

DECEMBER 2005

ISSUE 56



**Oddfellow
Bearded Mask**

**Coalport China Museum:
Audio & Tactile Interpretation**

**V&A: Sacred Silver
and Stained Glass
Bromsgrove's War**

SHCG NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

Join SHCG?

If you're reading this and you're not a member of SHCG but would like to join please contact:
Kitty Ross,
Abbey House Museum,
Abbey Road,
Kirkstall,
Leeds LS5 3EH
Tel: 0113 2305499
Email: membership@shcg.org.uk

Write an article for the SHCG News?

You can write an article for the News on any subject that you feel would be interesting to the museum's community. Project write ups, book reviews, object studies, papers given and so on. We welcome a wide variety of articles relating to social history and Museums.

**DEADLINE FOR
NEXT ISSUE:
24TH APRIL 2006**

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.

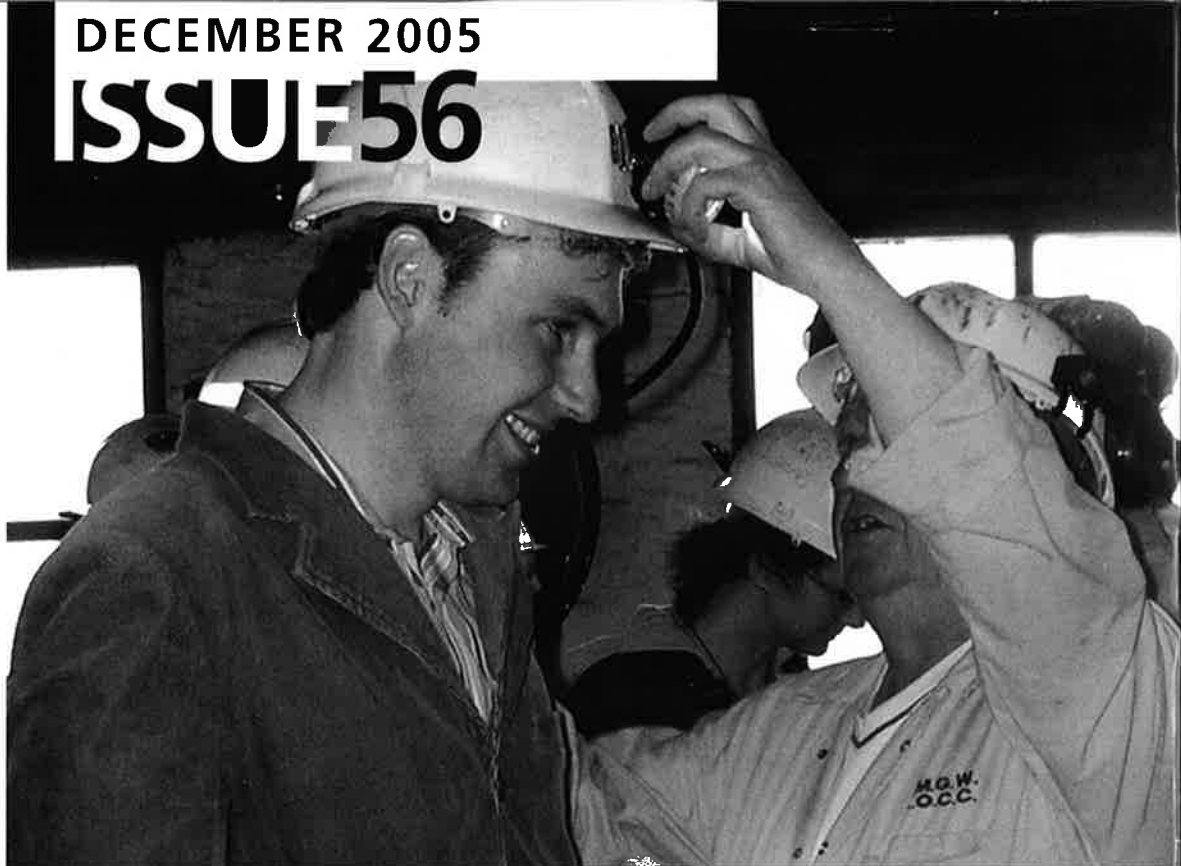
Articles for the NEWS should be between 500 to 2000 words. Please submit a typed copy of your article along with a copy on disk, saved as a PC word file or richtext format, or you can send it as an Email. Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

Send all contributions to:
Sarah Maultby,
York Castle Museum,
The Eye of York,
York YO1 9RY
Email: news@shcg.org.uk

Front Cover:
Masks for use in Oddfellow ritual.

Contents photos:
Micheal Terwey being fitted for safety helmet and torch before going on the underground tour at The Big Pit.

SHCG News design by Paul Cook
www.pcookdesign.co.uk



Welcome to Issue 56 of the SHCG News. I would like to thank the committee members for organising the Conference 2005 in South Wales. It was very successful, with a large number of delegates, very interesting lectures and some great meals out! For a more detailed description please read the Conference Reviews. The conference for next year is in the planning stages but we do know it will be in Scotland from the 6th–8th July 2006.

Thank you for a marvellous response to my plea for articles through the SHCG LIST (if you haven't signed up yet the details are in the Bulletin Board section). As a result there is a diverse mix of pieces within this Issue ranging from Gallery Evaluations using Generic Learning Outcomes to an Audio and Tactile Exhibition at Coalport Museum. I have also tried to put together an update on some of the Subject Specialist Networks. It is not a definitive article as it only includes 7 groups out of the 23 that were successful in gaining exploratory grants from the MLA earlier this year. Those that have contributed are relevant to Social History Curators, and they include a brief summary of the outcomes from the meetings held over the summer.

The Object Focus and Book Review are on the theme of Friendly and Fraternal Societies. I'm sure we all have some objects lurking in the back of our stores pertaining to this area, but none as impressive as the Oddfellows Bearded Mask!

Thank you again to all contributors to this Issue, I shall be emailing a call for articles for the next issue in March, the deadline is 24th April 2006. Until then I would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

SARAH MAULTBY—EDITOR

03
**BULLETIN
BOARD**

06
**THEORY
AND PRACTICE**

Bromsgrove's
War

V&A:
Sacred Silver
and Stained Glass

SSN Update

The Use of
GLOs in Gallery
Evaluation

Coalport
China Museum
Audio and Tactile
Interpretation

14
**CONFERENCE
REVIEW 2005**

Delegates'
Reports



17 OBJECT FOCUS

Oddfellows
Bearded Mask

18 BOOK CORNER

Discovering
Friendly and
Fraternal
Societies

19 SHCG COMMITTEE



SHCG MATTERS

CONFERENCE 2006:

Edinburgh & Glasgow
6th–8th July 2006

Next year's Conference is heading north to Scotland, where we'll be based in Edinburgh. The dates for your diary are Thursday 6th to Saturday 8th July.

The theme will focus on collections and collecting, with sessions covering collections development, collecting with communities, contemporary collecting and the ever-thorny issue of disposal. As ever, the programme will feature a range of presentations, case studies,

visits and the all-important social events.

Watch this space, the SHCG website, and mailings for more information as we firm up the details. We hope we'll see you there.

**For more information
please contact:**

Briony Hudson,
SHCG Chair,
Email: bhudson@rpsgb.org.uk



SHCG MATTERS

Calling all past committee members!

We are making a concerted effort to locate all of SHCG past 'archive'. If you have been involved in SHCG committee in the past and have minutes, bulk copies of the News or the Journal, or any other paperwork lurking in your house, office or shed, please contact Briony Hudson—SHCG Chair, so that we can finally attempt to get it all in one place. Please do not send it through the post before contacting Briony first!

To get in touch with Briony Hudson, please
Email: bhudson@rpsgb.org.uk

SHCG email list takes off

SHCG's new email list for members has been an instant success, attracting 100 subscribers in its first few months. Both individual and institutional members have joined SHCG-LIST - and institutions should note that an unlimited number of staff may subscribe.

The list has many different uses. For example, if you're starting a new project and want to find out about other museums' experiences, a question to the list will reach curators all over the country, enabling them to share their experience and advice. SHCG-LIST is also an ideal place to ask about mystery objects that you may be struggling to identify. You can even attach digital photos (though try to keep them small to avoid overloading people's inboxes!). With so many curatorial brains to pick, somebody may well know what an object is or at least be able to suggest a source of further information.

The list also acts more generally as a noticeboard for news and events of interest to members. If you're a student member, you might find the list helpful to keep up with the latest news and trends in social history curatorship, or even to ask questions relating to your research. Some jobs are also advertised on the list.

SHCG-LIST uses reliable software that gives subscribers the highest levels of protection from spam and viruses, in addition to personal or institutional defences. And because the list is exclusive to SHCG members, messages are more relevant to your interests and needs than on more general museum lists. One list member commented: "I enjoy getting the messages. The list members seem to stick to the subject much more than the other groups to which I subscribe."

The list is an exclusive SHCG membership benefit additional to the existing package, so make the most of your membership and join today! If you work for an institutional member, any interested colleagues in your organisation may also join the list.

