

SHCG NEWS

Editor: Ian Lawley, City Museum and Art Gallery,
Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent.

EDITORIAL

The great buzzword of the season has been 'heritage'. The most widely discussed book of the past few months (barring Spycatcher) must surely have been Robert Hewison's entertaining tract, The Heritage Industry. Sundays have been enlivened by a series of eloquent Observer columns by Neal Ascherson, each startlingly entitled something along the lines of Why 'Heritage' is right wing. Turn on the radio and the chances are you'll find yourself embroiled in yet another thrilling polemic on how Britain is becoming one big museum. The debate has even entered the usually esoteric world of aesthetics. Witness the recent Palaces of Culture exhibition at Stoke, in particular Mark Wallinger's plastic garden gnomes. These were taken up by the Independent's Arts Correspondent as 'an absurd mimicry of the Museum industry's mass production of a past filtered through nostalgia, satirically contriving a green and plastic land peopled by a happily smiling workforce of pygmies! Follow that, if you can!

The Heritage Industry is essentially a witty synthesis of ideas that have been variously articulated, sometimes in greater depth, elsewhere. But it has succeeded in popularising and thereby bringing an urgency to a debate of vital interest to Social History curators. Indeed, commentaries on the nature of 'heritage' seem ironically to have overtaken heritage establishments themselves as our fastest new growth industry. SHCG News would like to hear your views.

Indeed, we welcome your observations and opinions on any or every aspect of the strange world of Social History. Under Mark Suggitt's erudite editorship the News has more than maintained its reputation as a lively channel for the dissemination of information and critical commentary. As S.H.C.G. goes from strength to strength, the News must ensure its continued vitality by reflecting the diversity of views among our increasing membership. Contributions from members, however critical or controversial are the lifeblood of this organ. Use your News!



COMMITTEE REPORT

The Committee met at the Grange Museum, Neasden, on 4 August 1987 and at the Town Docks Museum, Hull, on 24 November.

Business dealt with included the following:

1. The Hale Report
The Museums and Galleries Commission had requested S.H.C.G.'s response to this important new report on the future of training for museum personnel. The Report was discussed in depth and a detailed response to its recommendations drawn up.
2. Training
Fifty people (around two-thirds from outside Wales) attended the training seminar on Wood held at St. Fagan's on 18 November. The Training Working Party is to meet shortly to finalise the future programme.
3. A.S.W. 1988
Liz Frostick is co-ordinating plans for the 1988 A.S.W. (details elsewhere in this issue). She is liaising with John Williams-Davies on accommodation arrangements.
4. Finances
The Group's finances remain healthy. The Nottingham A.S.W. made a profit of £463.97.
5. Membership
Membership now stands at 339 (250 personal, 89 institutional members). The arrears list is being updated and reminders will soon be on their way. A new membership form is to be produced.
6. Journal
Issue 15, due out in March, will be a 'bumper' volume, containing papers from the Nottingham A.S.W. Back issues are still available from the Editor. A complete set has been bound for deposit in the British Library.
7. Antipodean developments
Elizabeth Willis, of the Museum of Victoria, (who attended the 1985 A.S.W.) has written to inform SHCG of the formation of a new Museum Historians Group in Australia. A letter of congratulations has been sent.

Social History in Wonderland

As reported in the last issue, the proposed date of the next A.S.W. is 7-10 July 1988. It will be held at the Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagan's, on the theme of 'Childhood in Social History Museums'.

All museum visitors - indeed, all Social History curators - have been children. Yet their experience of childhood may have differed according to social, economic or regional variants. Are there common experiences, peculiar to Childhood, that transcend such differences? An enormous variety of material relating to aspects of childhood can be found in Social History collections. It provides a subtle indication of changing attitudes towards the idea of childhood itself, sexual roles, social aspirations, national identity, and so on. Yet how many displays simply revolve around the cosy world of the recreated Nursery? Why does the awkward, spotty teenager never get a look in? Where does the evidence relating to childhood diseases, playground folklore, and child labour fit in? How can we avoid simplistic stereotyping and reflect the wider context of childhood?

