural service in the future.

Sarah Levitt provided us with a photo-history of the many approaches to the interpretation of costume. We learnt of the history of awful presentations alongside constructive displays that attempt to relate the history of costume to their social and sexual/political context. It was obvious from Sarah's talk that there is much greater potential to interpret costume than has previously been attempted. There seem to be many potential holes to fall in - the ghoulish dummies, the inappropriate settings, the reluctance of some curators to play with costumes and dummies - but the paper left many of us more determined to tackle the complex subject of costume in the future.

Steve Newfield of the Freud Museum stressed the dual needs of a personality museum; a shrine and a base for communicating the ideas and achievements of Freud. The latter is largely achieved by guided tours, while the 'enchantment' is in the presentation of the objects used by Freud in his last year. I am afraid that I did

not quite understand how the museum managed to convey information about psychoanalysis to the visitor, other than using the museum as a site for lectures, or how Freud used his own antiques to illustrate some of his theories. Surely it would be helpful to find ways of suggesting why Freud chose to take these particular items with him to London and the reasons why Miss Freud was not keen to return any of the stuff to Vienna. I suppose it is true that faithful reconstruction of the house in the 1938-39 style creates an ambience suitable for hero-worship but, presumably, one has to be a bit clued-up on Freud's life and theories beforehand to fully enjoy and appreciate the 'enchantment'.

Saturday evening's discussion group discussed the Player's Archive recently acquired by the Brewhouse Yard Museum. It touched three areas already discussed: Aesthetics versus functionalism, Images of Empire and interpreting Industrial collections. How can they use it without making it an advert for the tobacco company and incurring the wrath of groups like ASH? Delegates suggested a number of avenues to pursue. Perhaps a small exhibition as a test to gauge response to the material would be helpful in deciding on its further use? Sunday morning saw an enlarged session for members papers. The one that interested me most was Helen Clark's account of the oral history project - the People's Story reminiscence group offered personal and often surprising memories and information about their past. Another area that Helen is undertaking in Edinburgh, is the provision of objects which are handed out to trained staff doing reminiscence work with the elderly. Both enable the museum to give something back to the community whose history they are portraying.

Sam Mullins showed us the reconstruction of a shoe repairers and retailers workshop - it was fascinating, as was Stuart Davies' account of the 'dirty postcard' museum at Holmfirth and the exhibition "Welcome to the Motherland" at Tolson about the history of the Afro-Caribbean community. Will other authorities follow Kirklees example?

Alan Menton of the Science Museum demonstrated that the visitor can often be given a distorted view; the juxtaposition of a fighter plane near the title 'Civilisation through Tools', was a memorable example. His main contention was that the museum visit itself is now seen as a commodity, as are objects in science museums which rarely show machines as part of a larger production process. It would be useful to test the perception of visitors to find out what 'messages' they are receiving from displays.

Michael Holt of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, talked of the display there that followed the journey of the emigrants who caught their ships to America from Liverpool. A novel tool is the computer, which gives advice to visitors trying to trace their ancestors' histories through passenger lists. Although, as Michael said, the exhibition managed to pass on information to more people than would be reached by a book, the lack of objects suggests that the subject is more suited to that form rather than a museum. Nevertheless, it is an effective display.

The final session, led by Dieter Hopkin, provided a useful over-view of the subjects we had discussed and raised some interesting debate about political censorship and other obstacles to interpreting 'difficult' subjects.

The weekend was a very stimulating experience - a great disco too. It was very successful and everyone appreciated the efforts of Suella Postles team at Nottingham who organised it so well. Special thanks to Oliver Green for putting together such a good 'package' of speakers.

Derek Phillips  
(Coventry Museums)

SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

WOOD

SHCG Training Seminar to be held at The Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans, Cardiff.

Wednesday 18 November 1987

Wood has been a basic raw material over the centuries and most museum collections contain a wide range of wooden objects. The sheer variety of types of timber together with the multiplicity of its uses makes the identification of wood one of the curator's recurring nightmares. Part of this seminar will be devoted to this very problem with a practical session devoted to wood as a material - its properties, identification and conservation. In addition, there will be a historical survey of woodland utilization with a chance to see a variety of craftsmen working with wood. There will also be an opportunity for the more adventurous to try their hand at various traditional woodworking skills.

