

**SOCIAL HISTORY
CURATORS GROUP**

news

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

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Stanley Spencer at work on the Clyde. (See review inside)

ART AND SOCIAL HISTORY *(Never the twain shall meet?)*



INSIDE

THE MAGIC OF REAL THINGS

LONDON TRANSPORT
MUSEUM

MOTHER'S PRIDE

A NIGHT OUT

BALANCING THE MAGIC OF REAL THINGS

It is heartening to see that one exhibition can cause such a stir, and that colleagues are so committed to the work they do. However, the debate on the role of objects is becoming worryingly authoritarian and prescriptive. Surely our work as social historians in museums demands that we use a variety of approaches according to the museum's resources and the preferences of the audiences and communities we wish to serve. Whatever the situation at either extreme, the average general museum service cares for a collection of post-1600 material which is variously called folk life, local history or social history. Due to well-known biases in survival, collecting and 'taste', this material is weighted towards middle-class homes, skilled manual work and male social groups. However, within these limits they contain much that can still provoke wonder and excitement, and much that can be interpreted in new ways that were never anticipated by the museum staff who collected them. At the same time, the same average museum employs just one person to curate all the post-1600 collections and create displays covering the last 400 years. Although often now called a Keeper of Social History, it is rare for this jack of all trades to have any academic training or qualifications in social history, other than that acquired by specialising on the Leicester course. This curator tries to keep abreast of new academic developments, but also deals with enquiries, conservation audits, exhibitions, staff development and building maintenance, to name but a few. If we know our communities, and that is a big if, then surely the average curator strives to seek a balance between work led by ideas and interpretations, and work led by the objects in or out of the collections. Very few exhibitions are at one extreme of the spectrum of possibilities or at the other. Thus at Wakefield, our recent social history exhibitions have included a theory-led one on child-care, aimed at mothers; an object-led one on topographical photographs, aimed at the

over-50's; and one on the human face aimed at children and young adults. 'Bringing Up Baby' was an academic discussion on changes in child-care, illustrated by objects; 'Wakefield in Old Photographs' was a nostalgia trip enlivened by some analytical captions; 'Making Faces' combined ideas on the function of portraits and cosmetics with some breath-taking paintings, sculptures and masks, many never displayed in Wakefield before.

As an academically trained social historian who works as a Keeper of Social History, I believe that balance is all. A museum provokes pleasure, excitement, curiosity, nostalgia and anger - sometimes all in the same person at the same time. We do this with the collections (old and new), loans, our interpretations and our juxtapositions. We are selling the people we serve very short if we only work in one way and provide just one sort of exhibition.

*Christine Johnstone
Senior Keeper and Keeper of Social
History
Wakefield Museums, Galleries and
Castles.*

Helen White's response to my alternative review of last year's Annual Study Weekend 'A Traditional View' (not my title I hasten to add) made interesting reading. As a result of her comments I have thought long and hard as to why my vision of the function of social history curator should be so at odds with some fellow professionals. Although my academic background is social history, my

first career was in education and I tend to approach museological issues from an educational, as much as an historical perspective. However, I would argue that my time spent in education has added to, rather than subtracted from, my curatorial work. But let's get analytical. I am sorry if Ms White feels I have a "disturbingly introspective of the role of the museums in society", as it was not my intention to give this impression. I simply feel that as those charged with the display and protection of material culture, we should attempt to confront serious issues primarily through the use of material culture. Ms White also

states "Objects are arguably central to the function of a museum". Surely, there is no 'arguably' about it. We cannot deny the preservation and interpretation of objects are our central functions. Why else do we pay such strict attention to the provision of handling collections, environmental conditions and the dangers of infestation etc.? Indeed, as Gaynor Kavanagh has recently written "Objects make museums...and I recognise that there are still museum people who have trouble with this." (Social History in Museums. Vol. 20 . 1993 p.61)

As a relatively late convert to museology, I am constantly bemused by the problem that many social history curators appear to have with objects. Even though recent educational reform has at last recognised the value of objects in teaching, some curators seem unable or unwilling to grasp the opportunities this has offered them. It is a delusion to believe visitors (especially the young) are won over to museums by the book-on-the-wall approach, especially as most museum text is written in a language that is beyond the reading age of the average school child. Similarly, as for the 'over-use' of design, who seriously believes we can compete with the images people (here again, especially the young) are exposed to in other walks of life? No, what keeps new generations of people coming into museums is the magic of real things. How many of us learned to love museums because of a specific item we saw as a child: most of us I would suspect. Yet we would risk denying this opportunity to future generations. The magic of real things remains, no matter what steps are made in design and exhibition technology.

