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ISSUE 61



**Collecting for Tomorrow,
Brent Museum**

Social History Under Fire

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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:

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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:
9TH NOVEMBER 2008**

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.

Alternative formats:
Electronic copies and alternative formats are available on request. Please call 01234 353323 or Email: LSaul@bedford.gov.uk

Send all contributions to:
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Front Cover: *Collecting for Tomorrow*, see pg.7
Contents Photo: *Making the most of plastics*, see pg.12

This is certainly a bumper issue, thanks to all those who have contributed their articles and news to this edition. This issue explores a variety of projects in Theory and Practice including Brent Museum's contemporary collecting to reflect different communities, *Pulling the Plug* with the Royal Pump Rooms exploration of their medical collections through the development of oral history records, and why Social History curators are coming under fire from different sectors.

We are all looking forward to an exciting Annual Conference 2008 *Ahead of the Game*, which aims to help members prepare for and provide ideas and inspiration in planning towards using collections in the 2012 Olympics and the Cultural Olympiad.

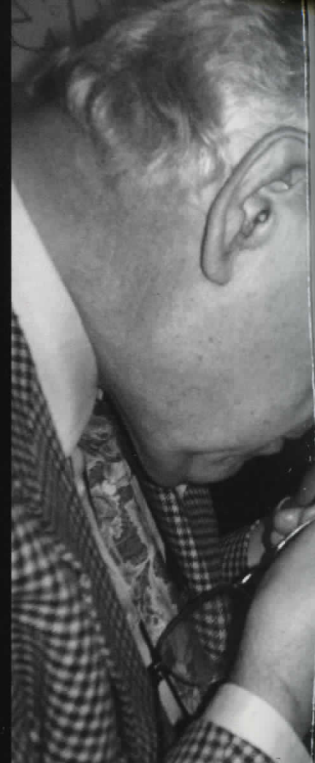
The reviews cover the SHCG seminars that have taken place since the last issue of the News. The first looks at making the most of and caring for plastics, and the second called *Trash or Treasure*, explores printed ephemera. The object focus highlights one object from Lancaster that featured as a mystery object on the SHCG email list and an interesting poster from the London Transport Museum's collections being understood increasingly through oral testimonies.

It seems to be all change at the moment on the SHCG committee. There will be five vacancies on committee available at the elections held on the 12th July during the AGM at the Conference. We look forward to seeing some new faces, as well as some familiar ones. Please contact Hannah Maddox if you are interested in joining the committee, or just helping out at seminars or conference.

I would like to thank Sarah Maulty, the previous editor of SHCG News for all her hard work. Sarah stepped down as News Editor for her maternity leave in March and I am happy to report that she had a bouncing baby boy on the 4th April.

The next issue of the news will have a call for articles with a deadline of the 9th November 2008. I have recently moved and am now working at Bedford Museum, please contact me on LSaul@bedford.gov.uk with any enquiries, articles or news. Enjoy reading this summer issue.

LYDIA SAUL—EDITOR



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With 2012 fast approaching, this year's conference will examine how social history curators can make links to the Olympics and the Cultural Olympiad.

Speakers will clarify the strategic framework and opportunities offered by the Cultural Olympiad and looking at how social change in London in the run up to 2012 will be recorded by the city's museums. *Ahead of the Game* will also feature practical case studies and papers from museums who have successfully interpreted themes of sport and leisure or creatively engaged young people as part of their community outreach and audience development work.

The conference will be based in Greenwich, London and will include visits to the Museum of Childhood, Hackney Museum, the National Maritime Museum and Museum in Docklands

Themes over the three days include the strategic framework of the Cultural Olympiad, interpreting sport and leisure and engaging young people in the work of social history museums. There will be opportunities to meet fellow social historians, hear about inspirational projects and get practical lessons and advice to apply to your own museum.

Speakers include:

Michael Rowe - Curator,
World Rugby Museum.
*Our Sporting Life: The sports heritage
network and London 2012*

Rebecca Lee - Hub Fundraising &
Development Manager,
Renaissance Yorkshire China In Yorkshire

Victoria Rogers - Exhibitions Officer,
Cardiff Museum Project.
Bats, Boots...and Balls!
*Making a social history exhibition
out of a city's sporting life*

Sarah Barnwell
- Cultural Opportunity Manager.
London 2012 The Cultural Olympiad

Dr Peter Davies
- Senior Lecturer in History & Media,
University of Huddersfield
*Pubs, Post Offices and Police Stations:
Bowling a Local Community Over with
a Cricket Heritage Project*

Alexander Jackson - PhD student,
Leeds Metropolitan University
in partnership with the
National Football Museum
*Jumpers for Goalposts: exploring the changing
place of football in childhood from the 1880s to
the modern day*

Hamish MacGillivray
-Freelance Museum Project Manager
& Steve Hill - Adur District Council
*100 Years of Passion and Pride;
the Crystal Palace Football Club Centenary
Exhibition*

We look forward to seeing you there.

Kay Jones & Georgina Young
Conference Organisers

SHCG Email List roundup

SHCG's email list passed its third birthday in January. Over 160 personal and institutional members nationwide (plus a few international members) are now subscribed to the list. If you haven't joined yet, see the end of this article for more information on how to sign up.

Object identifications continue to be one of the most useful features of the list. In the last six months, objects up for identification included fragments of two pharmaceutical

jars and a piece of World War Two memorabilia. There was also a successful identification of a fine specimen of a Whist marker from about the 1890s, used to record scores. The marker was an example of inlaid of Japanese Shibuyana ware, with floral lacquering called hiramaki-e. Identifying relatively unusual objects like this is where the list really comes into its own.

The list is also a useful place to appeal for information when researching particular topics or types of object – enquiries in recent

months have been on subjects as diverse as Radio Caroline North, a salt box, the Leeds music scene including vocalist Frankie Vaughan, 'Consul' one person air raid shelters from World War Two, Lyons corner house place settings and an appeal for items relating to hair culture in collections. As ever, social history curators cover a huge range of areas in their work.

One question demonstrated the need to be aware of health and safety issues when working with collections. A museum had a gas mask leaking a yellow powder. Gas masks can contain asbestos, and irrespective of the identification of the powder (for which specialist advice should be sought) helpful suggestions were made about caring for gas masks – information is available from the Imperial War Museum, and specialist companies can remove the asbestos so that the mask is safe. On a lighter note, apparently children now associate gas masks with Doctor Who following the appearance of gas mask wearing zombies in the programme. This may be a challenge for museums seeking to educate visitors, but it's a good example of the changing cultural relevance of artefacts.

Sometimes, the queries on the list are about topics other than collections – such as what charges are made to groups for local history lectures. Responses showed a range of policies and charges according to local situations. The discussion subsequently broadened to look at charges for other services. The list is also used to advertise jobs and invitations to tender for collections-related work. Like the rest of the list, this function is completely free to members, so why not make sure that your advert reaches SHCG members if you have relevant positions to fill?

Thinktank publishes collections and communities toolkit



Thinktank, Birmingham science museum, has published an online toolkit based on a new community engagement project. The museum opened a new exhibition, *Changing Times: Our messages from the past to the present* in February 2008.

The exhibition was developed by a diverse group of ten local residents drawn from four different local community groups and organisations.

The group chose the theme of the exhibition and selected the objects from the stored collections at Birmingham's Museum Collections Centre. The group's reasons for choosing the objects both individually and collectively form the basis of the exhibition interpretation, and the group worked with an external designer.

The project has succeeded in getting very different individuals to work together and created an exhibition full of resonant, personal interpretations of artefacts. Sustainable partnerships with local community organisations have also been developed.

The museum has published a toolkit entitled; *We Chose It! Connecting collections and communities*, which gives an outline and diary of the project, plus extensive lists of 'top tips' based on the project team's experiences.

