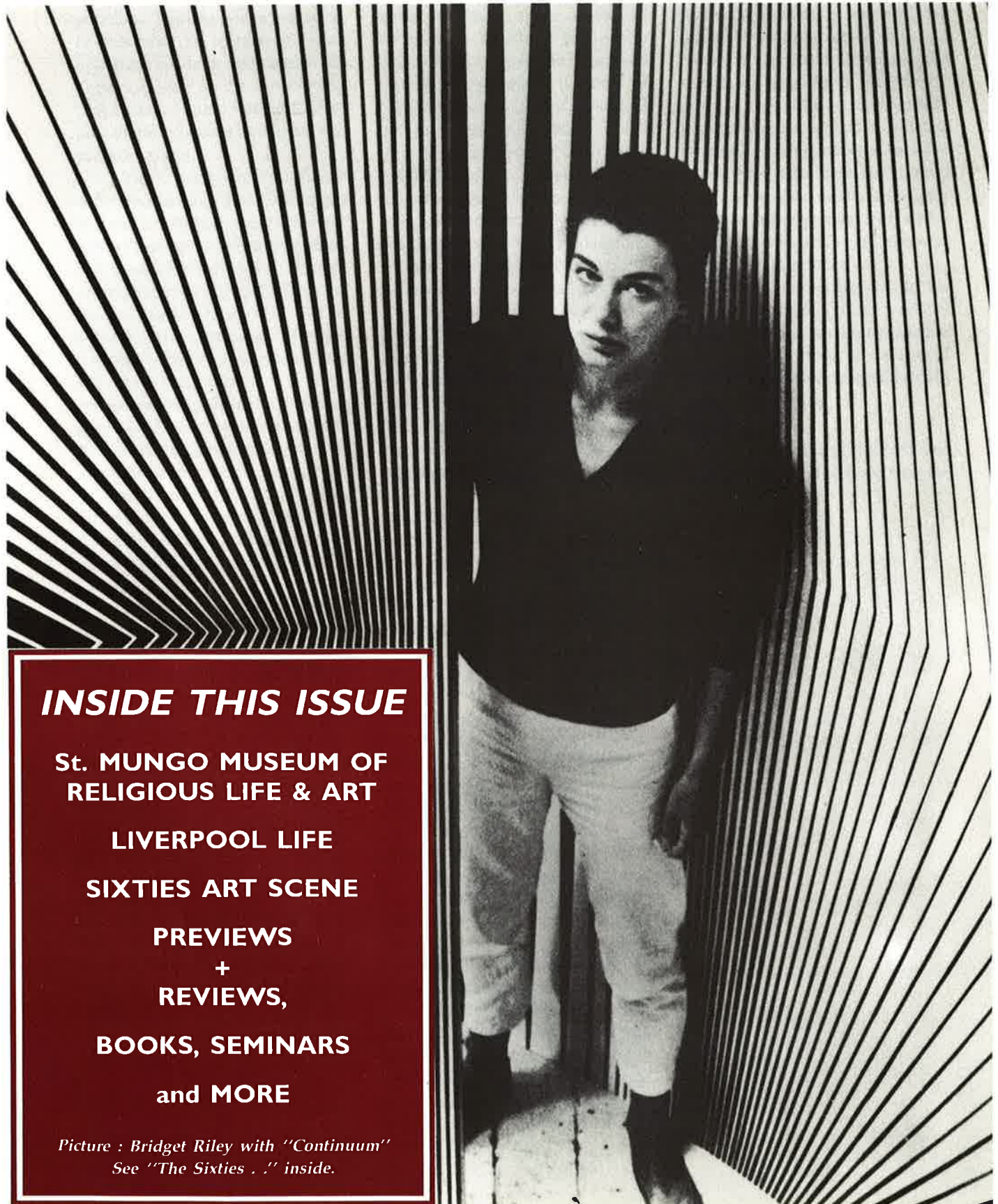


**SOCIAL HISTORY
CURATORS GROUP**

news

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP ISSUE NUMBER 31 SPRING 1993



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REVIEWS,

BOOKS, SEMINARS

and MORE

*Picture : Bridget Riley with "Continuum"
See "The Sixties . ." inside.*

RELIGION IS A SENSITIVE ISSUE

The latest addition to Scotland's museum world, 'St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art', has recently opened in Glasgow to a storm of criticism. Dealing with a subject as controversial as religion it seems opportune to draw attention to the project in view of the forthcoming SHCG annual study weekend, when one of the curators involved will present a paper.

The perspective which determines the displays in St Mungo's is firmly multi-faith, multi-cultural. Not only are there splendid artefacts belonging to the major world religions, on a national and local (i.e. Glasgow) level displays are not restricted to Scottish Presbyterianism. On the contrary, Glasgow is presented as a city which has given space to many religions and expressions of belief, at least over the last two hundred years. Nor is Protestantism presented as unproblematic or homogeneous but as one form of Christianity with different forms of expression within. As was to be expected, such an approach has attracted criticism from various quarters.

