

A POSITIVE CAULDRON OF CULTURAL ACTIVITY

This issue of SHCG News is even bigger and better. It contains more and it has an exciting new look for the 1990s. Forget Neville Brody and his imitators. The revamped News comes from the design studio at the Summerlee Heritage Trust, Coatbridge near Glasgow, and a vast improvement it is too.

Also in Glasgow, City of Culture, was this year's Museums Association Conference.

According to the pre-conference publicity this was supposed to "take place in a positive cauldron of cultural activity". I never discovered exactly what they had in mind, but the phrase may have referred to the session organised by SHCG. Two of the papers delivered there are published in this edition of the News. Unfortunately, plans to include a free Puccini flexi disc to accompany David Fleming's essay on Class have been abandoned due to escalating production costs.

This issue also includes reviews of the 1990 Annual Study weekend and the usual conglomeration of news and views. The new format enables us to include more pictures. So, please send in black and white photographs of your activities and exhibitions.

If they're not included, it's because you haven't sent them.



Getting people involved in museums? Gordon Spokes, Stan Dossdale & Ray Gibbins at the Old Grammar School, Hull. © T.C. / Yorkshire Post

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR

We are trying to look at the question of how you 'exploit' heritage and how that ties in with economic development strategies that are being promoted particularly by local authorities. They all, now, have to have a 'heritage strategy' and we all want to see what aspects of heritage are being picked up on in that" - Sue Wilkinson of Newcastle University's Centre for Urban and regional Development Studies, as quoted in the Journal newspaper in October this year, explaining why CURDS had organised a major workshop entitled 'Heritage, Image and Economic Development'. This was attended by over 80 planners, tourism officers, academics, curators and elected members, who debated the image being created to encourage tourists and relocating businesses to come to Newcastle upon Tyne, and the place within that image of the 'heritage', or history of the city.

Does a vibrant history make a place attractive to tourists, but unattractive to businesses? The answer is important, because if this is true, local authorities like Newcastle City Council may turn away from investment in and support for museum development: not all local authorities believe that the sometimes indeterminate benefits of a tourism industry are preferable to the employment statistics brought by Nissan, or Komatsu, or Mitsubishi, or waves of smaller employers. The debate in Newcastle emphasises that the issues of real history vs confectioned heritage, and the value of museums (and similar) to the local economy are very real. For those of you who thought that this issue had gone away, think again. This is a burning issue, and may be one we address at the 1991 MA Conference.

Sue Underwood,
Chair, S.H.C.G.

INSIDE

*Collaboration or
Appropriation?*

The Miles Tae Dundee

People are the Driving Force

Class - The Final Frontier

In Print - Listings and more ...

COLLABORATION OR APPROPRIATION?

Collaboration in Contemporary Documentation,
V & A, 26th June 1990

The day long seminar was introduced by John Murdoch, Assistant Director of the V & A. We were all reminded why we were at the seminar, to discuss collaboration in contemporary documentation. The V & A hosted the seminar because the museum, in collaboration with Middlesex Polytechnic, had recently opened an exhibition called 'Household Choices'. This was a photographic exhibition which explored the choices people make in designing their own home interiors, and purported to bring into question both the intention of the designer and the standard collecting policy of the V & A (indeed of all decorative art curatorship.)

The conference combined an intriguing mixture of approaches to contemporary documentation from a wide variety of museums. The photographic project done by Richard Raby, Simon Buckley and Yin Yin for Oldham Art Gallery on the Chinese Community in Manchester showed how important it was to build confidence in the community about the project. They also stressed the importance of ensuring the work did not marginalise the community.

Denise Braice explained the genesis of the People's Story, Edinburgh, a museum which tells of the lives of the ordinary people in the Scottish Capital up to and including the present day. She emphasised the possibilities in contemporary documentation for recording those aspects of life which material evidence and traditional methods of collection neglect. Aspects, for example, like unemployment, which is an experience of loss and of lacking things.

Eileen Gordon talked about the various and ingenious projects which had been initiated at Springburn Community Museum in Glasgow. She expressed the importance of community involvement in any contemporary documentation project, and emphasised this by giving examples of self-documentation projects which the museum had encouraged. Two 'collaborative' projects were also presented. "The Real Lives Project", a collaboration amongst Scottish Museums to document the working lives of people living in Scotland, was presented by Carol Haddow. It had stemmed from a desire to systematise contemporary collection in Scotland. Each museum involved took on a proportion of the project equal to their resources. While it was admitted that there were problems with the collaboration, particularly that the project was taken over by the well resourced museums, the result was a comprehensive survey of working life in Scotland and a high quality exhibition for a fraction of the cost.

The other collaborative project presented was the "Household Choices" exhibition, a collaboration between the V & A and Middlesex Polytechnic. The exhibition grew from the idea that "houses are built, while homes are made".

illustrations :

*this page • from the "Working Lives" exhibition
opposite page • Sukhminda Athwal
dresses a dummy in her own wedding sari
for the "Miles Tae Dundee" exhibition*

Charles Newton who curated the exhibition with Tim Puttnam of Middlesex Polytechnic, pointed out that the history of design is deficient because there is no record of the use of designs. Household Choices, an exhibition of documentary work in progress, was the V & A's answer to this gap in the historical record. While much of the seminar was taken up with case studies, perhaps one of the most useful of the presentations was that of Gareth Griffiths. Seeking to evaluate the methods and objectives of contemporary documentation, he stressed the need



to set clear aims and objectives for each documentary project so that anyone interpreting the material would have an understanding of the curator's bias. He also pointed out that the choice of media by which information would be recorded was crucial to the success of the completed project. Clearly anyone who is thinking of setting up any project of contemporary documentation has to ask themselves three questions; who is the archive being recorded for? How will the archive be used? and How might the audience react to the chosen media? Gareth Griffiths managed to put the case studies into a perspective, alongside other forms of documentary work, and also encouraged a firmer methodology amongst museum work. He stressed the need for wider collaboration between Universities, Polytechnics, Research Institutes and

Museums and related institutions, something which Tim Puttnam also called for in the discussion which followed. But while the seminar in general approached the problems of contemporary documentation in its wide varieties it neglected a vital area of collaboration, that between the collecting institution and the people involved. Surely this is the most important collaboration.

Little was said about the importance of the engagement and empowering of museum users or the subjects of contemporary documentation, though the work done at Springburn and the 'People's Story' certainly showed this to be true. This failure of vision was expressed clearly in the discussion of the 'Household Choices' exhibition. The exhibition, John Murdoch claimed, was "an attempt to question the intentionality of the designer", not to document the choices of the people. The exhibition was effectively a collaboration between the institutions, seemingly against its subject, those individuals who had been documented. Clearly a collaboration of the worst kind. John Murdoch's plea against this criticism to develop "a dialogue within this non-marriage", will not be heard until a commitment to the collaboration between institution and subject is developed. Otherwise documentary material merely becomes a trophy, the collaboration simply an appropriation.

Tim Corum City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent.

THE MILES TAE DUNDEE

the multi cultural history of a city and its people

*"Cauld winter was howling
O'er muir and o'er mountain
And wild was the surge on the dark rolling sea
When I met about daybreak a bonnie young lassie
Wha' asked me the road
And the miles tae Dundee"*

The Miles Tae Dundee is a traditional Scottish folk song and Dundee is in many ways the archetypal traditional Scottish city. Our latest exhibition project, however, sought to discover the hidden history of the city and to probe its enormous cultural diversity.

The Miles Tae Dundee looked at the growth of the city over the last 150 years from the point of view of the groups and individuals who have moved there from all over the world and who have formed the city into the entity it is today. The project has included the formation of photographic and oral archives and the collection of artefacts. A lay 'exhibition support group' was set up to involve local people in the project and together we produced a museum exhibition, 14 community displays, a book, multi-lingual leaflets, and a 9-week events programme.

