

SHG news

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP



TITANICa at Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

Mapping Memory on Liverpool's Waterfront

Christmas in August

Sneaker Speakers



Join SHCG?

If you're reading this and you're not a member of SHCG but would like to join please contact:

Laura Briggs
Project History Officer
Harris Museum & Art Gallery
Market Square
Preston
PR1 2PP

Tel: 01772 905103
Email: l.briggs@preston.gov.uk

Write an article for 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:
18 April 2012

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 copy of your article by email, saved as a PC word file or richtext format. Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

Alternative formats:
Electronic copies and alternative formats are available on request.

Send all contributions to:

Adam Bell
Assistant Keeper of History
Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums
South Shields Museum & Art Gallery
Ocean Road
South Shields NE33 2JA

Tel: 0191 456 8740
Email: adam.bell@twmuseums.org.uk

Front Cover: : *TITANICa: The Exhibition* at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum's Transport Galleries, pp. 5-6. Image courtesy of National Museums Northern Ireland.



Welcome to Issue 68

As our profession faces up to the uncomfortable implications of widespread budget cuts, as reported in issue 67's editorial, a "return to the 1980s" has been feared.

Looking back at 2011, in some ways we did see a return to the 1980s. First there was Royal Wedding mania, not seen on such a scale since 1981 when Prince Charles tied the knot with Lady Diana Spencer. This time round the world went mad for 'Wills and Kate'. Gift shop shelves groaned under the weight of the usual social history collection stock-in-trade 'limited edition' royal collectors items from mugs to trinket boxes. Then there were the more wacky collectables, like the pack of 'Crown Jewels' condoms – "regally ribbed" – and Royal Wedding sick bags, for those who felt an uncontrollable urge to "throne up"...

Another blast from the 1980s past came with the online launch of 'Domesday Reloaded'. The Domesday Project, first launched in 1986 to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the original Domesday Book, sought to record a comprehensive survey of contemporary life in the UK. Over one million volunteers participated in the project between 1984 and 1986, in which participants wrote about social issues in their locality and about their daily lives, supplemented with maps, photos, video and statistical data. All this was stored on laserdisc, a technology then considered state of the art, but which soon became obsolete.

Domesday Reloaded makes the information captured by the Domesday Project widely accessible again for the first time in 25 years. It's a fascinating snapshot of everyday life in mid 1980s Britain, and is searchable by place name or postcode. Go to: www.bbc.co.uk/history/domesday/

There are, for example, 2,426 articles and pictures about 'Christmas' on Domesday Reloaded. With the festive season fast approaching, may I take this opportunity to wish all our members a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

Adam G. Bell

Editor, *SHCG News*

Corrections and clarifications:

Staff losses in the History Team at Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM) were reported in the editorial accompanying issue 67. *SHCG News* wishes to clarify that the posts of Principal Keeper of History and Senior Keeper of History at TWAM were deleted as the result of Newcastle City Council's single status review. The deletion of one Assistant Keeper of Social History post at TWAM was necessitated by the 2011-12 budget cuts, however the postholder was redeployed into a HLF funded fixed term post.



SHCG News clearly has a youthful readership! Pictured is Lucy, daughter of SHCG member Briony Hudson. 😊

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9. Mapping Memory



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SHCG Matters

SHCG Annual Conference

Do We Always Get it Right? Interpreting our Social History Collections

**12 – 13 July 2012
Cardiff & Bristol**

Over the years SHCG and its membership has led the way in pioneering and advocating new approaches to interpreting social history collections for our audiences. We hear a lot about innovation in interpretation and one of the current buzz words is co-creation, an approach in which audience groups are integral to the interpretation of content and developing displays.

But, do we always get it right? Conference 2012 will explore what does make for successful interpretation and what are the approaches that work best with our visitors? Honest and open consideration will be given to what works and what doesn't; mistakes, pitfalls, highlights and eureka moments of projects past and present.

As with last year, we will aim to explore the core conference themes in a variety of ways, including: conventional presentations, a lively and thought-provoking debate, workshops, discussion groups and tours of our host venues, Cardiff Story and Bristol's MShed.

There will of course be many opportunities for networking with colleagues, including the ever-popular evening activity and meal on the Thursday night.

If you would like to submit a proposal for contributing to any of the conference sessions or would like further information, please contact:

Karen Oliver-Spry

SHCG committee,
karen.oliver-spry@nrm.org.uk

firstBASE needs you!



As many of you know, in July 2011 we heard that SHCG was successful in getting a grant for £26,000 from the Museums Association Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund.

Our application was one of seven successful applications from a total of 85 to the fund. The grant, together with match funding from SHCG funds, will be used to create a redesigned and reinvigorated firstBASE (our online searchable resource of material to help in the identification and interpretation of social history collections). It will not only enable us to create a more dynamic, user friendly, improved firstBASE, but will also see us working with the Collections Trust to produce an electronic version of SHIC.

The project runs until summer 2012, and we are currently out to tender to commission a design company to create the new site. SHCG are in discussions with Collections Trust about the electronic version of SHIC and Gemma Sturtridge from the Museums Computer Group has very kindly agreed to sit on our project steering group to advise us on the technical issues surrounding the project. We are also embarking on a period of 'housekeeping' the current firstBASE site, to make sure all the data and information held on it is up to date, correct and relevant, prior to its migration to the

new version.

Once we have appointed the designers, we will be looking to recruit a team of SHCG firstBASE users to test and feedback on the site throughout its development. We need to make sure that its look and feel, its functionality and search structure mean that it is easy and attractive to use, search and add to. I don't anticipate that this would take too much time – at various points in the design process, probably from later in the new year onwards, you'll be contacted to use a test version on-line and feedback your comments. If you would like to be a member of this team, please contact me at vrogers@cardiff.gov.uk

As part of the project, we have identified a budget to commission documents, films and/or resources for upload onto the site – things like 'a beginner's guide to...' or 'information about the top 20 medical objects you probably have in your collection...'. We're looking for your nominations of the themes/ collection types that you need most help identifying or increasing your knowledge of – what do you want us to commission? Please email your nominations and suggestions to firstbase@shcg.org.uk

Lastly, a major part of the project will be to increase the amount of information held on the site... and here, we'd like all of your help. Help us to pull together all sources of collections knowledge and information in one place, and help us make firstBASE the place to go to learn from each other's experience, increase our knowledge and understanding of our objects, and improve the identification and interpretation of social history collections. Again, please email any suggestions to firstbase@shcg.org.uk

We want to know about:

- pamphlets issued by museums on social history subjects or objects
- identification factsheets
- key books and texts (including out of print ones)
- useful websites
- museums who hold particularly strong collections in specialist areas and which may be a

source of information and advice – especially those with hidden ones

- booklets published in conjunction with exhibitions
- research conducted as part of wider funded projects (e.g. like that undertaken across the country for various projects to commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade)
- handover sheets produced by retiring curators

Victoria Rogers

SHCG committee
vrogers@cardiff.gov.uk



SHCG object lessons

Slots are now available for the loan of Object Lessons boxes. We are aware that in the current economic climate it is increasingly difficult to find the funding to travel to training seminars. Why not borrow one of the object lessons boxes and organise a training session for colleagues in your institution or region? Object Lessons is an exciting series of resources designed to help you develop your skills and confidence in identifying and caring for core materials found in social history collections. They are an excellent CPD resource and can also be used to assist you with a programme of documentation work.

Each resource is made up of a loans box of museum objects with an accompanying pack of information which guides you through the basic principles of identifying and caring for materials. The boxes also contain a selection of key books currently available on the topic.