Joining the list

SHCG-LIST is easy to join and use even if you've never been on a mailing list before. To join, please send an email to shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk (this is also the address for any queries you may have) stating your name and whether you are a personal member or employed by an institutional member. If you work for an institutional member, please also state the name of the institution. You will receive an automated acknowledgement of your

request: and may be asked to click on a link to confirm your email address (this is a security feature).

What happens next?

Requests to join the list are processed manually, usually within 48 hours, but please be patient and allow up to 10 days. Once your membership is processed you will receive some automatically generated emails, including one containing a jargon-free guide to how the list works and one containing more technical information about the list. You should save both of these emails for future reference as they contain important information such as how to unsubscribe from the list. After this, you will receive all emails sent by members to the list address, and will be able to post messages yourself by following the simple instructions in the guide.

We hope that you will join our successful new list. Please email shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk if you have any questions about the list - I'm happy to help.

**Jack Kirby—SHCG Committee Thinktank, Birmingham Science Museum
Email: shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk**



SHCG SEMINARS

Next year's seminar programme is now at a planning stage, but there's still time to get in touch if you feel that we can meet your training needs. We have two seminars planned for 2006:

How to Identify Watchamacallits

Back again by popular demand. If you have objects lurking in your store that you need help to identify (who hasn't?), or you feel that a back to basics seminar would meet your training needs, this is the course for you. The day's

programme will focus around hands-on, small group, practical sessions looking at identification techniques for social history objects. With the emphasis on strategies for demystifying any mystery item, the course will be helpful for all kinds of objects.

Social History Curators - do they exist anymore?

The development of Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs) in areas such as medicine and health, contemporary collecting, and costume and textiles, poses questions about the role of

the Social History Curators Group, and the wider role of general social history curators. This seminar will include speakers from some of the existing SSNs, and investigate the different stages that they have got to and their plans for the future.

It will also look at the practical reality of being a social history curator, potentially embodying all of the different specialisms within an organisation.

How can the Social History Curators Group help you in your role, and what other resources are available to support your work and development?

Please get in touch by Email: seminars@shcg.org.uk

Join the Society for Folk Life Studies!



Elderly Couple, Cefyncoedycymmer, Merthyr Tudful, late 19th Century.

The Society for Folk Life Studies is the only organisation in Britain that brings together curators, historians, folklorists, geographers, musicologists, linguists and many other people to explore the regional identity of the British Isles and beyond.

Founded in 1961, the Society currently boasts an international membership of around four hundred people and institutions. Its main activities are organising conferences, study days and publishing a refereed annual journal, *Folk Life*. Members maintain an important informal network of expertise and resources in areas such as:

- Traditional crafts
- Costume and material culture
- Vernacular architecture
- Landscape studies
- Custom and tradition

The Society's journal, *Folk Life*, is sent free to all members annually. *Folk Life* is an academic journal, recognised worldwide, which contains many papers and seminal articles by leading authorities in folk life

studies. A wide range of historical and contemporary subjects is featured including agriculture, transport and maritime history, domestic crafts and traditional industries, vernacular architecture, home life and furnishings, costume, sports and pastimes, dialects, customs and folklore.

The annual conference is a friendly four day event held at various locations in September. It includes papers by Society members and eminent guest lecturers and study excursions to local sites of interest. The conference provides a unique opportunity for the exchange of ideas and information on an informal basis.

Membership is open to anyone with an interest in regional culture and tradition and costs £17 per year (£18 for members outside the UK and Ireland).

For more information please contact:

The Membership Secretary,
Society for Folk Life Studies,
c/o. Museum of Welsh Life,
St. Fagans,
Cardiff,
CF5 6XB
Email: www.folklifestudies.org.uk

Thames memories are brought to life by an award winning pod-cast audio walk

A unique audio walking tour of two stretches of the river Thames has been published this summer, exploring London's hidden history through the voices of people who have lived and worked along the river.

Using rare recordings from the Museum in Docklands archives as well as new interviews, SCHG member Toby Butler has devised an audio CD and downloadable MP3 tour which uncovers the heritage of two routes. One walk takes in the scenery of West London from Hampton Court to Kingston; the other in East London from the Cutty Sark to the Millennium Dome. The tours consist of sounds, interviews and archive recordings, which chart a century of social history. Listeners can experience an insider's view of the river first-hand, as each recording is designed to be played on a personal stereo at specific places along the Thames path. The double CD comes with a fold out map and guide which will allow users to take a tour of London's fascinating river at their own pace.

Any comments or suggestions can be Emailed to tobybutler@boltblue.com

The double CD and map booklet are for sale at £6.99 from the Museum of London, Greenwich or Kingston Tourist Information centres, or by mail order from the website at www.memoryscape.org.uk, where the recordings can also heard and downloaded for use on an Mp3 player for free.



Bromsgrove's War: Community Involvement on a Shoestring

We commonly hear that community involvement is big, grand, expensive and time-consuming. The experience of Bromsgrove's War is that plenty of enthusiasm and good intentions, tempered with realism, will take you a very long way. It is possible for everyone in museums to engage with their local communities. Give it a go - it is fun, it really is!

Karen Spry

Curatorial Officer,
Bromsgrove Museum.

Bromsgrove Museum has recently come to the end of a project to document, record and present the experiences of local people during the Second World War. The project was the first of its kind for the museum, but has piloted a new way of working with the community in Bromsgrove that involves them in their own museum.

As a benchmark for future working, it was important that this project and exhibition represented good practice in as far as possible. Two years budgets were allocated to 'proper' display panels and promotions. Though ten designed and printed A1 display panels, along with leaflets and posters quickly accounted for this money.

Prices were kept keen however, partly by negotiating a good deal with the designer, and partly by ensuring that the designs for the boards, posters and leaflets were co-ordinated, ensuring that less design work was involved.

The project consisted of a years worth of memory gathering, which culminated in an exhibition the following year (2005). The idea was to concentrate very specifically

on what real people had to say about their own experiences and the exhibition was very much designed around these stories. Objects from the collection supported these memories, along with one or two loaned items.

Stories were collected on 'memory sheets' which combined with an agreement, signature and contact details, to provide succinct and considered accounts from which direct quotations could be drawn. Those who struggled with the task of writing could either dictate to another person or speak to the museum about making an alternative arrangement.

Funding from the BBC People's War Fund allowed Bromsgrove Museum to purchase the equipment to record and display oral histories. However, the oral histories were gathered as illustrations and voices rather than an oral archive. A large-scale oral history project, while worthy, was never going to be practical in our case.

Instead, good, vivid, and illustrative accounts were picked out of the memory sheets and pursued as oral histories. Contributions were therefore short, refined



Above: Making the most of available space and limited resources.
Left: Preview Opening for contributors. Karen Spry is second from left, MP Julie Kirkbride second from right and four of the oral history contributors.

and to the point, imposing as little as possible on the time of the museum or the participants and reducing the need for editing. Each gobblet of information was therefore salient and useful.

The exhibition panels were deliberately quotation heavy, with explanatory text simply providing the links. Additional quotations were mounted onto card and included as stand alone elements of the exhibition and several 'memory books' were included with the exhibition, containing copies of the memory sheets.

These personal contributions were also put onto the BBC People's War website, a condition of receiving the funding. In this way, everyone who had contributed to the project actively participated in the end result, and could feel ownership of both the project and the exhibition.

As a courtesy, every participant was sent a thank-you card with details of the exhibition and their personal contributions. Those who had contributed oral histories were also invited to a special preview of the exhibition, opened by Bromsgrove MP Julie Kirkbride. Other participants were made 'especially welcome' to attend the public launch which included costumed interpreters from local re-enactment groups. These people were enthusiasts rather than professionals but gave their time for the price of refreshments and were a real asset to the day.

The exhibition opened to the public on 14th May and the project and exhibition are being hailed as a success. Visitor numbers have increased noticeably, while local schools have made a point of booking visits and are interested in the spin-off resource pack now being compiled from the exhibition.

Everyone involved seems to have been genuinely pleased with, and proud of, the way his or her contributions have been used. Comments on the exhibition have included "beautiful", "excellent and well thought out", and "a real asset".

Not only has the exhibition been well received publicly, but it also seems to have prompted interest from the Local Council. This project went ahead through a period of scrutiny, and this project has been used to great effect in illustrating the benefits, not only of keeping the museum, but also of resourcing it properly and providing it with a long-term future.

Being flexible was essential to pull the project through. The project morphed itself and was adapted along the way in response to circumstances. However, good groundwork also paved the way for success. Being realistic about time, resources and ability ensured that the project never spiralled out of control. While you cannot please everyone, your community will cut you a lot of slack if you are open and honest with them about what you hope and feel able to achieve.

To small museums wanting to make the most of their communities and resources, please take this as encouragement to try something similar yourself. If Bromsgrove Museum can do something with the limited resources at its disposal, anyone can. The public really will appreciate your efforts and as long as you have a genuine desire to involve and do your best for people, you can make it work.

This project was co-ordinated, managed and delivered by Karen Spry who is Curatorial Officer with Worcestershire County Council.



The public launch day. Spiv from local group 'Victorian Westerners', trying to sell dodgy goods to visitors. The mock street part of the museum was given a wartime twist with lots of masking tape to extend the exhibition into the rest of the museum.