Answers will hopefully emerge during the A.S.W., which will examine changing perceptions of childhood, maternity and babyhood as a subject for museum displays and the role of oral history in recording experiences of childhood. The practical implications of devising displays not simply about childhood but for children will be discussed. Other subjects will include children's clothes, dolls, toys and games, and schooling and education. Practical activities will include a session at Maestir School on communicating with children, workshops on the effective display of objects associated with children, and a visit to the Big Pit Mining Museum at Blaenavon.



SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY

Valerie Bott of Wandsworth Museums is no longer a member of the Committee on Labour Archives of the Society for the Study of Labour History. Her replacement is Nick Mansfield of Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil.

The Guardian (2.12.87) reports that the recent decision to impose charges at the Imperial War Museum has led to the resignation of Professor Margaret Goring as a trustee. She argues strongly against charging on the grounds that it is short-sighted and will discourage many potential visitors. 'I come from a low-income family and the museums of South Kensington were our cultural lifeline', she said, 'To exclude low income people from the good things of life, to disinherit them, is a very serious thing in terms of our national cohesion. One of the best bits of Victorian values was the free museums movement of the late nineteenth century and to move away from that ideal is very wrong'.

EPHEMERAL CURIOSITIES

Miss G. Swain of Ilminster writes to say that she has for disposal a variety of articles amassed by her parents, ranging from 'items of worth to ephemeral curiosities'. The collection of clothing, household equipment and fittings, etc. includes everything from Old Holborn playing cards to 'a gentleman's 1946 overcoat of staggering weight and thickness'.

The full list is available from the Editor should any reader(s) feel able to give this material a good home.



THE KATHERINE BRIGGS FOLKLORE AWARD 1987

The Katherine Briggs Folklore Award has been awarded annually by the Folklore Society since 1982 for outstanding works of scholarship in the field of 'folklore studies'. This term is interpreted broadly to include all aspects of traditional and popular culture. Past winners have included the intriguingly titled Wives for Sale: an ethnographic Study of British popular divorce, and The Singing Game. The award is named in memory of the distinguished folklore scholar Dr. Katherine Briggs.

This year's award was presented to Amy Shuman for her book Storytelling Rights (Cambridge University Press) at a reception held at University College, London, on 10 November 1987. Among the other works short-listed was Peter Brear's Traditional Food of Yorkshire. The organisers would welcome nominations for the 1988 Award. To be eligible, a book must be in English and have its first publication between 1 June 1987 and 31 May 1988.

LEAP FORWARD WITH SHIC

The Social History & Industrial Classification (SHIC) has been an enormous success and an important tool in collections management. It is now used in over 350 museums and in 22 countries, but as museums and collections develop, new subject areas need to be expanded and reflected in the Classification. Feedback is essential, both to keep this publication of use to you, and to make it easier to work with. We need to ensure uniformity of practice for SHIC to remain a viable international system. Accordingly, it is proposed to establish a SHIC Users' Group with the following aims:

1. To establish a forum for exchange of ideas and experience by supplying a list of existing users.
2. To insert areas recognised as not being adequately covered, e.g. packaging and advertising, women's movements, emigration/immigration, slavery.
3. To provide more Activity Subdivisions based on information supplied by specialists.
4. To establish specialist discussion groups to draft detailed proposals for inclusion in an enlarged edition.
5. To provide material which will be published in the enlarged edition, with a new index.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Send copies of your internal wordlists for inclusion as index entries.
 2. Send ideas for new Activity Subdivisions (using the model in SHIC pages 77-80), and even major headings.
 3. List any objects you cannot classify.
- P.S. So we can work on the enlarged edition, we need your replies by April 1988 - sent to

SHIC Working Party c/o Peter Brears Leeds City Museum



50 YEARS OF BIFFING

A seminal figure in recent British Social History, the Dandy's Desperate Dan celebrated his 50th birthday on 4 December. Dan, whose designer stubble could give a Braun electric razor a nervous breakdown, must be the longest surviving cartoon character in British comic history. Sources close to him indicate that this longevity owes much to his remarkable diet of cow pies.

Also 50 this month are Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

VICTORIAN VALUES AGAIN?

SHCG members will probably be aware of the threat that is hanging over the future of the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow. Opened in 1950, in the pioneer Socialist's boyhood home, the Gallery has gained a local, national and international reputation for its activities and its collection of works by Morris. It is the only museum in the country devoted to examining his life, work and continuing influence. Yet it now faces severe cutbacks and possibly even closure.