On its opening day, or rather, the night before, St Mungo's was subjected to an unholy row initiated by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Which goes to show - religion is a sensitive issue. It was unfortunate that the Moderator was given a head start by a rather major mistake which occurred in the exhibition text and the guide book. The British Monarch was named as head of the Church of Scotland, whereas Presbyterianism is adamant that only Christ can claim this title. The Church leader listed other 'glaring mistakes' but most of these, I believe, are not so much errors of fact as historically moot points.

There is the question of weighting - how much space has been given over to the respective religions. The Moderator, yet again, complained about the limited space devoted to religion in Scotland (an entire gallery!) and how the Christian Church is represented in terms of conflict rather than ecumenical movement and co-operation.

The museum staff, in my view, did the best thing. They apologised for any genuine errors made and promised correction at the earliest possible opportunity (the guide carried an 'erratum' slip the next day) but did not apologise for the overall approach.

Nevertheless the newspapers lapped it up and visitor numbers during the first week of St. Mungo's existence were boosted by plenty of free publicity. Now the specific attack from the Moderator has ceased to make headlines, visitors seem quite happy with what is on offer in the new museum. There is opportunity for comment or criticism on note paper available from the reception desk which can be pinned up on open display there and then. When I checked the notes on the day of my visit they were critical but constructive. With the exception of the odd cranky one suggesting for example that the Museum should devote itself to exposing all religions for what they are - 'opium for the people'. A sort of anti-religion museum. We know that we can't please everybody all the time!

I thought it was good to see groups of young people from obviously different cultural background (Sikh, Pakistani, Chinese) discussions going on, especially in the gallery which looks at how religion pervades all aspects of human life, including war and peace.

The fact that religion IS one of the more difficult issues to deal with before a public as wide-ranging in educational and cultural background as museum visitors. One of the excuses put forward by museum staff

for errors of fact or 'misinterpretation' was the very short period (a mere two years) given to them for getting the museum off the ground. We all know that such pressure is very real and increasing as grant aid or sponsor's money is expected to be turned into something tangible in the shortest possible time. Maybe such pressure is something that should be resisted, especially when it involves sensitive issues. More time should be allowed for research and consultation and for formal evaluation exercises, which can pick up mistakes we are otherwise left to apologise for.

I am looking forward to the opportunity at SHCG study weekend to hear from one curator involved in the project his views on the task of making religion the main subject of a museum exhibition.

*Marij Van Helmond
Merseyside Maritime Museum*

the sixties: art scene in london

Barbican, London until June 13, and then the McLellan, Glasgow

Artists in London didn't all go 'Pop' in the sixties, they went *Action, Situationalist, Op, Kinetic* and *Psychadelic*, as the sixties: art scene in london successfully displays .

Guest curator, Dr David Mellor (Sussex University) and his colleagues have energetically assembled a large and diverse collection of 'key' and often long unexhibited paintings, sculptures, and installations. The opener, Robin Denny's large and bold *Austen Reed Mural* (1959) has been brought out of one of the shop's backrooms.

the sixties: art scene in london, in appropriate sixtyish sans serif, lower-case typeface, is also interesting because of the range of supporting contemporary 'ephemera': posters, photographs, cartoons as well as magazines, books and film clips, that shed evocative light on the fine art. The organisers are to be congratulated for this inspired hunter-gathering. No doubt some high-cultured consumers will find the inclusion of such material a distasteful distraction but not this social historian with philistine tendencies.

Mellor is at pains to show the diverse influences on avant-gard artists. He provides exemplary contextualising overviews of the art, which is organised chronologically. Instead of stylistic or

biographic centred interpretation: a gallery norm, Mellor has chosen themes such as 'dissent', 'satire', 'gender & bodies' and 'codes' to organise the works. In overview



Bridget Riley with "Continuum"

texts he traces the impact on artists of phenomena such as, cold war and nuclear anxieties, sexual permissiveness, technological optimism, American and French art and the modernisation of London: its high rise office developments and rationalised road signs. His language is eloquent and succinct, i.e. of 'heroes and heroines' he writes, 'across the new media landscape strode the figures of anglo-american mass culture. For artists such as Richard Hamilton these were the true successors of Graeco Roman mythology...'

One reviewer has criticised Mellor for '(sucking) the juice out of the swinging city (Time Out). Rather than lack of juice what I found missing were the alternative, subjective, personal voices of the artists themselves. Only in the small print of yellowing clippings can you read artists describing their work at the time. Moreover whilst the exhibition undoubtedly succeeds in its aim to shed light on overlooked artists and on movements overshadowed by 'Pop Art', I was less convinced of its claim to explore London as an 'art

scene'. Key art, artists and exhibitions, do not add up to a sense of London as a place for artists to live, work, exhibit and sell. Only in a short film made by the artists of SPACE (Space Provision, Artistic, Cultural, Educational), who in 1968-9 created studio space in the disused warehouses of St Katherine's Dock, were some of the practical realities of artistic life in the Capital on show.