Project Profile:

TIME SCALE:

Approx. 14 months

HUMAN RESOURCES:

1 Curatorial Officer: working alongside ordinary duties.

4 Volunteers: to help with setting up the exhibition and compiling the resource pack.

BREAKDOWN OF PROJECT COSTS:

10 x A1 display panels:	£1500.00
10,000 promotional leaflets:	£650.00
20 x A2 posters:	£190.00
Assorted hardware & stationery:	£110.00
Refreshments for interpreters:	£25.00
Listening Post (Blackbox AV):	£525.00 (ex VAT)
Sony Minidisc + 5 discs:	£130.00

TOTAL PROJECT COST:

£3130.00

New Sacred Silver & Stained Glass Galleries open at the V&A

On 24th November 2005 the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) will reveal sumptuous new displays of ecclesiastical artwork its new Sacred Silver and Stained Glass Galleries. These galleries have been three years in the making and were made possible by the generous support of The AH and BC Whiteley Charitable Trust.

Megan Thomas—Assistant Curator

**Metalwork Section,
Victoria & Albert Museum.**

The silver displays focus on the beautiful decoration of sacred vessels, from the austere to the elaborate, and explore their history and use in Christian and Jewish worship. The 40m long galleries are lined either side with selections from the Museum's world-renowned collection of stained glass. The displays explore the materials and techniques of stained glass manufacture from around 1400 to the present day. Objects in the galleries span European regions and traditions of Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy and Nonconformity. The V&A commissioned examples of both ecclesiastical silver and stained glass to bring the story of Sacred Silver and Stained Glass up to the present day.

Whilst these galleries focus on objects relating to the Jewish and Christian traditions, sacred trails will lead the visitor around the museum, linking up with established galleries devoted to other world religions. The scope of the collections can be seen in the broadly chronological layout of both silver and stained glass. Themes are highlighted in carefully selected displays which explore fascinating developments in design, function and manufacture. In the galleries you can explore displays on the medieval church, the Reformation in England, worshipping in secret, the Jewish faith and the modern church among others.

The redisplay of the church silver and stained glass displays demanded investigation into how this material was perceived and understood by the visitors to the Museum. V&A curators and educators took to the galleries with a selection of objects for the visitors to handle (with care!) and their opinions were sought on the old displays. Many members of the public used the galleries as a throughway, and were not tempted to stop and examine the many beautiful objects, whose appeal was somewhat dimmed by displays which had inevitably faded since they were installed in the 1970s. People of different faiths expressed confusion over the uses of objects, something the new galleries have gone to great pains to address.

One of the most visually arresting pieces of silver on show is a monstrance¹ made in Augsburg, southern Germany, in 1705. It is chased (a technique where the silver is worked with tools to form sculptural reliefs) and partly gilded to great effect to emphasise details of the scene of the Last Supper. It was made by Johann Zeckel (a master goldsmith who specialised in silver for the church) and is rich in imagery and superbly executed. On the front are Christ's disciples, with a space for the wafer (or 'Sacred Host' as it is also known) serving instead of a representation of Christ. This ornate object would have been carried in procession during special occasions, such as the feast of Corpus Christi. This feast commemorates the institution of the Eucharist (described by Christ at the Last Supper as the giving of his body and blood as a sacrifice for mankind).

The monstrance was acquired for the V&A in 1952 by a key figure whose support helped shape the metalwork collection. Dr Walter Leo Hildburgh donated outstanding examples of craftsmanship in silver between 1916-1955. Gently steered in his purchases by curatorial staff, his gifts ensured that the silver collections of the V&A remain one of the richest in the world. The nature of this personal and



The Monstrance, Johann Zeckel, 1705. Museum no. M.3-1952. Copyright: V&A Images.

friendly relationship between individual and institution can be seen in the touching way that Hildburgh's gifts to the museum were often presented on his birthday and at Christmas.

The monstrance is one of a number of star pieces put under the spotlight for the visitors' contemplation. Specially tailored displays highlight the 'wow factor' that is typical of many pieces of church silver. Enhanced spoken descriptions on accompanying audio guides extend the experience so visually impaired visitors can also enjoy the exhibits.

These displays came about as a result of research carried out on the continent, particularly in the rich treasuries of the cathedrals of Cologne and Aachen in Germany. Whilst exploring the social and cultural significance, it is also important to remember that many of these objects were designed to be eye catching, and it is appropriate to give them a chance to shine.

Over 500 pieces of silver and stained glass can be seen on displays. Visitors to the galleries are able to touch a specially commissioned copy of a piece of stained glass, and watch a film showing how stained glass is made. Displays and computer interactives explore the iconography of symbols found on objects throughout the galleries, and occasional demonstrations will take place in the space, showing techniques of silver and stained glass making. For those unable to visit in person, from the end of November the V&A's website will explore the themes and highlights of the sacred silver collection. (www.vam.ac.uk)

Notes:

1: Have reworked this section a fair bit to concentrate on monstrance first and Hildburgh second.

Subject Specialist Network Update

This is an article updating SHCG members on the current situation of a few of the groups that benefited from funding by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) as part of the 'Renaissance in the Regions' Subject Specialist Network (SSN) Development Grants 2005. This is not a complete list of SSN's but hopefully these are all relevant to Social History Curators.

Contemporary Collecting for Urban Social Historians

This SSN has met twice to discuss the current state of contemporary collecting in UK city museums. The first meeting in April consisted solely of the lead partners of the SSN, which to date has been led by Tyne and Wear Museums and supported by the Museum of London, the Museum of Liverpool Life, Croydon Museum, Reading Museum, Bristol Museums, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and Clifton Park Museum in Rotherham. The second meeting in August was open to all, and attracted 40 delegates from across the country. In addition, an email and telephone survey has been carried out of 19 other museums to ascertain current collecting activities and potential interests in the SSN.

Issues of concern to delegates varied according to whether or not their museum is actively engaged in contemporary collecting initiatives. Most of us are still largely reactive in our collecting approaches, responding to public donors as they pop up in the museum or on the phone. It is hoped the SSN will assist these museums to raise the profile of contemporary collecting, providing practical advice and skills for those embarking on projects or policy revisions through one or two seminars a year. By raising awareness of who is collecting what, the SSN will provide a support framework, assisting staff in making a stronger case for spending time on collections development. Those museums that are already committed to ongoing programmes of contemporary collecting will use the SSN as a space for more critical reflection on their methodologies, to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the process can influence the results.

As contemporary collecting is an increasingly important part of social history curatorship, SHCG will remain an active

partner in this SSN. For the time being, the SHCG email list, website and News will be used to circulate queries, disseminate the SSN's work and advertise future events. If you haven't yet signed up to the email list but are interested in the work of this SSN, please do so now!

For more information on the SSN, please contact:
Zelda Baveystock
Tyne and Wear Museums
Email: zelda.baveystock@twmuseums.org.uk

Crime and Punishment Collections Network

This SSN is for museums, libraries and archives with collections or sites related to the Police Force, Prison Service or Legal Profession. The MLA funded exploratory consultation process set out to measure and respond to the demand for an SSN concerned with criminal justice. The initial core group of 10 soon rose to the current 36 interested parties. The overwhelming support for such a network was evident from the initial workshop meeting after which the primary focus of the process became the creation of the resource and support infrastructure. The key documents regarding the future direction, aims and objectives and operational structure are the *CAP Constitution* and the *CAP Five Year Business Plan*.

These documents have been compiled in consultation and with the full support of the organisations interested in becoming members of the proposed network. The creation of these documents has been one of the key objectives of the exploratory process and provides the committee and membership with a clear framework for operation and responsibilities.

For the short term an interim committee has been appointed to oversee the arrangements for the three key objectives prior to the first Annual General Meeting (AGM) and conference in November 2005, at which point an official standing committee will be elected. The key objectives necessary to prepare the network for the November event are the organisation of the AGM/Conference, the administration of the subscriptions process and the editing of the first edition of the quarterly newsletter. All three of these objectives are being led by a 'nominated' interim committee member and

are currently in progress.

For more information please contact:
Paul Baker—Curator
NCCL Galleries of Justice
Email: Paul.baker@nccl.org.uk

Jewish History, Culture and Religious Life SSN

Exploratory work on the Jewish history, culture and religious life SSN began in April 2005. The work was co-ordinated by the Jewish Museum, and included specialist partners such as Manchester Jewish Museum and the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, as well as larger organisations such as the British Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum. At the end of the exploratory phase, in June 2005, it was decided to carry the network forward through a collections mapping project as well as through regular meetings. The mapping project will cover as many objects as possible relating to the Jewish theme, including those in local authority museums and other non-specialist collections, as well as archival material and oral history. The result will be an invaluable resource for researchers and curators, facilitating collaboration between partner institutions and increasing the visibility and accessibility of their collections. In the longer term, the SSN hopes to establish links with other networks of Jewish museums in Europe and North America, and with other BME collections in Britain.

If you would like more information about the network, please contact:
Lily Steadman at the Jewish Museum,
lily.steadman@jewishmuseum.org.uk

Thinking Wider - A Subject Specialist Network for Inland Transport

In February 2005 MLA provided a £4,000 exploratory grant as part of the *Renaissance in the Regions* initiative to develop a Subject Specialist Network for Inland Transport (SSNIT).

