



NEWSLETTER



Vol 4 No 7

BCG Aims and Objectives

Our aims and objectives - expanded and reaffirmed.

When the Group was formed in 1975 the following terms of reference were agreed:-

'To facilitate the exchange of information between individuals concerned with collections of specimens and records, their conservation and interpretation.'

'To present the views of biological curators to the Museums Association and to other bodies.'

After ten years, the time has come for the Group to reaffirm its primary objectives but it is now appropriate to be more specific. The above could be elaborated on the following lines:-

- 1 To encourage research and the dissemination of information on the care, maintenance, ordering, documentation and interpretation of biological collections.
- 2 To take action to make biological collections in museums more widely known and available to those who need to carry out research.
- 3 To work towards a Code of Practice for the curators of biological collections to include: standards of documentation, policies on type and voucher specimens, research, access to and disposal of collections, and the legal and ethical aspects of all forms of acquisition (including field collection).
- 4 To take appropriate action to safeguard biological collections in Britain by encouraging surveys of collections, and by seeking the support of the Museums Association, the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Area Museum Services. Also to explore ways of obtaining additional resources for natural history conservation.
- 5 To liaise with the biological collections user community to ensure the most effective use and care of collections.

6 To encourage the setting up of Biological Record Centres in co-operation with the Federation for Biological Recording and to move towards the acceptance of defined standards. Also to seek additional resources in terms of finance and manpower for survey and recording.

7 To seek to improve natural history exhibitions by encouraging the exchange of information, critical reviews and evaluation.

8 To review and to seek to improve the ways in which natural history museums provide a service to the community including their role in disseminating information about the natural environment in conservation education.

9 To promote advances in the display and maintenance of living museum collections (zoological and botanical). In the case of live animals, to conform with the Secretary of State's standards for zoo licensing which require a high level of husbandry and which emphasise the role of licensed establishments in recreation, education, scientific study and conservation (captive breeding).

10 To improve the status of natural history museums and natural history departments in museums.

11 To ensure that biological collections in museums with no specialist staff and biological collections held by other institutions are recorded and their condition monitored periodically by professional biological curators.

12 To press for more facilities for the training of natural history curators and this to have a strong practical element. To seek the support of the Museums Association in this.

13 To liaise with other Groups and Bodies with similar aims, both within the UK and abroad, in order to establish a framework for information exchange and establish joint promotional strategies on issues of common concern.

To achieve the above we need to set some targets:

- 1 To aim to persuade all practising natural history departments to become members of the Group, (i.e. to launch a membership campaign).
- 2 To use the Collections Survey Report as the basis for BCG statements on the care of systematic collections including recommendations for appropriate action and to lobby those organisations who are in a position to implement the recommendations.
- 3 To formulate plans for a 'Guide to Curatorial Practice for Zoological and Botanical Collections' on the lines of the GCG Manual.
- 4 To prepare a programme of seminars (at least one per year) and associated publications to achieve the above.
- 5 To press for specialist natural history curatorial training courses to become part of the Museums Association Diploma training, to be run by the Group with full Association support.
- 6 To continue to improve the Group's publications and to seek their acceptance by the scientific and museological communities as essential sources of informed opinion and information relating to all matters involving biological sciences in museums.
- 7 To campaign for more biology curators and conservators to be employed in permanent posts, particularly in museums without specialist staff.

G. Stansfield, John Mathias, Gordon Reid
June 1987

BCG Curatorial Training Course

Only one person expressed an interest in the proposed course for 1987, so the committee have decided to POSTPONE THE COURSE TO 17 - 21 OCTOBER 1988. Once again we have booked Losehill Hall in the beautiful setting of the Peak District National Park, within easy reach of Manchester, Liverpool, Bolton, Buxton, Derby and Sheffield museums and with suitable localities for fieldwork. The course will be aimed at Museums Association Diploma students (for example, there will be a mock practical) but will also be suitable for the mid-term curator as a refresher course, and the non-specialist curator. Once again the price will be 'bargain basement', hopefully less than £100, covering full-board accommodation at a delightful field centre, with excellent food and facilities. Please make a note in your diary now, and look out for further details in forthcoming Newsletters.

Derek Whiteley
Sheffield Museum

Exhibitions

The Live Animal Displays at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry

Historical background

Like most live animal displays in museums in Britain, that at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum started life as a series of aquaria housing native freshwater fish. It consisted of thirteen glass and angle-iron aquaria, six measuring 120 x 45 x 45 cm and seven measuring 75 x 38 x 38 cm. These were installed in the late 1960's.