In many ways the project reflected a growing feeling among people in the city that there's more to Dundee's history than the jute, jam and journalism cliché which unfortunately we still hear. It also reflects a feeling that civic history is made up of the experiences of individual people and groups of people rather than of amorphous terms such as trade, industry and political life.

The project was developed at a time when staff at the Museum were becoming aware of the need to attract a wider audience than we had previously relied on. Our visitor profile like that of many other museums was, and still is, biased towards social classes A and B. Many people when questioned said they thought the Art Galleries intimidating and high brow. One response by the museum service has been the appointment of a trained Community Education worker to work in museum outreach. Another has been the development of exhibitions which involve the public much more closely in all stages of their development so that a lot more people will find the museum does have 'something for them'. One group who could find little to represent their culture and history in the museum permanent displays were members of ethnic and national minorities in the city. And yet over the last one hundred and fifty years people have come to live in Dundee from all over the British Isles, Europe and Asia. In that period the city has had significant Irish, English, German, Russian, Polish, Jewish, Ukrainian, Italian, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese communities. It should be stated at the outset that while we accept that there is always a perceived or dominant culture in any community, the whole point of the project has been to demolish the idea that there is a

single cultural identity. Rather the project celebrates the range and diversity of cultures which together make up Dundee and give us the sub-title "... the multi-cultural history of a city and its people". What we have found we can talk about is not a common identity but a common experience. Whoever you are, wherever you come from there are common experiences in moving from one place to another. Why people move how they get there, finding a home or a job, settling down and subsequent life in the city are all common themes. So while the events programme is themed on cultural basis with its Chinese week, Italian weeks and so on, the exhibition does not seek to single out national or cultural groups at all, but deals with common experiences and above all with people. I stated earlier that one major aim was to involve people in the project. All too often museum staff decide

the exhibition theme and content and present the result to the visiting public on "culture". In this project one of the most interesting, and to me, delightful aspects of the exhibition is that to a great extent the content, form and delivery of the project has lain in the hands of the members of the public. Their contribution has been vital.

So what did we actually do?

We began by simply talking to people. We had to, much of the history is not available in books or museum collections or if it is, only on a national level. From there we progressed to collecting individual stories, photographs and momentos. As

research progressed it soon became clear that much of the exhibition's interest would be personal stories with which the public could identify. In the spring of 1989 we formed an exhibition support group made up of people we had met who we thought would enjoy being involved in the exhibition, who would have something to contribute or who were representative of various communities in the city. The group met monthly until December 1989, membership was about 25 and attendance at meetings varied between 4 and 16. The group had 2 main functions, firstly to advise and act as a soundingboard for the content and form of the exhibition, secondly to act as contacts for the formation of exhibition groups who would put together the final part of the exhibition, namely the community displays. As time went by and the Miles Tae Dundee became one of the themes of the Dundee City festival they also acted as advisors and organisers for the festival events programme and the festival parade. Members of the Tayside Interpretation Project sat in on the exhibition group and their help became invaluable once the decision to translate the exhibition into 5 languages other than English was taken.

The exhibition covered 3 Galleries in the McManus Galleries. It had a nine week run from June until August, 1990. It was divided into 5 main sections.

The first section was a light hearted introduction. It made two main points - everyone moves at some time and people have moved to Dundee from all over the world. It also included



posters, cartoons and a free prize draw in which your 'exhibition passport' or leaflet was stamped - 1st prize was a meal for 2 in a restaurant of the winner's choice.

The second section looked at Dundee's historic trade links with the rest of the world, particularly with the Baltic, Ireland and India. This is the most 'museumy' part of the display and allowed us to display part of the museum collections.

The third and largest section was very closely based on the oral history research we did. It looked at the reason people have moved to Dundee such as marriage, employment, war, persecution and education. In each section a general point is illustrated by the stories of living Dundonians.

Because we found it difficult to use individual artefacts meaningfully in this section we created a series of reconstructions which illustrated a series of stories. We personalised the stories but although in each case the reconstructions were based on factual information, the characters themselves were fictional. So we had Robert and Anne from rural Perthshire in 1865 (based on census records), Kateryna a Ukrainian volunteer worker in a hostel room in 1948 (newspaper and oral accounts) and Mohammed Din a Punjabi jute worker (several oral history accounts).

The fourth section reinforced the messages of the third section and allowed the visitor to discover more information in a series of participatory games.

Sink or Swim was a computer game which invited adults to find out how they would fare if they moved to Dundee's twin town, Wurzburg. It was produced in collaboration with the Dundee Institute of Technology one of whose HND's students produced it as his final year project. *All Around the World* was aimed at children and encouraged them to discover how everyday things we take for granted have more exotic origins. *Di' Ye Ken Dundee* told the little known origins of some of the city's street names and buildings. A video using many of the photographs and oral history interviews from the project played continuously.

The fifth part of the exhibition was a series of community displays. We took a gallery and partitioned it off to give a series of 'trade stands'. We then asked groups to put up displays on a loosely based theme of "The Way We Are Today". The subject and the content were left up to them although assistance with the design and installation was given by museum staff. They produced a series of colourful and attractive displays some of which were almost of a professional standard. A few examples were 'A wee bit o' Poland' - a Polish living room in Dundee; The Arts and Crafts of India, A Jewish Passover scene, and "*From Bombay to Dundee*", a photographic comparison of street life in Bombay and Dundee.

The stands included work by four schools who were approached over a year previously. The schools were from different parts of the city and looked at different topics. Like the adults, the children were able to come down and put up their own work in the museum. The main exhibition was translated into 5 languages. These were Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Punjabi and Hakka (Chinese). This decision was taken to encourage members of the public who did not read English well, to visit the exhibition and were, in the opinion of the support group, the most useful languages to have. It is an enormous task to contemplate but not so difficult to put into practice, and multiplying the text by 5 does wonders for your label length!

Similarly, our promotional material was multi-lingual and the exhibition acted as a catalyst on us to produce our main museum promotional material in a multi-lingual form. As the exhibition group pointed out, you can't expect people to come to a one-off exhibition if they've never heard of you. So our multi-

lingual museum leaflets went out in the spring to be followed a couple of months later by the Miles Tae Dundee leaflets. The main leaflets were part funded by our Equal Opportunities Unit.

The nine weeks of the exhibition included an events programme of almost 60 activities. Each week focused on a particular culture. The first week was Chinese week and included a Dragon dance outside the museum, calligraphy and a vegetable carving and noodle-making demonstration. Each week one event was repeated at the Central Library where we hope to attract new audiences who might not otherwise think of coming to the Museum.

The events were extremely popular. Not one flopped and we had to put up house-full sign for all the food-tastings! Many of the events have been suggested and staged by members of the local community who used their own skills and who were pleased to be able to demonstrate them in the Museum. Many people did not even take expenses. Other performers were brought in as part of and were funded by the Dundee City Festival who built part of the 1990 Festival around the theme of the Miles Tae Dundee. Miles Tae Dundee was also adapted as the theme of the Festival Parade and somewhat to our embarrassment the Arts and Leisure Division float, staffed by various members of the exhibition group, won first prize. There were, I hasten to add, 50 other entries. The work of the project has not disappeared with the close of the exhibition. Apart from the permanent photographic and oral archives an 80 page book has been produced which looks at the growth of the city over the last 150 years together with six individual stories taken from the oral history archive.

A brief assessment of the exhibition is probably appropriate. We had two main aims, firstly to put on a successful exhibition and secondly to attract a new audience.

The exhibition was certainly successful. Visitor figures were up 50% on the same period last year. People seemed to like it, largely because they were drawn into the personal stories. Visitors spent longer than usual in the gallery and we got a lot of positive comments. We also got very good press coverage. Did we attract a new audience? Well almost everyone who was interviewed, who joined the group, who put in a display or who lent us material were not museum goers. Nor were their families. There was an increase in the number of visitors who were from the ethnic minorities.