PROGRAMME

- 10.00 Assemble at the Welsh Folk Museum : Coffee
- 10.30 'The greater part of their sustenance they obtained from the wood: the history of woodland utilization'.  
Dr. William Linnard, Assistant Keeper, Department of Farming and Crafts, Welsh Folk Museum.
- 11.30 Practical Session: 'Wood - its structure, identification and Conservation'. R. E. Child, Senior Conservation Officer, Welsh Folk Museum.
- 1.00 Lunch
- 2.00 Visit to the museum's craft workshops - wood turner, cooper, wheelwright, basket maker. This session will involve a tour of the museum when there will be an opportunity to look at furniture and architectural woodwork.
- 4.00 Tea, Open Forum
- 4.30 Depart

FEE: £2 for SHCG members (£3 for others), cheques payable to SHCG. To apply please complete slip below and return it, with fee, to John Williams-Davies, Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans, Cardiff. CF5 6XB. (0222 - 569441).

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Please enrol me/us for the SHCG Training Seminar 'Wood' on 18 November 1987.

Number of places required..... Name .....

I enclose £..... fee Address.....

Signed .....

Date .....

Do you wish to be collected from Cardiff Station? YES/NO

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 RIGHT TO REPLY
 

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Ron Fitzgerald, Keeper of Armley Mills Museum featured in the review of the Industrial History in Museums seminar published in News 14. He was clearly not impressed by the review, which he felt to be a "gratuitously offensive, vindictive and unbalanced account".

Before printing his reply I must state, as Editor that the views expressed in the News are not those of S.H.C.G. or S.H.C.G. Committee. They are the opinions of the individual contributors, who are usually cast, by me, in the role of the critic. If I disagree with their views, I as Editor not Censor, will always print them. The purpose of this publication is to disseminate information and provoke debate. Museums, as creative institutions should thrive on criticism and a little controversy should do no one any harm. The Art World seems to thrive on it!

So, back to Ron, who, you will remember guided the participants around the museum

"From the report it seems to me that any kind of oral interpretation was indeed superfluous to the two gentlemen concerned and that even a visit to the site was largely irrelevant. The prior distribution of the guide book would obviously have sufficed to substantiate their prejudices. Under normal circumstances I would be disinclined to engage in any discussion of what is clearly a purely subjective outburst but as the result gives such a distorted view of this establishment and the events of the day I feel the following comments to be necessary.

Firstly, I was asked by the organiser of your event to give a conducted tour of the site and comment upon the way in which the museum had been built up. The retrospective decision by Messrs Mansfield and Jones that this was not required, should I suggest, have been reached prior to the visit.

I had previously informed Miss Mattingley of the likely duration of this tour. As a consequence participants were asked at the close of the morning session to arrive back at Armley Mills at the scheduled time in order that the tour could start promptly at 1.00 p.m. At 1.30 p.m. participants were still meandering back from their lunch time venue. As a consequence a party, whose numbers did not equate with those of the morning session, left the main lobby at 1.45 p.m. Messrs Mansfield and Jones ire might be more appropriately directed towards those responsible for this state of affairs.

In the course of the ensuing tour had Messrs Mansfield and Jones been more concerned to attend to what was being said rather than conducting a rearguard privy council amongst themselves, they would doubtless have been better equipped to provide an account of the museum and its background. Their ill mannered conduct however represents only a partial explanation of the deficiencies of their account. So clouded is their judgement that they failed or chose not to relate what was obviously before their eyes.

I spent some time discussing the graphic presentation within the museum and the public reaction to it. I think that it is fair to say that the textural content of our museum is not inordinately large and is written in a concise readable form with imaginative presentation. This is a reaction which we have received from a wide spectrum of the general public. Nevertheless written graphics have limitations and these we have acknowledged. The relatively extensive use of audio visual aids integrated into the displays is an attempt to deal with the problem. Less biased observers feel that the balance between written, visual and spoken presentation is about right.

The disparity between the level of presentation in the upper floor galleries and that of the lower floors I also accounted for in the course of the tour. The bulk of resources have, over the past few years, been concentrated in the upper floor areas. The lower floor is the area at present under development. Probably one third of the time taken was spent explaining this. I made it quite clear that the objects at present accommodated here were in store only, but that we preferred the public to have access to this material rather than operate a closed storage system.