When the author started work at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in April 1979, the emphasis of the display had shifted slightly to include native species of reptile and amphibian, and small mammals and stick insects in addition to the fish. The display cages (which at the time of my appointment were apparently the original angle-iron aquaria!) were replaced during the summer of 1979 by "all-glass" aquaria (six 120 x 45 x 50 cm and seven 75 x 40 x 40 cm).

Between 1979 and July 1981 the live animal display was further diversified to include exotic reptiles and amphibians, tropical fish and foreign invertebrates. Animals were selected which exhibited special adaptations for movement within their chosen environment, in readiness for the opening of the new permanent exhibition "Animal Movement" which opened on July 1st 1981, and of which the live animal display was designed to be an integral part.

The problems of maintaining a successful live display in small vivaria were familiar to the author, and plans to redesign completely the vivarium section were commenced in 1981, and implemented in January 1984. For those contemplating changing their aquaria into vivaria, the following possible pitfalls should be borne in mind:

- 1 It is virtually impossible to create a realistic looking and interesting habitat within a small vivarium.
- 2 All glass vivaria can cause condensation problems; for many reptiles dry conditions are vital for healthy survival.
- 3 Small vivaria impose considerable limitations on the size of animal which can be kept. With lizards, this has far-reaching implications. Small lizards are extremely vulnerable to predation in the wild. To combat this problem they are normally (a) nocturnal or crepuscular or (b) extremely secretive and retiring or (c) cryptically (usually drably!) coloured. Although there are exceptions, the majority of small lizards make poor display specimens in terms of arousing public interest.

- 4 In small vivaria many lizards are unable to set up territories, thus the more interesting aspects of their behaviour - territory defence, and often courtship and mating, are not witnessed.
- 5 Even for many snake species which are undemanding in terms of their space requirements, display in small vivaria can result in concern amongst visitors who feel the animals are cramped.

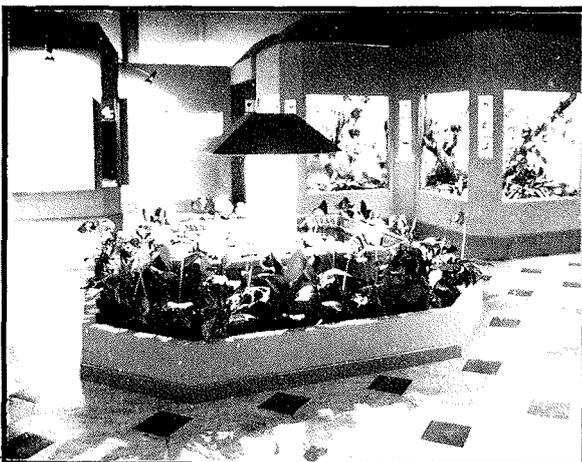
In the context of a live animal display relating directly to an exhibition on animal movement, the limitations of small vivaria are felt even more acutely.

The new vivarium at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum

The new live animal display is composed of two 4 cu m vivaria, one tropical house of approximately 10 cu m, two 240 litre aquaria, one 300 litre aquarium and a terrapin pool of roughly 1020 litres capacity. All vivaria and the terrapin pool are octagonal in shape to complement the shape adopted for the display cases in the "Animal Movement" exhibition.

All vivaria are painted internally with a durable washable paint to facilitate cleaning. Lighting is provided by fluorescent tube lights of two types. "Trulite" produces a spectrum so close to natural sunlight that reptiles are actually capable of vitamin D synthesis using "Trulite" as the light source rather than sunlight. Few other synthetic lights can provide this facility. "Grolux" is an ultra-violet light used to promote plant growth. It should be noted that the current trend towards "Black" light ultra-violet tubes to promote rapid growth and breeding responses in reptiles can be dangerous, and can cause blindness to specimens (pers. comm. with several herpetologists) unless radiation time and intensity are carefully controlled.

Heating is provided by spotlights which produce concentrated areas of heat and light



Animal movement exhibition, Coventry Museum.

to stimulate basking. All lighting is controlled by individual automatic time switches for each vivarium and day length can thus be altered to simulate seasonal changes. Similarly, the wattage of the spotlights is altered to vary the temperature in the vivaria, again simulating seasonal changes.

A silvered "egg-crate louvre" ceiling separates all the lighting and its attendant electric wiring from the livestock, and serves to make this equipment unnoticeable to visitors.

Vivarium 1

Lit by three x 120 cm "Trulite" tubes and one x 120 cm "Grolux" tube light, with two 150w "Par 38" spotlights to provide hot basking areas where the temperature may reach 40°C. False rock work landscaped in Tetrion coated papier mache provides climbing, basking and hiding spaces. There is a bark chip substrate. The vivarium houses one adult pair of Mexican Black Spiny-tailed Iguanas, Ctenosaura acanthura.

