

**SOCIAL HISTORY
CURATORS GROUP**

news

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Greetings to all long-standing and hopefully many new members at the beginning of a new SHCG year. The past year has been quite a successful one - with two seminars and an Annual Study Weekend organised during a year which was shortened because of the shift of date for the ASW. From this place also many thanks to the retiring chair, Bill Jones, for all the hard work he has put into SHCG over the past years, and in various capacities. Best wishes in your new post, and don't lose sight of SHCG completely!

What plans then for the forthcoming year? Firstly, our autumn seminar 'Tools for the Job' - read all about it on the next pages. We will be preparing two more seminars and start work on next years' ASW and you are being asked to give your views/comments on this years event and wishes for 1994 - please return the questionnaire. The committee will continue to state the case for social history in museums. Vehicles for doing so are, amongst others, our Newsletter and our much improved Journal, whose next issue is to be published shortly.

However, as has been said by many of my predecessors before - any organisation is as good as its membership. Whereas we, your committee, aim to serve the membership the best we can, in this we rely very much on your participation and your views and comments. Your contributions to the Newsletter and the Journal and attendance of SHCG events are crucial. So please keep in touch - it keeps us on course.

Marij van Helmond
Chair

SHCG ANNUAL STUDY WEEKEND.

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, 8-11 JULY 1993

This edition sees two articles inspired by the ASW. In the first, Emma Taylor reviews the ASW and in the second, David Tucker argues against "issues-based" projects - strong on ideas but weak on objects - and puts the case for the primacy of the object.



Kate Downie 'Perfect Girl': 1993, from the exhibition "From Here to Maternity" People's Palace Museum, Glasgow

The ASW began with a rain-drenched bus tour of the sights of Newcastle. We drove from the city's prized Victorian monuments to the West End, its most deprived area, recently awarded funding through City Challenge. This tour, though tinged with a kind of curatorial voyeurism, provided an apt context for one of the main elements of the conference, a look at how social history curators can, or should, record and interpret the diversity of personal experience to be found in their local communities. Linked to this discussion were several papers on individual subjects which are deemed difficult or sensitive in the museum context.

Most speakers focused on their own experience of exhibition making. This did give delegates a good overview of recent projects, and brought to light a lot of practical problems and ideas, as well as ethical snares. Its disadvantage - perhaps a congenial disease of conferences - was that many of the wider implications of the subject became a subtext rather than the focus of discussion. For this reason, I found it useful to discuss each speaker's contribution in the context of some of the principal themes, in my opinion, of this year's ASW.

WHAT MAKES A SUBJECT SENSITIVE?

There appear to be a few universal rules defining difficult exhibition subjects. One illustration of this came from Ian Whitehead, Assistant Keeper of Science and Industry at Tyne and Wear. He is developing a new military museum for the service, amalgamating two existing museums. The new galleries will use photographs, letters and diaries to concentrate on the often harrowing experiences of individual soldiers. Paradoxically though, it was the departure from the old style celebratory displays that had caused controversy, rather than the potentially upsetting nature of the new material.

Interesting to note that most of Ian's examples were from the First World War. Most speakers were referring to exhibitions centred on the last fifty years, and were dealing with the problems arising from displaying personal views and possessions of people likely to see the exhibition. Can the private lives of people outside living memory still be sensitive display subjects? Probably not. Some current conflicts, however, are so explosive that they charge past events too. Brian Lacey, Programme Organiser for Derry Museums in Northern Ireland, talked about the Tower Museum, a recent development in the restored city centre. Most of the gallery space is now devoted to an exhibition on the history of Derry from geological times onwards. Brian assured us that only the pre-historic periods had been uncontroversial!

Carrie Van Lakenfeld opened the conference with a fascinating account of her work at the Amsterdam Historisches Museum. Curator of an impressive battery of controversial exhibitions - on old age, homosexuality, homelessness - she made some interesting points about the nature of such themes. Firstly, the shock factor of some subjects, such as sexuality or politics, varies hugely between countries and according to the media employed: to take an obvious example, sexuality is a more familiar, and hence less shocking theme for film or television than for museums. Carrie also believes that, in anticipating political antagonism towards some subjects, the curator must try to make the subtle distinction between 'justified concern' and cowardice, fear of 'sticking one's neck out'. In some cases, an exhibition on a 'scary subject', if done well, can both help to legitimise that topic as a serious subject for discussion, and can open up the museum to new ideas and approaches.

HOW SHOULD SENSITIVE SUBJECTS BE TACKLED?

With caution, certainly! Beyond that, speakers shared the same basic approach: if an exhibition is dealing with the beliefs and feelings of individuals, rather than factual information, the exhibition 'voice' should be created from the views of local people, not curators. All, therefore, stressed the importance of discussions with community groups and of oral history. Jayne Tyler, Keeper of Social History at Hull, talked about her forthcoming exhibition on the main religions practised in Hull: an oral history project, and several collecting roadshows have been central to her preparation, and have given her the relevant collection, of source material and objects, that was previously lacking. Harry Dunlop, talking about his work on the Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, referred to the city 'Sharing of Faiths' group which worked with curators on both text and object selection. Liz Carnegie, also at

Glasgow Museums, discussed her preliminary work for an exhibition on childbirth, 'From Here to Maternity', opening at the People's Palace later this year. She intends to use oral history quotes extensively on the text panels for this exhibition, feeling that they will be immediately accessible, and will bring out the humour, joy and pain of the subject in a non-patronising way. Another decision, which arose partly out of her oral history interviews, was to minimise the number of 'gory' gynaecological instruments shown in the exhibition: only a few are needed to make the point, and a large display would be unnecessarily upsetting for some visitors.