For enquiries about the project contact:

Jack Kirby - Thinktank,
Birmingham Science Museum
Email: jack.kirby@thinktank.ac

The toolkit is available to download at <http://tinyurl.com/25un5u> (PDF, 5Mb).

Joining the list:

If you would like to join the list, please send an email to: shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk stating your name and whether you are a personal member or employed by an institutional member.

You will receive an automated acknowledgement of your request, then your request will be processed manually.

If you have any queries about the list please email Jack Kirby via: shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk

Newcastle Campus Tales

Over the past few years, oral history has become an important means of interpretation within the museum world. Drawing on this approach students of the Museum Studies course at Newcastle University's International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies have created three 10 minute online podcasts, challenging the student stereotype. *Pranks? Pints? and Protest?* tries to unveil the true relationship between the town and gown.

The reason for the podcast is that students at Newcastle University are sometimes seen as troublesome and inconsiderate to the city of which they are a part. Drunken antics, disruptive displays of political activism and general disregard for their fellow residents are often seen as typical student behaviour. In return, students often feel that they are not welcome in the community.

A range of students from the 1950s to the present day were contacted with the assistance of the Alumni Relations Office. Additionally members of the Newcastle community were asked to give their side of the story. The interviewees were asked to reminisce on themes such as RAG Week (Raising and Giving, an annual charity event), accommodation, social life and finances. Moreover, trivia and anecdotes from several eras of student life in Newcastle have been recorded. James Adamson, a former student narrated: 'There's a famous story of men at Newcastle University throwing their hats in the river because they were so disgusted that women came to the University and that's why we don't have hats at Graduation.'

The themes chosen are until today important factors for the student culture, as well as the community. The stories reveal how the presence of students has impacted on the city over the years and the evolution of the changing relationship of students and community. As student Ben Kenyon commented; 'I think that as a city and as a group of people Novocastrians are very welcoming friendly people. You know many times I've just stopped and had a bit of idle banter or a bit of a chat with someone in the shop or someone in a pub'.

This type of project was new to the majority of the students on the team. The project equipped them with essential transferable skills, which will be invaluable as their progress to their future careers in the Museum sector. Students had to master the challenge of utilising computer editing software, such as Audacity, in a successful manner. In addition to this, students gained an understanding of the techniques used to produce an informative interview, including handling professional electronic devices, like the Marantz digital recorder, and developing an interpersonal approach between interviewer and interviewees.

Recollections of the university will be preserved in oral history interviews that are being added to Tyne and Wear Museums' collections. Listeners are invited to share their own memories of Newcastle and the university on the website.

**Elisabeth Salmen -
University of Newcastle**

The podcast is now available online and can be found at:
<http://campustales.ncl.ac.uk>

London Transport Museum launches new online Museum

One of the world's most important collections of urban transport and graphic design can now be seen online at London Transport Museum's website:
www.ltmuseum.co.uk.

Visitors can browse over 1,400 objects from London Transport Museum's galleries, along with 16,000 historic photographs and 6,000 posters and artworks. The online museum is searchable by gallery or by object in the collection, and visitors can share stories based on their memories of the items shown.

They can also find out more about people from the past who helped keep the city moving; including Joseph Clough, who became London's first black bus driver in 1908, and Cast Iron Billy who drove cabs and omnibuses for over 40 years until 1877.

Sam Mullins, Chief Executive of London Transport Museum said, 'We developed the online Museum in order to make our collections as widely accessible as possible. The aim is to both inspire people to visit the Museum and also to enable them to follow up their visits with more research'. The online museum was supported with funding from Renaissance London and developed by the digital resources team at London Transport Museum.

**For more information
and images contact:**

Wendy Neville

Email: wendy.neville@ltmuseum.co.uk

Tel: 020 7565 7266

Have your say about SHCG's website

SHCG's partnership with Collections Trust (formerly MDA) means that we have a real opportunity to improve our website and make sure that it is doing what it needs to do. Following my appeal for feedback in the last edition of News, I've put together an online survey to collect your views on the current site, how and why you use it, and how you think we can improve it.

The feedback we've had so far has already

informed some immediate improvements, like a new 'resources' section, with downloadable past journals and our Object Lessons toolkits for identification. For anyone who has yet to make their views known, the survey is still open, and responses will go towards our work to redesign the website in the future.

Please go to: [www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=1VrnG7irtxgGMZXHAEXMAg_3d_3d)

1VrnG7irtxgGMZXHAEXMAg_3d_3d

The survey is only 10 questions long, and is all multiple choice, so it shouldn't take too long!

For more details please contact:

Victoria Rogers - SHCG Web Editor
Cardiff Museums Project,
The Old Library, The Hayes,
Cardiff. CF10 1BH
Email: vrogers@cardiff.gov.uk



Pulling the Plug

***Pulling the Plug* is a Wellcome Trust funded research project, run jointly by Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum and the Centre for the History of Medicine, University of Warwick, to record the memories and experiences of both patients and practitioners working at the NHS medical unit at the Royal Pump Rooms in the second half of the twentieth century.**

Vicki Slade & Dr Michael Bevan

Vicki Slade - Curatorial Officer
Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum

Dr Michael Bevan - Research Fellow
Centre for the History of Medicine,
University of Warwick.

Following the closure of the NHS physiotherapy and hydrotherapy unit at the Royal Pump Rooms in the 1990s the building was redeveloped and now houses Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, Leamington Library, Assembly Rooms, Tourist Information Centre and a Café. On moving to the building, the Art Gallery & Museum inherited the physio, hydro and electro therapy equipment that had been used in treatments. These additions to the collections, coupled with the history of the building itself fostered a programme of collecting, display and events which focussed on the history of spa

treatments. This programme included a 'Memory Pool', which encouraged those visitors to the Art Gallery & Museum who were treated at the Royal Pump Rooms to write down their memories and thus contribute to our knowledge of the history of the building.

The quantity and nature of responses to the 'Memory Pool' highlighted a lasting interest in the recent history of the Royal Pump Rooms among local people.

Pulling the Plug developed from the evident need to learn more about this period in the story of the building. The project also builds on an ongoing collaboration between Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum and the Centre for the History of Medicine at the University of Warwick. This partnership has resulted in several research projects over recent years.

Much of the material relating to the later history of the Royal Pump Rooms can be found amongst the papers of the local council and health authority, the archives of the Art Gallery & Museum and in the columns of local newspapers. These sources provide valuable information about finance, political infighting, civic planning and local health administration. They do not however tell us much about the everyday practice of physiotherapy and hydrotherapy at the Royal Pump Rooms.

Such was the unique nature of the Royal Pump Rooms, both as a building and in the



nature of its medical practice, that it is essential to know something about its daily life, its work practices and routines, the nature of its treatments and the experience of its staff and patients. Written sources supply very little regarding the day to day work of staff or the treatment of patients. We were, however, fortunate to be able to draw on the oral testimony of individuals who have personal recollections of working in or being treated at the Royal Pump Rooms.

In order to make use of this material a series of oral history interviews were conducted with former staff, patients and medical practitioners whose experience of the Royal Pump Rooms stretched from the late 1950s until 1990. Interviews were also carried out with individuals who had been involved with the proposed redevelopment of the building in the 1980's. One individual commented that one of the 'most important things we used to do at the Pump Rooms really were to do with the water. The exercise in the pool was what we offered that was different from anybody else'.

Informants were recruited through publicity in the local press and at the Art Gallery & Museum, and also by word of mouth. Separate interview schedules were drawn up for each category of informant, thereby allowing us to focus on the different experiences of those who worked at the Royal Pump Rooms: those who were treated there, those who carried out the treatments, and those who referred patients for treatment. The aim was to encourage each informant to talk about their particular memories of the Royal Pump Rooms. For example, physiotherapists and hydrotherapists were asked to describe their working environment, daily routines, workloads and treatment of patients. Patients were questioned about issues

including the types of treatment they received and they were asked to assess the benefits they derived from it. One patient's treatment consisted of the following; 'He (the practitioner) kind of turned my legs and my shoulders in opposite directions, like someone wringing a cloth!' Local medical practitioners were asked to describe their professional relationships with the Royal Pump Rooms: how they referred patients, their opinion of the service provided there and their views on the efficacy of physio and hydro therapies.