Vivarium 2

Lit in the same way as Vivarium 1, except that two x 150w and two x 100w spotlights are used to provide basking areas rather than the Par 38 spotlights. The effect is to produce cooler basking areas. The floor temperature is around 26°C. The substrate is bark chips, with sandstone rocks providing shelter and basking areas. The vivarium houses an adult trio of Mexican Indigo Snakes, Drymarchon corais erebennus, which produced seven fertile eggs in 1984. Sadly, these were destroyed part way through incubation by a failure in the incubator.

Tropical house

Fluorescent lighting comprises six x 60 cm "Trulite" and six x 60 cm "Grolux" tubes. Eight 100w spotlights provide basking areas, although it is normal only to utilise six of these at any one time. The air temperature is normally 27°C, higher in basking areas and cooler on the ground.



Tree frog in the tropical house.

The floor of the tropical house is polythene lined, and it is covered by a substrate of soil and forest bark to a depth of up to 40 cm. Two plastic ponds (largest dimensions 120 cm x 60 cm) are sunk into the substrate. One contains water to a depth of only 5-8 cm, the other is up to 40 cm deep in places. The tropical house is furnished throughout with living plants, including Ficus pumila, Ficus elastica, Maranta leuconeura, Monstera deliciosa, Philodendron scandens, six species of bromeliad and several epiphytic orchids.

In terms of animal life, the tropical house contains a variety of small amphibians, including newts, tree frogs and true frogs, and three species of lizard. The selection of livestock to live in such an environment must be undertaken with great care. Few lizard species will tolerate high humidity levels for long periods in captivity, and care must also be taken to ensure that no species present will bully or predate upon other cohabiting species.

The following lizards are currently maintained in the tropical house: Cuban Knight Anoles (Anolis equestris), Thai Water Dragons (Physignathus cocincinus) and Tokay Geckoes (Gekko gekko).

In terms of amphibians, the "tropical" house contains Oriental Fire-bellied toads (Bombina orientalis), Thai Golden Tree frogs (Rhacophorus leucomastyx), Leopard frogs (Rana pipiens), and Chinese Rough-skinned newts (Parameotriton sinensis).

Aquarium 1

This tropical freshwater aquarium comprises a community tank of small fish exhibiting a variety of adaptations to moving in water.

Aquarium 2

An aqua-terrarium housing Clawed frogs (Xenopus laevis) and Axolotls, Ambystoma mexicanum.

Aquarium 3

This tropical marine aquarium has power filtration in addition to the undergravel filtration system. It contains a Porcupine fish Diodon hystrix, Cowfish Ostracion cornutus and Humbug Damsels Dascyllus aruanus.

Terrapin pool

This free-standing wooden construction is essentially an octagonal pool with an island in the centre. The water depth is approximately 45 cm and the pool capacity is 1020 litres. The pool is lined with a butyl pond liner of the type used for lining reservoirs. Above this is a layer of pea gravel. The water is electronically heated and filtered.

The central island is constructed of cornish slate and spotlighted by four 100w spotlights, which provide warm basking spots. A sandbox

is available for egg deposition. Originally the pool was open, but following thefts of specimens (including a snapping turtle Chelydra serpentina!) the whole has been enclosed in perspex covers sloping from the roof to the pond sides.

The daytime air temperature is 25°C, rising to 34°C directly under the basking area. Water temperature is 25°C.

Following the thefts mentioned above, current stock in the terrapin pool comprises two species: Red-eared terrapin Pseudemys (Chrysemys) scripta elegans, and common snappers, Chelydra serpentina.

There are back-up facilities behind the display, containing aquaria and vivaria for breeding, separation, quarantine and feeding purposes, a refrigerator, incubator, sink and food preparation area, including breeding cages for locusts and mealworms.

The effects of the Zoo Licensing Act, 1981

Following the implementation of this Act in 1984, all museum live animal displays were obliged to apply for a licence to operate as a zoo, or for exemption from the effects of the Act. Whilst some museums applied for licences, others applied for exemption under Section 14 of the Act. The implications of the Act for museum live animal displays have been documented by Reid (1984) and Wright (1985). The latter reference includes the case history of the successful application for exemption from the effects of the Zoo Licensing Act, 1981, by the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. Exemption was applied for on the grounds that the collection of live animals at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum was of small size and limited diversity.

