



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP



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**SHCG**

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**SOCIAL  
HISTORY**

**CURATORS  
GROUP**

# 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. Articles should be between 500 to 2,000 words. 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.

## *What we really, really want*

We want typed and double spaced articles. 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.

## *New News Editor*

It could be you ! Yes your opportunity to have a go at producing the News of the Social History Curators Group. Interested ? Get in touch with a member of the Committee, to discuss details. It's good fun, keeps you in touch with what's going on, and, it's a lot of work really. Go on, give us a ring if you think you'd like a go; or maybe share the job with someone else.

**Harriet Purkis**  
*Editor*

*Cover photo: Scottish Film Archive and Summerlee,  
'Behind the Screens' Exhibition.*

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# Derry Guns Controversy

*The 'Troubles' display at the Tower Museum, Derry: A reflection on museums, the media and automatic weapons.*

## *Troubled with comfort*

**L**eafing through a back issue of SHCG News (Issue 38, Winter 1995), I was intrigued by Alasdair Wilson's view that '...whatever the subject area we chose 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'. In the context of an exhibition dealing with the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' clearly not all of these criteria apply - certainly not visitor comfort with or interaction to the subject area! Mr Wilson continues, saying that we should '...be challenging, be stimulating, but also be careful, be responsible and be aware...continue to adapt to the world in which we live...and continue to be relevant...'. Although it would be fair to assume that this approach should be the norm, many museums choose to avoid contentious themes rather than apply considered professionalism. Recent experience, as a consequence of inequitable media reportage of an exhibit at the Tower Museum, illustrate some of the reasons behind such trepidation, although, I would argue, fail to justify typically negative and apostate positions adopted by many museums when it comes to interpreting sensitive subjects.

## *Blood, guns and poems*

The normally mundane world of Northern Irish museumdom briefly created media ripples during the winter. The attention to this sphere of social activity was drawn by the Times Ireland correspondent, Nicholas Watt, when he erroneously reported that the RUC was investigating the, 'display of (an) IRA rifle'

in a recently opened section of the Tower Museum. This most recent addition to 'The Story of Derry' exhibition is a three dimensional display chronicling the period 1965-1997 - the 'Troubles'. The display contains over 200 artefacts illustrating many of the seminal events of the period. Items on show include a bloodstained NICRA (Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association) banner which covered a victim of Bloody Sunday; mannequins dressed in UDA, RUC and British Army uniforms armed with the appropriate weaponry; original manuscripts of poems by IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands, and the much publicised depiction of an IRA man armed with a Kalashnikov rifle hovering over documents relating to the Peace Forum. This extension was part of the original plan for the museum, which opened in 1992. The delay came about simply as a consequence of the museum's difficulty in assembling an appropriately broad range of exhibits to ensure a fair and objective interpretation of these recent if not controversial events.

## *What's Watt*

**I**n his report Mr Watt mischievously invited comment from Conservative MP, Andrew Hunter, who criticised the exhibition by stating that it is '...perpetuating the propaganda of the IRA. It conceals the fact that the IRA is a minority within a minority that has murdered and maimed almost without apology. It is sick that anyone in authority can treat the security forces on the same level as the IRA and UDA.' Strong criticism from a person in authority who never actually visited the museum and certainly had no information at that time about the latest addition other than that furnished by the Times journalist.

## *Tait's Taste*

Curiously, the visit by Mr Watt followed the inclusion of the Tower Museum by the Museum Correspondent of the Times, Simon Tait, as one of his 'Ten of the Best Museums' in the UK in an article published on 14 December 1996. However this 'follow-up' was not based on that article. Rather, Mr Watt claimed that

he had heard that the Museum was planning an exhibition to mark the 25th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, one of the more notorious and contentious incidents of the 'Troubles'. While it runs against the professional grain of one working in a museum environment, I believe that it is fair comment to speculate that Mr Watt felt a degree of disappointment following his discovery that the Museum was not in fact planning the type of exhibition that would have possibly justified antipathetic media attention.

### *Silly Mid off*

**S**ubsequent reporting of the 'story' inevitably led to a Unionist/ Nationalist split of opinion regarding various aspects of the actual and conceptual background to such an exhibit. A local DUP Councillor echoed Mr Hunter's criticism while an SDLP representative described the affair as typical media 'silly season' material. It is an unfortunate fact that in Northern Ireland it is difficult to be seen as occupying the 'middle' ground. Criticism of this nature has a tendency to lead to subjective perceptions being made and the victims being labelled - green or orange.

### *A range of rifles*

**B**y coincidence, a previously agreed arrangement between the museum and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, which required the RUC to take temporary custody of three weapons in the display (an AK47, a British Army SLR and a Browning automatic pistol - none of which were used or donated by the IRA!), while documentation was upgraded, was carried through on 30 December. Unfortunately, this occurrence in proximity to the Times article, led to a plethora of reports in the days following, exacerbating local sensitivity to this issue and appearing to corroborate Mr Watt's claims.

## Missing horrors of the Tower Museum

A NUMBER of the tools of the terrorists' trade are missing from the Londonderry's Tower Museum exhibition.

Where are the bloodied, spiked baseball bats, iron bars and hurley sticks encrusted with hair and gore?

Essential items omitted are the list hanging from the combat jacket, assiduously gathered on their innocent unsuspecting victims, and the black binliner (perhaps the most cowardly and evil part of their kit).

