



<http://www.natsca.org>

NSCG Newsletter

Title: "Death by a Thousand Cuts" The meeting of the UKIC Archaeology Section December 2000


Author(s): Entwistle, B.

Source: Entwistle, B. (2001). "Death by a Thousand Cuts" The meeting of the UKIC Archaeology Section December 2000. *NSCG Newsletter, Issue 16*, 25 - 30.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/644>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Having not known what to expect (the museum was one of the few not listed in our tourist guidebook) I came away feeling that my knowledge had been enriched and despite all of its former problems the museum definitely has an important standing in other European national museums. The NSCG held a Pyrite Decay Meeting on 27th February at the



Pyrite Decay Meeting

Adrian M Doyle, Conservator, Palaeontology Conservation Unit, Department of Palaeontology, The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD U.K.

E-Mail: A.Doyle@nhm.ac.uk

The NSCG held a Pyrite Decay Meeting on 27th February at the Natural History Museum. The day, which was an experimental format, was split into two discrete events:

The morning was taken up by 6 excellent and varied presentations covering topics relating to pyrite decay problems including Curators needs, Preventive and remedial treatments including a case study, barrier films, pyrite mineral and paper label problems.

In the afternoon, the 25 attendees visited the Palaeontology Conservation Unit to watch demonstrations of 2 treatments for pyrite decay: Ethanola mine thioglycollate and the Ammonia/Polyethylene glycol treatment. It was also an opportunity to have a good nose around and discuss other conservation issues.

The event was a success for both the organisers and attendees although the bad weather north of the border prevented some people attending. I also I believe the format hit the right balance.

A full report will appear in the next newsletter, but in the meantime I would like to thank those people who made the event a success notably Paul Brown, Sue Lewis, Bob Entwistle, Jill Kerr, Paul Davis, David Gray, Caroline Buttler, Alison Stooshnov, Joy Irving, Gill Comerford, Kevin Webb, Michelle Laundry.

The event was a success for both the organisers and attendees although the bad weather north of the border prevented some people attending. I also I believe the format hit the right balance.

A full report will appear in the next newsletter, but in the meantime I would like to thank those people who made the event a success notably Paul Brown, Sue Lewis, Bob Entwistle, Jill Kerr, Paul Davis, David Gray, Caroline Buttler, Alison Stooshnov, Joy Irving, Gill Comerford, Kevin Webb, Michelle Laundry.

A questionnaire, included in the meeting pack, has given us an idea on what the membership would like to see in a further 1 day meeting and has been useful feedback - watch this space! Caroline Buttler, Alison Stooshnov, Joy Irving, Gill Comerford, Kevin Webb, Michelle Laundry.

A questionnaire, included in the meeting pack, has given us an idea on what the membership would like to see in a further 1 day meeting and has been useful feedback - watch this space!



"Death by a Thousand Cuts"

The meeting of the UKIC Archaeology Section December 2000

Bob Entwistle, Ipswich Museum, High Street, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP1 3QH
E-mail: bobbyent@supanet.com

The loss of conservation posts and conservators

On December 12 the UKIC Archaeology Section organised a half-day conference to discuss the worrying trend in conservation job losses in local authority and county council run museum services.

"Over the past decade conservation posts have been lost in local government and other public sector organisations. Three quarters of museums services believe their in house conservation services are now inadequate.

How will the new moves towards regional government and local councils Best Value performance plans affect this process? How can UKIC arrest the decline?"

What happens today in local government museums may have repercussions for national museums in the future. The conference was very well attended with conservators from both groups of museums representing all sectors of the conservation profession. The speakers were all interesting, sometimes controversial, sometimes thought provoking, sometimes highly entertaining and sometimes all four at once. Much lively debate ensued, which resulted in some draft proposals that will be presented to the UKIC council.

John Price – Consultant conservator and formerly of English Heritage.

JP quoted the UKIC mission aims and objectives, saying that the high standards of conservation UKIC hoped to promote were not helped by the loss of conservation posts. Whilst UKIC is not there to defend the jobs of individual members, the loss of conservation posts means a lessening of conservation awareness, less conservation being carried out and loss of money for conservation purposes. JP stressed the need to lobby and/or make friends with local or county councillors.

Conservators are needed in the field, for display and long term collections care. Perhaps conservators were regarded by some councillors or museum managers as bit like dentists, no one enjoys visiting them but they are regarded as a necessary evil!

Another threat to posts is the present Best Value initiative which local government is legally bound to implement. This is similar to the old CCT whereby in-house services can be out-sourced if they are deemed to uncompetitive when compared against the private sector. This gives local authorities the ammunition they need if they wish to out-source conservation.

In Best Value, local Government services are compared against the 4 C's,

- Challenge: are the services under review really necessary?
- Compare: the services are compared with those provided by the private sector.

- Consult: the users of the service are consulted on what they would wish the service to provide.
- Compete: how does the in-house service measure up to the services provided in the private sector?

Local government finances are very complicated. Museums are not a statutory service, and councils are not legally obliged to provide them. They are funded out of the locally raised Council Tax, and their funding is usually the first to be cut when savings have to be made. JP was passionate in his defence of local authority museums and the service they provide, and hoped that UKIC would lead the fight to make sure that local authority museums keep their conservation services.

George Monger – Independent Conservator

GM was the conservator at the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket Suffolk. He was made redundant 5 years ago after the local authority cut its grant to the museum. Savings had to be made and the museum trustees decided that conservation was something they could no longer afford. This decision was taken despite the building of a brand new conservation laboratory, and a recent report that stressed the importance of conservation to the museum.