The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and an hour and usually took place in either the informant's own home or at the Royal Pump Rooms. Informants were given a general idea about the kind of subjects that would be raised during the interview but were not told the precise nature of the questions. They were also made aware of the uses to which the recordings might be put in the future. The interview schedule in fact provided only a basic guideline for the interview. The idea was that informants should be allowed to present their stories in the way in which they felt most comfortable and should be free from the restrictions of answering a rigidly ordered set of questions. In some cases, informants were also willing

to donate audio and visual material, photographs, books and drawings which will supplement the archive of interviews produced by the project.

Though some informants were initially hesitant at the start of the interview and unsure about the value of their memories, most quickly relaxed and found themselves remembering details of events which they had not thought about for many years. Overall, the interviews supply firsthand accounts of life at the Royal Pump Rooms during its later years as well as providing us with a valuable insight into the nature of spa therapy in the second half of the twentieth century.

A total of 27 interviews were recorded. These, together with transcripts, have been deposited at Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum and the Centre for the History of Medicine, University of Warwick. Already the interviews have been used in a talk about the recent history of the Royal Pump Rooms. In the future, we plan to use the oral history testimonies to help us reinterpret the medical equipment in our collections and they will also play a major role in the proposed rediscovery of the medical history galleries.

Collecting for Tomorrow

What do a Guinness bottle, a burnt Newcastle United scarf and a tin of Mong Lee Chang Mock Duck have in common? No, this is not the start of a hilarious Tommy Cooper sketch, but examples of museum objects that are helping to make up the collections of the future.

**Joe Carr - Curator
Brent Museum**

Can a museum ever truly reflect its communities? It is a challenge for a museum to fully represent a population, especially one that has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Through the effective use of contemporary collecting, Brent Museum strives to represent one of the most diverse communities in the country.

Brent Museum opened its doors to the public in 2006 after moving to its new site at

Willesden Green Library Centre in North-West London. With a total project cost of £2.5m the museum boasts a permanent gallery, temporary exhibition gallery and education space. The use of personal stories and community contributions are central, giving over 300 contributors a sense of ownership to the museum.

The London Borough of Brent is one of London's most culturally diverse boroughs. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups in Brent now make up the majority of the population at 54.7%, according to GLA projections (2001 census). It is therefore important that Brent Museum's collections represent this varied community and that people feel that the museum is relevant to their lives and is representative of them.

Contemporary collecting was central in developing Brent Museum, continuing the process of working with the local communities and ensuring that the museum



A workshop at Brent Museum as part of the British Museum / Brent Museum Cultural Exchange Project. (Courtesy of the British Museum)

continued to evolve and embrace the concept of being a 'community museum'.

The aim of our contemporary collecting is to collect and represent life in Brent over the past 50 years, to collect everyday objects as well as those indicative of events and issues important to the region. In doing so we can help to change the way museums are viewed by the public. This will help museums to remain relevant and provide an opportunity for people to engage and be involved. As well as physical 3D objects the definition of contemporary collecting has been widened to include oral history as well as photographic collections. There is much work to do, as the collections generally are made up of artefacts representative of a white, middle class, Victorian population. However, through relevant contemporary collecting projects Brent Museum is reaching out to its wider communities.

One such successful contemporary collecting project has been the Cultural Exchange Project in partnership with the British Museum. The aim of the project was to work with a number of community groups made up from young adults (16-24 year olds) and those representing Brent's diverse communities. A range of youth groups from across the London Borough of

Brent took part in object handling, art workshops and visits to both museums. In doing so they looked at the questions of what a museum means to them and how they should be represented through a museum. Through collecting oral history and photography, the project culminated in a museum exhibition in the Clore Education Centre at the British Museum (March 2008). This presented some of the participants, explored their personal reactions towards objects and included some examples of their work.

The Cultural Exchange Project aimed to increase the participants understanding of how both museums are relevant to their lives and how they can contribute and influence activities delivered by both organisations. This in turn will help to inspire a desire to interact with Brent Museum, the British Museum or other museums again in the future. It has helped to provide opportunities for further involvement with these groups after the life of the project. The project has been a success in recording the views and opinions of a range of different local communities and understanding their attitudes towards museums. The exhibition is currently at the British Museum and it will also be exhibited

at Brent Museum in the future.

Current contemporary collecting projects at Brent Museum also include working with Brent's developing Brazilian and Polish communities. Workshops and discussion groups will result in these groups helping museum staff to decide what artefacts the museum should acquire to represent their communities. Working with these groups includes explaining the processes museums go through in acquiring, documenting and conserving collections. This enables them to work with museum staff to decide what collections should be acquired, giving them a better understanding of museum issues, practices and problems. It is important that local communities have a say in what is most representative of them, which will in turn increase the feeling that museums are relevant to peoples lives.

Museums should try to represent the communities of which they are a part. In a time of rapid change and social movement it is a challenging task to be representative of our entire communities and their histories. However, through working with our local population we can continue to show that we appreciate everybody's participation through their opinions, lives and stories.



Photo courtesy of Cuning Museum.

Social history under fire

Social history museums and curators have recently been criticised in print from two very different directions. This article aims to analyse the arguments involved, and stimulate further debate.

Jack Kirby

The author is writing in a personal capacity.

In February, *Museums Journal* published an article by freelance journalist Scott Billings, entitled 'A sense of place'.

The article was trailed on the cover as investigating 'Why local history museums need to start breaking the mould'. Curiously, while museum directors and other commentators were interviewed, no serving social history curators are quoted in the article, making it rather one-sided.

The article is introduced with the assertion that social history museums 'often tell the same old stories', 'where the town is

merely a local case study of the broader picture'. This is blamed on 'the curator's wish to get as much as possible on display, with a chronological mapping of events'. Yet using local evidence to illustrate the national picture has a strong academic pedigree, for example in local studies relating to the English Civil War. Despite arguments against chronology, curators might argue that museums can show how the different periods fit together; a technique notably used at the Museum of London.

If the chronological approach reflects reality, it may be due to the National Curriculum, for which the suggested schemes of work for History are largely based around chronological periods. The Curriculum also specifies a local history study at Key Stage 2, which may include how the locality was changed by significant national or local developments: in other words, a case study.



Photo courtesy of Cuming Museum.

Billings argues that the design of local history museums is insufficiently distinctive, partly because the same firms of exhibition designers are often employed. It could be countered that as the primary audience for local museums is local people, this alleged repetition will mainly be noticed by museum and design professionals. Moreover, the theory fails to hold water. One would not immediately guess that Brent Museum and the Cuming Museum, both in London and opened within months of each other in 2006, had both been designed by Real Studios as each has a distinctive feel and design.

Commentators interviewed for the article concur with the thesis that social history museums lack variety of interpretation. Graham Black of Nottingham Trent University argues that 'museum personnel have to do more to establish what kind of visitor experience they want and then lead designers', though reasons that this might not happen, e.g. lack of resources for visitor research, are not considered. Black also states that 'it's not always about collections of 3D objects'; yet social history museums have led the profession in incorporating oral history and film into displays, and most revamped museums now have interactive exhibits. Broader interpretation using sources other than objects is hardly new.

In 1990, Gaynor Kavanagh's book *History Curatorship* highlighted trends towards the contextualisation of objects compared to former displays of labelled by-gones.