Carrie Van Lakenfeld talked about the problem of finding object material to illustrate some controversial themes. The slides of her exhibitions showed the importance of lateral thinking in producing an innovative interpretation: an example, their homosexuality exhibition showed cases of 'trendy' clothing and slogan T shirts worn by gays. In an exhibition on the Dutch experience of the Second World War, however, she, like Ian Whitehead, had found large displays of photographs and letters the most immediate and moving method of interpretation.

Several curators had tried hard not to reinforce offensive stereotypes or exacerbate conflict within their communities. Jayne Tyler decided not to exhibit photographs of Muslim ritual lamb slaughter: they would create antagonism, and she had no comparable images for other religions, to give a balanced view. Liz Carnegie, refusing to acknowledge any difference in the birth experience, elected not to mention disabled babies in her exhibition. Sometimes, of course, the curator has to make an ethical decision about an exhibition which ignores the views of some participating groups. Harry Dunlop had been persuaded by Muslim groups to take portrait photographs out of the Muslim life display, but refused to remove the quotes from Muslim women which were a particularly illuminating part of the display. The Ferens Art Gallery in Hull has a considerable reputation for tackling subjects often ignored in history museums, such as child sex abuse, the Gulf War, disability and sexuality. David Briers, Exhibition Officer, described

these exhibitions and talked about the Gallery's policy of including relevant details of artists' lives in text panels, and pointed out that for many artists (Eric Gill was a favourite example) this would require some editorial courage! In its permanent displays, the Ferens is almost trying to 're-sensitise' the interpretative labels, banishing the traditional reverent style, and acknowledging, for example, the pornographic element in much Victorian art.

INTERPRETING THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

On the Friday, our base was 'Newcastle Discovery', where we all spent some time in the new gallery on 20th century Newcastle, 'Great City', an ambitious and exciting display which proved an admirable setting for a series of papers about recording and interpreting the lives of urban communities. Cathy Ross talked about the development of 'Great City'. She described its three tier structure - which gives a general context, the story of a particular community and some individual views for each of seven periods - and explained how the memories and remarks which emerged from the oral history came to dominate this structure. The individuals involved in the displays were the 'lifeblood' of the gallery, she felt, but this emphasis meant a lot of contextual material had to be left out. She argued that many social history curators face a conflict between telling individuals' stories and explaining the wider social and political context; the latter should never be excluded.

Gina Barron, outreach worker for Tyne and Wear, described her first six months in the post, most of which she has spent building links with community groups in the West End of Newcastle with a view to involving them in the new People's Gallery. She stressed the importance of building trust as the basis of any collaborative project. At this early stage, however, it was unclear how these links and contacts would be used to build an exhibition programme, probably the greatest test of the project.

Lynne Otter, a photographer and lecturer, was also working with groups in the West End, this time on recording their lives through photographs. She had spent time building trust

and giving group members the confidence to 'develop a new subjectivity' on their communities. These photographs will later be displayed at the People's Gallery.

Bob Little, Age Concern training manager for North Shields, discussed the legal and ethical issues associated with recording oral testimony. He argued that all such projects need a clear sense of purpose, and that questioning should not deviate unnecessarily from the agreed subject. Interviewers should also try to warn participants against the frequently unscrupulous attentions of television and press journalists. Adrian Osler, Keeper of Maritime History at Tyne and Wear, reinforced this point the next day, describing how his academic book on boat building in the Shetland Isles has instigated what is now a highly commercial industry, no longer using the techniques he attempted to preserve. While curators may not be responsible for the long term repercussions of their work, they should be certain of its value at the outset: at the plenary session on Sunday, it was suggested that evaluation should therefore have a higher priority in setting the aims of our exhibition.

Several speakers stressed the many positive effects of involving communities in history exhibitions. Lynne Otter described the sense of 'empowerment', of excitement and confidence, felt by her students when they realised that their images of their communities will be displayed in the museum. Jackie Haq is chair of the Scotswood Community Project, and an indomitable campaigner for the future of her community, one of the deprived in Newcastle. She took Lynne's point a step further, arguing that, by creating balanced displays about communities like Scotswood, in co-operation with the people living there, museums can help to change stereotypes. They can begin to challenge the damaging negative views that are applied by some to all Scotswood people.

WHAT ABOUT THE OBJECTS?

At the end of his paper, Adrian Osler asked whether museums are really best able to tackle sensitive or controversial issues; surely television and literature can deal more effectively with oral testimony and deeply personal experiences? The answer, of course, is that the museum exhibition, as opposed to the newspaper article or the television programme, uses object evidence to interpret such themes. Conversely, museums can only justify tackling 'difficult' subjects if these will help them interpret their collections, or aid them in expanding those collections. This point was emphasised by Hazel Edwards, who gave us an excellent critical analysis of her exhibition 'Follow the Banner', at Woodhorn Colliery Museum. She concluded that the subject, the role of the Northumberland Miners Union, was more suited to textual analysis than to an exhibition, but that the gallery was ultimately justified by the dominating presence of the Union's huge banners. In this context, it was encouraging to hear some speakers explain how exhibition ideas were being presented through carefully chosen objects. In his members paper, Jon Brown, from Croyden Museum, explained how their forthcoming galleries will use specific objects, together with their donors' stories, to

look at certain themes - a wooden leg and a false ear will lead into a discussion of facilities for disabled people, for example, Brian Lacey, on the other hand, had chosen not to include shrapnel and other debris from sectarian conflict in Derry; he knew that such objects become powerful icons, fostering rather than healing divisions.

