

SOCIAL  
HISTORY  
CURATORS  
GROUP

NEWS

ISSUE NUMBER 38  
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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL  
HISTORY CURATORS GROUP



Photo: Time Travellers.

ON THE FRONT  
PAGE WITH . . .

- A Really Wild Show!
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- Interpretation - Dead or Alive?

# *Editor's Statement*

The views expressed in this newsletter are wide ranging and do not necessarily express the views of the SHCG committee or SHCG, unless otherwise stated.

## *Mission Statement.*

SHCG NEWS will encourage and publish a wide range of views from those connected with history and museums.

The NEWS aims to act as a channel for the exchange of information and opinions about current practice and theory in museums.

## *Articles and writings are welcome.*

If you would like to write for the NEWS, any terms can be discussed, though we do not pay a fee. For example, if you wish to remain anonymous, confidentiality is assured ;if you wish to express a view that may not seem SHCG correct, it can be expressed.

Please type them and double space them. If you are working on a disc it may be helpful to send that in as well as hard copy, it depends on the disc and programme you are using. If you think something should be reviewed, but don't wish to do it yourself, let me know and I may be able to fix up a reviewer.

## *The Journal*

The next journal is currently being prepared. This is an appeal for articles. Published once a year, it gives you an opportunity to write an in-depth article or review an important new gallery or book. If you would like to write an article, please contact Jane Whittaker to discuss the subject. She is based at Oakwell Hall, Nutter Lane, Birstall, Nr Batley, WF17 9LG. Tel.: 01924 420536.

## *Feedback*

It's great to see some letters in this issue. I welcome feedback so please write some if you would like to. This time, SHCG particularly invites you to tell us your views on the SHCG National Research Project, which you will read about on a page that follows.

## *Dolly Peg*

Dolly Peg is currently on holiday.

*Harriet Purkis*

Editor

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# Home News

## *SHCG National Research Project*

In order to further the kind of debate arising from Annual Study Weekends and seminars, SHCG members at the AGM of the Group in July decided to seed fund a national research project culminating in a publication intended to be of lasting benefit to its members and the wider museum profession. The Group has some money in the bank that was originally designated for an SHCG Journal that was never produced some years ago. In addition the Group sees a need to fill a gap in the literature about 'evaluation'. A small working party was established at the AGM to look into the matter of setting a project up. All members are invited and encouraged to comment on the proposal for the research project, before it goes ahead. You will find full details in the pages of this NEWS.

## *New Kid on the Block*

Timothy Mason, who has taken over as Director at the Museums and Galleries Commission, is a strong advocate of bringing contemporary issues and culture into museum displays. At the MA conference in September he talked about the importance of building local relationships, and also about bringing the genuine culture of present day communities into museums. This contrasted strongly with the Director of the British Museum - a Mr. Robert Anderson - who seemed to be stuck in the era of past documents from which he copiously quoted. Well, the British Museum is an object that speaks for itself, so I won't quote Mr. Anderson too heavily here.

## *New Heritage Secretary*

Virginia Bottomley has moved into the National Heritage office, replacing Stephen "Classic FM" Dorrell. In her keynote speech to the M.A. conference in September, Little Gini reminisced about, "being dragged around the BM" (her words not mine) by her mum. She said she was keen to visit the 'Street Style'

exhibition at her local community museum - the V&A. Well that's finished that one, in February actually; maybe she'd appreciate the last SHCG News for the review of it, though? On a more general policy matter, she wants museums to, "open more doors and windows" (metaphorically speaking we hope); and sees museums having a vital role in giving people, "a sense of place in times of turbulence and transition". Watch this space for more selective quotations and biased reporting during Mrs. Bottomley's stint at DNH.

## *New man at V&A*

The new director for this museum comes from a history museum. The former director of the Imperial War Museum - Alan Borg has taken over. SHCG wishes him well and encourages him to retain his historical eye while looking over the collections. Perhaps the potential in seeing all objects as potentially social history objects might be a useful starting point. We'll give him a few weeks to settle in before offering any more advice. Just one other thing; do look out for Virginia in the corridors, I believe she may be trying to locate 'Street Style'?

## *Forward Planning*

The Museums Professionals Group have recently published another set of Transactions. No.29 called, 'Forward Planning' discusses the reasons for planning and offers practical advice for producing effective plans. It emphasises the need for museums to understand their mission and make clear policies. The stages in the production of business development and forward plans are described by contributors including Jane Walton, Neville Wills, and David Fleming who introduces, 'An Anarchist's Guide to Planning'. To obtain your copy and a list of back issues of Transactions please contact Janet Dugdale, City Museum and Art Gallery, Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent ST1 3DW. 01782 202173. Price £6.60 which includes p&p. Make cheques out to, 'The Museums Professional Group' or ask for an invoice.

# Annual Study Weekend

Thursday 6 - Sunday 9 July 1995, Tuille House, Carlisle

**THEME: COMMUNICATION AND INTERPRETATION**

*Rachel Mason from the Green Dragon Museum in Stockton-on-Tees reports on the study weekend.*

## *The basics*

On arrival in Carlisle on a warm Thursday afternoon at my first SHCG Annual Weekend, I was rather apprehensive at what lay in store for me. However, I needn't have worried, because from the start everyone was quite human and friendly, from the front of house staff at Tuille House to the Social History Curators en masse. The reception and meal in the evening broke the ice quite nicely.

After a very good meal, a local hostelry bore the brunt of the SHCG. The accommodation was located in student residences in the Old Brewery - was this designed to see if social history curators could organise something there?

## *The business*

The next morning it was down to business. Alisdair Wilson, the chair, welcomed everybody, pointing out that the subject of the conference - 'interpretation and communication' - was a logical extension of last year's topic - 'the object is dead, long live the object'. Steph Mastoris and Lucy Harland, as joint convenors, set the scene, posing 4 questions to be considered throughout the weekend:

What type of medium are we working with?

What do visitors want?

What do curators know about communication?

What is the role of the social history curator?

## *Who said what*

Paper 1, 'The Way Tuille House does it, or still might', came from Nick Winterbotham, of Tuille House Museum. After an introduction to the museum generally, he gave a brief overview of Frontier 2000, the CD-ROM package of the history of the area covered by the museum. He pointed out that interactives can be high or low tech, and emphasised that the thought behind them is as, if not more, important than the interactives themselves.

Selwyn van Zeller, of Birmingham Museum of Science and Industry, delivered Paper 2, 'It's not

what you do, or even the way that you do it - it's whether you do it at all that is important - communicate, that is'. One of his opening remarks struck a chord with me; "never mind the quality, feel the laminate!". Reinforcing Nick's message from the previous paper, Selwyn stressed that too many curators are happy with glitzy interactives without checking the message they are communicating, and that interactives should lead to conversations with and between visitors in order to be classified as 'successful'.

Discussion after these two papers suggested that it is important to know what visitors want, but that their needs should also be addressed, and that there is a significant amount of literature already dealing with evaluation, but it is largely unread. Evaluation is vital for the amendment and updating of interactives.

## *A 'Mini-manhattan' in Croydon*

Sally MacDonald from Croydon Clocktower gave Paper 3, 'Soul Searching'. Croydon Museum was set up from scratch, opened in March this year and cost about £4 million, replacing a traditional Victorian museum. The entire planning of the new museum was based around interviews with traditional and non-traditional museum users, taking four years of research in an attempt to provide the people of Croydon with the type of museum they want. Questionnaires are used to give continual updates of opinion and suggestions for exhibitions. From this, 'Lifetimes' was developed: the history of Croydon from the 1830's is told through a number of displays, each with their own interactives monitor in front, repeating the display on screen, allowing the visitor to investigate the objects on display through touching the screen and calling up information as required. In this way, the visitor discovers and enjoys at their own pace, giving them a feeling of control. There is also the 'Mini-manhattan' project on screen, giving basic information, and a less linear view of history. There were some problems with the screens:

sound tends to bleed from one area to another; only two or three people can participate in the experience of the touch-screen at one time; and school parties and the inevitable stoppage of movement at the monitors leads to log jams. A mezzanine with 12 more monitors exists to try and alleviate some of the problems. However, despite this, early evaluation of visitors shows that 39% were encouraged to go back and look again at the objects because of the use of multi-media.

