

Issue 71
June 2013

SHG **news**

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP



**Experimental Re-interpretation & Display
Community Engagement at Birmingham
Eli Whalley's Donkey Stones
Medical Objects Part II**



Join SHCG?

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

Laura Briggs
Membership Secretary
Email: laurahbriggs@gmail.com

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 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 October 2013

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 *News* are wide ranging and do not necessarily express the views of the SHCG committee or SHCG, unless otherwise stated.

The suggested word count for submissions is: Bulletin Board 100-300 words, Theory & Practice 900-1,000 words, Reviews and Object Focus 400-500 words (one page) or 900-1,000 words (two pages), Tea Break 200-300 words. Please submit your article by e-mail, saved as a Word file (Arial 12 point). Images can be e-mailed or, if high resolution, submitted on a CD (high resolution preferred). Images should be accompanied by a brief caption and credit details.

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: Inter Alia, an experiment in re-interpreting and displaying the stored collections at Bury Art Museum, pp. 10-11.

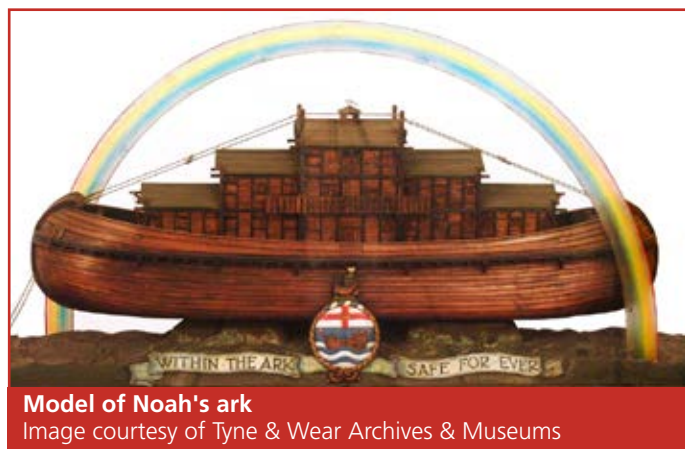
Image courtesy of Danielle Quinn.



Welcome to Issue 71

At the end of June a new permanent exhibition opens at Newcastle's Theatre Royal, in which the history of theatre is charted from its origins in Ancient Greece to the present day. An important part of the narrative focuses on the medieval mystery plays, in which stories from the Bible were acted

out. Among the best known of the mystery plays was the story of Noah and the Flood. To help illustrate this in the Theatre Royal exhibition a model ark was sought, and Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums were happy to help as we have, would you believe, not one but two models of Noah's handiwork.



Model of Noah's ark
Image courtesy of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums

While processing the loan-out paperwork a documentation anomaly occasioned the consultation of the original MDA catalogue cards from 1977, in the hope that this would lead to some clarification. I was amused to read under 'production data' that the 'manufacturer' was identified by the recorder as "Noah and Sons", and the 'association data' group identified the 'associated person' as "Noah and Friends". Turning the card over, 'description data' yielded the dimensions "300 cubits x 50 cubits x 30 cubits", and under 'documentation' – following the format 'author : date : title : journal or publisher : volume : detail', the recorder inserted "? : Bible : Genesis : chapter 4, verses 14 = 16". I take my hat off to the recorder, Dave Bowler, whose use of the MDA Data Standard made me laugh out loud!

All this got me thinking: setting aside whether or not you actually believe the biblical story, what tools might Noah have used to construct his ark? I posed this very question to the Tools and Trades History Society (TATHS) and their response was as follows:

"If one believes that the world was created in 4004 BC, then the Great Flood was probably about 2500-2000 BC and we know that by then both copper and bronze were being used, so the bronze axe, adze, chisel and the saw would all have been available. Joining timbers would probably have been done by the use of wooden dowels, called treenails, driven into pre-drilled holes, made by bow drills using bronze (or flint tipped) drill bits. All these tools were available to the ancient Egyptians who could also work stone using them. A useful book is *Experiments in Egyptian Archaeology* by Denys A. Stocks (ISBN 978-0-415-58894-2). Waterproofing / caulking the hull would have used either natural asphalt eruptions which occur in the current oil fields in the Middle East, or plant resins."

With the introduction in April of SHCG's new membership structure, all members will now receive digital copies of the Group's publications, providing an e-mail address was supplied on the membership renewal form (if members opted for 'print' membership a digital copy will be e-mailed in addition to the copy sent by post). As a special treat for members who would like to learn more about diluvian era ark building, I will include extra detail from the nice people at TATHS when I e-mail the digital copy of issue 71.

Adam G. Bell

Editor, *SHCG News*

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7. Connecting History



10. Inter Alia



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SHCG Matters

SHCG Conference 2013 Local Stories, Global Identities

Thursday 27 & Friday 28 June 2013

The 2013 SHCG conference will be held in Belfast, Northern Ireland. SHCG committee looks forward to welcoming you to the Ulster Museum and Ulster Folk and Transport Museum for an exciting programme of papers, workshops, debate and discussion. Full details of the conference programme can be found on the SHCG website: www.shcg.org.uk.



If you are attending conference and wish to extend your trip, it's worth considering a visit to the City of Derry. The city is hosting a number of unique cultural events this year as part of its 2013 UK City of Culture programme.

Staff at the Tower Museum in Derry have kindly offered to host a behind the scenes tour of their museum for SHCG members on Saturday 29 June. A visit to Derry also offers a chance to visit the newly restored Guildhall and Plantation exhibition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of the city walls.

Please note that the Derry trip is not a formal part of the conference programme and private transport to and from Derry will not be organised or provided by SHCG. However, public bus transport between Belfast and Derry is affordable and frequent.

If you are interested in joining a group of conference delegates for a visit to Derry on Sat 29 June please contact Jude or Ciara. Everyone is welcome.

For more information about the City of Culture in Derry visit: www.cityofculture2013.com.

Jude Holland and Ciara Canning

SHCG committee
judith@ssgreatbritain.org
ciara.canning@colchester.gov.uk

SHCG e-mail list

The SHCG e-mail list continues to be a valuable platform to promote events to museum colleagues.

In the past few months it has been awash with details of job opportunities, workshops and conferences, showing the range of opportunities that are around at the moment for those seeking career development.

The list has also proved useful for those needing help with identifications as well as tips on how to get the most out of a collections management system. Perhaps the most extraordinary message of the last few months related to a query about 19th century urinals and their flushing mechanisms!

If you're not a member of the list, you're missing out! To join, e-mail shcg-list-request@jiscmail.ac.uk, stating your name and type of membership.



James Allen and Sons urinal in Bristol's Great Western Dockyard, as featured on the list

Image courtesy of ss Great Britain Trust

Connect with SHCG



In addition to the e-mail list, we also publicise our events and activities via our website and social media accounts, so please feel free to visit www.shcg.org.uk, follow us on [Twitter@SHCG1](https://twitter.com/SHCG1) and like us on Facebook (search for "social history curators group"). We also regularly post new messages about the latest content to be uploaded to firstBASE, so it's a great way of keeping track of what's new there too.

Catherine Newley

SHCG committee

catherine.newley@stalbans.gov.uk

firstBASE

The new version of firstBASE has now been live for six months, and it is really pleasing to see the website becoming more interactive.

We've currently got over 35 active contributors who are sharing their experience and knowledge of useful resources by uploading them onto the site. The new resources that have been uploaded echo the wide variety of objects and topics we all look after in our collections – from chocolate to democracy, types of glass to workhouses!