Another commentator, Maurice Davies of the Museums Association, argues that 'local history museums rely too much on a narrow range of design ideas – death by graphic panel'. Yet wordy panels are not limited to social history museums. In the Spring 2008 issue of *Museum Practice*, Davies instances the new Museum of Croydon's 'brilliant' screen-driven connection of objects to stories, people and places. A photograph of Croydon illustrates Billings' article, yet this innovative approach is not featured in the piece. Instead Hedley Swain of MLA is quoted as saying that 'the places we really remember are ones like Sir John Soane's Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum' – true, but both developed from highly individual visions and neither is a social history museum.

The article does recognise that 'ideas about the museum's role and position in the community are very much on the agenda', yet this is not new. As the SHCG Committee pointed out in a letter to April's *Museums Journal*, history curators have led community engagement for a generation. In the 1980s and 1990s, outreach, access and

inclusion were emerging disciplines, and it was often social history curators who developed new consultative approaches and methods of interpretation. Although outreach and community posts are now common, curators continue to work with new colleagues and set the pace in contemporary collecting and greater representation of diverse communities.

A list of recently opened museums appended to the article shows that *Museums Journal* tends to cover larger local authority history museums. Many local museums are small, with tiny budgets and largely volunteer staff. They certainly do not have a homogenous design, or ignore innovation. SHCG has always embraced the shoestring approach, with articles like Karen Spry's 'Bromsgrove's War' (*SHCG News* issue 56) and the presentation of the Bedworth Parsonage Project at the 2005 conference showing how innovative interpretation takes place in small museums.

The second attack on social history curators comes from industrial archaeologist Dr Ron Fitzgerald, a former keeper of Leeds Industrial Museum. In the preface to an article in the Autumn 2007 edition of *Industrial Archaeology Review* about the Stone Dam Mill Engine House, he argues that in industrial museums 'technologically



Brent Museum, which opened in 2006

informed staffs have been dispensed with in favour of proponents of the social agenda whose contribution to the gallery consists of the facile storyboard or trite voiceovers that descend into the toe-curlingly patronising'.

Fitzgerald's critique argues that 'a distinguished and largely rational collection' of historical technology was assembled by industrial museums in the 1960s and 1970s, but that these museums have become 'a major casualty' of the growing influence of social history. Fitzgerald contends that 'historical analysis and understanding [have been] supplanted by a morality play with platitudinous value judgements substituting for historical rigour'.

Fitzgerald's arguments highlight a debate over what and whom museums are for. He claims that the *raison d'être* of preserving historical technology has been lost – yet industrial museums, for all that their interpretation has shifted towards the social historical, still preserve thousands of technological artefacts in their stores. Less is being collected, but this is largely because stores are full and resources stretched due to the (not always rational) collecting of previous generations.

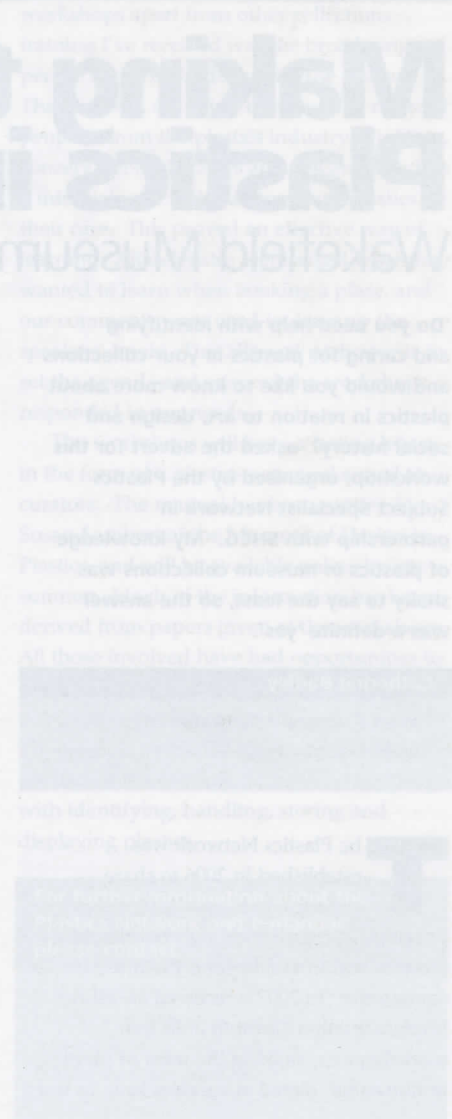
The shifting interpretation of technological artefacts is (as Fitzgerald recognises) partly due to limited public understanding of science and technology. Yet it is also part of the contextualisation that Gaynor Kavanagh saw happening in 1990. Social historical contexts are a good way of introducing visitors to complex subjects like technological history. Keeping the enthusiasts for technology on side is difficult but a process of dialogue rather than conflict is essential.

Taken together, Fitzgerald and Billings have something to say about the position of social history in museums today: criticised for insufficient historical and technological

rigour from one side, and criticised for insufficient innovation and contextualisation from the other. The role of social history curators is often broad: expected to be experts on artefacts and local history, yet also to engage with new audiences, collect contemporary material, work with educators, and create innovative interpretation.

Regarding Fitzgerald's arguments, there needs to be recognition by all sides of the fact that a large proportion of knowledge about museum collections is held by specialised organisations and individuals, both within and often outside the museum sector. Generalist curators can learn more about their collections from specialists and enthusiasts, but the latter should recognise that most museums must meet the needs of the wider audience in terms of interpretation and the quantity of material on display. There is a need for greater access to stored collections by enthusiasts, and for lending to independent collections aimed primarily at specialist audiences. There are good examples of this already, and there may be a role for subject specialist networks in brokering relationships, though as ever more investment is needed.

Regarding the position of social history curators in the museum sector, evidence of the impact that social history museums have on visitors is the most effective riposte to ill-informed commentary. If you have opinions about the issues raised in this article, write to SHCG News, post a message on the SHCG email list – or even highlight an example of good practice to Museums Journal. Social history may have become the dominant form of interpretation in both local and industrial museums (arguably due to its popularity and success with audiences) yet it must speak out to gain respect and recognition from the museums and heritage sector.





Making the Most of Plastics in Your Collection

Wakefield Museum, 5th December 2007

'Do you need help with identifying and caring for plastics in your collections and would you like to know more about plastics in relation to art, design and social history?' asked the advert for this workshop, organised by the Plastics Subject Specialist Network in partnership with SHCG. My knowledge of plastics in museum collections was shaky to say the least, so the answer was a definite 'yes'.

Catherine Badley

Project Assistant – Decorative Arts
Hull Museums

The Plastics Network was established in 2006 to share expertise in the history, development, care and interpretation of plastics, within and beyond the museum community. In 2007 it received an MLA Implementation Grant to hold four workshops on 'making the most of plastics in museums', aimed at curators keen to learn

how to identify and care for plastics in their collections.

The workshops were held in London, Edinburgh, Liverpool and Wakefield. Each workshop followed the same pattern, beginning with three different speakers giving presentations on milestones in the development and use of plastics, identification of plastic materials and production techniques, and care of plastics. The afternoon sessions were more informal with a range of opportunities to participate, including an open discussion of plastics brought by delegates from their own museums' collections.

Plastics timeline

The day began with a 'plastics timeline' presented by Steve Akhurst of the Plastics Historical Society. I had thought of plastics as modern materials, but Steve revealed that the first man-made plastic was exhibited by Englishman Alexander Parkes at London's International Exhibition in 1862. Obviously keen on self-promotion, Parkes gave his invention the trade name *Parkesine*.

Parkesine enjoyed shortlived commercial success, being used for a range of small toiletry and household items such as hairbrush handles.

Steve took us through the development of plastics up to the 1960s, from old favourites like *Bakelite* (patented 1907) to less well-known materials such as casein, a type of plastic derived from milk protein which was widely used for knitting needles. Along the way he revealed some surprising facts. For example, although man-made plastics were developed from the 1860s, it was not until 1920 that Hermann Staudinger published the first realisation that plastics are made up of polymers.