The Gallery is funded by the London Borough of Waltham Forest, which has been targeted for ratecapping. One of the proposals put forward to implement the cuts was the complete closure of the William Morris Gallery. At a Leisure Committee Meeting on October 28 this proposal was deleted, but a proposal to 'lose' two of the Gallery's three members of staff still stands. This despite the Council's 'no redundancies' policy. The Gallery's staff have now been advised to seek sponsorship to meet the cost of salaries and to maintain the current level of services.

A final decision will be made in January, so there is still time to register your opposition to these proposals. Please contact Norah Gillow, Peter Cormack or Helen Sloan at the William Morris Gallery, Lloyd Park, Forest Road, London E17 4PP (Tel: 01-527 5544 Ex. 4390)



EXPORT OF WORKS OF ART

The Working Party on the Export of Works of Art has drawn up a revised system of monetary limits for export control. In place of the present system (which is based on only one monetary limit) they recommended the following categories of limit.

1. £ Zero limit
Applies to architectural drawings, manuscript and archives, UK archaeological material.
2. £ 500 limit
Photographs, film, etc.
3. £ 5000 limit
Arms and armour, portraits of 'British Historical Persons', textiles, (excluding carpets and tapestries).
4. £ 20,000 limit
Ceramics, clocks and watches, coins and medals, drawings, furniture, metalwork, paintings and sculpture, carpets and tapestries, scientific, engineering and medical items, transport.
5. £ 30,000 limit
Paintings

The recommendations have been endorsed by the Reviewing Committee. Comments are urgently required by S.H.C.G. Committee.

In particular, specific examples of items which have recently been exported are required. Would they still have fallen through the 'safety net' had the new limits already been adopted? Information, please, to Jenny Mattingly or Rosie Crook.

REVIEW : FOOD IN HISTORY

AMSSEE Seminar, Morley College, London
29th October 1987

It is hard to give an account of the day without dwelling on the lunch, which was as diverse as it was delicious. It proved a salient point, however, that a practical demonstration of cooking, and more particularly in this case eating, provides an interesting and easily accessible approach to an historical subject. The talks emphasised this point, being a mixture of practical demonstrations, advice on avenues for research and applications of this for the interpretation of collections.

Mike Corbishley, of English Heritage introduced the subject of Roman Food with an illustrated talk dealing with the sources available for a study of the subject, supplementing material from this country with evidence from abroad. The cooking demonstration used recipes adapted from Apicius, the only extant cookbook from the period, but other sources were used to give a fuller picture of eating across the social scale.

An exhibition by Bedfordshire County Council provided a colourful introduction to the food and utensils of medieval cooking, while in the lectures we did a quantum jump to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Peter Brears, of Leeds City Museum, stressed the importance of a wide variety of sources that can help in looking at cookery of the period and provide the necessary background for demonstrations. Conversely the study of food and eating habits could contribute a great deal in the interpretation of artefacts, their construction and use.

Both of these talks emanated from a museum viewpoint, while the third was by Julia De Waal, a cookery lecturer at Morley College. She gave a practical demonstration of using an 18th century recipe to show cooking methods, while at the same time introducing various related historical subjects. This approach had proven to be most useful in gaining the interest of students who would have veered away from straight historical courses.



Carol Anderson provided details of the use from the museum educationalist's view, illustrated by her experience with Oxfordshire Museums Service. One of the main points to come across was the opportunities the subject offered for active participation by school parties and the contribution this could make to the interpretation of historical sites.

The last talk, by Gail Durbin, Education officer at the Royal Palaces, looked at the resources available for reconstructions in the way of reproduction cooking and eating equipment, suppliers of unusual foods, lecturers and food consultants and specialist book suppliers. The accompanying lists would prove most useful to anyone embarking on such projects. The day concluded with a discussion, which reflected the growing use of, and interest in the use of practical demonstrations on the theme of food in history.

With thanks to Zoe Brooks for what must have been a most difficult logistical seminar to organise and especial thanks to those who did the cooking.

Annie Hood
(Museum of Kent Rural Life)



REVIEW : WHAT ABOUT THE WORKERS?
Science Museum, 2 November 1987
An Industrial Archaeologist's View

The introductory paper, given by John Burnett of the Royal Museum of Scotland was titled, "Why do Industrial Archaeologists and Historians of Technology forget about the workers?" This presupposed that all such people do and set the tone of the day in its pessimism. We were told that the Great British Public are not all "rivet-counters" but only go to see industrial exhibits because they hiss and chug and clank. Besides relegating the public to the level of fascinated children, this attitude put me on my guard. Surely this is not the best way to convince an unreconstructed technologist to consider the workforce and not just the machine.