In fact the whole of the fifth paragraph of the text carries with it an air of unreality. There is a palpable failure to give an accurate account of that which exists in the areas discussed. As far as static machinery presentations were concerned I must have imagined the demonstration of the mule and the water wheel working. Where were your correspondents when I explained the working weekend procedures and told the group that it was only the lack of time which prevented them from seeing a film presentation in the cinema?

I would hesitate to suggest that there may be an ideological component in your correspondents arguments. They should be careful however to distinguish between pointless rhetoric and critical analysis. I would consign the comment "...the class differences of the past were heat sealed onto the present..." to the realms of meaningless verbiage. The most astounding comment of all however is contained in the final sentence of this paragraph "...the workforce and their working conditions seldom imposed their presence..." Armley Mills has been widely acclaimed for the contextual presentation of the exhibits. This is not a matter of opinion but is testified to by the prizes awarded and by the comments of impartial observers amongst whom I would number Kenneth Hudson.

Whatever substance there may be held collectively by S.H.C.G., expressing them through such unctuous pedagogues as Mansfield and Jones will do little to assist their acceptance in the areas it wishes to penetrate. We all have views as to what constitutes a successful museum and most of us use some generalised criteria to form our judgements. The less self opinionated amongst us would not presume to elevate these to the status of a binding charter for all museums be they regional or otherwise. I find Messrs Mansfield and Jones promulgation of the "ultimate goal" both immature and arrogant.

It is my view that the origins of this petulant outburst are to be found in my "...dramatic and unhelpfully dismissive exit...". It may therefore be helpful if, for the benefit of those who were not present, I recap upon the events which took place. I did not feel that it was appropriate to participate in a discussion amongst an invited group of which I was not a member. I remained present as a representative of the host organisation. In spite of this I failed to see why I should tolerate the disparaging and ill informed comments which were made by your correspondents concerning the museum. Based upon a cursory visit on a November afternoon is was suggested that our visitor numbers were indicative of the lack of appeal of the subject matter and its presentation. In response to this somewhat glib assessment I pointed out that on the previous weekend we had admitted 2,487 visitors. I went on to say that the bulk of these visitors had come to see the machines. Unpalatable to Messrs Mansfield and Jones as this fact may be this is what the public want to see. The public are no more prepared to pay obeisance to Messrs Mansfield and Jones viewpoint than I am. If they doubt this then perhaps they would care to look at the published visitor figures for the Science Museum (3.5m) the National Railway Museum (1.0m) or Beaulieu (0.75m). Even in the rarified world that they inhabit they would be culpable indeed had they failed to take note of the enormous enthusiasm that exists for the preservation of



technology as expressed in railway societies, traction engine, stationary engine rallies and more which it would be tedious to list.

This is not to say that the role of a museum of technology is identified with any of the latter. In my view our role is to present technology in context at the same time maintaining it as the central interest within the museum. There is no single prospective which can apply. The history of technology and more particularly industrial archaeology has vast cross disciplinary potential. It is ideally placed both to make and receive contributions but it is a childish over simplification to see this process simply in terms of a dialectic between social historians, or perhaps more accurately folk life historians and the historian of technology. There is an equal case for arguing that the influence of the economic historian should be felt in the museum, or the urban historian or the architectural historian. The myopia of Mansfield and Jones has prevented them from observing all of these at work within our displays. I suggest that anything less than a Valhalla of trade union worthies and impedimenta is perhaps over subtle for our two friends.

Ron Fitzgerald  
(Keeper of Industrial Archaeology  
Armley Mills Museum)

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REVIEW: PLASTICS TRAINING SEMINAR  
Science Museum. 15th June, 1987

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It is just as well that plastics are no longer branded cheap and nasty, because we come into contact with them everyday, as confirmed by a recent MORI poll in which three quarters of the people questioned believed that plastics had improved the quality of their lives. Misconceptions remain, 62 per cent thought that there was no plastic in cars or furniture, in spite of the significant amounts which are now incorporated into these products. Clearly many people including curators have difficulty identifying plastics, as the S.H.C.G. plastics training day set out to rectify.

The seminar opened with Dr. Morris Kaufman, a Science Museum Fellow and author of several books on plastics, outlining some basic principles. A significant proportion of plastics occur naturally, like cellulose, others are synthetic derivatives of coal, oil or gas, such as polystyrene. All plastics will soften and flow freely when heated, allowing them to be moulded, but they divide into two basic types. Thermosetting plastics, such as phenolics like Bakelite, change chemically during processing so that their moulding is irreversible.