The responses of Helen White and Catherine Ross only serve to reinforce my disquiet. I suspect some curators have unconsciously fallen victim to the same malaise that makes some museum professionals in other disciplines sneer at our collections as 'the bits that nobody else wants'. Ironically, our visitors seem

immune to this peculiarly curatorial condition, museum visitors of all ages appear to appreciate the strange alchemy that makes the mundane and everyday interesting, purely because it is displayed within a museum.

The last thing I would suggest is that we 'ignore large swathes of working class history' or that I have any intention of attempting to 'perpetuate the elitist approach to cultural representation' (both quotes taken from Ms White's text). It is precisely because I have been fortunate enough to work at the National Museum of Labour History that I am aware of the terrible limitations placed upon us by the non-existence of material culture. Having (quite literally) travelled the length and breadth of England and Wales attempting to locate artefacts and ephemera relating to the struggles of working people, I have reluctantly concluded that where material culture does not exist, the work of interpreting history should be left to other forms of media. However, social history curators can (and should) play a vital supportive role in facilitating local interest groups working in these other media. Now let's get conciliatory. I fully accept Ms White's point about the moral dilemma facing Labour councillors over the competition for 'City Challenge' funds. It cannot be easy entering what is little more than a government sponsored lottery, knowing that success will see vital funds denied to equally hard pressed towns and cities elsewhere. I also accept that it was less than fair in my use of the phrase 'object-poor exhibitions'. I do not doubt that there were many artefacts on display in the Great City! Exhibition, simply that by the time I came to write my alternative review I couldn't remember any of them. However, the designer's "house-style" is engraved on my memory to this day.

Elsewhere, I was erroneously paraphrased by Dr Ross as having written 'we are not historians'. In fact I stated 'we are neither historians or artists, but a cross between the two'. The clear implication here being that we must strive to fulfil both, rather than one or none of these functions. Furthermore, it is woefully inaccurate to claim that at any point I stated that the Great City! Exhibition was in itself an insult to social workers etc. Yet I fully accept Dr Ross's charge that I am merely average. Unlike Dr Ross I do strive to ensure that when quoting or paraphrasing a written source that I preserve both the accuracy and the spirit of that source.

But let's get one thing clear: I am not a lone dissenting voice and I have received a great deal of personal support over the content of my review. The underlying issue here is the balance between objects and people in the work of social history curators, and that is a debate that won't go away.

David Tucker, Curator, Trowbridge Museum

Art and Social History : *Never the twain shall meet?*

In 1940 the War Artists Advisory Committee commissioned Stanley Spencer to paint Lithgow Shipbuilders of Port Glasgow. **Canvassing the Clyde: Spencer and the Shipyards** is an exhibition staged by Glasgow Museums to celebrate the results of this commission. This exhibition, I suspect, like Spencer's paintings, is not quite what the establishment (the yard owners then, the



Stanley Spencer sketching a riveter.
Picture Post, 2nd October 1943.
The Hulton Deutsche Collection

art critics now) wanted to see. The Lithgow brothers expected a factual record of merchant shipbuilding on the Clyde during the war; the art critics wanted the art to stand on its own. The exhibition is in fact a re-evaluation of Spencer's work, it 'puts two kinds of wartime experience side by side in order to tell both sides of a unique story'. (Glasgow Museum Preview) In other words, it contextualises the paintings.

What the Lithgows got, and I'm no art critic, was a representation of the human spirit behind one of the largest and most important industries in the world. Spencer, who was brought up in rural England, spent six years in a small industrial community and was deeply affected by the humanity, strength, humour and compassion of the workers. This was expressed in his paintings. This expression of the human spirit is what makes Spencer's work significant and

relevant from a social historian's point of view, and one can see the attraction of interpreting his art through social history.

At the time, Lithgows were disappointed, and so, recently was one art critic who described the exhibition as a '*grotesque, strident, peacock blue and red rust second-class window display of a few chains, thin metal grids, cheap rough raw wood, dim orange lights, hammers, photographs and old bowler hats....it doesn't need....contextualising via social history*'. (Clare Henry, Glasgow Herald, 06/05/94) She didn't like it, I guess. Fair criticism? It must be said that the decision to combine art and social history is a brave one in the setting of Kelvingrove.