Imaginative programming of live music in the Barbican's foyer below meant that the gallery echoed to the sounds of the sixties when I visited. There is also a sixties film season: *Blow Up*, *Performance* and the *Ipcress File* et al, at the Barbican Cinema. This and the media attention the exhibition has attracted, led me to speculate how much 'Art' as opposed to fab music, fashions, films and the theatre put sixties London on the cultural map. Significantly the famous 'Time' magazine article, 'London: The Swinging City' fails to mention an artist. Perhaps then, 'the sixties: art scene in london' is in part enjoying the reflected glory of other aspects of that most retro-genic decade.

Javier Pes,
Museum of London



"The Bullrunning Jug"
(See facing Page)

Hands on History

Museum of St. Albans 3 October 1992 - 21 February 1993

Hands on History is best proof I've seen that high tech, high cost gadgets are not the only way to create that much sought after user-friendly exhibition. Through it, the Museum of St. Albans invited their visitors to become History Detectives by posing problems and activities which encouraged them to touch, think and answer questions about the objects and illustrations on display.

Activities ranged from trying on shoes to being Michael de Burke reporting from the 1st Battle of At. Albans in 1455 and each section contained clear instructions to help the visitor along. Simple methods were used to demonstrate a variety of principles: by matching different captions to a photograph 'Seeing

is Believing' showed how totally different interpretations could be given to the same image. In the same way, by asking questions and giving clues about a series of objects, visitors were encouraged to work out for themselves what they were and how they functioned.

Hands on History was geared very much to school parties and the National Curriculum and children accompanied by their teachers or their parents will have gained much from this exhibition. For unaccompanied children, the exhibition may have proven more difficult. There was so much going on and to think about that younger children needed an adult was needed to steer them around. Adults themselves will certainly have had fun and learnt a lot - once they managed to lose a few inhibitions and join in the spirit of the exhibition.

Not content with providing an accessible array of open display objects for those going into the museum, the staff went another step forward by taking Hands on History out to the people. The exhibition was transferred to a local community centre for a weekend and was joined there by residents' reminiscence sessions and a collectors' afternoon.

Well done St. Albans. The museum has taken the profession another step away from the blue rinse image and certainly gave me confidence that despite dwindling budgets and cost cutting councils it is still possible to produce exciting displays.

*Maggie Appleton,
Stevenage Museum*

Bullrunning Jug

The MGC\V&A Purchase Grant Fund recently supported Stamford Museum's acquisition of a pearlware jug commemorating the singular custom of Bullrunning which was practised in Stamford from the Middle Ages until it was finally stamped out in 1839 when central government sent troops to the town.

The Running, which the jug celebrates, involved chasing a bull through the town before it was killed and roasted on the town meadows amid general celebrations. An annual event, taking place six weeks before Christmas, the day was presided over by a 'bull-queen' or 'bull woman', dressed in blue and carrying a blue

'bull stick'. One of the more well-known holders of this title was Ann Blades, bull-woman at the end of the eighteenth century until her death in 1808 and who became known as the 'Empress of the Bullards'. She was energetic in her efforts in keeping the interest in bullrunning alive in her town. Her name is inscribed on the jug together with the date, 1792 and the ditty,

'A Bull, a Bull, is all my cry;
A Bull, a Bull, for ever.'

She is also featured in a painting, now hanging in Stamford Town Hall wearing her traditional costume and carrying her staff of office. Artefacts connected with

bullrunning infrequently come onto the open market and one with such personal connections are rare, making the jug a unique document of social history which fully deserves its place in the museum's collections. The strong case for Purchase Grant Fund support of the acquisition put forward by the museum included the results of the research that museum staff had undertaken on bullrunning and the people involved with it. They were also able to show how the jug would complement the collection of material surrounding the practice, already assembled by the Museum and the Town Hall.

*Janet Davis,
Victoria & Albert Museum*

THE MUSEUM OF LIVERPOOL LIFE

Phase one of the Museum of Liverpool Life opened on May Day. It brings together the collections of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside's (NMG) Regional History department which were previously split between the Museum of Labour History, the Large Objects Collection and the Liverpool Museum. The Labour History Museum closed in 1991 with the promise that it would re-open in the Albert Dock. Phase one contains three sections: Mersey Culture, Making a Living and Demanding a Voice. Future phases will consist of 'homes and communities' and the Liverpool King's Regiment.

So is this really Liverpool life? Can the particular life of a turbulent city like Liverpool be distilled into a museum and what is meant by Liverpool Life? The Labour History Museum was unashamedly about working class history. A common sense understanding leads one to assume that Liverpool Life is too, but it is no means spelt out. Despite publicity claims that it is a new national museum its success or otherwise needs to be judged by the people of Liverpool with their fierce affection for the city. Certainly the Liverpool woman I overheard thought it was 'absolutely brilliant'. She loved the suffragette with her bike ('Votes for Women, ya-hoo!' she cried) and the memory of the co-op divi. Perhaps it does not matter that these are pieces of history common to other cities. After all, she did then move on to have a good look at a display about Bessie Braddock.