At the end of the 'action-packed' weekend, we had covered a considerable range of exhibition projects, and had established some practical guidelines and ethical considerations for dealing with sensitive subjects. We had also benefited from a number of fascinating visits - the Laing Art Gallery, Woodhorn Colliery Museum, Sunderland Museum and Beamish - and had consumed vast quantities of quiche and salad! I did feel, however, that delegates and speakers did not have a strong sense of the issues which could have arisen from the general theme, and this affected the quality of the debate throughout. A brief workshop or discussion session at the beginning of the weekend might have given us this necessary focus.

*Emma Taylor
Carlisle*

A TRADITIONAL VIEW OR A RADICAL RE-THINK?

Call me a traditionalist, but I have always assumed the roles of the social history curator are primarily the display, interpretation, collection, documentation and preservation of objects. After the recent Annual Study Weekend on Tyneside I was left with the distinct impression that our reason for existence - material culture - is becoming more and more marginalised, rather than remaining the stimulus for the exhibitions we create. Many of the speakers (though by no means all) spoke of projects that were fuelled and funded by initiatives and institutions having little or nothing to do with material culture. We were presented with exhibitions and projects driven from outwith, rather than within museums.

The growth of initiatives spurred on by factors other than the display of material culture, appears to result in exhibitions that are poor in objects, but high on designer input, reconstructions and text. Moreover, some of these collaborations with external organisations seem to have become little more than ciphers for the 'political' agendas of these organisations.

Rather than concentrating our limited time and resources on exhibitions born from an idea, and then seeking material culture to fit the idea, we should do the opposite. Our medium is material culture, by first considering the nature of our collections (and those of other museums that are favourably pre-disposed towards loans), ideas and connections as to how this material can be displayed should flow freely. Working from the principle of the 'primacy of the object' we should produce exhibitions that are object rich, rather than exhibitions that only develop a limited coherency through secondary material.

Indeed, such an approach should lead us to question the practicality of many of our projects, in that we are forced to face the fact that what seemed like a 'good idea' is doomed to failure by the lack of material culture, a situation that no amount of designers and clever reconstructions

can cure. Too many of the projects and exhibitions discussed on Tyneside seemed to fail this simple acid test. Hazel Edwards, when speaking of her interesting exhibition on the N.U.M at Ashington stressed the complexities of producing an exhibition where objects were not easy to come by. Her exhibition succeeds because of the material culture that was available, the wonderful union banners at the heart of the work.

I believe there is a subtle difference between the Ashington N.U.M. exhibition and the Birmingham Heartlands and Newcastle West End outreach projects with which Birmingham and Tyneside museums have become involved. The Ashington exhibition does not pretend to be something it is not. It was sponsored by local councillors not to give the impression that 'Ashington is bouncing back' but to serve as a record of a way of life rapidly vanishing, when the town was a homogenous settlement gelled together by the shared experience of the pits. As worthy as they may seem, the Birmingham and Newcastle projects appear to bear little real relevance to the job of Social History curating. Although in the case of Newcastle, one can only applaud the empowerment of people by giving them their own space within Discovery. It is to be hoped the 'Peoples Gallery' belongs to all the people, so we might see all the aspects of Newcastle life portrayed here, not just the lives of the oppressed, for to restrict this space to those our society disadvantages will be the worst type of condescension.

The true worth of these projects is that they help create jobs for talented museum professionals, and at this level alone the respective directors should be complimented for becoming involved. Yet no-one should kid themselves into believing they really are making a significant difference to the lives of their subjects.

Moreover, the central government funding of such initiatives does not sit comfortably with the principal of curatorial independence. These rather dubious central government funded initiatives are in the main cosmetic, the aim of which is to provide 'bread and circuses' to some of the people who are unfortunate enough to live in areas of economic depravation. Sending a handful of earnest,

liberally-minded, middle class museum curators out into Benwell is a hell of a lot cheaper than spending real money on jobs and infrastructure. There's nothing like a nice display, prepared and organised for and by working class people and mounted in a high profile museum to give the impression that things are getting better. Whilst I don't doubt some of the inner city residents who become involved gain something at a personal level, the real winners seem to me to be an uncaring government (scoring yet another P.R. victory) and the museum professionals, who get something interesting on their C.V.'s. And remember, whilst Newcastle is revelling in its £30 million City Challenge, other areas of extreme poverty are losing out. Benwell's gain is Toxteth's loss. One doesn't have to be an economist to realise it will take significantly more than £30 million to return the Tyne valley to anything approaching its previous industriousness.

If curators are to become involved in this type of project, we must ensure that quality thresholds are maintained. The museum professional must not deny their acknowledged expertise and allow exhibitions that are below par, merely because we do not have high expectations of the people involved. People should be cajoled and encouraged into producing work worthy of themselves and of the institution in which the work is to be displayed.