Politics tend to get in the way, with accusations of pandering to the masses, underestimating the ability of the public to appreciate art 'neat'. This however is a very typical criticism by the art establishment. Is it such a sin to try to broaden the audience for art? Re-interpret it? Art is so often seen as the preserve of the elite; witness the language used in one review 'His dramatic oils exploit the chiaroscuro light and shade'.

The exhibition covers two galleries. The intention, which I feel works well in the main gallery, is to create an ambience reflective of the shipyards - a difficult task considering the reality. Thus there is the symbolic red lead paint, wooden frameworks, wire mesh, sombre lighting, and a raised floor section representing cutting patterns. The paintings and sketches are hung around the walls with quotes from Spencer himself as captions while free-standing back-lit panels describe shipbuilding work through oral history quotes and photographs. The tools used are displayed in an almost sculpture like manner against these back-lit photographs; a great way of contextualising the objects. On the practical side, it is quite difficult in places to read the text against the white light, and I wonder how many people have tripped over the raised floor section, I know I did.

The second gallery is devoted to putting Stanley Spencer's paintings into their historical context, covering the war (which isn't reflected in his paintings at all), boss relationships (summed and perfectly and simply by a bowler hat and a cap - no caption); Spencer's religious beliefs and personal memories of the man. Within a red bow of a ship is a video presentation of shipbuilding on the Clyde and to the side is a handling area which allows people a glimpse of the sheer physicality of building ships. This gallery does not have quite the same atmosphere of the main one, due to the lighting. In that respect, the exhibition doesn't really flow from one gallery to the other too well. There are the obligatory listening posts, but these appear to be almost there as an afterthought, designed in a hurry.

I visited the exhibition with my mum and dad, purely on account

of the social history content, as well as an appreciation of the work of Spencer. My dad entered a neighbouring yard to Lithgow's in 1944, aged 14. He worked there for 43 years till all but one of the Lower Clyde shipyards closed. Through this exhibition my dad made a connection with the past. He realised that his working life is very much part of history now. He recounted stories spurred on by aspects of Spencer's paintings, the quotes of workers and the objects. I heard tales of uncles and aunts who worked in the yards; things that I had never known. 'Looking like this, it doesn't seem like yesterday' was one remark. This is the essence of social history and it should be the essence of all aspects of museums; personal interactions with the objects. On the same day, school groups from Port Glasgow were visiting. It was interesting to eavesdrop on the role-playing session organised by the Museum Education Service. I grew up with the shipyards, and I'm not that old, but it was strange to hear 14 year olds asking questions about a local industry which landscaping has virtually removed all trace of. If this exhibition helped these kids to appreciate their local and national history then it will have achieved something worthwhile. One lesson to be learned is that we shouldn't think of exhibitions under headings of 'Fine Art', 'Science', 'History' etc.... Canvassing the Clyde combines art and social history to great effect in my mind, and is definitely the way forward. We just need to persuade the art critics! My dad loved it, by the way.

Vincent P. Gillen M.A. (Hons)
 (Currently studying for the Diploma in
 Museum Studies at Leicester University.)

The Smart "New" London Transport Museum

The Crown Jewels weren't the only things to get refurbished in London recently. Four million pounds have been spent at the London Transport Museum which has just re-opened after a nine month overhaul.

Major improvements are two new mezzanine floors, clearer and livelier graphic panels, lots of touch screen interactives, a couple of imaginative multi-screen audio-visuals and an up-market 'Transport Cafe' (with no greasy spoons in sight).



An actress plays 'Vi', a 1940's bus conductress, one of the characters visitors will meet at the new London Transport Museum.

© London Transport Museum

Museum as Sardine Tin

The refurbishment has created extra space but the museum's pride and joy, its collection of buses, trains and coaches are still tightly packed into the old Covent Garden flower hall. There isn't much spare room with all the models, interactives, and graphic panels. Plenty of stuff is perhaps always better than empty space in any museum, besides a public transport museum should perhaps be on the crowded side, like the proverbial tin of sardines.

Nice Touches

There are many nice things about the new museum, not least that from the new mezzanine floor there is an impressive view of the vehicles. Moreover the museum can't be accused of visitor unfriendliness not least because of the amount of seating it provides. Separate small galleries make attractive spaces for posters and maps from LT's fine collection. Coming shortly in the small temporary exhibitions space, there will be exhibitions on LT's Caribbean recruitment campaigns in the 50's and on the inter-relationship between LT and London's big sporting events (FA cups, Wimbledon, the Boat Race etc.).