The Mersey culture section specifically raises this issue of whether Liverpool has a culture all of its own: 'We'll leave you to decide' was the rather weak conclusion. Certainly the museum illustrates things specific to Liverpool like Aintree, the Mersey Beat, Everton and Liverpool football clubs and the Liverpool Philharmonic. But there

is also much in the culture section which is universal: reading, playing the piano, listening to music, watching television. Somehow the Liverpool culture to be found just outside the door of the museum was not captured. That culture lies in the way people talk which hits you immediately you step onto the platform at Lime Street. Then you detect it in the way they sit in pubs, the way the women wear their clothes and hair; then you notice St. George's Hall, the derelict and windswept open spaces, the Liverpool building and the Mersey itself stretching away into the wider world which the museum states, made Liverpool's wealth. To an outsider at least it is all this which makes up the Mersey culture; it's the texture of peoples interaction when they move about this remarkable landscape. Can these sensations be captured in historical museum displays where facts rather than impressions or emotions are the main currency? More Liverpool accents where people talk about what Liverpool means to them might help.

Liverpool's image has been strongly influenced by fictional as well as factual accounts. Inevitably perhaps the displays reflect these combined influences. Fictional impressions of Liverpool from Brookside, Z Cars and the Liver Birds stand side by side with factual narratives. And so fact and fiction become blurred and the museum's authority lends the fiction the status of fact. What is it about life in Liverpool which makes it such a powerful source for fiction?

The museum is to be welcomed because it does attempt to do more than simply display collections alongside a narrative history of the city; it is more than a stand-up local history lesson. I enjoyed the opportunity to wander about and pick up almost arbitrary glimpses of Liverpool today and in the past: photographs of work in the dock, the shipwrights' ceremonial standard and the Aintree section with its Victorian jockey scales. It does though have a didactic atmosphere. The feeling is

that the museum is there to tell you things rather than immerse you in a distilled version of aspects of the past and present of Liverpool. But the labels are good and short and there is no strict route through so there is no sense of having information imparted is not overly oppressive. It is possible to pick and choose, to flit about, which was what all the visitors I noticed were doing. At times it invites participation, it raises questions and it occasionally suggests that the history of Liverpool is a contested and contentious field.

But this approach is not taken consistently throughout. The museum primarily presents the curators' view told through the collections, only at times tempered by Liverpoolians' own views. The video of people talking about the Toxteth riots in 1981 is the best example of the latter. If it had been possible for the staff to be bolder they might have worked more closely with artists, community groups, historians, children or teachers.

The 'making a living' section ends tamely with the International Garden Festival in 1984 and the move to provide employment through tourism. The museum stands in the heart of the Albert Dock development where one can look around and see the decline of Liverpool's economic wealth and the hope placed in tourism. The museum's role in this process could perhaps have been suggested so that is not merely seen as an independent reporter but an actual part of the process which it is seeking to describe. The limitations of the collections can prevent contentious issues being raised. But then the old Labour History Museum did tackle controversial issues. Hopefully, the move to the Albert Dock, Liverpool's tourist showcase, where a brave face is put on the

economic decline of Liverpool will not mean the museum loses its critical edge.

The museum has brought together previously dispersed collections but greater indication of the presence of other collections in the city which also speak of the life of Liverpool would be instructive. The weight of institutional history within NMGM hangs heavy. The Walker Art Gallery, the Liverpool Museum and the Maritime Museum can all lay claim to being about life in Liverpool, as can the forthcoming slave trade gallery in the Maritime Museum. Once again it is evident that the adoption of academic disciplinary terms to order museum collections might make the management of collections easier but does not ease interpretation.

There are a few simple interactives and an excellent outside play area in the courtyard, but provision for children is scant. One child was desperate to know if he could climb on the 1936 Lister Autotruck once used for portering in the dock: "Mum, are you allowed to get on it? There's nothing to say you can or can't. Everything still works, it's still got an engine in it." He loved the fact that it was real. His mother liked the nearby typewriter in the dock clerical work section. But when she told her son that her own office used similar machines not all that long ago he was not much interested. He was not allowed to climb on the truck and so he lost interest and went back to driving his remote controlled car around the museum. He stopped to press a video button but the film of the Unity Theatre was of no interest.

One three year old was placed in an armchair in the Brookside lounge to be filmed 'talking' to the Brookside characters: 'This is your big chance to audition for Brookside. Don't be shy...speak up...Get the hang of it?'. I found this a rather disturbing example of how children are taught from an early age to watch adult television. It was much more

entertaining to see one of the attendants trying it out. His mixture of embarrassment and glee at his own humiliation seemed to offer another glimpse of an aspect of culture.

The boy's fascination with the authenticity of the truck was shared by a woman in the mockup of the cinema. "It's actual seats this" she said to her husband. They didn't stay long to watch the film about Aintree and the Grand National but she liked sitting in the real old cinema seats. Mind you, they are the only soft seats in the gallery.