### *People, planning and popularity in Stevenage*

Maggie Appleton from Stevenage Museum followed with Paper 4, 'Interactive Interpretation for smaller museums.' Here, interactives were regarded as second place to the attitude of museum staff, who were friendly and welcoming. The emphasis is on making the museum a people place, taking people into account when planning interactives, thinking about such things as height, type and appropriateness. Planning is vital to the success of interactives, for example thinking ahead to the cleaning of blackboards. The fact that 60% of the museum's visitors are children, and these are largely working-class, is a sign that the museum is popular and thriving. The attitude of staff to visitors as important in engaging them as an interactive.

### *Wot no objects ?*

The discussion following these two papers centred around the question of museums owning their own collections, both Stevenage and Croydon borrowing heavily for displays. Steph Mastoris posed the question as to whether collections were the vital spark for museums, pointing out that there is a relationship between objects and the interpretation of them. The idea of a museum of social history versus a museum of social memory was brought up. The consensus seemed to be that collections are important, despite the fact that Croydon and Stevenage appear as successful museums without large collections.

### *The Workshops*

On Friday afternoon, there were four workshops, twice. Each person could choose

two. I plumped for Workshop C, 'Design Basics' with Mandy Barnett, and Workshop A, 'Frontier 2000: CD-ROM in museums', run by Nick Winterbotham. The other workshops were, 'Get Your Hands on History', led by Harriet Purkis, and 'The Use of video and pictures in museum exhibitions' with Beverly Cole. 'Design Basics' began with Mandy emphasising the importance of orientation, both psychologically and intellectually. She then looked at interpretation which is shown through design. She stressed the importance of encouraging people into the exhibit, the use of rest spaces - physical and intellectual, and design for people with a visual impairment. We were then put into groups of four to do a practical. My task involved displaying a bible supposed to have been given to Princess Margaret by Peter Townsend during a reception at Buckingham Palace.

In contrast, 'Frontier 2000' was more of a spoon-feed. After the necessarily rather lengthy explanation of how it worked, and why it had been produced, we were allowed to have a go. Finding our way through the timeline of events in Carlisle and the U.K. simultaneously was fun, but the Trail left us feeling a bit cheated because the areas we wanted to find out about were not annotated. However, the programme itself is quite impressive. Using a mouse, children have to find out answers to questions posed by 'the Professor', with a clock to allow teachers to monitor how quickly the various tasks are achieved. Hampshire LEA have adopted the pack, thus allowing children far removed physically from Carlisle to discover its history. Also a staggering 70% of Tuille House visitors say they came because of Frontier 2000.

The day finished at the Roman Army Museum at Greenhead, on Hadrian's Wall, where the AGM was held - one of the slickest I have attended of any organisation.

### *Labelling Up in the Morning*

The Saturday programme began with Helen Coxall, a museum language consultant, delivering Paper 5, 'It is what you say, and the way that you say it'. This was a reminder of the importance of labels in giving, and withholding information, which influences the message being communicated. Unknowingly, as curators, we

put out the 'preferred' message, and so have to be aware of the nuances which can creep into seemingly innocent and well-written labels. A graphic illustration of this is the description of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan as found in the Imperial War Museum. The text talks about bombing Hiroshima, and then says, "a second bomb fell on Nagasaki." The same event is described in the Peace Museum in Nagasaki more fully, 'but this text' also acknowledges that the bombs were carried by aircraft, and did not simply fall from the sky.

### *Going Live*

Jon Price of 'Time Travellers' followed this with, 'It's Interpretation Jim, but not as we know it: Interpretative performance and the communication of social history'. He is an advocate of 'people stimulus', which attracts visitors because it is something to which they can relate. High-tech interactives have to be studied by visitors who have to learn how to operate them. People know how to relate to other people, and they can interrogate them with ease.

In the discussion which followed these two papers, the importance of accuracy and balance in interpretation came up. The brief was important in both label writing and live interpretation; but in the case of live interpretation, the briefer had to be able to trust the actor, and not tie them into anything too restrictive, which would knock the realism of the character.

### *Hands-On or Hands-Off?*

Tim Coulton from the department of Leisure Management at Sheffield University, next presented his paper, 'The role of interactive exhibits within traditional museum galleries'. Tim has worked at Eureka! in Halifax. He outlined the rise of children's museums, especially in the States, where the process of learning is given importance over the end-product. Interactives can be costly, take up valuable space, and have a limited life-span compared to traditional gallery displays. When these factors are taken into account in planning, perhaps less glitzy interactives can do the interpretative job as well as expensive ones.

### *Batteries not included*

Richard Doughty of the National Fishing Centre in Grimsby introduced us to, 'The all singing, all dancing museum', with live illustration. He changed into a German-sounding Professor and activated his Smellovator to show the ways in which museums could turn to the entertainment industry to draw people in. The entertainment industry had influenced Grimsby, not only in the marketing aspects but also in presentation. The Fishing Centre has changes in temperature, a net-making interactive, and smells, moving parts and noise. He acknowledged that not all of the things he had tried had worked - for example asking people to wear silver clothes with hoods while they watch a film. It was good to hear of things that went wrong, and the reasons why.

### *Art and History*

John Millard from the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, next told us why he thought a lot of art curators were not getting it right. In his paper, 'Art, history and half-baked gimmicks', John forcibly led us through many examples of Art people not making the right connections with their visiting public. In Art history, it seems to be a tradition to explain things in terms of high-falluting language and assuming that the inquirer is on the same academic level as the historian. He felt quite strongly that the best way to approach art history is through social history. To this end he developed the 'Art on Tyneside' exhibition at the Laing, which has attracted a lot of snifty verbiage from art critics - which John seems to enjoy immensely. Along with all Tyne and Wear museums, the Laing follows a policy of public access for all. Under-14's are allowed in to choose what painting to hang up, and there is a play area for young children.

### *Saturday night, Sunday morning*

A trip to Keswick and then back for the SHCG 21st Birthday party, where Suella Postles and Stuart Davis were presented with long service awards.

On the final morning of the weekend, we heard five papers from ordinary members - a chance for curators to tell others what they are doing.

Alisdair Wilson spoke about the new, 'A Soldier's Life' gallery in Newcastle Discovery. Helen Clarke talked through the development of the Newhaven Heritage Centre; Kristina Sayle showed us Soho House in Handsworth, Birmingham, before and after renovation; and Harry Dunlop talked about a Glasgow Museums exhibition about mental health. Stuart Davis took the opportunity to look at the political climate, and emphasised the need for curators to speak the language of accountability. He felt social history curators should feel their strength and showed how curators could influence governing bodies and politicians by emphasising the importance of our visitors.

**The End**

The concluding discussion of the Weekend confirmed that curators can be the strongest or the weakest link in the communication cycle.

Interactives can help communication and thus interpretation, and there are many sorts, both low and high tech. Feedback needs to be encouraged if the communication is to be seen as a success, because it is a two-way thing, and it must be remembered that there is no single approach to collections and people. If museums want non-users in, they must use their ways of communicating.

It was a great weekend, and any qualms I had beforehand were quickly dispelled. We were warned by Steph on Sunday of thinking that the SHCG is the only group at the cutting edge of progress. I would say that it is way ahead of many other specialist groups, not necessarily just in the museum world, of being welcoming and friendly to newcomers. Will I be there next year? You try and stop me !!



## *Interpretation: Dead or Alive?*

**Some thoughts on Live Interpretation of the Second World War, by JON PRICE of Time Travellers.**

*"Readers and listeners must not forget that no confidence can ever be placed in statements coming from German sources . . . British news can always be relied on. German news never. That is a distinction of vital importance."*

From, 'Hitler's words and Hitler's deeds', government pamphlet 1940.

During 1995, there will have been many events around the country on the theme of World War II. They range in size from a village fete to the official VE Day event in Hyde Park (the biggest ever village fete?). Any survey of the content of these events would show great disparity in

quality of presentation. One of the standards of quality that could be measured might be the validity of the historical information employed. Clearly, what is acceptable at a village fete, for example any period of military clothing standing as a cipher for the uniforms of the 1940's, or pastiche songs in common currency such as, "Who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler?" standing in for original songs, is not acceptable or suitable for any but the most archly camp of post modern museum events. The content of a museum event should be determined by the museum's interpretation policy (formal or informal). Where there is no formal policy, it is likely that the content and form of museum events will be affected by the attitude of the museum staff towards military history.