The second speaker was Dr. Barrie Trinder of the Ironbridge Institute who spoke on the "World of Work in Museums of Technology and Industry". Whilst his delivery was as free-flowing as porridge, Dr. Trinder did bring to light considerations about the workforce which I had not fully appreciated, such as the problems of re-creating the pressure of work in working museums. He listed four aspects of working life that he felt should be considered; the variety of tasks that an individual had to perform and whether he or she had a choice?; the lack of logic in the workplace and how the worker humanised it; group allegiances in the work place; and the sense of common experience of work, felt by workers over generations. However he did not offer many practical suggestions as to how we portray these areas of experience.

Andy King, Assistant Curator (Technology) at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, entitled his paper, "Andy Capp and Industrial Museums: How the presentation of Technology and Industry in Museums could be improved by making reference to people". Not one to mince words, he accused Social History curators of never having "worked", (i.e. getting their hands dirty) and attempted to illustrate how his own museum was tackling the problem of humanising technological exhibits. One method was to follow the life of a particular worker, Mr. Neal, through documents and photographs donated by his family, contrasting his life with that of a similar worker of a later era. One important point that Andy made

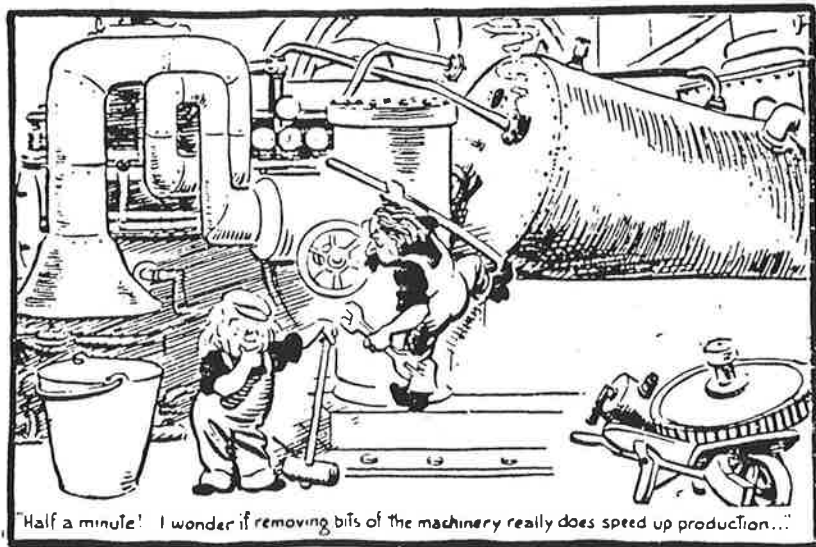
was that unemployment is not often dealt with in museums even though it was a significant factor in many peoples lives.

After lunch came Nick Mansfield of Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr Tydfil, who examined the lot of rural workers and the approach of his own Museum, illustrating his paper with slides of photographs of working people. In his efforts to dismiss most photographs as biased sources, presenting a rosy, quaint view of life, he neglected the possibility that we might learn about both the photographer and the subject from the very fact that it is presented in such a manner; were they trying to cover something up? Who commissioned the photograph and why? After all, it was usually the more affluent members of society who had commissioned these photographs.

The last speaker was Chris Ellmers, who spoke on "Things and People in the Museum in Docklands". This new museum, scheduled to be opened in 1991, is devoted to London's Social and Industrial history. I found his paper encouraging in its optimism and far-sightedness, although his assumption that London was (and is?) the centre of the Universe was irritating. A more subtle approach is surely called for? The museum has collected a staggering amount of material and has carried out a very worthy programme of oral history recording. If used to its full potential this should give a wider picture of the workers than any photograph or tableau could achieve on its own.

On the whole, the seminar was illuminating, if pessimistic. Museums cannot possibly cover every facet of the worker's existence, nor I feel should they, for different material lends itself to different interpretation. To dress up assumptions as "facts" is a pompous and dangerous practice which I hope the museum profession will strenuously avoid.

