

*Special Care Baby Unit at St. John's Hospital, Howden, Livingston,
West Lothian. Part of the forthcoming SHCG Collaborative exhibition.
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EDITORIAL

What will be the impact of the proposed Council Tax on local authority museums? Does the government plan to clarify the legal status of museum collections in order to prevent a repetition elsewhere of the recent actions by Derbyshire County Council?

Is there any substance in reports that the government is now considering ways of transferring council run museums, libraries and parks to trusts or private owners? If so, what measures would be taken to safeguard the integrity of museum collections and to keep good faith with the many individuals who have contributed to those collections?

These are some of the questions SHCG News put to Timothy Renton, MP, Minister for the Arts in a recent letter.

The Minister's reply appears inside.

EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE?

MUSEUMS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Annual Study Weekend, 5th - 9th September 1991, Oxford

This year's ASW concentrates on the way museums adapt to the environment in which they are set. David Hall, Director of the Town and Country Planning Association, will set the scene for the weekend by charting the changes in town and country over recent years and attempting to forecast future developments. Other speakers will explore the problems that museums face in specific environments, while workshop sessions will offer a practical approach to environmental interpretation. It promises to be another vital and important ASW, so make your booking now! If you would like to give a short member's paper (about 20 minutes in length), then please contact Tim Corum at the City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent (telephone 0782 202173 Ex 231). Papers from members who have never previously spoken at an ASW would be particularly welcome. Members are also advised that SHCG's Annual General Meeting will be held during the course of the ASW on Friday, 6th September. Papers will be distributed by the Secretary in due course. Free places are available.

RENTON'S REPLY

Dear Ian Lawley,

Thank you for your letter of 2 May to my Private Secretary asking for a written response to your questions for Social History Curators' Group News. You will of course realise that some of the issues you raise are presently linked with the Government's current major review of local government Finance and Administration, and as such I do not think that it would be particularly useful to answer specific questions at this early stage. I will of course be happy to provide you with a detailed response as soon as the consultation process has been completed and its findings fully evaluated. Nevertheless, I would like to take this opportunity to emphasise that the Government attaches the very highest importance to the work of the museums, ever mindful of their unique contribution to our cultural heritage. This commitment was clearly borne out by last November's announcement that Central Government expenditure on National Museums and Galleries in the current financial year will be £181m, representing an increase of about 40% in real terms since 1979/80. Further increases announced at the same time will mean that a total of £193m will be available in 1993/94 (these figures do not include funding via the Museums and Galleries Commission of local museum activities). I note that you raise the question of scholarship versus accessibility. I firmly believe that these are complementary rather than conflicting functions of the museums, and indeed that individual institutions are best placed to decide how to steer the course between these twin objectives.

To this end, the Government has actively encouraged the work of bodies such as the MGC's Conservation Unit and has provided over £400,000 per annum towards the Museums Training Institutes's programmes, which are designed to heighten professional standards within the sector. In addition we have always strongly supported the concept of touring exhibitions, and, as you may be aware, both National Museums and Galleries and the MGC's Travelling Exhibitions Unit undertake an extensive range of outreach programmes which aim to enable greater public access to the nation's treasures. I am sure that you would agree that the very popularity of British social and industrial history museums speaks for itself. One need only consider the national and international award winning reputations of open air museums such as Beamish and Ironbridge to recognise their unique ability to bring the past alive for their visitors young and old alike. I certainly have been excited and impressed by the diverse nature of museums in this country, and by the commitment and enthusiasm of professionals and volunteers throughout the museums sector. May I extend my best wishes to you and the members of the Social History Curators Group.

Tim Renton

THE BRIC-A-BRAC MAN

"You ought to go down to the Peahen now it's been done out", he said, "It's full of social history things on the walls". And River Island has mementoes of the Deep South's agricultural past with its hayforks, violins, seed dibbers and typewriters (typewriters?). Whence cometh all this? The answer is the bric a brac man. Breweries use bric a brac men to bric a brac their pubs. Which is why when Devenish Breweries took over the collections of Weymouth Museums they found it difficult to distinguish the collection from another lot of bric a brac.... Rodney Alcock is curator at Weymouth and fighting the good fight to keep the collection together. He has just put together an excellent exhibition on tea with Twinings and the Museum of London, with a series of lectures and tea tastings for the Friends to soothe their savage breasts (savage from Weymouth's treatment of the Museum's collection) and to win them over to continue their support of the collection. Meanwhile in this time of recession, attractions like Weymouth's Timewalk are finding it difficult to be financially viable.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON M.D.A.

Tired of filling in M.D.A. cards? The London Museum of Jewish Life can provide a new outlook on those three letters. This M.D.A. are an Adeni pop group, who combine rap with Middle Eastern music to create a distinctive contemporary sound. The group featured in a recent exhibition, 'The Jews of Aden' which examined the identity of the Adeni community. Tracing their roots from antiquity through to events such as the 1947 riots, Operation Magic Carpet and their final departure in 1967, the exhibition was created with the help of members of the Adeni community themselves. The finale took place on 21st May when a variety of musicians and singers performed traditional and contemporary Adeni music in the museum. M.D.A. (Mony, David and Anna), recent Israeli chart toppers, made a special appearance at the event.

A BIT CRACK from SPENDER'S BACK YARD

Welcome to the North East - or as BBC announcers of the television series 'Spender' would have you believe, Geordieland! This report is mainly an account of the happenings in Tyne and Wear. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, news emanating from colleagues who reside in other parts of the Empire, which stretches from Kirkleatham (Langbaugh-on-Tees) in the south to Berwick upon Tweed in the north, is somewhat patchy and sporadic. And secondly, for which I apologise, I probably haven't done enough homework. The blame must be shared by both parties!