In the coming months we will be adding a new section to the site, written by National Museum Wales' (and SHCG stalwart!) Steph Mastoris. This section will be a 'beginner's guide to', with step-by-step pointers and suggestions of how to approach identifying social history objects.

The firstBASE Editorial Committee are also working with around 14 different SSNs and specialist museums and organisations to create brand new

resources on a range of subjects with which you told us you needed support. Titles planned include 'how to date pocket watches', 'top 10 friendly society objects in your collection' and 'how to identify ship models'.

firstBASE can be found at www.shcg.org.uk/firstbase and remember, it's now really easy to sign up and start adding your own suggestions of useful resources in the Contribute section.

Victoria Rogers

SHCG committee
vrogers@cardiff.gov.uk

Masonic periodicals online

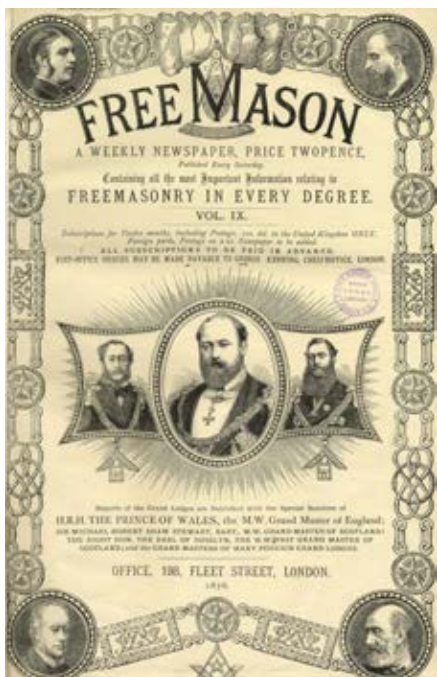
In 1717 the first Masonic Grand Lodge was formed in London and it wasn't long before printed references to freemasonry began appearing in an increasing number of English magazines

and newspapers. From the end of the 18th century up to the present day, various series of periodicals were also published by freemasons for a Masonic audience.

These publications are important sources not only for understanding the issues within freemasonry but for providing information about the individuals involved and the localities where lodges were based. Few complete series of these periodicals are held in libraries and where they exist there are only limited indexes.

The Library and Museum of Freemasonry, in partnership with King's College London Department of Digital Humanities and Olive Software, has undertaken a groundbreaking project to provide free access to searchable digital copies of the major English Masonic publications from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries.

The titles digitised for this project, which comprises approximately 75,000 pages, are as follows (shown with the dates of publication available digitally):



Silver of the Stars

Edinburgh Museums & Galleries is diving headlong into a new temporary exhibitions programme with the launch of a gleaming exhibition – *Silver of the Stars*. The Museum of Edinburgh, set in a complex of 16th century buildings on the historic Royal Mile, is the latest to host this highly successful touring exhibition. It features the collaboration of ten world-famous, contemporary Scots including Sean Connery, Lulu and Billy Connolly, with ten of Scotland's finest silversmiths. Each pair has created a piece of silverware with the theme 'a drink with a close friend', and the results are as eclectic as the celebrities themselves.

The display at the Museum of Edinburgh celebrates the lavishness of the pieces and creates a feeling of luxury and opulence by using rich purple colours throughout, swathes of flowing silk, and highlights of sparkling silver. The display also taps into the sense of fun behind the pieces and includes a



Museum of Edinburgh
Image courtesy of Edinburgh Museums & Galleries

'Star Designer' area for children (and big children too!) to design their own pieces inspired by the exhibits. Visitors are also invited to be a 'Star for the Day' and have their photograph taken with props such as star-shaped glasses, hats and tiaras.

The exhibition provides a contemporary compliment to the nationally important array of traditional Edinburgh silverware on display in this local history museum, while adding a further dimension to the information already available about the history of silversmithing in the Capital. It is accompanied by a dedicated programme of events and entry is free. *Silver of the Stars* runs at the Museum of Edinburgh until 21 September 2013, and can be seen afterwards at venues in Wick, Thurso, Inverness and West Kilbride.

Title page of *The Freemason*, 1876
Image courtesy of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry

- *Freemasons' Magazine: or, General and Complete Library (later The Scientific Magazine and Freemason's Repository)* [1793-98]
- *The Freemasons' Quarterly Review* [1834-49]
- *The Freemasons' Magazine and Masonic Mirror* [1856-71]
- *The Freemason* [1869-1901]
- *The Freemason's Chronicle* [1875-1901]
- *Masonic Illustrated: A Monthly Journal for Freemasons* [1900-1906]

Access to this digital resource is free via the Resources page of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry website at www.freemasonry.london.museum or the project website at www.masonicperiodicals.org/, where articles can also be found about the development of the Masonic press.

Diane Clements

Director
The Library and Museum of Freemasonry
dclements@freemasonry.london.museum

Gemma Lundie

Curatorial Assistant - History
Edinburgh Museums and Galleries
gemma.lundie@edinburgh.gov.uk

A Black Country tipper toilet

Winter maintenance work to re-lay a quarry tile floor in an outside toilet at the Black Country Living Museum recently revealed an opportunity to bring a 'tipper toilet' back into use as another of the museum's 'live' exhibits.

Designed by James Duckett of Burnley, the tipper or 'automatic slop water closet' was patented in 1887. It has a tipping tank instead of a cistern tank and the water comes from 'slop' or waste water, e.g. from the kitchen or scullery sink.

The toilet in question, at the rear of our Brook Street back-to-back property, would originally have received water from a drain located outside the brew'us

(a Black Country name for the 'wash house'). When the tank was almost full it tipped over, sending a powerful rush of water to flush the toilet.

During the 1890s and early 1900s the tipper closet was installed in many backyards of working class houses in the midlands and the north, replacing the pail system which had continued despite many places in the south of England adopting the WC system much earlier.

Having discovered a pipe connecting water to the toilet during the maintenance work, we are using a tap inside the water closet to feed the system. Final work on regulating the water is underway, so we hope to



The tipping tank

Image courtesy of Black Country Living Museum

have the toilet working soon by activating the flush periodically. We may also arrange for our costumed demonstrators to flush the closet by pouring buckets of water down the nearby drain which runs into the tipper tank.

The tipper toilet is part of a range of WC exhibits at the museum, from the pail system to an indoor toilet in our 1940s cast iron council house (constructed in the 1920s). However, visitors will continue to be directed towards the more modern facilities to spend a penny!

Clare Weston

Curator – Domestic & Cultural Life
Black Country Living Museum
clare.weston@bclm.com

Research into Birmingham's suburbs goes online

Social history curators at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery have taken part in a ground-breaking collaborative research project. 'Suburban Birmingham: Spaces and Places, 1880-1960' was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and involved Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham Archives and Heritage and the University of Birmingham's Cadbury Research Library. Supervised by the University, two research fellows from each institution undertook detailed research on aspects of Birmingham's suburbs, drawing upon their own and each other's collections. The Museum's two social history curators researched the early history of Cadbury's factory in Bournville, and Edgbaston in the late 19th century.

The output of the project is a website, www.suburbanbirmingham.org.uk, which features online galleries of objects and archival material and

4,000 word essays by each of the fellows. The website was officially launched in February 2013.

The project enabled curators, archivists and academics to work together and learn from one another. All the participating institutions gained an invaluable understanding of the others' collections and methods of working. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery's new series of history galleries, 'Birmingham: its people, its history', features many objects which were identified during the research project, along with a touch screen interactive on which visitors can access digitised objects and archival material selected by the research fellows.