The following loan boxes are currently available:

Object Lessons 1: Metals
Object Lessons 2: Wood
Object Lessons 3: Plastics

Each Object Lessons box is free to borrow, but you will have to organise and cover the cost of transporting the box to and from your venue (just over £20 per box).

For more information visit www.shcg.org.uk/scripts/resources_object.asp or contact me by email to make a booking:

Jennifer Broadbent

SHCG committee
j.broadbent@wlct.org

SHCG website

For those who missed out on the conference in July, or even those who went and just want a refresher, some of the handouts from the sessions are now available to download from the SHCG website.

We're hoping to update the website in the coming year so if you've got any bright ideas or useful suggestions for things you'd like to see on our web pages, email the SHCG Web Editor: catherine.newley@colchester.gov.uk

SHCG gets even more social!

SHCG continues to connect with followers on Facebook, using it as another medium to spread news and share links. This year also saw SHCG embrace Twitter

for the first time, with several members using #SHCG2011 to tweet their thoughts and responses to the papers being presented.

Both sites work best when there's lots of discussion and shared content so please feel free to get involved, either with comments, questions or photos of your recent projects. It's a great opportunity to tell all our followers and spread the word!

Search Facebook for "Social History Curators Group" and Twitter for @SHCG1



SHCG mailing list

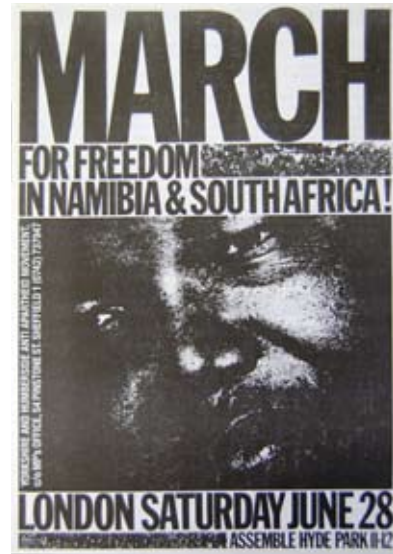
The mailing list continues to be one of the strongest elements of SHCG, allowing members to share helpful information and advice. In recent months, list members have tackled the minefield of copyright in social history collections, the issues of asbestos in gas cookers and offered support for numerous mystery object identifications. Some of the more unusual requests have included where to look when you want to date a lightbulb or find the year of a car

TITANICa opens at Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

Artefacts recovered from the seabed wreck of the Titanic have gone on display for the first time in Northern Ireland to mark the centenary of the famous ship's launch.

Seven of the items – displayed as part of *TITANICa: The Exhibition* in the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum's Transport Galleries – are on show for the first time anywhere in the world.

The new exhibition, curated by



Anti apartheid march poster, dated 1986 through the mailing list

registration plate. All the enquiries and the responses are archived online so don't worry if you've missed something, just go to: www.mailtalk.ac.uk/SHCG-LIST

If you aren't already a member, join up by sending an email to shcg-list-request@mailtalk.ac.uk, stating your name and whether you are a personal member of SHCG or employed by an institutional member. If you work for an institutional member, please also state the name of the institution.

Be part of the network, get to know your colleagues, stay up to date and have fun!

William Blair, Head of Human History for National Museums Northern Ireland, opened on the 100th anniversary of Titanic's launch at the end of May 2011. Star items include 35 artefacts salvaged from the wreck including a part of the hull structure, a porthole, silverware, glassware and personal belongings.

They are part of a loan from US-based RMS Titanic, Inc. a wholly owned subsidiary of Premier Exhibitions, Inc. and the Salvor in



TITANICa: The People's Story

Possession of the wreck site. These artefacts have been displayed alongside some 500 objects from the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum's own collection.

Tim Cooke, Director of National Museums Northern Ireland (which runs the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) said in May: "This is a real coup for the museum. One hundred years to the day that Titanic was launched in Belfast, items from the ship will

be on display in our galleries on the shores of Belfast Lough. This exhibition in the Transport Galleries is sure to prove a huge draw for local and international visitors."

Complimenting *TITANICa: The Exhibition* at the Transport Museum is *TITANICa: The People's Story*, a new living history attraction at the adjoining open air Folk Museum. Visitors to *TITANICa: The People's Story*

are invited to experience Titanic and its times through the daily routines, activities and stories of people in the period before, during and after Titanic's maiden voyage, told through costumed guides.

Visitors can walk the reconstructed streets of the Folk Museum and enter the shipyard riveter's home, visit the Post Office to compose their own Morse code message sent from Titanic, call into the printers for a Titanic launch ticket and go upstairs in the Newspaper Room to read newspapers of the time. The Museum's reconstructed Picture House now also screens silent films featuring shipyard workers and historic footage of life at the time when Titanic was built.

Mark Irvine, Head of Operations at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, said: "The outdoor Folk Museum provides a fabulous setting for telling the story of people living in the time of Titanic. *TITANICa: The People's Story* is unique in the world and offers visitors the opportunity to experience how shipyard workers and their families actually lived 100 years ago."

Fish & chips at Beamish

An authentic taste of the past is the latest addition to Beamish: The Living Museum of the North, in the form of Davy's Fried Fish Shop, where visitors can sample real fish & chips fried in beef dripping in a beautiful coal-fired range.

Davy's Fried Fish Shop in the Beamish Pit Village opened on 15 July 2011 and has proved to be hugely popular with the open air museum's visitors, who number up to 420,000 each year.

The Fried Fish Shop has been named in honour of brothers Brian and Ramsay Davy who, until 2007, used the last working coal-fired range on Tyneside in their chip shop at Winlaton Mill near Gateshead. The business was set up by their grandfather in 1937.



Beamish fish & chips, served the traditional way

No picture of pit village life in north east England would be complete without a fish & chip shop. The sociable atmosphere full of gossip was popular with women, children and young lads, while their evening opening and provision of eat-in areas proved attractive to courting couples in

the days before pubs and cinemas welcomed women!

Davy's Fried Fish Shop is typical of a type found throughout the north east, which often began life as Victorian commercial buildings and were later converted to their new role.

The building was constructed by local builder, stonemason and bricklayer Kenny Bowen, who used reclaimed materials including red wire-cut bricks typical of the area. Kenny laboured throughout the winter of 2010, in some of the most severe weather seen for years, to ensure that the building kept to schedule.

Once the shell was complete, work on the interior began. Walls were tiled with beautiful decorative panels from Cowes Fish & Game Shop in Berwick upon Tweed and the original counter from Davy's in Winlaton Mill was installed.

On entering, visitors encounter a succession of three ranges

dating from 1910 through to the 1920s and 1930s. In the main room, where fish & chips are fried and sold, there's a 1920s range by Mabbott of Manchester. This range was used until the 1960s in a small village near Chester. Its greatest historical association was during the Second World War when locally stationed GIs regularly 'borrowed' it to cook thousands of doughnuts for their homesick countrymen.

The third range was made by Nuttalls around 1934 and reflects the huge growth in the business before the outbreak of war in 1939. This range remained in use until 2007 in Davy's Chip Shop at Winlaton Mill.

The delicious Beamish fish & chips are fried in real beef dripping, then wrapped in specially printed newspaper. There's a choice of where to eat too – either in the adjacent Saloon, with scrubbed pine tables and benches or in the sunshine at picnic tables just outside.

Richard Evans, Beamish Director, said "Davy's is an exciting addition to the museum, telling more of the story of north eastern pit village life in Edwardian times. It's a chance for visitors to reminisce while enjoying a real taste of the past - we hope they will agree this really is Beamish at its best."