People First

The new museum tells a people-centred history. One complaint might be that the interpretative voice tends to be impersonal and neutral. Pithy quotations would enliven things and show contrasting viewpoints. As the museum frequently points out, public transport is a fundamental part of daily urban life for millions of Londoners and visitors. It is inevitable that people have had and are always going to have something to say (and moan) about it. A bit of oral

history, and a trawl of newspaper headlines and London literature showing this, would pay off.

Most of the vehicles are "peopled" by character dummies which really do enliven them. The plastic horses "pulling" the coaches are fun. The current temporary exhibition, called 'Laughter Lines', shows how buses and tubes have been used in newspaper cartoons. Perhaps future displays will look at how different people, besides cartoonists, use (and mis-use) public transport: commuters, shoppers, tourists, buskers, football supporters, graffiti artists or pickpockets (the list could go on and on). A look at how people behave whilst using it (and waiting for it) would be very interesting. There is probably an anthropologist somewhere, working on 'The Consumption of Time and Space in Mass Urban Transportation Systems' already.

Good Design Rules, OK.

The museum pays justifiable tribute to LT as a patron of good graphic, interior and architectural design, particularly in the 1930's. But what about the temptation to appropriate posters, walls and tube trains with a bit of graffiti? Acknowledgement of alternative creativity and comment, be it with chalk, felt pen or aerosol cans, is missing in the museum, which is a pity.

Back on the Road

The "new" London Transport Museum might not include any big surprises but it has returned to the London museum scene looking much smarter and doing better justice to its collection and subject matter. A visit is well worth the fare money, (even at LT's prices).

Javier Pes, Museum of London.

Mother's Pride.

The exhibition 'From Here to Maternity' originated by Glasgow Museums and now on a nation-wide tour reflects the current preference for issue-based rather than collections-led exhibitions.

The idea for an exhibition on pregnancy and childbirth was not new. A similar

target or attract women. They provide a safe place for women to go alone and to meet friends for coffee. We know that women do visit and enjoy museums so what is meant by marginalised? Although it is important that women feel safe, often this need for safety is provided for in the subject matter. Samplers, tapestries, and nice artworks do little to challenge the concept of what is suitable subject matter for exhibitions. Exhibitions must not



Mum - Sharon Daly Dad - John Winters Baby - Kelly Ann, 7lb 13oz : February 4th 1994

exhibition had been proposed for the People's Palace some years earlier to resurface as a temporary exhibition tied into the expanding touring programme. The subject matter fulfilled the then unwritten criteria of targeting woman, an often marginalised group in society, despite the fact that over fifty percent of the population are women.

At least it is the perceived opinion that women are marginalised. In fact, many exhibitions, like *Degas* at the Burrell, and museums, most notably Pollok House, do

offend unless they challenge the boundaries of art when debate is possible, and the risk of empowering women is to challenge men. 'From Here to Maternity' aimed to challenge the seeming vow of silence surrounding the mystery of birth and creation and to celebrate what is for many women the most powerful moment of their lives. Although the birth experience is different for all women, the universality of the subject matter suggested that the exhibition should appeal to everyone. After all, everyone is born. The universality of the subject matter actually made the task more difficult. With big subjects like birth, death and religion it is impossible to be comprehensive, foolish even to try. Health Board officials might have shaped the exhibition to reflect current concerns like breast feeding. The objects did not allow for an

anthropological birth across the world approach and a purely historical exhibition would have been less lively and appealed less to the younger mothers.

How then to approach the subject of pregnancy and birth, to deal with the issues without seeking to offend or expose?

For 'From Here to Maternity' to succeed it had to be community led. The original push for the exhibition came after a long and complicated labour with my son David. (Let me tell you about it sometime!) Whilst in hospital I took to interviewing the other mothers to keep my hand in. It seemed clear through talking to women that birth was a pain they were expected to forget. Most felt apologetic about the need to talk about their experience. Above all the exhibition aimed to create a forum for people to express the fear, pain, joy, elation and fight for dignity which is the shared experience.