Henrietta Lockhart and Jo-Ann Curtis

Curators of History, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
henrietta.lockhart@birmingham.gov.uk
jo.curtis@birmingham.gov.uk



Entrance to Cadbury's Bournville Works by Claude Buckle, 1930
Image courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

Connecting History at the Ulster Museum

Earlier this year National Museums Northern Ireland successfully acquired funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund towards the redevelopment of its modern history galleries.

The project 'Connecting History' aims to forge connections between people and their history in engaging, relevant and meaningful ways. A new multi-layered gallery approach to interpreting the centuries from the 16th century Elizabethan conquest of Ireland up to the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 will cater to diverse visitor needs and learning styles.

Another aim of the project is to make the museum's collections more widely accessible to the public through a wide-ranging programme of collections digitisation. Since January 2012, over 1,200 objects have been added to the online records of the History collection.

A focus of the digitisation was placed on the Decade of Centenaries, which explores the defining period in Northern Irish History from 1912–1922.



Anti Home Rule sticker showing Sir Edward Carson
Image courtesy of National Museums Northern Ireland



18th century Volunteer coat reputed to have been worn by United Irishman James Hope

Image courtesy of National Museums Northern Ireland

Visitors from all over the world can now access a wide variety of collections material including photographs, silverware, weapons, souvenirs, propaganda posters or costume and explore the many facets of historic events such as the signing of the Ulster Covenant, the First World War, the Easter Rising and Partition.

The recent online addition of a number of uniforms from around 1798 sheds light on an earlier period of 'Connecting History'. The uniforms highlight the strong military culture of the time, with scores of men enlisting in local Militia, Yeomanry and Volunteer regiments to police the land against rebels and dissenters. A new web-tour 'Loyalism or Rebellion?' addresses the shifting allegiances of the 1798 struggle and challenges notions of loyalism as a black-and-white concept. This and other online collection highlights tours can be found at: www.nmni.com/um/Collections/Collections-highlights.

Sarah Kingston

History Intern
National Museums Northern Ireland
sarah.kingston@nmni.com

Understanding British Portraits

Understanding British Portraits is an active network with free membership for professionals working with British portraits including academics, curators, conservators, museum learning professionals, researchers and art dealers. The network aims to enhance the knowledge and understanding of portraits in all media in British collections, for the benefit of future research, exhibitions, interpretation, display and learning programmes.

The network organises a programme of seminars and visits to private collections, is engaged in mapping portrait collections of every size throughout the UK, mapping research and expertise in portraiture and associated disciplines and providing online toolkits to assist in the research, display and interpretation of portraits.

A new website was launched earlier this year offering access to a database of



Mrs Townley, attributed to Richard Cosway (1742 -1821), painted about 1800. As featured on the UBP blog.
Image © Private collection

portrait specialists and portrait collections in the UK, online publishing opportunities for portrait-relevant reviews and articles, a guest blog with regular posts on new research and events, a queries section for members to post questions and a bursary area with details of available funding opportunities and best practice case studies. See www.britishportraits.org.uk.

The network's next seminar will focus on contemporary responses to portraiture and portrait collections, showcasing many of the projects taking place in the West Midlands this summer, and elsewhere. It will be held at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, and the Barber Institute of Fine Arts on Tuesday 16 July 2013. Further details of the programme will be posted on the network's Events page: www.britishportraits.org.uk/events/.

Caroline Pegum
 Researcher / Co-ordinator
 Understanding British
 Portraits
cpegum@npg.org.uk

PRISM fund

The new round of PRISM (Preservation of Industrial and Scientific Material) funding is now open. Grants can be between £500 and £20,000 with a match funding requirement of 10%. PRISM is open to museum and heritage groups in England and Wales, awarding grants towards the costs of acquisition and conservation of items or collections which are important in the history and development of science, technology, industry, and related fields. Applicants do not have to be Accredited, but do need to have charitable purposes. PRISM is a rolling fund and applications can be submitted at any time of the year. For more details see: www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-for-funding/prism/.

Wakefield's new museum opens

Sir David Attenborough officially reopened Wakefield Museum in March. The museum moved from its former home, a Georgian Music Saloon, to its new site in the £31m Wakefield One building in November 2012. Sir David said: "It is a great privilege to open this spectacular new museum. It's a beautiful design, is beautifully displayed and is full of interesting things".

Wakefield's collections are used thematically to explore the lives of the city's residents since it was first settled over 1,000 years ago. They offer a fresh approach to its history, growth and development and are planned to change and evolve over time. Emotive subjects such as love (inspired by a beautiful medieval finger ring discovered in the ruins of Sandal Castle) flow into displays which explore different aspects of Wakefield living, from working lives to Tudor architecture and Rugby League. A special gallery dedicated to the extraordinary life of Charles

Waterton, a Victorian pioneer of wildlife conservation, uses innovative techniques to unlock his collection of natural history specimens. A Cayman (like an alligator) which Waterton rode out of a South American river is displayed under the floor to give visitors his unique perspective of the animal.

The museum joins the library service at Wakefield One, improving visitor experiences, visitor numbers and uniting local history collections and knowledge. Local Studies archives feature in the museum displays and indeed many of the Wakefield people discussed in the displays were researched in the library.

John Whitaker
 Museums Curatorial and
 Collections Officer
 Wakefield Museum at
 Wakefield One
jwhitaker@wakefield.gov.uk



Sir David Attenborough studying Charles Waterton's 'John Bull and the National Debt' – a composite piece of satirical taxidermy. Image courtesy of Wakefield Council

The great donate

Question: what do a 1970s sunlamp, a Wham! t-shirt, and a hand built model of a pit cottage have in common?

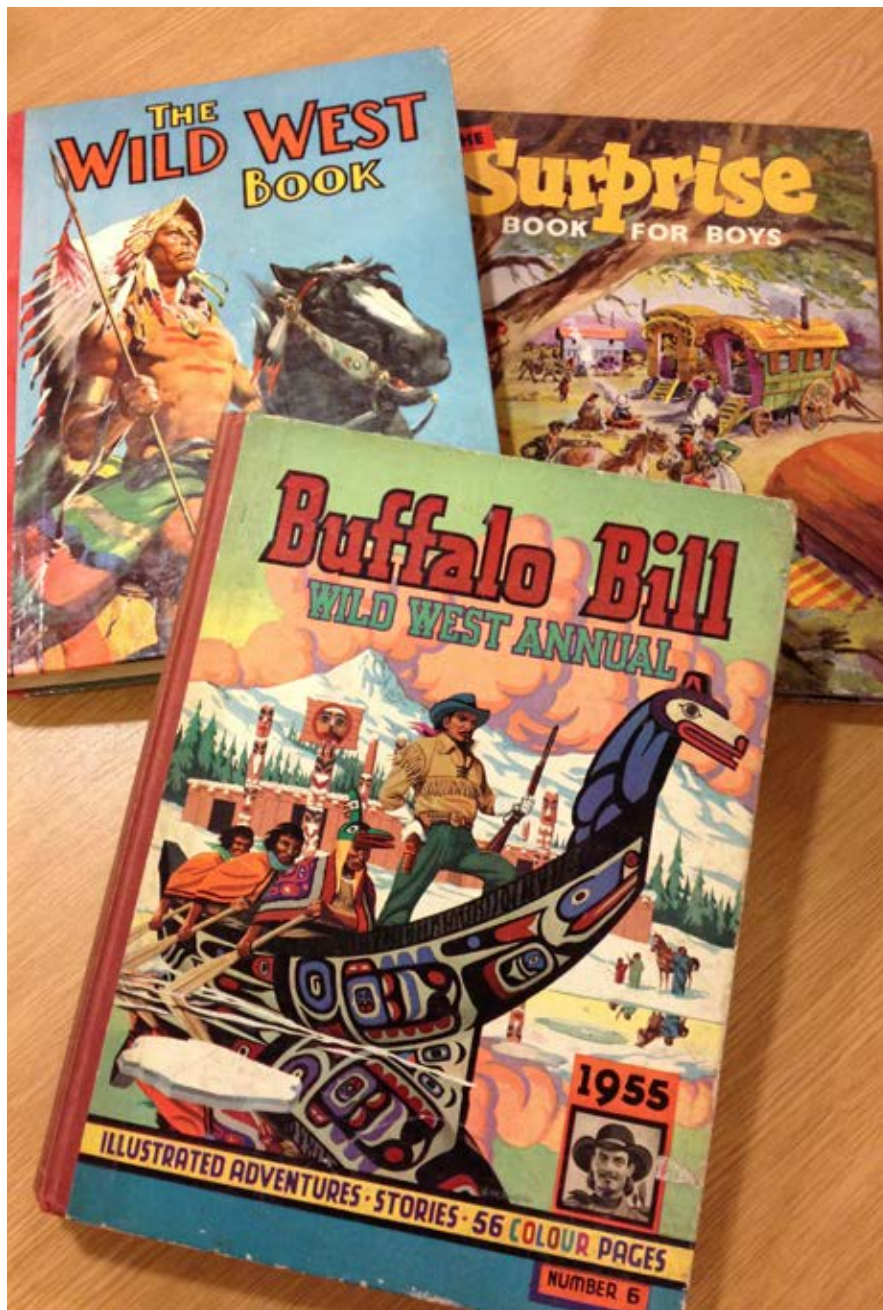
Answer: all of these items were donated to Beamish during our half term Great Donate event! For one week during February half term, Beamish's Collections Study Room was transformed into a 'donation station', complete with 1950s style living room, try-on '50s costume, and a 'design a '50s living room' family activity.