Just as we appear to be marginalising material culture, we are also marginalising ourselves through our language and subject matter. The profession of social history curator runs the risk of becoming like the pre-Clinton Democratic Party, a loose coalition of 'minority' interests rather than a coherent body with a common agenda. No-one would deny the importance of 'minority issues', but just as it has done in teaching, political correctness seems to be eating its insidious way into our profession. What about an exhibition on middle aged, middle class housewives in Solihull, Gosforth or the Wirral, half out of their minds on valium and boredom? Such an exhibition seems perfectly justifiable to me, if the material culture exists around which to base it. Or are we unable to face the inadequacies of our class, whilst

trumpeting the suffering of others? Surely an imaginative curator can think of ways to encouraging visitors to think about matters of gender, ethnicity and sexuality as natural progressions from the material culture under consideration? Our exhibitions should be more than museological 'sound bites', an exhibition gives us the time and space to display a level of sophistication commensurate with our abilities. In Newcastle, our host stated 'We aren't social workers', and he was right, we're not. Why then do we persist in acting as though we are? To assume these 'issues' based projects and their spin-off publications really make a difference to their subjects is a delusion, and moreover, is an insult to real social workers, police officers, teachers and housing officers who strive to make a material contribution to the quality of people's lives, often at no little danger to themselves. I do not doubt the recording of the struggle for dignity of many of our fellow citizens and the reprehensible conditions they are forced to live in is worth while, but it is not the core of our existence, and can probably be handled with more sensitivity by other media anyway. For example, B.B.C 2's 'Video Diaries' effectively empowers ordinary people by cutting out the unnecessary 'middle man'. Whilst recognising the importance of oral history and photography, we must remember the central place of material culture in our activities. But I also mentioned language, I was left with the distinct impression that our current interests are at risk of

We bandy the word 'community' around as a polite euphemism for harsher terms based on class. 'Community' creates the illusion that 'we're all in this together'.

trapping our profession in a politically-correct ghetto of its own making. The foundation of this intellectual ghetto seems to be the language we use, not least, the odious word 'community'. We bandy the word 'community' around as a polite euphemism for harsher terms based on class. 'Community' creates the illusion

that 'we're all in this together'. Well, we're not. After we've finished our community projects for the day, we invariably return to our relatively safe homes, our subjects return to their considerably less pleasant environments. Furthermore, we seem to use the word 'community' not as a short hand for society, but as a short-hand for the less well off in society. Terms like the 'Benwell Community' or Black or Gay Community are used to persuade right-on liberals that these socially and economically oppressed people form a cohesive group, as if poverty and hardship act like some social super-glue holding the poor together. For if individual wealth fails (as it obviously does) to knit people into a visibly united 'community', oppression and competition for scarce yet necessary resources is hardly likely to do so.

And this brings me to the theme of the week-end: 'sensitivity'. Whose sensitivity are we really concerned about? Speaker after speaker rightly stressed the need for humanity when dealing with, and portraying the people who are subjects of our exhibitions: not least in recognition of the fact that what we do, we do in public space. However, it seemed to me the real issue of sensitivity is the sensitivity of our superiors, be they councillors, senior museum officials or trustees. The 'sensitivity' we are most aware of seems to be the sensitivities of those who would censure us, rather than those over whom we wield a degree of power, our subjects. Museum curators are a hybrid breed, we are neither historians nor artists,

but a cross between the two. Would that we possessed the courage and individualism of the average artist. Where the artist shows the world in his or her purely subject terms, we vet our work lest we incur the wrath of our paymasters, politicians or bourgeois sentiment in general. We have fallen into the same trap as other forms of collaborative media, especially television and radio. We have been bludgeoned by the Right into accepting their agenda, that our pronouncement, like those of programmes like 'Panorama' should be as objective and balanced (and therefore as bland) as possible. Surely, the whole point of collaborative media productions is that they be subjective and polemical, that they reflect the sincerely held, and well-researched beliefs of their creators. We should also be aware that when we take money from organisations like development corporations for 'community' projects, their lack of editorial input does not mean we have scored a victory for 'truth', it may mean the production has been so insipid as to be below comment. As social history curators in a relatively peaceful country like Britain we are not asked to show great courage. If we are outspoken, we are unlikely to face physical violence like so many intellectuals in other countries. Yet we can show a lesser form of courage, moral courage, the courage to face real issues in our work head on, without resorting to euphemisms, condescensions and 'political' pressure from above. At most such a stand is likely to cost us no more than the occasional stand-up row or thwarted promotion.

And this brings me back to where I started, material culture. We need to develop a holistic form of social history curating, so that in our displays and exhibitions we strive to bring together as many strands of history as possible in the interpretation of material culture, recognising that not every display and exhibition can include all facets of our society. As long as we keep the object centre-stage and recognise that the enlightenment, education and entertainment of people through material culture is in itself enough, we will not go far wrong. Social history curating is a worthy, and fortunately, gentle profession. We do ourselves no favours when we take 'dodgy' funding from 'development' corporations or try to fool ourselves into thinking we really make a difference to people's material well-being.

Three images from the wonderfully stimulating and inspiring 1993 Annual Study Weekend will remain with me. The first of these is the obviously heartfelt and meaningful debate in which Liz Carnegie found herself in over the display of material culture related to the agonies of childbirth. The second is the simple but direct slides of people interacting with material culture at St. Albans: the tactile experience of touching artefacts cannot be over stressed. The third, and strongest image is less happy. It is a young boy, poorly dressed and undernourished, standing alone in a rain soaked car-less Benwell back street, making an obscene gesture at a coach load of rubber-necked museum curators as they stared at him and his home. Perhaps as we toured 'Heseltine-like' in our air conditioned bus we should have given rather more thought to part of the title of the Annual Study Weekend: Private Lives.

David Tucker
Great Barn Museum, Wiltshire

MUSEUM OF LIVERPOOL LIFE

"So is this really Liverpool Life?" asks Myna Trustram (SHCG News #31) of NMGM's latest venue the Museum of Liverpool Life? "Can the particular life of a turbulent city like Liverpool be distilled into a museum and what is meant by Liverpool Life?" These are reasonable questions to which I welcome the opportunity to reply by offering some background information on the project. What are we doing in a tourist area?