An initial steering group was formed by a number of representatives of transport museums, including the National Railway Museum, the National Tramway Museum, Heritage Railways Association, London's Transport Museum and the Heritage Motor Centre, in order to assess whether a SSN would be appropriate and practical.

The grant funded a conference entitled *Thinking Wider: The Public Transport Subject Specialist Network* held at the National Railway Museum on Saturday 14th May, 2005, attended by a total of 32 delegates from a range of large and small museum with transport collections.

The aim of the conference was to discuss whether an SSN is a good idea, what should the SSN do and how it should work. The conclusion of the conference was that the SSN would be a good idea if:

- There is a strong base on which to begin/strong focus.
- It helps us to do better what we already do.
- It remains simple and jargon free.
- It remains sustainable.

Further research is now under way to develop this informal network further in order to provide a UK-wide cross-domain network, bringing people together to share knowledge and information. It will enable better care of and enhanced access to inland transport collections.

For further information, please contact:

Martyn Halman
Knowledge & Collections Facilitator,
National Railway Museum
Tel: 01904 686284
Email: martyn.halman@nmsi.ac.uk

Disability History Subject Specialist Network

The initial research phase was completed in August. Many thanks go to Sue Westmore who conducted the research and drafted the report for MLA showing that there was widespread support and interest (including from the HLF) for the idea of a disability history network.

The aim of the network is to raise awareness and increase understanding of the history of disability by uncovering existing material held in museum, library and archive collections, building on those collections and facilitating research. The network is intended to provide information and resources to help those working with collections to achieve this. It will not provide advice on physical and intellectual access as there are other organisations, such as MAGDA, addressing these issues.

A website is seen as the best vehicle for supporting the network's aim. The website will function in a number of ways. It could:

- Showcase recent and current projects that develop best practice.
- Offer 'how to' resource packs on topics such as where to find information on disabled people in a Record Office.

- Provide a directory of disability history sources including collections.
- Host an online exhibition.
- Be the forum for discussion of disability history issues.

Beyond the virtual contact offered by the website there will also be opportunities to develop a training programme, touring exhibitions and publications.

The next step is to set up a committee to drive forward these ideas.

If you are interested to have a role in this process please contact:

Tom Hodgson at Colchester Museums
Email: tom.hodgson@colchester.gov.uk

Medical & Healthcare SSN

The response to the feasibility study and consultation exercise on the possibilities of developing a Medical & Healthcare SSN was extremely positive. Although 'medical history' collections seem more frequently to be classified under broader categories such as 'social history' or 'science', it is hoped that the creation of a Medical & Healthcare SSN will promote and support the unique issues faced in this sector. Individuals representing the sector (including specialist and general national, local and independent museums, libraries and archives) felt that the development of an SSN would be highly beneficial both to the profession and to audiences. It was felt that a well constituted and well resourced SSN could help to develop the sector's ability to deliver future projects and nationally important initiatives.

The steering committee will now draft an action plan to develop longer term activities, including development and administrative support, information exchange, such as an email forum and a website, projects to increase the knowledge and skills of the sector, projects to benefit audiences, and a forward plan for SSN meetings.

The final report to the MLA documenting the findings of the feasibility study will be circulated to members.

For more information contact:

Tate Greenhalgh at Thackray Museum
Tel: 0113 244 4343
Email: tateg@thackraymuseum.org

Science, Technology and Industry SSN

A group of museums have joined together to form a Subject Specialist Network in Science, Technology and Industry. Birmingham Museums, Bristol Industrial Museum, National Museums Scotland, Science Museum, Tyne and Wear Museums, Thinktank and the Museum of Science and

Industry in Manchester combined forces with funding from the MLA to undertake exploratory activity into the establishment of the network.

The network steering group consulted with the Science and Industry Museums sector through a questionnaire and a conference in June 2005 to identify the level of enthusiasm and need for the network. The group identified that the network should be as broad and inclusive as possible, with regular communication and the need for better information exchange, possibly through the creation of an experts' database in Science, Technology and Industry subject areas. The conference focused on the necessity to share skills and expertise between museums, increase training and advocacy in the sector and develop research with academic departments.

In the medium term the network aims to hold a regular annual conference, stimulate collaboration on collecting policies, develop collaborative projects and funding streams and improve discussion and dissemination between institutions. The longer-term development of the network depends on further funding from the MLA, but it hopes to be able to develop structured information exchange, create and maintain an experts' database and raise training and the profile of the sector.

For more information please contact:

Dr Tilly Blyth
Curator of Computing and Information,
Science Museum
Tel: 0207 942 4211
Email: tilly.blyth@nmsi.ac.uk

The Use of GLOs in Gallery Evaluation

During March of this year, Tyne and Wear Museums (TWM) commissioned students at Newcastle University's International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, to conduct a gallery evaluation project based on Generic Learning Outcomes.

Sarah Anne Rose—PhD Student

University of Newcastle.

The purpose of this evaluation was to review and compare the effectiveness of the interpretative approaches used within the latest history galleries at TWM. Not only was this in order to improve the current exhibits, but also to inform the design of those in the future. As well as determining how successfully key messages were being interpreted by target audiences, the evaluation also focused on measuring the impact of each gallery on visitors, according to Inspiring Learning for All's (ILfA) five Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs), shown right.

The evaluation took place at three venues under TWM's remit: Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens; Discovery Museum Newcastle and South Shields Museum and Art Gallery. As the brief requested, the evaluation included both male and female visitors from all age groups, and used a number of evaluative tools, including comments books, observation and tracking. However, the principle method employed was a visitor questionnaire, administered in an interview style. As well as collecting basic demographic details about visitors and their thoughts on such aspects as the gallery design, most of the questions were aimed at visitor learning and were directly connected to the GLOs, having been based on those in the ILfA's 'Question bank.'

The latter was a very helpful guide considering the students' relative lack of experience, both in terms of gallery evaluation and the GLOs. While ensuring a certain amount of uniformity in terms of approach, the suggested questions were also flexible enough to be tailored to the individual characteristics of each gallery. The use of a five-point scaled response meanwhile (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree), produced the quantitative data needed to help measure the extent to which each GLO was being met and also

ease the interpretation of results.

Once analysed, the visitor responses were compared with the objectives of each gallery, outlined at the outset of the investigation. These were largely based on individual design briefs and consequently a number of specific recommendations were made for each exhibition. Based on evidence from the more open-ended, gallery-specific questions and behavioural observation, these suggestions for improvement related to the provision of clearer orientation, maintaining interactives and contextualising oral history. However, of more interest in relation to the title of this piece, was the role of GLOs in determining the success of each gallery and results that this produced.

Following an analysis of the findings, it was clear that the strength of evidence for each GLO varied greatly, but followed a very similar pattern across all the galleries featured in the evaluation. The most prominent GLOs were Knowledge and Understanding; Enjoyment, Inspiration and Creativity; Attitudes and Values. The reason behind this seemed to rest on the personal connections many visitors felt with the theme and content of what were largely social history exhibits. This was manifested through family connections, specific objects and personal memories. These emotional ties consequently meant that appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of the exhibits, featured very strongly in the results. Interestingly, most people felt that their knowledge had been confirmed rather than increased. The reasons for this are likely to lie partially in the fact that the majority of visitors were locals and, moreover, repeat visitors. Yet it should also be considered that adults can struggle to recognise that they have 'learnt' something, particularly so soon after the experience.

This difficulty of reflecting on specific experiences in such a short space of time may have also contributed to the fact that the findings in relation to other GLOs were not so positive as those above. Firstly, while Enjoyment was perhaps the strongest GLO of all, the results showed little support for its other components: Inspiration and Creativity. This is likely to have been due to the gallery content, as well as the behaviour of adult visitors. Indeed, it was commonly noted from observations how few reacted



Above: Generic Learning Outcomes, see www.inspiringlearningforall.org.uk.

physically with their environment, with many adults ignoring the interactive elements. This was also reflected in the fact that the Skills GLO received the lowest score in all of the evaluations. The lack of evidence in this instance also suggested that the impact and importance of skills cannot be adequately measured with such a short-term research design.

Gathering evidence about skills was further impeded by the fact that most visitors seemed to regard the question about skills as very practically orientated. ILfA's definition of this GLO is actually very broad and includes communication and reading abilities. However, while observations proved that all the galleries encouraged this behaviour (for example, stimulating inter-generational discussions), the visitors did not refer to such instances in their response. It would also be very difficult to isolate how an individual gallery had contributed to personal improvement in these areas. Indeed, for many conducting the evaluation, it was felt that 'measuring' evidence of skills was more appropriate in terms of school group activities, or a specific workshop, rather than in an informal learning environment.

Similar challenges were found with Activity, Behaviour and Progression, which was largely determined through the questions 'will you be likely to visit again' and 'will you talk or think about your visit in future?' Once again it was difficult to isolate a particular gallery's effect on visitor behaviour from the museum visit as a whole, as most of those who were interviewed were already repeat visitors.

It was also appreciated that visitors themselves would find it difficult to define the visit's likely future impact with any certainty. While nearly everyone agreed that they would talk or think about their visit again, it would be likely they would have done this along with other activities anyway.