Thermoplastics, such as polyethelene or polystyrene, will melt again if re-heated which allows the possibility of reuse. To understand fully the way in which plastics behave, it is necessary to know something about their structure. They are based on a variety of polymers which differ in both their chemical and physical form. These polymers are chains of individual molecules, called monomers, which consist of carbon joined to elements of hydrogen, nitrogen or chlorine, the reaction in which these monomers form into chains whilst the plastic is setting or curing, is called polymerization. The physical properties of a plastic are determined largely by the way in which these polymer chains join together.

Polymers are not the sole ingredient in plastics. According to their intended application they require additives to increase strength or stiffness, to colour or to prevent degradation. Usually a filler such as talc, limestone or glassfibre is added, and in products like P.V.C. floor tiles the proportion of this filler exceeds that of the polymer. In some high-tech applications carbon fibre reinforced polymers will even

out perform metal alloys. However no plastic is indestructable or completely stable, each being affected adversely on exposure to ordinary environmental conditions. The rate at which plastics will deteriorate can be roughly predicted by the manufacturer so that a major consideration in the choice of additives and polymer is the desired useful life of the product. Without additives to inhibit the effects of oxygen and ultraviolet light polyethelene would under normal conditions deteriorate in three to four weeks, yet in its various forms, it can be made to last several years as a washing-up bowl or only a matter of months as a packaging film.

Having set the scene, Dr. Kaufman gave an indication of the range of different stimuli that have affected the plastics industry, suggesting that it might be constructive to study the impact of new plastics in association with the rate of their adoption into British society. Both the Germans and the Americans have in the past been much quicker to adopt the latest materials, the implication being that the public response to new materials in this country is conservative. The development of individual plastics since 1850 was shown diagrammatically in a chronological sequence, on to which were superimposed two further sequences concentrating on academic achievement in organic chemistry, and the esoteric study of colloids. Innovations which at first seemed random, were seen to coincide with developments in other fields of research, especially those made during the two World Wars, when development was stepped up. A social history of plastics would overcome the technological stereotype of innovation, and so reconcile the relationship between innovation and the stimulus of market-pull.

The Science Museum's Plastics gallery, one of three sections that cover chemistry, was opened early last year and reviewed by Oliver Green in the S.H.C.G. News, No. 12, p.2 (Summer 1986). Dr. Robert Bud explained the philosophy behind the new gallery which aims to show the development of plastics over the past century, focussing on current technology and future trends. This emphasis on the impact of materials and production processes has been seen as a shift in the museum's approach towards combining social history with economic and environmental issues, although the primary concern is still with technology. The visual link between displays is strong, but they are intended to function individually and there is no pre-determined route. The displays, which Dr. Bud described as allegories, concentrate on a particular aspect of plastics, whether of historical or technological significance, whilst reflecting the overall themes of the exhibition. For instance the ubiquitous theme of the fantastic or magical is sustained throughout, although there is a reluctance to interpret the many implications raised by the exhibits or use the past to enhance our understanding of present developments. It is hoped that visitors absorb the sense of continuing development within the industry, without necessarily needing to look at every display.

The ensuing discussion revealed that initially arguments for a material-orientated gallery had failed and the Plastics gallery was only considered viable after funds had been raised outside the museum. Perhaps a case of social history being a poor relation within a larger structure? Surprisingly, it was the smaller companies which were keen to support the gallery, because it would raise the status of the industry, and perhaps help improve the traditionally poor image that plastics have had in this country. It was suggested that other curators could capitalise on this, although currently museums seem to concentrate only on the narrow field of art-plastics. Add to this the fact that products are increasingly made of composite materials, and it would perhaps be better to consider examining the industry within a local context. However, unlike other craft based industries, such as ceramics, plastic moulders are not usually associated with a particular town or region.

Susan Mossman spoke with first hand experience of preparing a catalogue of the Science Museum's extensive collection. Here the objective has been to collect material of historical and technological importance, from early plastics like Parkesine (1855), through to a nose cone from Concorde. She emphasised the value of documentation and recommended that even disposable plastic packaging, which it is known will degrade badly within a few years, should be accessioned, as this ensures a proper record, which might in the future be the only evidence of its brief existence. The catalogue of the plastics collection is being prepared according to Museum Documentation Association (M.D.A.) guidelines, on index cards using (S.H.I.C.) classifications, with a view to possible computerization. It is also hoped in the future to house a plastics reference collection alongside the National Art and Design Archive at Blythe Road in West London.