However, back to Newcastle and to Tyne and Wear. As readers may know, the Tyne and Wear Museums Service, (*now known as Tyne and Wear Museums*), has recently undergone a lengthy management and financial review. This, thank goodness, is now completed, the main relevance to this article being that a new History Department has been created. (At last official recognition - in part balancing the strong commitment given to all things Art in former years). The seven member team is led by Principal Keeper, Dr Cathy Ross and consists of three Keepers - Alisdair Wilson (Social History), Caroline Imlah (Costume and Textiles) and Adrian Osler (Maritime) - and two Assistant Keepers (Social History) - Martin Routledge and Joe Ging and one department assistant, Alan Lister.

The new structure demands that the staff of each Collection department (of which the above is one example) are no longer restricted to the geographical boundaries established by the Museum in which they work. Instead, staff are expected to operate Countywide. However, the level of operation given to each of the five Districts of Tyne and Wear depend on the new Service Level Agreements negotiated by the Museums Service and each District ie you get what you pay for!

Which brings me on to the Poll Tax. As some of you may know, Newcastle City have been looking to save some £12.7m in order to avoid capping. Mercifully, the Council has looked kindly on the Service and budgets for 1991-92 are as they were in 1990-91! The Poll Tax has, however, left its mark regarding museum provision in other Districts - particularly North Tyneside in which Dial Cottage (once the home of railway pioneer George Stephenson and subject of a spectacular, albeit untimely, 'plug' in the first episode of 'Spender') is no longer part of Tyne and Wear Museums, and Wallsend Heritage Centre for the time being is now open just two days a week. So, in fiscal year 1991-92, at a time when other museum operations are having to reduce the service previously offered, Tyne and Wear Museums must be seen to be increasing theirs in the vain hope of staving off the inevitable budgetary attack in 1992-93. We won't be as lucky again! But the 'New Age' has dawned and Tyne and Wear, through the new History department, now talk of people power. South Tyneside have decided as a matter of policy to hold a major annual social history exhibition at its main museum in South Shields. The first planned for 1992-93, will be an expose' on the appeal of those sun-drenched or should it be windswept beaches along the



Trolley Buses Reborn : VRD 186 from Sandtoft Trolley Bus Museum, Doncaster and 6AJ 15 from Langbaugh-on-Tees Museum Service. Courtesy of Phil Philo, Kirkleatham "Old Hall" Museum.

South Tyneside coastline. Even within the hallowed portals of the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle there are signs that the notion of exhibiting 'Art,' in a 'social context' (to access collections, etc) is beginning to catch on - whatever next?! Those of you lucky enough to get to the MA Conference in Newcastle in July will be able to see the new £370,000 Art on Tyneside display at the Laing in which the people positively "peep out" from behind the paintings.

Alongside a rare mix of finding feet and navel contemplation, the most exciting project with which the department is currently concerned is the 'Newcastle Time Tunnel' (opening Autumn 1991 at Blandford House) - a wild, imaginative and needless to say, "cheap" look at the rich history of Newcastle from the Romans to 1990. This temporary exhibition will herald the Museum of Newcastle and will ensure an account of its overwhelming popularity that such a Museum will no longer remain a figment of the imagination.

South of the Tyne, Sunderland A.F.C. played out its 100th year in the Football League. In commemoration of this, Sunderland Museum is staging an exhibition (18 May - 15 September 1991) which was opened by Charlie Hurley (1957-1969) or 'King Charlie' as he was better known by the Roker faithful. He commanded the type of support that began to rival only with the popularity of 'The Messiah' Bob Stokoe, manager of the infamous 1973 FA Cup side which beat Leeds! The exhibition is an amalgam of independently commissioned contemporary photographs showing the many facets of Sunderland A.F.C. and mementoes illustrating the Club's significant events and achievements during those 100 years.

Unfortunately the promise of an exhibition was not enough to keep Sunderland A.F.C. in the First Division (well, it didn't work at Derby either!) but naturally we hope that the show will denote a turning point in the fortunes of the Club for next season.

Obviously the same logic is being applied at Newcastle Utd F.C. (where a revival in fortunes is certainly long overdue) as they are to open their 'museum' in June/July 1991 in time to mark the Club's centenary in 1992.

Other recent projects in which department staff have played a major part include improvements to South Shields Museum's re-created William Black Street c. 1905 (ref Catherine Cookson) and to the re-created Booking Office and Foyer c 1910 in Monkwearmouth Station Museum. Initial discussions have taken place concerning a new permanent exhibition 'Getting Around' - transport in the context of Sunderland and its people - also for Monkwearmouth, in December/January 1991/92. As a throwback to her days in the Art department, Cathy Ross completed an exhibition back in February about Gerrard Robinson (Newcastle Woodcarver 1834-1891) which included the exhibiting of some of Robinson's spectacular sideboards which, as the hype told us, had to be seen to be believed!

Outside Tyne and Wear, Phil Philo, battling with the unpredictabilities of being answerable to a 'hung' council (that is until the recent local elections) in

Langbaugh-on-Tees, found time to orchestrate the re-running of two out of the last three surviving Teesside trolleybuses along their old routes years after they were last in public service. One of these the Sunbeam (GAJ15), the last trolley bus made, was acquired by the Museum Service in March 1990. The event, together with a re-union of ex-trolley bus employees, was a huge success. Now efforts are being made to gather memories, memorabilia and the like to support the larger acquisition.

The Middle March Centre for Border History in Hexham has now changed its name to the Border History Museum in the Old Gaol. The terrors of the dungeons and stocks within the walls of the medieval gaol are now re-told in gruesome detail!

Recently appointed Curator, Chris Green, arrived moments before the opening of the new Burrell Gallery at his museum in Berwick upon Tweed.

Beamish's twentieth year of operation saw, amongst other things, the resurrection of the Methodist Chapel which once stood in Beamish Village and now stands adjacent to the Colliery. This year, (in a full programme of events celebrating the Museum's coming of age) has seen the official opening of the Sunderland Echo's branch office in the Town complex by Sir Richard Storey, grandson of one of the paper's founders. Doubtless we shall hear more about other events and other projects (I hope!) in future issues.

Alisdair R Wilson Tyne and Wear Museums

HELP HELP ME RHONDDA!