The museum, unwittingly perhaps, sets off trains of thought as to just what is 'Liverpool Life'? I sat afterwards in the Liverpool Tate cafe and watched two girls with their parents. Katy and Lucy sat on stools in their pink dresses and fluffy pink cardigans. They each had the same ribbons in their hair, short white socks, pink sandals and purses around their shoulders. I knew they were Katy and Lucy because their names were appliquéd on the back of their cardigans. Somehow this was Mersey Culture: dressing up your daughters in pink when you yourself wore jeans and a T-shirt to come down to Albert Dock. The wide variety of people in the cafe spoke of something of the success of the Albert Dock complex. Liverpool Life will be a welcome addition to this if it can keep asking questions and keep abreast of the city's development.

It is hard to do this however with permanent displays which are costly to change. The Demanding a Voice section has a 'case for change', a case of material which will be regularly renewed. It currently contains material about Eric Heffer. But it was too late to change the display about the Grand National so that it could mention this year's race, one of the most infamous in its history.

*Myna Tristram
National Museum of
Labour History,
Manchester*

BLOOD on the COAL

Last Autumn Woodhorn Colliery Museum in Northumberland was the stage for an exciting living history project called "Blood on the Coal". The project was designed for schools and explored the causes and impact of a gas explosion which struck Woodhorn Colliery during the First World War claiming 13 lives.

The children and their teachers took on the role of museum officers with the job of researching a new museum display devoted to the Woodhorn Disaster. Through the living history drama they encountered eight scenes featuring real and fictional characters from the time of the disaster. Characters were carefully selected to illustrate people's different experiences and their conflicting views about the disaster and its cause. The cast included a widow who movingly recounted the Sunday morning when she learnt of her husband's death, a different angle on the tragedy was given by the Colliery Manager who complained of the problems managing the pit with a third of his workforce at war, while the union's point of view was expressed by the General Secretary of the Miners' Federation who talked of his fight for compensation. At the conclusion of each scene the children were encouraged to question the actors about the disaster. They were also given 'tokens', (copies of documents from the museum's collection) which reinforced the drama. Performances closed with a re-enactment of the inquest into the deaths. The verdict was deliberately left open to encourage the children to come to their own conclusions.

"Blood on the Coal" was a collaborative project involving museum staff and teacher advisors from the Northumberland Schools' Drama and Dance Service. The cast of 15 was made up of High School pupils who had the valuable experience of working with two professional actors. The script and songs were written by a local writer and historian, Mike Kirkup, who is also the Chairman of the museum's friends' group. The timing of the event seems particularly ironic coinciding with the controversial pit closures announcement - a reminder that pit disasters are not the only calamities which mining communities have to survive.

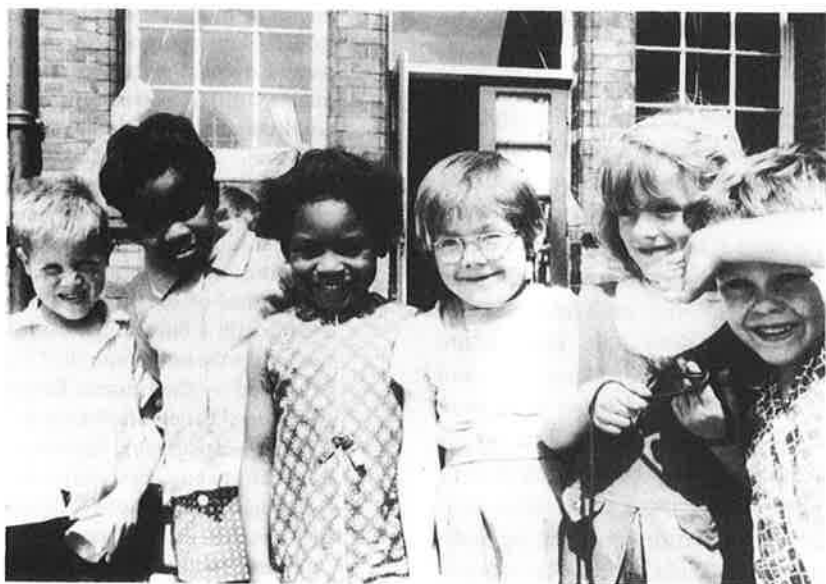
*Hazel Edwards
Assistant Museums Officer
Woodhorn Colliery Museum*

Take Heart

People, History & Change in Birmingham's Heartlands

Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery 14 May - 18 July

The aim of the Take Heart project has been to explore the social and industrial history of the area of Birmingham now designated as 'Heartlands', the city's biggest redevelopment zone. Situated to the north and east of the city centre, Heartlands stretches from the edge of Aston Science Park and St Andrew's Football ground in the south, to Lichfield Road and Spaghetti Junction in the north, before branching eastwards to Fort Dunlop in the direction of the M6 motorway. So why Heartlands? What is Heartlands? And what is so special about this particular part of Birmingham?