I determined that 'From Here to Maternity' should be oral-history led. That is to say that interviews were conducted and quotes chosen before the text was written which meant that the quotes themselves carried some of the main points raised. This seems a particularly effective tactic when there are opposing viewpoints, for example on the bottle versus breast issue, and allows the curatorial voice to be more balanced, if not impartial. The use of oral history resulted in a contemporary feel to the exhibition rather than a pure social history approach. In order to encourage freedom of speech, quotes used were not attributed. This lent an interesting ambiguity to the text when age, status or even gender remained unknown and for some visitors left too many questions unanswered.

It is interesting to note that a doctor in Oldham actually wrote to express disappointment at the coverage given to bottle feeding which he felt was not in keeping with the current Breast is Best

campaign. Health Board officials in Glasgow took a more pragmatic stance acknowledging that bottle feeding is cultural. In fact, the exhibition highlighted the Nestle boycott and was seen as positively pro-breast feeding by some but the aim was to ensure that the public were fully informed of the arguments for and against bottle feeding. In conjunction with the Open Museum, a satellite exhibition shaped like a babushka doll called 'Bottle or Breast' is now touring community centres. Although museums need to tackle issues in a responsible and informed way, I was keen to avoid an over-didactic approach, believing that museums are able to tackle these subjects in a different way from professional bodies for whom issues are all. If the exhibition succeeded in being accessible and entertaining, people would surely be more receptive to health issues.

Although doctors, midwives and Health Board officials were consulted, their opinions were used in display simply as quotes and therefore opinions rather than facts which helped to break down the Them and Us approach. In the main, there was a lot of support for the exhibition and Rottenrow Maternity hospital allowed photographer James Dunn to spend days and sudden nights photographing births. Not surprisingly, he witnessed several Caesarean sections before he got permission to photograph a natural birth. In Glasgow, the Caesarean rate, at between 23-25%, is higher than in other parts of Britain.

Kate Downie also spent four weeks as Artist in Residence in the hospital, resulting in an exhibition 'The Mother Pool' which was shown alongside 'From Here to Maternity'. Rottenrow also lent forceps, stirrup irons and an object like a cheese wire which was used to decapitate dead babies before Caesarean sections were pioneered in the late 19th century.

Many of the 120 objects used in the final display, drawn from the history, art and anthropological collections, were extremely powerful and some censorship seemed sensible to avoid any unnecessary distress. For this reason, the 'cheese wire' was deemed too brutal to display. Already worried about the risk of seeming voyeuristic, I had no wish to appear gratuitous. The dramatic designs by Janie Andrews with curved cores which mirrored the female body helped to soften the look of the exhibition. Although the overall tone of the exhibition was celebratory some sadness was unavoidable. It was impossible not to be moved by the gaping baby face formed from clay by a grieving mother or by the spoons, pushers and cups given to twin boys who did not survive beyond infancy.

The most popular item on display was the Empathy Belly or pregnancy simulator, a weighted canvas apron designed to allow men, or women who have not had children, the opportunity to test-carry a full-term baby. Men who can never be more than spectators, cheer leading each contraction, may have felt marginalised by the exhibition but they do appear throughout both

as medical staff and fathers. The exhibition was well attended by both men and women although men tended to be more self-conscious and some older women, as typified by the GAGMA visit, did not necessarily want to be reminded of their childbearing years.

The community involvement helped to shape the exhibition but the message for me was that professional bodies expect a lot from issue-based exhibitions and that means taking a hard line. The role of the curator is not simply to do exhibitions which we feel are good for people but to move, challenge, inform and, above all, entertain.

Liz Carnegie, Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries

Thomas Clarkson, Slavery and the Slave Trade

This contribution to multi-ethnic studies is an education pack of 37 items based exclusively on original material in the Wisbech and Fenland Museum or in the Cambridgeshire County Record Office. (There is a permanent exhibition with the same title in the museum.)

Cost = £12, including postage and packing, preferably prepaid, from David Devenish at the Wisbech and Fenland Museum.

Study Tour of Gibraltar

I am arranging this primarily for the Museum Ethnographers Group, but if anyone else would be interested, I should be most grateful if they could let me know. Provisionally, I have been thinking in terms of making use of a 3-4 day "City Break" next November. This would probably cost about £200 each.