The Black Gold Experience, Rhondda Heritage Park

The "Multi-million pound Rhondda Heritage Park is a unique ambitious project" as their publicity leaflet tells us "set up to interpret and present the social and industrial history of the Rhondda and South Wales Valleys through a range of new and exciting techniques". Located in the Lewis Merthyr Colliery in Trehafod, the first major stage in the development, "The Black Gold Experience" (!) opened in May this year, and will be followed in due course by "Black Gold II, The Underground Experience" and a recreated mining community of the 1920's period. I took the opportunity to visit and see if it really does bring "the true story of the world's most famous coalmining valley to light - and life - again". The pit is compact and very attractive although the "52 bedroom Heritage Hotel" next door is a truly ghastly case of Post-Modern meets Edwardian School, doing nothing to improve the area. There is ample evidence of considerable capital investment in the buildings which are immaculate, whilst the graceful lines of the pit-head gear are almost dazzling in a fresh coat of red oxide, even in the rain.

"Black Gold" is a guided tour and the staff were commendably friendly without recourse to the "Have a good day" technique. A number of them were ex miners from the area able to give their own views and

observations and all noticeably generated a feeling of pride in the place and the job they were doing. The Hewison nightmare vision of miners demonstrating their ex-job in the very same place has come true, but they seemed quite pragmatic about it.

The tour itself involves entering a number of buildings on the site, within which one is met with audio visual presentations, figures frozen in mid activity, a considerable array of lighting and sound effects, and, somewhere behind all this, the machinery originally used therein. At times this can be highly effective, and the claim that this is a "theatrical experience" is not too far from the point, although the decision not to use actors is therefore perhaps surprising. The first "experience" starts off quite well, with the huge winding drum of the Bertle Engine House rumbling with a deep and ominous monotony eerily in shades of blue, and I liked the concept of screening the visual presentation onto the graceful arched window apertures behind the drum.

However, although the images were well chosen and full of human interest, I found the sound balance uncomfortable and could not always clearly hear the various narrators above the accompanying sound effects, many of which seemed superfluous. The presentation seemed over long covering considerable ground and not always in a particularly logical sequence.

The following presentation used the same techniques and again lacked clarity, especially when Lord Bute was briefly illuminated in a section of Castle Coch to say "munmmff nmuffghry mnff" to his architect.

There were highlights however, especially in the section dealing with pit explosions and rescues. This conveys genuine tension through the use of historical photographs and excellent colour recreations of the rescue team frantically digging to reach the sight of "ten pairs of eyes" of the trapped men.

The lamp room and pithead where the coal drams were loaded on and off the cages were quite strange experiences, peopled with fibreglass Lewis Merthyr men seemingly frozen in time. The figures are actually quite good with clothing showing great attention to period detail (1950's). The guide in the lamp room spent some time demonstrating the theory behind testing for methane gas using the flame testlamps and the use of canaries in the pit. The lack of piped sound effects, natural lighting, and the freedom to actually move around these areas and talk with the guide was refreshing. The pithead even included the detail that the man at the control panel was sited directly below an aperture in the roof that drenched him in rain!

The final section open at present was actually in my mind the most successful. It was a straightforward tape slide presentation of notable slickness and narrated by Neil Kinnock who has a superb narrating voice, and no doubt enjoyed the image of Rhondda school children campaigning against "Thatcher the Snatcher". (The clarity of sound in this section was excellent and was sparing in its use of music and sound effects.)

The presentation concentrated largely upon the "poorest minions of King Coal" the women, giving a powerful and moving account of the "17 hour day"

endured by the women in their struggle to manage the household, using oral history over well chosen images to effectively drive the point home.

Although quite moving, it manages to avoid sentimentality, which cannot always be said of the other sections, which even included an image of burning red dragon on a heap of coal! The overall impression is one of effort and expense to try and do something different although I am not sure I saw any new techniques employed at all. It was certainly enjoyable, but afterwards one was left feeling that despite the noise, colour and dry ice, there was far too much sitting and looking at a screen. I would have liked to have absorbed some of the quite superb images for longer. It is hard to imagine returning until the second phase is completed as the structured and unvarying nature of the presentations do not encourage this.

There were no leaflets, guides etc at present to follow up any of the issues covered, although the book shop was well stocked. Ironically, the most relevant back up material available is the book; "Tribute to the Black Diamond", produced by Rhondda Borough Council to mark the closure of the very last pit in the valley in December 1990. It is extremely good value and full of oral history accounts, poems, articles, statistics and photos, even if the sources are rarely credited. I wondered that the Rhondda Heritage Park did not create or even assist in the creation of this book and no reference is made in the book to the "Exciting vision of the Future" that the Heritage Park claims to represent.

In judging the "experience" one must remember that it is not and does not try to be a museum, and as such there are no display cases, labelled objects etc. This is in a way quite refreshing at the time, and the audio visual techniques potentially succeed quite well in representing a community of people and their interactions. The problem comes when you wish to spend longer absorbing details, facts, images and wish to build upon and follow up the experiences so provided. The slickness of the presentations have an air of authority about them leaving the viewer feeling unable to contradict or question the facts and images presented. Because of this it is not of great educational value. Perhaps when the project is more fully developed this problem will be addressed.

The Heritage Park is thankfully no Jorvik, and there seems to be no intention to introduce gimmicky rides in electric coal drams. Instead it is rather like seeing a curious television documentary, heightened by the actual experience of being in the place under discussion. It is often said of museums that they are "books on walls" so perhaps it is progress to have "television on walls"?

Stephen Done SHCG Regional Reporter (South Wales)

MANX MUSEUM FINDS A TAIL WORTH TELLING

'MAD MANX. A separate parliament, special tax laws, the noose, the birch and tailless cats. It is the only place in Europe where homosexual sex is punishable by life imprisonment.' The Independent Magazine, 1st June 1991 'It was farming, and fishing and some mining that kept the community growing.' Walter Leece of Peel, Isle of Man 1949

To most people the Isle of Man means Manx cats, three-legged symbols and the T.T. motorbike races. The Manx Folk Life Survey, however, shows the Manx people to have a very different cultural identity. This Survey, a pioneering oral history programme undertaken in the 1940's and 1950's, reveals a rich cultural history of everyday life that is rarely reflected in the stereotypical views of the Island so beloved of the 'mainland' press.