Identification of plastics remains a problem, especially as earlier catalogues might have incorrectly used generic names like Bakelite or Polythene. Apart from comparing an unknown plastic to charts of physical characteristics, most tests are based on the different odour each type of plastic gives off when heated. These heat tests require small shavings or the use of a hot pin, and are not recommended because they mark the object. Several reference books were suggested, including Brydson, J. A. Plastic Materials, 4th ed. (1982), and Braun, D. Simple Methods for the Identification of Plastics, (1982), in which there is a simple to use identification chart. Similar information is contained in Katz, S. Classic Plastics; from Bakelite to High Tech, (1984), and the Building Research Establishment publishes a guide with a range of plastic samples, Aids to the Identification of plastics; explanatory notes with plastic samples, (1977), but older plastics are not included.

Contrary to popular belief plastics are not indestructible and as yet very little is known about how best to preserve them. Until recently it was thought best to do nothing, apart from occasional accelerated-ageing tests. In spite of discussions prompted by the crisis in several collections little information and few ideas have emerged. All plastics deteriorate from the effects of ultraviolet light (photodegradation), oxygen and water vapour, although modern plastics usually contain inhibitors to counteract such environmental factors. But each batch of plastic is slightly different, and even with these additives no one can predict which plastic will remain stable or if it will present any toxic or tainting hazards. The National Maritime Museum has found that metal scientific equipment in its collections is being corroded by integral plastic components which are degrading, and textile conservators are also unsure how to treat synthetic and rubber coated fabrics because, ironically, a process beneficial to one material may attack others that it is combined with. These problems are likely to increase in the future if the trend for more complex composite plastics continues and environmental legislation requires manufacturers to build a measure of degradability into their products.

The Plastics training day outlined some possible modes of interpretation, display strategies, and methods of managing a plastics collection. It also showed that a number of different themes can be used to question a central, cultural assumption. Clearly what must be tackled soon is the long term survival of the plastics themselves. Museums need to co-operate by exchanging observations and initiating research, perhaps involving the plastics industry, which might be persuaded to share its expertise, as B.P. have with preservation techniques for the Mary Rose. Until the situation improves the display of duplicates or replica plastics might be the only way of safeguarding the real thing.

Pierre Elena  
(Central School of Art and Design)

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#### A VIEW FROM THE SINK

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A new video about women and the kitchen. It looks at the changes, and lack of change, in women's work in the home, and their roles and expectations. Sounds like just the thing for brightening up those domestic displays.

The video is available from Media Arts Lab, Town Hall Studios, Regent Circus, Swindon, Wilts. (0793 26161 ext. 3140). Hire £6.00 Sale £15.00.

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#### PRIVY COUNCIL

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Mollie Harris, author of "Cotswold Privies" is now writing another book about privies all over the country. She would be pleased to receive any information about sanitary ware in museum collections, including privies and earth closets.

Could all potential specialists write to

Mollie Harris  
The Close Cottage  
63 Mill Street  
Eynsham  
Oxford  
OX8 1JY

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#### I HEAR THEY WANT MORE BOVRIL!

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The Bovril Archive has a growing collection relating to the company, including excellent collections of posters, showcards and packaging. The Archivist, Angela Clark is keen to hear from any museum that has Bovril material that is surplus to requirements and prepared to loan parts of the collection for exhibitions.

Contact: Mrs. Angela Clark  
Beecham Bovril Brands  
Wellington Road  
Burton on Trent  
Staffs. (Tel: 0283 511111 ext. 392)

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#### THE SILVER STUDIO COLLECTION: EXHIBITION OF BRITISH WALLPAPERS OF THE 1920s AND 30s

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Wallpapers, although not generally favoured by the 'smarter' middle-classes in the inter-war years, were immensely popular for the majority of homes and great acreages of the cheaper papers were manufactured and hung. The Silver Studio Collection possesses a very large collection of wallpaper pattern books and samples for this period and is planning an exhibition on the subject to start touring in 1989. The exhibition will include papers of all styles and prices and will show them in their various stages of design, manufacture, advertising, sales and use in the home.