No self-respecting terrorist is complete without his can of petrol, wrapped with explosives and shrapnel.

Seldom would I be in agreement with Gregory Campbell. On this occasion he is entirely right.

It is much too close to the events to attempt to display a somewhat incomplete exhibition which, in truth, is not history but current affairs.

I would appeal to the professionalism of the curators to drop the exhibition; allow time to elapse, so that this period in our history - a time of high ideals and low deeds - can be fully reflected in all its obscurity.

A.R.,

Co Antrim.



**Brutal act: Reconstruction of a baseball bat beating.**

Most were critical of the museum and several ignored Museum and RUC statements emphasising the routine nature of the arrangement. The use of emotive language such as 'seizure' 'snatched' and 'raid' to describe the co-operation between the police and municipal authorities further divided opinion and put the museum in an insidious and delicate position. It should be mentioned that the RUC were among the contributors to the exhibition, most notably the donation by the then retiring Chief Constable, Sir Hugh Annsley of his forage cap.

### *Mad bad media*

Despite the frenzied and inaccurate media attention, the display has been well received by the myriad range of visitors who have actually viewed it. The Tower Museum was awarded the Gulbenkian Irish Museum of the Year award 1993, the IBM UK Museum of the Year award 1994 and was specially commended by the Committee for the European Museum of the Year in 1994. The last praised Derry City Council, 'for the great courage of the local authority in attempting to use the museum as a bridge between political and religious factions in Northern Ireland, a function which it has fulfilled with conspicuous success'. The most recent display is an example of this, and it appears that informed opinion agrees. The display is testament to the museum's continuing policy of non-evasive and forthright interpretation of contentious historical episodes. History is a shared if not always pleasant experience. Honesty in dealing with it is a prerequisite to gaining an understanding of the lessons which the past, even the recent past, has to tell us. The Tower Museum offers an honest and uncompromising vessel for such exploration and extends an invitation to all and sundry to experience our history.



## *We'll carry on*

Tragically, the media, our main source of information and analysis of what is happening in the wider world, is not governed by the needs of veracity and accuracy: personal involvement in a 'media event' casts doubt on our entire perception of the world and society as we think we know it. Seamus McKinney of the Belfast Irish News wrote that, 'working on the basis that there is no such thing as bad publicity, maybe some politician could describe artefacts dating from the Siege of Derry (1688-9) as loyalist paramilitary weapons.' The humour of this can be lost in the

quagmire of Irish politics and perhaps Mr McKinney is sadly right. Nevertheless, museums have a responsibility to provide balanced but objective information albeit in inspiring contexts as expressed by Alisdair Wilson and as demanded by the late 20th century public. The Tower Museum will continue aspiring to inform in frank, uncompromising but yet stimulating fashion, irrespective of ill-informed opinions of, or generated by the media!

*Dermot Francis*  
Curator, Tower Museum, Derry



## *Super Highway Cruise Review*

**T**his SHCG seminar explored the new opportunities presented by the adoption of multi-media computer applications and the Internet within the museum environment. Carolyn Abel went along and here is her review.

### *Good Morning*

The morning session began with an introduction and welcome from Stephen Lowey of Yorkshire Museums Service. This session primarily focussed on the benefits of Information Technology (IT) and the practical experiences of those using multi-media applications in exhibitions.

In a review of the developing technologies, Mark Suggitt, St Albans Museums, emphasised the increased opportunities for physical and intellectual access now and in the future with the utilisation of IT. He highlighted many ways in which computers are currently being used in museums and galleries, for routine tasks such as information retrieval and creating art, like that displayed in the Cyburban Fantasies at the Croydon Clocktower. With reference to the Internet, he outlined the potential for

developing Virtual Shops and merchandising, enhanced communication and multi-layered interpretation, and the use of CDROM to produce digital versions of museum collections.

The limitations he raised related to the maintenance of these technologies and the fact that only one person at a time can manipulate a computer terminal. However, Mark stressed the uniqueness of museums and the experiences they offer, and concluded that museum staff need to develop the confidence to explore these innovative new approaches to interpretation, collections and audience development.

### *Multi-Mini-Manhattan-Museum*

Sally MacDonald, Croydon Museum Service, followed with a review of the permanent "Lifetimes" exhibition at Croydon Clocktower. After the initial market research, it was decided that a combination of multimedia and static display of objects would communicate the richness, depth, and sense of modernity required to successfully challenge the dusty image of museums. Moreover, it would provide the opportunity to portray a variety of ethnic, class and gender perceptions of Croydon from 1835 to the present.

Following the market research, attention turned to the collection, documentation and editing of oral histories and associated objects and concluded with the establishment of focus groups to test the computer appliances and ensure they worked. Throughout, Sally emphasised the exhaustive number of person hours required to build this social history context and urged curators to consider this and the costs before undertaking such a project. She warned curators not to use interactives for the sake of it and to ensure copyright arrangements with the designers and oral contributors were clear from the beginning to avoid subsequent legal wrangles.