This will give Members an opportunity to experience one of the last remnants of the British Empire. Sites to be visited might include:

*The Gibraltar Museum
(I was Curator/Archivist 1967-70)
The Moorish Baths
Moorish Castle - Tower and Gatehouse
Garrison Library (Colonial Social Club)
The Convent (Governor's Residence in former Franciscan convent)
R C Cathedral (Medieval)
Co E Cathedral (neo-Mauresque)
Europa Cathedral (former Mosque)
St Michael's Cave
Upper Galleries (artificial caves/gun emplacements)
Both the synagogues (18th century)
Circuit of City Walls (Medieval, Renaissance and 18th century)
City Hall (Aaron Cardozo's Palace)*

I hope that it may be possible to meet some local people, such as the Gibraltar Society, the Garrison Library, and the Jewish Community.

For details contact:

David Devenish

Curator and Librarian
Wisbech and Fenland Museum
Museum Square
Wisbech
PE13 1ES
Tel: (0945) 583817

Samuel Smith - Calotype Photographs 1852-1854

A travelling exhibition of the life and work of this pioneer photographer is available on hire @ £300 per month from the Wisbech and Fenland Museum. It is made up of 60 reprints 16" x 20" and 19 other panels, some with photographs printed using the original process.

For details contact:

David Devenish

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A NIGHT OUT

SHCG COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION

Recognising that co-operation between museums should, in theory, be encouraged, a group of Scottish social history curators set up the Collaborative Exhibition Project. The project had two principal aims :



Photograph by David Peace from the exhibition "A Good Night Out".

- 1. to produce a touring exhibition which would focus on an aspect of life in present day Scotland*
- 2. to provide a catalyst for museums to record life in their own communities.*

The value of the material collected by each museum would be enhanced by the existence of similar material in other museums throughout the country.

That was back in 1989 and now, five years on, the third collaborative exhibition has been launched.

Focusing on 'A Night Out', the exhibition looks at popular culture in Scotland today. Each of the ten participating museums recorded an activity felt to be important within their community. The exhibition contains a selection of b/w and colour images together with captions and text provided by the participating museums. The standard of photography varies, as some museums employ professional photographers whilst others rely on the skill of the curatorial staff. Some of the photographs were taken by members of local groups and organisations, with museums supplying camera and film.

The success of a project like this is dependent on the level of commitment of participating museums, and the commitment must be sustained during the months of recording. Enthusiasm was high at the beginning but, as time passed, other priorities took over; some museums had changes of staff and others found they were unable to allocate sufficient finance to the project.

An application for Grant Aid was submitted to the SMC, which was unfortunately unsuccessful, leaving finances rather stretched. Each

museum submitted £200 which was used to pay a designer; all the photographic work being provided free by Summerlee Heritage Trust. Despite the set-backs the exhibition was finally launched, and although smaller than originally planned, it contains some interesting material.

The project would have run more efficiently if fewer museums had been involved. The distance between museums is also an important factor as it is essential that curators can meet easily to discuss each stage. I would like to see the project continuing as it is obviously worthwhile in terms of the benefits to individual museums. Each museum now has a collection of contemporary material. Ideally a curator should be nominated to co-ordinate the project as part of their day to day work. The question is who; and who pays?

Carol Haddow, Summerlee Heritage Trust

The Tempting Table

European Table Layout and Decoration 1500-1870

The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham, DL12 8NP

May 28 - August 29 1994

This exhibition looks at the formal service of dinner in Europe in the period 1500-1870, examining the division of a meal into separate courses, the evolution of the dinner service, and its layout on the table. The exhibition will progress from the Medieval and Renaissance style of serving dinner (with all the different foods laid out in the manner of a modern buffet), to the evolution of formal dining or service a la francaise in the late 17th century, with the division of foods into dishes called entrees, hors d'oeuvres, roast etc., through to their separate service one after another in the 19th century in the modern manner (a la russe) that continues today. Each type of service will be represented by a full table layout in the museum's superb sequence of period rooms, and special attention will be paid to the differences between Continental and British dining, and the decoration of the table for the dessert or last course of dinner, a meal of sweet things and fruit.

A special attraction will be the reconstruction of three full-scale desserts representative of the Tudor, Stuart and Georgian periods by historic-food specialist Ivan Day of Cumbria. These will comprise full-scale layouts of confections of the most complex and elaborate nature, laid out in pyramids and wicker baskets, with special emphasis on decorative pastries and sweet meats. A special feature will be a centrepiece of a Classical temple, with columns and a cupola, made entirely out of sugar-paste, surrounded by Derby porcelain figures of Cupids.