A few gallery questionnaires did ask the visitor whether they would be likely to pursue a specific activity or topic further. In these cases very few visitors answered in the affirmative. Of course, as when referring to the Knowledge GLO above, the museum visit may only contribute in a very small way to the visitor's individual schema. In terms of something as abstract as behavioural change, this contribution would be particularly difficult to measure, especially at a single point in time. The large number of negative responses in this case also prompts questions about the expectations held by both visitors and practitioners in terms of a free-choice visit and its outcomes.

Aside from these specific theoretical issues associated with the GLOs (and indeed visitor evaluations in general), there were several methodological flaws to consider, which caused some concern about the value

of the results collected. Following their application, some of the questions were found to require re-wording to avoid confusion. Yet they also proved to be ambiguous and vague in relation to specific GLOs. Indeed, many of the results could be applied interchangeably as evidence for several outcomes: thus potentially producing many different conclusions. It was also found that while the quantitative GLO-based data was easier to analyse, it did not easily lead to clear recommendations and seemed to lack the in-depth insight into visitor profiles and experiences that qualitative data can provide.

Despite these issues, the project was completed to everyone's satisfaction. The GLOs were felt to be fairly easy and convenient to apply, although required some care to interpret and an appreciation of their methodological limitations. The fulfilment of some aspects was certainly difficult to prove, particularly the improvement of skills and behavioural change. Indeed, the evidence from this evaluation suggests that these GLOs were not entirely suited to being 'measured' in a free-choice environment, nor with such a short-term research design.

In order to discover how the exhibits could be improved therefore, it was beneficial to augment the GLO-based interviews with observations of visitor behaviour. Using the objectives of each gallery also helped to define what specific improvements could be made.

Overall the use of the GLOs in this project was very interesting and certainly provided a fairly useful, uniform tool and framework with which to conduct and report on each evaluation. However, such attributes will prove most beneficial when the GLOs are used in context with the aims of individual galleries. The evaluator must also remain wary of categorising the visitor experience and judging 'success' on these five generic outcomes alone: particularly in a free-choice environment. Indeed, if there was one memorable experience taken from this project it was that there is no such thing as a 'typical' visitor (Melton, 1935: 53).

References:

Melton, A.W. (1935) cited in S.K. Nichols & R. Adams (eds.) (1999) 'Visitor Surveys: A User's Manual', Washington DC: American Association of Museums.

Audio and Tactile Interpretation at the Coalport China Museum

The Coalport China Museum, one of the ten Ironbridge Gorge Museums, is currently approaching completion of a project to introduce audio and tactile interpretation into our galleries, aimed at improving interpretation of our site for visitors with visual impairments.

Jennifer Thomson—Curator

Coalport China Museum,
Ironbridge Gorge Museums Trust.

In order to deliver the project we have worked in partnership with the Dog Rose Trust, an innovative charity which works to make all environments accessible to people with visual and other sensory impairments. The Dog Rose Trust received funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the work, as part of their *Audio for All* project.

Whilst the Coalport China Museum has a strong focus on live demonstration and hands-on activities, its designated collection of Coalport and Caughley porcelains are displayed in galleries with traditional glass cases, which can often have little to offer for those with visual impairments. We therefore felt that specific interpretation needed to be introduced into the site to enable visitors with visual impairments to engage with and enjoy not only our extensive china displays, but also the historic buildings and history of the site as a whole. The funding received by the Dog Rose Trust has not only helped us achieve this but has also enabled us to do

much more with the project, for example involving members of the local community in recording audio narratives and utilizing our existing oral history archive on the site.

The project began by carrying out consultation with representatives of disability groups, researching the different options and equipment available for delivering audio and tactile interpretation, and holding an open evening for the local community in order to encourage volunteers to take part in 'voice over' workshops. After much discussion we identified the areas where we felt that interpretation for visitors with visual impairments was currently weak, and developed a number of different approaches for delivering audio and tactile interpretation in these areas. These take the form of a series of separate exhibits in different areas of the Museum, which were installed in late Summer 2005.



Above: Ralph Jandrell, an independent potter and tenant of the Coalport China Museum working on the tactile cup panels.

Top Right: Members of the local community recording 'voiceovers' as part of the project.



A tactile panel showing the decoration on a Coalport jug. The jug itself is in the bottom left corner of the display case.

Tactile Cups

In order to enable visitors to understand the history of the Coalport China Works and the china that was produced here we have developed an innovative display of tactile cups with accompanying audio recordings which are located in the first gallery of the Museum. Six distinctive cup shapes were selected from different periods of the Coalport factory's history, from the early 19th century through to the 20th century, and 'sacrificial' examples of each cup were sourced. The cups were then used to make moulds from which a special 'half-cup' in a surrounding flat panel was cast in bone china. All this work was carried out by a potter who is a tenant of the Coalport China Museum. The panel also includes a Braille caption briefly describing each cup. These six panels were then fitted together into a larger panel with an accompanying push-button audio system which enables the visitor to listen to a recorded narrative about each cup. These narratives, recorded by members of the local community, describe the shape of each cup and explain how it reflects changing fashions and fits in to the wider history of the factory.

Tactile Panels

The beauty of Coalport china lies not just in the wonderful range of shapes that were produced at the factory, but also in the high-quality decoration that was painted or printed onto the china. In order to enable visitors with visual impairments to understand the range of different decorative styles used at the factory we developed four

tactile panels presenting the decorative designs to be seen on four different objects. These are in the form of a raised tactile outline overlaid above a full-colour reproduction of the object. The panels are mounted in the first gallery of the Museum, alongside the objects they relate to. It is hoped that eventually we will be able to include accompanying audio descriptions for these pieces as well.

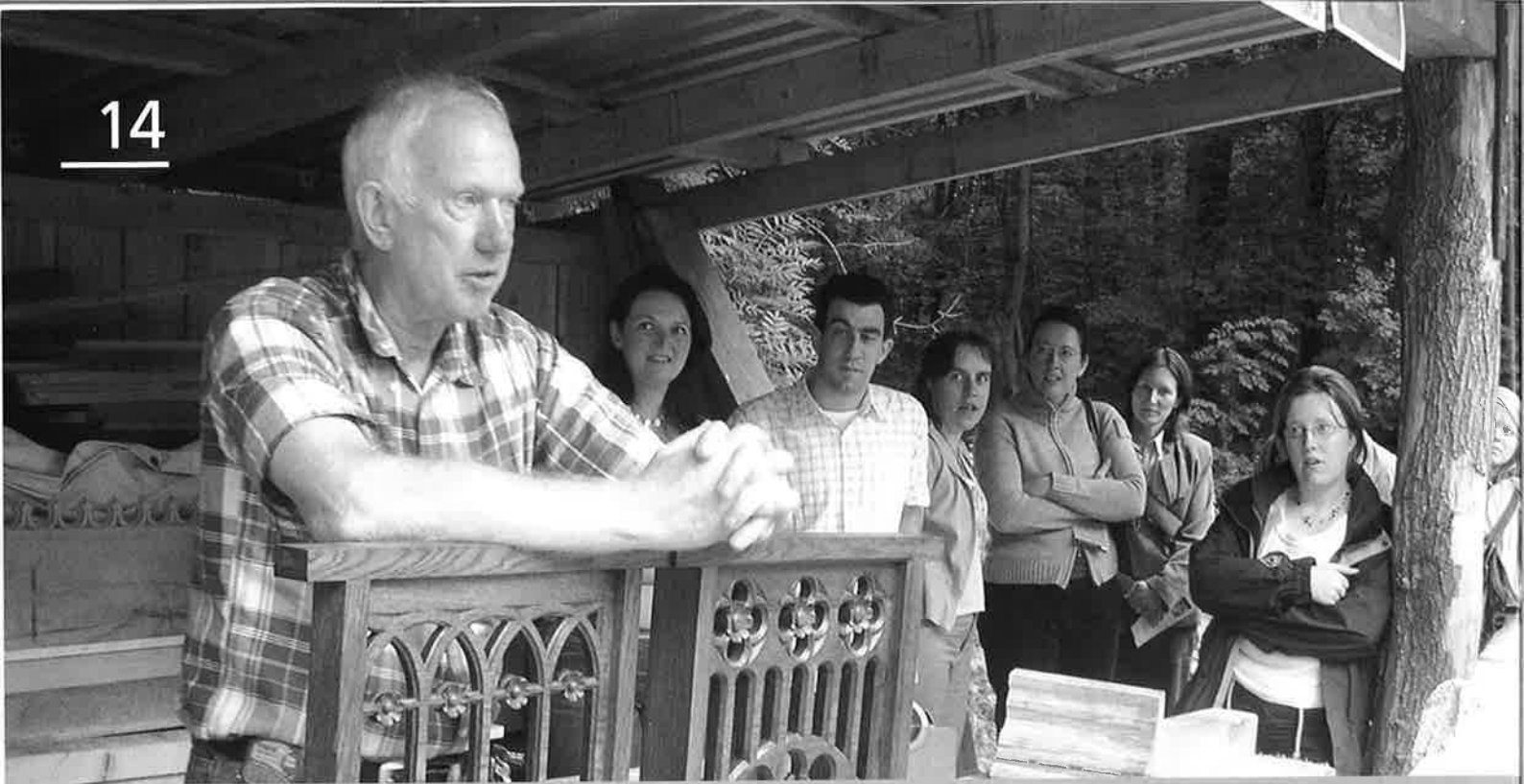
Oral History

The Coalport China Museum possesses an extensive oral history archive of recordings of the reminiscences of former employees of the Coalport China Works, which were made in the 1970s and 1980s. However until now we have not been able to make them available to visitors within the Museum, and the format they were recorded on was rapidly becoming obsolete. Luckily, as part of this project the Dog Rose Trust was not only able to transfer the recordings onto CD for us, but they also put together three CDs of selected highlights from the recordings (the full versions run to several hours in length) which are available on a three-CD player system in one of the historic workshop areas of the Museum. The tracks have been arranged thematically on the CDs to cover different aspects of the workers' reminiscences: the processes involved in china manufacture at Coalport, the working lives of employees and aspects of daily life in the Ironbridge Gorge. This gives visitors an insight into experiences of the china workers and enables them to identify with the human stories behind the fine china they can see on display.