Steve's presentation was a great introduction to the long and unexpectedly complex history of the development and use of plastics. It also set alarm bells ringing: with so many new plastics invented in the century from 1862, was I ever going to learn how to distinguish one from the other?

Identification

Alistair Leeson, Product Development Manager for *Paragon Print and Packaging*, spoke about the identification of plastic materials and production techniques. Alistair concentrated on modern plastics, and it was positive to hear from someone in the plastics industry who could share his knowledge of the latest developments.

Alistair simplified the complex chemistry behind plastics to explain the main types and production techniques. Most modern plastics are made from oil-based polymers; there are two main types. 'Thermoplastics' can be reheated and re-formed, and can therefore be recycled. Examples are polyester, polypropylene and polythene. 'Thermosets' like silicones and synthetic rubbers can only be formed once, and cannot be recycled.

The latest development is 'renewable' plastics such as polylactic acid, derived from sweetcorn, which is used for food packaging. These plastics are biodegradable: with plenty of moisture, light and oxygen they can break down within 2-3 weeks. This could pose some interesting challenges for museums collecting modern plastics!

Modern plastics used for packaging can often be identified by their recycling logo, a triangular arrow symbol with initials beneath, such as PETE for polyester and HDPE for high density polyethylene. Other identification tests are visual and tactile, and rely to a certain extent on building up experience of the look and feel of different plastics. Smell can be another clue, with many plastics letting off gases when rubbed gently to generate heat. For example, hardened rubber such as Ebonite and Vulcanite releases sulphur gas.

Caring for plastics

Cordelia Rogerson, Modern Materials Specialist Conservator at the British Library, provided guidance on caring for plastics and spotting deterioration. Cordelia made a simple but crucial point: plastics are more fragile than you think. They are susceptible to brittleness, breakage and scratching, and must be handled carefully.

Plastics can be divided into two types. Malignant plastics are the ones to watch; as they break down they let off gases that harm other materials. Non-malignant plastics don't emit gases, but are still prone to deterioration themselves.

Plastics are damaged by light (especially UV), moisture and atmospheric oxygen. These cause two main types of deterioration. Shortening of the polymer chains making up the plastic occurs as the chemical bonds

break down, leading to crumbling. Separate polymer chains within the plastic can also begin to link together, leading to brittleness. Other problems, such as cracking, shrinking, warping, weeping, blistering and sticky surfaces, are caused by additives within the plastic rising to the surface.

To detect degrading plastics, you often need to follow your nose. A vinegar smell is caused by acetic acid released by degrading cellulose acetate. If you are unlucky enough to have degrading cellulose butyrate in your collections, you can expect to smell vomit!

Most chemical deterioration is irreversible, so controlling the storage environment is vitally important to slow the rate of deterioration. Cordelia explained the ideal storage conditions for plastics: low temperature, no light, and an RH of 30-50%. Malignant plastics such as cellulose nitrate, cellulose acetate and PVC should be isolated from other items in well ventilated areas, to avoid a build up of gases and damage to other items.

Storage solutions

Following lunch and a trip round Wakefield museum to see how well we could put our new-found plastic-identification skills into practice Curator John Whitaker demonstrated Wakefield's new approach to storing plastics. The museum uses plastic trays slotted into units to keep small plastic objects of the same type together, and to prevent malignant plastics damaging other items. The effect is similar to the tray units used in primary school classrooms, but all the materials are inert, preventing damage to the objects.

Putting our knowledge to the test

The final part of the day was a group discussion of objects brought in by delegates for identification. All the speakers took part, and delegates were invited to have a go at identifying the type of plastic used to make each object. This was a good opportunity to put into practice what we'd learned in the morning sessions about the appearance of different plastics, the dates when they were manufactured and the types of objects they were used to make. But with even the experts sometimes disagreeing, it also highlighted how difficult it can be to distinguish different plastics.

My favourite object from this session was not a museum object at all, but a rather woebegone Barbie doll discovered by one of the delegates in her loft, whose surface was beginning to go sticky. Having listened



attentively in the morning, we were all able to diagnose a case of plasticiser rising to the surface!

Conclusions

This workshop was a great practical introduction to the world of plastics – modern and historic. Although the complexity of the subject means I still feel unsure about identifying some plastics, I'm now equipped with the tools and contacts to find the information I need.

What set the Plastics Network's series of workshops apart from other collections training I've received was the broad range of people involved in delivering the sessions. The Network set out to bring a wide range of people – from the plastics industry, scientists, conservators, educators and private collectors – into dialogue with curators with plastics in their care. This proved an effective way of learning. All delegates were asked what they wanted to learn when booking a place, and our comments were used to draw up the speakers' briefs. This allowed participants to set the agenda and ensured the workshops responded to our needs.

The workshops will have a lasting legacy in the form of a plastics e-manual aimed at curators. The manual has been written by Susan Lambert of the Museum of Design in Plastics, and will be available online by late summer. Much of the information has been derived from papers given at the workshops. All those involved have had opportunities to comment on the e-manual, allowing delegates to have a say in shaping its content. The result is a detailed manual providing practical information for curators struggling with identifying, handling, storing and displaying plastics.

For further information about the Plastics Network and e-manual please contact:

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Trash or Treasure? An Introduction to Printed Ephemera

The Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising,
Notting Hill, London. 22 February 2008.

In the gloom of January, running a small local history museum single-handed, I needed something to cheer me up. I was attracted by the title of this one-day seminar and I was lucky enough to be granted the free place, the first SHCG event I had attended. I hoped to learn more about caring for and identifying ephemera to use at the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum, which has an interesting local history collection that dates back to Victorian times.

Caroline McCutcheon

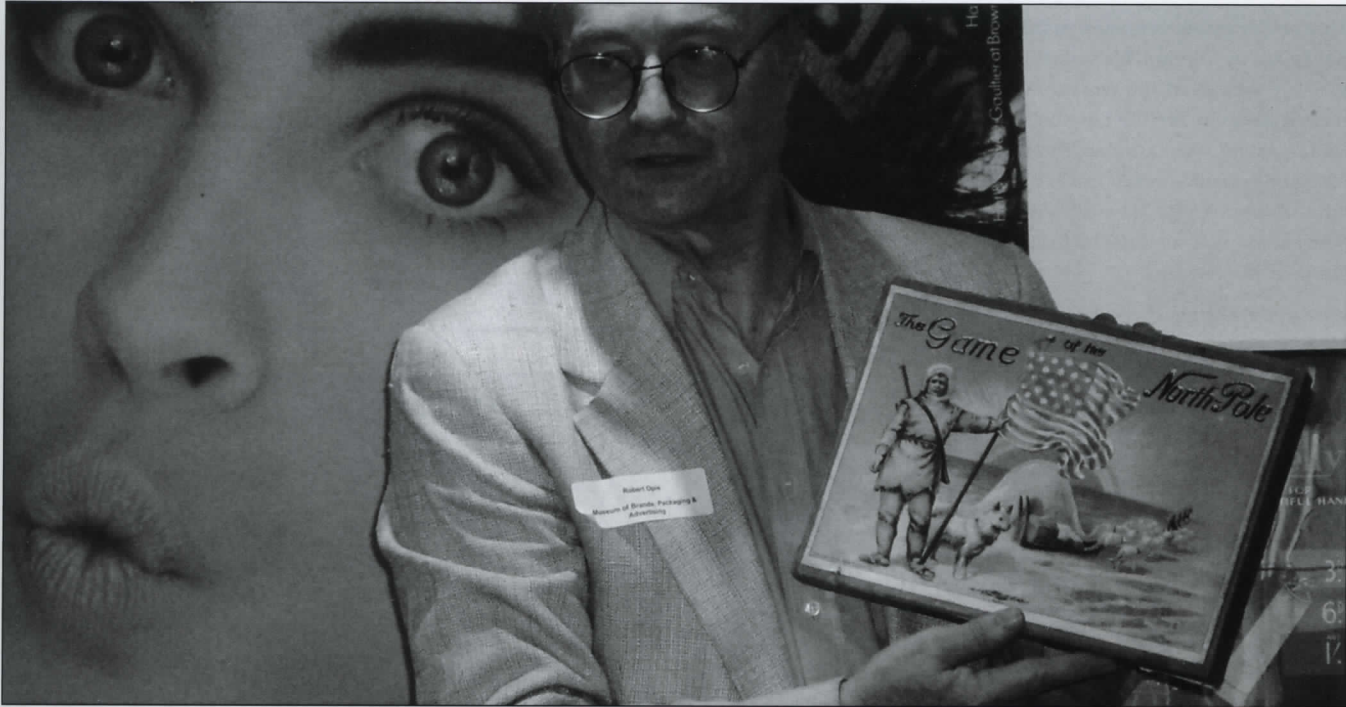
Heritage Development Officer,
Windsor & Royal Borough Museum