### *It's Terminals*

**T**he final morning presentation was given by John Roles of Brighton Art Gallery and Museums, in which he reviewed his experiences in the development of "My Brighton". This community history programme used two multi-media terminals as an alternative approach to interpretation through the use of video, sound, photographs, text and computers. Through their intrinsic portability they were transferred to other venues and so accessible to more people. Like Sally before him, it was seen as a unique opportunity to generate links with the community, presenting a multiplicity of stories and viewpoints, and as a means of stimulating two way communication. Although the project was largely directed by John at the Museum, it was people from the community who collated the information and documented their own experiences of the town, thus avoiding the traditional portrayal of a seaside resort and its tourists. The touch screens used community guides to take visitors on excursions around the town viewing pictures taken by a cross-section of the community with disposable cameras. American Express sponsored the project from its Community Program and the £25,000 donated covered the whole project, including the hardware and software. John emphasised the fact that the sponsors did not impinge their own agenda, in fact giving more money to the museum when the project was shown to be a success. Evaluation showed the terminals were well used and there was a marked increase in visitor attendance, particularly among the groups C2, D and E, young people and previous non-visitors. The success of the project has been attributed to the incorporation of computers, the participation of the community, and word of mouth.

### *The Afternoon Show*

The afternoon session was given over to a more detailed discussion of the Internet, how it works and the opportunities it presents for museums. Ian Dolphin, lecturer in Curriculum Development at the University of Hull, emphasised the potential benefits of the Internet and multimedia in the provision of museum education. He advised museums to take advantage of the increasing number of schools that are networked. This could open the doors to a host of additional museums services. Access to collections and associated information could be provided through the Internet by way of digital representations, thus avoiding the need to handle archival or delicate material. In addition, schools could be given the opportunity to create their own exhibitions on the Internet and an extended dialogue with students could take place using electronic-mail (e-mail), though this could be time consuming.

Ian also highlighted the collaborative opportunities for museums and other educational institutions in terms of research, exhibitions and spreading the costs of leasing lines, obtaining equipment and staff time and expertise. Moreover, it could open up new sources of European funding through programs such as SOCRATES and LEONARDO with their focus on producing an "Information Society".

### *Get Netted*

**A** glossary introduction to the Internet was given by Tony Gill of the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, with brief and useful descriptions of some of the mystifying terminology associated with the Net. Although it would have been more useful if it had preceded Ian Dolphin's discussion, it again served to highlight the opportunities for providing physical and intellectual access and entertainment on a local and global scale. The strong collaborative potentialities and most tantalisingly, the potential it presents for marketing and raising revenue through ventures like those mentioned by Mark Suggitt and Ian Dolphin, were also reviewed. One important point was the fact that the costs and difficulties involved in transferring this data are reducing everyday. For example, Hampshire Museums Service has put MODES object records onto the World Wide Web.



## *MDA cards do it on-line*

**D**avid Dawson, Regional Outreach Manager for the Museums Documentation Association, reviewed the Aquarelle project. Briefly, it is an international consortium funded by Europe, concerned with the development of access to cultural heritage over the Internet. As stated on the Aquarelle web site, the main objective is to 'develop a resource discovery system for the cultural heritage information available in archive and folder databases'. It aims to provide access to this material through hypertext navigation and retrieval, thus creating an Information Superhighway. The emphasis is on sharing information and developing multi-layered information retrieval, querying and browsing systems using agreed data standards and terminology from a variety of cultural sources. The MDA intends to hold workshops on the Internet and multi-media.

### *What we learnt*

The morning session was a useful exercise in making clear the difficulties and intricacies of developing

multi-media exhibitions. The opportunities for developing closer links with the community and the fact that the projects can still be concept rather than technology led, should surely be a welcoming enticement to develop similar projects. Although the afternoon session was also useful in clarifying and de-mystifying the Internet and related jargon, a short practical exercise in designing a web page would have been an excellent way to demonstrate the ease with which such technologies can be applied. The overwhelming message that came from the session was that museums cannot afford to ignore these new technological developments. Such technologies are not going to disappear and if museums fail to acknowledge and utilise them, then great opportunities for audience and collection development, as well as revenue raising may well be lost. The costs of such ventures can be overcome with imaginative sponsorship and building upon collaborative tendencies within and without the museums world.

Carolyn Abel

## *Stuff, Glorious Stuff*

### *A review of a Travelling Exhibition on the Co-op - 'A Happier World of Better Stuff'.*

'**Museum faces Closure**' ran the headline as I walked up to Bury Museum last year; which rather distracted me from the purpose of my visit this time, which was to look at the exhibition of Co-operative material entitled, 'A Happier World of Better Stuff'. The exhibition is one of a dying breed, a travelling exhibition actually put on by an Area Museum Council, yes, the North West Museum Service actually

still does 'things' - rather than give money to other people to do them. It seems Bury Museum has survived and it is the travelling exhibition arm of the AMC which is for the chop. Asked to find a 4% cut by the MGC, the accountants were brought into the Area Service and concluded that travelling exhibitions were not economically viable, along with the design, technical and transport backup which touring exhibitions need.

### *Stop the Lot*

The North West Area Service therefore follows the other AMCs around the country in stopping this service. It seems that our political masters have



decided that using public money to subsidise exhibitions which can be provided by commercial organisations, is anti-competitive, and must stop. Next stop will probably be conservation services which can also be provided by private concerns. This should be precipitating a rather interesting debate on the function of AMCs, a debate which unfortunately does not seem to be taking place within the member museums of the AMCs.