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*"The War is over," the doctor said.  
"Germany is defeated."  
We sat in that room . . . and no one had anything  
more to say.'*

Quote from, Martha Gellhorn, Dachau, 1945

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The perceived difference between celebration and commemoration muddies the water when it comes to embarking on interpretations of the history of twentieth century conflicts. Although the celebration versus commemoration issue may be of relevance when debating the public/political aspects of a museum's external relations, it need not be an issue for a properly planned programme of live interpretation. An interpretation programme should be concerned neither with celebration (which is the province of public and private ceremonial), but with the validation of people's experiences. This may involve a direct experience as participant in, or witness of, events; or an indirect experience as close contact with a participant or witness, such as an older relative. When working with schoolchildren who are now up to three generations away from such a direct experience, the interpretation of such a long-past event is concerned with history rather than experience. In this case, the purpose of interpretation is still validation, although validation of a society's historic experience rather than that of an individual.

All events and activities take place within a preexisting conceptual framework. Our view is influenced by a range of media images. Most of these media images are from the realms of popular culture and tend inevitably to stereotypes, (even where the stereotypes are placed within an accurately portrayed environment), and cliches. Any visitor to a museum in this country is likely to have been exposed to a wide range of material, for example films, (A Bridge Too Far, Kelly's Heroes, A Long

Walk In The Sun, Ice Cold In Alex, The Guns of Navarone, 633 Squadron, The Dambusters . . .), and comics like Victor and Commando. Live Interpretation, to be successful, has to take account of those stereotypes. Characters must be designed to avoid unnecessary references and readings to emerge. If a Home Guard character looks too much like Captain Mainwaring, then much more time will be spent fending off discussion of old men, young boys and invalids being our final defence against an army of veteran regular soldiers.

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*"The first thing which the rescue squads and the firemen saw as their torches poked through the gloom and the smoke and the bloody pit which had lately been the most chic cellar in London, was a frieze of other shadowy men, night creatures who had scuttled within as soon as the echoes ceased, crouching over any dead or wounded woman, any soignee corpse they could find, and ripping off its necklace, or earrings, or brooch: rifling its handbag, scooping up its loose change."*

Nicholas Montserrat, on the Cafe de Paris bomb, 1941.

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It would be crass offensive insensitivity to attempt a first person interpretation related to World War II without considering the implications of the fact that members of the public, whether soldier or civilian, might have experienced trauma by close contact with that war. Time Travellers has been responsible for the production of a number of live interpretation programmes dealing with the 1914 - 1918 war, but until 1994 we had avoided the Second World War as a topic. This was because of the significant difference we could see in the two periods. In the case of the First World War, we were generally involved in validating the historic experience of a society, and interpreters had almost no contact with people who had had personal experience of the subject under consideration. With World War II, our interpreters would potentially be in



From: Time Travellers.

regular contact with people whose direct experiences they were interpreting. This had an effect on the choice of material and on the methods used by our interpreters in presenting that material. Even where programmes were produced for schoolchildren, we were aware that teachers or helpers were highly likely to have indirect experience through parents or older relatives.

It was clear that we would be asked to provide characters with experience in the armed forces, as well as civilians with some form of direct involvement in war work. It is our policy to attempt to balance male and female characters where possible and this affected our selection process. We were concerned wherever possible

to provide characters which reflected the experience of the locations where we were working, which dealt with the issues of a war where civilians were as involved as much as soldiers, and which avoided stereotypes as far as possible. In the end we ran three Second World War programmes. These were at: The Stephenson railway, North Tyneside (seven days for general visitors), Museum of St Albans (ten days for primary school children) and Watford Museum (five days initially for primary school children, but modified at the request of the museum to include reminiscence visits to three elderly persons homes). To run these programmes, we provided four characters: a female war worker, a male ARP warden, a female soldier (an ATS theodelite operator serving with a heavy anti-aircraft battery), and an Italian prisoner of war.

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*"Our landings in the Cherbourg-Harve area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops . . . My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available . . . If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone."*

**General Eisenhower, despatch prepared before the D-Day landings, 1944.**

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Selection of characters and initial development was done in consultation with the respective clients; however, each interpreter carried out some research and design work in order that they fully 'owned' their character and felt confident with that character's range of responses to potential questions. All research was either guided or monitored and regular discussion meant that the character remained within the parameters set by the clients. From the start it was decided that where interpreters met adults who were judged to be sufficiently old to have direct experience of the issues, then the interpreter would move from first person to

third person, and where suitable would adopt a more receptive or passive approach. In general this approach worked well: with school groups and family groups, interpreters stayed firmly in role; but with older adults they were able to move rapidly out of role. Once out of role interpreters were able to elicit information from visitors about their experiences. In many cases, the visitor was drawn towards the interpreter because the character was similar to their own role or the role of someone they knew. In those cases, interpreters were able to assimilate what they learned from the visitors into their own character's database of information for subsequent use.

Live interpretation is an intimate process and the methodology of human interaction must be understood and taken on board in designing a programme. It is also a process whose raw material is historical information and so any programme must be sensitive to the feelings of the stakeholders in that information. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in any detail any other programmes of interpretation of the Second World War, but it would be true to say that those which have been most successful have followed these guidelines, and that those that have been least successful have not.

As an example, the following programmes could be compared. Both programmes are summer activities for young people. In 1994, visitors to the National Army Museum met a soldier just returned from France after D-Day. He was initially shaving and having a mug of tea and a sandwich. As they talked to him, the young people discovered what he thought about things, and how he had experienced them. In the course of their discussions, many of their preconceptions and stereotypical views were challenged. They then went on to a guided session of handling artefacts from the collection. In 1995, visitors to the Imperial War Museum took part in an activity

based on the story of the Channel Islands in the Second World War. Working with actors, they undertook a secret reconnaissance mission using clandestine radios, sample wartime rations and they followed gallery trails. Whilst it may be true that the Imperial War Museum event was enjoyable for participants, so was that at the National Army Museum, but this does not guarantee quality of interpretation. From the point of view of the stakeholders in the historical information, it is clear that the Army Museum reflects their interests whilst some might find the Imperial War Museum's event offensive.

Finally I believe, based on my own experience, and the experience of other good practitioners, that live interpretation of the Second World War in museums is no more or less 'difficult' than is live interpretation of any historical period or event. All that is required is careful planning, co-operation between interpreters and curators, good interpreters, and sensitivity in dealing with people's history.

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*"We in our haste can only see the small  
components of the scene;*

*We cannot tell what incidents will focus on  
the final screen.*

*A barrage of destructive sound, a petal on a  
sleeping face,*

*Both must be noted, both must have their place.*

*It may be that our later selves or else our  
unborn sons*

*Will search for meaning in the dust of long  
deserted guns.*

*We only watch, and indicate, and make our  
scribbled pencil notes,*

*We do not wish to moralise, only to ease our  
dusty throats."*

**Donald Bain, soldier poet of the Second World War.**

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# *A Really Wild Show !*

Photo: Members of the young Ornithologists Group



A new facility at Queensferry Museum. **Denise Brace** discusses this environmental initiative.

'Going Wild' is a new facility at Queensferry Museum. Its aim is to interpret the natural and historical environment of the Forth Estuary at South Queensferry. The project has been a joint undertaking between Edinburgh District Council's Museum Service, and Countryside Ranger Service.

## *The approach*

It began in the autumn of 1994 when I approached Carol Huston, the senior Countryside Ranger. Both our services have a history of collaborating with colleagues from other divisions and departments within Edinburgh District Council. The Countryside Rangers had already assisted the museums service with the natural history in our newest museum at Newhaven. We were therefore aware of and eager to exploit the mutual benefits to be

gained from partnerships in sharing costs, contacts and staff resources.

Carol and I were delighted to find a great deal of common goals. We were also both convinced of the advantages of working across disciplines - in this particular case - social history and natural history. In the real world, the social and natural environments are closely interlinked. It is therefore sensible to adopt an interdisciplinary approach in order to increase understanding and promote awareness of both.

Our initial project brief was based on the active participation of community groups, as well as the rather optimistic assumption of being awarded grant aid. However, we were determined, that should a slimmed down version of the project become necessary, the aspects involving local people would kept at all costs. As it happened, we were fortunate in receiving the grant aid for which we applied.

### *School children get out and walk*

Three local primary schools agreed to prepare illustrations and text for individual local trail leaflets. Carol allocated a ranger to each of the schools to co-ordinate the work. The rangers also trained pupils from each school to conduct guided walks based on their leaflets. A grant was obtained from Edinburgh District Council's 'Spring Fling' to cover printing costs. The leaflets and guided walks were successfully launched in South Queensferry during the week of the 'Spring Fling' in May this year.

