

APRIL 2000

ISSUE 46



**Exhibiting
Homosexuality**

**Contemporary
Collecting**

SHCG NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP



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.

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

Articles for the NEWS should be between 500 to 2000 words. Please submit a typed copy of your article along with a copy on disk, saved as a PC word file or richtext format, or you can send it as an email. Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

Nicola is happy to discuss any ideas for articles and answer all queries.

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Cover photo:
**'Pride & Prejudice:
Lesbian and Gay London'**
- part of the 'Capital Concerns'
series of temporary exhibitions at
the Museum of London debating
contemporary issues.
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Millennium Collecting

Collections which reflect the life and work of the local community are one of the defining aspects of museums of social history. Curators have always endeavoured to promote greater understanding of the communities which they represent, but in the past it has been the museum professional who has normally chosen what to collect. In addition, the way in which material culture from our past makes its way into museums has not always meant that collections represent all aspects of the community.

As we enter the new millennium, more and more museums are adding another dimension to their interpretation of the communities which they serve, by asking the communities themselves to choose how their lives should be represented and with what. However this outward looking approach is only the start of a difficult process of ensuring total inclusivity.

In this issue of SHCG News, curators leading contemporary collecting projects at Tyne and Wear Museums and at the Museum of London, explain the different approaches they have adopted in order to facilitate their local communities in the task of representing themselves as they would like to be perceived rather than through the curator's interpretation. In a separate project the Museum of London, used extensive consultation with the community to develop an exhibition exploring the issue of homosexuality, a subject which is very relevant in today's society but which was not well represented in the museum's collection.

NICOLA BLEASBY - EDITOR

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31st AUGUST 2000**

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ASW 2000: 13th-16th July

at University College,
London

This year's Annual Study Weekend returns to basics with a look at work.

The decline in traditional manufacturing industries, the impact of modern technologies, flexible working hours and new legislation have all had a radical impact on working lives in the last fifty years, but what are museums doing to collect and interpret these changes? The ASW promises some stimulating debates & practical workshops on what we can do...

SPEAKERS WILL INCLUDE:

- **PROFESSOR ERIC HOPKINS**
University of Birmingham,
on Life at Work in the
20th Century
- **GABY PORTER**
on museums' current
presentation of work
- **ANNE GREEN**
Institute of Employment Research,
on the Future of Work
- **JAVIER PEZ**
Museum of Reading,
on their new Huntley
and Palmers gallery

- **MARTIN ROUTLEDGE**
Sunderland Museum
and Art Gallery,
on women & work in
Sunderland

There will also be workshops on collecting work through oral history, photography and material culture.

Evening receptions will be held at the Museum of London, with an address by Dr. Simon Thurley, and at the Museum and Library of Freemasonry to include a tour of Freemasons Hall.

Sunday offers the traditional opportunity for members to share experiences of projects they have been involved with over the past year and will include papers on contemporary collecting, and a museum exchange project with Namibia.

For further information contact:

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Museum of Memories receives writers' commendation

Opie's Museum of Memories - the newly opened attraction at Wigan Pier has won a top tourism Oscar. At an award ceremony at the Savoy, London on the 14th November 1999, Elizabeth Bates, Wigan Pier Manager collected the British Guild of Travel Writers 'Highly Commended' second place prize in the 'Best New Tourist Attraction 1999' category.

"The award is recognition for the quality of the experience and the importance of the attraction", Elizabeth Bates said.

"The awards are ranked highly among those within the tourism industry because they are voted for by people who know and appreciate the business best - travel writers."

Opie's Museum of Memories was considered worthy of a nomination

because of its original content, educational strengths and commitment, community importance and its environmentally sensitive development.

"We are all pleased with the impact that the attraction has had since opening last May", said Bates. "The public are enthralled and excited by the Museum and now, having gained the praise of the travel writers, we are hoping to show off this special place to even more visitors".

Other nominations within this category went to the Museum of Scotland and the Earth Centre, Doncaster which won the top award - the Silver Unicorn.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Association of Industrial Archaeology Conference 2000 The University of Manchester Hulme Hall, 8th-14th September 2000

Threading its way through Manchester and Salford is a linear site of such importance in the development of Britain as an industrial country that it is one of the sites chosen by the UK Government as a candidate for World Heritage Site status. The basis of the submission is that Manchester is the archetypal city of the industrial revolution. The city witnessed the creation of Britain's first industrial 'true' canal, Britain's first mainline intercity passenger railway and the country's first industrial suburb based on steam power.

'Manchester the archetypal city of the Industrial Revolution' is therefore the natural choice for the theme of this year's Association of Industrial Archaeology conference. It will explore

the role, importance and development of the industrial city, industrialisation across the region and the claim to the title of 'Cottonopolis'.

The World Heritage Site, which extends from Salford through to Manchester, is linked by the Bridgewater and Rochdale canals. Key elements include Worsley Delph, a system of underground canals, which at their peak totalled 46 miles; the Castlefield canal basin with its warehouses which became a model for canal basins across the country; the oldest passenger railway station and custom-built railway warehouse in the world; a wonderful landscape of soaring railway viaducts; and Ancoats, famous for its unique grouping of early and late cotton mills.