Ann Nuttall
(Stoke Museum)



MASS OBSERVATION OBSERVED

1987 has seen a plethora of publications and comment on the subject of Mass Observation, a project founded fifty years ago to undertake the 'anthropology of ourselves', a major social survey of Britain. Here I will attempt to compare three different media, exhibition, radio documentary and book, and their contribution to the history of Mass Observation.

The exhibition, produced by the Waterman's Art Centre, Brentford, was on show in Bolton when I saw it. This was a most appropriate venue since Bolton was 'Worktown' in M.O.'s most well known study of urban industrial life carried out between 1937 - 1939. In conjunction with the exhibition a series of videos were screened explaining the work of M.O and contemporary documentary film directed by Humphrey Jennings, one of the movement's founders. The videos were not an integral part of the exhibition, being physically separate, but they illustrated many of the key features of the group's work and the social and intellectual milieu from which M.O developed. On the video the middle class accents of the 'observers' contrasted with those of the people of Bolton, highlighting just one of the problems they faced in the town.

The actual exhibition I found disappointing, not simply as it was obviously beset by severe financial restrictions which meant that labels were enlargements from a dot matrix printer, but because I felt that the balance was wrong. The exhibition dealt with the whole history of M.O, and the Worktown study was represented largely through the work of photographer Humphrey Spender. There was no attempt to explore what the people of Bolton felt about the observers or use material from the museum's collections to strengthen this element of the exhibition for the public of Bolton.

A great opportunity was missed by using the two tape recorders in the gallery to play Edward VIII's abdication speech and Chamberlain's return from Munich speech. What about comments from observers themselves or their helpers in Bolton? Later sections chronicled M.O publications in a very two dimensional way using dense sections of close type which broke every readability rule. Paintings produced by members of M.O did little to relieve the fatigue created by the bibliographic approach of the exhibition. (1)

In an attempt to explore M.O's work further I read The Pub and the People, (2) the only publication to emerge from the Worktown survey and published in 1943. The book is a mixture of fascinating information on drinking habits and drinking places in Bolton, together with an irritating collection of quirky pseudo-statistics which illustrate some of the problems of M.O's methodology. The 'observed' evidence collected by M.O staff is in many ways less interesting than the direct comments collected through newspaper questionnaires and interviews. The approach taken was strongly anthropological, with observers viewing this 'alien' environment in what now appears to be a very dated, almost patronising manner.

When questioned, drinkers gave health or physical reasons for their drinking habit, reflecting ideas promoted heavily by the brewers themselves. Yet the social pressures occasionally surfaced with one drinker commenting:

My reason for drinking beer is to appear tough, I heartily detest the stuff, but what would my pals think if I refused? They would call me a cissy. (3)

The information on pub interiors and the social distinctions represented by different bars is likely to be of particular interest to social history curators, although it is specific to Bolton. Visual evidence must be used with care as M.O found that the spittoon was no longer as widely used as its presence in Bolton bars suggested. The absence of women in bars other than the lounge was particularly noticeable, although this taboo, (along with many others), was often broken during annual holidays to Blackpool. How many museums displays reflect the social distinctions between lounge and vault or discourage female visitors from entering a reconstructed pub interior?

Some of the survey's findings are fascinating; the role of sub-groups of users offering 'services' to regulars, such as bookies' runners, pub pianists and prostitutes. Many findings contrast sharply with the role of pubs today; observers found it almost impossible to obtain meals in pubs, for example.



This study highlights many of the strengths and weaknesses of the Worktown study; the volume of material, the apparent irrelevance of many of the 'statistics' and the influence of Tom Harrisson's anthropological training on the study. I finished the book still wanting to know more from the people of Bolton.

In October 1987, BBC Radio transmitted a programme entitled The Lost Tribes of Bolton which described the Worktown study and the origins of Mass Observation. It looked somewhat cynically at Harrisson the anthropologist and the approach of the observers to their subjects. Through the words of members of M.O it described living conditions in the back-to-back Harrisson chose as his base, his chaotic working methods and the idiosyncrasies of some of the projects studied (including average urination time in Bolton public lavatories). Harry Gordon a 'native' of Bolton assisted with M.O's photographic equipment and acts as interpreter for the middle class intellectuals attracted to the survey. Communication difficulties were not restricted to the observers however, since one of their studies found that the language used by all candidates in a Bolton election was partly unintelligible to the electorate. The political motivation behind M.O was strong and helpers such as Boltonian Harry Gordon, hoped that the movement and the Worktown study in particular would provoke change. In a poignant footnote the programme recorded that Harry Gordon remained unemployed for most of his 'working life'; the hopes were never realised.