Local branches of the RSPB Young Ornithologists Club and Watch group were enlisted to produce A3 visitor display books. First, they made surveys of the local birds, animals and plants, and also investigated pollutants in the area. Then we had two brainstorming sessions and agreed on a brief. It was agreed that the text was to be clear, concise and 'visitor friendly' with no Latin names. Most of the illustrations were drawn by the young people taking part. The groups also undertook to gather together and label material from the natural world for some handling trays.

### *Trains, planes and hedgehogs*

In addition to the display books, the exhibition included a sound unit. Visitors can access sounds from the past and present world around us, for example, a steam train, a modern jet, a curlew and a hedgehog - snuffling.

There is also an interpretation panel of the view over the Forth showing aspects of the built and natural environment. A telescope and binoculars are on hand, for in hand use. The local groups were involved in discussing what should be on the sound selection and the interpretation panel.

### *Artreach*

An unanticipated addition to the project came about when we were approached by the District Council Arts Outreach section with the

suggestion of a community mural. They would supply the funding for a locally based community arts worker. We linked this into 'Going Wild'. At an open day during the 'Spring Fling', people were invited to make their personal contributions to the mural. In later sessions, a voluntary core group completed the art work. The mural is now on display at the entrance to the museum.

### *Money, support and loans*

The 'Going Wild' project was supported by many external organisations. The Scottish Museums Council grant-aided the project. The Environmental Initiative gave its support and awarded Queensferry Museum a clay plaque for promoting appreciation of the environment through Museums. Dan Hellier is assisting with an evaluation of the project. Further grant-aid was given by Scottish Natural Heritage, together the loan of a newly developed multi-media touch screen system. We also received support and assistance from Mark Jennison of Forth Estuary Forum. Specimens for the 'Bird of the Season' case were kindly loaned by Perth Museum and Art Gallery.

### *The future*

Carol and I view the exhibition as a starting point. We plan to work together in the future on changing displays and activities to strengthen the partnerships already made and to draw in new audiences. There is certainly much scope for bringing out environmental messages using other parts of the museum's collections.

# *This is Your Life - SHCG*

Here, **Alisdair Wilson** who chaired SHCG in 1994/ 5, reflects on the history of the Social History Curators Group on its 21st Birthday. He would like to thank Stuart Davis for allowing him liberal use of his article in *Museums Journal* vol.85 No.3 December 1985: 'Social History Curators Group', in the preparation of these thoughts.

## *The Birth*

Back in 1974 in the year when Jimmy Connors and Chris Evert won their respective Wimbledon singles titles, when Britain was subjected to two General Elections, resulting in a Labour majority of three, when Richard Nixon resigned from the Presidency of the United States on account of Watergate, when ABBA was topping the charts with SOS and Mamma Mia, when Carlisle United FC briefly, headed the First Division before succumbing to eventual relegation and I was taking my 'O' levels, an even greater event was about to take place in Leeds - the inaugural conference of a group to be known as . . . The Group for Regional Studies in Museums (GRSM).

Those curators who founded GRSM were essentially of the Folk Life tradition and as a result, it was intended to be a forum for British regional ethnographers working in museums in which to meet and discuss their subject and its particular application in museums. They hoped to extend their own understanding of the subject by looking at what each other was doing and to learn from the experiences of colleagues.

## *When We Were One*

An auspicious start perhaps but one year later in the first issue of the Newsletter, editor Richard

Langhorn of the Lancashire Museum, Preston reported that:

"The group has just celebrated its first anniversary, and it can hardly be claimed that this first year has been one of auspicious achievement nor even one of modest success. The responsibility for this lack of activity must rest with those of us on committee, and it is to be hoped that our inertia has not exhausted the goodwill of members. That the group has a valuable role to play in promoting the specialist

interests of regional studies in museums was amply demonstrated by the response of those who attended

the inaugural conference in

Leeds, and yet one year

later we appear to be

on the verge of

collapse. I personally

feel that the break-up

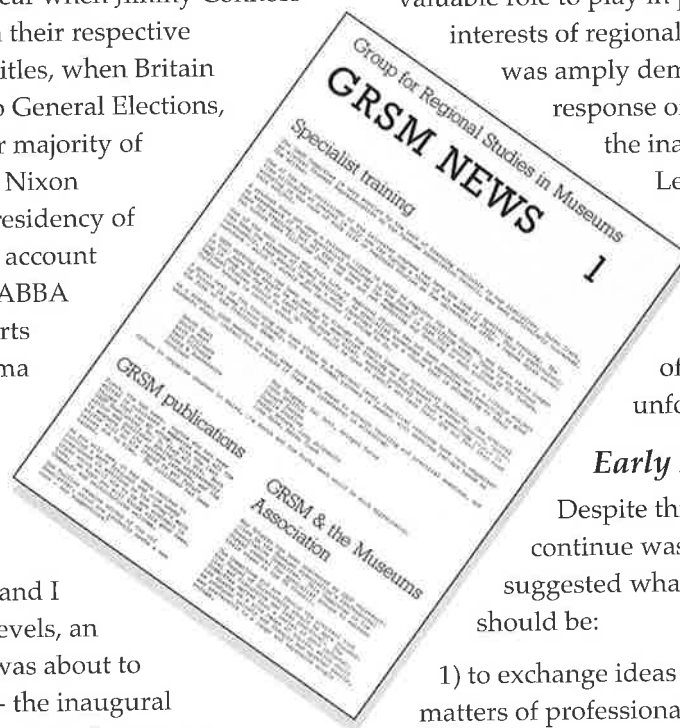
of the group would be

unfortunate."

## *Early Promises*

Despite this, the resolve to continue was strong and the editor suggested what the role of the group should be:

- 1) to exchange ideas and information on matters of professional interest e.g. display and interpretation, conservation, storage, documentation etc.
- 2) to trouble-shoot: that is to provide support to smaller museums where expertise was limited and financial resources meagre.
- 3) to hold meetings to consider methodology, approaches and techniques available in the study of regional culture complementing the academic work initiated by societies such as, the Society for Folk Life Studies, the Society for Post Medieval Archaeology and the Oral History Society'.
- 4) to provide a forum for specialists in disciplines of an overlapping and complimentary nature,



i.e. Regional Ethnology, Local History and Social History, and consider their roles in the study of regional culture.

- 5) to publicise the interests of their subject within the wider museum world and to other organisations and institutions outside that world, thereby achieving greater recognition of the Group.

Some of these original aspirations can still be recognised in the Group today, but there were more changes afoot.

### *Identity Crisis*

Throughout the 1970's there was an increasing awareness of the 'politics' of the profession. At the same time there was a drift away from "Folk Life" studies and a greater interest was in firstly local history then later social history. New members coming into the profession were now tending to be historians of one sort or another and no longer British ethnographers.

It was inevitable that the Group would have to change in some way. At the 1982 AGM of GRSM, which was held in Carlisle, Crispin Paine became Chair and in November the Group formally changed its name to the Social History Curators Group.

The Group's priorities were as follows: Firstly, it would continue to support the dissemination of information. Indeed in 1981 the annual Newsletter was replaced by the more professional looking Journal and the following year the equally professional looking 'NEWS' was instigated. Secondly, events such as the Annual Study Weekend and the various seminars that took place between ASWs were to continue. Thirdly, training was now identified to be of particular interest. With the transfer of the Diploma Courses to Leicester from October 1980, there was growing concern about the lack of specialist provision in Diploma teaching. As a result, a series of training seminars was set up, designed to cover the principal specialist subjects (for example, oral history, urban studies, rural history, documentation). The fourth priority was

to develop a more campaigning nature and be more aggressive at a political level.

### *Growing Pains*

In essence, the emphasis of the Group had moved from being interested solely in its subject to one now prepared to get involved in wider issues. These changes which took place 12 years ago are an example of one of SHCG's greatest strengths - the ability to be flexible and adapt to the mood of the day. Today membership is something in the region of 400 and there is a wide geographical spread of members representing a wide range of interests and varied backgrounds. SHCG does represent a broad church of opinion - debate on occasions can be vigorous, stimulating and often challenging. The Group is strong enough to survive some internal battering. However, whatever the differences we may have, we are united by a common interest in promoting the development of social history in museums - or else why would we be members.