Finding the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising seminar venue tucked away in the corner of a small mews near the Portobello Road was the first challenge and surprise. It wasn't at all expected that the rather discreet sign on Lonsdale Road would point me to a collection of national renown: The Robert Opie Collection, which moved from Gloucester to London two years ago.

Alison Walker, Head of the National Preservation Office (NPO), at the British Library began the day with a comprehensive talk on the care of ephemera. She started by explaining that the NPO provides information and advice on all paper-based collections throughout the country. She informed us of two useful short booklets on Preservation Guidance: *Basic Preservation for Library and Archive Collections* and *Managing the Library and Archive Environment*.

Alison explored the risks to ephemera and summarised the guiding principle to reduce the risks as being, 'Do No Harm, with prevention being better than cure'; adding that the British Standard BS 5454:2000 makes recommendations for the storage of archival documents, including film and photographs.

We considered what is different about ephemera, which Alison described as 'the fragmentary documents of everyday life', and how their proposed use for display or research will govern their storage. Rotation and lux monitoring during long-term display were touched upon and we were reminded that accredited conservators can be found in the conservation register on the internet. Being pro-active about security in protecting against damage and particularly thefts is of paramount importance, as thefts are rising greatly, and we covered some of the measures in common use. Finally, we were reminded that to minimise damage



and preserve the original item a 'surrogate' can always be made by using microfilm, scanning or digital photography.

Julie Anne Lambert, Librarian of the John Johnson Collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, then tackled the topic of curatorial issues. First she told us of some of the major ephemera collections: the London School of Economics (LSE) Library for election ephemera, the Imperial War Museum, the Harvard Law Library for 'Bloody Murder', the Bodleian Library, the Mary Evans Picture Library – and even Ebay if anyone ever had the time to archive it! She mentioned interesting websites, such as the University of Glasgow's on John Smith, and on-line teaching aids including the National Archives Learning Curve.

Julie Anne spoke about cataloguing systems, referring to the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative and also the Spectrum requirements. She explored the issue of cataloguing at collection level or item level, bearing in mind the need to be accessible and avoid getting bogged down in metadata. She also warned us to be aware that genre terms differ, for example 'trade cards' in the US are actually what we in the UK know as advertising cards, not business cards.

She recommended reading the *Encyclopaedia of Ephemera* by Maurice Rickards and referred us to the British Library's *English Short Title Catalogue*. She also took us through the recommendations of the CILIP report of 2003 entitled *Ephemera: the stuff of history*. To conclude she recommended that we advertise our

collections on available websites and get them 'out of the boxes and onto the screen'.

We were then treated to a beautifully illustrated 'Introduction to Printing' by Dr. Martin Andrews, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication and Deputy Director of Ephemera Studies at Reading University. He explained that knowing the printing process will help us date and describe our ephemera more accurately, improving the metadata, and may give us some idea of the original status or value of the item.

Dr. Andrews showed us the difference between relief (ink on raised bits), intaglio (ink in the valleys) and planograph printing (printing from a flat surface), the modern mass production method. We learned of wood carving on the side grain using soft fruitwood, with Durer's work as an example of this method, as distinct from wood engraving on the end grain of boxwood, known to be slow, laborious and expensive like the work achieved by Thomas Bewick. He explained the explosion of the technology in the nineteenth century was down to the use of steam engines, and the development of off-set lithography, which accounts for 90% of modern printing.

Martin's entertaining gallop through the development of printing was illustrated by slides of the various printing processes and the resulting printed ephemera, together with handling materials of tools, printing plates and printed materials. With copious examples of every method and many styles of printing through the ages he made complex processes understandable.

After lunch we were treated to another highly visual presentation and passionate commentary by the self-described 'Extreme Collector' Robert Opie himself, with nearly 40 colourful slides of products he has collected. As we watched we enjoyed seeing our childhood flash before us: sweet wrappers, cheese labels, Matchbox models, baked bean labels, yogurt pots depicting cartoon and TV characters, milk bottles and the now very rare pyramid-shaped milk cartons.

Robert taught us what clues to look for to assist with dating; for instance an image of Popeye on an orange wrapper has to be post 1929. Changing styles in branding is often a clue, such as on Kellogg's Cornflake boxes, as well as codes on printed leaflets, for example 78/2 translates as February 1978, and also depictions of events on the packaging are a give away, such as the Festival of Britain in 1951.

Lastly we broke up into two groups, which alternated with one group visiting the fascinating museum, while the second group divided into smaller groups to rotate around four tables of ephemera where we put into practice at top speed what we had just learned about identifying and dating it.

The day ended with a plea from Robert Opie himself – he has all the Argos catalogues except No.1, so do please contact him if you have it. And what was our conclusion to the question: 'Ephemera: Trash or Treasure?' Most definitely Treasure, and a great venue for learning about it.

This poster by an unknown artist was published by London Transport in 1969. It tells the story of the workers who built the Victoria line for the London Underground. The London Transport Museum is beginning to uncover exactly what it was like for them through researching the personal histories of some of the workers.

Lucy Davison

Curator of Community History,
London Transport Museum.

Begun in 1962, the Victoria line was the first new Tube railway to cross central London in 60 years. The miners who dug the line were mostly Irishmen. It was hot, tough work, but they could earn at least £100 a week, a large sum in the mid-1960s.

Although much information survives about the construction of the line, there is very little of the stories of the miners themselves. One man who remembers 'Black Jack' and the Irish gangs is John Leonard, originally from County Monaghan, Ireland. He began working on the line in 1964, and like the other miners he worked all over the line with different gangs. 'For each section of work the gang negotiated a price based on an estimate of how much work was required and how much time. If the price didn't suit the gang they might split up, moving on to another gang or part of the line'

Miners worked from inside a protective circular shield, which moved through the soft London clay like a giant apple corer. Curved iron segments were bolted together to line the hole. The shields dug quickly, but were useless in gravel and unstable ground. There the miners had to go back to digging by hand. John remembers the work as very hard. 'At first you had 12 hour shifts, though there were breaks where you had to come up to the surface and tea was sent down. When the shields came in, conditions improved. It was all conveyor belts and no digging, all you had to do was build the segments'.

When tunnels were dug in waterlogged soil, compressed air could be pumped in to hold back the water. One side-effect was that miners, like divers, could get 'the bends' if they returned to the surface too fast. Working under compressed air in such damp conditions was far from pleasant, and could lead to long-term health problems. The gangs were rarely heard to complain. In the heat of the tunnels there was little or no safety equipment worn; clothing was usually 'white shirts, trousers, and a cap to keep off the sweat'. The hard hats and jackets worn by the men in this poster would hardly have

ALL OUR OWN WORK

Green Park Warren Street King's Cross St Pancras Finsbury Park Tottenham Hale Walthamstow Central
Victoria Oxford Circus Easton Highbury & Islington Seven Sisters Blackhorse Rd

○ Interchange with other Underground lines ≡ Interchange with British Rail P Car Park

The world's most advanced underground railway, the Victoria Line, is now open, and London Transport would like to thank the men who built it: miners, like Black Jack's Gang above; engineers, architects and surveyors; planners, draughtsmen, electricians, steel erectors, carpenters, bricklayers, labourers. Their £70 million effort is now on permanent exhibition, and the price of admission is as little as five-pence.