The move to the Maritime Museum site, *(of which we occupy the Mann Island section between the Albert Dock and the Pierhead)*, gathering place for political and trade unionist rallies over the years and embarkation/disembarkation point for millions of people in search of a better life either overseas or in Liverpool itself, is not an inappropriate location - except when the weather is bad. In terms of cityscape it has a high profile and, yes, we are already benefiting, in relation to the number one performance indicator - visitor numbers, from being close to a tourist destination where, nonetheless, Visiting Friends & Relatives make up a large part of the market. Later on this month when our first visitor survey is conducted we shall have a clearer indication of our initial visitor profile but I am confident that it will include a high proportion of local residents.

We did have some reservations about the site initially but having examined the other options - a gallery either within the Liverpool Museum or the main block of the Maritime Museum and, at one point, within St George's Hall, the Mann Island option appeared preferable because it would enable us to retain a separate identity within the NMGM group. (A new site outside the NMGM estate wasn't an option). It also, most importantly, gives us the opportunity for expansion in the future on the adjacent car park site which the Trustees own. Until we get a new building - and we already have outline plans - we will not be able to display our significant land transport, printing and public health collections and we will not have a proper temporary exhibitions area which, in my view, is the lifeblood of any museum.

The process of finally uniting all the regional history collections on one site is, therefore, going to be lengthy but at least possible and I do believe that our location is going to be a crucial factor in the success of our future development.

WHAT ABOUT THE NAME?

We do not call ourselves a national museum. To be a national museum of Liverpool Life would be contradictory in terms. We are a local history museum within a national museum framework which has its advantages and disadvantages. We have highlighted those aspects of Liverpool's history which are of national significance but our collecting policy is clearly defined as Liverpool. We only collect from the other districts of Merseyside in situations where the district local authority museums do not have the resources so to do. For example, in 1991 we purchased a 1910 Vulcan Victoria motor car manufactured by Vulcan Motor Co., Southport which was beyond the purchasing power of Sefton Borough Council. In Liverpool social history is a post-1974 discipline and our collections are patchy. They do not, for example, adequately reflect the 1960's when Liverpool was the centre of world attention in terms of popular culture and the port was undergoing substantial change and new industries (now gone) were being introduced to outlying areas of the city. The former Social & Industrial History Department evolved from the Department of Shipping and its emphasis was very much on land transport and (domestic) technology with the exception of the King's Regiment collection. The creation of the Museum of Labour History prompted the review of social history treatment when NMGM was re-structured in 1989. I would agree wholeheartedly with Myna's comment that "the adoption of academic disciplinary terms to order museum collections might make the management of collections easier but does not ease interpretation". The Regional History Department's collections will continue to rely heavily on other NMGM departments' longer established collections of Decorative Arts (which include ceramics, silver, furniture and costume of Liverpool manufacture and provenance), Antiquities (which include local medals) and Fine Art (which has a small collection of paintings by and of Liverpool subjects). The dividing line is often aesthetic



Rialto Ballroom reconstruction. Mersey Culture display.

quality making social history the poor relation in more ways than one. However, colleagues are always extremely helpful with inter-departmental loans and at the end of the day the survival and care of the object is of prime importance.

Getting back to identity the choice of title for the new site was difficult. We did not want to alienate the Museum of Labour History supporters. At the same time we wanted to encourage visits from those sectors who, market research studies showed, were deterred from visiting by the name of the museum and their perception of what it would contain. In the end we compromised with Museum of Liverpool Life incorporating Merseyside Museum of Labour History.

WORKING CLASS-ISM AND CULTURE

The museum's name may have changed but the commitment to working class history and facing up to contentious issues has not and the MAKING A LIVING and DEMANDING A VOICE sections of the phase 1 displays are revised and extended versions of the Employment and Building the Union galleries at the Museum of Labour History. Freed from the grade 2* listed architecture of the County Sessions House we have been able to make these displays more 3-dimensional than before. The Mersey Culture display which attempts to look at aspects of culture within and outside the home was the least straightforward of the three. Posing the question as to whether Liverpool has a distinct culture of its own and leaving it to the visitor to decide may be considered "weak" but definitions of culture are far from clear cut. To attempt to capture all that is "to be found outside the door of the museum" is an impossibility but then I don't believe that museums should be a substitute for real life or that they can ever give more than a partial picture of the past and present for those involved in their creation - curators and lay people alike - will, unfortunately, always be forced to be selective within the constraints of time, space and money.

*Lorraine Knowles
National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside
Liverpool*

*People, History and Change in Birmingham's Heartlands
A National Curriculum Resource for Schools and Colleges*

This education pack is derived from the community history project and exhibition of the same name. It consists of twenty A4 size photographs of Birmingham people at home, work and leisure throughout the 20th century, a 60 minute tape of 56 extracts of interviews on the same theme and 27 pages of background information for students and teachers. The resources are excellent: the photographs are a good size and copyable for versatile classroom use, and the tape is clear and divided into admirably short and pithy extracts. There are very useful notes on the use of photographic and aural sources as historical evidence, and there are comprehensive and varied suggestions for pupil activities. These activities are tied into the technicalities of the key stages and attainment targets of the National Curriculum (although the numbering of these does not match that in my copy).

This is all fine as far as it goes, and, for many teachers, will serve a limited purpose very well indeed. If the teaching context were to be a 'then and now' exercise my only quibble would be that the pack should focus more deliberately on the 1920s and 1940s. Most of the photographs and interviews are of or about that period and the odd earlier or later ones are slightly distracting.