The programme will also explore the wider region including:

- Mills in Bolton, Oldham, Rochdale and New Mills
- Portland Canal Basin at the junction of the Ashton and Peak Forest canals and Park Bridge industrial complex, Tameside
- Manchester warehouses
- The only surviving hydraulic pump house of its kind in Manchester
- The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester
- Salt works, salt mine and the salt town of Northwich
- Cheesden, the forgotten valley
- Queen Street and Helmshore Mills
- Wet Earth Colliery
- Quarry Bank Mill, Styal

**For further information contact:
The Conference Secretary, 62 Marley Road, Rye, Sussex TN31 7BD**



shcg.org.uk

SHCG goes online

A website is now an almost ubiquitous communication tool for most organisations. So it was a logical proposition for SHCG to consider how it could present itself on the web, and one which was warmly received at the Group's 1999 AGM in Belfast. Many ideas were generated about how the site might be developed as a resource for the Group, which included providing an electronic index of past journal articles, online SHCG News issues, a noticeboard and discussion list.

shcg.org.uk has now been registered as the Group's domain name and the site currently acts as a point of contact for SHCG and a place to go for information about current and future activities. You can use the site's multi-purpose print-off form to book seminar places, to join SHCG or to renew membership and committee post holders have individual email addresses through which they can be contacted directly.

To create the website, we collaborated with a team of three students from the University of Leicester's Department of Museum Studies. The current site was entirely designed by them as part of an IT module on their MA course. Here Josephine Jacobs, Ruth Coates and Helen Whitcombe reflect on the whole process...

Studying Museum Studies at Leicester University had been an exciting and fast paced experience, but this was our biggest challenge yet! When we acquired the brief for this project, we had very little knowledge of the technical processes involved in web design. It has been a steep learning curve for all of us, with pitfalls, hysterics and the odd triumphant moment.

Many of the initial ideas for the site proved to be unsuitable for this medium and our abilities, but we had a preliminary site developed for the SHCG Committee Meeting held on the 24th January 2000. We received quite a bit of feedback on our ideas and settled on a design layout that met the approval of the committee. The site features the new improved SHCG logo and a colour scheme that complements SHCG - simple yet dynamic.

It was agreed that the site should include a multi-purpose booking form, email addresses and links to other useful sites. We have also included photographs of SHCG members at Group events and photographs that illustrate the many aspects of social history in museums, showing the diverse possibilities of this discipline. This is very important, as the site is text heavy, due to the amount of information it was necessary to include.

There were many problems in producing the site, but we overcame the obstacles and moved on to produce a quality site. Despite high tensions and the occasional disagreement within the team, we pulled together, with each of us contributing something different and equally valuable to the finished product. The combination of our collective expertise has created something that we can be proud of and can include in our professional portfolios. Working with SHCG has provided us with an opportunity to broaden our technical abilities as well as our networking and interactive skills with the profession that we will be entering in the near future.

We have created a resource for SHCG that launches the group and their activities further into the public domain. The foundations we have laid have now been handed over to you, with the hope that the site can be a continuing success.

To discuss the project further, please contact:

Eleanor Moore
at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester.

Comments on the site to:
webadministrator@shcg.org.uk



SHCG MATTERS

Web Challenge

Do you have access to a networked computer, basic IT skills (Microsoft FrontPage) and the enthusiasm to develop the brand new SHCG website? If so, the SHCG committee would like to hear from you.

It is hoped that a new committee post of web-administrator will be created at the next AGM, but in the meantime, we would like to co-opt a willing volunteer onto the committee to ensure that the potential of this new resource continues to be developed.

If you would like to take on the challenge of being the new SHCG web-administrator, contact Eleanor Moore at webadministrator@shcg.org.uk

Millennium Collecting

Contemporary collecting for the new millennium

Creating community links, the focus of the last issue of SHCG News, highlighted the fact that now, more than ever, museums are willing to prioritise and explore this objective. New, effective ways of promoting awareness and dialogue about the potential of cultural resources, museums and collections are encouraged.

As a result, we are witnessing initiatives all over the country which are devoted not only to taking resources out to the community but which invite people in - into museum stores, discussion forums and many areas traditionally guarded as the domain of the curator. The creation of community links was once regarded as a necessary duty of the outreach department but today, such relationships are being re-evaluated. The potential rewards of their creation - and sustenance - has become a goal from which the whole museum can benefit.

Gillian Findlay from Tyne & Wear Museums and Rachel Reynolds from the Museum of London share their experiences of working on projects that aim to collect from their museum's local community in order to represent life as it is at the turn of the millennium.

Collecting 2000

Rachel Reynolds

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In October 1999 the Museum of London embarked on a major contemporary collecting project - *Collecting 2000*. The idea is to invite London groups, clubs and societies to select and donate to the Museum of London one item, object, image or recording that, for them, summarises who they are at the start of the twenty-first century. The objects will be exhibited from September 2000 at the Museum and are being accessioned into the permanent collection as a snapshot of London enthusiasms in the year 2000. Each donation has to be accompanied with a statement from the group explaining why the object is meaningful to them.

The project developed out of two areas of the Museum of London's existing activity: contemporary collecting and

community work, both of which have been central to the Museum's development in the 1990s. *Collecting 2000* is designed to bring together the two different approaches that inform these activities, in particular the process-driven character of community work and the 'product-driven' character of curatorial collecting.