The story of Heartlands is, broadly speaking, the story of Duddeston, Nechells and Bordesley, an old and well established part of Birmingham, an area that could have been described for many decades as Birmingham's own industrial heartland. The story of 'Heartlands' echoes in so many ways the wider history of Birmingham and the experiences of people living and working within an environment amidst change and development, growth and decline. Within the history of Heartlands we can see so much of Birmingham's history, from the growing industrial town of the 18th century, the change from a rural to an industrial economy, the building of canals and railways, the growth in population, housing and industry in the 19th century, to the development of factories and industries for which Birmingham is so well known.

The story of Heartlands highlights also Birmingham's skill in metal working and the particular industries for which Birmingham is renowned - metal founding, buttons, engineering, motor cars, bicycles, and household names like Dunlop and HP Sauce to name but a few. Post-war council housing, high rise flats and redevelopment schemes, the building of motorways, the decline of manufacturing, general inner city decline and regeneration are part of the familiar landscape of Birmingham at a local level, the development of a city as seen and felt by ordinary people, living and working in a particular locality.

From a strictly historical point of view, Heartlands did not exist until 1988, when the redevelopment agency with that name was first set up. Birmingham Heartlands Ltd was the first joint private and public sector

development corporation in Britain and is made up of representatives from Birmingham City Council, five private companies - Wimpey, Bryant, Douglas, Galliford and Tarmac - and the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. The aim of the development agency has been the comprehensive redevelopment of the 2300 acres of Birmingham which includes Duddeston, Nechells, and parts of Bordesley, Aston and Bromford. In 1987 the levels of unemployment in the area were three times the national average and it was described as an area of 'multiple deprivation'. In March 1992, Heartlands was granted urban development corporation (UDC) status by the government from which it now takes its name, Birmingham Heartlands Development Corporation.

A further aspect of the Take Heart project has been to explore the key historical concepts of continuity and change, and the ways in which people respond to social, political and economic changes. In other words, some of the experiences in Heartlands have been shared by people living in other parts of Birmingham as well as in other towns and cities in other parts of the country and over the same period of time. We all experience change in our lives, and as far as we know, always have, but people react to change in different ways. People often have very different views about what happened in the past, just as people see things differently today. By including the words and experiences of people in recent years we can understand much more about our lives, thoughts and concerns of people in the more recent past. Perhaps it will lead us to the conclusion that some aspects of life are always changing, while others remain remarkably the same! We hope also to show that the history of

Birmingham is relevant to the challenges and strengths of the city today. All those involved in the Take Heart project hope that it will be a major step towards understanding the vital role that the area and people of Heartland's have played in a city that has touched and influenced the rest of the world. Over 300 local individuals, schools and community groups have been actively involved in special projects - like The Barrack Street Banner - and the creation of the exhibition itself. Materials loaned from local industries - from Salt's early surgical instruments to HP Sauce bottles, Dunlop tyres and a supermarket trolley of Chinese groceries, illustrate graphically the richness, variety and changing nature of work in the area.

The exhibition is presented in lively and exciting ways - using objects, photographs, sound and oral history, video and interactive displays. A range of agricultural tools and 17th century objects borrowed from Aston Hall help to illustrate the long history of an area which appears to be entirely modern. Room settings include a public bath cubicle from the 1930's, contrasted with a bathroom from a modern local Bryant home demonstrate housing changes in the more recent past. The history of transport from stagecoach to canal boat, trams and cars, and Spaghetti Junction as a living monument to the former dominance of the motor industry in Birmingham explores the role of communications in the area's development.

A section on local community life and leisure looks at dancing, cinema, pubs and weddings and Trevor Francis' England strip will help tell the story of the local football club - Birmingham City FC.

The exhibition has included an extensive oral history programme, providing individuals with opportunities to recount their own personal histories and express their own views without judgement - an

approach which encourages people to see the relevance of museums to their lives and values.

The project consists of a major exhibition in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Chamberlain Square, a high quality publication, available at £4.95 and an education resource pack, price £5.95.

Further information contact:

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'Home Truths?'

The Secret Language of Everyday Things

The Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester
3 April - 26 September 1993

This exhibition explores the hidden messages in everyday objects by exploring what objects 'say' through their sound, shape, colour and feel.

Familiar things have been made strange - pink motor bikes and black rubber washing machines. By changing the conventional image of familiar objects visitors are encouraged to think about the meanings that are usually ascribed to them. Visitors are invited to experience how objects have different meanings for people of different ages, cultures and physical abilities.

The exhibition also focuses on the social and cultural elements of technological developments, using familiar objects to suggest that technology is shaped by people.

A Night Out

Images of Scottish Popular Culture in 1993

This SHCG collaborative contemporary recording project will collect, record and display images of popular culture in Scotland today. The exhibition will display the variety of ways people choose to spend their leisure time when participating in a 'Night Out'. The photographs will provide a useful basis for each museum's archive on the theme of popular culture in the 1990s and these collections will be enhanced by the existence of a body of comparable material in other museums. A selection of these images will be used in the exhibition.