VICTORIA LINE

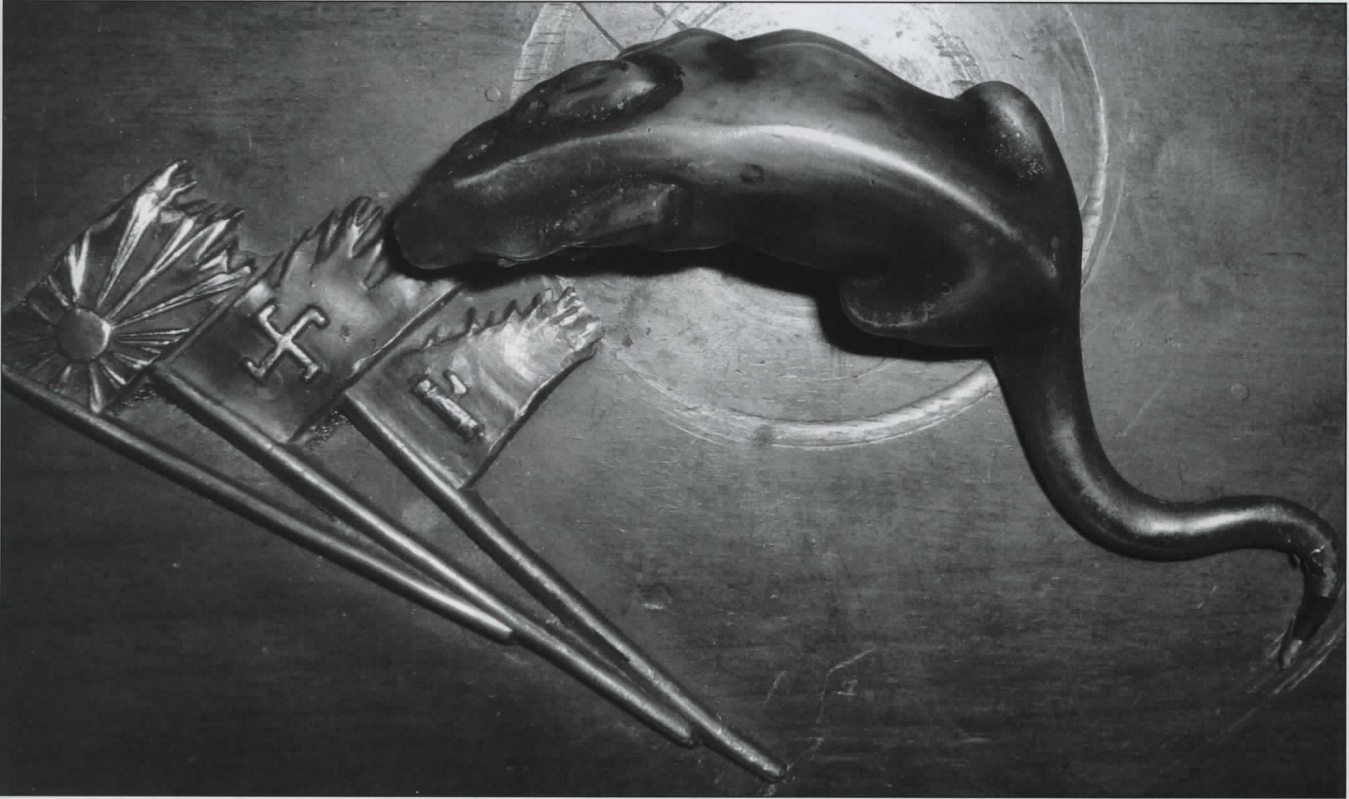
London's pride

been seen underground. John recalls; 'there were a lot of injuries but nothing serious, there was only one man killed on the Victoria line. The skips carrying the muck used to come off the tracks, and someone would break a leg or lose a finger. But I wouldn't call it really dangerous, and I never hurt myself. There was a lot of vermin in the tunnels and you'd have to tie your trousers around the bottom with a piece of string to stop the mice and rats from crawling up!'

On the plus side there was a strong social community for the miners, many of whom already knew each other from back home. 'The men would go out drinking and dancing together, and also to the Irish Centre in Camden for Mass. Some of the men were cousins, some I went to school with.' The hard work didn't deter the men from making

the most of their free time. 'You worked a five day week and had Saturday and Sunday off. If you were on the night shift Monday night you could be out until late on a Sunday night and then sleep all day on the Monday!' Irish communities grew in areas near to the line 'Typically if you were working in South London you lived around Haringey or Manor House but for Euston or Kings Cross or Green Park you lived in Camden Road.' Today many retired miners still live in these areas and meet up at the Irish Centres such as that in Camden Square.

John's story was recorded as part of the *Revisiting Collections* initiative which extends across all London Hub museums and is funded by MLA London. For more info please email lucy.davison@ltmuseum.co.uk



The mysterious case of the Lancaster Rat

This mysterious object was brought into Lancaster City Museum for identification in 2007 along with various other, more easily-identifiable and seemingly unrelated, objects. It did not come with any details on where it came from, or how it came to be residing in Lancashire.

Ellenor Swinbank

Assistant Keeper of Social History (previous),
Lancaster City Museum.

The object is a sinister looking item, probably some kind of paper weight or desk decoration.

I recognised the swastika and Japanese symbol, but had no idea as to the significance of the rodent, or indeed what the third flag represented. The rodent is screwed onto the base and looks as though it was fixed in position at some point, but has come adrift so it is now possible to unscrew it entirely. There are no makers' marks, or any other kinds of potentially helpful marks, visible anywhere on the object. I decided to ask the SHCG mailing list about it and was quite overwhelmed, but delighted with the response I received.

The third flag was quickly identified as another fascist symbol – the fasces originally used in ancient Rome, and adopted in the twentieth century by Mussolini's Italian fascist party. The symbol, which consists of a bundle of birch rods bound together with an axe among them, is generally taken to mean one of two things either the power to punish and execute citizens; or the strength of standing united, a bundle of rods being more difficult to break than one rod on its own.

Several SHCG members suggested that the rat was actually a Jerboa, the adopted symbol of the Desert Rats (British 7th Armoured Division). It looked as though it was chewing on the three flags possibly representing the suppression of the fascist axis of evil by the Desert Rats. The Division fought in every major battle in the North African campaign, and in Sicily and Italy. Later they fought in North West Europe, landing in Normandy and working their way east, ending the war in Kiel and Hamburg. The 7th Armoured Brigade detached from the Division in 1942 and fought the Japanese in Burma before returning to the Mediterranean. It seemed probable that the object was a piece of

'trench art,' created from battlefield scrap, or possibly even from looted materials. However, it was pointed out by some members of the mailing list that the Desert Rats did not actually fight the Japanese, although the associated 7th Armoured Brigade did. Also, if the creature was supposed to be a Jerboa it was not a very good one, its ears are too small for a start.

If it wasn't a British Desert Rat, it was suggested, perhaps it was a Rat of Tobruk. 'The Rats of Tobruk' was the nickname given to the soldiers of the garrison that held the Libyan port of Tobruk against the Afrika Corps during the Siege of Tobruk in 1941. More than half of the garrison was made up of soldiers of the Australian 9th Division and the 18th Brigade of the Australian 7th Division. The rest of the garrison largely consisted of British and Indian troops.