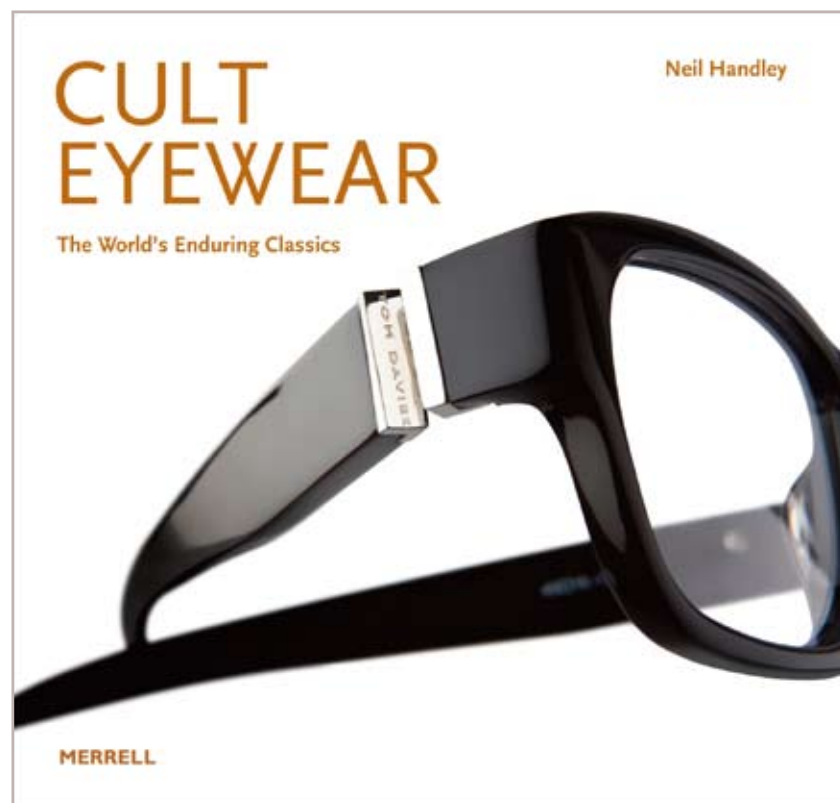
Cult Eyewear

Most therapeutic devices are far from stylish, but in the second half of the twentieth century spectacle frames made the cultural leap from a barely tolerated medical appliance to must-have fashion accessory.

The story of how this happened, not always to universal approval, is covered in a new book by Neil Handley. *Cult Eyewear* is the first detailed history of designer spectacles and features numerous illustrations drawn from the collections of The British Optical Association Museum at the College of Optometrists where the author has been curator for the past 13 years.

Neil is also the current chairman of the London Museums of Health and Medicine group, though the book is as much a cultural history as a scientific study and includes sections analysing the appearance of branded eyewear in popular films such as *Easy Rider*, *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *The Blues Brothers*.

In researching the book Neil tracked down Elvis Presley's personal optician, Dame Edna Everage's costume designer and a man who bought up all the good stock of an optical practice just



before Elton John walked through the door, much to the Rocketman's annoyance! He demolishes the myth of 'John Lennon Spectacles' and describes the career of Udo Proksch, so far the only spectacle designer to be convicted of mass murder.

Cult Eyewear includes an extensive glossary which should prove invaluable to social history curators cataloguing spectacle

frames from all historical periods.

Cult Eyewear: The World's Enduring Classics

Published by Merrell
Hardback
192 pages
350 colour illustrations
ISBN: 978-1-8589-4509-5
RRP £29.95

Contemporary Collecting: Theory and Practice

This important new book deals succinctly and thoughtfully with the problems of collecting contemporary objects in museums. It aims to provide a working model for the future of contemporary collecting based on relevant debates and theories, and on past and current practices.

Contemporary Collecting: Theory and Practice proposes answers to some of the many challenging questions raised: What should we collect? Who should decide? How can we best record how we live our lives? What about storage? What limits should we place on our collecting? What is best practice?

Contemporary Collecting is the first in a new series of attractive, concise, affordable and practical monographs on key museum and gallery issues to be published by MuseumsEtc.

Author Owain Rhys, Curator of Contemporary Life at St Fagans: National History Museum, Cardiff, has a long-standing interest in the field, having recently developed a long-term contemporary collecting strategy, and led many contemporary collecting initiatives.

"A timely reflection on the development of contemporary collecting practice, and how museums might face up to the challenge." Professor Simon Knell, School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester.

For more information and to obtain your copy, visit: <http://museumsetc.com/products/collecting>

Contemporary Collecting: Theory and Practice

Published by MuseumsEtc
Hardback
168 pages
ISBN: 978-1-907697-34-0
RRP £19.95

OpenCulture 2012

Brought to you by the Collections Trust, OpenCulture is the annual collections management conference that you can't afford to miss being part of.

OpenCulture 2012 is a two day UK & International conference – the only major event focused on collections, providing delegates with the chance to debate the latest developments in practice and get the inside track on the key issues affecting collections over the next five years. It is taking place on 26 and 27 June in the Kia Oval in London.

OpenCulture 2012 will be structured around the four key areas of Strategic Collections Management, as defined by the BSI PAS 197 'Code of Practice for Collections Management'.

The theme for 2012 maintains the Victorian carnival theme established in 2011, but for 2012, in line with the Olympic events taking place across the capital, OpenCulture is joining in with the sporting fun! Expect us to be raising the competition, assessing the stamina of collections and seeing how well placed the museum sector is to go the distance!

For more information about OpenCulture 2012 please call 020 7942 6080 or email events@collectionstrust.org.uk

Rhino horn theft

Organised criminal gangs are targeting premises throughout Europe and the USA, stealing rhino horn for sale in Asia. There have been at least 20 thefts across Europe – most from museums.

A single horn can be worth up to £250,000.

The thieves' method is typically overnight burglary or 'smash and grab'; suspects may use CS/pepper spray if challenged.

There have been three recent thefts at museums and an auction house in Essex, Surrey and Suffolk, as well as three 'hostile reconnaissance' events, including at a stately home in Yorkshire. The suspects are believed to be members of an Irish organised crime group.

Museums, galleries and other historic premises with rhino horn should be aware of this significant threat. Please pass any intelligence to:

john.gill@soca.pnn.police.uk
ian.lawson@met.pnn.police.uk



Mapping Memory on the Liverpool Waterfront since the 1950s

Mapping Memory was an AHRC-funded Beyond Text project undertaken by the University of Liverpool, Merseyside Maritime Museum (National Museums Liverpool) and film-makers Re-Dock. It ran from April 2010 to September 2011, and one of its key outputs is now available as a set of webpages on the NML website: www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/mappingmemory/

The project focused on an area of south-central Liverpool behind the docks, which was a mixed-use district closely tied to the maritime economy. Radically altered in the past half-century, there is little surviving sense of the busy communities that lived and worked there into the 1960s. Given the suddenness with which traditional seaport societies were disrupted by containerization and air travel during the 1970s, this area presented an important case study for research into a relatively neglected aspect of modern urban history.