It seems however that an opportunity might have been missed to address an issue which is in the title of the whole project, and is also very prominent in the National Curriculum, and that is change. If the teaching context were to be the process of change in 20th century Britain, more information would be needed on how and why areas like Nechells were redeveloped, and on the extent to which individuals like those represented in the pack were involved in that process. These issues are addressed in the book published in association with the exhibition and presumably were in the exhibition itself. This is complicated and difficult territory where teachers and pupils may find themselves applying the formal historical skills of the National Curriculum to subject matter on which there may be strong local folklore or community wisdom. In this pack the teachers have been given exemplary support for the easier historical exercise and none at all for the more difficult!

This is surprising, because the exhibition had complex and ambitious aims for its contribution to the culture of the local areas of the Heartlands. The pack has a much simpler and prosaic purpose (in which it largely succeeds) but it leaves a question about how much more work must be done before museums can draw school children into fuller participation in cultural missions of this kind. Teachers vary greatly in their enthusiasm for the local history of anywhere outside their catchment area of their own school. This pack deserves to be used anywhere in the country (the UK) as a supplement to locally generated resources. Scottish teachers in the context of 5014 Environmental Studies and Standard Grade are addressing largely similar skills and historical content but, as is usual with published sources, must face the task of matching use to the detailed aspects of their curriculum unaided.

*Alison Gray
Museum Education Service
Strathclyde Regional Council*

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

MAKING FACES

*Elizabethan Exhibition Gallery, Wakefield
1 May - 4 July 1993*

Each morning most people spend some time arranging the 'face' which they want to present to the world, by brushing their hair into particular styles, applying cosmetics or perhaps by putting on wigs, spectacles, scarves, veils or jewellery. These 'faces' express messages which we are all used to reading - how often do we 'judge someone by their appearance'? As well as being used by private individuals to make statements about themselves, faces are also used by politicians, artists, religious bodies and the police, among others, to present different messages. Making Faces at the Elizabethan Exhibition Gallery is an exhibition which explores the many ways in which people make and use faces.

The exhibition contains a wide variety of objects from around the world, ranging in date from pre-Roman times to the present day. Masks, town charters, hair-dryers, identikit photos and pottery are all included in the eclectic displays. The diversity of the objects on show is indicated by the contents of the introductory section. The first case contains both items whose main function is the depiction of the human face, such as portraits and family photos, and also objects decorated, for a variety of reasons, with faces, - for example, bank notes and Coronation mugs.

The exhibition is divided into a number of sections with titles such as 'Look at Me', 'Gilding the Lily' and 'Facing Beliefs'. Each section takes a particular aspect of 'making faces' as its main theme. A section on portraits looks at how these images of the human face developed from straightforward likenesses to forms which artists could manipulate to illustrate their own skills, their feelings and aspects of their sitters' characters. 'The Face of Authority' shows how rulers and politicians use images of their faces on legal documents, coins, stamps etc to express their authority whilst items in the 'Fighting the Power' section illustrates how this authority is attacked by distorting the same faces in cartoons and satirical images.

Shelves of masks and spectacles and a number of mirrors set at different heights invite visitors of all ages to try changing the appearance of their own faces. As well as these interactive exhibits, there are also quiz sheets for children to complete as they go around the gallery.

The gallery is staging a programme of events linked to the exhibition. This includes guided tours by 67 Wakefield Museums staff, examining themes in the displays, and activities for children, adults and families such as mask-making, make-up and hair styling and face painting.

The gallery publicity invites visitors to explore '...the thousands of ways people make faces - through Roman coins, Celtic heads, African masks, wigs, cosmetics, sunglasses... Come and work out the connections for yourself...' The displays present a number of connections and ideas, many of which could be expanded into individual exhibitions but which combined together form an exciting whole. The link between the numbered objects in the cases and the numbers on the labels is sometimes unclear, creating some problems with the interpretation but overall the diversity of themes and objects make Making Faces an interesting and enjoyable exhibition to visit.

*Carolyn Aldridge
Kirklees Museums*

'... LIKE A TEDDY BEAR?'

'ROUND AND ROUND THE GARDEN'

Stoke City Museum

'Round and Round the Garden' at Stoke City Museum is a lively and diverse exhibition - a good advertisement for what can be done with a small budget and a lot of imagination. This temporary display, laid out on two floors of the museum, presents a wide range of material relating to the theme of gardens and gardening, reflecting the inter-disciplinary approach taken by museum staff - paintings, textiles, ceramics, gardening equipment, photographs and natural history specimens have been gathered from museum collections and Arts Council loans and have been displayed alongside schools and community projects - everything from a ceramic cucumber and papermache cabbages to real ants and a water butt.

With such a diversity, the exhibition requires a coherent sense of design. Publicity materials, text and labels use a graphic style somewhere in between the Body Shop and Quentin Blake, reflecting the friendly and unpretentious tone of the text. On the upper floor there is an imaginative approach - to display - photographs are mounted on (genuinely) rusty corrugated iron, cased ceramics sit on a layer of bricks and chicken wire, plastic grass, brown paper and wooden palettes demonstrate a cost-cutting, skip-dipping approach to exhibition design. The ideas are imaginative without being intrusive, although occasionally design wins over clarity and interpretation. However, it is a pity that in the lower gallery the consistent design themes of the upper floor seem to disappear and the exhibition loses some of its coherence. Billed as an exhibition about gardens, a good proportion of the information presented is specifically concerned with the subject of allotment gardening. Among the contributions from the Community History Department, emphasis is firmly placed on contemporary documentation, perhaps not reflecting the amount of historical research that went into the exhibition preparation and raising questions for the social history about the need to find a place for history when presenting the result of contemporary documentation.