The exhibition will tour throughout Scotland and be exhibited in the 14 contributing museums. The images are collected in a number of ways, not only are curators taking photographs but cameras have been given to people to record their own night out and at least two professional photographers have been commissioned to record particular nights out.

The exhibition opens at Summerlee Heritage Trust in October 1993.

SEMINARS

Presentation of Religion in Museums'

27 April 1993. Wesley's Chapel, London

Whilst in the middle of running Roadshows around the City of Hull appealing for material for the Old Grammar's new exhibition Faith in the City". I welcomed the opportunity to attend this seminar and discover what was being developed elsewhere. More importantly I was interested in how other museums had dealt with such a powerful and sensitive subject as religion and religious belief in a museum context.

The day began with an introduction from Alison Taylor, the Curator of Wesley's House and the Museum of Methodism. The need for a seminar exploring the presentation of religion in museums was demonstrated by the attendance of over fifty representatives from a diversity of museum and religious backgrounds. Alison emphasised the absence of non-Christian religious objects from many social history collections and the need for museums to redress the balance. Ms Taylor raised the question of who museums of religion were targeting, whether they were for pilgrimages from a particular faith or for the general museum visitor. She felt that motives for including religion in social history should be clear. Ms Taylor felt that the differences between a living religion and historical or official line of religious belief should be made.

The day proceeded with various papers from Brian Durrans (Museum of Mankind), John Hardacre (Winchester Cathedral), tours of Wesley's House and a number of 'work in progress' presentations.

Two papers which were particularly stimulating relevant to my own experience in Hull were by Mark O'Neil from Glasgow Museums and Rickie Burman from the London Museum of Jewish Life.

The first of these papers looked at the new 'St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life' in Glasgow, a purpose built museum which is the first to focus on world religions in a museum context. Mark O'Neil raised the question of how you set up a museum of religion, what you include or exclude and how you present people's beliefs in a way that is acceptable to them. The brief was to explore religious art and life through the interpretation of Glasgow's rich collection in 70 words in order to leave space for translation into Glasgow's other four main languages. Mr O'Neil explained how the curators had tried to be challenging in their presentation of religion in order to stimulate debate rather than provide a 'recipe' or 'answer'. He presented some of the criticisms which have been made of the new museum and the way in which the curators have responded positively using it as an opportunity to further the discussion raised in the displays. A review of the museum and a evaluation will take place after a year. One of Mr O'Neil's closing statements and one I would empathise with was the only reason NOT to create a museum of religion was FEAR! It was a very lively paper and certainly a motivating force for people to visit this exciting development in Scotland.

Jayne Tyler
Hull City Museums

Re-thinking the Decorative Arts

13-15 July 1993. University of Manchester, History of Art Dept.

Whilst some believe that a theoretical and methodological framework is necessary to the decorative arts and look to influences from a range of humanities subjects, others support a more empirical approach, believing that observational study of the objects and detailed recording of associated information is all important. This conference provides an opportunity to examine these trends by bringing together museum professions and academics from the decorative arts and related disciplines such as social and economic history, design history and material culture studies.

Collecting & Interpreting Domestic Artefacts.

8 July, Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester

This seminar explores how museums can represent the familiar, simple and everyday, posing questions such as, what is excluded from domestic collections and displays and why? What can we learn from developing debates in feminist and technology studies? And how can museums represent 'a typical home', from millions of different households?

CONFERENCE

European Ethnological and Social History Museums.

Paris 22-24 February 1993

This conference was organised by the Direction des Musees de France, and the Musee national des Arts et Traditions Populaire with the collaboration of various other bodies, including the International Council of Museums (ICOM). There were over 300 participants from thirty countries, although the majority of delegates were French. Due to inadequate publicity in the United Kingdom there were only seven UK participants and several were attending because of their positions in international organisations. For example, Davis Boston (Horniman Museum) attended as Vice-Chairman of the ICOM Ethnographers Committee; Andrew Roberts (Museum of London) attended as Chairman of ICOM Documentation Committee; while Chris Zeuner (Weald and Downland Museum) was there in his capacity as President of European Open-Air Museums.

The conference began by defining its terms of reference. Social history and ethnology museums were taken to include open-air museums, regional museums, local or community museums, ecomuseums, industrial museums, and ethnography museums. A constant theme of the conference was that museums should be relevant to contemporary society and that they should stimulate a respect for different cultures.

Other general points emerging from the conference can be summarised as follows:

1. There is a need for scientific research of material culture, especially in the light of the following factors:

a. some museums are being used to express cultural identity and there is a danger that this can be subverted by political ideology. Museums should reflect and interrogate cultural identity, but not create it.

b. some museums tend to concentrate on a romantic and superficial view of rural life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Research would be facilitated by better links between museums and universities.