The results of the Folk Life Survey have been used extensively in two new Social History galleries at the Manx Museum. The contents of the Survey helped form the agenda for the galleries and a majority of the text comes directly from the Survey - to the extent that the galleries are now being marketed as, 'The Voice of the People'. Apart from an introductory panel used in each section, all the words on the graphic panels are the words of the people recorded in the Survey. In the areas of tourism and the T.T. races, where this was not possible because these areas of life were untouched by the original Survey collectors, the essence of the idea was continued by the use of quotations from guidebooks and diaries.

Obviously, as curators, we had our input, but this was primarily editorial - which quotations to put in and which to leave out. To reinforce the fact that we are using the people's own words, each quotation is captioned with the name of the person and where they lived on the Island. To provide a context for each area an introductory panel of 'curator speak' has been provided. Here we kept the text to a minimum, used active verbs and addressed the visitor directly as an individual, using the word 'you'.

Two videos, specially commissioned from a professional film company, also form an integral part of the displays. The first contains a series of set pieces on crofting life, showing, for example, turf cuttings, ploughing and fishing, using archive film and photos as well as newly commissioned footage. No actors were used. Instead the staff from the Museum's branch museum at Cregneash rose to the occasion, and were filmed using museum objects, in the context of the 'film set' of Cregneash village.

The commentary, again made up exclusively of extracts from the Folk Life Survey, was spoken by local Manx people. The film introduces the main themes of the gallery, and some of the words spoken on the video are duplicated on the written panels themselves - a deliberate attempt to emphasise the importance of the words people actually spoke to the history 'produced' by a Museum.

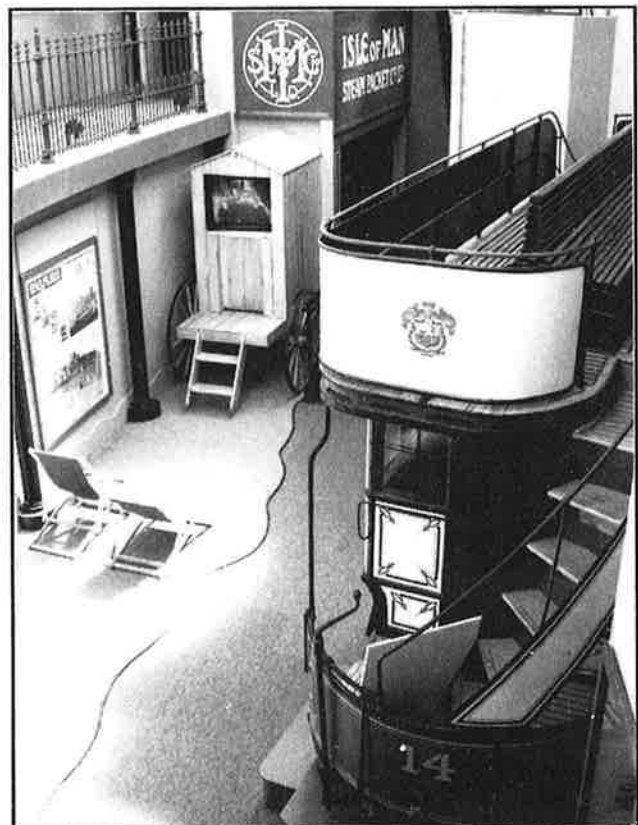
The second film introducing the 'Golden Age of Manx Tourism', relies more on atmosphere and the use of contemporary songs extolling the virtues of the Isle of Man as a holiday paradise. (None of us who worked in the galleries while the films were being installed will ever forget the words of the song:

'Flannigan, Flannigan, Take me to the Isle of Man again'). Both films were transferred onto laser disc along with the other audio visual elements of the gallery - of which, more anon. Two major sponsors were secured to help pay for this technology, both keen to emphasise their commitment to Manx culture. The Isle of Man Bank and Manx Telecom both contributed £50,000.

Tour of Gallery One: You are now a crofter

The first gallery runs from 1651 (the Manx Rebellion) to about 1850. It is structured thematically, however, and chronology is underplayed. The overall theme is the life of a Manx crofting family and the gallery begins by examining internal influences on this family, namely Manx Folklore and Tradition, the Hearth and the Manx Gaelic language. A video monitor is housed in place of a roaring fire at the back of a hearth in a stylistic cottage; extracts from the original 1940's Manx language tapes can be heard upon leaving.

External influences then begin to impinge on our crofting family in the form of the Church and Education. Each is examined in its own 'set'; the church in an area with tiled floor, pillars and arches and schooldays in part of a classroom complete with wooden floor and yukky green walls. 'Outside' the classroom we chalked



'Step onto the real sand, sit in a deck chair and watch a film about the heyday of Manx Tourism.'

hopscotch numbers on mock stone flags. Next, the visitor is invited to become a crofter and make a tough decision about how best to make ends meet; whether to work on someone else's land for money to pay the rent, or go to the fishing, or go down the mines (lead not coal), or emigrate. The element of choice is (hopefully) emphasised by a large question mark '?', and a series of arrows cut into the carpet and three foot high letters declaring 'CHOICE'. When you follow the final option's path - to emigrate - you find yourself walking along a ship's gangplank and then into a railway station interior, where you metamorphose into a tourist to the Island and walk down a gangplank onto a 'beach'.

Tour of Gallery Two: You are now a tourist

The second gallery has attracted great interest on the Island as, for the first time, the Manx Museum has addressed itself to twentieth century history. As such the Museum is beginning to challenge people's perceptions of what museums are. With the extensive use of videos, the creation of a sandy beach, complete with buckets and spades and deckchairs for people to sit in, the use of ambient noises (such as the cries of a seagull), and an invitation to climb aboard a double decker horse tram, people may be persuaded that museums can be fun.