Transport and Industry

The Coalport China Museum not only covers the history of the Coalport China Works, but also explores the wider history of Coalport as a 'new town' of the 1790s. But again our displays of local social and industrial history are contained in a gallery which currently provides poor intellectual access for those with visual impairments. The Dog Rose Trust worked with members of the local community to create an audio narrative outlining the history of transport and industry in Coalport. This recording is triggered as visitors enter our social history gallery, enabling them to gain a broader understanding of the local area from the 18th through to the 20th centuries.

These audio and tactile pieces have only just been installed, and it is too early yet to report on their effectiveness, but we have commenced a process of evaluation for all the new exhibits. Initial observations suggest that the project will not only enable visitors with visual impairments to enjoy and learn from our galleries and displays for the first time, but will also greatly enhance the level of interpretation for all visitors. There is of course much more we would like to do with this project, and still many areas around the site which require further interpretation in order to make them accessible for visitors with visual impairments, and we are currently seeking further funding to enable us to extend the project. However we are delighted that we are able to improve some areas of the site, and are very grateful to the Dog Rose Trust for all the hard work they have put into this project, which has resulted in an innovative and exciting series of audio and tactile exhibits.



CONFERENCE 2005: Delegates' Reports

I was one of two SHCG members lucky enough to receive a free place at this year's Conference, based at four of National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) in South Wales.

**Ellen Chapman—Post Graduate Student
University of Newcastle.**

As a doctoral student money is always a little short and as someone involved in academic research I often find it all too easy to lose sight of the practical issues of social history curatorship so I really appreciated the chance to listen to curators and museum professionals discussing practical approaches to the interpretation of their collections. While I enjoyed the practical nature of the sessions, many of the curators I spoke to said that the conference provided them with an opportunity to move beyond the day to day nitty gritty of curatorship and consider wider theoretical issues. The Conference had something for everyone!

We've decided to split the review of the Conference into two parts. I'm going to write about Thursday and Friday morning's sessions and then Rachael, the other lucky

recipient of a funded place, will discuss the sessions of Friday afternoon and Saturday.

The weekend began on Thursday at the National Museum and Gallery in Cardiff. After a much needed buffet lunch to restore us all after our journeys we settled down to the opening session, on current museum projects in south Wales. The first two papers introduced the NMGW sites and the issues facing them in the representation of Welsh identities, a subject dear to my heart as it's the topic of my research. We were lucky enough to gain an insider's view of the eight national museums from Mike Houlihan, the Director of NMGW. Mike discussed the challenges facing the NMGW in representing the many diverse identities of Wales and the issue of who decides which narrative of national identity is privileged as the national identity? He went on to address a tendency of social history museums towards micro history, focussing too narrowly on regional or national stories without addressing them in context. Mike stressed that all histories, whether local, regional or national, have links with broader global events and trends. Museums should strive to interpret their specific histories within this wider context, for example addressing the changes immigration and emigration can make on an area's culture, society and identity.

The second paper, by Dr Rhiannon Mason of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, gave an outsider's analysis of the NMGW and their representations of Welshness. Rhiannon's key question was if and how Welsh identity is staged differently at the different sites within NMGW, the topic of a book she is currently producing. Three key issues were raised: whether national museums still have a place in globalised and so-called post national contemporary society; what a national museum is and how the NMGW are national; and what the NMGW can tell us about Welsh national identities. Rhiannon stressed the multiplicity of Welsh identities, both cultural, ethnic and civic. She went on to discuss the different ways in which a museum can be national - by proclaiming the nation's status through the value of its collections like the National Museum and Gallery in Cardiff, or by representing the nation through its collections like the Museum of Welsh Life, or by representing specific elements of the nation like Big Pit, the National Mining Museum of Wales, or the Welsh Slate Museum. Rhiannon concluded that the NMGW represent a multiplicity of Welsh identities - the many different versions of Wales and the many different ways in which to be Welsh.

Left: Ray Smith, Senoir Conservation Officer, Historic Buildings Unit, Museum of Welsh Life talking to delegates about reconstructing a church at St Fagan's.

The last paper in this session was given by Anna Smith of Cardiff Council on the Cardiff Museum Project. Although Cardiff is home to two of the NMGW it unusually does not possess a museum dedicated to the history of the city itself. Campaigns for such a museum have been running for around 20 years. Anna outlined where the project stands at the moment. The current focus is on temporary exhibitions, made up of loaned objects, the collection of oral histories and on the development of an archive. There is as yet no permanent collection of objects, in part because the museum project has not yet found a building, but the intangible and virtual material being collected will be of much use to the future city museum. Anna stressed the importance of working with the other museums and heritage sites of Cardiff, in order to ensure that each site has its own key area of expertise or interest and to prevent any overlap.

After a break for tea and biscuits and a chance to digest the many interesting points raised by these three papers we reconvened for the second session, which gave us two practical responses to the Museum Association's *Collections for the Future* report. Graeme Meggeson, from Tyne and Wear Museums, continued the theme of partnership raised by Anna Smith as he discussed the development of the Regional Resource Centre, a collection storage facility in which space is shared by Tyne and Wear Museums, Beamish Museum and several smaller museums. Graeme illustrated how the project's objectives fit into the context of current museum policy as outlined in the *Collections for the Future* report, for example in the prioritisation of collections, conservation issues and in improving public access. Fiona Orsini, of the Museum of London, gave the last paper of the day, on the *Exploring 20th Century London* project. This partnership project between the Museum of London, the London Transport Museum and several others will produce an online learning database on the social history of the English capital in the 20th century through the partnership museums' collections. Fiona discussed the stages of the project, from surveys and focus groups to identify potential users to the design of the website itself. She stressed the need for close partnership work between the various museums involved, in order to ensure a standard style of documentation and digitisation.

The day ended with an all too brief chance to explore the National Museum and Gallery's exhibitions, which could have taken up a day on their own but were curtailed by the need to put our glad rags on

ready for the evening meal, an event just as important as the more formal sessions. This was a chance to mingle with curators from all over the country and from all levels of the profession, and to discuss the day's papers at leisure. I really benefited from the opportunity to hear so many different perspectives on issues of social history interpretation.

Friday began bright and early with a coach trip to the nearby Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans, on the outskirts of Cardiff. Our base for the day was the lecture room of Oakdale Miners' Institute, re-erected at the museum in 1995. This was interpretation in its own right: listening to papers in the same room that the miners of Oakdale once attended lectures. We listened to three curators giving us their personal experiences of maintaining the balance between interpretation and collection care in the display of objects. First to speak were Julian Bell and Hannah Miller from the Weald and Downland Museum, a site in many ways similar to the Museum of Welsh Life. At the Weald and Downland Museum the maintenance and care of its 45 re-erected buildings, dating from the 13th to the 19th century, has been incorporated into the site's interpretation. Care of the collections takes place in public view, during opening hours, and maintenance is often carried out using period methods and tools. The problems of a regular programme of care and maintenance were addressed, with a collection in store that is growing all the time as well as the re-erected buildings, which are on permanent display. The on site Gridshell Artefact Store, opened in 2002, has helped to solve these problems. It provides well organised storage with up-to-date environmental controls and is accessible by both staff and visitors, continuing the theme of maintenance as part of the interpretation. The next paper was given by Ruth Shuttleworth of the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester. Ruth discussed the planning stage for the revamping of the museum's Power Hall and the interpretation and presentation of its massive steam engines. The framework of the *Inspiring Learning for All* and its generic learning outcomes (GLOs) was used in the development of the plan, which will include the renovation of the building itself, improvements to the displays and interpretation, and improvements in access. Ruth explained the three styles of interpretation in use at the site: first person period guides, third person modern guides, and working replicas of some of the engines.

The rest of the morning was filled with one of three hour long workshops featuring

visits to some of the Museum of Welsh Life's buildings. The choice was between the 1950s prefab (a clear favourite with the SHCG members!), the Corn Mill and the Church. I have to admit that I didn't go to any of the workshops. Remembering the very short time given to look around the National Museum and Gallery on Thursday I decided to spend the hour exploring the rest of the Museum of Welsh Life, as it is one of the sites under analysis in my current research.