Generous visitors were responding to the appeal for items from the 1950s and beyond, to help with the future development of Beamish – most importantly, the construction of a 1950s and 1980s area at the museum.

This project was an entirely unknown quantity – we had no idea how (or indeed if!), the public would respond. The results were amazing and beyond all our expectations – by the end of the week, we had collected over 2,000 items. All of these objects are now being processed, researched and catalogued, ready to go into 1950s buildings on site.

As well as objects for the collection, the Great Donate was an exercise in story gathering – visitors dropped in to tell us their memories and perceptions of the period and to fill in specially designed story forms. All of these stories and memories will be used to research future developments at the museum, and ensure that the story we tell at the museum reflects the memories and experiences of communities in the North East.

Crucially, the Great Donate ran alongside the 'Category D' project delivered by our Learning and Community Participation teams. This project explored the impact on local communities



1950s boys' annuals

Image courtesy of Beamish, The Living Museum of the North

of the 1951 Durham County Development Plan, which aimed to reshape the county of Durham for a brave new post war world with sometimes severe and long lasting consequences for the communities affected.

For more information on the Great Donate and the Category D

project, visit our website at www.beamish.org.uk.

Cheryl Knight

Assistant Keeper of Social History
Beamish, The Living Museum
of the North
cherylknight@beamish.org.uk

Inter Alia: an experiment in re-interpreting and displaying the stored collections

Inter Alia was a collaborative project between the curators of Bury Art Museum and the 3rd year students on the BA (Hons) Fashion Image Making & Styling course at Salford University.

With over 60,000 objects in the museum collection at Bury Art Museum we are conscious that not every object can be put on display at any one time. Eager to use our stored collections in an innovative way, we approached the course leaders of the Fashion Image Making & Styling course to collaborate with us. The outcome was Inter Alia - a project that we feel pushed boundaries in how we can display and interpret our collections.

Bury Art Museum curators had an initial meeting with course leader Christine Ratcliffe to

explore possible ways of working together. She was given a tour of the museum collection and an introduction to the type of objects Bury collects. After this meeting the students were given the following project brief:

'Working in collaboration with Bury Art Museum, students will focus on the REINVENTION of the way the collection is seen. With a sense of ADVENTURE we will be marching off the edge of our map...! A restless need for change (REINVENTION), approaching the exhibition with a NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE, objects will be used out of chronological order –mimicking the structure and recall of human memory. The possibilities are endless. A new world can be created through scenarios, sets and photographs that play with colour, proportion and volume to emphasise SURREALITY; transporting you into a world of pure IMAGINATION. A correlation of the world of real objects and the life of objects in the mind, by capturing imagined scenes using props and sets creating trompe l'oeil effects. What we see finally will have undergone several changes initially from your imagination (an unreal dimension), to an actualisation in real space and real time before the camera, and finally returning once more to the realm of fantasy through the eyes of the viewer. We know the worlds we are creating are not a reality. It is a whim - an entertainment to PROVOKE something in people, whether as escapism or relief'.

32 students from the course were divided into four groups. The first group used museum objects in their photographic fashion shoots. The second group used the art gallery and artworks as

'The students had no pre-conceived notions of what the objects were, how old they were, and quite often what they would have been used for. They saw them as colours, shapes and things of beauty.'

a backdrop to their shoots. The third group created individual case installations in the museum, an exhibition space which lends itself to ever-changing displays, and the fourth group took inspiration from the museum and art collections to create their work off-site.

The students had no pre-conceived notions of what the objects were, how old they were, and quite often what they would have been used for. They saw them as colours, shapes and things of beauty. Some students delved further, enquiring about the stories behind the objects, but most built their own stories.

For instance, Ian Robert Slater, one of the eight students who created a display in the museum, used a 1950s pink fridge and a mannequin from the museum's Co-operative collection in his installation 'Trey LaTrash: Pop Psychic'. He recreated a day in the surreal Pop Psychic life of New York artist and underground club DJ Trey LaTrash. He also used quotes from interviews about the New York scene which appeared in *JUKE Magazine*,



'Trey LaTrash: Pop Psychic'
Image courtesy of Robert Slater



'Shibari'
Image courtesy of Danielle Quinn



'Genuine in Existence'
Image courtesy of Jodie Stringfellow



'No Tears for the Creatures of the Night'
Image courtesy of Danika Gavin

printing these on material and suspending them across the back of the display case.

Danika Gavin worked with museum objects and took inspiration from a work of art by Sir Joseph Noel Paton, *Dante Meditating the Episode of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta*, from the art collection. Danika used objects from the museum's medical, natural history and furniture collections in her fashion shoot which took place in the collections store. Danika's piece, 'No Tears for the Creatures of the Night', is an exploration of how "some dreams matter, illuminate a crucial choice, or reveal some intuition that's trying to push its way to the surface" – (*The Lake of Dreams* by Kim Edwards). She took inspiration from surrealist artists Leonora Carrington as well as photographers Tim Walker, Camillie Vivier and Gareth Pugh's Spring/Summer 2013 collection.

Danielle Quinn was one of the students who created her photo shoot off site. Her piece 'Shibari' was inspired by the Museum's collection of late 19th and early 20th century objects from the Prestwich Asylum - in particular the stretcher, wheelchair and hand

restraints used on the patients. Danielle based her photo shoot in an abandoned building and she used found objects and props. Her piece explores bondage and restraint, not by showing women as submissive but the opposite by putting women in control; the theme of powerful women is very current in contemporary fashion. Shibari marries the idea of restraint, bondage and female empowerment by using the restraint methods based on Japanese rope bondage, Shibari.