### *Post-Teenagism and Social Responsibility*

Last year we looked at the role of objects in our museums at the ASW. There were times when I for one couldn't help feeling that somewhat dangerously, we were considering this subject in isolation of our other responsibilities. Yes, I know objects are important - they are our bread and butter - but what about the people who authorise our salaries - the elected members and their constituents to whom they are accountable - we surely have some responsibility to them too? For us to be primarily concerned with the acquisition and preservation of objects is a fine ideal but if no-one wants to look at them - what then? We must always remember our accountability, we must remember the needs, expectations and requirements of our customers whether actual or potential. We must make our objects work for them too. Here, of course, unlike many disciplines, we do have an advantage in being a people-based discipline: visitors can begin to relate to the material in our case more easily, but

we shouldn't necessarily assume this. It could be argued that an over familiarity with our objects might lead to a passive experience and then ultimately be a turn-off.

*Coming of Age*

So what must we consider? Well, of course, it was the theme of our 21st ASW - interpretation. Interpretation and context is all important. Unless these issues are addressed those objects will, for many, unless seen in special directed circumstances, remain as just objects - uninspiring, dull and lifeless. If we need to be reminded of this - we probably don't but if we did - we only have to look at some of the more creditable and successful "heritage" projects, in which the power of the context is overwhelming. People will queue, pay out large sums in gate money, and what's more, get involved in what they see: they stare in amazement, chatter in excitement, they have their pictures taken standing next to figures from the past and they marvel at the quality of the replicas ! Yes - I said replicas - but the obvious effect is that they feel as if they've had an interesting and exciting time - so they go home happy, tell their friends about it and so the

experience continues. The danger is, of course, that these same visitors will not have visited their local museum which might well be free and full of REAL things. This is what we continue to be up against. Therefore, whatever the subject area we choose to explore our galleries have to be engaging, provide an experience which people want, provide an environment in which people instinctively feel comfortable and one in which they can interact and almost become part of. If we can do this, there is a chance that visitors will remember the quality of the exhibition or gallery over and above the quality of the tearoom and toilets.

*The Roaring 20's*

So, be wacky, be challenging, be stimulating, but also be careful, be responsible and be aware. We have to continue to adapt to the world in which we live, actively respond to new opportunities (such as the availability of National Lottery money), respond to new challenges (such as Virginia Bottomley !), and continue to be relevant and then if we're very lucky the future of social history in museums and of this Group will be a long and happy one.

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## SHCG Research Project

Following the AGM of the Group in July, it was decided that SHCG would set up a National Research Project. A sum of money has remained untouched in the SHCG bank account for a number of years which was originally earmarked for one of the group's scheduled annual journals which was never produced. This is the money that has now been set aside to be ploughed into this research project. A working party was established to discuss this and has looked into the details. They then reported fully to the SHCG Committee. The next step is to invite comment from the whole of the SHCG membership. It is vital that the project is relevant

and worthwhile to members.

Set out below is a draft proposal that is intended to be sent to prospective researchers and research institutions. What do you think of it ? Please read and comment on this. Ring or write with your views, questions and comments, to: Tim Corum at Oldham Museum, Greaves Street, Oldham, OL1 1DN. Tel.: 0161 911 4657.

*Introduction*

The Social History Curators Group is a specialist group whose members represent the whole range of history provision in museums. Membership, which numbers around 450,



includes museums and curators from around the world. Through a series of seminars, an annual study weekend, a thrice yearly newsletter and an annual journal, the group promotes debate at the forefront of museum thinking. In order to further the kind of debate arising from its annual study weekends, SHCG has decided to seed fund a national research project culminating in a publication intended for the lasting benefit of its members and the wider museum profession. In addition, the group sees the need to fill a gap in the evaluative literature available to those working in the field of history curatorship.

SHCG expects this project to be a partnership between practising social history curators and one or a number of academic institutions which have a proven track record in the field of museological research. The group intends that the project will bring matching funding from the partner institution and that it will establish a close working relationship between the two.

## *Project Brief*

### *1 General Parameters*

- The project will involve SHCG members, probably via a nationwide survey
- The project will be of lasting benefit to social history curators whilst reflecting the full breadth of history provision in museums
- It will be a piece of original research
- It will be published in an accessible form

### *2 Aims of the Project*

Based on input from members at the SHCG AGM in July 1995, the committee has considered the following areas of interest and is seeking proposals for a suitable project based on these.

- a) An investigation of both museum visitor and non-visitor perceptions of the past - how do people learn about the past?; from where do they get their sense of history?; what are popular perceptions of history?

- (b) A survey of recent presentations of history in museums, heritage centres and associated sites.
- (c) An assessment of how well museums match public perceptions of history. How do museums rate alongside competitors? Why do some people go to heritage centres and not to museums?
- (d) A survey of existing data on the subject of evaluation, incorporating a set of practical guidelines on how to evaluate history provision in museums and how to measure success.
- (e) The project must include a set of recommendations or guidelines for future practice.

### *3 Funding*

- SHCG will fund the project to the value of £6000
- Matching funding is sought via the partner institution
- The total funds will pay for research expenses and a publication
- The publication will be made available at reasonable cost to SHCG members
- Income generated by sales of the publication will go to SHCG

### *4 Copyright*

SHCG will retain copyright of the publication. The form and length of the publication will be decided between partners.

### *5 Timetable*

The project is expected to take about one year and the results expected by the end of 1996. The project coordinator will be invited to present a progress report to a sub-committee at agreed intervals throughout the year and to make a presentation about the project to the wider membership at the 1996 Annual Study Weekend.

# The Seminar Section

## 1. FFFashion !

A review of the SHCG Fashion Works seminar held at Newcastle Discovery on May 9 1995, by Judith Fox from Hull City Museums.

The recent Fashion Works seminar provided not only a well needed memory jogger on the basic points of conservation and the storage of costume collections, but further, looked into the interpretation of costume from a social history perspective and debated the problems of contemporary collecting in the field of fashion.

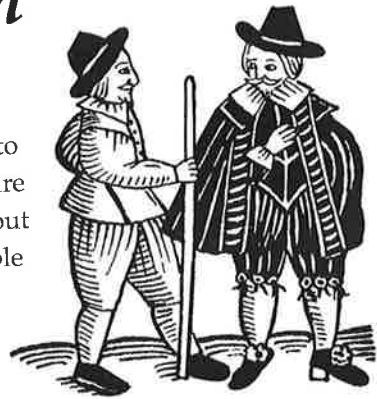
### The beetles

Alisdair Wilson, the Principal Keeper of History at Tyne and Wear Museums, opened the day. The morning was then given over to Caroline Rendell, the textile conservator, to do her thing - a hands-on guide to the care of costume collections: basic do's and don'ts and a beginners guide to bug-spotting, those tell-tale signs of moth or carpet beetle infestation. Such sessions are always welcome to re-motivate those of us who sometimes feel at our wits ends as to where to begin to solve the many problems involved in costume storage. I personally returned to Hull to order a whole new batch of archival quality storage materials: start as I mean to go on !

### Anti-Fashion

After lunch, Catherine Dingwall, the Curatorial Assistant of the Textile and Dress collection at the V & A, gave an academic, but very interesting lecture on their well publicised 'Street Style' exhibition. She looked into the ideas behind the exhibition on 'sub-cultural clothing', the 18 months of researching sub-cultural groups, the joining of dress and anthropology . . . Unfortunately, I got rather lost in the midst of all those post-modernist theorists' quotations, but at least the exhibition has not only widened their costume collection, it widened their visitor profile too. It proved anti-fashion to be just as important as high fashion, and the collection continues to be added to.

Problems were addressed on how to approach sub-culture academically without alienating the people themselves. Does displaying their dress in an institution such as a



museum (not to mention the V & A!) lessen the protests of these groups and absorb their dissent, as it is now appropriated by the fashion trade to sell clothes? Has sub-cultural dress lost its power to shock? Hmmm . . .

### Dundee Silk

The third speaker of the day was David Stockdale, Assistant Keeper of Human History at Dundee Art Galleries and Museums who sought to provide a social history approach to costume display on a scale more museums can relate to. Dundee's costume gallery which opened in 1991, has so far held two exhibitions; 'Hearts and Flowers', which looked at wedding clothes from around the world, and 'Pure Silk', a chance to display some of the collection's luxury silk items within a cross-cultural approach. David Stockdale emphasised how these exhibitions followed a social history rather than a fashion framework. 'Hearts and Flowers' viewed wedding clothes as just one example of wedding customs. The issues to be addressed in the exhibition were all chosen prior to the clothes.