Of the three approaches considered here; the book written by M.O, the exhibition on show in 'Worktown', and the radio documentary, I found The Lost Tribes of Bolton, the most interesting and informative, providing most insight into the methodology of M.O. The work of M.O extended beyond their study of Bolton to wartime work for the Ministry of Information and their role in market research. The story of the evolution of M.O is a fascinating one.

I draw two rather disturbing conclusions from this study: that an exhibition can be a very unsatisfactory form of communication if it does not draw on the strengths of the subject and its relevance to a local audience, and that the experience of M.O should not make us complacent of the need to develop a very strong methodological approach to the task of contemporary collecting.

Footnotes

1. A catalogue was produced to accompany the exhibition: Rod Varley, Mass Observation 1937 - 1987, Watermans Art Centre, 1987
2. Mass Observation, The Pub and the People, Century Hutchinson reprint, 1987.
3. Ibid p.42.

Catherine Hall
(Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston)

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Barbie - her life and times, by Billy Boy (Columbus Books, £14.95)

Toy Trains : A history, by Pierre Carlson (Gollancz, £16.95)

Radios, by Philip Collins (Columbus Books, £8.95)

Victorian and Edwardian Furniture and Interiors, by Jeremy Cooper (Thames and Hudson, £25.00)

The Social History of the Machine Gun, by John Ellis (Cresset, £5.95)

Laura Ashley Style, by Iain Gale and Susan Irvine (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, £14.95)

The Heritage Industry - Britain in a climate of decline, by Robert Hewison (Methuen, £6.95)

Populuxe - America in the '50s and '60s, by Thomas Hine (Bloomsbury, £16.95)

On Your Bicycle - An illustrated history of cycling, by James McGurn (John Murray, £12.95)

The Art of the label, by Robert Opie (Simon Schuster, £12.95)

Rethinking English Local History, by Charles Phythian-Adams (Leicester University Press, £5.95)

A Social history of madness, by Roy Porter (Weidenfeld, £14.95)

The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain by Ron Ramdin (Wildwood House, £8.95)

Death, Dissection and the Destitute, by Ruth Richardson (R.K.P., £19.95)

'FROM MIRFIELD TO DEWSBURY': COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

As part of this year's inaugural Dewsbury Festival, Kirklees Museums Service initiated a local history project which combined oral history, theatre, exhibition and childrens activities to produce a unique experience.

The first part of the project was done in conjunction with Yorkshire Arts Circus, an independent group which specialises in producing books portraying the lives of ordinary people as interesting and as worth of artistic explanation as the lives of the rich and powerful. Interviews with people from Dewsbury and the neighbouring Mirfield and Ravensthorpe were gathered at pre-publicised sessions in local libraries and at Dewsbury Museum. The information was then fed onto a word processor and full transcripts produced.

This material was edited to make up a book (price £2.50) entitled 'From Mirfield to Dewsbury', which details the common experiences of people in the area over the last eighty years, including chapters on school, work, leisure time and community life. Apart from material of academic interest, the book entertains with a wealth of anecdotes about schoolday 'lackin', work and hardship, Whitsuntide marches, nights out at the Music Hall and day trips to the seaside.

The oral information also formed the basis for 'Milltown Memories', a play devised and performed by local people as part of the Festival, with the help of the local Youth Theatre. The participants met, wrote and rehearsed the play in an intensive and creative short time before the actual weekend of performances. Well received by their audiences it was practical proof of the role that museums can have in bringing diverse cultural activities together. One performance was videoed to enable people unable to attend to view it by hiring a copy from the museum or local library.

To coincide with all this the museum also put on a temporary exhibition called 'Community Voices'. This brought together the interim results of two MSC Community Programme schemes run by Kirklees Museums Service, 'Sound Archives' and the 'Photographic Preservation Unit'. The exhibition explained the function and achievements and potential of oral history work in Kirklees, using photographic illustrations from the collection of 60,000 glass plate negatives currently being catalogued and copied.