Collecting 2000 is not alone. There are several other similar projects around the UK, most of which are also funded by the Millennium Festival Fund. The Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service is running two collecting projects, *Our Sense of Place* for 2-D material and *Millennium Collection* for 3-D material which are seen as 'a focal point of community celebration' (Leicestershire County Council: 1999). *Making History: Your Story, Your Lifetime* at the Discovery Museum in Newcastle is collecting from individuals, as is Anglesey County Council Museum (Oriell Ynys Mon) for *A Thousand Things* (Neri: 2000) and the Manx Museum for *Summer 2000 (Right Here, Right Now)*. *Telling Tales* in Rochdale is an intergenerational oral and video history project based on the theme of celebration.

“The habit of forming voluntary associations for every sort of social purpose is widely spread and deeply rooted in this country. Quite naturally in Britain when a man has a new enthusiasm, he buys a twopenny notebook, prints ‘Minute Book’ carefully on the first page, calls together some of his friends under the name of a Committee - and behold a new voluntary society is launched” - A.F.C. BOURDILLON, SOCIOLOGIST, 1945

In all these projects the emphasis is on people telling their own stories. Some museums are approaching groups, others individuals; some have asked for recordings or objects that represent the place that they come from, others for things that are from their personal lives. A further difference is whether museums choose to have items on loan or as a permanent donation, either way a record is kept of the objects donated. These are not only projects for people now but the hope is that they will be of interest for generations to come. All projects stress an interest in the ordinary and everyday. Museums want to capture the spirit of the people not the people's idea of what they believe museums want to know and represent.

The Museum of London wanted permanent donations for *Collecting 2000*. Various institutions keep written records on London life but only museums keep objects as a primary source for study. We wanted to reinforce this, and to make our permanent collections better able to reflect the diversity of London today. Why did we choose to collect from groups rather than individuals? We felt that the presence of clubs and societies in cities is an aspect of urban life that

deserves greater scrutiny by historians. Also, by collecting from groups rather than individuals the project would reach a greater number of Londoners: some of our groups have memberships running into thousands. Furthermore, the project reflects the current mood in the public sector of supporting and celebrating community spirit.

It could be said that museums embarking on millennium collecting projects are only jumping on a bandwagon because of funding opportunities. However, another way of looking at it is that we are simply doing our job as social history curators and for once we are lucky enough to have a designated fund to help achieve our aims. *Collecting 2000* and the other projects of this type all aim to underline the potential of museums to be socially inclusive, something which is high on the current political agenda.

Of course being socially inclusive involves approaching white, middle-class groups as well as the drug-user support groups and ethnic women's centres. Problems have arisen at both ends of the spectrum. London's traditional gentlemen's clubs are by nature exclusive and we found many reticent and

reluctant to take part, with some exceptions. The City of London Club was very forthcoming in donating a picture to the project. However the Chairman was anxious to remain anonymous and insisted that his name not be mentioned in the exhibition. This is the first time that the issue of protecting an individual's personal identity has arisen in connection with *Collecting 2000*. Generally, most people are keen to be identified as part of their group and eager to make their thoughts and beliefs more widely known.

We have had some difficulty in encouraging ethnic minority groups to donate an object and are currently tackling this through a number of ways: liaising with community leaders to enlist their support; visiting community and cultural centres to speak directly to groups; inviting people to come to the Museum for a tour behind the scenes, handling sessions and discussion about the value and meaning of objects. Why are we not making headway with these ethnic minority groups? Perhaps museums are seen as alien, irrelevant or both. If so we hope that taking part in *Collecting 2000* will help change perceptions of museums. It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation. Unless we can encourage ethnic minority groups to take part we won't have their material culture in our collection in order to make displays representative and relevant. By contrast campaigning groups, such as the Pedestrian's Association, are quick to see



Some of the objects donated to 'Collecting 2000' by local community groups

the potential for promoting their causes through donating an object: in the Pedestrians' case, the object is a shoe. The local history societies and archaeology groups, both of whom are familiar with museum activities, have also been keen to take part.

One of the project's aims is to reflect London's diversity. So far we have achieved diversity in the type of groups taking part, ranging from The Girls' Brigade to the Simon Community, a charity that works with homeless in Central London. We are also attracting a diversity of objects, although some similarities are inevitably starting to appear. What do the London Gay Men's Chorus and the Society of Antiquaries have in common? They both chose to donate their web-sites to *Collecting 2000* as they felt that this most accurately represented them at the start of the twenty-first century. When I approached the Society of Antiquaries, founded in 1707, I expected them to donate something that represented their longevity and scholarly tradition. The Society however, wanted to shake off their fusty image by donating their web-site. By allowing groups to choose for themselves we bypass the problem of curatorial bias and preconceptions.

Curatorial bias and preconceptions do creep in at the stage of selecting groups of course. Our aim is to collect 1,000 objects from 1,000 groups. How do we select our thousand groups? We are dividing our target into thirds. I will select 350, concentrating on groups with a pan-London remit, and/or historical importance. A further 350 will be selected by local borough representatives - London's MPs, Millennium Officers and Racial Equality Units - thus ensuring a geographical spread across London's 32 boroughs. Finally, the last third will come, we hope, through self-selection, with groups contacting the Museum as a result of media coverage. We hope we end up with an even geographic, demographic and special interest spread, one that roughly reflects the composition of London's population and the standard categories of groups identified by the Charity Association.