Other benefits have included the establishment of excellent relations with the Tayside Interpretation Service who we will use again and generally a network of contacts and friends that the museum did not have previously.

What problem and failures were there? Firstly we lacked initial support from colleagues, directors and design officers who thought it "a difficult subject", "worthy" (aka boring), "two-dimensional" and even more damningly "sociological". Tayside Region's policy of not highlighting ethnic differences in schools meant we had to form our own contacts with head-teachers rather than use established channels: Secondly we did not achieve all our aims. Some communities we approached were less enthusiastic than others and were probably underrepresented in the project. It took a long time to establish contacts and largely because of these two reasons a plan to make oral recordings in language other than English failed miserably. Because of the projects' huge scope we could not cover all the areas, such as for instance second generations, that we had hoped to.

For us, the exhibition, in both its subject area and its development broke new ground. It is probably best to regard it as a starting point from which we can continue further.

PEOPLE ARE THE DRIVING FORCE

Getting People Involved in Museums

SHCG Annual Study Weekend 20 - 22 September 1990

'Demographically Destroying Ourselves' *(Thursday and Friday.)*

Is there anybody out there??

This year's Annual Study Weekend aimed to take a look at the population of Britain and explore ways in which people 'out there' might be persuaded to get involved in museums. The theme of participation was echoed in the structure of the weekend with plenty of practical activities and discussion, which made a refreshing change.

After a comprehensive tour of the 'sights and sounds and smells' of Hull the conference formally started with a civic reception at the impressive new Transport Museum, which is heavily social history oriented and puts the people back into transport. Money does not seem to be a problem in Hull and the warmth of the welcome offered by the mayor and, particularly, the chair of the Cultural Services Committee, confirmed that the museums' political masters are firmly committed to their city's culture and heritage.

The first full day began with an introduction by Liz Frostick. She drew attention to the parallel growth of interest in 'people in history' and 'people in museums', but observed that while many curators are happy to jump onto the people-centred band wagon, few have paused to consider where it might be going. We all have a vision of the people we serve but is that vision accurate? Who is really out there? How do we diagnose which 'community' to target?

The first speaker, A.H. Halsey, Professor of Social and Administrative Studies at The University of Oxford, addressed some of these questions in a stimulating and provocative look at demographic trends in Britain today. His paper included a number of unsettling pronouncements.

As curators our concerns should focus on the area of CULTURAL reproduction which is undergoing some profound changes, thanks to the growth in the number of one parent families. (Today 27% of babies are born 'out of wedlock', a sixfold increase since the war). Apparently it was the kitchen education we enjoyed as infants which made us curators what we are today, it was our mothers who encouraged our linguistic skills and curiosity about culture. Feminists may argue what they may, but in today's society of single parents and working mothers child socialization is simply not what is used to be, to the detriment of cultural appreciation.

If this news were not worrying enough Professor Halsey made another announcement: "Britain is in the process of demographically destroying itself". Museums are documenting a dying civilisation because our TFR (Total Period Fertility Rate) is too low, women are only having 1.88 children as opposed to the necessary 2.1, thus the population is doomed to decline.

The low birth rate and the demise of kitchen culture are both born of Western society's central psychological characteristic: the primacy of the individual. This phenomenon can be traced back at least as far as the Angles but its increasing influence across all cultures threatens the very survival of the species. Only if women once more become 'slaves' can we hope to avoid this.

Professor Halsey is clearly an experienced speaker who likes to bait his audience but I found it disconcerting having to

distinguish between what may have been said as a 'tease' and what was born of genuine conviction, particularly in a man so influential. He later admitted that the feminisation of men may ease the child socialisation problem and immigration could replenish Britain's falling population, and that the history of demography is the history of spectacular mistakes, (fingers crossed).

He moved on from birth to old age and explored the 'Theory of the Third Age' which may have more immediate relevance for curators. Basically this theory considers the increasing proportion of over 65 year olds, and the fact that most younger people now expect to live to a reasonably solvent and healthy old age. Together this amounts to a collective consciousness which may have some social and political influence, perhaps enough to win older people an 'aristocratic' way of life, the freedom to enjoy leisure and learning without having to work. The concept of Britain as a 'Third Age Nation' is a complex one and its significance for museums goes beyond simply marketing for 'WHOOPIES', older people having a great deal to offer in terms of skills and experience. Not surprisingly, however, discussion after the talk tended to focus on the future of humanity with Professor Halsey maintaining that the falling population could pose a threat even more serious than the dislocation of the environment. When challenged he denied that he was blaming women specifically for this and assured us that he does still believe in democracy.

Kenneth Hudson brought us back onto more familiar ground in a paper which looked closely at the relationship between the curator and the public. Drawing on numerous European examples he contrasted the approach of different countries towards volunteers. In his view it is 'outsiders' who do the best work in museums and he is wary of any British 'Certificate of Competence' which, if introduced, might result in some kind of professional closed shop.

In a similar vein he criticized didactic exhibitions. For the curator to presume to tell the public what to think, he stated, is both impertinent and arrogant. Displays should be impressionistic, hitting peoples hearts and stomachs before their heads. The images may have to shock - he cited the example of a Russian exhibition last year which looked at the Nazi Soviet pact. This had to be powerful if it was to shake fixed received ideas. Exhibitions should address relevant, even controversial issues. Why does the Chernobyl factor not appear in the Science Museum, or acid rain in the Natural History Museum? In discussion later he admitted that curators can face difficult choices in such situations but Ian Lawley pointed out that self-censorship can be the worst form.

Much of his paper suggested that we should be prepared to meet people half way. There are too many museums and people have too many other things to do, so why not hook museums onto other magnets like The Bewleys Cafe Museum in Dublin or the Gardening Museum at Harrogate Botanical Gardens. He had recently visited a newly created museum which had been dropped onto the small island community of Pico in the Azores. This could only survive if it developed as a social centre, perhaps with a cafe attached (the V & A's advert was mistaken only in terms of scale). In such a situation much would depend on the personality of the curator. A beautiful priest can attract a large congregation, is there anything immoral in that? A welcoming, innovative curator could have the same effect. While Hudson seemed keen to do away with any airs and graces curators may have, he still saw their role as crucial. He described the Jokkmakk Museum in Northern Sweden which illustrates how the Lapps (or

Sami people) have been exploited by the Swedes. The curator would have liked to change the emphasis, showing what Lapps could do rather than how they suffered as victims, but the Lapps own pressure group would not allow this. With regard to pressure groups here, Hudson looks forward to the day when ethnic groups are portrayed honestly, with warts and all, rather than being placed on cultural pedestals. Not surprisingly he was challenged on this. Is there not a case for redressing the balance, countering racism with positive images? Hudson replied that if a group of individuals were asked to describe themselves the curator would hear a variety of different views, he or she must then act as the 'referee' and select a representative picture. It was ironic that, after attacking the closed shop and championing the outsider, by the time we broke for lunch we were back to the professional acting as gate keeper.

Both morning talks were stimulating. I am not sure I understand demography any better than I did but I am wondering about how Museums reflect changing relationships and the rise of the individual. (The 'real people' appearing in our exhibitions through oral history or via costumed interpreters are real because they are personal, individual...).

I attended the Beaver Arts Theatre Workshop in the afternoon which required me not only to think, but to prowl, yell and create a shadow puppet show. More than anything else this reminded me how rewarding group creativity can be. Mark O'Neill's workshop considered how to devise exhibitions with community groups. Again it was amazing to see what imaginative project ideas came out when 'brainstorming' against the clock in small motivated groups. I understand that the 'Needleworks' bannermaking Session was also a great success, thanks largely to the inspiring qualities of Clare Higney. The video workshop was informative despite the fact that the equipment broke down. Peter Lewis's 'Everything you do is a portrait of yourself' was interesting, but less participative.

I was extremely sorry to have to leave the conference at the end of the first day but was already convinced that working with people was not only necessary but extremely rewarding.