The exhibition itself was accompanied by a series of activities in the main Festival week which included an introduction to historic games and pastimes and 'magic lantern' shows, again drawing on the Service's extensive photographic collections.

Finally, all this was only possible because Kirklees Museums Service has largely overcome barriers between 'curatorial', 'educational' and 'arts' staff categories. This allowed Chris Aldred, an Education Assistant at Oakwell Hall Country Park, to dream up this project, do the considerable detailed planning required and then lead a multi-disciplinary team capable of enthusing and stimulating local participants to create a truly community event. That doesn't happen very often in the museum world, but when it does it feels good.

Stuart Davies

AH, YES, BUT . . . A few thoughts on the objects vs people debate

In the pages of *SHCG News* an important and long overdue debate has at last opened up. Through the review of a seminar held in Leeds, written by Bill Jones and Nick Mansfield published in *News* 14, and the angry reply from Ron Fitzgerald, the Keeper of Armley Mills Museum, Leeds, published in *News* 15, an old dichotomy of view on the purpose and direction of museums has been vividly brought to our attention.

I expect like many readers, I was not at the seminar and, for my sins, I have not visited Armley Mills. Therefore it is inappropriate and even irrelevant to get into the detail of the argument, whatever it was that did or did not happen. However the drift and divergence of the points made are fundamental to the orientation of curatorship and the social and intellectual roles of museums.

On the one hand, there is the belief that museums are equivalent to libraries of objects: visitors come to read the 'texts'. On the other, is the view that the museum has to be a social recorder and interpreter, where objects are held as part of a record of human experience and expression: the visitor is provided with the opportunity to reclaim or rediscover something of the past that more formal histories have conventionally omitted. Within each of these perspectives there are specific ranges of questions posed about the past and hence underlying convictions about the object as evidence of it. Equally there are ranges of questions that are ignored, abandoned or left unconsidered. Similarly each of these views operates from a set of fundamental assumptions that need regular challenging and re-examination if they are to remain valid and relevant. I am sure that these issues and many others will be explored in the forthcoming seminar *What about the workers?*, to be held by the Ironbridge Institute at the Science Museum on 2 November.

There is one aspect of the comments made by Ron Fitzgerald in *News* 15 that I believe should be explored by SHCG, either through the pages of the *News*, or at future study weekends. It is the use of visitor figure to validate or exonerate a point of view and a specific curatorial approach. The truth is that we know relatively little about what draws people to museums and what they get out of them. What research is available to us would appear to suggest that visitors have a fairly low expectation of museums. Because of this, people will visit museums, taking a fairly uncritical stance on what they see. Too seldom are visitors offered the standard of exhibition and service that could indicate to them that they have the right to expect much better from museums. Although this is beginning to change.

This lack of criticism and direct response from visitors leads to a number of assumptions, not necessarily justly held. The first of these is that the public are a uniform mass of people who are of like mind to the people who put the museum together. The second is that the visitor is there to receive the information and absorb the view offered by the museum. The third is that the public is satisfied with what is on offer and therefore implicitly cannot or will not cope with more challenging subjects or ideas (by which I do not mean longer labels). Each of these are essentially flawed assumptions. They are however fairly common, almost to the point of being reflex reactions.

The fact that a museum receives 2,000 visitors in a week-end may mean a host of things. The weather, alternative leisure or recreational facilities locally, popular identification with the museum or its subject, media attention, publicity campaigns, school holidays and changes in the curriculum, what is on the telly or who is playing whom at home, plus a range of other variables will contribute to the circumstances in which a visit is made. Maybe if a museum's services or direction were different the visitor numbers would be doubled, and maybe they would be halved.

COMING EVENTS

10 February 1988 : WOMEN IN MUSEUMS A Museums Association/W.H.A.M. Seminar, Leicester Museum

An analysis of the MUSEUMS UK DATABASE shows that women occupy the lower echelons of the museum service and relatively few hold the senior posts. Why is this? Do women in museums suffer from lack of opportunity or lack of ambition? Or is the museum world lagging behind in offering working practices which enable women to achieve fulfilment both at work and at home?

This day seminar will begin with a detailed analysis of the position of women in museums as illustrated by Database and comparisons will be drawn with women in similar professions. The problems which women face in managing their careers and combining work and family responsibilities will be examined, together with the options available to achieve their personal goals. The two workshop sessions, 'Equal opportunities - translating policy into practice' and 'Alternatives to 9-5' will enable delegates to discuss these key issues with a variety of speakers.