Although curatorial bias can be minimised, the objects chosen by the groups will of course be biased towards presenting a positive image of their own work and beliefs. This in our view does not really matter. Nor does it matter how 'odd' the object chosen is. *Collecting 2000's* first donation was a cow horn from Stepping Stones Farm, a community farm

from Stepney. Their first ever cow, Louise, had died in July 1999 and the farm wanted the Museum to preserve a memory of her. The Museum has never collected a cow horn before and it is admittedly not a typical museum object. It is the sort of thing that would normally be relegated to the status of 'curiosity' in a museum context. However, by collecting it we are at least attempting to do justice to the emotional side of people's lives, and it is, after all, the insight into the enthusiasms and emotions of Londoners that is the value of this project.

Certain objects donated so far are more traditionally 'valuable' and fit more easily into our existing collections. The 'Starburst' millennium party dress designed by Jasper Conran for Debenhams donated by the Museum's own Friends of Fashion is a valuable addition to the contemporary clothing collection. The 3-D cityscape by Jiro Osuga, an artist already represented in the collection, donated by the London Arts Cafe makes an equally valuable contribution to the Department of Paintings, Prints and Drawings.

Collecting 2000 raises the issue of how the public regard museums and respond to them. Although curatorial outlooks have changed in recent decades, the same does not automatically apply to the public and in fact the outmoded view that museum objects have to be rare, precious or historical persist. A lot of my work has thus been communicating to the public the idea that the modern and the everyday are valuable, and that museums are interested in collecting and recording them. After the initial confusion, people have responded enthusiastically to the idea that they can donate a T-shirt printed with their club logo, or a teapot.

They like the idea that their material culture is being 'legitimised' and valued. When asked what they found worthwhile about the project, groups have responded with things like: 'The recognition', 'The importance of showing who and what we are at a critical moment in time', and 'It's good to be part of a larger project and share ideas across London'.

One of the most accessible ways that I have found of explaining the project to groups has been to describe the project as a type of time capsule. Time capsules are part of public consciousness. Marks & Spencer's were selling them as Christmas presents last year, in January Now magazine ran a four-page spread entitled 'Mission Millennium' about the things that four leading soap stars chose to put into their own personal time capsules: among their choices were a mobile phone, make-up, a tube ticket, and trainers - ordinary, everyday objects. People seem to understand the concept of placing items that are significant to them in time capsules, and conceptualising the project in this way has worked well for us.

Our attempt to marry the process-driven approach of community work and the product-driven approach to contemporary collecting has not always been easy. Thinking ahead to the exhibition, I already have concerns over the amount of 2-D material being donated - visually not so exciting - but often don't feel it is appropriate to ask the group to think of something else. On the whole the stronger focus for us at present is still the 'process' - liaising with groups and helping them to create their own identity through objects. Our 'product' though is still important. Once the project is complete there will be a full

evaluation of the 'intellectual capital' of the objects that we are passing down to posterity. We hope that posterity will find them fascinating. But perhaps they won't. Perhaps the objects and the surrounding information on the groups, will never be of great significance. What will be of interest about *Collecting 2000* might just be the fact that the Museum of London and others chose to engage in this sort of work. Encapsulators can never control how their time capsules will be decoded. It is not the time capsule itself but the "intellectual and social manoeuvring" involved in creating it that is significant. (Durrans: 1993)

So, for now, the process is the most important thing and we believe that the project is one that our collaborating groups enjoy and benefit from. According to the DCMS the end point in the social inclusion journey, after access and audience development, is that museums become agents of social change. Grand aims indeed. Through *Collecting 2000*, the Museum of London is at least actively engaging members of the community in their heritage, and, hopefully, helping them muse on their place in the world now and the ways in which the future will remember them: an activity that might indeed result in social change.

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Millennium Festival Information

Making History: Your story, your lifetime

This article has been written as an introduction to the background and aims of 'Making History', a creative collecting project which is currently underway at Tyne & Wear Museums. Over the next year, two further updates will discuss more specific issues encountered whilst working with the community.

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Tyne & Wear Museums (TWM) has a long standing commitment to facilitating community-orientated activities and has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to a workable access policy which really '...puts people at the centre of museums'. In recent years, the public have been invited behind the scenes to choose their favourite artworks and objects for display, have provided personal interpretation on these items and have been encouraged to develop their creative skills in designing and producing their own material for exhibition. The identity and value of our local

communities have been recognised in temporary and permanent galleries, such as Newcastle Discovery Museum's *Great City!*, and it is from this background that plans were made by the History Department as early as 1998 for a new project. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund as a Millennium Festival Fund Project, it was called: *The People's Museums for the Millennium*. Its broad objective, as summarised in the original bid, was straightforward:

"At the turn of the Millennium this project puts people in touch with their regional cultural resources and promotes a sense of history, the future and local identity. It encourages participation in a celebration of our history and culture and in the creation of new and representative collections for the forthcoming Millennium."

Of the three Millennium programmes which are now underway at TWM, two come under this umbrella title of *The People's Museums for the Millennium*. Both *Making History* and *Objects of Desire* have a region wide remit and as a condition of funding, some £130,000, are required to meet four key criteria. All of these involve encouraging interest and lifelong learning, enabling access and improving understanding of our local heritage.

The focus for *Objects of Desire* is the involvement of local groups and individuals in the use and curation of existing collections. Various schools,

community groups, societies and members of the public have been invited to select their favourite item from the stores which will form part of a touring exhibition later this year.

Making History differs from this project in several ways. Primarily, it is a creative, contemporary collecting project which depends upon individuals to plan, develop and create the collections of the future. In so doing, it addresses an area where the History Department is increasingly proactive; contemporary collecting. What is so exciting about this project is that it also presents a real opportunity for people of different ages, cultures, abilities and religions from across Tyne and Wear to get involved at every stage of the collecting process to create a unique Millennium Collection which truly represents their stories and their lifetimes.