### *It's history*

At a time when museums are increasingly hard pressed for resources, many rely on touring exhibitions to fill a gap in their programme, merely to allow them to do something else for a change -

is a market for touring exhibitions - but how many of these are social history based? It is often felt that social history is very specific to a particular place, with a need to be relevant to the local community, so how feasible is a touring social history exhibition?

### *Co-operation*

**T**he Co-operative movement is an obvious candidate for such an exhibition, as an 'organisation' which covered most of the country in some form. The idea for the exhibition came from Jim Garretts, Assistant Curator at Bury Art Gallery and Museum, a museum with a very good collection of co-operative material and a museum which is now actively



am I the only curator who feels pangs of nostalgia when they actually accession an object? There are other options, such as the South Bank Centre with their Fine Art exhibitions and the exhibitions supplement of the Museums Journal shows that there

collecting to fill gaps in this collection. This collection contains material of both a local and national level and it made sense for Jim to curate the exhibition for the Area Service, while Alan Robinson at the Area Service designed, produced and paid for the show. Initially,



the exhibition was intended for a North West audience, but in an effort to increase revenue for the Area Service, it was offered nationally.

## *A 'Divi' near you*

The benefits of designing an exhibition from the outset as a touring exhibition are obvious and Jim chose the themes and objects for the show with one eye very firmly on the fact that it should be of interest to those outside the Bury area - in essence Bury was merely an example of a town comprising a number of different co-operative societies, which people in their locality would be able to relate to on the 'Oh, I remember, we had one like that' level. This is actually made clear in the text, that Bury has been used as an example of a typical northern town, but that a similar story could be told for your town. Looking at the booking schedule for the exhibition, it seems to have been successful in this respect: Southend, Barrow-in-Furness, Darlington, and the Summerlee Heritage Centre near Glasgow.

## *Just in cases*

**A**t a more practical level, the choice of objects was made partially with a view to how they would stand up to life on the road. Given that the exhibition was always intended to travel, one of the first things you notice is that it is crammed full of 'stuff'; there are over 250 objects in 8 display cases. The most frequent request from the Area Service has been for object based exhibitions, and this is by far the most 'object heavy' one produced. The cases themselves were actually designed and made specifically for the Co-op material. The objects range from a mangle and desk to collar studs and hand drawn advertising posters. Each case has a theme such as, 'A Store for all Reasons' and 'Desbeau of Desborough', a case devoted to 'foundation ware' and all designed to be seen from both sides.

The themes concentrate on the shopping and production side of the Co-op story, rather than the political/ welfare, insurance/ banking, Womens' Co-operative Guild side of things, although these are touched upon. Indeed, one of the ways in which the exhibition succeeds is that it wets the appetite; on several occasions I was left feeling rather frustrated that I couldn't find out any more about a specific aspect of the Co-op, which I think shows that the exhibition has successfully engaged me, so that I now want to find out more.

## *Nostalgia in the 21st century*

**T**he exhibition does have lots of 'stuff', looks good and, listening to people's comments as they walked around it was clear they enjoyed it: "I've got one of those", "I remember that", "It makes me feel old", "A real exercise in nostalgia". Ooops, that's a naughty word, isn't it? Surely the purpose of our exhibitions is not merely to make people feel nostalgic for the good old days, we should be displaying more thought-provoking, challenging topics - or should we? A question often skirted around is do we give the people what they want, or what we think they should want? Whatever our own views on the purpose of exhibitions, it is clear that we have to ask different questions if an exhibition is set to tour and be seen by many different communities as opposed to one specific target group in our museum area. As AMC's pull out of the touring exhibition market, it seems likely that an exhibition of over 200 objects on a theme which many communities can relate to, is set to become something museum curators in the 21st century can look back on with...nostalgia?