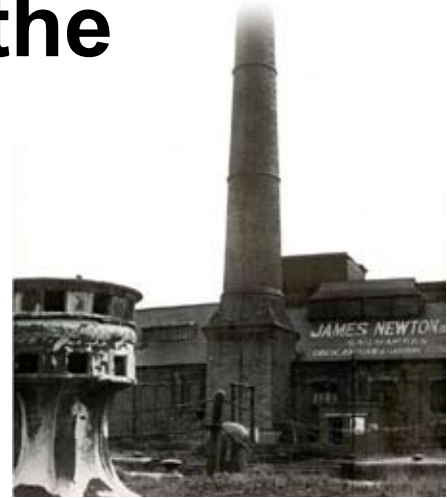
Mapping Memory used cultural mapping workshops and interviews, where contributors identified and recreated their own histories of the waterfront space. In conducting these sessions, the project team had to constantly consider the various linked outcomes of the work, which included the multi-media website, academic journal articles, a small museum exhibition display and a documentary film.

Just as a particular urban space was at the heart of the project's focus, so a map of that space was at the heart of the project's methodology. Participants and

project staff gathered round a large table-top map, annotating it with dots, notes and drawings. The map encouraged detailed oral history accounts, whilst also providing the opportunity to populate the waterfront area with both existing locations and those that had been lost with the passing of time.

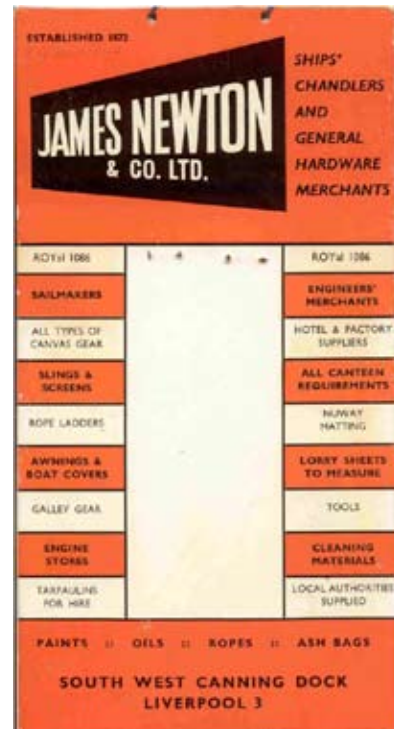
Initially, we used a diagrammatic map of the current street layout in the expectation that interviewees would orient themselves more readily and that sites could later be transposed onto older street patterns. However, participants wanted to work in more detail, and also seemed more comfortable navigating former street plans rather than the current one. We had to quickly create a new base map, still somewhat simplified, but a much better representation of street maps from the 1950s and 1960s.

The project combined group workshops with individual interviews. We met with a women's history group and a group of male, retired seafarers. We also ran two drop-in sessions in an attempt to engage with people who might not normally put themselves forward for research projects; these took place in a rare surviving near-waterfront cafe, and in the foyer of Radio Merseyside. Individual interviewees were recruited through community organisations with existing links to the Maritime Museum, and contacts subsequently developed through those people. The map was crucial to the process in all cases, because it encouraged interaction, stimulated memory and triggered debate in relation to where certain pins should be plotted, and what their significance was. Each session produced a mixture of extended personal testimonies and simple plotted points with



Examples of archive and object collections that the Mapping Memory interviews were able to contextualise.

Images courtesy of National Museums Liverpool, Maritime Archives and Library.



varying amounts of information attached to them.

We used a large number of archive images to trigger memories. This was also, it emerged, one of the most enjoyable aspects of the process from the interviewees' perspective. Although the material we used is readily available in local archives, few of our interviewees were users of such services, and there was a real sense that we were making hidden material available to the public.

This is an issue that public history projects might pay more attention to, perhaps building into their plans an element of outreach and encouragement to interviewees to follow up their interests by visiting museums and archives.

Probably the most important difference between this project and most oral history work was that Mapping Memory filmed all its workshops and interviews. This did not seem to have an off-putting effect on the interviewees, and it was crucial to the interpretation of

"The map was crucial because it encouraged interaction, stimulated memory and triggered debate"

the mapping evidence. Because a large part of each session involved interviewees pointing to locations on maps and indicating their relationships with places, the audio recordings alone could not convey much of the meaning of the work.

Although the project focused on a specific area of waterfront Liverpool, the maps that our interviewees plotted were very different from one another. Sometimes this reflected different experiences in the same place (office workers and warehouse workers based in the same street would have different landmarks),



Participants in a workshop annotating the base map

but in other cases it stemmed from a very short-term engagement with the waterfront itself, and a rather longer connection with the city centre more generally. Even though the project was dealing with a historically-short timeframe, therefore, we had to bear in mind that some of our interviewees had even more specific and short-lived experiences, which we had to try to pin down chronologically.

From a museological perspective, the project offered insight into the geographical area within which the Maritime Museum is itself sited, but also provided context for collections acquired by the museum through this period of change. The collecting trends of the museum, especially from the late 1960s until the 1980s, directly reflected the fortunes of the Liverpool waterfront, its shipping and associated industry and activity. This collecting would, in current terminology, be classed as contemporary collecting. However, this implies a level of agency which, at

the time, the museum did not possess. The collecting during this period was characterised by the museum taking a salvage role, responding to a rapidly changing maritime environment, and taking responsibility for preserving material culture. Mapping Memory's findings allow us to work with existing object collections to more effectively represent this district's history. The museum can now present a range of information linking objects, oral histories, archive and photographic collections to explain a transformational period in Liverpool's history.

Mapping Memory generated a great deal of rich material, all of which is being archived by the Merseyside Maritime Museum, and much of which is on the project website. As an enhanced oral history project involving mapping, museum collections and film-making, we believe it demonstrates great potential for similar projects. It was also an important exercise in public engagement for museum and university researchers, and feedback from the interviewees suggested that they valued the opportunity to contribute their memories to the city's collective archive. The project team would encourage anyone interested in the project's methodology and outcomes to get in touch.



A closer view of the map

Rachel Mulhearn

Director, Merseyside Maritime Museum, National Museums Liverpool
rachel.mulhearn@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

A Collection Review of a Moving Image Collection

Part of my job as Cataloguer at the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) is to carry out collection reviews of distinct groups of material. I look at the range of material currently held, assessing whether there is any duplication as well as the condition and relevancy of each item. Besides making recommendations for the possible transfer or disposal of items, I also make suggestions for future collecting. The aim is to achieve a fully catalogued and rationalised collection, backed up with a firm understanding of the collection's scope and relevance.

When I joined the BPMA I was aware that the General Post Office (GPO) – whose history

makes up a large part of the BPMA's collection – had produced a number of excellent films such as *Night Mail* (1936). Under John Grierson and later Alberto Cavalcanti, the GPO Film Unit was a hotbed of daring and innovative film making from 1933 until the early years of the Second World War, when it became the Crown Film Unit. This material is cared for on behalf of BPMA by the British Film Institute (BFI). However, whilst auditing the museum backlog I discovered around 400 VHS videocassettes and 16mm film reels, as well as around 25 U-matic videocassettes. Little was known about this material so it was decided that I should carry out a review of it, which also formed part of my AMA work based project.

Working with a moving image collection presented a lot of challenges, not least because I am by no means a specialist in the area and had very little pre-existing knowledge of how to assess and care for such a distinct type of museum object.



Emma Harper with consultants using the Collections Review toolkit

Whilst the films are physical objects made up of composite materials that have their own particular environmental and storage requirements, it is not necessarily the object itself that is of interest but the content which it carries, the moving image. Moreover, viewing the content is also an issue, as we only have the ability to view VHS or DVD at BPMA, not to mention the effect viewing might have on the condition and stability of the media.