2. There is a need for a multi-disciplinary approach towards interpreting the material held by social and ethnological museums.

3. There is a need for national catalogues of social and ethnological material in museums, and the idea of an international documentation standard for this material should be explored further.

4. There is a need for active contemporary collecting. The Swedish SAMDOK programme is one possible model.

5. There is a need for more networking between museums on a European basis. A good starting point would be the listing of current collaborations. A specific idea was collaboration between museums on particular themes, e.g. homemaking, the impact of the car on everyday life, and the symbolism of St George.

The final session of the Conference was devoted to discussion of a proposal to create a European Charter of Ethnological and Social History Museums and a European Association of such museums affiliated to ICOM, (see Resolution attached). It was agreed that a working party would be established to consider these matters and that it would report back to the next European Conference gathered as a general constitutive assembly.

It is hoped that UK representation at the next conference will be much greater, in particular from the relevant specialist groups, e.g. Social History Curators' Group.

RESOLUTION

The participants of the European Conference of Ethnological and Social History Museums, held at the Musee National des Arts et Traditions Populaires from February 22 to 23 1993 agree to initiate the study of:

1. A European charter of Ethnological and Social History Museums

2. The statute of a European Association of Museums affiliated to ICOM.

To do so they herewith decide to form a working group constituted by the members of the Committee for the preparation of the 1993 Conference, open to European Museum professionals who so desire.

As a first approach in the preparation of the charter they invest this group with the following orientations:

The charter's principles will be disclosed and applied by the members of the assembly at all levels of territorial competence (international, national, regional, and local) and by all concerned specialists. The charter will state the deontology of their main goals which are:

1. Propagate the knowledge and comprehension of other nations in order to promote the acceptance of differences and the creation of conditions for a peaceful co-existence and active toleration.

2. To work towards the protection, the collection, the documentation, the study and the critical interpretation and comprehension of cultural and natural material heritage (personal, landed estate, non permanent) as well as immaterial heritage.

3. To be both vigilant and devoted to the protection and safeguard of nation's interests and the culture of ethnic minority groups.

4. To uphold and guarantee the future of Museum institutions and professions, their realisations and their contributions to the development of societies.

The subscribers to this charter are invited to respect the principles mentioned in the Convention of The Hague concerning the protection of cultural heritage, as well as the corresponding ICOM principles.

The working group will report on its advancement, the results will be presented and subjected for approval to the members of the next European Conference gathered as general constitutive assembly.

*Chris Newbury,
Deputy Director MGC*

RECENT PUBLICATIONS • RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Resources for Women's History in Greater Manchester: Manchester Women's History Group

The Manchester Women's History Group has undertaken a major project of retrieval and recovery which will be of value to all those interested in researching the history of women. Sources cover film, photography, oral history, manuscripts, artifacts and printed sources from over forty institutions. Price £5.95 + £1 p&p. Copies available from the National Museum of Labour History

Memories of Childhood on the Isle of Dogs 1870 to 1970

This book, using first hand accounts, traces life on the Isle of Dogs from the days when the first London Board School was built on the Isle of Dogs, through a period of

industrialisation when a settled working class community lived among the docks and factories until the upheaval of the Second World War and up to post-war society and the beginning of great changes in the 1960s.

Edited by Eve Hostettler, 100 pages, illustrated, £7.50

Social History in Museums

Social History in Museums is a practical handbook for everyday use in the museum. It details the primary sources of data available; the practical considerations required in collection of the many different types of object that the discipline encompasses, and the different methods of interpretation. All this is backed up with extensive notes and further reference material.

Edited by Fleming/Paine/Rhodes, 424 pages, £37.25 Members/£45 Non-members

INFORMATION NEEDED

Colchester Museums Service are currently planning the redisplay of their Saxon, Norman and Medieval collections, and the Castle prisons.

We would be interested to hear about any such displays undertaken during the last three years, that have involved novel themes or techniques.

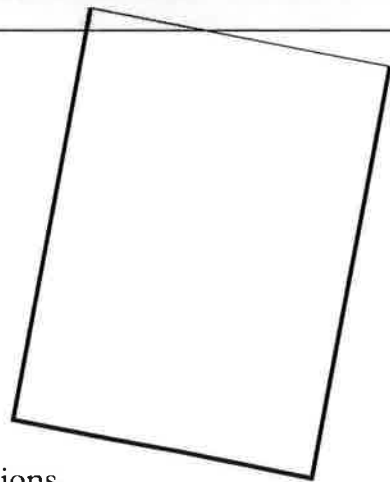
Please contact immediately: Rosemary Wark, c/o Bill Seaman, Colchester Museums Service, 14 Ryegate Road, Colchester, Essex. CO1 1YG.

All contributions, letters, articles for consideration and correspondence should be sent to Frank Little, Summerlee Heritage Trust, West Canal Street, Coatbridge ML5 1QD
Tel: 0236 431261
Facsimile: 0236 440429

Copy date for the next SHCG Newsletter is 15th August 1993

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