Breeding

Although the live animal displays at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum are primarily kept for educational purposes, efforts are made to breed from the specimens we maintain. Since the opening of the vivarium in 1984, the breeding records are as follows:

- 1984 8 eggs from Indigo snakes, destroyed by incubator failure
- 1985 14 Oriental Fire-bellied toads bred
5 Red-eared terrapins bred (representing over 35% of recorded British zoo-bred population 1972-1985)
6 eggs from Banded basilisks (Basiliscus vittatus); full term, dead in shell.
- 1986 3 Banded basilisks hatched
3 Red-eared terrapins hatched
6 eggs from Cuban Knight Anoles. 3 of these went full-term; dead in shell. It would appear there are no published reports of anyone breeding this species in captivity.

1987 At the time of writing (13 February 1987) we have a further egg of the Cuban Knight Anole incubating. We are hoping that utilisation of "black light" during 1987 may cure the "dead in shell syndrome" problems we have experienced with both this species and *Basiliscus vittatus*.

1 Red-eared terrapin successfully hatched.

4 "red ear" eggs in the incubator

6 eggs of the Thai Water Dragon *Physignathus concincinus* in the incubator.

References

- Reid, G.M. "The Zoo Licensing Act, 1981 : Implications for Museums with Live Animal Displays". Biology Curators Group Newsletter 3 pt.10 (October 1984).
- Wright, A. "Museum Livestock Collections - Licensing or Exemption!" Biology Curators Group Newsletter 4 pt.3 (October 1985).

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Alan Robinson, Design and Display Officer at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum for the design of the whole gallery and to Chris Palmer, Keeper of Natural History for helping me with the practicalities of establishing the new vivarium. Thanks also to Penny Wheatcroft, my predecessor as Senior Keeper, Natural History at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, who originated the concept of the Animal Movement display. Had she not chosen this topic for the permanent exhibition, the need for the new vivarium would not have been nearly so pressing.

Adam Wright
Senior Keeper Natural History
Herbert Art Gallery and Museum
Jordan Well
Coventry CV1 5RW.

Peter Lambley was until recently the Keeper of Biology at the Castle Museum in Norwich. He now works in the Natural Sciences Resources Centre at the University of Papua New Guinea. He sent this description of a recent family visit to the Queensland Museum.

The Queensland Museum

Australian museums generally set high standards in displays, research and publications. I was therefore very interested to visit the Queensland Museum which reopened last October in a new purpose-built building which forms part of the Queensland Cultural Centre Complex. My visit was in January during a family holiday and I only had time to sample the public exhibition galleries. Nevertheless my short visit convinced me that this is indeed a major event in the museum world and deserves to be widely known outside Australia.

The Queensland Museum was founded in 1862 in Brisbane and had a number of homes before moving to its new site in 1986. It is part of a Centre which also includes a magnificent art gallery, a performing arts complex and the State Library and is situated on the south bank of the Brisbane River just across from the main shopping centre. The museum building occupies 18,000 square metres and includes three floors of displays with twelve main rooms, each covering a specific topic.

The main subject areas covered in the displays are biology, geology, ethnography, science and technology and social science. The building is spacious, clean, air conditioned and carpeted and this produces a pleasant atmosphere in which to view the displays. Escalators link the three floors and provide a relief from museum fatigue. There is ample parking in an adjacent multi-story car park and the museum cafeteria is good. There is no charge for admission except to a special exhibition which was on at the time of our visit.

The style of the displays is a marriage of some long tried successful techniques, for example dioramas, with open displays coupled with the use of computers and audiovisual methods. The standard of presentation is high and I liked the uncluttered style of text which made it easy to assimilate the important points. Some of the techniques owe something to those used at the Natural History Museum in London, but there is a greater use of dioramas and specimens are more in evidence. Resin moulding has been used to great effect in a number of very realistic dioramas on such diverse subjects as termite mounds, rain forest trees and a fossil reptile in situ.

I did find the arrangement of the various rooms to be rather confusing; for instance on the ground floor you move from a display on images to one on fish followed by displays on underwater archaeology and transport. I suspect that this is perhaps inevitable when the Museum's policy is to change half the displays every five years. This rather confusing layout did not seem to bother my children who I think enjoyed the sense of discovery that this created.

The first floor reached by escalator has an engine room with working models of steam and combustion engines and a very enjoyable demonstration of various types of levers. Set in the middle of the next room are two resin casts of termite mounds, while the walls of the room are lined with a photo montage of a grassland landscape dominated by termite mounds. A feature of these mounds is that they are always aligned north-south and the visitor is provoked into thinking of possible explanations. A very successful demonstration of population dynamics is provided by the display titled "Feast and Famine". This follows the cycle of events after the ending of a drought near Birdsville in central-west Queensland, in particular the growth of a native rat plague and its

subsequent population crash. The effects are illustrated in a series of five large dioramas. It is pleasing to see dioramas used in this way, when there must have been a temptation to use computers, graphics and photographs instead. The result is that the points are well made without recourse to long paragraphs of text.