Fortunately, help was at hand in the form of the London Screen Heritage Programme. This programme has several different strands to it, one of which is the creation of a toolkit to help museums and archives without specialist knowledge or equipment to undertake a review of their moving image collection. The BPMA, along with three other museums and archives, was chosen to pilot this toolkit. The main body of the toolkit focuses on two processes, the Significance Assessment and the Collections Review tools.



16mm film reels in BPMA's Repository

It is these processes that were tested during a two day visit from specialist consultants, David Cleveland and Caroline Reed. Each process has a framework: for the Significance Assessment process there is a series of questions to help you assess the significance of particular items - by examining their provenance, rarity, visual impact, condition and historical meaning. This looks at both the local and national significance of items. The Collections Review tool helps to assess current levels of care, management and usage by using a points-based system, with the aim of highlighting hotspots for intervention.

The two day site visit was an invaluable experience through which I was able to gain a wealth of knowledge about the best way to store and handle film, as well as tips on gaining information about the film without viewing it: for example by looking at film on a light-box, examining packaging and using manufacturer's marks to help date it. By carrying out the processes laid out in the toolkit we were able to think critically about the films and collect a lot of information, even from those films that we cannot presently view. We were also able to make some simple changes to the way we stored film that would help preserve it for longer, such as storing reel film horizontally and VHS vertically.

Whilst we did, inevitably, find some duplicate copies of the more famous GPO produced films such as *Night Mail*, the review revealed the importance that film, as a medium, continues to hold right through to the modern day. These films were used among other things to train staff, inform the public about new services and gauge reaction to changes in the postal service, with subjects ranging from the history of Britain through stamps; the benefits of a job with the Post Office; the effect of mechanisation; right through to recordings of adverts released on television for new stamp issues in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.



U-matic and VHS videocassettes in BPMA's Repository

Using the collection review criteria, we have been able to identify some objects for potential disposal due to condition, duplication or irrelevancy – often the training or purely information based films contained material that is more easily accessible and better presented elsewhere in our museum and archive collections. However, we have also gained a lot more knowledge about the scope of the collection, as well as the content, date and length of the films. All this has enabled us to start cataloguing the films and will hopefully result in catalogue records being available for the public to search online in 2012.

Work still remains, however, as we need to consider how to preserve these films in the long term – this inevitably means digitisation and all the associated issues, particularly in terms of film storage and rights. We also need to consider whether we want to collect film in the future and if so, what sort, both in terms of content and format.

This is something that will increasingly be an issue for museum curators in the future, as the current generation are so used to creating instant amateur films with the success of mobile phones and YouTube. It is also worth remembering that many of those who owned the first home movie camcorders will be starting to think about retirement over

the next decade or so, resulting in more and more museums being offered 'home movies' to add to their collections. Ever changing technology highlights the importance of considering the best options for the longevity of the material in terms of our ability to care for it, but also our ability to watch and use any material we collect.

Carrying out this collections review has been an interesting experience which I have learnt a lot from, not just in terms of the BPMA's moving image collection and how to care for it, but also in terms of the wider issues affecting the storage and use of films across the heritage sector. The toolkit discussed in this article has now been published and includes a wealth of resources and advice on how to collect, identify, care for and catalogue moving image collections – I urge any social history curator with film lurking in their museum stores to consult it now! It is available to download for free from the London Screen Archives website: www.londonsscreenarchives.org.uk (click on 'Professional Resources' for links to the handbook and toolkit).

Emma Harper

Cataloguer (Collections), British Postal Museum & Archive
emma.harper@postalheritage.org.uk

Sneaker Speakers: The Symposium of the Training Shoe

Given the ubiquitous nature of trainers, it's perhaps surprising that they are not seen more often in museum displays of contemporary culture. Then again, perhaps not – a pair of trainers is an ephemeral product that tends to be thrown away when the shoes are worn out, rather than offered to museums. Nevertheless, a one-day symposium held in Northampton in April 2011 offered an opportunity to consider the cultural and historical significance of trainers (or sneakers, the North American usage preferred by collectors).

Introducing the day, Will Hoon from Northampton University suggested that trainers had



followed a similar cultural trajectory to denim, ceasing to be a specialist object and transcending locality, ethnicity, gender, age, wealth, and social status. Rebecca Shawcross from Northampton Museum then explained that the symposium was one of the final elements of a three-year Heritage Lottery Fund Collecting Cultures project.

The project came about because Northampton Museum had identified trainers as a gap in its Designated shoe collection, and one that had potential to widen its visitor base. The Collecting Cultures award of £130,000 had resulted in the purchase of 650 pairs of trainers, as well as the exhibition *Sport to Street* and an accompanying photography exhibition, *Sneaker Peak*, produced in collaboration with local young people. Features of the exhibition such as a signed pair of David Beckham's boots and a Nintendo Wii had proved popular with children, and helped to widen the museum's audience.

Thomas Turner from Birkbeck College explained that sports shoes actually date back to the mid nineteenth century, when industrial techniques allowed rubber to become a usable sole (in contrast to the standard leather sole). The instantly successful introduction of lawn tennis in the

1870s led to the tennis shoe, which quickly went from pure sporting use to become part of a relaxed young middle-class gentleman's clothing for lazy afternoons of 'fresh air and flirtation', rejecting the formalities of Victorian dress.

The historical perspective was developed by Anne Sudrow of the Centre for Contemporary History, Potsdam, and Technische Universität, Berlin, with a case study of the plimsoll as an early product of globalisation. Plimsolls were made possible by the vulcanisation of rubber, by which a rubber sole could be securely attached to a canvas upper. Originally developed in the late nineteenth century, they became hugely popular in the 1920s and 1930s, with

"Shoes carry a promise of transformation, as evidenced in culture by Cinderella, Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, and the film The Red Shoes."

manufacturers like Dunlop producing ranges for diverse uses such as golf, walking, and tennis. Moreover, the working classes, unable to afford leather shoes, wore plimsolls. Manufacturing started to shift abroad at this time, with competition coming from Japan and Hong Kong, and British manufacturers became



"As an uncritical fan of trainers, it was naïve of me not to have previously considered that the shoes could be actively disliked!"

increasingly concerned that consumers were buying cheap imported footwear.

An alternative perspective came from Jenny Hockey and Rachel Dilley of the University of Sheffield, who are conducting a research project called 'If the Shoe Fits' (www.sheffield.ac.uk/iftheshoefits). Shoes carry a promise of transformation, as evidenced in culture by Cinderella, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and the film *The Red Shoes*. Predictably, trainers act as status symbols in primarily male subcultures such as skateboarding, but more interesting were negative connotations amongst female research participants. Older women, whilst wearing trainers for orthopaedic purposes, did not like their appearance and found that trainers had a negative effect on their sense of self: "you can't get dressed up or anything" said one interviewee. As an uncritical fan of trainers, it was naïve of me not to have previously considered that the shoes could be actively disliked!

One of the best things about the symposium was the way that it brought together academics and collectors, both in the audience and as speakers. London-based photographer Errol has portrayed trainer collectors as a personal project, and emphasised that collectors tend to accumulate pairs of shoes as part of their lifestyles. The photos (which can be found on Flickr: www.flickr.com/photos/errolphotography/)

show large collections of trainers frequently crammed into small domestic settings. Errol described how manufacturers have become more astute, reissuing vintage designs and marketing them to a more general audience than the original sports for which the trainers were designed.