GM has seen more and more people going freelance after being made redundant. He thinks the loss of posts has led to a lowering of standards in collection care, and a worrying trend in inexperienced museum staff taking on conservation work and using inappropriate methods. He is now a freelance conservator and he travels round the country taking on conservation contracts. Over the past 5 years he has been very busy and work has been forthcoming. GM gave some personal accounts of the work and projects he has taken part in.

Tim Shadler Hall – Reader in Public Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology.

TSH is not a conservator but a curator and as such it was interesting to hear a non conservator's point of view as to the problems facing our profession. TSH emphasised the importance of conservation but more importantly the need for conservation to get its message across to the public. Conservation needs to show the public as a whole and not just other mu-

seum professions, that it plays an essential role in the protection the country's heritage

TSH quotes a recent survey in which members of the public were asked what they thought was the most important function of a museum. The display of objects came out top and research came at the bottom for the list.

TSH quoted the survey as evidence that we live in changing times when the public as well as the government demand value for money. There has been a change in management styles and a growing demand by government for more flexibility in its workforce. This has resulted in more posts being contracted out and less work being carried out by in-house specialists.

However this cost cutting by out-sourcing only works in a stable environment. If there is a disaster or difficulties of some sort, the system breaks down and falls apart. TSH also stressed the importance of having hard facts and statistics at hand when arguing a point. No one knows the exact number of museums in Britain, which TSH finds amazing. Some recent surveys have put the number at around 700 others 1200. Thus there is a lack of knowledge and statistics as to what is actually taking place in the museum world. Over the last 15 years, there has been a large reduction in funds for local government activity. This has had a knock on effect in the non statutory services such as local museums. The buzz words of recent years are "social inclusion" "community" and "access". Conservation must and does have a serious part to play in all these areas. TSH said that museums are unique in not only having an obligation to the future but also to the past. Conservation has a key role to play in fulfilling these "intergenerational" responsibilities.

The North West Museums Service is due to fold quite soon with the loss of its conservation unit and its experienced conservators.

TSH said the North West Museum Service had decided to take a more "strategic approach" to conservation, which he took to mean a lot of people writing reports about what should be done but nobody actually doing it. TSH said that management thinks that consultants will solve their problems, but they are not necessarily the answer.

Conservation's promotion of environmental conservation on its own has led to curators seeing this as a means to reduce their conservation staff. Environmental conservation on its own will result in the neglect of collections and their eventual loss.

The conservation profession needs to re-examine its preciousness and its exclusivity which, in TSH's view, have done it no favours. It needs to become more accessible to the public, more "sexy". If Time Team can carry out 3 day digs on TV and popularise archaeology so successfully why can't conservation do something similar?

In TSH's view access means the use of collections and most probably the eventual loss of some of the objects but this is a price in his view which is worth paying. The collections are there to be used.

Finally he stressed the worth of in house conservation as opposed to contracting out. The in house conservation staff have a loyalty and commitment to the collections and the institution which cannot be bought.

If I had to sum up TSH's talk in one word it would be promotion. Conservation and conservators have to promote themselves and the profession and explain to the public and our masters the importance of our job. Conservators have usually been quite happy to stay out of the limelight but this will not do any more. If we don't promote ourselves, who else will? In these lean times we have to fight our corner.

Pete Windsor from Re:source

PW stressed the importance of having facts and figures to back up arguments. He stressed that conservation is still a relatively new discipline, and that since the war the number of employed conservators has risen sharply. PW went on to say that the major employer of conservators were National Museums, employing 50% of the nations conservators. Over 25% of conservation departments in local government museums and 50% of private sector conservation businesses where one person shows. In his view these set ups were not viable.

Conservators must learn to play the political game. We should not wait to be asked our view but should grasp the initiative before its too late. Tell

Resource and other government bodies what it is we want and explain to them the importance of conservation. We must make our voices heard.

The following draft resolution was discussed.

This meeting asks the Archaeology Section of UKIC to request the UKIC council

1) To set up a standard working party from members and co-opted specialists to advise on the present and future loss of resources, posts and facilities for antiquities conservation within the public sector, especially local government

2) To make continuous and effective representations at all levels in Government, advisory agencies, national archaeological bodies and local government organisations regarding the nationwide loss of such conservation resources and to consider how to educate and inform the general public of the importance of conservation activities.

These resolutions were revised and adopted.

It was suggested by a number of those present that **all** areas of conservation and not just archaeological conservation be included in the resolution. It was hoped that other specialist conservation sections and societies would add their weight to the resolutions and make representations to UKIC and/or NCC-R as appropriate.

I have waited for a long time for such a debate. But it is really up to us to use our influence and not just hope national organisations will do the job for us.



The WWW

Regional Museum Services



Scottish Museums Council: <http://www.scottishmuseums.org.uk/htdocs/index.html>

North East Museums Service: <http://www.northeastmuseums.co.uk/>

North West Museums Service: <http://www.nwmuseums.co.uk/>

Northern Ireland Museum Council: <http://www.nimc.co.uk/>

East Midlands Museums Service: <http://www.emms.org.uk/>

Yorkshire Museums Council: <http://www.yorkshiremuseums.org.uk/live/>

South West Museums Council: <http://www.swmuseums.htmmedia.co.uk/>

The Southern Museums Agency: <http://www.southernmuseums.org.uk>

World list of Biological journals
<http://arachne.prl.msu.edu/journams/>

Global Gazetteer

<http://www.calle.com/world/>

This is a directory of 2880532 of the world's cities and towns, sorted by country and linked to a map for each town.

IPA Directory of Fossil Collections of the World

<http://ipa.geo.ukans.edu/Fossil/fossil.html>