During the winter of 1999 and into 2000, 200 individuals are being invited to think of five significant events, people, or moments in their lives. They are then being asked to select five items of their own which they feel are representative of these and to donate them to TWM. The items they choose could be personal possessions or everyday things. They may not even be objects at all, but the images, sounds, thoughts or ideas that have shaped their experiences. And because the donors are being asked to give an explanation of why each one is important to them, the 1000 items that make up the new collection should all have a full, unique and very personal provenance. This testimony is regarded as being just as important as the item itself and in the future will be valuable as a source of information about individual lives and objects, reducing the need for subjective interpretation by various

curators. The objects in this collection really will be able to speak for themselves.

The active collecting of contemporary material and testimony is not new. Nor is the idea of engaging with local people or communities to properly represent their history. What is interesting is the convergence of a number of factors which have prompted this project to happen now, which prioritise issues of representation, inclusion and accountability and which ultimately gives *Making History* the impetus to succeed.

The coming of the year 2000, with all its symbolic importance, has provided the perfect moment for investigating ways to promote a sense of history and local identity. We are, after all, taking advantage of a time when many people are already reflecting on their lives, past and future, in a more profound way than perhaps they ever have before. To engage people in the positive creation of a new collection now, is a logical ambition. The word 'positive' is chosen specifically because *Making History* aims to propagate a more meaningful and considered process of donation than the norm. It wants to challenge the perception that museums are suitable repositories for attic clearances and instead, imbue each of the donors with some sense of the importance of their actions. It is not by chance that we refer to 200 participants of *Making History* and have the sub-title 'Your story, your lifetime'. Without individual participation, commitment, time, enthusiasm and donations, this project would collapse.

Another motivating factor is that *Making History* is being conducted at a time when, as means of assessing accessibility



©TYNE AND WEAR MUSEUMS

Gillian Findlay with Tyne and Wear resident Grigor McLelland and the objects he has donated to 'Making History'

for their community, many museums are considering exactly who their collections are for, whose history they represent and to what extent today's visitors can relate to them. Extensive research was undertaken at the outset of this project into the condition and extent of TWM's current history collections. It has been established that some donor groups are under-represented and that the majority of contemporary items are being collected through the processes of curatorial donation or purchase. One of the key aims of the project is to redress this imbalance whilst at the same time bearing in mind that what the participants want to give does not always coincide with what the curators want to collect! To counter this, creative collecting strategies and alternative methods of public involvement with TWM are constantly being explored. It is essential that nobody and nothing is overtly rejected.

A great deal of research and planning has also gone into compiling strategies for fair participant recruitment, for sustaining the relationships which are being made and

for productive final outputs. The most amount of time and attention however, is being devoted to finding participants and to ensuring that at least one or two individuals from all the communities and peoples that TWM represents are included.

People of all ages, sexualities, religions, cultures and abilities are being featured in *Making History* because we are aiming not simply for demographic representation, but for the involvement of individuals whose stories can truly reflect the diversity of our society in Tyne and Wear at the start of the 21st century. To this end, forty participants are being asked from each of the districts of Newcastle, Gateshead, Sunderland, North Tyneside and South Tyneside and their ages (hopefully!) will span 100 years. Because the project aims to be as inclusive as possible we are pursuing a policy of actively targeting museum non-users, individuals from under-represented donor groups and people who may otherwise feel excluded. These specifically targeted individuals account

for approximately half of the 200 intended participants. The others are being identified through established routes and contact groups.

An important objective of *Making History* is that it should remain as simple and accessible as possible and so a very personal, but labour and time intensive, approach is favoured, where the issues are explained and discussed with each participant individually. Only two single A4 sheets of explanation are distributed where appropriate - an individual project summary and a set of guidance notes, written to aid the participants with their object selection. Some are unsure of what museum collections are, others have questions about the condition or size of the items that can be donated and it is hoped that these notes will help to avoid major concerns or misunderstanding. They also allow us to explain the extent to which we can collect material in a more creative format.

For example, an oral history interview with a man who has worked at Swan Hunter Shipbuilders for 40 years will count as 1 of his 5 items for donation. If someone wants to include the Tyne Bridge in their selection, it can be videoed or photographed and a record will be produced of their accompanying story. Sounds, poems, music can be taped, landscapes can be captured on various media and we can even - in theory - capture smell! The point is that we will go to great lengths to secure anything for the collection which is important to the individual.

Participant involvement continues to be crucial even after the initial stage of the project is completed. For example, the most tangible output we will have is a fully documented contemporary

collection of 1000 items - created by the 200 *Making History* participants. They will also be asked to have an input into the design and production of an illustrated catalogue or commemorative record of the project. The exact format of this will be the decision of those who choose to get involved. They will also be asked for their views and design ideas for a possible touring exhibition of the new collection for the year 2001 or beyond and this in turn could initiate further collecting, exhibition and community work.

Making History also intends to inform TWM's existing contemporary collecting policy - perhaps instigating some sort of 'designated donor' scheme where individuals continue to donate, and update their testimonies, over a period of years. It wants to explore ways in which outreach, education and curatorial processes can further interact to the benefit of all and the project will be evaluated as a potential model for future social inclusion work.