There is strong evidence of community involvement in the exhibition - individual allotment owners and local schools have been working with museum staff to record their gardening activities through photography and both written and video diaries. Care has been taken to fully incorporate contributions from the community into the design framework in the upper gallery but, again, in the lower gallery the less coherent design feel relegates some of the schools contributions to their more familiar status as add-ons to the main displays. 'Round and Round the Garden', with a run of only nine weeks, is very much a summer holiday exhibition with a full programme of related events - not a social history exhibition perhaps but a good example of thorough contemporary documentation and local participation in museum activities.

*Lucy Harland
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery*

LOVE AND WAR AT THE IWM

Until October 15th

'Forces Sweethearts', the Imperial War Museum's popular exhibition, proves something Hollywood has known from its infancy, that love and war are box office dynamite. Can you go wrong with stories of falling into, and out of love, stories of separation and reunion; of bereavement and of brief encounters, during the extraordinary circumstances of war? Of course you can, because a compelling subject does not guarantee a good exhibition. Thankfully 'Forces Sweethearts' is very good.



'Forces Sweethearts' a WW2 Wedding.

Visitors first see the exhibition title, as a twinkling neon sign. This nice touch is typical of the imaginative and attractively kitsch design of the whole exhibition, which also includes a revolving glitter ball, and dressing tables as display cases, complete with comfy and very handy, purple velvet dressing table stools. Just the right mood-music is provided by a background soundtrack of 1940's crooners and big bands, The Crazy Gang, and of course Dame Vera Lynn. Perhaps part of 'Forces Sweethearts' effectiveness stems from the contrast between it and the hard, mechanical and inanimate war weaponry on display nearby.

The exhibition is subtitled 'Wartime Romance from World War 1 to the Gulf' and 'romance' is the key word, because 'Forces Sweethearts' concentrates, and sells itself on the bittersweet, the tragic and the heart-warming aspects of wartime relationships between servicemen and their loved ones: 'the meetings, the partings, the reunions and the heartbreaking stories of men who did not come home'. That 'Sweethearts' is biased towards the male gaze, and male desires, as is obvious from the exhibition title and poster image: Betty Grable in high heels, a

swimming costume, and come hither pose, is surprising. There is no exploration of areas described in 1941 by one down-to-earth and predatory WAAF, 'The main consequence of a lot of women living together seems to be that... conventional barriers and restraints are torn down and conversation gets down to bedrock...And what is this thing we're all after?' Obviously, a man. Preferably an officer or a sergeant pilot' (Confessions of a WAAF, in, *Speak for Yourself*, Cape 1984:133). Indeed the first part of 'Forces Sweethearts' looks at what are called 'The Dream Girls', the favourite female pin-ups, and entertainers, of different wars. On display are Kirchner's erotica from WW1, Vargas prints and Jane cartoons from WW11, and Marilyn Monroe's red dress from her Korean tour. The importance of 'ideal females' as male morale boosters, and in propaganda is stressed but 'Sweethearts' is coy about their plain old titillation value. Fighter plane 'nose art' i.e. the 'Memphis Belles' and Enola Gays' are also mentioned, but curiously women as black propaganda, 'Tokyo Rose' springs to mind, is not. Similarly, only a few male pin-ups, Gable, Bogart etc. hint at the existence of the male idol in uniform, for female consumption. Moreover, homosexual romance is still, securely in the IWM's closet. Part two, called 'The Real Thing', looks at the realities of partings, separations, and meetings and the importance of keepsakes, and putting on a brave face during wartime. This is where the dressing table display cases come in, and work brilliantly. Each is crammed with letters, post cards and telegrams as well as personal mementos such as rings and locket, as many as twenty per display, and everything is brilliantly captioned. This is really the most interesting and moving part of 'Forces Sweethearts'. There is, for instance, the last letter sent by a submariner in 1941 to his girlfriend, and a bullet cartridge that saved the life of a Company Sergeant Major on the Western Front. He sent it to his wife to reassure her that he would survive, but was killed two months later. Next is a wall of statements, giving uncontextualised information such as how many British war widows the First World War created; the average life-expectancy of a 'Battle of

SEMINARS

STUDYING THE SCOTTISH HOME 1600 TO THE PRESENT DAY

Britain'' pilot (under a month), and how divorce figures rose during both World Wars. These are superimposed on half tone images, one of which is of a packet of 'Thins' Service prophylactics. This is as conspicuous a treatment of the darker flip-side of 'romance' that one gets in 'Sweethearts'. The last half of the exhibition is devoted to wartime weddings. A series of cases profile actual weddings, or in the case of 'Meg and Jock' a near wedding. Jock jilted his childhood sweetheart for an army nurse leaving Meg broken hearted. The love letters she kept in an embroidered bag under lock and key are on display.

Whilst the biographical cases work well, perhaps half the wedding dresses on display would have been sufficient. Given that 'Forces Sweethearts' is so modestly sized some of this space might have been better used exploring areas the exhibition overlooks. Where for instance is a section looking at wartime sexual jealousy, were not Polish airmen stereotyped as 'Romeo's', and GI's said to be 'overpaid, and oversexed and over here'? What about black GI's and official fears of miscegenation? The WAAF quoted above suggest the fundamental role rank played determining the object of, limits to, or opportunities for 'romance'. What about infidelity and war, and 'dear John' letters? What about conflicts between love and Service, or the work of the Military Police, rounding up soldiers painting the town too red, or love-sick ones gone AWOL. Moreover, if the exhibition had looked to occupied France, or even Jersey, (?) love as collaboration might have added another dimension to this exhibition. Therefore, whilst 'Forces Sweethearts' is very good, as far as it goes, it is a pity that it did not choose to go further.