### 'Fashion Works' works

Finally, Caroline Imlah, the Keeper of Costume and Textiles at Tyne and Wear Museums, showed us around their new costume gallery, 'Fashion Works'. Curators have chosen to use realistic mannequins and a whole host of gimmicks and gadgetry - from the 'macroscope', to touchy-feely swatches of fabric, pull out drawers for flat textiles, an activity area, poetry and two touch screen interactives. The whole gallery has not only a more 'happening' feel to it than most

costume galleries, but it is much more airy and has open space to walk around in. It was unfortunate that we had so little time to look around, as we tended to concentrate on how the items had been displayed, barely noticing the costume actually on view.

### *Sewing up*

The day rounded off with questions and answers about the problems involved in the collecting of contemporary costume and the action needed to be taken not to stereotype the people we try to represent. It was a very stimulating seminar. Many thanks to Hazel Edwards for organising the day.

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## **2. Other People's Seminars**

### *Must Everything Go?*

Issues of Collections Rationalisation and Disposal.

Organised by MPG. At Stoke City Museum on **Tuesday 7 November 1995**. Cost £15 for non-members which includes a sandwich lunch, tea and coffee. Contact Julia Marsh, V & A Museum, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL.

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### *Society of Museum Archaeologists*

Annual Conference 1995. Representing Archaeology in Museums. Museum of London **9 - 11 November 1995**. Please see enclosed flyer for full details.

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### *Opening Historic Buildings*

How to balance the needs of the public and conservation when opening historic buildings. Organised by the Museums Association. **Tuesday 21 November 1995**, Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London. Prices are £50 for MA members, £100 for non-members. For a booking form please contact Sam Evans or Sue Robinson on 0171 250 1836 at the Museums Association, 42 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0PA.

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### *Exploration Under Water*

This course traces deep and shallow water techniques from the nineteenth century, through to the raising of the Mary Rose. Organised by The Open Museum, National Maritime Museum, London, SE10 9NF. **Saturday 25**

**November 1995**, at the National Maritime Museum, London. Cost is £25. Please contact the Open Museum for details, tel.: 0181 312 6747.




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### *The Museum in Your Living Room*

Museums and the Broadcasting Media. The Leicester Department of Museum Studies Christmas lecture. **Friday 8 December 1995**, 12.15 - 4.50. 2nd Floor, Parkside

Lounge, Charles Wilson Building, Main Campus, University of Leicester.

Contact Janet Owen at the Dept. of Museum Studies.




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### *Carry on Collecting?*

Developing a Strategy for the future of collecting. The Fourth International Conference in Museum Studies, University of Leicester. **14 - 17 April 1996**. The conference is intended to be challenging, yet informal and inexpensive. If you would like a paper to be considered or would like to book a place, please contact Simon Knell & Kevin Moore, Dept. of Museum Studies, 105 Princess Road East. Leicester. Tel.: 0116 2523963, Email: SJK8@le.ac.uk

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### *Annual Conference of Sports Historians*

The growth of the study of sport history in Britain. **June 1 - 2 1996**. At the Arts and Humanities Department, De Montfort University, Gateway House, Leicester. Contact: Dr. Daryl Adair, Dept. of Historical Studies, De Montfort University, Leicester, LE1 9BH. Tel.: 0116 255 8385.

# Letters

## *We've gone green*

Dear Editor,

I read with interest Dan Hellier's article, 'Going Green' (SHCG No. 37). He highlighted a particularly exciting new role for museums, namely the Agenda 21 initiative.

Oldham, along with six other boroughs in the UK, have been involved in piloting a study into measuring sustainability indicators. Oldham Museum has been involved from the outset and has taken a strong lead in fashioning the outcome of the study, particularly with regard to finding an indicator of bio-diversity (number of ponds with amphibians). It has been an eye-opening, multi-disciplinary exercise, linking experts on health, crime, culture, education, housing, transport, energy, environmental health, wildlife and voluntary organisations, many of whom had not understood the holistic link between each other before.

All this has led to the creation of an Environmental Forum for Oldham, in which all these disciplines will be incorporated with the aim of giving concerned members of the public a stronger voice, whilst spreading the word of sustainability. The Museum will be strongly involved in this, providing expertise, not only on wildlife and 'green issues', but also on more obviously social indicators, such as crime.

Involvement of this sort not only provides a higher profile for the Museum, but also utilises the expertise of staff to provide a more directed contemporary role for the Museum.

The social and natural history staff at Oldham already work closely together, with a policy of producing integrated exhibitions, in order to show that the two fields are not mutually exclusive. Our contribution to developing the ideas of Agenda 21 in a museum context has provided a model to re-direct the social policy of the borough.

**Bruce Langridge**

*Museum Officer (Natural History)  
Oldham Museum*

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## *Feedback*

Dear Editor,

I enclose press releases and details of Armagh County Museum as suggested in issue 37 of SHCG News. I enjoyed the News very much, especially, 'Helen Clark and Chips' and the book review section.

I hope you can feature Armagh County Museum at some time!

**Catherine McCullough**

*Curator  
Armagh County Museum*

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## *Museum Studies Bursaries*

Dear Editor,

I wondered if any other SHCG members felt the same degree of disquiet as I over the decision of the Department of Education to cut all postgraduate museum studies bursaries to the courses at Leicester and Manchester? It would seem to me that this is a matter that has implications for the whole profession, rather than just being a squabble between the DoE and the universities. Moreover, it is yet another symptom of the deleterious effects that the market driven lunacy of the DoE is having on education in general.

Whilst the bursary scheme was far from ideal, the eleven bursaries Leicester (where I was a student) had in its gift represented a way into the museum profession for many people possessing good first degrees but not the financial resources to fund themselves through another year of study.

Although I am reliably informed that Leicester did all it could to block this action, Professor Pearce has perhaps somewhat muddied the water in stating that alternative sources of funding exist through bodies such as the European Social Fund (ESF), (quoted in

Museums Journal, May 1995). This to me seems rather a red herring, if I understand correctly, the ESF places both geographical and age constraints on its applicants, in a way the bursaries did not. Even if other funding bodies such as the British Academy feel able to fund Leicester students on occasions, they are hardly likely to provide anything like eleven bursaries a year.

Whilst recognising Leicester (and presumably Manchester) at present has more applicants willing to pay than there are places on the course, surely the issue is not simply one of quantity, but one of quality? Logic dictates that if a key determinant of a place at Leicester is the ability to raise £5,000, many very able people will be discouraged. Speaking from my own experiences of Leicester, of four outstanding British students in my year, at least three were on bursaries.

It should be recognised that as the museum profession professionalises itself primarily through the mechanism of university based postgraduate courses, the opportunities to enter the profession by other routes will vanish. If I may draw on Cathy Ross' recent article in 'Social History in Museums', where she states she came into the profession without a formal museum qualification, but with a doctorate. It is becoming less likely that this route would gain entrance to the profession in the 1990's. The reason for this is simple, professionalism instils homogeneity.

To return to my original point, I would suggest the removal of the bursaries can be seen as both classist and ageist. We are all aware that it is becoming more and more difficult for working class students to support themselves through their undergraduate studies. Most working class students contemplating postgraduate study simply do not have the financial confidence to take on further debts with 'career development loans', especially to gain entry to a low paid profession such as ours, even if they have a good chance of being able to repay this loan.

Age too plays a significant part, the older the student, the greater the likelihood of other commitments already in existence. It too should not be forgotten that bursaries offered a 'safety net' for students from more affluent backgrounds denied support by their families.

I suspect this move by DoE has implications for social historians in museums that it does not have for other sectors of the museum profession. At the risk of reinforcing stereo-types, I would claim that we, the SHCG represent the profession's radical and innovative cutting edge. We, more than any other professional grouping, appreciate the necessity of ensuring that museums are open to all, irrespective of class, gender or ethnicity.

*David Tucker*

*Curator of Trowbridge Museum*

- Editor's note: At the AGM of the SHCG in July, it was agreed that the group strongly protest about the withdrawal of bursaries for museum studies courses.

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## *Appeal*

Dear Editor,

I would like to ask the members of SHCG if they could provide me with information on the accessibility of museum photographic collections. I am currently researching my M.A. dissertation at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The subject of the dissertation is 'Making Museum Photographic Collections Accessible through Information Technology'.