Before I hand over to Rachael and her review of Friday afternoon and Saturday, I would like to say how much I enjoyed the Conference and the chance to meet curators from around the country. I had a really enjoyable and interesting weekend and hope to return next year (wallet allowing!)



Oakdale Miners Institute, Museum of Welsh Life St Fagan's.

Following on from the more theoretical sessions at the beginning of the conference, the second half took a change of direction exploring the practical realities we face when we interpret our collections.

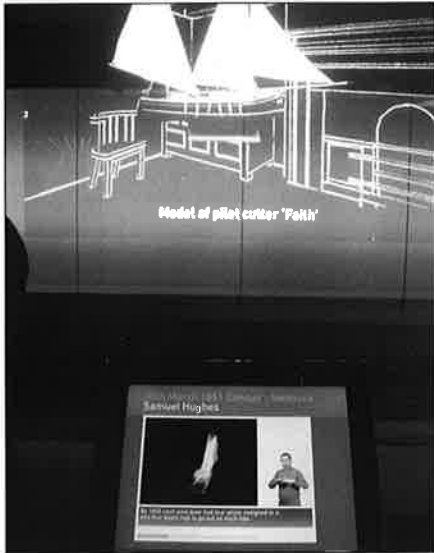
Rachel Chambers

**Assistant Keeper (Human History)
Warwickshire Museums.**

This year's conference theme of interpretation was particularly timely given the recent publication of the Museums Associations' *Collections for the Future* report. By offering such a varied programme, which dealt with theory and practice in equal measure, the conference provided a useful framework for us to think through our own responses to the big questions asked by *Collections for the Future*.

So, on a wet afternoon at the Museum of Welsh Life at St. Fagans Emma Lee from Reading Museums Service told us about the innovative ways they have found to interpret their loan box collections and some of the developments planned as part of a recent Heritage Lottery award.

As the largest loan box operation in the Country, Reading is now a model for other museum loan box schemes. Emma was able



New Technology at the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea.

to share with the group some practical tips learnt along the way - from the ideal weight of boxes (about 12-13kg) to the importance of professionally designed teachers' notes. There were also a number of ingenious packaging ideas, such as the Perspex sandwiches designed to allow children to handle objects without touching them. For someone as thrilled by a well-cut piece of Plastazote as I am, this was a real treat!

From loans services to reminiscence sessions, the next speaker Fiona Ure, from Leicester Environment & Heritage Services, explored what museums can offer to groups who are largely excluded from the traditional museum visiting experience.

In her lively and engaging paper, Fiona shared her experiences of running object-based reminiscence sessions with a group of older people with learning difficulties.

Again, whilst offering some useful practical hints and tips, Fiona also contributed to the overall conference theme of interpretation and the power of 'the real thing'. How, for instance, can you begin to use historic objects to tell stories with groups of people who have little or no understanding of time and history - concepts that we as museum professionals take for granted. Why, indeed, should museums even consider doing this kind of work? For Fiona, the answer was clear: because we're so good at it!

For the remainder of the second day, we were lucky enough to be given a sneak preview of the brand new National Waterfront Museum, Swansea by Steph Mastoris, the Director, and his team. Walking around this fabulously good looking new building it was easy to understand the staff's obvious delight in their new space.

The new museum has a clear interpretative vision - 'to showcase and



Big Pit, preparing for the Underground Tour.

celebrate industry and innovation in the whole of Wales past and present'. However, whilst aiming to place people at the heart of the experience, the museum relies heavily on technology to tell their stories. There are some intriguing ideas - from the contemporary collecting 'pods' in the 'Frontiers' gallery to the array of impressive interactive gadgets - It will be fascinating to come back again and see how these ideas work in practice.

In a short session after our guided tours, some of those involved in developing the museum described their aims for the future. The education team is presently devising a formal education offering that consciously steers away from purely curriculum focussed activities. By placing a greater emphasis on supporting key skills, such as communication and understanding historical chronology, they hope to enable visiting groups to engage with the new displays.

For the curators and interpreters, it is clear that their aspirations don't stop the day the Museum opens. They plan to go on collecting contemporary material in an effort to represent the vibrant industries of modern Wales. By using techniques such as oral history, they will be showcasing the human stories behind the machinery and scientific advances - an area where other industry museums have not perhaps been so strong.

Day 3 of the conference took the theme of interpretation and technology a step further within the backdrop of a converted mining museum - The Big Pit! This was what we had all been waiting for: a chance to judge the winner of this year's Gulbenkian prize for ourselves.

It is easy to see how the museum impressed the Gulbenkian judges. The site itself is hugely atmospheric with its towering pit engine but it is the staff of former miners

who turn this experience into something really special. Proud of their mining heritage they told us how they would still work underground today if the mines re-opened but they also shared their terrifying experiences of danger and death. Former pit buildings, such as the old baths, have been sensitively transformed into display spaces. Importantly, the experience is not overly sanitised and a few swear words even crept into the script.

After the tours, we returned to more (very welcome) tea and Welsh cakes and the final papers in the conference programme. These three papers all looked at interpretation from different perspectives, starting with audio and visual media.

Zelda's paper, *Truth, Fudge or Fiction*, explored the theme of 'the real thing' - getting as near as we can to the truth or essence of an object.

As part of the recent capital development project at Newcastle's Discovery Museum, Zelda and her team redesigned and interpreted the 'Working Lives' gallery. The redisplay relies heavily on audio-visual media or AV. Out of a pot of £368,000, nearly two thirds was spent on the AV. Zelda explained the rationale and creative process behind the cornerstone of the redisplay - the 'Object Theatre'.

The 'Object Theatre' was designed to harness key objects from the collection to tell different aspects of the stories of Newcastle's workers over the last 200 years. It is a semi-enclosed space with seating and a large display case housing 17 objects. Projected behind each object in turn, there is a series of short films. These films, as Zelda wasn't afraid to admit, consciously 'go for the jugular' employing fact and fiction to engage the audience. We were shown one film, for example, set in late 19th century Newcastle, about a teenage girl dying from lead

poisoning as a direct result of having worked in a white lead factory.

Zelda used this discussion of the Object Theatre to ask some bigger questions about interpretation. Do we, as museum curators, too often obscure the real power of the objects by overlaying our own messages to suit our displays? Should we try to allow objects to speak for themselves, if in fact this is ever possible? Her conclusion was a pragmatic one reminding us that the art of museum interpretation does not lie solely with searching for the almost mystical essence of our objects but in doing all the wonderful things we all do within challenging boundaries set by buildings and budget.

The theme of interpretation 'on a shoestring' was developed further by the next paper given by Vince Taylor and John Burton from the Bedworth Parsonage project. If any of us in the room were worrying about money and resources, we were swiftly reminded of how much more difficult life is in small, often volunteer-run, heritage centres like Bedworth. Nevertheless, Vince and John were able to inspire us with their inventive use of PowerPoint technology to develop a touch screen kiosk.

Finally, Vicki's Wood's paper offered a fitting conclusion to the conference as well as the 'reality check' that its' title promised. In posing the question: 'can museums ever tell it like it is', Vicki adeptly summarised the different themes of a 3 day conference programme which looked at everything from interpretation in rural life museums to modern museums of science and industry, virtual reality and the web.

She also offered a museological context to our discussions. Vicki explored how curators over the last 30 years have responded to the concept of object and objective reality with techniques such as recreated Victorian towns, third person re-enactors and the smell machines of Yorvik. She questioned how far we can get with these empathic or experiential approaches - does smelling a 20th century reproduction of a Tudor kitchen ever really help visitors appreciate what it may actually have been like to work in one?

More than this, Vicki offered a note of comfort and reassurance. Yes, we need to actively challenge ourselves to think of new ways to interpret and use our collections but we are already offering our visitors a wealth of exciting opportunities. She concluded that museums are as much about real people as real objects and we should be less concerned with theory and any 'fudges' we might make. Ultimately, our visitors are much more expert at identifying 'real' objects and using them to tell their own stories than we might think.



Object Focus: Oddfellow Masks

The many friendly and fraternal organisations that exist and have existed across the world have a linked feature in the equipment and costumes that have been used in their dramas of initiation. These dramas have parallels in other cultures and periods of history but are very striking in the context of secular and increasingly industrialised western society.

Mark J R Dennis—Curator

Library and Museum of Freemasonry.

One of the most extreme of costume items is the mask. The group of three illustrated relate to 'The Oddfellows' which originated in the 1700s and continues to thrive in several unrelated organisations or 'Unities' on both sides of the Atlantic. The masks were recently exhibited, and in a review the *Museums Journal* was

prevented just in time from captioning them as 'Masonic Oddfellow Masks'. This underlines the confusion in the museum world where fraternal organisations are concerned. A generation ago vast numbers of men women and children belonged to this world of secular ritual fraternities but now they are all but forgotten. They are often grouped together as 'Masonic' but there are very clear differences between the masonic orders and the others.