The theme of marketing was continued by sneaker connoisseur Kish Kash, in conversation with Ligaya Salazar from the Victoria and Albert Museum. Modern trainer culture was influenced by travelling sports fans bringing trainers back to the UK, together with growing use of celebrity endorsements, starting with 1980s hip hop group Run DMC, who wore Adidas, and Nike's endorsement by basketball star Michael Jordan, with commercials directed by Spike Lee. Sports shoes themselves have changed in the last 10-20 years: they may be more technical, but are seen by collectors as aesthetically inferior to earlier designs, and manufacturing quality has also declined.

Following the symposium, there was an opportunity to view the exhibitions at Northampton Museum. The Museum now has probably the best public collection of trainers in the UK, with a cross-section of iconic and more obscure pairs. The well-presented *Sport to Street* exhibition starts with a historical introduction and is then organised by brand, with particular pairs of trainers highlighted. The sneaker collectors I spoke to were impressed, and the family-friendly nature of the display, with a Wii Fit and trainers and football boots appealing to children, was evident. The accompanying *Sneaker Peek* project saw local young people work with artist and photographer



Kenneth Martin to explore the collection, develop photography skills and take photos exploring people's relationship with trainers.

Northampton is to be congratulated on using the Collecting Cultures funding to make its historical shoe collection relevant through the acquisition of more contemporary footwear. While the town may no longer be a major centre of shoe manufacturing, shoes themselves remain a universal product. With the continuing decline of UK manufacturing in the face of global competition, this project may serve as a model for other museums with specialist collections to consider how to increase their relevance and appeal to a younger audience.

For information about the project contact:

Rebecca Shawcross
Shoe Resources Officer,
Northampton Museums and Art Gallery
rshawcross@northampton.gov.uk

Jack Kirby

Collections Interpretation
Manager, Thinktank:
Birmingham Science Museum
jack.kirby@thinktank.ac

Images of *Sport to Street* courtesy of Northampton Museums & Art Gallery

Who Do We Think We Are?

Working with Social History Collections in the 21st Century

SHCG Annual Conference 2011, Manchester and Liverpool

Review Part I – by Briony Bengel-Abbott



The People's History Museum, host venue for day one.

For someone who has just completed their first year of work within the museum sector (as Exhibitions Officer at Brent Museum) this conference's theme of 'Who do we think we are?' couldn't have been more perfect. Whilst studying as a Museology student, my background in fine art meant that I had expected to pursue a career working with fine art collections. However, after a year of working within a local authority museum, the biggest surprise for me has been the discovery that I have found working with social history collections not only interesting but extremely rewarding. Therefore, I came to my first SHCG Conference a little confused about my professional identity - am I really a fine art curator dressed up in social history curator's clothing, or vice versa? I was also anxious to hear the thoughts of others on the future identity of social history curators.

"I came away more confident about my role and inspired by the work of others."



Nick Poole (centre) arguing the case for 'generalism'

The first presentation by Collection Trust's Nick Poole was a fantastic kick-start to the conference, making everyone sit up in their seats - not least because of his 'colourful' language! Based on his experience of talking to friends about the state of museums today, Nick presented the conference with a selection of their opinions and questions such as "museums are like churches...worthy but boring" and "whose problem do museums think they are solving in the world anyway?" The main message of the presentation was tough and difficult to hear: essentially, that museums are still not valued by everyone, despite the dramatic developments of the past ten years. But with it came a positive call for action: a proposal for a more aggressive and confident national expression of the collective value of museums.

Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Curator at Reading Museum, followed with an interesting talk in which he reflected upon his first year in post and offered practical advice on how to avoid the pitfall of short-termism when engaging with community groups. I found his approach very interesting, particularly his insistence upon collaborating with other agencies, which has saved him much valuable time over the past twelve months and has

helped the museum avoid, as he described, 'parachuting' into community engagement. I was pleased that he brought up the 'Whose cake is it anyway?' report, which provides an uncomfortable but useful insight into how our partners experience working with us. I also found it refreshing to hear Brendan recommend that museums shouldn't be afraid to say 'no' to some community activity and recommending that museums have a Community Engagement Policy to ensure consistency in approach.

The second half of the day was concerned with the question of whether social history curators ought to be specialists or generalists. Lauren Woodard of the RAF Museum provided an excellent argument in favour of the specialist. However, her presentation was followed by the debate 'This conference believes social history curators should stop trying to be all things to all people', during which many strong arguments in support of the generalist were put forward. There were many 'I'm a generalist, wanting to be a specialist' admissions throughout the room, but largely it was agreed that social history is not a separate academic discipline, it has no 'ology', but can instead be considered as a state of mind because it is primarily about identifying and communicating the human stories held in collections. I found the debate extremely useful in reconciling my fine art and social history curator 'hats', content with viewing social history as a state of mind, or an approach which can be applied across collections. I also found that, following the debate, I have felt the pressure to specialise ease somewhat, having recognised how much I am thoroughly enjoying the variety of being a generalist.



On the second day, talks by Robert Knifton, Research Associate at the University of Liverpool, and Angela Robinson, Curator at the International Slavery Museum (ISM), strengthened the argument that social history collections are, in fact, everywhere. Robert presented findings from a recent AHRC project that investigated how museums collect, preserve and interpret popular music history. He argued that although popular music has not typically featured heavily in museums, it can actually be a rich resource for telling local/global/personal/political stories and, thanks to its immediacy and ability to be used to highlight common shared experiences, has the capacity to be used in exciting outreach projects. Likewise, Angela Robinson used objects from the ISM, such as an apron decorated with an image of a goliwog, to demonstrate that social history can be found in any collection, regardless of its focus. Furthermore, Angela argued that the core message of the museum - that enslaved Africans fought for their freedom - combined

with the museum's engagement with discussions and debates surrounding contemporary slavery and its relevance to the lives of 'ordinary people', perhaps offers one of the most obvious examples of what social history collections can be used for: social change.

Both talks also highlighted issues surrounding contemporary collecting. In Robert's talk, I found the question of 'to what extent should a museum seek to represent the 'star' system of the commercial music scene, when the amateur, the DIY, the fan, or even the 'failed' musician could potentially often offer a greater reflection of everyday life?' particularly interesting. It was also fascinating to hear Angela Robinson talk about the ISM's collecting policy and the challenges faced not only because they are building a collection entirely from scratch, but also because the subject is so sensitive and complex.

The conference provided a great opportunity to step back, reflect and discuss, and I came away more confident about my role and



Delegates assemble for the spooky tunnels tour at the end of day one

inspired by the work of others. All of the presentations and practical sessions were thought-provoking and I found everyone to be extremely friendly and welcoming. Thank you to the organisers for an excellent conference and I look forward to seeing you all again next year.

Briony Bengel-Abbott

Curator (maternity cover),
The Women's Library
b.bengel-abbott@londonmet.ac.uk



Above and left: The new gallery at the People's History Museum

Review Part II – by Tabitha Cadbury

I would like to thank SHCG for my free place at the conference. As a member of a Human History department, my specialism is ethnography but I also share responsibility for archaeology and social history collections – and there’s no way my employer would fund sufficient training in all three!

The conference theme sounded ideal for a beginner faced with roller-racks full of stair-rods, microwave cookers and pole-heads. Basically, I wanted to be confident enough about what social history 'is' to stand up for it effectively during an impending collections review. I came away understanding that 'social history' tells stories through objects – and although there wasn't time to talk to everyone, I now feel part of a support network which can be called upon in times of need.

The venues (the People's History Museum, Manchester and the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool) are both museums with a message, an opinion, a

call to action. Both celebrate the struggles of oppressed people and applaud their victories, whilst aiming to inspire visitors to fight inequality today. Maybe this partiality reflects the 'social history' style of curation - these exhibitions don't sit on the fence or 'try to be all things to all people'.