As you arrive in the 'Island of Happy Holidays', you see the 'beach' and a version of Douglas promenade, complete with horse tram. Two mannequins stand on the top of the pier, attracting your attention upwards (aided by sound effects) to emphasise the height and airiness of this gallery.

Sitting in a deckchair, you may watch an introductory video, positioned inside a replica bathing hut. Inside the tram you can see archive film of the Island's electric trams (some still running) and narrow gauge railway (also running on a reduced network).

A Cultural Mixture: T.T. as well as T.E.

A T.T. motorbike display features next, alongside an appreciation of the 'National' Poet T. E. Brown. In the T.T. section a 1987 Honda motorbike is displayed with an adjacent large screen showing film taken from an on-board camera as the rider completes the 37 mile course in a little under twenty minutes (crazy!). The film is divided into ten two-minute sections likened to a control pad and a large illuminated map of the course. For the first time many tourists and Manx people alike can have some inkling of what it must be like to ride the T.T. course - empathy at work? Displays on the growth of Douglas, the Island's capital town, and the Finance industry, are also designed to appear relevant to visitors, and incorporate contemporary photographs of 'everyday' Douglas and objects such as an 'I love the Isle of Man' hat. As part of their sponsorship deal, Manx Telecom provided us with a monitor and access to the Prestel information network, installed in this section.

All through the galleries we aimed to emphasise the uniqueness of Manx history. Nowhere was this more apparent than during the two World Wars when

thousands of 'enemy aliens' were interned in boarding house rooms previously used for tourists to the Island. We have tried to illustrate internment between 1940 and 1945 by having a set of a boarding house bedroom, split down the middle: in 1939 it is fully furnished and the set is displayed as if someone is unpacking after arriving on holiday. In the other half of the set it is 1940, and the carpet has been rolled up, a suitcase acts as a bedside table and internment camp art is pinned on the wardrobe door. The rest of the area contains several huge pin boards on which are pinned extracts from camp magazines, and quotations from internees themselves.

The gallery's final section celebrates Manx art through displays on prominent Manx artists, including T. E. Brown, the national poet. Extracts from his poetry are provided on a continuous loop, probably the first time that many Manx people, never mind tourists, will have heard his verse being read.

Feedback and preliminary evaluation

At the time of writing, the galleries have only been open for two weeks and a structured evaluation has not yet been accomplished. However, there are questions we would like answered and we have already received some feedback, most of which seems to be very positive. Obviously, we want to know whether the carefully worked out logical concepts behind the gallery are actually conveyed to visitors. Do people have any idea what the question mark on the floor means? Do they even notice it? Does anybody stop and read the text? How are they making sense of the galleries?

The blackboard in the classroom provides an opportunity for visitors to comment. Headed 'Comments Please', it has operated as a good place for feedback, as well as graffiti! Through talking to the attendants it was quickly discovered that people couldn't even find the galleries within the museum, never mind follow our carefully thought out route through them! A couple of hurried meetings later, a few discreet notices were placed advising people of the location of the galleries, which seems to have done the trick.

We were aware that the second gallery, with its more contemporary theme would surprise some people, and perhaps one comment from an elderly visitor sums this up. There is a small board fastened near the beach area with prices of 'Coach Excursions' from a hotel on it; it is at least fifteen years old. The elderly visitor commented, "You've got that wrong, look it should be 9 shillings there, not 45p, 'd' not 'p', you've made a mistake dear, that's not the past, 'p', that's now and museums are about the past".

But perhaps we take ourselves too seriously as museum curators: the final comment must go to the gentleman who 'phoned the Museum with the following observation, "This is a positive criticism, I think you've missed something out. Can I just point out that you've omitted to have a case on the 'Manx Cat'.

Nigel Wright, Harriet Purkis, Yvonne Cresswell The Manx Museum, Douglas, Isle of Man

BY WORD OF MOUTH

The North West Sound Archive, based at Clitheroe Castle in the Ribble Valley, has over 80,000 recordings in its collections, covering many aspects of regional history. A growing awareness of the importance of oral history recording has led to involvement in various museum based projects over the past few years.

These include a continuing oral history recording programme of Lancashire textile workers in association with Towneley Hall Museum and Art Gallery in Burnley and a similar project with the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston. As the two museums are based in east and west Lancashire respectively, this allows the opportunity of comparison between the textile towns of Preston and Burnley.

An exhibition (on the Lancashire Textile Industry) was held at Towneley Hall during 1990. An experimental endless-loop tape system was installed and a full 45 minute interview made available to visitors via a telephone handset system. It was discovered that, if suitable seating was provided, people were prepared to sit for quite long periods listening to the tape. A further development was the preparation and installation of an oral history programme on Compact Disc for the exhibition "Old Yarns Re-Spun" at the Harris Museum in Preston, also featuring textile workers.

At Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, oral history is used to great interpretative effect in the recently opened Asian Gallery. Here visitors can listen to the memories and reminiscences of Asian members of the community recalling their first impressions of the town. The recordings were made by the Asian News Agency in Blackburn in association with the Museum and the NW Sound Archive. A flick of the switch allows the visitor to listen to various translations of the oral history reminiscences on telephone handsets, the replay source again being Compact Disc. The four languages available are English, Punjabi, Urdu and Gujarati.

Another current project involves a primary school at Overton, near Morecambe, in Lancashire. Overton is an interesting community close to Sunderland Point, formerly the old port for Lancaster. To reach Sunderland Point, it is necessary to cross the estuarine marshes at low water, which gives the area quite a distinctive character. Around four miles away to the north, on the coast, are Heysham Nuclear Power Station and other industrial complexes.

Traditionally, the area was involved in farming, fishing, boat-building, and related activities. Indeed, salmon fishing using half-nets is still carried on to this day.