Interpretation took the form of a book, which was on display for the public to view alongside the exhibition, featuring the students' photo shoots and a brief outline of their work. QR codes were also created and placed around the museum which link to a newly created blog which features a selection of the photo shoots: <http://buryartmuseum.com>.

The project has been successful in terms of visits to the blog, visitor responses to the exhibition, as well as influencing our curatorial working practices. We feel that taking inspiration from outside our sector and harnessing the creative energies of the fashion industry has really pushed boundaries in terms of how we

use and display our stored collections.

We enjoyed working with the students in such a creative way and the end products, we felt, were extraordinary. The legacy of this project will carry on, we now have a stock of high quality images from each of the students and the students themselves have gained invaluable experience through working on a 'live brief'.

For us, seeing the collections interpreted so differently was truly liberating. The project has given us the confidence to work with people from beyond the museum sector and taught us new ways of working, displaying and interpreting the collections.

Susan Lord

Museum Curator
Bury Art Museum
s.lord@bury.gov.uk

‘If I ran Birmingham’: community engagement and the new Birmingham history galleries

Community engagement is a box that everyone wants to tick. But can community engagement inspire not just the participants but visitors too? And how far should we try to influence what the final output of a project should be?

‘Birmingham: its people, its history’ is a major new gallery development at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which opened in October 2012. Community engagement has been at the heart of the project from the outset, and we set out a programme of consultation and in-depth projects which ran for three years.

We wanted to integrate community engagement fully into our interpretation, using the output of projects to put across important and sometimes complex ideas and themes. These projects were not ‘add-ons’; the aim was that they

would be central to the visitor experience. The outputs therefore had to be historically accurate and fulfil specific briefs. However, one of the most exciting things about community engagement is the unexpected - you don’t know exactly what you’re going to get! So the challenge for us was to ‘square the circle’, to allow the projects creative freedom and to ensure that they gave us what we needed. Here are just a few examples.

One of the key themes of the new galleries is migration to Birmingham from the medieval period onwards. We wanted to make the experience of medieval migrants relevant to Birmingham’s diverse community, but most medieval migrants came from Wales, or from Warwickshire, rather than from overseas. Could we show that moving from Wales in 1300 might be as dislocating an experience as coming from the other side of the world today? By the 17th century, reasons for migration included flight from religious persecution as well as economic opportunity

– experiences which many of today’s migrants can identify with. We chose community engagement as a means of communicating these ideas.

We recruited a diverse group of students from Birmingham School of Acting and two freelancers: a script writer and a film maker. Their brief was to produce short films about migration prior to 1700. It was essential that the historical background was correct, and before the project started two museum studies students prepared detailed fact sheets about medieval and 17th century life. Once the creative process began, we had to maintain a balance between keeping the group on track historically and imposing too much control. Inevitably we made mistakes along the way – at one point the freelancers had to ask us to step back. For us, there was a slight feeling of looking over a precipice – what if the scripts didn’t get across the points we were trying to make? What if they were over-simplified, trite or just boring? Once scripts started to appear, however, we knew we were on to a winner. The finished films are hilarious (with nods towards Monty Python) but also profound.

The films are popular with visitors, and evaluation suggests that people are picking up our key message about migration. We took a risk in using a diverse group to present an aspect of medieval history, and some visitors have said that the films misled them into thinking there were black people in medieval Birmingham. However, we don’t regret having taken that risk – consultation had suggested that many people find medieval history quite difficult to relate to, and we wanted to counteract that



Drama students tell the story of migration in medieval Birmingham
Image courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

by introducing diversity into the interpretation right from the start. And since DNA research now shows that there were people of African origin in Britain from Roman times onwards, who knows who might have been here...

Some projects, however, presented us with the challenge of dealing with the unexpected. John Freeth was a coffee shop proprietor in 18th century Birmingham, who entertained customers with ballads he and his friends had written. The topical issues which inspired these ballads were exciting at the time but might seem obscure to our visitors, so we felt community engagement could bring the concept of the ballad up to date. We recruited a group of African-Caribbean elders, and engaged a freelance writer to enable them to produce their own take on current affairs. Our hope was that they would use the historical material for inspiration, but for various reasons the freelance practitioner felt this would not work, and their engagement with 18th century ballads was very limited. The results were audio recordings of poems of outstanding quality, under headings including 'If I ran Birmingham'. We had a fantastic body of material, but not the kind of material we had expected.

Despite initial anxieties, the end result was far better than we could ever have anticipated. Working with a creative company (Centrescreen) on the final audio-visual interactive was crucial. In the galleries, visitors use a touch table to listen to either the historical ballads or the poems. When the 21st century material



African-Caribbean elders from Birmingham share ideas about their city
Image courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust



Artwork by a Year 6 pupil showing the journey of former slave Amanda Smith from America to Birmingham Image courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

is selected, the 18th century background soundscape changes to reflect the atmosphere of Starbucks. The disparity between the ballad format and the poems does not matter; the point is that people separated by 200 years are essentially the same, and enjoy socialising in public spaces, gossiping and complaining about 'the powers that be'.

'Crisis equals opportunity'; this platitude occasionally proves true! At the last minute we discovered that one of our planned projects was too similar to one carried out by another group a few years earlier, and we had to devise a new one rapidly. We decided to focus upon black abolition campaigners who visited Birmingham in the 19th century – an important story for which we had no objects to show. A freelance artist worked with a primary school to develop artwork and creative writing. It proved highly successful both for us and for the school, although we flew by the seat of our pants as we weren't sure what to expect and couldn't plan how we were going to use the material until the project had been completed. Faced with an outstanding range of material, we were able to build the interpretation around the children's work.

Across many different projects, we were overwhelmed with the quality of the material produced,

and our community engagement programme has genuinely enabled local people to take ownership of the galleries and contribute directly to the visitor experience. Our long term relationships with the participants will vary; some may not want to continue any involvement with us, but many do, and most will have gained new skills that they can take with them into the future. A project in which fashion students made garments based on wartime 'Make do and Mend', in consultation with people who lived through the Birmingham blitz, opened up a new understanding of history for the students as well as teaching them new skills. Many individuals have discovered a new interest in the museum as a result of their involvement, and some have become repeat visitors.

Making community engagement so integral to the interpretation has presented many challenges and has been a steep learning curve for everyone involved. But the experience it has offered to participants and staff has been unique, and seeing visitors engaging with the results is the icing on the cake.

Henrietta Lockhart

Curator of History
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery
henrietta.lockhart@birmingham.gov.uk

What is it? Identifying Mystery Objects Medals & Militaria

Museum of Liverpool, 18 January 2013

Thanks to funding from Arts Council England, SHCG ran a series of free study days earlier this year. From identification and interpretation to handling and storage, participants gained practical skills and useful knowledge about items commonly found in many of our museum collections: medals & militaria, photographs, and trade tools.

On a snowy Friday in January SHCG held a fascinating and informative day on identifying medals and militaria at the Museum of Liverpool. Despite the weather conditions, participants from across the UK came together to find out more in preparation for the forthcoming centenary of World War I.

Tommy Atkins (aka Richard Gardiner) introduced us to the make-up of the British Army, himself wearing full military uniform from the Great War period. From Brigades to Battalions, we got a sense of the scale of the Army in July 1914 and the way it was structured throughout 1914-18. Richard also brought along his handling collection and chatted to participants throughout the day.

Karen O' Rourke, Curator of the King's Regiment Collection based at the Museum of



Liverpool, introduced us to the world of military medals. The more well-known 'Pip, Squeak and Wilfred' World War I medals, named after characters in the Daily Mirror, were circulated and participants were offered hints on how to handle medals. We were given an insight into the meaning of some of the colours of medal ribbons and discussed the displaying of medals, including the order in which they should be displayed.