My enquiries into this strange object have been by no means conclusive, but have yielded some very interesting suggestions and I have certainly learned a lot in the process of trying to identify and understand the piece. Many thanks to all those who contributed to the email list discussion about this object.

Tea Break Crossword

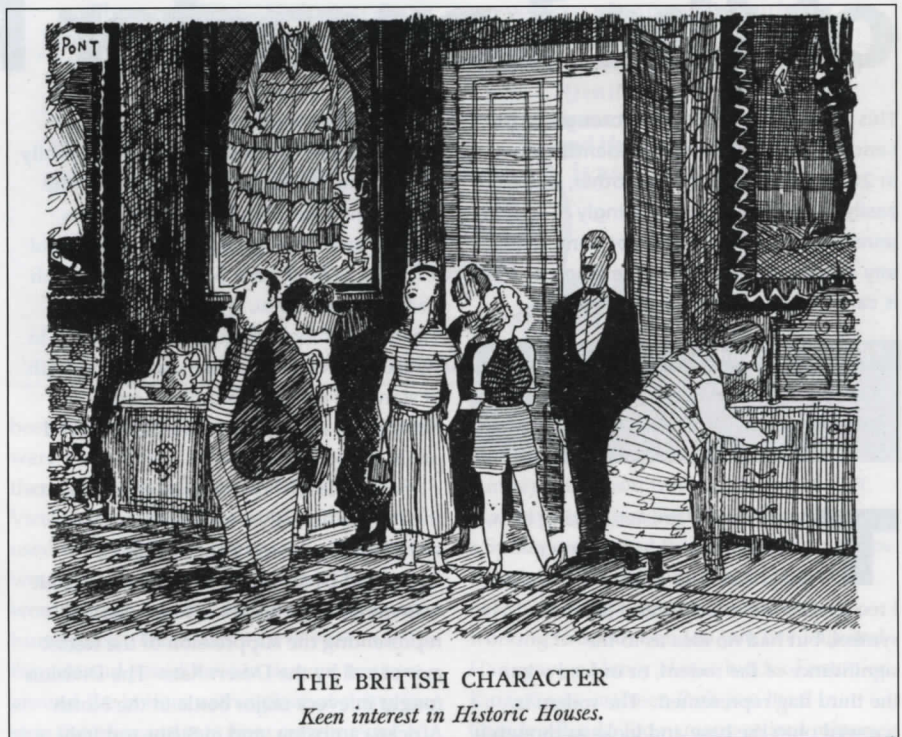
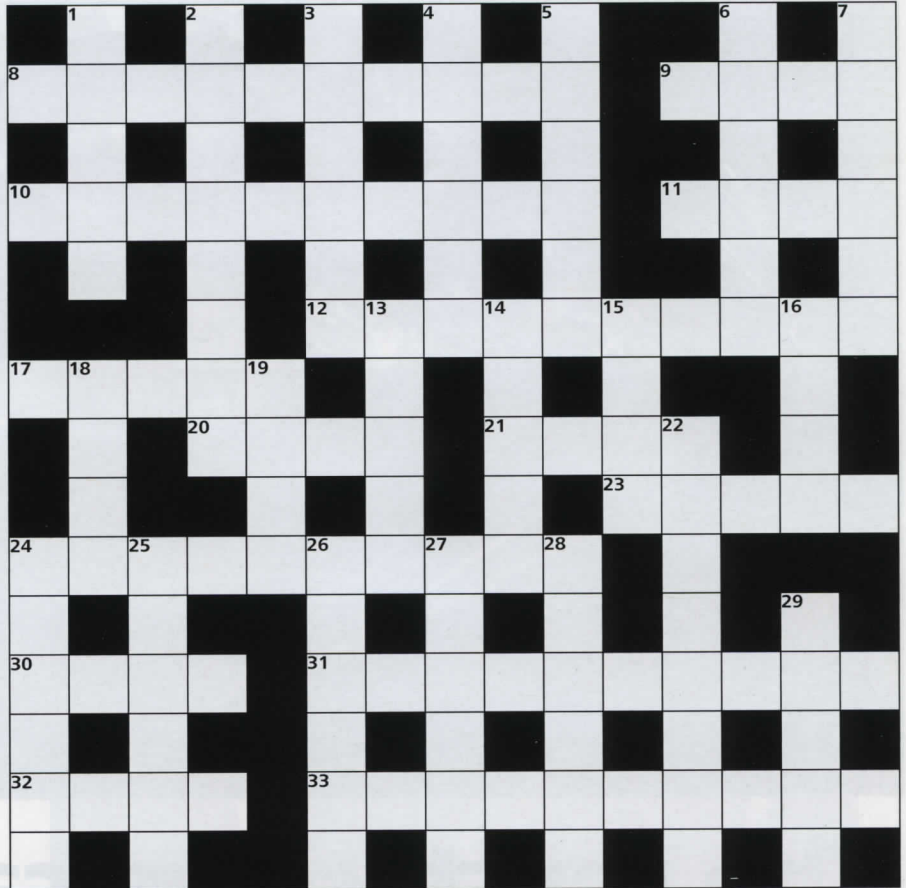
Taken from The Daily Telegraph crossword puzzle book, Penguin Books, 1942 from Hull Museum Collections.

ACROSS

- 8 Somebody's darling suggests the filling in the chocolate (10).
- 9 This old philosopher was nothing more than an animal (4).
- 10 Tale in goal leads to a statement (10).
- 11 Listen to part of 8 across (4).
- 12 Where the insinuator apparently lives is not on the coast (10).
- 17 This yard does not measure distances (5).
- 20 This bar is first rate inside (4).
- 21 What the ignoramus cannot be master of (4).
- 23 The middle weighs many times the whole (5).
- 24 Wherein one may hesitate as to the course to take, but take it easy at first (10).
- 30 This man certainly can play cricket (4).
- 31 No slight description (10).
- 32 May be an opening for tanners (4).
- 33 "slug in tent" (anag.)
(it might be to a fair camper!) (10).

DOWN

- 1 Landlubbers at sea don't think it fine (5).
- 2 If unofficial may be a kind of fence (8).
- 3 Beat with a bit of the second half perhaps (6).
- 4 The issue is little more than a matter of proportion (6).
- 5 This may depend upon just how you put your foot down (6).
- 6 Snappy reference to the last dozen years of the boat race (6).
- 7 Very warm (6).
- 13 He is not busy, but may become riled if disturbed (5).
- 14 Conveyance for a canned artist (5).
- 15 Rude remark that upset a film celebrity ? (4).
- 16 A palindrome (4).
- 18 Sound quality from 23 across (4).
- 19 May be said to be a flow o 17 down 23 across (4).
- 22 "Stay idle" (anag.) (8).
- 24 Vigorous nonsense about a vehicle (6).
- 25 What is got in a pig is not very bright (6).
- 26 Epithet for 20 across reversed (6).
- 27 Disliking poetry ? (6).
- 28 It may end a war (6).
- 29 Humorous (5).



The British Character, Keen Interest in Historic Houses. Published in PONT, by Collins, 1942 from Hull Museum Collections.

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29: FUNNY
 28: TREATY
 27: AVERSE
 26: UNTRUE
 25: SHADOW
 24: ROBUST
 22: STEADILY
 19: LAVA
 18: TONE
 16: NOON
 15: RATS
 14: TRAIN
 13: IDLER
 7: TORRID
 6: CAMERA
 5: STANCE
 4: RATION
 3: THRASH
 2: RECEIVER
 1: SWELL
 DOWN:
 33: UNSETTLING
 32: SLOT
 31: TREMENDOUS
 30: BRAD
 24: RESTAURANT
 23: STONE
 21: ARTS
 20: RAIL
 17: STEEL
 12: HINTERLAND
 11: HEAR
 10: ALLEGATION
 9: CATO
 8: SWEETHEART
 ACROSS:

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