With so many exciting avenues for *Making History* to follow, it is encouraging to be able to report that response to the project so far has been overwhelmingly positive and personal. Recently, participants between the ages of 13 - 92 years old have begun to select their items for donation. These are various and unpredictable and often represent the minutiae of individual lives, ranging from running shoes, photographs, bus tickets - the number X10 to be precise! - to apprenticeship papers, a prayer mat and paper weight. Over the next twelve months, we hope that this initial enthusiasm will be translated into continued effort and that the people of Tyne & Wear will go on to create a substantial Millennium Collection.



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Visitors completing the electronic questionnaire within the 'Pride & Prejudice' exhibition

Exhibiting Homosexuality

'Pride & Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay London' at the Museum of London

Until recently, museums have shied away from tackling homosexuality, partly due to Section 28 prohibiting local authorities from promoting homosexuality.

But with a change of government bringing a change of climate, and a new commitment to repeal Section 28, the Museum of London decided to fulfil its aim of attracting young adult Londoners by producing an exhibition on a subject relevant to a large section of that population.

Nikola Burdon,
Curator of 'Pride & Prejudice',
Museum of London

The exhibition *Pride & Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay London* ran from July 2nd 1999, for six weeks, at the Museum of London. It examined the history of homosexual culture in London and the thriving lesbian and gay scene that exists in London today. Exhibiting homosexuality brings with it many challenges: it is a sensitive subject for many people, which by its nature involves confronting sexuality. Additionally, there is the more practical problem of finding and deciding what to exhibit when there is no existing object based collection to draw from.

Pride & Prejudice was part of a *Capital Concerns* series of temporary exhibitions at the Museum of London debating contemporary issues. It was one of the first exhibitions in any of England's major museums to focus on lesbian and gay life, and the first attempting to acknowledge the long history of homosexuality in

London. Over 300 years of lesbian and gay history were covered, exploring themes such as homosexuality and the law, the history of Pride, and gay and lesbian dress codes. Objects on display included an anti-homosexual ballad from 1707 (loaned from the Guildhall Library), memoirs and prints of Charlotte Charke (an 18th century lesbian), Bette Bourne's Russian crown (made and worn in 1978 for the Bloolips company's production of *Lust in Space*), a Kenric ring (a symbol of one of the first lesbian groups), and contemporary paintings and ceramics by gay and lesbian artists.

Two major aspects of the exhibition were an oral history section which enabled visitors to listen to the experiences of gay and lesbian Londoners from the 1950s to the present day, and an electronic questionnaire which gave visitors the opportunity to express their opinions on both the exhibition and homosexual issues.



The panel of speakers during the public debate 'What now for lesbian and gay London?' held at the Museum of London

From the outset, a major aim of the project was to involve as many organisations and people as possible in order to produce a balanced exhibition reflecting the wealth of gay life in London. The Museum of London had very few objects or ephemera relating to gay life or history within its collections, so time had to be spent developing contacts and researching in order to track down possible exhibits. Hundreds of gay/lesbian/bisexual shops, societies, archives, bars, social groups and media were consulted, offering them the chance to contribute to the exhibition. As a result of developing this network sponsorship was attained from Millivres Ltd, the multimedia group who produce *Gay Times* and *Diva*. This sponsorship enabled proactive advertising, with full-page colour advertisements in *Millivres'* magazines and leaflets, a luxury not usually possible with a small budget. A strong relationship was built up with the Hall-Carpenter Archive (the largest source for the study of gay activism in Britain) and the Glasgow Women's Library, resulting in loans from both institutions being agreed. The Sappho banner, designed and made by Emmelene Davis for the Gay Pride Week March (1980), incorporating many lesbian and feminist symbols, was one such object. Having this banner on display in London (it is usually housed in Glasgow)

was a strong attraction to many women and an incentive to visit the exhibition. Collaboration with the Hall-Carpenter Archive led to an offer to house the graphics and images used in the exhibition (produced as flexible banners to be hung from the ceiling) within their archives maintained at Middlesex University.

To coincide with the exhibition, a public debate, *What now for lesbian and gay London?* was held at the Museum. This was a central ingredient to the whole project, using the Museum as a forum to openly discuss issues raised by the exhibition. The response to this event was overwhelming - all 270 of the (free) tickets were booked well in advance. Chaired by Tom Robinson, the panel of speakers included Angela Mason, Executive Director of Stonewall, Peter Tatchell of OutRage, David White, Co-Director of Pride (London) and Steve Wharton, a lecturer from the University of Bath who has studied the concept of the 'pink pound'. After a five-minute talk from each speaker the debate was opened to the floor and audience members were given the opportunity to express their views and question the panel. The event was concluded with a glass of wine and a chance to view the exhibition. Fantastic

entertainment was provided by the London Gay Men's Chorus.

One way of assessing public opinion of the exhibition was through the electronic questionnaire, which was accessible within the exhibition and via the Museum of London web site. Visitors to the site were asked fourteen questions requiring a yes/no answer. The questions addressed both lesbian and gay equality, and also museological issues. 1792 people accessed the site over the six week period, a huge response considering previous electronic questionnaires at the Museum have only attained a maximum of 200 responses over the same time period. A major factor contributing to this response was placing the electronic questionnaire (and a screen analysing the results) within the exhibition space, enabling visitors to voice their immediate reactions (see box for results).