But what of the conference content? The first day was strikingly different to the Museum Ethnographers Group (MEG) conferences that I'm used to, which tend to consist of a rapid-fire succession of fairly academic papers. Instead, we were treated to the broader thoughts of luminaries Nick Poole (Collections Trust) and Nick Merriman (Manchester Museum). Poole's opening paper was thought provoking, offering insights into criticisms levied against museums by 'outsiders'. As an 'insider' it's easy to accept the cosy consensus that takes for granted the value of museums. Like our venues, Poole rallied us to action.

Subsequent papers looked at community engagement (Brendan Carr, Reading Museum) and the case for specialist knowledge (Lauren Woodward, RAF Museum). The former was useful for me as I lament the false division between Learning and Collections teams where I work. The latter highlighted for me that 'specialist knowledge' is on



African sculptured figures, International Slavery Museum © Lee Garland

a sliding scale. This issue was followed through in the concluding debate on the motion 'this conference believes social history curators should stop trying to be all things to all people'. Initially it seemed that most were inclined to sit on the curatorial fence, so the resounding defeat of the motion in the final vote came as a surprise. In the afternoon, the AGM focussed on SHCG's next big step - becoming a registered charity, in line with other SSNs including MEG. The motion was passed and should open up new funding opportunities as well as putting the organisation on a more stable footing.



Recreation of an Igbo compound, International Slavery Museum © Lee Garland



Black Achievers wall, International Slavery Museum ©Lee Garland

Day two began with a paper by Dr Robert Knifton (University of Liverpool) on 'Popular Music Beyond Text: Translating Academic Research into Exhibitions'. Having taken the trouble to complete his survey last year, I was glad in return to get feedback on its outcomes. This was followed by a truly inspiring community engagement case study by Fiona Ure (Leicestershire Museums). I would love to work on a project like 'Paper Memories', which brought together social history collections and reminiscence sessions through the catalyst of artist Felicity Austin, who makes wonderful paper clothes.

"The conference theme sounded ideal for a beginner faced with roller-racks full of stair-rods, microwave cookers and pole-heads."

The next session provided a 'toolkit' to do just that. Heather Lomas (Collections Management Network), one of my tutors in Heritage Management at Nottingham Trent University a decade ago, introduced the Revisiting Collections



Model of a plantation, International Slavery Museum © Lee Garland

Methodology. This online guidance covers more tricky issues in community engagement, including how to overcome ethical and practical stumbling blocks to getting user-generated content into documentation systems.

Our tour of the Slavery Museum also brought back memories as I last visited its predecessor, the Transatlantic Slavery Gallery, on the aforementioned course. The first two new galleries, on Africa before European slavery and the Middle Passage, clearly take forward their predecessors' formats. In my student review I noted that the Gallery used ethnographic objects in an innovative way and the Museum's

current curator, Angela Robinson, highlighted how it uses social history objects in new contexts.

The final session provided more practical training. I chose an introduction to SHCG's online resource, firstBASE. I was sceptical at first, as often online knowledge-sharing systems are set up but nobody shares knowledge on them! However, firstBASE already contains a great deal of useful links to books, museums and websites on specialist topics, achieved through voluntary effort alone. I'll give it a trial run next time I get a random enquiry about an old fire extinguisher, cannon ball or coffee machine.



Fight for Freedom and Equality Timeline, International Slavery Museum © Lee Garland

In summary, the conference was a well-orchestrated delight. Everyone was friendly and welcoming. The content was refreshingly varied. Even if I don't get funding to come again, I've already gained a useful network of contacts, research routes and food for thought about what social history 'is'. That hardly makes me a 'specialist' - in fact, it's furthered my quest to become 'all things to all people'.

Tabitha Cadbury

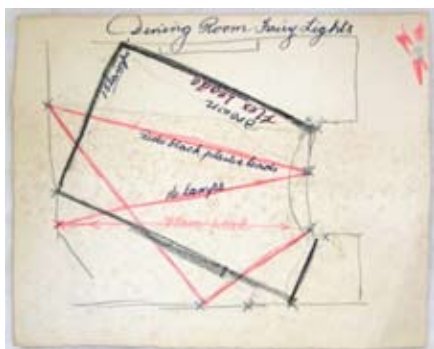
Assistant Keeper of Human History,
Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery
tabitha.cadbury@plymouth.gov.uk

Christmas in August...

It was December last year and a conversation in the office about who puts up their Christmas decorations on what day which led to the realisation that this festive occasion was sorely under-represented in collections here at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.

It's such a major part of most people's lives and yet a few Christmas cards and precious little else was all we had to show for it. Fairly quickly a public appeal was launched and I waited with baited breath to be swamped by an avalanche of tinsel and baubles. I think it's safe to say that I was underwhelmed by the three responses I received: one from a shop offering some of their seasonal overstock, one from too far outside of Plymouth, and another from a colleague who bought a token offering in a charity shop!

Several months later I received a phone call to say that there was someone at the front desk offering some items for donation. You can imagine my sheer delight (and the slightly bemused expressions of my visitor and his family at the over-excited response) when I opened a battered looking box to discover three sets of Christmas lights and a box of tinsel strands. The tatty box from



Sketch of the layout of lights in the previous owner's dining room

a local department store showed a delivery date of 1937 and, coupled with the presence of old style round pin plugs, this suggested a date of late 1930s to early 1940s. The decorations had been discovered by the donor in the attic of a deceased family friend, who along with her husband had lived at the address for many years.

The husband was previously a strategic engineer for the dockyard, so perhaps it should have come as no surprise that a more detailed look through the items revealed his 'Christmas lights testing kit' and all the little hardware accessories he used for stringing up the lights. Even more charming were his hand drawn diagrams for placement of the lights in his dining room and his scrawled checklist of the lights and leads with added notes.

"a public appeal was launched and I waited with baited breath to be swamped by an avalanche of tinsel and baubles"

In the 1930s an enthusiasm for Victorian Christmas traditions, which had waned since the death of Queen Victoria, was reignited and artificial Christmas decorations became increasingly popular in homes across the country. The lights that I found in that scruffy box are a great selection of the kinds of lights that people were buying around this time. There are imitation candles, coloured pine cones and some fairly vulgar but quite delightful Chinese lanterns. I should imagine that a certain house to the north



Selection of glass lights from the three different sets of Christmas lights



Set of different coloured glass pine cone lights

of Plymouth City Centre, or the dining room at least, would have been quite a sight to behold.

Many of the original lamps with their glass shades still exist and two of the sets are very nearly complete. They are still housed in their original boxes whose appearance suggests they've been in the attic for decades. But even though the sets are incomplete and the boxes decidedly scruffy, they are definitely my favourite objects of the year!

This Christmas, with any luck, a small display of festive items will inspire a few more seasonal donations.

Rachel Smith

Curator of Social History and World Cultures, Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery
rachel.smith@plymouth.gov.uk

Images courtesy of Plymouth City Council (Museums and Archives)

A Butcher's Knife that Travelled the Globe

The object I am going to talk about in this article is not from our museum's social history collection so, you may find yourself wondering, why is it being featured in SHCG News! However, I would like to use this object to demonstrate how different collections in a museum often overlap with each other, and how social history itself can be found in all objects regardless of what collection status the object has. It's all about spinning a story out of an object, isn't it?

Sheffield is known throughout the world for its association with steel and cutlery: in the 1800s primarily for its pioneer steelmakers and innovation, and more recently for processing and finishing. Museums Sheffield is the custodian of a collection of finished metalwork, awarded Designated Status in 1999 in recognition of its outstanding national and historical significance.