*Jonathan Wilson*

*20B North Terrace, Claremont Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE2 4AD.*

# Double Bill

## 1. *The William Morris Centenary 1996*

### *Who was William Morris?*

Yes, there have been several people named William Morris but the one we are concerned with was born on 24 March 1834 and died on 3 October 1896. He was a poet, artist and storyteller, designer, socialist and prophet; he was an entrepreneur and founded Morris and Company to supply church and domestic furnishings. In this work he rediscovered the lost skills of many crafts e.g. dyeing with vegetable dyes; he learnt and then encouraged tapestry weaving and large scale embroidery; going back to the first printed books he revived printing and book design at the Kelmscott Press. Indeed, as far as the Arts and Crafts are concerned it was Ruskin who provided the theory and Morris the practical skills which generated a wide reaching movement which continues to this day.

Morris is often dismissed as a medievalist, but it was the Victorian medievalists such as Pugin (did you see the 1994 V & A exhibition?) and Morris who inspired a new vision in the face of the squalor and pollution of the nineteenth century. Morris put his ideas into 'News From Nowhere', a Utopian romance set in the distant future which is now an inspiration to Green socialists.

### *The William Morris Society*

This Society is based at Kelmscott House, 26 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, London W6 9TA. In 1996 it is the centenary of Morris's death, and the Society will be celebrating his life and work. A 1996 sub-committee has been at work for the last year with a particular plan in mind. The WMS Committee felt that they were not able to finance any large-scale exhibitions or events; it was therefore decided that - in addition to the normal programme of lectures and other activities - we would,

(a) find out what was being provided by others

and circulate a full calendar of all national and local events to the membership

(b) where appropriate, to either co-operate with other providers or to hook on events of our own e.g. offer lectures to accompany exhibitions; or just put up a stall to inform people about the Society and try and attract members.

In the event this strategy has produced results; there will be a large scale national exhibition at the V & A, and an associated exhibition on the crafts at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, which will tour. Libraries with large holdings of Kelmscott Press books such as the John Rylands Library, Manchester are thinking of exhibiting their collections. The William Morris Gallery at Walthamstow (Morris's birthplace) will be mounting an exhibition of domestic tiles, and there are plans for a map to accompany a London trail.

### *Can you put Morris on show in 1996?*

The William Morris Society would like to appeal to all curators - and particularly those outside London - to put their minds to the following theme: Morris on display in 1996.

What is in your collections already? Because of the multifarious nature of Morris's work you may have books, tiles, metalwork, stained glass or wall-paper in your museum or gallery. There may even be a woven textile hanging, acting as a room-divider somewhere. If you have Socialist archives from the nineteenth century there may be diaries recording a visit by Morris, or a local newspaper report of a speech.

All over the country there are examples of the work of Morris, some well-known, some almost forgotten. It may be that in a church near you William Morris is waiting to be noticed. Let us - literally or metaphorically - light a candle before every Morris or Morris Company window. Let every library with a collection of Kelmscott Press books put them on public view. Let any surviving domestic interiors with Morris

decoration or furnishings be open for one day at least. Let Morris's works, his poems and speeches be read or at least quoted in public.

There are, of course, Morris artefacts throughout the world: we have so far heard from Germany, but would be pleased to hear from any of you overseas if you have news of what is being done to commemorate Morris.

Please notify me if you have any plans or want further information or help: John Purkis, 41 Highworth Avenue, Cambridge CB4 2BQ. Tel.: 01223 574183. Fax: 01223 574184.

## *2. Lloyd Webber's Morris tapestries on display in the North East*

Four stunning Morris tapestries recently bought by world famous composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, have been kindly loaned to Tyne and Wear Museums for a whole year, and will be toured around the region starting at the Laing Art Gallery.

They are to appear in a new exhibition called,

'Knights - Chivalry, Romance, Legend'. The tapestries - all William Morris and Company Merton Abbey Tapestries from the 'Quest of the Holy Grail' Series - were designed by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, commissioned by George McCulloch and woven by Martin, Ellis, Tylor Merit and Keich in the late 1890's. They were made to hang in the large dining room at Stanmore Hall in Middlesex, the home of the Australian mining millionaire, William Knox D'Arcy.

At the time Morris wrote, "I have had a careful discussion with Mr. Burne-Jones . . . and after considering the spaces to be filled, the light in the room and other circumstances . . . the subject chosen is the Quest for the Sancgreal". In an interview for the Daily Chronicle at the time, Morris said about the making of the tapestry - 'The Attainment', that " . . . it occupied three persons for two years. The people who made it, and this is by far the most interesting thing about it, are boys, at least they're grown up by this time . . .".

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# *Danish Life and Bread*

**Margaret Sloan** visited the Arbejdermuseet - The Workers Museum - in Copenhagen recently and here she describes the trip.

On a visit to Copenhagen I found, near the centre of the city, The Worker's Museum housed in the former Worker's Meeting House built by the Workers' Movement in 1879; a museum firmly rooted in a place associated by Danes with the history of workers and the development of their social conditions.

The museum is on four floors, three of which cover definite historical periods. The top floor, entitled 'For Life and Bread - the first workers', depicts a workers' street in the 1870's when the move to the city and industrialisation was really

taking hold in Denmark; a grim story of poverty, deprivation, and loss of individual craft skills, as in other countries. The whole museum describes developments in the context of the movement of Danes from agriculture and the countryside to industry and the city, and here it contrasts the work of children on the farms with child labour in industrial workshops which continued for many years after it had been prohibited by an Act in 1873. The street scenarios show such a workshop with a child, the artisan with his tools, and a prostitute at a window. Part of the floor is cobbled over and made into a slope to give the feel of walking in the narrow space between the workshops and houses (also to permit wheelchair access).

### *A Family's History*

One floor down, the story of husband and wife, Peter Martin Sorensen and Karen Marie, is told. They were a couple who moved from the countryside to the city in search of work in the 1890's and lived in various small lodgings while Peter moved between jobs and their family grew. The story in particular is told because in 1990 the museum acquired the flat which they had moved into with six of their eight children in 1915 and which had been little changed until their surviving daughter moved out, aged 94 years, in 1990. First you see a mural depicting the agricultural area from which they came, and then scenarios showing the kind of simple lodging rooms they would have had, and a depiction of working families in a park where poorer families went for picnics when they had any time off from their 11 - 12 hour working day. Peter eventually went to work for a brewery and became a driver and later a salesman: this is used to portray work in a brewery at the time, and there is also a section on work at the harbour loading and unloading vessels. As well as objects, there are a number of mannequins with fairly rough hewn features which look reasonably realistic.

Finally you reach the darkly-decorated small sitting room and kitchen of the original flat; (the museum has had to make some adjustment to fit them in the space - and unfortunately there is no room to display the bedroom or the hall which comprised the rest of the apartment). The museum was grateful to obtain many of the original furnishings and possessions of the Sorensens' to exhibit in the flat. Following their parents death, three sisters lived in the flat, and the story of the last surviving sister, Yrsa, is told. After her own retirement she was able to take the bus and visit the Tivoli gardens; although she had never felt so wealthy as then, the lifetime habits of frugality remained and objects in the flat were rarely replaced or added to. (It would be interesting to see and contrast the wealthy middle class apartment to which the National Museum arranges limited access: built in the 1850's and decorated in the 1890's and also remaining unchanged).

### *The American Dream*

On the first floor, the exhibition is entitled, 'The American Dream' and looks at life in Denmark in the 1950's when change gathered pace, and the Marshall Fund helped speed revival but strengthened American influence in Europe. The text - always equally in Danish and English throughout the museum, and never more than a few paragraphs at each scenario - is here placed against an American flag. At the beginning of this floor is a small coffee counter with some adjoining tables where the visitor can buy coffee made with 'Rich' - chicory - to evoke the authentic taste of the period, before walking along a streetscene with small shop fronts showing the type of differentiation and goods before the spread of supermarkets. The arrival of prefabricated building in the 1950's meant a fast growth of new homes. There is also a room scene with television playing, and then an exhibition of washing equipment which is related to women working 'invisibly' at home and also 'invisibly' doing washing and domestic chores for others.

The 1950's display was the area of the museum which came closest to offering nostalgia, but the objects and display were put in the context of social change and the issues of the time such as growing recognition of women's equal rights, and that although unemployment benefit seemed fairly high in the early 1960's, there was a potential for benefit recipients to lose their electoral rights.