*Nigel Wright*

*Curator, Astley Hall Museum and Art Gallery*

# Knotty Railway Connection

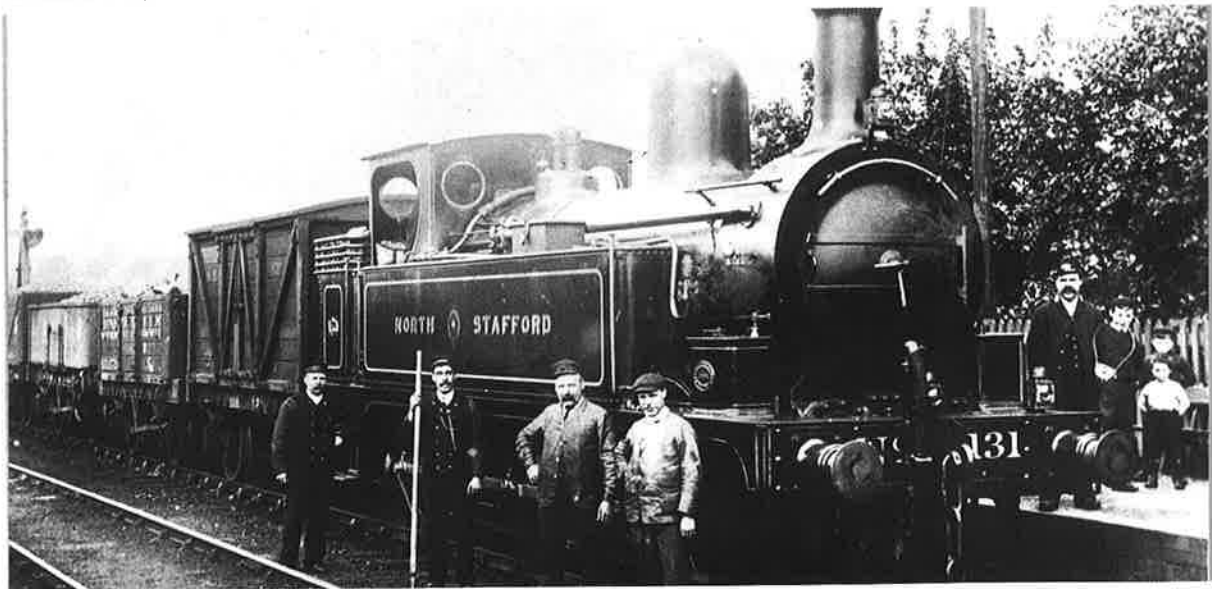


*Celebrating 150 years  
of the North Staffordshire  
Railway, Janet Dugdale Stoked up  
the steam engines.*

## Anorak Angst

Last year was the Year of Trainspotting for me. While organising 'The Knotty Connection' an exhibition to celebrate 150 years of the North Staffordshire Railway

locomotives, uniforms and stationery and soon became a focus for the exhibition. The Railway was known locally as 'The Knotty'. The NSR existed until the end of 1922 when it was amalgamated to form the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS). The exhibition concentrated on the period from 1846, when Acts of Parliament were passed allowing the Railway to be built, to the end of 1922. A brief section looked at the days of LMS, British Railways and contemporary issues surrounding railways in the area. The exhibition's title was intended to reflect



I did not meet anyone who actually talked about collecting train numbers. Is this a secret activity, hidden deep in anorak pockets, I wonder? The jokes ran round the museum, but so far no one has bought me an anorak or a notebook.

## Why Knot ?

Why 'The Knotty Connection'? Well, the North Staffordshire Railway Company (NSR) used the Staffordshire Knot on its coat of arms. The Knot was a symbol for the Company and appeared on its

locomotives, uniforms and stationery and soon became a focus for the exhibition. The Railway was known locally as 'The Knotty'. The NSR existed until the end of 1922 when it was amalgamated to form the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS). The exhibition concentrated on the period from 1846, when Acts of Parliament were passed allowing the Railway to be built, to the end of 1922. A brief section looked at the days of LMS, British Railways and contemporary issues surrounding railways in the area. The exhibition's title was intended to reflect

## Fellow Travellers

I formed a steering group to research the exhibition. The group met every 2 months during the lead up to the show. The graphic designer, marketing and education officers were involved from the start and were invited to attend steering group meetings. The group was made up of a local railway historian and collector, representatives from the 2 local railway

societies, 4 model makers and 2 members of the North Staffordshire Railway Association (NSRA).

The NSRA was originally for people who had worked on the Knotty and now has a membership of their relatives and other interested railway enthusiasts. A few Knotty nonagenarians still attend their annual luncheon. At one get together, I talked to them about the exhibition and met people who were willing to lend items as well as 3 men who had worked for the NSR. All in their 90's, they agreed to be interviewed. The oral history recordings provided useful information about the years leading up to the amalgamation in 1922.

### *PRISM purchase*

The steering group and the NSRA provided a mass of contacts for the exhibition and its associated events programme. The local press took an early interest and encouraged people with collections to contact us. We bought an NSR poster which advertised trips to Blackpool (with the aid of a grant from the PRISM Fund). The purchase provided positive publicity and also a link with national railway collectors. In the end, over 50 people lent objects for the show and a further 100 became involved in the events programme. Working with such a large number of people is stimulating and having a steering group of ideas people was vital. Railways and their histories are specialist subjects and as a social historian, I realised that my technical knowledge was extremely limited. From the beginning I admitted this to anyone who became involved in organising the show.

### *Tom Beddow opens the Show*

The exhibition opened with 1,500 objects in 2 galleries. Tom Beddow opened the show. Tom is a former Knotty worker who had allowed me to record his memories of starting work as a locomotive cleaner during the First World War. During his working life, he went on to become a fireman and finally a driver. Each progression took many years as he explained that railway workers were always waiting for dead men's shoes. At the opening, Stoke and Moorlands Youth Brass Bands played familiar tunes, a cake decorated with the NSR coat of arms was cut and a model railway steamed round the Museum. A celebratory atmosphere was truly created. The exhibition was full of objects: postcards, tickets, uniforms, badges, signalling equipment, model locos, station and signal box name boards, photographs, hand lamps, whistles, passes, booklets, union cards, rule books, commemorative plates, chairs, tables, leaded windows and personal items.

The main topics of the exhibition were indicated by designs based on station signs. The railway theme was completed by calling the galleries 'Platform 1' and 'Platform 2', and by using signs directing visitors to the exhibition saying, 'This Way to the Trains'. There were over 30 events to support the exhibition.