Additionally, the day provided everyone with an introduction to biographical research. Participants were made aware of the vast amounts of sources available to researchers, including the collections in our own museums, regimental histories, war diaries, personal diaries and letters, photos and albums, local newspapers and local archive offices, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the National Archives and fee paying services. We were reminded however that it is not always easy to find personal details of individuals that served with the Army, although the mention of six and a half million pension records currently being digitised by the Western Front Association aroused a considerable interest among those assembled.

Next we looked at the iconography of British Army cap badges. From bugles to cannons, white horses to castles, this was an exciting exploration of how Regiments incorporate significant elements of their history into their badges. A fun end of day quiz picked up on the military theme and re-enforced the learning from the session.

This was a useful and interesting course which offered insight and support for those working with military collections, and will do much to equip us for next year's centenary of the First World War.



Jules Wooding

Volunteer
Cumbria's Military Museum
juleswooding@gmail.com

What is it? Identifying Mystery Objects Photographs

Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne, 11 February 2013

The training day began with a talk by Colin Harding, Curator of Photographic Technology at the National Media Museum. This talk was a great opportunity to learn about the different ways of identifying photographic processes and to hear a brief history of photography.

As an Art Historian, I have had relatively little exposure to the history of photography, so I found this training day very interesting and revealing about just how many types of photography there are. It was also very useful as a guide to identifying photographs and the preventative conservation techniques required to care for a photography collection. This was ideal for someone new to working with collections in museums and galleries.

We were encouraged to handle some examples of photographs that Colin had brought with him, in order to have a go at identifying the different processes used to create the photographs. It became very obvious that identifying these processes would take a lot of practice! Each photograph had so many minute varying details that it would take a keen eye and some experience in order to correctly identify all of them.



One of the processes I found most interesting was the daguerreotypes. This was the first photographic process to be announced to the public in 1839. It was achieved by using a copper plate with a highly polished silver surface. This plate was then sensitised to light by exposing it to iodine fumes. After exposing the plate in a camera it was developed with mercury vapour. At first, the process was not very sensitive so the plates required long exposure times; however improvements to the cameras and the chemistry of the process gradually reduced the required exposure times.

I was very intrigued by the look of the daguerreotype, which at first glance appears to be both a positive and a negative image, depending on how the light hits the surface when you tilt the image from side to side. This appearance of the surface is unique to the daguerreotype which means it is one of the easier processes to identify.

Top Tip: For the care of daguerreotypes, always refer them to a specialist for cleaning. The image can be very easily damaged by touching or wiping as it is on the surface of the plate.



This explains why the photographs are usually enclosed in a case or frame with a decorative matt and protective glass cover.

The second workshop of the day, provided by Christine Stevens from Newcastle University, was about dating photographs through costume. As a placement student currently working on the costume collection at Newcastle's Discovery Museum, I found this workshop most helpful. Christine went through some of the key features and styles of costume from the mid 19th century onwards, which can help to provide clues when dating photographs.

At the end of the day we were split into smaller groups and given some images to date using the sitters' costume as an indicator. This quiz allowed the group to put this method of dating to the test, and with a respectable seven out of ten, the group I was in was very happy with the end result!



Ciara Phipps

Curatorial Placement Student
Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums
ciara.phipps@twmuseums.org.uk

What is it? Identifying Mystery Objects Trade Tools

M Shed, Bristol, 4 March 2013

I must admit I didn't know a twybil from an adze before the training. By the end of the day, however, I could enthusiastically explain the difference between a dado plane and a plough plane!

The training day was delivered by The Tools and Trades History Society (TATHS). Jane Rees, Vice-President, began with an illustrated beginner's guide to identifying tools. The main principle is to treat tool identification as a puzzle:

- What does it do? (Cut, join, bend, hold etc.)
- Is it for heavy or light work?
- What materials is it made of? (Don't be misled by ivory in the pre-plastic era)
- Are there any maker's stamps, registered design or patent numbers?
- Does it seem complete or incomplete?

- Might it work as a pair or a set?
- What do the wear marks tell you?
- Look for residues, e.g. sawdust or straw, before cleaning.
- Never take a hand tool apart for storage, especially mixed media objects like planes.
- Use trade catalogues, directories and specialist publications like Shire books to aid identification.

The 'Whatsit' quiz was the most edifying part of the day. Split into teams we were invited to identify 20 tools placed in themed groups. Guessing the theme was half the battle, e.g. metal working, measuring, leather working. Gently guided, we learned how to exercise our powers of deduction. Memorable was a salt saw with a copper blade (steel would have corroded) and a shoe stick (for measuring shoe sizes) which I had figured, erroneously, was for measuring yarn. It's the mistakes that help us never forget!

Two talks with illustrations and handling followed: on heavy edge tools (bill hooks) by Bob Burgess, whose personal collection numbers 6,000, and woodworking planes by Jane Rees and David Schweizer, the range and variety of which should make you embarrassed for documenting them simply as a 'woodworking plane'. With the erosion of subject-specialist curatorial training, the role of societies like TATHS in helping us manage and interpret collections cannot be overestimated.

I am very grateful to SHCG for awarding me a travel bursary to travel to Bristol from West Cornwall. I look forward to sharing my new knowledge with others.

Tehmina Goskar

Freelance Curator
(industrial and social collections)
Penzance, Cornwall
tehmينا@goskar.com



Eli Whalley's Donkey Stones



Donkey stones and moulds

Image courtesy of Tameside Museums and Galleries

Donkey stones are part of Lancashire and Yorkshire's rich industrial history. Made of limestone, cement and bleach, these small blocks were used for cleaning stonework such as flag stone floors, front door steps and window sills.

Donkey stones were originally used in textile mills to provide a non-slip surface on greasy stone staircases. During the 19th and 20th centuries, they were adopted by housewives as the ideal way to keep their front door steps looking like new. The step would be washed first to remove soot and dirt and then the donkey stone, mixed with a little water, would be

rubbed along the edges. "Doing the step" was an ideal occasion for gossip between neighbours, as well as a source of rivalry. It was not unusual for a proud housewife to clean the pavement in front of the house too! It was a chore often bestowed to children at weekends.

The name 'donkey stone' comes from the trademark of a donkey used by Reads of Manchester, who were among the first companies to produce the stones in the 19th century. Donkey stones were very cheap to buy and people often got them free from their local rag and bone man in exchange for old items. The stones came in white, cream and brown, with cream being the most popular colour around Manchester.

Production peaked in the 1930s when 2.5 million donkey stones were made every year.

One manufacturer of donkey stones was Eli Whalley and Co. which was founded in the 1890s in Ashton-under-Lyne, a few miles east of Manchester. Whalley continued the animal theme, choosing a lion as his company trademark. The inspiration came from his many childhood visits to Belle Vue Zoo.



Eli Whalley's workshop shortly before its closure in 1978

Image courtesy of Tameside Local Studies and Archives

Eli Whalley and Co. was based on the old wharf of the Ashton and Peak Forest Canal meaning the stone and salt could be delivered by canal boats. The large chunks of stone were crushed in a stone crusher then mixed with cement, bleach and water in the large pan to form a paste. The paste was then transferred to the work

bench where it was formed into a block using the wooden boards and cut to make two and a half dozen stones. Finally the stones were stamped with the 'lion brand' moulds before being transferred to racks to dry. Production peaked in the 1930s when 2.5 million donkey stones were made every year. Placed end to end they would have reached from Ashton to Blackpool and back. Eli Whalley was reputed to have built himself the finest house in Ashton from the profits of his business.