Siobhan Kirrane Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries.

Getting People Involved in Museums : II

Access and accessibility (Saturday & Sunday)

The final day and a half of the A.S.W. gave us a chance to examine the real nitty gritty of "getting people involved in Museums" particularly the practicalities and problems of access and accessibility.

As social history curators we are all too well aware of how museums may give access to some potential visitors while excluding others. Some problems are obvious - people with disabilities may be physically excluded, people with no adequate transport may be effectively excluded, and even people whose working day coincides with opening hours may be inadvertently excluded. Other problems are more difficult to evaluate and solve - the sometimes unnoticed exclusion of sections of society because of their age, or youth, lack of education or inability to find anything in the Museum of relevance to their own culture or experience.

The papers, discussions and visits of Saturday and Sunday did much to clarify the issues at stake and to offer very honest and practical ideas as to how we might tackle them. In general we concentrated on the problems of intellectual access rather than physical, though this was certainly discussed. Three main suggestions seemed to come to the fore - firstly, targeting selected groups of people for involvement in specific museum projects; secondly, carrying out market research to identify people's requirements and expectations; and, thirdly, improving the relevance and accessibility of displays to visitors in general. Targeting was shown to be a very effective way of giving particular access to groups who might not usually consider themselves "museum-worthy". This can be done in many different ways and with a variety of different groups. Rachel Halstead told of her work to make Bruce Castle Museum (which, as its name implies, is set in an old-established "country" house) relevant to the ethnically diverse population of Britain's sixth poorest borough. A photographic project was commissioned to produce images of members of the Afro-Caribbean population in Tottenham for the Museum's permanent collection. By giving the photographer and photographed considerable editorial control over the production and use of the images, a basis of trust and communication was built up between the Museum and the black community which led to a very successful exhibition. Furthermore, the new contacts made could lead to further involvement and collaboration in the future. Sue Giles drew our attention to a group which often goes unnoticed even in the most forward-looking museums - the under-fives and their carers. She described how, for a day, a great Edwardian institution (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery) became "open house" to six thousand noisy toddlers! The obvious popularity of the event reflected the effectiveness of the advertising and the success of a sponsorship deal with a local bus company to provide transport from the poorer areas of the City. Though Sue was quick to point out that not all of the activities worked perfectly, some very good ideas were discussed from the use of story tellers and toddler trails (to help adults interpret galleries for children) down to the provision of toddler steps given by Boots, and a buggy park!

Youth culture has become an important part of the social history brief in recent years and many exhibitions have explored its origins and impact. However, few curators will have worked so closely, and so bravely (!), with a mixture of pensioners, Punks and Skinheads as Carol Haddow when "Teenage Kicks" was produced at Alloa Museum. Carol outlined how these groups contributed to the setting up of their own exhibition, and in particular how she approached and gradually built up a rewarding relationship with a group of young men who, despite their menacing appearance and reputation, were "just like everyone else really". After a sceptical start, their enthusiasm increased rapidly, almost to the point of excluding others, but in doing so they were able to develop artistic and communicative talents which had previously been kept hidden. During the exercise traditional barriers and customs were broken down, not least the abandoning of wine in favour of cans of lager at the opening!

The importance of involving members of the public to produce good social history exhibitions was further demonstrated by more examples from Scotland. Helen Clarke and Denise Brace gave papers about the development and launch of the People's Story in Edinburgh and in particular showed how much of the 'Story' is shown through the lives of real individuals based on the testimony of the members of the Museum reminiscence group. Not only does the recounting of real memories provide first hand source material from which to work, but, in many cases,

it gives the contributors a new personal identity and sense of self esteem. For some, their 'ordinary' lives have been made important and valuable for the first time.

Finally, two members' papers showed how targeting various groups in society resulted in the production of the exhibitions "Miles Tae Dundee" at Dundee Art Galleries and Museum, and "Telling Tales" at Stoke-on-Trent City Museum. In the first example, Janice Murray and David Stockdale described how they worked with representatives of the various ethnic groups that have shaped Dundee's modern history, and created an exhibition reflecting the city's diverse cultural heritage. In the second, Tim Corum explained how individuals and organised groups from Stoke's six original towns were given an opportunity to tell their own "tales" using a variety of media, including home video. The issues represented ranged from the remembrance of a late husband to the campaign against the Poll Tax. These examples illustrate how specific targeting can be a very exciting and rewarding way of approaching the public. As many of the speakers indicated, it is not for the faint hearted and involves a high degree of personal involvement and commitment from all those involved. The main concern expressed, however, was how to maintain the interest of each targeted group after its "honeymoon" with the museum is over. There is clearly no easy answer to this, but at least in breaking down the initial barriers, the individuals involved may feel that have greater access to the museum in the future and be less wary of joining the ranks of "museum visitors".

To keep people coming back to our museums it is important to make them as attractive and accessible as possible to a wide cross section of people, not only targeted groups. But just how do we find out what our visitors, and particularly our non-visitors want? Two papers addressed this problem and suggested how professional qualitative market research on the one hand, and small visitor surveys on the other, can help us to find out.

Firstly, Sally MacDonald gave a fascinating paper about the research commissioned by the Borough of Croydon prior to the opening of a new museum and arts complex in 1993. The survey was mainly directed at non-visitors and many of the findings are very enlightening, not least the fact that many interviewees found the worst aspect of the proposed museum was that it would be administered by the local council which they vehemently distrusted. Secondly, a large distinction was made between museums, on the one hand, and art galleries on the other, the latter being seen as particularly high brow and irrelevant.

When it came to what people said they wanted there was general agreement that the Museum should be comfortable and welcoming, a place to socialise where visitors would be treated as guests. (The view from the floor was that perhaps these should be made conditions of Registration!). On many issues, however, there was great diversity of opinion, particularly between the old and the young. The former wanted exhibits that were "real" and "reassuring" while younger interviewees preferred to be "disorientated" and "shocked" and learn new skills (including martial arts and motor bike maintenance) rather than look at old things. When the work from Croydon is eventually written up its results should be of great value to many museums. However, it was an expensive exercise and one which cannot be repeated by many museums. As an alternative, Fiona Matheson of Newcastle Polytechnic and N.E.M.S. explained how effective research can be carried out on a small scale by museum staff themselves. Her practical suggestions will help to turn the nebulous visitor survey into something effective and useful. In particular she stressed the need to set out very specific aims and objectives on the outset, to run pilots to test the appropriateness of questions and in the end

to believe the results even if they are unexpected. Finally it is often advisable to offer interviewees an incentive to co-operate - a prize draw for instance.

The third way in which we can serve to make museums more accessible to our visitors is by increasing the relevance and intellectual approachability of the exhibitions themselves. As Liz Frostick explained, the usual chronological history exhibition often expects the visitor to come in off the street and make a quantum leap into some remote century, which is difficult even for those with a clear knowledge of history. Far better to engage the visitor at a level which is relevant to his or her own experience, for instance, "The Story of Hull and its People" uses the personal life cycle common to all of us as its frame of reference, and contrasts how at each stage, individual experience differs according to time and environment. This exhibition, like the People's Story in Edinburgh breaks down initial barriers by portraying the lives of real people in a way that is identifiable for all of us.

Another example of divergence from straight chronology was discussed by Sam Mullins who showed slides (a few of which were the right way round!) of the new social history display at St. Albans. This follows the days of week. Experiences and activities are grouped together according to the days when they would traditionally have been carried out. This again makes a direct connection between the exhibition and everyday life, engaging the visitor at a personal level.