It is very difficult to extract and analyse information from such a limited set of results. The exhibition obviously attracted a gay friendly audience rather than a representative sample of the population. Surprisingly only 55% of the participants lived in London or considered themselves to be Londoners. It is encouraging that the highest percentage (95%) agreed that the Museum of London was 'right' to stage this exhibition, with only 62 participants reacting negatively. The question of whether gay and lesbian history should be integrated into permanent galleries had a rather less decisive reaction (87%). It is interesting that the question that created the most 'unanswered' is perhaps the most politically topical; should Section 28 be repealed? This reaction may be connected to the fact that we did not define Section 28 within the questionnaire, although it was explained

within the text of the exhibition. A mixed response came from questioning people's opinion of the annual Pride march, a subject which caused heated debate during the evening forum event; many people believe it has lost its true meaning and turned into a commercially driven celebration.

Pride & Prejudice succeeded in bringing a new audience to the Museum of London; 58% of respondents visited the museum specifically to see the exhibition (only one visitor asked to see the Jane Austen exhibition). The exhibition was received in a very positive way, with little criticism of its content. Those criticisms that were made were mainly linked to the size of the exhibition. The Capital Concerns gallery occupies a compact space (c.120 m²), and many people visiting the exhibition were disappointed that it was not larger with more to see and read (a criticism of other Capital Concerns exhibitions). The space was maximised by including in-depth detail and interactives through the use of oral history, an information table and the electronic questionnaire. Several visitors also commented on the lack of Black and Asian material in the exhibition (a problem deriving from the lack of historic evidence available), although the information table within the exhibition did have details of present-day organisations such as Big Up and the Naz Project. More positive comments stemmed from the balance between male gay and lesbian related exhibits and information. To its advantage the exhibition was held in a prime location; the first gallery you see as you enter the museum. The museum could not have been accused of hiding the exhibition away in a corner, a request from one visitor who did not agree with displaying an exhibition about homosexuality.

BREAKDOWN OF ELECTRONIC QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS	YES	NO	Unanswered
Do you think that lesbians, gays and heterosexuals should be equal under the law?	1277	101 414	
Should the age of consent be the same for gay sex as for heterosexual sex?	1224	137 431	
Should same sex couples share the same legal entitlements and rights as heterosexual couples (e.g. tax, inheritance)?	1242	111 439	
Should lesbian and gay couples be allowed to marry?	1138	183 471	
Do you think the adoption of children should be open to same sex couples?	1084	226 482	
Should Section 28 be repealed?	1067	107 618	
Should lesbians and gays be allowed to join the armed forces?	1235	85 472	
Do you believe the Museum of London was right to stage the 'Pride & Prejudice' exhibition?	1266	62 464	
Should lesbian and gay history be integrated into the permanent galleries of the Museum of London?	1235	171 386	
Does the annual Pride march portray lesbians and gays positively?	933	373 486	
Would you be more likely to buy from a company that you knew to be gay friendly?	1013	374 405	
Do you live in London or do you consider yourself to be a Londoner?	785	631 376	
Have you visited the Museum of London specifically to see this exhibition?	836	591 365	
Are you lesbian/gay/bisexual?	897	533 362	

Negative reactions from the public were received in the build up to the opening of the exhibition, in the form of protesting phone calls. Consequently, we became aware that museum staff, especially front of house staff, needed to be fully briefed on the content and aims of the exhibition. Two briefing notes were produced; one for staff and the other for teachers bringing school groups to the museum. Gallery staff were also given a tour and briefing session of the exhibition the morning before it opened to the public, during which they could voice their concerns. Through this communication, staff felt better prepared and capable of answering any queries. However, this strategy was misconstrued in one article in the gay press: within the briefing note produced for teachers by our interpretation department, it was recommended that parental consent should be sought before taking children into the exhibition (a recommendation that was also applied to the London

Bodies exhibition at the Museum of London, which displayed human skeletons). Within the article in question, this was portrayed as preventing children from visiting the exhibition.

Through *Pride & Prejudice* the Museum of London has hopefully gained a new audience of primarily young adult Londoners. It has enabled the museum to develop its collections by acquiring about 50 objects/ephemera which were collected for the exhibition, whilst recordings of two life-stories of young gay/lesbian Londoners have been added to the oral history collection. Although the exhibition was only temporary, the graphics and images have been made available for future use through the Hall-Carpenter Archive. Now that links with the lesbian and gay community have been made it is hoped that *Pride & Prejudice* has opened the door for future projects and collaborations involving the Museum of London.

The Wood of Life - 'Take a Bough'

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery 10th November 1999

Living on the edge of Cannock Chase and having a wood burner as my sole source of central heating my primary concern with wood has tended to be 'Will it burn?' As a museums professional my question to date has been 'Is it being eaten?' I realise that beyond these two issues is another one, what sort of wood is it and would I be able to identify it?

Helen Ruthven

**Assistant Museums Officer,
Staffordshire Arts
and Museums Service**

On 10th November 1999 the SHCG ran *Take a Bough: A Seminar on Wood Basics* to help us all sort out the wood from the trees. The venue was the Gas Hall at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. It was obvious from the numbers present that I'm not the only one with a need to get a grip on the basics of identifying wood, its properties and its uses.

The seminar opened with Robin Hill from the Worcestershire County Museum, Hartlebury. He familiarised the group with wood terminology and by going through a glossary of general terms, noting the main features of the living tree (heartwood, sapwood, rings, rays, knots, grain and texture) and its conversion into usable timber. The individual properties of each species are the key to identifying the wood types in our museum collections and dictate how the wood is used.