### *Hands-on history*

The history of the NSR, the people who had built it, worked on its locomotives and in its offices and used its lines was interpreted in many ways. 9 highly illustrated graphic panels, extracts from oral testimonies playing directly from five themed tapes and a 15 minute video, helped to introduce the main story. There were various participatory activities linked to the objects on display: 'Have a go - blow a whistle' (next to a small case containing guard's whistles); a stereoscope (with mounted laser copies of original 1860's Alton Towers views); a big Brio train set in the middle of one gallery; copies of 19 century timetables (near a case containing originals; 'Design Your Own Knotty poster, as well as books for all ages. All were well used, we had to keep the poster blanks replenished, sharpen pencils and reinforce the stereoscope. The wooden whistles did not enjoy the same success because one visitor felt that they were a health hazard. So the noisy bit of the Show had to go! A large working model of Stoke Station failed its safety test, and so became a static exhibit. A plan to include 2 carriage wheels and their axle had to be dropped due to weight restrictions - the idea had been to include an interactive on wheel tapping. Visitors were able to rest on platform and waiting room benches.

### *On the right track ?*

The evaluation of the exhibition was mainly done through self completion questionnaires. We feel that we made a potentially specialist subject interesting to a wider audience by providing things to do and different topics to explore. The response we received was positive. Generally people had enjoyed reminiscing about the local railway lines and participating in activities for themselves and with their children and grandchildren. This was a community show because so many people from outside the museum got involved in its organisation. It's hard work coordinating so many ideas, people and objects. If anyone would like a list of comments from the questionnaire or a copy of the events leaflet, do get in touch. Trains can be fascinating and fun - I don't think I could have said that a year ago.

*Janet Dugdale*

# Out of Isolation

*Museums and Social Services join together.*

## *All together now*

Soho House Community Museum in Handsworth, Birmingham, was the venue for a seminar called, 'Out of Isolation - Asian Women's Cultural Heritage as a Means of Self Expression and Healing'. The seminar, a joint venture between Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and the the City Council's Department of Social Services, brought together artists, doctors, museum professionals, social workers and Asian women. It marked a significant step in the development of a project set up in the Museum and Art Gallery to encourage Asian women to develop their traditional embroidery skills using the Museum as a resource.

## *Inspiration walls*

**T**he project started in 1992 with a group of women meeting regularly in Aston Hall, a Jacobean mansion in the heart of Birmingham's inner city - now one of Birmingham's community museums. The elaborate decoration in the Hall was the inspiration for the women's embroidery work. The women have contributed to various activities since the project began, particularly the Nehru Gallery National Textiles project co-ordinated by the Victoria and Albert Museum. They have visited schools and colleges to demonstrate their skills, and also participated in exhibitions at venues throughout the city.

## *Outreach and Access*

4 years on and the project continues to grow, the most interesting development being the work with colleagues in the field of community mental health. Some of these activities are now being funded by

the Department of Social Services. Workshops now take place within the Museum itself, and also in various community and mental health venues. The purpose of the seminar was to demonstrate the important link between accessibility to culture and creativity, and people's health and well being. It drew attention to the dilemma within the mental health

service on how best to treat Asian women suffering from the modern day illnesses of depression, loneliness and stress. Women who have been prescribed tranquillisers by their doctors explained how they have come off the drugs after participating in the workshops. The stories were very moving and demonstrated the importance of putting people in touch with their creativity and the valuable contribution the Museum is making in its role of outreach and access.



## *Social craft work*

In this project, art is touching the lives of women in a very unique way. They are looking at Birmingham's cultural heritage as a way to explore their heritage as Asian women. The embroidery skills are the vehicle for bringing the experiences together. Focusing on the craft is helping to awaken and nourish inner resources and thus providing a basis for good health. The Department of Social Services see the project as offering further scope for development which could include members participating in further education, supporting employment and even the establishment of a co-operative.

*Eleanor Viegas. Community Museums Development Officer  
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery*

## Remembering and Forgetting

*Below, Gaynor Kavanagh invites SHCG members to contribute to a new academic research project.*

### *Start by taking three spaces*

**S**heldon Annis (1987) described the museum visit as a movement through three overlapping spaces: cognitive, pragmatic (social) and dream. The first two of these lie at the centre of educational work in museums. Learning through cognitive facilitation, arrived at through careful manipulation of the museum space in the light of knowledge about a museum subject and the needs of audiences, and the acceptance of the social nature of the visit are at the root of effective museum provision. Annis' third category 'dream space' is the most difficult to pin down and near impossible to interfere with, situated as it is in the rich inner life of all of us. It is within the dream space, at times interacting within the cognitive and the social, that the most enlivening, enjoyable and possibly subversive parts of the visit lies. It energises both our imaginations and our memories. Anarchic and unpredictable as it is, through dream space we can arrive at all sorts of possibilities not considered by those who make museum exhibitions. In accepting Annis' idea of the dream space, we have to accept more fully the roles of the imagination, emotions, senses, and memories. This may mean being more encouraging to affective as well as cognitive experiences, even seeing them as more instrumental in the quality and effects of a visit, then straight knowledge gain. This has been one of several starting points to my work on memory within history museums.

### *Then take some memories*

As an historian, my interests lie within the creation of the integrated archive, which is at the heart of good history museum provision, by which I mean a judicious balance between objects, accurate

testimony, photographic and documentary evidence. These together, provide the formal historic record from which all other museum activities spring. But I am equally interested in memory in relation to the visit, and the informal and often long lasting learning opportunities enabled when personal memories are prompted and shared within a visiting group or in the mind of the single visitor. My position rests on the acceptance that oral history in museum work is about product, about finding and taking memory and using it to a specific end. In contrast, working with memory and reminiscence is different; it is about process. Enablement and the production of a sense of well-being is its aim; in other words, it is not so much about taking as about giving. The two may well fuse in many situations, but need to be fairly well distinguished in the minds of those who work in these areas.