For further information, contact Howard Coutts, The Bowes Museum, 0833-690606, or Ivan Day on 0931-716266

Road to the Front

War illustrations by Joe Cole

4th June - 11th September 1994

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of D-Day (6th June 1994), Kirkleatham Old Hall Museum is staging a major exhibition of wartime paintings, military equipment and associated material. Joe Cole (1920-1984) was born in Redcar and lived for most of his life in Marske. He was a tutor at Cleveland College of Art and Design and a highly respected artist in his own right. During the Second World War (1939-45) he served in the R.A.F. and in the Normandy campaign was ground support crew for the 2nd Tactical Air Force when he painted the works included in the exhibition.

Joe's paintings show life on the home front (c.1940-44) and his experiences in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany in late 1944 / early 1945 but the bulk of his work depicts D-Day and the Normandy campaign in June 1944.

Also included will be a wartime room reconstruction, uniforms, arms and equipment with sounds from the war period. To coincide with the exhibition, prints of four of the paintings by Joe Cole will be for sale in the Museum Shop along with a booklet "Road to the Front".

The museum is open from Thursday to Monday (inclusive) from 10:00 am to 5:00 p.m. Admission free.

Kirkleatham Old Hall Museum

Kirkleatham

Redcar

Cleveland.

Oral History in Museums

Museum of London 9 May 1994

This one day seminar looked at the way museums incorporated oral history into their displays - from originating a project to public presentation. The enthusiastic key speakers encouraged the twenty six delegates to critically examine the process. Campbell McMurray - the Director of the Royal Naval Museum - who introduced the day, talked of a need for a professional approach to oral history projects, often given a low priority in museums. Chris Howard Bailey, also from the Royal Naval Museum, described how oral history was deemed the best way forward in documenting the massive change to the senior service - something more conventional collecting policies could not. The most interesting aspects were the interview process, followed by a comparison of recordings. Empathy is needed to convince some Navy personnel that their story is worth hearing; interviewing requires the ability to listen sensitively, and to ask probing questions. Some who initially thought they had no story to tell, proved some of the most interesting when given support. The comparison of the two recordings - one made by a junior Officer in 1941, and one by an Officer of the same rank in the Gulf War in 1991 - demonstrated how oral history could be used to depict some of the changes in, for example, working and social hierarchies, the nature of work and technology, language used, and attitudes to life in general. In addition, a montage of audio visual testimonies together with archive footage of the WW2 Corvette crews was shown, and strengthened how emotive the stories were. Jon Brown from Croydon Museum had us busily noting in our diaries the opening of the new museum there, showing us the

emphasis placed on oral history in the displays. To tell the social history of the area, objects were chosen to support oral history. Displays will have no labels, but touch-screens, and Jon discussed the pros and cons of this media. Although it was suggested that older people were not used to technology, and there could be a problem of queuing, Jon was confident the project will be successful as the interactives were market-tested in the locality; that older people often watched children use it, then felt they could too. Jon presented some very interesting stories: for example the illegal pan-making factory during WW2 where some workers stole the lucrative black-market goods for family and friends. However, due to limited resources, Croydon's selective oral history collecting policy, which targeted possible interesting stories, was in contrast to the Royal Naval Museum's where - with perseverance - subjects could be encouraged. Oral history in museums and the work of reminiscence therapy are different, yet their boundaries are sometimes blurred; more collaboration would be fruitful, particularly as selection policy is no doubt linked to time and resources available. In retrospect, reminiscence work was not mentioned at all during the day.

Lynne McNab of the National Maritime Museum gave a comprehensive and interesting talk on the challenges of originating an oral history project at the port of Felixstowe. Lynne wholeheartedly recommended the free one day course at the National Sound Archive for those wishing to start up a project. The most pressing issue raised was interviewee selection. Interviewees were picked by the port's senior management - often long-standing employees, thus deemed favourable towards the port. Also, the site of the interview was held in an alien environment. Lynne thus emphasised the need to record these biases for future research and, in addition, for proper cataloguing and classification.

Rory O'Connell of the Museum of London introduced us to the excellent "Peopling of London" exhibition and, during the lunch break, we had the opportunity to witness oral history in action. I liked the way there were visuals near the handsets which related to the oral information on display, and the clear instantaneously resettable recordings.