The project, still currently being organised, will hopefully be two-fold. Children will, as part of the National Curriculum, interview local people using old photographs as a basis for the interviewing sessions. It is hoped that the exercise will reveal other photographs, documents and artefacts as the project progresses.

Over 100 parents attended an initial public meeting in Overton organised by the head teacher at the

school. Many were extremely interested in becoming involved in an adult oral history project. We intend to build on this unusual and strong local commitment and, together, chronicle something of this unique community surviving on the Lancashire coast.

Ken Howarth Sound Archivist, NW Sound Archive

ORAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Annual Conference • Reminiscence Reviewed
22nd and 23rd March 1991

It was of little surprise to find this conference was poorly attended by museum professionals. The majority of delegates worked in social services, day centres or hospitals. Over the two days it became apparent that museums are rarely perceived as a resource for reminiscence material. Some delegates had even found their local museum to be unhelpful, suspiciously regarding any attempts to use their "treasures".

The conference was organised into a series of workshops with the emphasis being on involvement. This took the form of group discussion and problem solving, or even role-playing. Delegates were encouraged to use their backgrounds and experiences to enrich the sessions. Those who came to the conference with no experience had the opportunity to learn a great deal. Specific reminiscence projects from around the country were highlighted during several of the workshops. One of the more notable projects was 'Memories' organised by Catherine Rogers in Stockport whilst studying for a social sciences qualification. The project was established on an extremely low budget with no reminiscence resource material. Catherine Rogers collected her own material from friends and family. Each of her reminiscence sessions was based on a theme and included a debriefing period at the end of the session. Over a period of weeks strong relationships were developed between Ms Rogers and the elderly people which resulted in a great deal of distress when one of the main participants died prior to the exhibition which was planned as the end result of the project. School children became involved in the later stages of the project and it was gratifying to hear of the success in breaking down barriers between the generations.

Projects such as 'Memories' highlight the thrust of reminiscence work today. Cross-generational work is not uncommon and strongly implies the continuum of history, as one generation passes on its memories to another. Elderly people involved in such work benefit from an improved self-esteem, and they feel that their experience, knowledge and physical presence are valued. The process of reminiscence also acts as a vehicle for life-review and can allow participants to come to terms with their emotions.

The therapeutic value of reminiscence is being increasingly recognised; it is no longer seen merely as something to do on a wet afternoon. As a form of therapy it needs to be conducted by qualified people,

which the vast majority of museum workers are not. It also requires a lot of back up, and investment of time, which curators cannot afford. The role of the museum is therefore that of an enabler, providing the resource material for reminiscence sessions organised by outside agencies. Providing such material at once increases access to the collection and implies a strong commitment to the local community.

Resources are a perennial problem in reminiscence work. Many delegates to the conference illustrated means by which they acquired materials, including much hard work and persuasion. Museums should be prepared to meet the demand. Failure to do this is resulting in the emergence of a reminiscence "industry". Reminiscence packs are now commercially available at very high prices. Many of these are inappropriate, being compiled by businesses based outside the participant's locality. Several of the sessions addressed the problem of creating resource packs whether these were audio-visual presentations, small collections of objects or transcripts. Linked with reminiscence theatre, publications resulting from reminiscence projects are becoming increasingly valuable. Along with exhibitions, these are areas in which museum staff can see positive returns for their investment of time and resources. These results also increase the therapeutic value of the process, participants seeing their words in prints, their speech being used by actors on stage, their objects in an exhibition. It is also important, from an ethical point of view, to make available information collected from reminiscence sessions. Being in its broadest sense a form of oral history, its value lies in communication. People participate because they wish to pass on history as they see it or have experienced it. Curators have a role to play in the fulfilment of that process.

The conference put into perspective many of the qualitative and quantitative developments in reminiscence work over the last decade. However, there was little discussion of the future. Being dependent upon the words of people, reminiscence democratises history. Museums should be encouraging this process, for it centres upon the local community and links in directly with the collection policy. Reminiscence also overcomes barriers within society and curators should take the opportunity to present a community history through their collection. It was one of the real disappointments of the conference that the workshop on anti-discriminatory reminiscence work was cancelled.

The next decade should see a consolidation of reminiscence resources, another process in which museums can form an integral part. A local or regional reminiscence unit with resources at its disposal, the administrative structure to process requests for material, and a full training programme, would be a huge benefit. The last ten years have shown how people have been able to conduct reminiscence work; the next ten should enable trained workers to continue to develop the discipline within an organised network recognising the full value of reminiscence.

Alan Taylor City Museum and Art Gallery Stoke-on-Trent

LOTS OF POTS

*"Interpretation and Identification of Ceramics"
SHCG Study Day, City Museum, Stoke-on-Trent
Wednesday, 24th April 1991*

The Study Day began with a handling session using items from the City Museum's ceramics collection. Led by the encyclopaedic Pat Halfpenny, Keeper of Ceramics, this proved both informative and entertaining.

In the afternoon, a series of talks offered differing perspectives on the interpretation of ceramics. Peter Walton from York's Bar Convent Museum, discussed the exhibition "Pots about People", where 120 creamware items from 1760-1820, had been displayed. These mass-produced items were personalised with inscriptions and illustrations, so were useful for research purposes. Peter presented an interesting hierarchy of the 'arts' in art museums and galleries. At the top of the pile were paintings, sculpture, prints and drawings, followed by furniture and metalworks, ceramics and glass, textiles and costume and, finally, films and photography. This 'definition' of the arts informed gallery displays until the 1970's.

In this traditional scheme function had had little consideration. Quality and attribution (the maker, designer, or factory traced) were of greater importance. It was believed that the objects, in terms of their intrinsic value, should merely 'speak for themselves'. This was reflected in a very orthodox system of display.

The 1970's saw the rise of new ideas to challenge this orthodoxy, particularly the concept of Design History which gave higher status for the decorative arts. There tended to be a move away from elitist, connoisseur centred displays towards a more interpretative approach. The next speaker, Cameron Hawke-Smith of the Gladstone Pottery Museum, discussed the importance of museum visitors' expectations. How could these be met? Such expectations are not always clearly defined, so a new interpretation of objects and their history could be put forward.