Help and information would be very welcome, especially in the area of the manufacture of cheaper papers (mill records, reminiscences, photographs, etc.).

Contact: Mark Turner or Lesley Hoskins, The Silver Studio Collection, Middlesex Polytechnic, Bounds Green Road, London, N11 2NQ.  
Telephone: 01 368 1299 Ext. 339





*Committee 1986/7*

#### NEW PUBLICATIONS

Saturday Night or Sunday Morning? From Arts to Industry. New forms of cultural policy by Geoff Mulgan and Ken Worpole. (Comedia £4.95).

Street Style: British Design in the Eighties by Catherine McDermott (Design Council £12.50).

Troublesome People: Enemies of War 1916-1986 by Caroline Moorehead (Hamish Hamilton £14.95).

Designing Dreams - Modern Architecture in the Movies by Donald Albrecht (Thames and Hudson £20.00).

Consuming Passions - the dynamics of popular culture by Judith Williamson (Marion Boyers £6.95).

The Worst of Times - an Oral History of the Great Depression by Nigel Gray (Wildwood House £11.95).

Suburban Style - the British Home 1840-1960 by Helena Barrett and John Phillips (Macdonald Orbis £12.95).

Crime and Society in England 1750-1900 by Clive Emsley (Longman £6.95).

Family History and Local History in England by David Hey (Longman £15.95 Paperback £7.95)

On Display - A Design Grammar for Museum Exhibitions by Margaret Hall (Lund Humphries £37.00).

Did Britain Make It? British Design In Context 1946-1986. Ed. Penny Sparke (Design Council £11.95).

Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840 by Alan Macfarlane (Blackwell £8.95).

Women Talking: An Anthology from the Guardian Women's Page 1922-35 and 1957-71 ed. Mary Stott (Pandora £5.95).

Electrical Appliances by Penny Sparke (Unwin Hyman £7.95).

Office Furniture by Lance Knobel (Unwin Hyman £7.95).

The Care of Pharmacy History Collections ed. Kate Arnold-Forster. (The Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain).

Rocker! a history of motorbike boys in Britain (Plexus £6.95).

#### WOOD - PREVIEW

This S.H.C.G. Training Seminar will take place at the Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans, Cardiff on 18th November, 1987.

Wood has been a basic raw material over the centuries and most museum collections contain a wide range of wooden objects. The sheer variety of types of timber, together with the multiplicity of its uses makes the identification of wood one of the curator's recurring nightmares. Part of this seminar will be devoted to this very problem with a practical session devoted to wood as a material - its properties, identification and conservation. In addition, there will be a historical survey of woodland utilization with a chance to see a variety of craftsmen working with wood. There will also be an opportunity for the more adventurous to try their hand at various traditional woodworking skills.

See Coming Events.

#### COMING EVENTS

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

November, 18th 1987: Wood S.H.C.G. Training Seminar. The Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans, Cardiff.

(Contact: John Williams-Davies, Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans, Cardiff CF5 6XB  
Tel: 0222-569441)

##### The Rest

September, 28th 1987: Leather Craft. Science and Industry Curators' Group. Northampton Museum.

(Contact: Dr. S. Butler, Greater Manchester Museum of Science and Industry, Castlefield, Manchester M3 4JP)

September 17th-20th 1987: Folk Life Annual Conference. Sheffield

(Contact: Peter Brears. Leeds City Museum, Calverley Street, Leeds LS1 3AA).

October, 29th 1987: Food in History AMSEE Morley College, London.

(Contact: Zoe Brooks, Ferroners House, Barbican, London EC2Y 8AA).

November, 19th 1987: Toys - their conservation and restoration. U.K.I.C. Leicester

(Contact: Theodore Sturge, Newarke House Museum, The Newarke, Leicester LE2 7BY)

#### FURNITURE

Having trouble finishing off that Thirties Room? Thinking about a Sixties Room? or just dying for a Leopardskin three piece suite?

If so you may wish to pay The Furniture Store a visit. Situated on the first floor of West Hampstead Trade Centre. Blackburn Road, London NW6 it houses 13,500 square feet of furniture and decorative arts from the 1860's onwards, with a special interest in the Arts Nouveau and Deco plus the Arts and Craft Movement.

Apparently the staff keep a record of customers' requirements and deliver to anywhere in the U.K.

The Leopardskin three piece suite? A snip at £350.