Demand gradually fell over the following decades. The decline of the cotton mills removed the main bulk buyer of the stones and changing social trends meant it was no longer seen as essential to have a donkey-stoned step. By the time of its closure in 1979, Eli Whalley was the world's last manufacturer of donkey stones.

A selection of donkey stone making equipment including the large stone crusher and lion brand moulds can be seen on display

"Doing the step" was an ideal occasion for gossip between neighbours, as well as a source of rivalry.'

at Portland Basin Museum in Ashton-under-Lyne, Tameside. Open daily 10am-4pm, closed Mondays, admission is free. Call 0161 343 2878 for further information or visit www.tameside.gov.uk/museumsgalleries

Rachel Cornes

Curator (Social History)
Tameside Museums and Galleries
rachel.cornes@tameside.gov.uk



The donkey stone display at Portland Basin Museum
Image courtesy of Tameside Museums and Galleries

Medical Objects in Social History Collections

Part II

Objects associated with medicine and health care are often found in social history collections. With such a range of types and materials, from bottles and jars of unknown substances to nasty looking surgical instruments, it is easy to understand why these objects can be seen as problematic.

In a previous role, as Keeper of Community History for St Albans Museums, I undertook a documentation project on around 150 hitherto undocumented objects associated with medicine and health. Through this project I discovered a range of resources and became fascinated with these objects, which provide a unique insight into both local history and the history of medicine.

So, here is the second instalment of my medical object 'Top Ten'. It's not based on any quantitative research, purely my own observations as a generalist. The objects are pretty much all nineteenth century, and are things that you are likely to come across when working with a social history collection, although you will inevitably encounter older and rarer objects, too.

I have included reference to some further reading and online resources and there is a great deal of expertise in specialist museums across the UK. The UK Medical Collections Group is a helpful and active Subject Specialist Network. There are also many publications on the history of medicine, the most comprehensive (and weighty) is Roy Porter's *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (Fontana Press, 1999).



Various medical containers on display at the Museum of St Albans
Image courtesy of St Albans Museums

6 – Medicine containers

There are a huge variety of medicine containers in social history collections. 19th century containers were mostly ceramic or glass. 'Shop rounds', such as the one at the back in this display, were used by a pharmacist to store liquid, oils and granular ingredients for preparations. They are usually clear glass, round in section, with a paper label that is either varnished on or, in later examples, incorporated into the glass. Poison bottles are distinguished by being green, or blue, ribbed glass. The shop rounds would have been kept on high shelves behind the pharmacy counter, above rows of drawers where dry ingredients were stored.

The smaller bottles in this display contained prescribed medicines; these were bottles that the patient

took home. They have printed labels from local pharmacists and handwritten instructions. This image also shows two round pill boxes.

Any residual material left in containers should be

'Exceptionally, pills were coated in silver or gold leaf using the pill silverer'

approached with caution. Advice regarding pharmaceutical collections can be found on the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum website (www.rpharms.com/museum), *Social History in Museums: A Handbook for Professionals*, the HSE website (www.hse.gov.uk), particularly on the control of hazardous substances, and any conservation service that you have access to.



(L-R) Pill machine, pill silverer, pill pestle and mortar, pill rounder, pill tile, pill boxes

Image courtesy of Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society

7 – Pill making equipment

Pill machines were in use in Germany from around 1750. A pharmacist would prepare pills with a pestle and mortar using a mixture of the dry active ingredients and a binding ingredient such as glucose syrup. This stiff paste would be hand-rolled into an even length and placed along slots on the pill machine. By rolling using the slotted roller this length was divided into equal pieces. The pill rounder was rolled in a figure of eight motion over these pieces until they were spherical. The pills could then be dried and coated in talc or varnish. Exceptionally, pills were coated in silver or gold leaf using the pill silverer. The leaf would be placed in the silverer, the pills added and the lid placed on top. This would then be rotated by hand and the pills would be coated in silver or gold leaf.

There is a wealth of information on the history of pharmacy on the Royal Pharmaceutical

Society Museum's website (www.rpharms.com/museum). More information on Victorian pharmacy can be found in *The Victorian Chemist and Druggist* by WA Jackson (Shire, 2005).

8.1 – Surgical instrument kit

Surgery was very limited before the developments of anaesthesia, effective pain relief and antiseptics. Early surgical equipment tends to be for amputations and relatively simple procedures, for example removing bladder stones or cataract surgery, but sometimes the range of operations carried out can be surprising.

'As a general rule instruments with wooden or bone handles were no longer produced from the 1880s, by which time steam sterilisation was routine.'



General surgery kit by Baker, about 1865
Image courtesy of Thackray Museum, Leeds

Many instruments will carry a maker's mark and can be identified, and sometimes dated, through trade catalogues. Some trade catalogues have been digitised and are available to download, so it is worth searching online. Also helpful is *Antique Medical Instruments* by Elisabeth Bennion (University of California Press, 1992).

As a general rule instruments with wooden or bone handles were no longer produced from the 1880s, by which time steam sterilisation was routine.



Trephine on display at the Museum of St Albans
Image courtesy of St Albans Museums

8.2 – Trephine

Trepanning is the therapeutic removal of a section of skull. It is one of the earliest known surgical practices. This later 19th century trephine is approximately ten cm tall. It would be rotated by hand to drill out a section of bone. These often appear in larger surgical instrument sets along with other specialist saws for work on the skull.

9 – Domestic medicine chest

These chests are often mistaken for travelling kits, but were used domestically in a wealthy home, and the contents vary as they were often made to order. They would typically contain a range of medicines and equipment and were used alongside a variety of domestic medical advice books.

10 – Powder folder

This is another tool for a pharmacist to use in the preparation of a prescription. Dry, powdered medicines were prepared in bulk and then divided into individual doses to be added to water when taken. Each dose was wrapped in a neatly folded piece of paper and then boxed. These powder folders are usually cast metal and have adjustable



19th century powder folder on display at the Museum of St Albans
Image courtesy of Elanor Cowland



Domestic medicine chest
Image courtesy of Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society

arms which could be set to ensure that each paper 'wrap' was the same size.

Various online resources for material culture associated with medicine and healthcare:

Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum: www.rpharms.com/museum

Science Museum history of medicine webpages: www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife

Wellcome Library and Wellcome Images: www.wellcome.ac.uk

UK Medical Collections Group SSN: www.thackraymedicalmuseum.co.uk/library-resources/uk-medical-collections-group/

A website for all London medical museums: www.medicalmuseums.org

I would like to express my warmest thanks to Alan Humphries at the Thackray Museum and Catherine Newley at St Albans Museums, for their kind assistance in the preparation of this article.

The author is a freelance museum professional with a special interest in the uses of medical collections.

Elanor Cowland

elanor.cowland@gmail.com

Seventeen Years On ...