In conclusion, the papers and visits of Saturday and Sunday were mainly concerned with the practicalities of increasing accessibility to museums by targeting, market research and making exhibitions personally engaging. Much of the work that has already been done is very exciting and serves to encourage those of us looking for new inspiration to increase access to our own museums. However, it is one thing to sit in agreement with other social history curators at the A.S.W. and quite another to go back to work where those holding the power and the purse strings may be as yet "unconverted". But while some examples illustrated are probably at the forefront of innovation in history curatorship, it is well to remember (as Sally MacDonald pointed out) that bridges can also be built between the museum and visitor simply by increasing the attractiveness of the visiting experience as a whole. As a final example, Elizabeth St. Hill Davies showed how this was achieved with the redisplay of Stevenage Museum, thus compensating for its rather ugly exterior! By changing the entrance hall, the decor and lighting, and introducing interactive displays, the character as well as the content of the building was radically improved. And how many museums, like Stevenage, have a large and very popular "Welcome" mat! As a post script, however the final paper of the ASW took us away from the main theme of the weekend to a new problem - that of political access. Given by Jane Leggett, it outlined how, as Keeper of Leicestershire History, she has become involved with the controversial plans of the fox hunting fraternity to set up their own Museum. It left delegates with much food for thought and posed problems which I think need to be addressed fully at some later date. For instance, how far should museums provide a platform for the controversial views of minority interest groups? And how can a balanced impartial stand-point be maintained if the financial and administrative backing of the museum comes from a biased source? Secondly, should a curator take on the role of censor by making judgements on what is "in the public interest" or does he or she invariably act according to his or her own political views and prejudices? A further problem is that of providing general access to such a controversial museum without compromising public safety. In the case of foxhunting, the security implications

are obvious and it may be that such a project might seek to exclude rather than give access to those it feels will be dangerous...

Thus the issue of access and accessibility is indeed a complex one if viewed in its entirety. The problem of political access is something that will need to be debated further, especially in the light of the new developments in Leicestershire. That withstanding, there is still much to be done to increase visitor access in the ways already described above.

Perhaps before we worry about what, if anything, we should exclude from our museums, we should concentrate far more on what we should include.

Vicki Wood
Central Museum, Northampton

A PRIZE COLLECTION OF DINOSAURS

The genteel calm of the National Trust has been shattered in a bitter row fermented by one of its own council members. Rodney Legg, who is also Chairman of the Open Spaces Society, has accused the Trust of elitism, secrecy and malpractice. According to Legg, the Trust has blocked public footpaths on its estates and has illegally enclosed common land. He also accuses the Trust of concealing its ownership of various important properties, such as Max Gate, a house designed and owned by Thomas Hardy. Even the Ministry of Defence, suggests Rodney Legg, has more idea about preserving the natural landscape - an accusation which acquires even greater irony in the light of the Bradenham Estate Nato Nuclear bunker controversy of 1982. Legg delivered his stinging critique in a speech delivered to mark the 125th anniversary of the formation of the Open Spaces Society. Britain's oldest national conservation organisation, the Society began life in 1865 as the Commons and Footpaths Preservation Society. Its first experience of direct action came a year later, when 120 navvies were employed under cover of dark to remove fencing erected around the common at Berkhamstead by a bumptious local landowner. Thirty years later, CFPS activists such as Octavia Hill were among the founders of the National Trust, established to acquire "open spaces for the people in town and city". This original aim has been betrayed, suggests Legg. Since the launch of the Country House Scheme in 1936, the Trust has been transformed into "a major safety net for preventing the decline and fall of the English Stately home". It has saved parts of "the leisured landscape of the privileged" from extinction at the expense of its founding objectives and ideals. "From being an egalitarian access organisation promoting the public good, the Trust has become an elitist club of art connoisseurs, and defensive in the protection of a prize collection of dinosaurs". This is an accusation that has been voiced before, notably by Patrick Wright and Robert Hewison, but it has never before received so much media attention. That it has substance is borne out by the published diaries of the original architect of the County House Scheme, the snobbish and rather ridiculous James Lees-Milne. To Lees-Milne, and his associates, England's country estates were the embodiment of a superior system of values which were being rapidly eroded by the development of popular democracy. He candidly admitted that he detested the very idea of democracy. To Lees-Milne it merely represented "government by the masses, uncultivated, rancorous, savage, Philistine, the enemies of all things beautiful".

An animated Rodney Legg repeated his accusations on BBC Two's Late Show. Invited to respond, the National Trust's lugubrious director-general Angus Sterling denied that it was deliberate policy to keep the Trust's land off the Ordnance Survey Map. He also promised that the omission of Thomas Hardy's house from the Trust's ownership list would be rectified next year. However, his lacklustre performance was not reassuring. Indeed, Stirling's air of patrician diffidence brought to mind Patrick Wright's remark that the Trust has become "an ethereal

kind of holding company for the dead spirit of the nation". And the two men were not actually brought face to face in the studio. As they could not be more different - Legg passionate and angry, Stirling languid and complacent - viewers were deprived of the opportunity to witness what could have been real theatre.

The self-selected Great and Good are now rallying round to defend the beleaguered Trust. As Legg ruefully remarked to the Independent-on-Sunday, challenging the National Trust "is like criticising God or the Queen". But it is important that it should be challenged, and it is to be hoped that the current controversy will force the Trust to examine its aims and operation more closely. Those who feel that the National Trust postulates a static and unquestioning view of history in many of its properties must hope that the debate is widened to include issues of interpretation and representation. The Trust's old excuse that its houses are not museums, but somehow present their contents in their "natural setting", just will not do. It must answer the serious charge that, in celebrating a narrow and privileged way of life, it has been instrumental in constructing a bogus national identity. It must learn to reject the comforting myth of an organic and harmonious English past and begin to interpret its properties in the context of social and economic change, in the context of real history. Until it does this, the Trust will remain as a chain of ace cafts with some rather dubious properties attached.

Ian Lawley.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

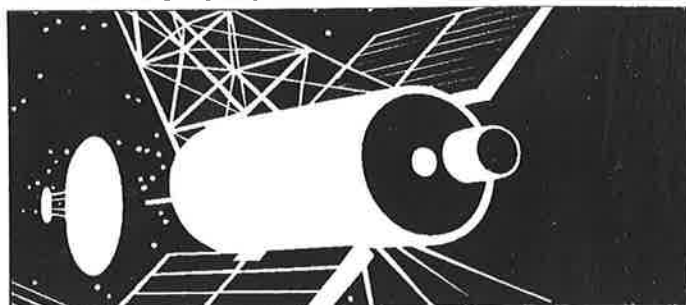
Forget Teenage Hero Mutant Turtles. Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, is back! The lantern-jawed hero with the extraordinary eyebrows is enjoying a new lease of life in the recently resuscitated Eagle Comic. Forty years after his original appearance, he is battling with renewed vigour against the domeheaded Mekon, the evil leader of the green-skinned Treens.

But the rejuvenated hero differs in one vital aspect from the Dan Dare of the 1950s and 1960s. He has become aware of sex! Next year, he will marry Professor Jocelyn Peabody, the lady boffin who has accompanied Dan and his sidekick Digby on countless intergalactic jaunts.

Now Dan is set to enter the heritage industry. In 1991 he will become the subject of a permanent exhibition at Southport in Lancashire. It seems light years away from the futuristic hero's favourite haunts in far off solar systems. Yet it was in a former baker's shed in Churchtown, Southport, that the illustrator Frank Hampson drew the first few frames of the strip cartoon that was to capture the imagination of a whole generation of post-war children. It was here that the perfectionist Hampson and a small team of local artists created the characters which gave lift-off to the original Eagle.

A temporary exhibition, which opened at Southport's Atkinson Gallery in May, has proved so popular that it has been extended until next year. It includes original art work, a reconstruction of the Eagle bake house studio, models, space costumes, toys and other marketing spin-offs, and a 1950s Dan Dare fan's bedroom. Two of the original illustrators who still live locally, Joan Porter and Greta Edwards (who was the model for Professor Peabody) helped in setting up the exhibition, which has seen visitor figures rocket. According to Stephen Forshaw, Keeper of Fine Art at the Atkinson Gallery, visitors have been finely balanced between the original forty-something fans and much younger people attracted by the combination of science fiction and comic book art. It is hoped that part of the exhibition will tour, while the bulk of the display will be given a permanent home in the Botanic Garden Museum at Churchtown, close to the site of the original Eagle Studio.