This butcher's knife was manufactured in about 1835 by Sheffield knife maker Joseph Elliot & Sons. The firm made table knives, razors, scissors, penknives and carving knives which were exported all over the world. They had offices all over the Americas and Europe.

The knife was exported to America and traded to the North American Indian Sioux tribe. George Catlin (1796-1872) an American painter, author and traveller who specialised in portraits of Native Americans in the Old West, described this type of knife as follows: "The scalping

knife, in a beautiful scabbard, which is carried under the belt, is the form of knife most generally used in all parts of the Indian country where knives have been introduced. It is a common and cheap butcher-knife with one edge, manufactured in Sheffield, England, perhaps for six pence, and sold to the poor Indian in these wild regions for a horse...."

The knife's sheath was made of deer skin by the Sioux people. Along the top of one side, there is a band of stained porcupine quills in white, black, yellow, red and blue, with a fringe of pieces of tin. The latter produces the sound of tinkling bells when the knife is moved. As described earlier by George Catlin, the knife and sheath would have been carried under the belt.

In the 1850s John Stuart-Wortley-Mackenzie, 2nd Baron of Wharnccliffe, travelled to America as part of a Grand Tour. A letter to his sister Caroline describes visiting a Mohawk village about 60 or 70 miles from Niagara and his meeting with Miss Brant, a mixed race woman wearing a western style dress with leggings and moccasins.

Upon return to Sheffield he brought back with him a small but important group of North American material which includes this knife and sheath. In 1901, the 2nd Baron of Wharnccliffe's grandson Francis John Montagu-Stuart-Wortley-Mackenzie who was the 2nd Earl of Wharnccliffe (apologies for lengthy names and titles!) donated this collection of Native American material including the knife and sheath to Sheffield's city museum.

I think this knife demonstrates how an object can have multiple stories fitting into different collections and with links to history around the

world. It started off as a day-to-day functional object, was passed onto different people and, having travelled around the world, it was eventually brought back to Sheffield by a local aristocrat.

The story fits really well into Sheffield's Precious Cargo project (part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad programme, v) which looks at how objects have found their way across the globe before becoming part of the city of Sheffield's collection.

This knife and sheath have also been featured in the British Museum / BBC project 'A History of the World'. See: www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/



A HISTORY OF THE WORLD
A BBC AND BRITISH MUSEUM PRODUCTION

Sheauran Tan

Project Curator (World Cultures),
Museums Sheffield
sheauran.tan@museums-sheffield.org.uk

Theatrical Pleasures: Contending for a Seat by Theodore Lane, 1821



This hand coloured etching shows two men fighting over a seat in a crowded theatre. It is the work of Theodore Lane (1800-1828) who came to prominence in the early 1820s as a prolific designer of political and social satires. His life was cut short in 1828 when, as the result of a drunken prank, he fell to his death through a skylight.

SHCG Committee 2011-12

In *Contending for a Seat* we see a section of the pit with the ends of four benches in the foreground and a box on the first tier behind. From their vantage point above, two women and two men - people of fashion - look down upon the disturbance below, between them registering restrained alarm, amusement, contempt, and interest. From the adjacent box, partly visible on the right, a woman watches the scene through an opera-glass. Below, in the crowded pit, a fight has broken out between two men, causing pandemonium all around them. A woman has fallen backwards from her seat, her legs high in the air, much to the shock of the patron in front!

Prints depicting social and political satire were supremely popular among all classes from the mid 18th to the mid 19th centuries. The print trade was centred on London and print shops became a firmly established feature of the capital, in particular around St. Paul's and Fleet Street.

Crowds would gather outside the print shops, looking at the caricatures and satirical prints lined up in the windows, providing a common point of discussion and amusement. The popularity of satirical prints continued unabated until the mid 19th century, when the emerging illustrated newspapers and pictorial journals of the day became the main medium for satire.

This print can be seen in the exhibition *In the Limelight: Newcastle's Theatrical History* at Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne, 4 February – 16 September 2012.

Adam Bell

Assistant Keeper of Social History, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums
adam.bell@twmuseums.org.uk

1. CHAIR:
MICHAEL TERWEY
Exhibitions and Displays Manager
National Media Museum
Pictureville
Bradford
West Yorkshire
BD1 1NQ
Tel: 01274 203345
Email:
michael.terwey@nationalmediamuseum.org.uk

2. SECRETARY:
GEORGINA YOUNG
Docklands Strategy Programme Manager
Museum of London Docklands
No. 1 Warehouse
West India Quay
London E14 4AL
Tel: 020 7001 9826
Email: gyoung@museumoflondon.org.uk

3. MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:
LAURA BRIGGS
Project History Officer
Harris Museum & Art Gallery
Market Square
Preston
PR1 2PP
Tel: 01772 905103
Email: l.briggs@preston.gov.uk

4. TREASURER:
JOE CARR
Curator
Brent Museum
c/o 2 Manor Park
Horham, IP21 5EE
Email: joe.carr@btinternet.com

5. JOURNAL EDITOR:
MICHELLE DAY
Exhibitions Organiser
National Media Museum
Pictureville
Bradford
West Yorkshire
BD1 1NQ
Tel: 01274 203392
Email: michelle.day@nationalmediamuseum.org.uk

6. NEWS EDITOR:
ADAM BELL
Assistant Keeper, Social History
Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums
South Shields Museum & Art Gallery
Ocean Road
South Shields
Tyne & Wear
NE33 2JA
Tel: 0191 456 8740
Email: adam.bell@twmuseums.org.uk

7. CONFERENCE ORGANISER:
KAREN OLIVER-SPRY
Manager, Audience Research and Advocacy
National Railway Museum
Leeman Road
York YO26 4XJ
Tel: 08448 153139
Email: karen.oliver-spry@nrm.org.uk

8. SEMINAR ORGANISER:
JENNIFER BROADBENT
Collections Officer
Wigan Heritage Service
Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust
Museum of Wigan Life
Library Street
Wigan
WN1 1NU
Tel: 01942 827594
Email: j.broadbent@wlct.org

9. SEMINAR ORGANISER:
JENNY BROWN
Curator (Industry)
Aberdeen Maritime Museum
Shiprow
Aberdeen
Scotland
AB11 5BY
Tel: 01224 337719
Email: jenbrown@aberdeencity.gov.uk

10. SPONSORSHIP & DEVELOPMENT OFFICER :
FREYA FOLÅSEN
Project Officer, New Centre Project
The British Postal Museum & Archive
Freeling House
Phoenix Place
London WC1X 0DL
Tel: 020 7239 2560
Email: freya.folaasen@postalheritage.org.uk

11. WEB EDITOR & EMAIL LIST CO-ORDINATOR:
CAT NEWLEY
Assistant Curator of Community History
Colchester & Ipswich Museums
Museum Resource Centre
14 Ryegate Road
Colchester
CO1 1YG
Tel: 01206 282935
Email: catherine.newley@colchester.gov.uk

12. FIRSTBASE PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR:
VICTORIA ROGERS
Cardiff Story Museum
Old Library
The Hayes
Cardiff
CF10 1BH
Tel: 029 2087 3197
Email: vrogers@cardiff.gov.uk

13. FIRSTBASE CO-ORDINATOR:
STEPH MASTORIS
National Waterfront Museum
Oystermouth Road
Swansea
Wales
SA1 3RD
Email: steph.mastoris@museumwales.ac.uk

GENERAL ENQUIRIES:
enquiry@shcg.org.uk

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