The development of fraternal organisations with regalia, foundation myths and ritual initiations is very much a thing of the 1700s and 1800s. This way of associating was enormously widespread in Georgian society, and was made use of at one extreme by frivolous societies such as the Bucks and Gregorians, which were little more than drinking clubs in regalia, and at the other by mutual benefit clubs generically known as friendly societies which aimed to provide

medical expenses and widows' pensions for their members. In the middle were fraternal societies such as the Freemasons, whose core was the emphasis on moral development through ritual plays and whose charitable activity was unrelated to the amount paid into funds by each individual. The rowdy drinking societies died out with the end of the Georgian era, and eventually most of the other non-mutual societies did too, leaving Freemasonry as the sole example of a once-widespread British tradition. The nearest parallel today is the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes who were actually formed as a deliberate lampooning of freemasonry in 1822 but rapidly became serious and remain the second largest fraternity in the UK.

In regalia the apron was a common feature, deriving from the traditional trade aprons that gave instant and commonly understood identification and provided a very suitable place for the organisations' iconography to be placed. Sashes and collars, breast decorations and even robes and costumes were also used depending on the complexity of the ceremonies and the wealth of the members. Room settings could be elaborate, with props and furniture.

The Oddfellow initiation was frightening, with water, noise and physical discomfort all playing their part in making the experience memorable for the candidate. When finally his blindfold was removed the members were all masked to prevent identification until he had sworn his oath. The lodge room was then restored to light and the other members unmasked to greet the new Oddfellow and take him to the festive meal that followed.

In 1799 the Unlawful Societies act banned much of the ritual activity of these societies and in the process destroyed many completely. The Act was passed by a Government panic-stricken at the thought of revolutionaries hidden in British society and eager to prevent any gatherings in closed rooms or bound by oaths of allegiance. Alone of the fraternal organisations the Freemasons were permitted to continue provided they declared the names of all their members to the authorities. The 1966 Wilson government repealed the law, which had also been used to prosecute the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

Officially the Oddfellows ceased to exist in this period from 1799 to the mid 19th century; but objects tell a different story. All through this period watches, ceramics and regalia appear with the same three masks showing that, in fact, the Oddfellows had survived and were prospering. By the 1850's they were the largest fraternity with a membership larger than freemasons, so much so after a special Royal Commission the Friendly Society Acts were amended so they

and others with their ritual and regalia could register. They still exist today, providing financial products for the public. The largest grouping is the Manchester Unity but there are others. They retain their regalia and ceremonies on an optional basis, still wearing collars and aprons, but not masks. The rituals were reintroduced during the mid 1800s but, in common with other friendly societies, were resumed in a more sedate and 'masonic' form with word and gesture replacing the earlier extremes of drama.

The masks are 19th century and may be survivals of English examples or possibly imported from America where the ritual continued unchanged for some time. In American fraternity, especially freemasonry, the use of masks in the ritual dramas continued into the 20th century, with many ceremonies being effectively theatre plays to be observed rather than participated in. For this reason US masonic halls are much consulted by theatre historians as props, stage equipment and scenery are in many cases more than a hundred years old.

The masks are constructed of shaped and painted wire gauze. Knotted skeins of hair are attached and the whole is held on the head by a linen bag that acts as a hat to

support them. The conservation issues are mainly around the stability of the gauze and associated paint but these examples appear in good condition. There is the probability of lead-based paint being used and the temptation to allow duplicate examples to be tried on should be resisted.

The pocket watch was purchased by the Library and Museum of Freemasonry in the last few weeks - it was, of course, in the auction catalogue as a 'Masonic' watch! Holdings of this material are scattered and many of the fraternal orders concerned have vanished. The artefacts shown in local museums are often mis-identified and shorn of context. They represent a vast pool of working class identity and a topsy-turvy world where noblemen wore tradesmen's aprons and farm labourers became 'knights' with breast-stars, collars and sashes.

The Library and Museum of Freemasonry holds a wide range of material from these societies and is happy to help with identification. The summer exhibition of Friendly and Fraternal orders 'Brothers and Sisters, Knights and Nobles' is currently being restructured with a view to offering it as a touring exhibition.

BOOK CORNER

Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies:

Their Badges and Regalia

Victoria Solt Dennis



'Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies: Their Badges and Regalia' by Victoria Solt Dennis.

A Shire Book
(Discovering series, no.295),
Shire Publications Ltd, Bucks.
ISBN-10 : 0 7478 0628 4.
£10.99p. 2005.

Victoria Solt Dennis has used the collections of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry as the core of her work for this impressive 160 page addition to the well known Shire Discovery series. Most social history collections contain items belonging to the many friendly and fraternal societies that were established in the 18th and 19th centuries. Their regalia is often complex, difficult to identify and can be totally mystifying to the outsider.

This little book does much to explain who the various societies were, how they operated and identifies some of their regalia. There are separate chapters on the Freemasons, Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes (RAOB), Druids, Oddfellows, Foresters, etc., with short accounts of their histories and their associated regalia, illustrated with colour photographs. (Although it is a shame that some of the photographs are so small that details are difficult to make out.) There is also a very useful section on the symbolism used on the artefacts of the most popular societies.

There are some gaps of course, which is inevitable in a book this size. Some societies are not mentioned at all - the Grand Independent Order of Loyal Caledonian Corks for example. Some of the most



Oddfellow Silver cased verge watch by Berrington of Bolton, hallmarked 'Birmingham 1830'. Old father time and justice support the Oddfellow shield. A wide range of wares were produced for use in the 'normal' world by fraternal members.

common items used by the societies are also missing - for example the crook staffs of the Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds, and the clay pipes of the RAOB, which were used in their rituals as well as for convivial purposes. Also the staffs used by the smaller West Country Friendly Societies etc. are not mentioned, and Margaret Fuller's ground breaking book on these is not included in the bibliography. The lack of footnotes detailing where items photographed came from and the origin of quotations is also frustrating at times. Furthermore, there is no mention of the extensive holdings of material of this kind held in provincial museums - the only regional museums mentioned in the Places to Visit section are MERL and the People's History Museum in Manchester.

However, these are small points and this book is an extremely useful and accessible introduction to a difficult subject. Friendly Societies were once very important to a large number of people at all levels of society except the poor, and a book about them in such a widely available series is to be welcomed. It will be an invaluable addition to the bookshelf of any social history museum.

Sherri Steel

Curator of Social History,
York Castle Museum,
York Museums Trust.

SHCG COMMITTEE 2005-2006

CHAIR: BRIONY HUDSON
Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society,
1 Lambeth High Street,
London SE1 7JN
Tel: 020 7572 2211 / 2210
Email: bhudson@rpsgb.org.uk

SECRETARY: HANNAH MADDOX
Curator of Community History,
Bridewell Museum,
Bridewell Alley,
Norwich NR2 1AQ
Tel: 01603 614018
Email: hannah.maddox@norfolk.gov.uk

TREASURER: ZELDA BAVEYSTOCK
International Centre for Cultural
and Heritage Studies,
University of Newcastle,
Bruce Building,
Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU
Tel: 0191 222 7419

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: KITTY ROSS
Abbey House Museum,
Abbey Road,
Kirkstall LS5 3EH
Tel: 0113 2305492
Email: membership@shcg.org.uk

NEWS EDITOR: SARAH MAULTBY
York Castle Museum,
The Eye of York,
York YO1 9RY
Tel: 01904 650335
Email: sarah.maultby@ymt.org.uk

JOURNAL EDITOR: REBECCA FARDELL
c/o All Saints' Vicarage,
40 Beaconsfield Road,
Wick, Littlehampton,
West Sussex BN17 6LN
Tel: 07792 722445
Email: rebecca_fardell@hotmail.com

WEB MANAGER: PATRICK COLQUHOUN
114 Salehurst Road,
Brockley,
London SE4 1AP
Email: patrickcol@supanet.com

**SEMINAR ORGANISER /
EMAIL LIST ADMINISTRATOR: JACK KIRBY**
Science & Industry Curator,
Thinktank Trust,
Millennium Point,
Curzon Street,
Birmingham B4 7XG
Tel: 0121 202 2279
Email: jack.kirby@thinktank.ac

SEMINAR ORGANISER: EMMA LLOYD
Royal Cornwall Museum,
River Street,
Truro TR1 2SJ
Tel: 01872 242785
Email: emma.lloyd@royalcornwallmuseum.org.uk

firstBASE CO-ORDINATOR: STEPH MASTORIS
National Waterfront Museum,
Swansea,
Wales
Email: Steph.Mastoris@nmgw.ac.uk

**OTHER COMMITTEE MEMBERS:
JILL HOLMEN**
Collections Manager,
Epping Forest District Museum,
39/41 Sun Street,
Waltham Abbey,
Essex EN9 1EL

REBECCA WALKER
Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery,
Riversley Park,
Coton Road,
Nuneaton CV11 5TU
Tel: 02476 350720
Email:
rebecca.walker@nuneatonandbedworth.gov.uk

FIONA ORSINI
Museum of London,
London Wall,
London EC2Y 5HN
Email: fiona.orsini@lmmuseum.co.uk

GENERAL ENQUIRIES: enquiry@shcg.org.uk

**EMAIL LIST ENQUIRIES:
shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk**

Social History
Curators Group



enquiry@shcg.org.uk www.shcg.org.uk