An illustrated booklet explaining how the Eagle came about is available from the Atkinson Gallery. Its cover art-work resembles a '50s style Eagle comic and it costs £1.00 plus postage and packing.



CLASS - THE FINAL FRONTIER

David Fleming
Tyne and Wear Museums

Nessun Dorma from Puccini's Turandot is possibly now the best known piece of opera ever written, thanks to its exposure as the theme 'tune' of the B.B.C.'s television coverage of the World Cup. It has become the first 'classical' record to top the U.K. singles charts, and had the outraged Sun newspaper berating Pava Grotti, whose sordid secret was that his song is taken from an opera about torture, beheading and sex. Meanwhile window cleaners and football hooligans all over the country have been whistling Puccini, and one has visions that when Leeds United meet Liverpool next season, Elland Road will, if the record industry plays its cards right, resonate to the strains of the rival fans taking the tenor and baritone parts for a mass rendition of the famous duet Au fond du Temple Saint from Bizet's The Pearl Fishers Listeners to Radio 2's World Cup commentaries may have discerned more Puccini, Tosca this time, in the theme music, while B.B.C.I broadened out into Verdi for its compilation of clips of the Italian team. The Italian fans themselves, led by a bugler in Bari, treated the world to more Verdi, Aida, while urging on their team against England in the 3rd/4th place playoff, the English substitutes responding with their own brand of culture by doing a Mexican wave. I.T.V. must have been left regretting their own timid choice of soccer theme tune, a synthesised sub-operatic drone which no-one whistles.

We have here a glimpse of cultural prejudices being turned upside down, as high culture (opera) meets popular culture (football) in joyous expression. More of this later.

CULTURE

"Culture can never be wholly conscious - there is always more to it than we are conscious of; and it cannot be planned because it is also the unconscious background of all our planning."

Thus T. S. Eliot, in his monumentally dull book Notes Towards a Definition of Culture, summarised Chapter 5. He wrote the book because he had observed with growing anxiety the misuse of the word 'culture' during the 1940s.

Now, this Conference is supposed to be all about Cultural Identity. Whoever came up with this theme must be extremely clever, because someone, I forget who, once said that 'culture' was one of the three most difficult words to define in the whole English language. We should be proud of belonging to an Association which can, in 1990, tackle an issue which it has been proven is impossible to solve... at least, though, it is an issue which is centrally relevant to museums. Anyone who thinks I shall attempt to define Culture or Cultural Identity had better leave now! I shall, though, consider some of the issues involved so as to preface my remarks on class and museums. 'Culture' is a word open to any interpretation you like: it can be any form of entertainment, or leisure, or body of knowledge, scheme of thinking, or creative achievement, or whole way of life. Leaving aside for the moment what we might call 'high' culture - painting, orchestral music, ballet, opera - and already we have hints of contradiction, it is 'popular' culture which has attracted most analysis since the war. Indeed the Social History Curators Group considered just this theme at its Conference in Glasgow last year, although without really getting very far. Popular culture is often represented as that of subordinate groups in society, and in modern Britain this means - or at least has meant until very recently - an industrialised culture. Popular culture has been represented as the culture of the industrial working class. Because of this, most people in the audience would be able to consider the following list of, arguably, cultural activities, and identify the 'popular' cultural ones: pigeon racing, hare coursing, fox hunting, greyhound racing, going to Butlin's, wrestling, ballet, watching Rugby League Football, playing Rugby Union Football, striptease, jazz concerts, graffiti, string quartets, video arcades, jogging. Bring your own prejudices and experience, and decide what you would do with horse racing or pantomime, or watching Eastenders, or Fine Young Cannibals. Popular culture is usually represented as being in opposition to the power-bloc, those who control our society. 'Mass' culture on the other hand, is said to be culture which is imposed on a passive, quiescent population by a culture 'industry'.

This is all murky water indeed, and 50 years of intellectualisation has not produced any kind of consensus. Furthermore, the introduction of the concept of class into the culture debate complicates definitions still further, and frustrates neat models, because no consensus can be reached on class either.

CLASS

*"A single topic occupies our minds.
'Tis hinted at or boldly blazoned in
Our accents, clothes and ways of eating fish,
And being introduced and taking leave,
'Farewell', 'So long', 'Bunghosky', 'Cheeribye' -
That topic all - absorbing, as it was,
Is now and ever shall be, to us - CLASS"*

John Betjeman

George Orwell described England as "the most class-ridden country under the sun". It is certainly difficult to avoid the conclusion that since the onset of industrialisation this country has been characterised by inequalities based on a host of factors, including occupation and education, which we have tried to categorise in a hierarchy we call the class system, consisting of the upper, middle and working classes. At its most basic the latter have consisted of manual workers and their families, and the middle classes have comprised everyone else except the aristocracy. Nowadays, seduced by the jargon of the market researcher we often refer to alphabetic categories instead - the A s, B s, C1 s, C2 s, Ds and Es, where the last three equate to the old working classes. The substitution of this alphabetic notation for class names indicates a degree of discomfort and embarrassment about the class system on the part of the middle classes, which, as sociologists are fond of telling us, are indeed reserved and embarrassed about their own histories.

It has become almost vulgar to talk in terms of class, and especially in terms of the working class, which is imagined as either an outdated and old fashioned Marxist concept (and therefore hardly likely to be part of the popular, let alone official vocabulary) or as perjorative and judgemental. Surely, in post-industrial Britain, the world of the working class is gone, and instead we live in the age of consumerism, entrepreneurship and opportunity, and of individual initiative? The modern, liberalist version of society is not based on class but on taste, preferences and human values. We do not have class struggles against inequality, but expansion and enrichment through new opportunities, through free economic and political activity. Nearly everyone owns cars, nearly everyone has holidays abroad, nearly everyone has videos, automatic washing machines, colour televisions. Rising standards of living, mass communications and higher education opportunities have blurred and overcome class distinctions. Drug abuse, alcoholism and crime are found indiscriminately in society, so are divorce, debt and even disease. Has the political mould not been broken, and is it not true that the Labour Party can no longer align itself confidently with what we used to call the working class? Only the left wing of the Labour Party is still beating the class war drums, as the leadership adopts an upbeat marketing image to respond to changes in society, and changes in voting patterns, in the quest for political power.

But there is something wrong here. Class is not something which we can re-name and then conclude that it no longer exists. Class is what people think, not what market researchers, or sociologists, or politicians, or historians decide. It may well be that modern British society has a fluidity and pace which continually reshapes the class system, so that the traditional pyramidal social structure now looks more like a light bulb, so that there are now fewer manual workers and more administrators, managers and other white collar workers. Nevertheless, I would argue that while class is not the sole dimension of life - because there are many others such as gender, race, age, all of which involve inequality of opportunity - class remains the main one.

Consider the following indicators of class status: occupation, education, housing. Occupation is the main criterion for establishing class, and it is the most common factor on which people base judgements - a dustbinman (refuse collector to the middle class) might be an E to Touche Ross, but to most people he is working class. Education too is seen as a very powerful indicator of class. Passing the 11-plus examination used to be seen as the most effective escape route from the working class, although it was overwhelmingly those who already came from the middle class who went to Grammar School. Since comprehensive re-organisation this pattern is less clear to people, and now simply staying on after the school leaving age is seen as an indicator. Going to university is absolute confirmation of class or change of class and, of course in amongst all this are the public schools, the educational heartland of the upper middle class, or those aspiring to it. House ownership is another potent indicator of class, and some say that if you have a mortgage you must be middle class, conversely, if you live in a rented council house you are working class. Witness the outrage of middle class homeowners when the local authority has the gall to build council housing on their estate; or the outrage of the working class when young middle class couples move in and gentrify an area, causing rents and property values to rise way beyond the means of the indigenous population.