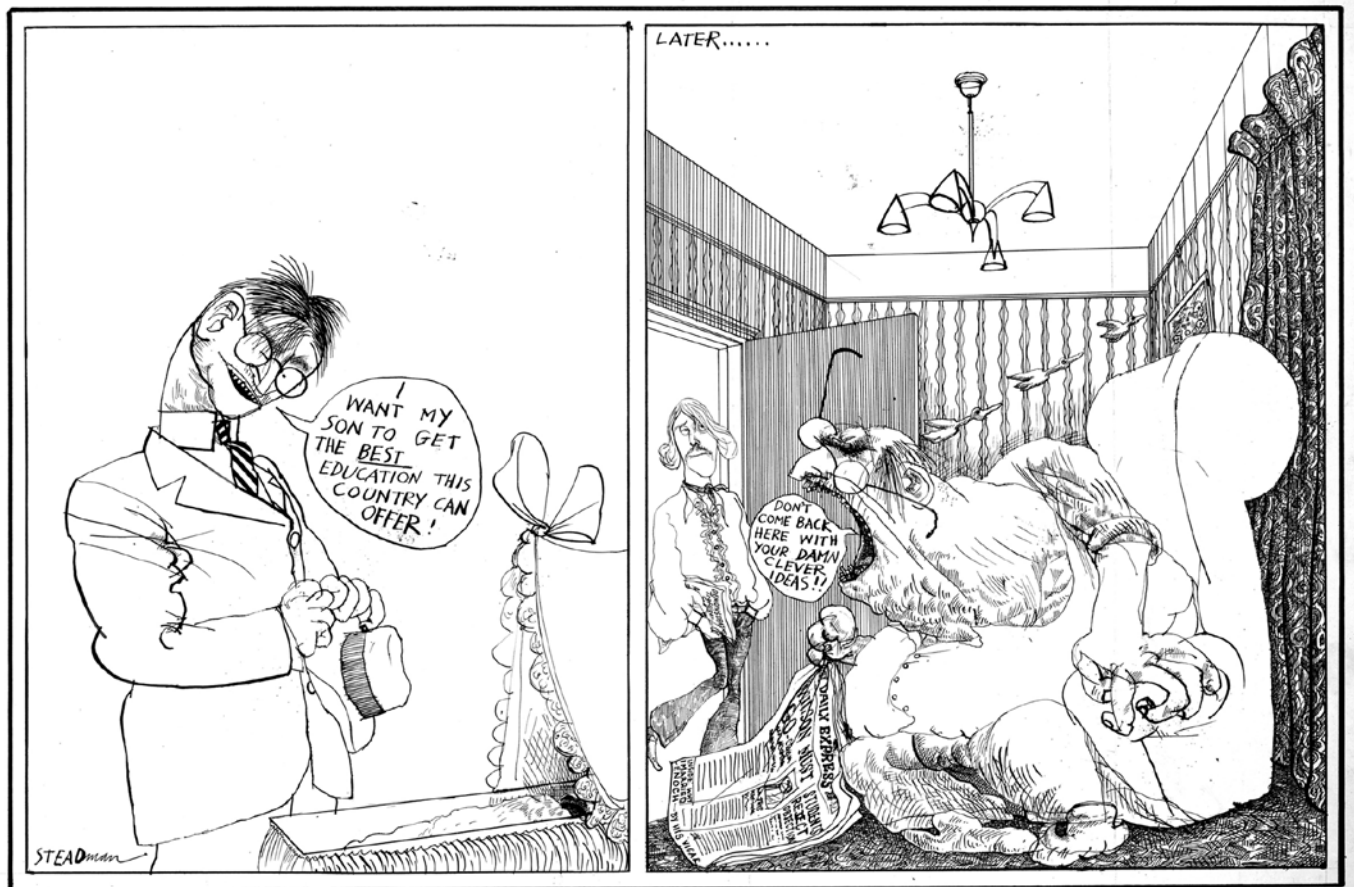


Image © Ralph Steadman

Pen and Indian ink on paper
by Ralph Steadman, c. 1968

Private Collection

In 1945 the Labour party won a landslide victory in the general election. The Welfare State opened up opportunities of free secondary and third-level education to many for the first time.

Boys and girls from working and lower-middle class backgrounds could now go to grammar school and ascend to the hallowed halls of universities. Their subsequent questioning of the status quo sometimes led to their estrangement from the family circle.

Ralph Steadman was born in Wallasey, Liverpool on 15 May

1936. His first published cartoon appeared in the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* in July 1956. From the early 1960s his work began appearing in magazines such as *Punch* and *Private Eye* and became a key part of what became known as 'The Satire Boom'. Many of his cartoons addressed the social and political changes which were transforming British society during the 1960s and early 1970s.

He is famous for his long collaboration with the writer Hunter S. Thompson, most notably providing the illustrations for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), and helping to create what has

since become known as 'Gonzo' journalism. The exhibition in which *Seventeen Years On...* features explores the full range of Steadman's work, including his earliest published cartoon from 1956, material from *Private Eye*, *Punch*, the *Observer*, the *New Statesman* and *Rolling Stone*, as well as his illustrated books, *Sigmund Freud*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, *I Leonardo*, *The Big I Am* and *Animal Farm*. There are atmospheric wine drawings produced for Oddbins catalogues, humanitarian pictures, savage political cartoons and some of his charming and funny illustrations for children's books.

SHCG Committee 2012-13

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

2. CHAIR ELECT:
 MICHELLE LEES
 Exhibitions Organiser
 National Media Museum
 Pictureville
 Bradford
 West Yorkshire
 BD1 1NQ
 Tel: 01274 203392
 Email: michelle.lees@nationalmediamuseum.org.uk

3. SECRETARY:
 JENNY BROWN
 Curator (Industrial and Social History)
 Aberdeen Maritime Museum
 Shiprow
 Aberdeen
 Scotland
 AB11 5BY
 Tel: 01224 337719
 Email: jenbrown@aberdeencity.gov.uk

4. MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY:
 LAURA BRIGGS
 Freelance curator
 24 Nathan Drive
 Salford
 M3 6BA
 Email: laurahbriggs@gmail.com

5. TREASURER:
 JOE CARR
 2 Manor Park
 Horham
 Suffolk
 IP21 5EE
 Email: joe.carr@btinternet.com

6. JOURNAL EDITOR:
 HELEN McCONNELL
 Collections Officer, Public History
 Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives
 M Shed, Princes Wharf
 Wapping Road
 Bristol
 BS1 4RN
 Tel: 0117 3526956
 Email: helen.mcconnell@bristol.gov.uk

7. 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

8. CONFERENCE & SEMINAR ORGANISER:
 CIARA CANNING
 Senior Curator (Community History)
 Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service
 Museum Resource Centre
 14 Ryegate Road
 Colchester
 Essex
 CO1 1YG
 Tel: 01206 282935
 Email: clara.canning@colchester.gov.uk

9. CONFERENCE & SEMINAR ORGANISER:
 JUDE HOLLAND
 Interpretation Manager
 ss Great Britain Trust
 Great Western Dockyard
 Bristol
 BS1 6TY
 Tel: 0117 9260680 (ext. 311)
 Email: judithh@ssgreatbritain.org

10. SPONSORSHIP & DEVELOPMENT OFFICER :
 JENNY BROADBENT
 Museum Manager
 Rochdale Pioneers Museum
 31 Toad Lane
 Rochdale
 Lancashire
 OL12 0NU
 Tel: 01706 524920
 Email: jenny@co-op.ac.uk

11. WEB EDITOR & EMAIL LIST CO-ORDINATOR:
 CAT NEWLEY
 Curator of Collections: Post Medieval to
 Contemporary
 Museum of St. Albans
 Hatfield Road
 St. Albans
 Hertfordshire
 AL1 3RR
 Tel: 01727 819580
 Email: catherine.newley@stalbans.gov.uk

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

STEADman@77: A Ralph Steadman Retrospective

1 May - 8 September 2013 at the Cartoon Museum, 35 Little Russell Street, London. The exhibition will tour to The Artworks in Halifax, September – November 2013, and thereafter to other venues around the country.

A catalogue is available through our online shop: www.cartoonmuseumshop.org/

Anita O'Brien

Curator
 Cartoon Museum
info@cartoonmuseum.org.uk

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