At present, the Gladstone is seeking to shift emphasis away from the ceramic 'process' to the 'people'. In this context, the existing "Tile gallery" (set up with the aid of sponsorship from H and L Johnson) and the bathrooms and sanitary ware display (sponsored by Twyford's) may both seem inappropriate.

The original workshops at the Gladstone Works are used for making pottery for demonstration purposes. Should this be a museum activity, or a productive enterprise? (A compromise can't really be reached on this.) Various constraints will necessarily impinge on historical accuracy. People cannot work in original pot-bank conditions for instance as this would be illegal. At the same time, the public are now better informed and there is a need to respect original structures and working-life experiences.

Jim Shea's talk centred on a project carried out by "Those Environmental Artists". A recent installation by

these artists in the City Museum, sought to explore the nature of a home in Stoke-on-Trent. It consisted of a wire frame clad with bisque cups, saucers and plates. Slide projections of home interiors were shown inside the structure. The pottery forms were deliberately chosen to evoke both the work environment of the area and domestic home life. As Jim pointed out, museum displays often consist largely of objects from the home which once had a functional purpose.

In conclusion, Pat Halfpenny discussed criteria for the display of the ceramics collection. Following the closure of the recent exhibition "A Passion for Porcelain", gallery space will now be made available for items from the reserve collection. This will form a new 'Study Gallery', a practical and innovative approach to the question of most effectively using available space. The interpretation of pottery in museums continues to present problems. Should modern heavy industrial items, such as sanitary wares and insulators, be represented in a museum? How can the lives of the pottery workers be interpreted? Many of the working processes are not very well researched, and there appears to be a lack of photographic and documentary evidence, which causes difficulties. There is a need to meet the expectations of many different museum visitors. A forthcoming temporary exhibition on Staffordshire Figures (1740-1940) will need to stimulate both general and academic interest. For the future it may be possible to classify pottery and porcelain in a thematic way rather than by ceramic process and 'type'.

During the course of the day a great deal of useful information and enlightening views were expressed. I am sure that I am not alone in saying that these informative and enjoyable study days are of vital importance to all of us involved in museums today.

Susan Payne Stafford Country Museum, Shugborough

SEEING RED

Councillors in Newcastle-under-Lyme had never witnessed anything like it as Fanny Deakin showed the Tories her knickers (red, of course). They've never seen anything similar since. This was just one minor, if colourful, episode in Fanny Deakin's eventful life. A founder member of the local Labour Party, then a Communist, she was repeatedly re-elected to the local council despite all the odds - including a prison sentence. She lost five of her own six children, but campaigned tirelessly to improve conditions for women and children. It was Fanny Deakin who stood up to Ramsay MacDonald to win free milk for pregnant women. When the Fanny Deakin Maternity Home was eventually opened in 1947, one of the assembled worthies referred to the obstacles she had faced. "Yes," she replies, "And most of the buggers are standing behind me on this platform today!"

Her remarkable life story is celebrated in *Go See Fanny Deakin*, a Community Play which was staged in May by local people from Silverdale, the Staffordshire

mining village where Fanny Deakin spent her life. More than a hundred performers of all ages took part in this extraordinary promenade production. Representing the culmination of two year's communal activity, from car boot sales to the creation of an enormous quilt, the play was a joy and revelation to everyone who saw it. Many of the performers had never previously participated in 'arts' activities. They not only brought a tremendous vigour to the production, but established a collective momentum that can only benefit the people of Silverdale in the future.

CHANGED DAYS

"*Changed Days - Memories of an Edinburgh Community*" was written by Alan Spence and is a documentary drama telling the story of the people of the Old Town from the inner-city deprivation and overcrowding of the Depression years to the post-war clearances and the new peripheral housing schemes, touching on themes such as health, diet, leisure, women's work and sectarianism.

Premiered by Winged Horse Touring Productions in 1988, "*Changed Days*" was revived in a new version by the Royal Lyceum Theatre Company of Edinburgh and presented at three community venues in the city between 11 April and 11 May 1991. The play was originally inspired by the impending opening of "*The People's Story*" and was intended to coincide with the opening of the new museum in April 1988. Museum staff were actively involved in the production, making photographic and transcript material available.

"*Changed Days*" is derived from the tape-recorded memories, experiences and opinions of local people who lived through the events portrayed - individuals together with members of the Old Town Reminiscence Group and People's Story Reminiscence Groups. The script follows the transcripts as closely as possible, being reworked where necessary to achieve theatrical impact. A small exhibition, comprising eight panels, was produced jointly by "*The People's Story*" and Royal Lyceum to accompany the play around the city.

"*Changed Days*" is being published by Hodder and Stoughton.

Elaine Finnie.

COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION 1991

"*From the Cradle to the Grave*"

Most curators of social history would agree that contemporary recording is an important part of our work and many of us do make some attempt to keep pace with our ever changing environment. But with so many demands on our time we tend to put off making photographic records until a building is about to be demolished or a major industry is about to disappear.

(A recent example of this here in North Lanarkshire was the closure of the Clydesdale Tube Works which we went in to record the day before its closure)

The aim of the Collaborative Exhibition Project was to provide a catalyst for museums to record aspects of contemporary life in their area. The idea for an exhibition arose from discussions between social history curators in Scotland concerning the lack of available touring exhibitions and the problems of contemporary recording. The Scottish Museums Council's touring exhibition programme had just come to an end. The subject chosen for the first exhibition was "Working Lives". It was launched in March 1990 and is still "doing the rounds".

The second collaborative exhibition will be launched in October 1991, and the topic chosen by the participating museums is "Health Care in the 1990's". The aim of the exhibition is to display images of the variety of services offered by the National Health Service and the private sector; services we all take for granted, assuming they will be there should we ever need them or little-known services so important to those that require them. It was felt to be very important to record the Health Service now, as it is under severe threat and may change radically over the next 5 or 10 years, or even disappear altogether.