There are many other areas where perceptions of class differences and prejudices about class influence us all about our class, or what we believe to be or own class, and that of others. For example, accent and vocabulary. Professor Richard Hoggart, one of the most eminent of all working class intellectuals, author of the massively influential *The Uses of Literacy*, admitted: I still find the tone of voice of certain middle-class professional people who went to public school and Oxbridge as deeply offensive as I did when I left school at fourteen.

We are all familiar with the class differences in the use of words like dinner, lunch, tea, lounge, sitting room, toilet and lavatory, and what they tell us about the people who use them. Do you remember Edwina Currie's analysis of northern (read working class) diet compared with southern (read middle class)? Northerners drink lots of beer, smoke themselves silly and eat piles of fish and chips and junk foods (it is a wonder they ever beat southern teams at football, really). In his book, *The English Middle Classes are Alive and Kicking* Ian Bradley claimed the moral high ground for the working classes, who commit adultery less often than the middle classes and have a lower divorce rate; the middle classes, meanwhile, have sex less often ... but in more varied positions.

There is, then, much prejudice, embarrassment, and resentment and conflict, involved in talking about class. The term has a huge number of meanings, and the main determinant of meaning is who it is who is using the term. I, for example, invariably use the term 'middle class' as a thinly veiled insult, and when I really want to offend I use the more aggressive insult - bourgeois! In this I am a devoted follower of Marx, who used the word to abuse anybody who thought only of money. Other words, such as yuppie, are just as loaded with scorn and envy. On the other hand, many middle class curators are reluctant to use the term 'working class' because they have a nagging doubt that it is patronising, or even insulting.

This last point leads us on to why SHCG should want to consider class in the context of museums and galleries. Bluntly, it is because museums still view society as a pyramid, a light-bulb, or even a sphere, it remains true that people with low incomes and limited education do

not visit museums as often., or in the numbers, that curators would like. Or should I say some curators, because I am afraid I do suspect that some curators are barely conscious that there is a working class, never mind that they do not visit their premises. This is not a misperception shared by television producers or Wapping editors.

MUSEUMS

There was a time when all a museum had to do for the public was to line up its collections in glass cases, and put on the occasional series of learned lectures. Collection and research were important jobs too, but in terms of 'interfacing' with the public, few concessions were made. Museums were full of the exotic, the bizarre, the curious, the fascinating, and they were mostly very bewildering places to be.

Consider this passage from Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, a masterly study of working class (Jewish) life in New York in the early 20th century. The young David and his Aunt Bertha, newly arrived from Austria-Hungary, visit the Metropolitan Museum:

"Before them, stood a stately white-stone edifice set in the midst of the green park. That must be it," she said. "So they described it to me at the shop." Whom shall we ask to make sure we are right?" A short distance from the building stood a peanut-vendor with his cart and whistling box. They walked over to him. He was a lean, swarthy fellow with black moustaches and bright eyes. Ask him!" she ordered. "Is dat a museum?" Dotsa duh musee," he flickered his eyebrows at her while he spoke. You go inna straight," he pushed out his chest and hips, "you come out all tire."

David felt his arm clutched; his aunt hurried him away.

"Kiss my arse," she flung over her shoulder in Yiddish; "What did that black worm say?" He said it was a museum. "Then let's go in. The worst we can get is a kick in the rear."

His aunt's audacity scared him quite a bit, but there was nothing to do except follow her up the stairs. Ahead of them, a man and woman were on the point of entering the door. His aunt pressed his arm and whispered hastily. Those two people! They seem knowing. We'll follow them till they come out again, else we'll surely be lost in this stupendous castle!" We must look at things with only one eye," she cautioned him, "the other must always be on them."

And keeping to this plan, wherever their two unwitting guides strolled, his aunt and he tagged along behind. Now and then, however, when she was particularly struck by some piece of sculpture, they allowed their leaders to draw so far ahead that they almost lost them. This happened once when she stood gawking at the spectacle of a stone wolf suckling two infants.

"Woe is me!" Her tone was loud enough for the guard to knit his brows at her. Who would believe it - a dog with babies! No it could not have been!"

Again, when they arrived before an enormous marble figure seated on an equally huge horse, his aunt was so overcome that her tongue hung out in awe. This is how they looked in the old days," she breathed reverently. "Gigantic they were, Moses and Abraham and Jacob, and the others in the earth's youth. Ai!" Her eyes bulged.

"They're going, Aunt Bertha," he warned. "Hurry, they're going away!" "Who? Oh, may they burst! Won't they ever stop a moment! But come! We must cleave to them like mire on a pig!"

In this fashion, hours seemed to go by. David was growing weary. Their quarry had led them past miles and miles of armour, tapestries, coins, furniture and mummies under glass, and still they showed no sign of flagging. His aunt's interest in the passing splendours had long since worn off and she was beginning to curse her guides heartily.

"A plague on you," she muttered every time those walking ahead stopped to glance into a show case. "Haven't you crammed your eyes full yet! Enough!" She waved her sopping handkerchief - "May your heart burn the way my feet are burning!"

At last the man ahead of them stopped to tell one of the uniformed Guards something. Aunt Bertha halted abruptly. 'Hoorah! He's complaining about our following him! God be praised! Let them kick us out now. That's all I ask!'

'Pheh! She spat on the stairs as they went down. 'May a bolt shatter you to bits! If I ever walk up these stairs again, I hope I give birth to a pair of pewter twins!'

Roth wrote this in the 1930s, but 60 years later, across something of a cultural divide (although perhaps not a very wide one) his words still make us smile and wince at the sheer believability of the situation. For museums can still be intimidating and alienating to many people. Why? Aunt Bertha didn't know any English, so she was at something of a disadvantage, but to be frank it probably would have made little difference to her understanding if she had. Language is just one of the barriers museums still erect between their exhibits and the public, with their too brief labels (Pot, Bronze Age), or their wordiness. Other barriers come in different forms: grand and overpowering buildings; cavernous and institutional interiors; grim and unsmiling uniformed guards. Language, potent barrier though it is, is only a medium. It is the message that really counts. There are ways of using different media to try to attract and hold attention, and museums make increasing use of, for example, computers, sound systems and various forms of image production to get their messages across. But if the messages we are sending are incomprehensible, or of restricted interest and relevance, then we shall always be looking to a restricted audience. Heighten the interest, broaden the relevance, and the audience grows. This is where social history comes into its own.

If you accept that working class people do not visit museums; you accept at least one of the following propositions: firstly, that there is a cultural barrier which causes people to stay away and spend their time doing something else; secondly, that there is nothing of sufficient interest to people to tempt them to come. The culture barrier factor brings us back to Pavarotti. How many people's image of opera is of iron-chested, helmeted Amazons with pigtailed brandishing tridents and shattering wine glasses with their tuneless shrieking? I promise you, quite a lot. But give Pavarotti some prime time television exposure, repeatedly with the show stopper from Turandot coupled with a weeping Paul Gascoigne or the Italian football team in full, glorious flight, and overnight barriers collapse. It will take a lot more than this to get opera on Radio 1, but just watch it go on Radio 2 and local B.B.C. radio stations. There is more to opera than a bosomy Brunnhilde, and there is more to museums than Tintoretto, if only the message can be got across.

The job of the social history curator is to tell a local community about its own history, not that of the corporation's weights and measures, or of how to catch haddock, or of the technology of the diesel engine. Social history concentrates on people, and social history curators use museum collections to illustrate the story of people. Good social history museums - and they are beginning to grow in numbers - have important messages to send out about the very people they wish and ought to attract through their doors, to be involved. In terms of class, and of overcoming cultural barriers they are ideally placed to satisfy the curiosity of traditional museum visitors - the middle classes - but they can also appeal to the working classes by exploring their history too. Social history is real history. It is not sanitised through commercial pressures, it is history, warts and all. Until recently I worked at Hull Museums, where we were developing a social history museum, the Old Grammar School, of Hull's people. In Hull, as elsewhere, childhood might have meant and still may mean health and plenty, but it might mean undernourishment and child abuse. Unemployment, homelessness and prostitution take their place in the museum displays, as curators strive for honesty in the stories they have to tell. History at the Old Grammar School is based firmly in the home, not the castle, the counting house or the council chamber, and women have a place equal with men. Would that the Russian visitors to the British life exhibition in Kiev could have as realistic a view of our society.