*Javier Pes
Museum of London*

A series of four day meeting on this subject took place over the winter of 1992-93 at the National Museums of Scotland, Chambers Street. These were organised as part of a joint project between the NMS (John Shaw) and the University of St Andrews (John Frew) which is funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Annette Carruthers was appointed as Leverhulme Research Fellow for this project which started in October 1991.



St Mary's Wynd, Edinburgh.

The aim of the project is to 'investigate the architecture, furniture and equipment of dwellings over the whole range of Scottish Society, looking at large scale buildings like castles and tenement blocks and at small cottages and council houses. The research is based on the idea of 'form and function' looking at how much the appearance of houses and household goods is influenced by the purposes for which they are used and how much by other factors.

When I first saw the programme for the four meetings my attention was drawn to the emphasis on the form and content of the home and apparent absence of papers directly looking at the function of the time and the ways in which people lived in them. Perhaps this was because, as a social history curator, this is the most interesting aspect of the home to me - as a place where people live and work. My initial reaction was that there was too much emphasis on objects and not enough on meanings and concepts. A vast array of speakers had been drawn together to give an overview of the research on work being carried out on the subject. It was also intended to bring people together from a variety of different institutions from universities to museums and give an indication of the range of sources and material available when studying the Scottish home.

The first session was about the 'conditions affecting the development of the home'. It aimed to give an overview of the many different factors which influence the form of domestic architecture and furnishings and the specifically Scottish conditions which have resulted in distinctive housing types and styles in Scotland. The speakers covered geology and building materials, the development of building technology, the climate and landscape, Scots law and housing and aspects of the historical development of housing in Scotland. The most informative talks for me were a delve into some impenetrable aspects of Scots Law and Christopher Smout on factors influencing housing. In the second half of the day there was a greater emphasis on Edinburgh which suited me, but maybe not those coming from other parts of Scotland.

At the next meeting speakers looked at 'sources of evidence and how to interpret them'. These ranged from architects plans, government reports, photographs, film, paintings, literature and oral history. This was quite a successful day, demonstrating the wide range of sources that are available when studying the home.

The day on Scottish material culture: household furnishing, aimed to look at the ways in which decoration and furnishing of a home is influenced by the availability of raw materials and technology for the production of goods and by our perception of what is necessary for everyday living and our ability to acquire it. This I thought was the least successful of all four days - there were ten speakers in all, many of whom spoke about their specialism with little reference to other speakers or the subject of the home.

The subjects covered household textiles, carpet making, linoleum, soft furnishings, picture hanging, pottery, glass and wood wares, silver and metal work and household technology. My memory of the day is somewhat dominated by my exasperation with Timothy Clifford showing off his knowledge about painting styles. There were some good moments - with talks on linoleum and floor cloth and household technology.

The final day was on furniture and room arrangements. It was the least frenetic of all the days and the speakers had more time to explore

their subject. The talks covered ordinary peoples furniture, highland furniture, fashionable and middle class furniture and the furniture in the NMS collections was covered with references to the layout and functions of the rooms.

Each day was attended by about 200 people which in the first two resulted in extreme overheating. The evaluation forms were distributed after some days and comments highlighted gaps in the programme and requests for future meetings.

Meetings are planned for this coming winter which will give the opportunity to look in greater detail at some of these topics.

*Helen Clark
The People's Story Museum
Edinburgh*

WOMEN IN INDUSTRY AND TECHNOLOGY

WHAM 10TH Anniversary conference and AGM April/May 1994 in London

We hope to attract both research/academic and museum based papers on the theme of Women In Industry and Technology. The conference will take a chronological form. Suggestions for papers are welcome within the following framework:

PREHISTORY

(e.g. tool making/.metal working);

ROMAN

MEDIEVAL

(e.g. metal workers, craftswomen, armourers);

POST-MEDIEVAL

EARLY MODERN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO WAR INDUSTRIES

(e.g. un/skilled work, scientists, long term effects)

HOME WORKING

CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

EDUCATION IN MUSEUMS

Papers and workshops may be given by individuals or by groups.

We would particularly welcome contributions from those working in the suggested areas, and from groups currently under-represented in museums.

We hope there will be an opportunity for displays of current work/small exhibitions/bookstalls.

Please express your interest to: Barbara Wood, Early London History and Collections, Museum of London, London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN Women, Heritage and Museums Women, Heritage and Museums

TOOLS FOR THE JOB

*The Salaman Collection of Trade and Craft Tools
Thursday 25 November 1993
Museum of St Albans*

Organised by SHCG this seminar looks at the care and interpretation of tools, provides handling sessions and an opportunity to view the recently redisplayed Salaman Collection. (see insert for booking form)

FRAMING OPINIONS

*The Whately Hall Hotel, Banbury, Oxfordshire
Thursday 28 October 1993*

Jointly organised by Cherwell District Council and English Heritage this conference aims to heighten awareness of the value of historic windows and doors, to assess the damage caused by unsuitable replacements and to offer advice on appropriate methods of repair and replacement.

Further details and booking forms are available from Mark Ashburn, Development and Property Services, Cherwell District Council, Bodicote, Banbury, Oxon OX15 4AA

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TREASURER

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Summerlee Heritage Trust
West Canal Street, Coatbridge : Tel 0236 431261

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

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JOURNAL EDITOR

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*Articles, Illustrations and Correspondence for
publication should be addressed to :*

FRANK LITTLE
SHCG NEWS
C/O SUMMERLEE HERITAGE TRUST
WEST CANAL STREET
COATBRIDGE
SCOTLAND ML5 1QD

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