### *Mix to make a memory space*

My work also moves into other areas where it seems to me that memory is important. I am conscious of how the different ways in which museums collect and record information can lead to archives of great quality with which much is possible, or alternatively to terrific absences, through which much is forgotten and little beyond the superficial is attainable. In these ways, museums at the most basic level of museum activities enable remembering and forgetting. This has had tremendous impact on what can be achieved. The recent example of the exhibition 'Lifetimes' in Croydon stands as a useful marker of good practice.

### *Then mix again, socially*

I have also been looking outside museums, to the considerable range of activities taking place in social and individual care. Through contact with different forms of therapeutic practice, I am aware of how much creative activity is now taking place which draws on memories. Aimed at healing and resolution, there is a good number of imaginative and engaging therapeutic approaches which have some element of museum relevance within them. I am also aware

## REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING

of the various forms of reminiscence work being conducted, especially with the older adult and with people in institutionalised situations. These have different purposes, dependent on the individual and their circumstances, but can often (although not always) have significant benefits for both remembrancer and carer.

### The book

Quite clearly memory potentially threads its way through much if not all aspects of history museum practice, from acquisition through to outreach. A greater understanding of memory and its effects on all of us must be a way of contributing to improvement in provision. I am now writing a book which has the provisional title of 'Remembering and Forgetting in Museums: Working with Memory'. I am drawing together a range of ideas about the nature of memory, both individual and social, the power and role of forgetting, and building of memory during different life stages.

### And you

History curators were at one time berated with the charge that they had moved too far away from objects and were moving dangerously close to social work (Tucker 1993). My view is that history museums need



a sensitive and informed understanding about the individual and the role of memory at different life stages. This is not an optional extra, but something that has to lie at the centre. Without it, histories are disconnected from life experience. I have seen too many chilling museum 'histories', nicely academic or suitable professional, but devoid of the fundamental task of asking people - what do you remember, what was it like, how did you feel, what did it mean to you?

**I**n my work I am drawing on a wide range of case studies and would like to hear from SHCG members working in any of the following areas, of course I undertake to acknowledge fully any help received:

*Collecting where the memory/ story behind the object has been important.*

*Efforts made to trace memory/ story behind an object within established collections.*

*Oral history programmes which have brought to light transmitted memories over more than one generation, or unexpected memories.*

*Studies of memory and remembering, say in terms of effectiveness of new galleries or educational programmes, or the results of comments books.*

*Reminiscence work, which may have been done for its own sake or with another purpose, for example, briefing for a new gallery.*

*Cross-generational work, either formal or informal, with other agencies or not.*

*The use of oral history in the National Curriculum and within formal and informal learning situations.*

*Liaison with other organisations and agencies.*

*Anything else which strikes you to be relevant to the study, comments are always very welcome.*

I would be particularly interested in some of your best and worst experiences of all of this. I appreciate that these are often very difficult areas in which to work, and in this, very little can teach like experience itself. Any of the worst experiences I am happy to make anonymous through changing names, if needed! It's proving to be an interesting journey, and there is still a very long way to go.

But my motivation lies in the conviction that museums are as much places for the emotions as for the mind, and are as much about remembering as about forgetting. Any help in this would be gratefully received.

#### References

- Annis, S. (1987) 'The museum as a staging ground for symbolic action' *Museum*, 151, 168-71  
Tucker, D. (1993) 'A traditional view or radical re-think', *SHCG News*, Summer, 6-8

## In Berlin

*A review of the International Committee of Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History Annual Conference in Berlin, October 1996.*

these with particular frisson as I am working in a county which may face this. Division had resulted in duplication of many museums and their services, so re-unification brought the opportunity to examine all aspects of the museum service, to re-display, re-interpret and re-write. Dr. Hans-Martin Hinz described the problems of re-unifying museums as



**B**erlin was an ideal city in which to meet and talk about the threats and opportunities for museums after the end of the Cold War. We met at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, in former East Germany, where architecture is a mixture of Prussian, Muscovite and building site. The conference was opened by Frau Professor Dr. Rita Sussmuth, the president of the Bundestag (just one sign of the support given to museums by national and local government).

### *Doing some History revision*

The first morning focused on the museums and collections of Germany. We heard horror stories of museums and collections split and rejoined. I heard

far greater than the problems of re-interpreting collections when the ideology changed. For example, staff were paid at different rates, depending on which pre-unification museum they worked in. It was, however, noticeable that few of the speakers were from the East; we did not hear how it felt to have to revise one's understanding of history virtually overnight.

### *World Wide Spread*

During the afternoon, the view widened, with speakers from Lithuania, Poland, Kenya and South Africa. In Eastern Europe, the opportunities to re-examine the theoretical frameworks of history were much the same as they had been for East Germans, but without the economic support.