Before the Old Grammar School opened to the public in 1988 - and already it is Hull's most popular museum - the city had no social

history on display, and the prospects of many of the 100,000 local people who live on the big council estates heading for museums were poor. This, Hull staff believe, is changing, and is in marked contrast to the plays of Hull-based John Godber, who would love to attract the working classes, but who cannot quite overcome the cultural elitism of the theatre.

I now work at Tyne and Wear Museums, and there are no social history displays in two of the five districts I work for, Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead. None of the museums in these districts is as well attended as the population warrants (attendances fall well short of those in Hull), whereas nearby Beamish Museum is very popular. Why this discrepancy, when Beamish charges for admission, and Tyne and Wear Museums don't? Because Beamish deals in social history, hitherto providing the only large-scale displays in the region. This, I hope, will change over the next few years, and people in Newcastle will be able to see their own history in their own city. If so, I can guarantee that visitor figures will rise, and that we shall attract people who have never been into any of Newcastle's museums. This means not only the middle classes, but the working classes, for whom our museums have little, if any, relevance to their lives.

Museums have to work very hard to tempt people to visit them and to use them, and none nowadays can sit back and be complacent about their limited appeal. The days of middle class curators creating museums in their own image, dominated by their middle class outlook, are gone. Museums have advantages over television, if only we can recognise them: our currency is real, and multi-sensory, and, in terms of social history, relevant in its local connections. Museum culture can all too easily be categorised by people as elitist, exclusive and irrelevant, but the social history approach can overcome prejudices, broaden the appeal to ever greater numbers of people and, literally, attract a better class of customer, widening access in the most meaningful way possible, and making museum visiting a natural part of ordinary people's lives.

Ken Brisbane's

LETTER FROM DOWN UNDER

G'day coppers. Queensland may not be on the list of places recommended to people who want heritage and culture holidays, but for those who enjoy swimming against the tide of fashion it has an enormous amount to offer. Kookaburras, Kangaroos, Koalas, sun, sea, surf and Fine Old Bushwacker Sherry, for starters.

And now another attraction has appeared on the Sunshine Coast, in the shape of Nostalgia Town. Unlike many so-called po-faced heritage experiences this one is chock-a-block full of history with a sense of humour. There's no didacticism here and no attempt to deal in pedestal cultures. Everything from the none-too-steady barber and his aptly named cut throat to Saturday matinees at the movie house are gently debunked as the visitor takes a laugh at the past. And not before time too. It also succeeds in appealing to the visitor's stomach - an important plus factor in my book. Grandma's old style confectionery shop has a splendid selection of mouth-watering boiled sweets and lollipops and the Old Fashioned Eatery provides an opportunity for the weary cultural pundit to enjoy a cuppa and a chinwag. Fair dinkum? Nostalgia Town certainly convinced me, if I needed convincing, that heritage without fun is a Bad Thing. Any fool can open a museum, but Nostalgia Town is something else.

IN PRINT : RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Vampires, Burial & Death
by Paul Barber,
Yale University Press, £7.95

The Decline and Fall of the
British Aristocracy,
by David Cannadine,
Yale University Press, £19.95

The English Town,
by Mark Girouard,
Yale University Press, £1.95.

Women Assemble: Women workers and the
new industries in inter-war Britain,
by Miriam Glucksmann, Routledge, £10.99.

Them: Voices from the Immigrant Community
in Contemporary Britain,
by Jonathan Green,
Secker and Warburg, £16.99.

Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience,
by Ronald Hyam,
Manchester University Press, £35.00.

Faber Companion to 20th Century
Popular Music,
by Dave Laing and Phil Hardy,
Faber, £20.00.

The Women's Domain: Women and the English
Country House,
by Trevor Lummis and Jan Marsh,
Viking, £16.99.

Feminism and Youth Culture,
by Angela McRobbie,
Macmillan, £9.99.

The People's Peace:
British History, 1945-1989,
by Kenneth O. Morgan,
Oxford University Press, £17.95.

The Miles Tae Dundee,
by Janice Murray and David Stockdale, Dundee
Art Galleries and Museums, £4.50.
Black Music in Britain,
by Paul Oliver,
Open University Press, £8.99

The Englishman's England:
Taste, travel and the rise of tourism,
by Ian Ousby,
Cambridge, £14.95.

Between the Acts:
Lives of Homosexual Men, 1885-1967,
by Kevin Porter and Jeffrey Weeks,
Routledge, £8.95.

The History of Syphilis,
by Claude Quétel,
Polity Press, £35.00.

The Myths We Live By,
edited by R. Samuel and P. Thompson,
Routledge, £12.99.

The Need to Give: Patrons and the Arts, by
Andrew Sinclair,
Sinclair-Stevenson, £16.95.

Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987,
by Lawrence Stone,
Oxford University Press, £19.95.

Cambridge Social History of Britain,
1750-1950

Vol. 1 Regions and Communities,

Vol. 2 People and their Environment,

Vol. 3 Social Agencies and Institutions,
edited by F. M. L. Thompson,
Cambridge University Press,
£45.00 (Vol. 1) £40.00 (Vol. 2 & 3)

I Don't Feel Old:
The experience of later life,
P. Thompson, C. Itzin and M. Abendstern,
Oxford University Press, £17.50.

REGIONAL CORRESPONDENTS

In order to improve the information gathering function of SHCG NEWS a series of regional correspondents have been appointed. It is their job to monitor activities and events in their own areas to ensure a livelier and more comprehensive coverage of the work of SHCG members nationwide. The first six are listed below.

Don't worry if your area isn't covered - more names will follow soon. In the meantime, start sending in the press releases, photographs & reports.

North East
Alisdair Wilson, Tyne & Wear Museum Service
(091 232 4562)

North West
Sally Coleman, Harris Museum & Art Gallery,
Preston (0772 58248)

North Wales
Kath Davies, Cyfartha Castle Museum, Merthyr
Tydfil (0685 723112)

E. Midlands
Diane Moss, Pickford's House Museum, Derby
(0332 293111)

W. Midlands
Rosie Crook, Sandwell Borough Council
Museum Service (021 556 0683)

COMING EVENTS

COLLECTIONS CARE & CRISIS

Conservation In Social History

14TH FEB 1991

10am - 4pm

YORKSHIRE MUSEUM

Specialist Groups & Federation Consultative Committee

Although the Museums Association's Specialist Groups and Federations Consultative Committee is supposed to convene on a regular basis, its meetings have been sporadic. Only two meetings have been held since last year's S.H.C.G. A.G.M. on 9th December 1989 and 9th July 1990. It has now been agreed that, if the committee is to serve any useful purpose, it should meet three times a year, at Easter during the Summer and during the Autumn. Two meetings will be held in London, the third at the Museums Association's Conference.

The Committee's main functions are to provide a forum for the exchange of information between the specialist groups and Federations and to discuss Museums Association matters. Topics dealt with during the past year included the restructuring of the Museums Association's administration, the Museum Training Institute, M.A. publications and future conferences.

The 1991 M.A. Conference will be held on 22-26 July, 1991 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. As in Glasgow Specialist Groups, Federations and other parties will be invited to run concurrent sessions. Mark Taylor would welcome any suggestions. The theme of the conference is not yet finalised, but may involve issues of interpretation in museums. The Association also hopes to offer specialist groups space in the Commercial Exhibition at little or no charge so that they may explain their work to the profession and attract new members.