### *Working Life*

However, during this period of suburbanisation, women begin to feel isolated and want to go outside the home to work; raising and educating children is begun to be seen as 'society's work' and childcare begins to be organised. Working life is also depicted by a small office accompanied by a description of how people felt this to be 'secure employment' and that they were not 'workers' and so did not need to belong to unions. Offices were said to be characterised by neatness and formality; visitors would be struck by the changes in office of today. This floor also contains a wall of old



social democrat and worker newspapers which visitors were reading with interest.

**Splendour**

On the same floor as the 1950's and 1960's displays, the visitor can enter the impressive Workers' Assembly Hall with its massive landscape painting, balconies and decoration. Lenin once spoke here, and, restored to its original World War I splendour, this is the place for nostalgia.

**Beer and Tolerance**

A beer hall from the 1890's and a 'folk-kitchen' from the 1930's (often apparently attached to churches) also provide visitors, and organised groups with refreshments and keep to the general atmosphere of the museum.

The ground floor held a temporary exhibition about refugees in Denmark since the Second World War. Although it was mainly panel based, there were also objects made by refugees, for example from Iran and Vietnam, and also a scene



with bunks from a reception centre. The thrust of the exhibition was multi-cultural diversity and a plea for welcoming behaviour and tolerance towards different ways of life. This was woven in with how Danes living abroad for many years, retained a sense of national cultural identity - as would the refugees coming to Denmark.

**Workers first**

There were a number of school groups of varying ages visiting the museum, which was obviously being used to bring home points about Denmark's social history and industrialisation. This was not a museum overtly praising the achievements and landmarks of the Labour Movement, but a down-to-earth, object based, and even

homely museum about the small-scale lives of typical working people set in the social contexts of particular time periods. Through these displays the visitor learns about the development of Denmark and its people from an agricultural country through hard times to today's comparative prosperity.



**Exhibitions**

**1. Front Room:**

***A Caribbean Perspective***

Front Room was conceived by a group of Black people from Brent who wished to create an exhibition to celebrate recent local Black history in an accessible and thought provoking way. They decided to use the Front Room as a positive image to represent their families' achievements and aspirations as they settled in the area during the late 1960's.

The result is a reconstruction based upon the recollections of the group. The full-scale room set is not intended to be 'typical', rather it reflects personal memories held by members of the group of their own front rooms and those of

other families which they visited while growing up in the late 1960's and early 1970's. It is intended that the radiogram, bar and paraffin heater, three piece suite with anit-macassars, and seaside souvenirs will encourage visitors to compare and contrast the room with their own memories.



Museum

'Front Room' is on open display. Visitors are free to walk around, take a rest on the settee, even thumb through the family bible. Entrance to the front room is through a hall way where a Silver



Cross pram sits next to a London Transport coat and hat hanging from a peg. Also from the hall, visitors can look into a kitchen area with a breakfast bar and chair. A loop sound track of oral history memories from members of the group can be heard.

This exhibition was made and first appeared at the Grange Museum, Neasden. It is now available to tour.

Claudia Bigg

2. *Mementos of War*

To mark the end of the Second World War, the National Museums of Scotland have put together an innovative, new exhibition which uses personal war mementos from the Scottish public.

The display, held in the Scottish United Services Museum at Edinburgh Castle this autumn, includes personal items from the public connected with what they, or someone they knew, did during the war. The objects are associated with the Armed Forces, Merchant Navy, industry, munitions work, civil defence, refugees, evacuees, prisoners of war or civilians. Each person was offered a space in the exhibition to display their personal mementos. They wrote their own labels explaining the significance of the object, and made the display themselves. People who could not get to Edinburgh themselves to plan the displays were visited by museum staff, and transport was arranged for their objects to be picked up.

3. *Irish Traditional Furniture*

This summer saw a new display at Armagh County Museum, of traditional Irish furniture. An exhibition of photographs taken by Claudia Kinmonth which was used to illustrate her prize-winning book, 'Irish Country Furniture 1700 - 1950', accompanied the display. Collections on show included a dresser, table and kitchen fittings, as well as a selection of chairs and other wooden items.

With the decline in the rural population and shift away from the thatched cottage to the modern bungalow, there has been a change in the focal point of the dwelling - from the hearth towards the television. This has been accompanied by changes in the fixtures and fittings of the house as the modern replaces the spirit of a bygone age by portraying the furniture of the people.

*Exhibitions now on*

*A Soldier's Life*

Newcastle Discovery, Newcastle upon Tyne. A new permanent gallery. The social history of military history is displayed through themes rather than dates of battles. The centre piece of the exhibition revolves around two characters living through the First World War - a true story of an engaged couple.

*Sporting Life*

The Old Grammar School, Hull. Explores many aspects of sport including women in

sport, heroes and controversial issues.

*Great Benin*

Museum of Mankind, 6 Burlington Gardens, London W1X 2EX. Tel.: 071 636 1551 Art from West Africa. Until 10 December 1995.

*Object of the Month*

McLean Museum and Art Gallery, 15 Kelly Street, Greenock. Tel.: 01475 723741. Changing objects on show every month, from an Eagle to a 19th century Japanese Tea Set.

**Pure Silk**

McManus Galleries, Dundee. Tel.: 01382 432020 for further details.

An exhibition of historic and modern clothes and textiles. It concentrates on Scottish and British costume, and includes embroidered robes from imperial China, Japan and Morocco. A soundtrack tells the story of silk and there are examples of silk to touch.

**Poetic Land - Political Territory**

City Museum & Art Gallery, Bethesda Street, Hanley, Stoke on Trent. Contemporary art from Ireland, until 29 October 1995.

**Photographers' London: 1839 -1994**

Museum of London, London Wall, London. Tel.: 0171 600 3699

Until 31 December 1995, this new exhibition shows photographs of the capital, from the first daguerreotype taken by Monsieur de St Croix in 1839 to the most recent photographs produced during the 1990's. The work of over 100 photographers will be on display.

**Knights: Myth, Legend, Romance**

Laing Art Gallery, Higham Place, Newcastle  
A new show until 18 February 1996 which displays works of art based on the theme of knights. Loans from National museums, and the 'Quest of the Holy Grail' Morris tapestries will be on show.

**Rupert Bear Festival**

Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, London.  
Tel.: 0181 981 1711.

In celebration of the 75th Anniversary of Rupert Bear's first appearance in the Daily Express, an exhibition and events run until 7 January 1996. Discover the world of Nutwood, and meet Rupert and his chums: Bill Badger, Algy Pug and Pong-Ping.

**Breaking Away Display**

Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, London.  
Tel.: 0181 981 1711.

A new display about adolescence in the twentieth century. Through over 150 items, including

clothing, accessories, photos and ephemera, the display looks at young people at work, play and school.

**A North East Childhood**

Tyne and Wear Museums Touring exhibition, currently at South Shields Museum & Art Gallery until 14 January 1996. Tel.: 0191 232 6789.

This new exhibition tackles many aspects of childhood in the last 200 years in the North East. It confronts the social issues affecting children, giving a realistic, sometimes shocking, but very nostalgic perspective of life experiences in the past.

**Move It!**

Scottish Mining Museum. Lady Victoria Colliery, Newtongrange, Midlothian. Tel.: 0131 663 7519.

A new do-it-yourself problem solving models exhibition designed for schoolchildren, but also proving popular with adult visitors. Aims to show how mining machinery worked and works, in coal mines, with gears, pulleys, slopes and ropes.

**A Hundred Years of Rugby League**

Wakefield Museum, Wood Street, Wakefield. Tel.: 01924 305796

From November 25 1995 - January 28, 1996.  
See the ball with which Castleford's captain, Arthur Anderson, made the game's longest ever kick. Remember the rows over payments for players.

**Sixty Years On**

London Transport Museum, Covent Garden, London. Tel.: 0171 379 6344.

Sixty years after the design of London Transport's first poster by Tom Eckersley, the museum opens an exhibition exploring the history and use of design throughout the century.

**To feature in this section please send your press releases to the editor. Particularly welcome is exhibition information from smaller museums. Please send your newsletter, or just a brief note about forthcoming exhibitions, or a press release. That's all you have to do.**



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Photo: Newhaven Community History Group

## YOUR EXHIBITIONS

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Press releases, reviews, polemics, views, cartoons, photographs, book reviews, and correspondence are all very welcome. Please send to : Harriet Purkis, The Editor, SHCG News, Hampshire County Museums Service, Chilcomb House, Chilcomb Lane, Winchester, SO23 8RD.

#### *Next issue includes: ?*

All contributions gratefully received for possible inclusion

**DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE IS 30 JAN 1996**