After lunch there was a slight restructuring with one speaker absent. So, Beth Thomas, from the Welsh Folk Museum, and Jack Latimer, a consultant who works with Brighton Museum, talked about the use of multi media. Beth emphasised the

importance of self-sufficiency when purchasing a multi media package - but to get a company who will give back-up too. Beth demonstrated "Picturebook" which, thanks to her, helped multi media to become less of an enigma for us. Problems associated with size of computer memory were discussed, and a suitable sound card was recommended. There were, in addition, problems of quality versus time : as a higher quality of sound took up so much memory, it meant shorter recording presentation. Beth's demonstrations were a pleasure, and listening to a recording of children singing a folk song, while we watched a visual, was a real joy. Jack's work caused some controversy. Brighton originated a project whereby local people could take snaps with a disposable camera, and were then interviewed talking about the scenes they had captured. This was then presented as a multi media interactive. The controversy was about two things : the cost; and the re-recording of the chosen snippets. The floor questioned using resources in a limited way, instead of investing in an archive. Jack answered these fears by suggesting that the project could be added to as resources became available. The big issue, however, was the way oral history was re-recorded : not unlike television interviews of perfected takes, or actors' voice-overs someone argued. This is a good point : oral history is unique in that it is a testimonial, often with meaning in the inflexions of unperfected on-the-spot narrative. However, this may be dependant on the emotive value of the material. Nevertheless it was an impressive package. The pleasure in witnessing both packages lay in seeing what is possible with multi media, and having the mystique taken out. Museums with no interactives may well need to look ahead to this exciting area. Indeed, in this so-called post-modern age, with the globalisation of oral culture, multi media has not used

orality to the full, and thus museums may be in an embryonic position to spread the word. To sum up, the day provided some very pragmatic insights. The discussion continued afterwards, and will continue to do so as museums explore further issues. Not least, the day created a forum where museum staff could air their own particular issues, experience, questions, and concerns, and was a thoroughly enjoyable one, excellently organised and presented. For further information about the National Sound Archive training day or the Oral History Society (which later this year is publishing a booklet on museums) please contact Rob Perks at the archive.

Brian Hanley. Wycombe Museum.

ONE DAY CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION

... focusing on school museums and associated research
on Saturday 24th September 1994
at Hitchin Priory Conference Centre, Hitchin
from 10:00 am to 5:00 p.m.

The conference will bring together :

Co-ordinators/Teachers-in-charge of school museums
Curators of museums with education collections
Lecturers and researchers in F.E.I.

The programme will include a keynote speech by Peter Gosden, previously Professor of History of Education at Leeds University, short papers, and an opportunity to see the British school site at Hitchin.

The cost will be £25 to include coffee, buffet lunch and tea.

The organisers are : Dr Elizabeth Foster, Lecturer in the School of Education and curator of The Museum of the History of Education at Leeds University

Wynne Frankum, Co-ordinator of The Katesgrove Schoolroom, Reading.

Elizabeth Hunter, of The Hitchin British School Trust.

Further information and booking forms from : either Joan Cadge or Shirley Merriott

Education Library Service, Shire Hall, Shinfield Park, Reading,
RG2 9XD

Telephone No. 0734 233268

Information Request

I am about to begin researching for my dissertation for an MA in Museum Studies at Newcastle University. My chosen topic, "The Portrayal of Women in Social History Collections, positive or negative?", aims to contrast social history collections in rural Lincolnshire and urban Tyne and Wear to see whether women are portrayed in a positive light by social history exhibits. I would be very grateful if anyone in your group could give me any advice on specific collections or exhibitions and any relevant reading material recommendations.

Contact: David P Worthington, Flat 32, Room 3, St Mary's College Flats, Fenham Hall Drive, Newcastle upon Tyne, NEH 9DQ

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor

Middle-aged Museum Directors who earn over £40,000 a year make unconvincing rebels.

Save space, Mr Editor.

Yours faithfully,
Crispin Paine

OBITUARY

Susan Jenkinson

It was with great sadness that SHCG members learned of the death of Sue Jenkinson in a road accident in February 1994.

She had been curator of Royston Museum in Hertfordshire and Tolson Museum in Huddersfield before moving on to her post with the East Lothian Museums Service in 1990.

Sue was a member of the Social History Curators' Group and a familiar face at its annual study weekends. She will be greatly missed by all those friends and colleagues who have worked with her and been touched by her enthusiasm, generosity and laughter.

Jane Whittaker



CURSE OF FRANK 'N' HARRY'S MONSTER LIFTED AT LAST!

This has been the belated and last issue of SHCG News to be edited by Frank Little and designed by Harry Kerr at Summerlee Heritage Trust.

THE EDITOR

All contributions, letters, articles for consideration and correspondence should be sent to:

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