The group was given eight sample pieces of wood to identify. These were common types likely to be found in most

collections; oak, ash, beech, sycamore, softwood (pine), walnut, mahogany and elm.

The second part of the exercise was to identify a selection of wooden objects, their use and the timber. This proved a little more difficult. The information that Robin had supplied was put to good use as we debated whether our group's brace and bit was elm or ash. The key to identifying the wood is knowledge of its strengths and properties - its grain, natural patterns, textures and colour - but also a historical knowledge of how it has been used over the years. The workshop continued with discussion about the wide variety of uses for each timber, usefully covering a wide range of objects and Robin rounded off the session by talking briefly about construction methods.

The afternoon session began with a tour and introduction to the Pinto Collection, by its curator Rajwinder Pal, at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

This diverse collection of wooden objects ranges from snuff boxes to ginger moulds, wood working tools to lace bobbins. It is mainly European and is the largest collection of its kind.

The collection was originally housed in Edward Pinto's own home and attracted visitors and interest from all over the world. It was purchased during the 1960s and approximately 50% of the 7000 object collection is displayed in the present gallery which opened in 1969. Pinto wrote many books about the collection and the museum holds his personal archive which reveals his life long passion.

It is a collection that can be appreciated on many levels, not least for its diversity. Many of the objects have great aesthetic beauty, but above all the objects are those of the every day. They were intended to be used, as well as enjoyed, by their owners.

Handling forms an important aspect of interpreting the collection with school groups. The objects are used to explore wider social history issues. Rajwinder explained that for him the collection's greatest asset is the window that it opens on the past through the customs and values it reveals. Wood is a material that is available to everyone regardless of social class and division. The Pinto collection is very much about the lives of ordinary people.

Before leaving the gallery the group had the opportunity to look round the stores. Two of the many objects revealed were a beautifully carved tortoise, in reality a spittoon, and an intricately carved nutmeg grater in the shape of a woman's shoe. Time was limited but I think that everyone could have happily spent the remainder of the day investigating the Pinto treasures with Rajwinder whose enthusiasm, knowledge and passion for the collection was infectious.

Chris Green from St Albans Museum led the final session of the day using examples from the Salaman Collection, a comprehensive collection of trade tools at St. Albans. He emphasised the importance of using the correct wood for every tool, as each wood has properties that make it ideal for different jobs. Objects from the Salaman collection formed the focus of the discussion, a

valuable exercise for familiarising ourselves with the appearance and function of the different types of object and timber.

The tools themselves fall into a hierarchy in the trades, classified by the woods used to make them. Cart makers and cabinet makers, for example, used tools of beech, boxwood or even ebony, expensive status symbols. They were not necessarily better for the job. An ebony brace would have cost two or three weeks wages and would have been more likely to warp and split than one made from ash.

The strength of the wood lies in the way it is converted from the tree. Chris briefly outlined the different methods of conversion including splitting which retains the wood's strength by following the natural grain, and training the growing timber, maximising its natural strength.

By the end of the day the group had been given a thorough grounding in the basics of identifying wood in the context of museum collections. The wood and the trees had been sorted out, and now I know what I'm burning!

Further Reading

- Bramwell, M.
'The International Book of Wood'
(Mitchell Beazley, London, 1979)
- Pinto, E. H.
'Treen and Other Wooden Bygones'
(Bell, London, 1969)
- Salaman, R. A.
'Dictionary of Tools'
(George Allen & Unwin, London, 1975)

SEMINAR FEEDBACK: LATEST SEMINAR EVALUATION RESULTS

If any of you have been to a SHCG seminar recently you will have, no doubt, completed one of our evaluation forms. To prove that they are not just an exercise to make you late for your train, we thought it would be useful to pass on the information that we receive to the membership - and evaluators! Seminar Organiser, Stephen Lowy deciphers the data.

Q1 INFORMATION RECEIVED PRIOR TO THE SEMINAR

Most respondents found that they received fair to excellent information prior to the day. The majority of participants find out about seminars from SHCG News or through mailings, although seminars are also advertised in the Museums Journal and in some area museums council mailings.

Q2 QUALITY OF VENUE

Again we tend to get a favourable response, although we can only thank the hosts. We do try and make the venue both appropriate to the seminar's theme and accessible to all (especially public transport users).

Q3 KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM THE SEMINAR

Most delegates report that they improve their knowledge of the subject covered from poor to at least good and sometimes excellent and it seems that delegates not only find the seminars useful, but also interesting.

Q4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE SHCG SEMINARS

The overriding response seems to be for a move towards more practical topics. Earlier evaluation responses have also asked for more hands on seminars. We hope the SHCG will be able to cater for both practical seminars and those looking at the issues social history curators constantly face. However, there does seem to be a gap in the market for low cost training events aimed at curators dealing with the collections on a day to day basis, rather than for museum professionals in more managerial posts. We will aim to continue providing low cost seminars for museum professionals interested or working in the social history field. Furthermore, in our mission to improve access, two free places and travel expenses within Britain will be available for future seminars.

Q5 REGIONAL SPREAD OF DELEGATES

The seminars tend to attract a greater number of local delegates. However, it is the case that most seminars attract people from across Britain although there does seem to be an under-representation of delegates from Wales (poor publicity or perhaps the Principality has excellent museum training schemes in place?).

Finally, thanks to all of you who have completed and returned seminar evaluation sheets - your comments are appreciated! If you have any comments about future seminars you can contact Seminar Organisers Stephen Lowy or Catherine Nisbet

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