For example, Rachel Kostanian of the State Jewish Museum in Vilnius, Lithuania, spoke of the opportunity to rebuild a collection which has twice been scattered, and of the problems caused by her near complete lack of resources. A paper by Dr. Mohammed Isahkia of the National Museums of Kenya looked at the museums of the Third World. The ending of the Cold War has seen a shift for some

## Re-visiting Museums

We visited several museums. We began with a visit to the 'Topography of Terror', and archaeological site museum - on the excavations of the Gestapo, SS, and Reich Security main office. The harrowing exhibition is very 'book on the wall'. It prompted discussions on the nature of truth: Some felt that 'the truth' of how many were murdered was not presented, others that 'the truth' of 'how come people can do that?' was not presented. We saw the German-Russian museum, which has revised its displays from celebrating individual heroes of the Second World War, to looking at German-Russian military and non-military relations in general. Interestingly, one of the old displays has been preserved. I got the impression that having history torn from under their feet before, they know the value of 'the real object' for telling the story of the past.

## Camp coffee

After lunch we visited a concentration camp. We went to Saschenhausen. This was a surreal visit, which ended in conversations about museums and reconciliation which took place in a hut with coffee and cakes. Next, during a tour through Cecilienhof Castle, there was some very heated discussion about what Stalin did, or did not say at the Potsdam Conference. We ended in the Dutch quarter of Potsdam and ate dinner in a house built for Dutch engineers who had dug canals in the 1700's.

*Papers from this conference will be published in English.*

*Patricia Reynolds  
Keeper of Social History, Buckinghamshire County Museum*



countries in both a reduction of funding and also a change in ideology as big as that in former Eastern Europe. Gordon Metz spoke of recent developments in South Africa, taking reconciliation as his main theme.

# The Pinboard

## Wakefield City Trail

Wakefield Museums Service announces the arrival of a pocket sized booklet with photos, info and pictures about the history of Wakefield City Centre. The guide will help you rediscover the historic buildings and streets of Wakefield city centre. If you want coverage like this about new booklets and exhibitions that you do, put SHCG NEWS on your press release mailing list tomorrow.

## Things

There's a new journal out called 'things'. It is about the history of design. If you want to read about such things as Modern Mermaids, swimming things in the 1930's, Disney things, Football things, and the history of the 20th century chair, look no further than 'things'. Write to PO Box 10632, London SW3 4ZF. Tel: 0171 352 6322

## North West Social History Group

This regional Social History Group is flourishing. Meetings for 1997 include: 11 November, Interpretation of Controversial Issues at Blackburn Museum. For more information why not contact Emma Chaplin at the Dock Museum, Barrow, Tel.: 01229 870871.

## Salutations!

An 18th century Inn sign which used to hang outside the Salutation Inn, one of Doncaster's oldest pubs, is once again on public view in the museum. It was purchased by Doncaster Museum and Art Gallery with support from the MGC/ V&A Purchase Grant Fund. The Fund will have a vote of £1 million for 1997/8. Why not ring Fund staff on 0171 938 9642 for further information or to discuss potential purchases of Social History Objects. It could be you.

## Table

Sewerby Hall Museum and Art Gallery (Registration No. 601) near Bridlington in East Yorkshire require a Victorian leafed dining table and chairs on long term loan for display purposes in a recently refurbished panelled room. Please contact Nial Adams on 01262 677874 if you think you can help. They can arrange transportation. Beam it up.

## Four Medical Matters

The London Museums of Health and Medicine has produced an excellent new leaflet detailing medical museums in London. Please contact the group at the Old Operating Theatre Museum on 0171 955 4791.

A Medical Museums Terminology Group has formed. Anyone who may be able to assist with guidance on sources, particularly of termlists for obsolete medical terminology, or who may be documenting a relevant collection is welcome to join. Contact Caroline Reed at the Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, London SE1 7JN. Tel: 0171 735 9141 ext. 354.

There is a series of History of Medicine day schools planned by the University of Leeds School of Continuing Education in association with the Thackray Medical Museum at St James Hospital, Leeds. To find out more contact 0113 233 3220.



The Historical Medical Equipment Society has formed. It is chaired by Mr John Kirkup, FRCS. All details can be obtained from The Secretary, 77 Carmarthen Avenue, Portsmouth PO6 2AG. e-mail 101767.2756@compuserve.com

## *The History Man*

Raphael Samuel, historian, died on December 9 1996. He dedicated his academic life to the social history of ordinary people and places. From the 1960's he established the History Workshop Journal. Most recently, in 1994, he published the book 'Theatres of Memory', which was controversial to some, in it's view of 'heritage'.



## *The Heritage Man*

The Rt Hon Chris Smith, MP, has been appointed Secretary of State of National Heritage. Chris told SHCG NEWS, " I am delighted to come to DNH;

I hugely enjoyed my time as Shadow Heritage Secretary. The job carries some heavy and important responsibilities, and I look forward to the challenges ahead. The work of this Department is all about the quality of the nation's life: the way we enjoy ourselves; our sense of identity as a community. It will be a powerhouse of energy and ideas for the new government and a source of some of the most radical and innovative things that we will want to do as a government. I relish the opportunities that this post offers." Well, good luck with the new job.

## *New SHCG Committee*

A new committee was elected at the 1997 AGM of the group in Liverpool in July. Their names are listed on the next page.

The retiring committee members are thanked for their work in the past years. Thanks go to Liz Carnegie, Maggie Appleton, Jane Whittaker and Sally Coleman.

# SHCG Committee 1997-98

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Catherine Nisbet (Kettering Museum)  
Vicky Wood (High Wycombe Museums)  
Stephen Lowy ( East Yorkshire Museums)  
Andrew Mackay (Norfolk Museums)

Press releases, reviews, polemics, views, cartoons,  
photographs, book reviews, and correspondence are all  
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