To produce an exhibition with an input from several museums requires considerable organisation. An editorial team of four was selected - or volunteered - and they have met three times over the past year to draw up guidelines for participants and prepare a list of possible topics to be covered. At the beginning of the project there were eleven participating museums but due to other priorities and changes of staff, the final number will be eight. Each museum has approached the project in their own way. Some have chosen to concentrate on distinct areas of the Health Service while one has followed the progress of an individual as he passed through the hands of the medical staff.

Obviously curators have chosen areas that they feel are particularly relevant to their community and their museum. The Marischal Museum at the University of Aberdeen for example has submitted images of students. Some museums have also interviewed the subjects of the photographs and now have a collection of useful archive material on the Health Service in 1990. The next stage which the editorial team is about to embark on is the selection of images for inclusion in the exhibition. The editorial team will make the selections and the participating museums will provide their own captions.

We intend to organise the images in a life style format and have chosen as a title "From the Cradle to the Grave" - a quote from a speech by Aneurin Bevan. This approach will ensure we have a wide age range of subjects. The 1991 exhibition will also include objects collected specially for display. The objects include disposable, sterile equipment, ECG traces and X rays and demonstrate the highly specialised nature of some of

the services provided by the NHS. We have attempted to cover sensitive areas like the care of the terminally ill and dying, as well as controversial issues such as NHS cutbacks and over stretched resources. Care has been taken not to compartmentalise people and to include a wide range of people of both sexes from all walks of life and from a variety of ethnic minorities.

We have not experienced any problems with access to hospitals and services. In fact, everyone concerned has been very helpful and enthusiastic.

The first collaborative exhibition was designed and produced by the staff and the resources of Summerlee and Springburn Museums and therefore most of the costs were absorbed by these museums. However, for the second exhibition we have to use the services of a freelance designer and have therefore had to address the problem of finance, the only source of funding has been the fees paid by the participants. An application has been submitted to the Museums and Galleries Commission for grant aid and we are hopeful that they will support the project.

Carol Haddow Summerlee Heritage Trust

NEWS FROM THE SOUTH EAST

Buckinghamshire Museums have appointed Sylvia Crawley, who formerly worked at the Dales Museum, as their first Social Historian. St Albans Museum Service has completed its divorce from the Leisure Department. Privatisation of leisure services have removed the biggest spender from the Council's budget, and the museums hope to fill the vacuum! Meanwhile, Aylesbury Museum is temporarily closed for essential repairs to the fabric. Despite a £60,000 grant for the scheme, the museum is still short of about £1 million for a proposed extension. Hertfordshire's newest museum opens on 25th June. The Forge Museum at Ware will specialise in blacksmithing. But what about the British School in Hitchin? Not only is this the only surviving school of its kind in the country, but it also has a tremendous collections of educational items. These include more than 18,000 books, around 5,000 items of ephemera, 10,000 postcards and photographs, 2,000 objects and costume, all dating from 1646 to the present day. The collection is particularly strong in Victorian and Edwardian material. Hitchin Museum's Fiona Dudswell curates the collection, which was established in the 1920's with an endowment. Unfortunately, the school stands on a "prime site", and is seen by some as ripe for demolition. Hertfordshire County Council is said not to be happy with the situation. Some say it is merely going through the motions of caring. Can the school be saved? Write to Hertfordshire County Council.

COMING EVENTS

WHAM Workshop, 9th September, 1991 Museum of London

An assessment of how the profile of Women's History can be raised in the museum of London, on a low budget and without major redisplay. Museum of London staff will talk about their plans, including a major new exhibition on the Suffragettes.

Contact: Angela Fussell, Croydon Museum Service, Central Library, Croydon, CR9 1ET (Tel: 081 760 5400)

ART AND LIFE

MPG Annual Study Weekend, 19th - 22nd September 1991 Birmingham

Looking at ways of bridging the gap between museums and "the Arts" through case studies and practical workshops.

Contact: Ann Bukantas, 7 Victoria Avenue, Mayfield Street, Spring Bank, Hull, HU3 1NX

ARCHIVES, ICONS & ARTEFACTS

Society for the Study of Labour History Conference, 30th November 1991 London

An overview of labour history resources, including archives, oral history collections, visual art, museums buildings and monuments.

Contact: Christine Coates, Librarian, TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London, WC2B 3LS (Tel: 071 636 4030 Ex 220)

SHCG Committee 1990/1991

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IN PRINT :

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

The Best Type of Girl : A history of Girls' Independent Schools,

by Gillian Avery, Deutsch, £20.00

Thomas Cook : 150 Years of Popular Tourism,

by Piers Brendan, Secker, £20.00

Ephemeral Vistas : The Expositions Universeller, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939,

by Paul Greenhalgh, Manchester University Press, £11.95

The State of Welfare : The Welfare State in Britain since 1974,

John Hills (ed), Clarendon Press, £40.00

A History of Contraception,

by Angus McLaren, Blackwell, £25.00

The Demographic Revolution,

by Jane McLoughlin, Faber, £12.99

Feminism and Youth Culture,

by Angela McRobbie, Macmillan, £10.95

At Duty's Call : A Study in obsolete patriotism,

by W. J. Reader, Manchester University Press, £10.95

Phantom Village : The myth of the New Glasgow,

by Ian Spring, Polygon, £8.95

Death and the afterlife in Victorian literature,

by Michael Wheeler, Cambridge, £35.00

CHRISTINE JOHNSTONE

. . . is standing for the position of Councillor-at-Large in the forthcoming elections for the Museums Association Council.

This nomination is supported by WHAM, MPG and SHCG.

The views expressed in SHCG News are those of the Editor and contributors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Social History Curators Group or its committee. The Editor reserves the right to edit contributions to SHCG News as necessary. All contributions and correspondence should be sent to Ian Lawley, City Museum and Art Gallery, Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, ST1 3DW. The copy date for SHCG News #27 is 1 October 1991