(Contact: Mark Taylor, The Museums Association, 34 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2SF)

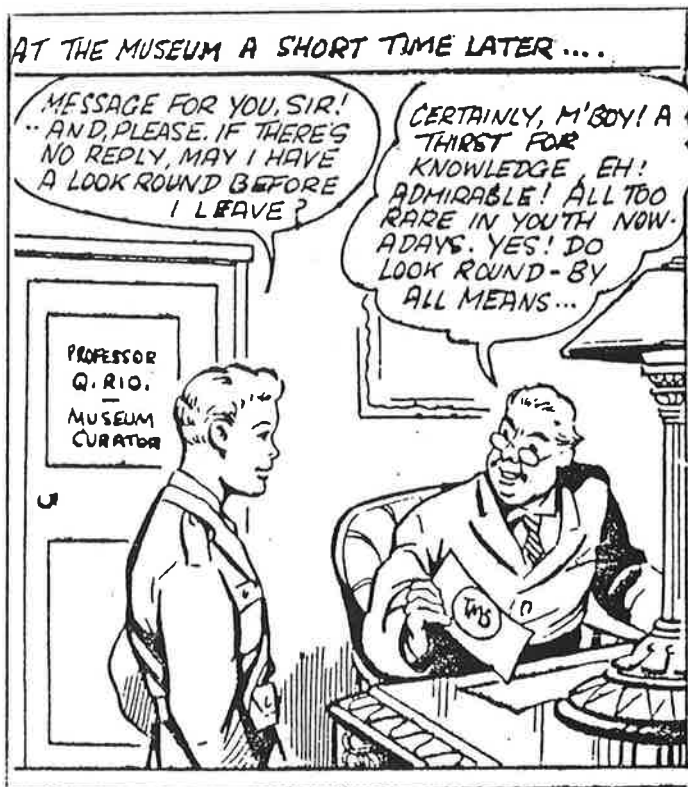
25-26 March 1988 : "OPENING DOORS" "WOMEN'S ACCESS TO MUSEUMS" W.H.A.M. Conference, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery and Bristol University

The first day of the third annual W.H.A.M. conference is an activity day in which the organisers hope to encourage mothers, carers and toddlers from the Bristol area to come to the Museum to find out how much fun a visit can be. Activities throughout the day will include a museum trail, hands-on experiences and an information pack on getting the most out of your museum visit. It is hoped that conference participants, who will act as helpers, will be encouraged to organise something similar in their own areas.

The W.H.A.M. National General Meeting will be held at 6.00 pm at Clifton Hill House, Constitution Hill, Clifton. It will be followed by the annual dinner at 8.00 pm.

Saturday's workshops, which will be held at Clifton Hill House, will discuss issues of great relevance to all museum professionals. Topics include Women as museum friends and volunteers, Museums and the G.C.S.E. examinations, Physical access, Museums and the pre-school child, Access or Outreach, Access to carers in museums. A creche will be available throughout the conference.

(Contact: Sue Giles or Sarah Levitt, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Queens Road, Bristol BS8 1RL or Kate Brown, Blaise Castle House Museum, Henbury, Bristol BS10 7QS)



Number of visitors is an odd and unreliable barometer of the museum's ability to communicate or to be relevant. When a museum has an all important admissions charge, then the number of visitors is of course essential information. However, the figures only become to any degree meaningful in terms of what the museum actually achieves, if they are accompanied by the sort of detailed research that begins to reveal visitor expectation, reaction and recall of a museum visit.

Through *SHCG News*, it would be interesting to hear members' views and experiences of this numbers game.

Gaynor Kavanagh
(Department of Museum Studies,
University of Leicester)

WEST MIDLANDS SOCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS RESEARCH UNIT

Three pilot project publications from W.M.S.I.H.C.R.U. are not available from the West Midlands Area Museum Service, c/o Avoncroft Museum of Buildings, Bromsgrove B60 4JR. 0527-72258

1. Classified Index (SHIC) of seven collections in the West Midlands (£4.50)
2. Simple name index of seven collections in the West Midlands (£4.50)
3. Termlist derived from the computerised records of seven collections in the West Midlands (£3.00)