The interdependence of an aboriginal people, the Jirrbal, who live in rain forest in northern Queensland and their environment is the subject of a set of dioramas which again use resin moulding techniques to good effect. They are designed so that you feel you are walking through rain forest, though there are no live leeches or mosquitos to give that final touch of authenticity! In contrast the arid side of Australia is shown in the next display which sets three species of kangaroo in a semi-desert habitat. Instead of giving a general account on the three species the display demonstrates the problems of separating the three species in the field. Having seen two of the species in the wild I can testify that it is not easy. Also on this floor is a reference area where many examples of the fauna of the Brisbane area are displayed in taxonomic order. Minerals, aboriginal artefacts and applied art are also set out in the room so that visitors can identify many things for themselves. There is also a reference desk which is staffed and there is a library for further information. To judge by the number of people in this room it is a very popular facility.

On the third floor there are displays of Queensland in the Cretaceous, with examples of some of the spectacular dinosaur and other reptilian finds from the State. There is also a display of minerals. Birds are notoriously difficult to display and I think that the exhibit here succeeds better than most. Various aspects of avian biology are discussed including territorial behaviour, feeding, colour, and learning using a mixture of specimens, graphics, and computers. I liked the Victorian dome full of brilliantly coloured birds which was used to illustrate the difference between pigments and structural colours. There are touches of humour in the labels such as the comment in a display on the emu "I might not be able to fly but I can sure beat the pants off a kangaroo". A memorable way of making the point about an emu's running ability. Other rooms on this floor cover social history and the Melanesian cultures of New Guinea, the Solomons and Vanuatu, Australia's nearest neighbours.

The Museum thronged with people while we were there, no doubt some to escape the sub-tropical heat of a Brisbane January and it was also the school holidays. However, considering the many other attractions of an Australian summer it showed that a good museum can more than hold its own with Dreamworld, Seaworld and the rest. With a policy of frequently renewing their displays it should continue to attract new and returning visitors for a long time to come.

Diary

During the week 24th to 28th August 1987
GCG meeting in Belfast to coincide with the British Association meeting there.
Subject: The Geological Heritage.
Contact: John Wilson, Ulster Museum, Botanic Gardens, Belfast BT9 5AB.

Monday 21st to Friday 25th September 1987
Symposium on the storage of recorded images, New College, Oxford.
Of interest to curators who have collections of slides or earlier photographic images in their care.
Full programme now available from:
Miss H.M. Graves, Research Division, Kodak Ltd, Headstone Drive, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 4TY.

Friday 25th September 1987
BCG Seminar at Coventry Museum, 'Live Animal Displays in Museums: the Lower Vertebrates'. Coordinated by Adam Wright, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry (the programme is given elsewhere in this Newsletter).

Thursday 1st October 1987
The Care and Management of Geological Collections by the Scottish Museums Council in Edinburgh
Contact: Admin Officer, SMC, County House, 20-22 Torpichen Street, Edinburgh EH3 8JB.

Thursday 1st and Friday 2nd October 1987
Joint GCG, Geol Soc and Pal As meeting at Burlington House, London, on 'Use and Conservation of Palaeontological Sites'.
Contact: Peter Crowther, Museum and Art Gallery, Queens Road, Bristol BS8 1RL.

Wednesday 7th October 1987
Association of Independent Museums seminar 'Video and Museums' at the London Transport Museum, Covent Garden, London.
Details from AIM Seminars, c/o Torfaen Museum Trust, Park Buildings, Pontypool, Gwent NP4 6JH.

5th to 8th November 1987
'Speciation', an international symposium to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences.
Contact: Dr George Davis, Symposium Committee, Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103, USA.

Friday 13th November 1987
Association of Independent Museums seminar 'Making Cheap Publications Better' at the Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, West Yorks.
Details from AIM Seminars, address given above.

BCG Autumn Meeting

Live Animal Displays in Museums - the Lower Vertebrates

25 September 1987 at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry.

Programme

- 10.00am Museum opens
- 10.30am Coffee
- 11.00am "Legislation Relating to Live Animal Displays" What are the implications of the various Acts? Zoo Licensing; Wildlife and Countryside; CITES etc Gordon Reid (Horniman Museum, London) will tell you!
- 11.45am "Freshwater Aquaria and Developments at Bolton" Bolton aquarium will, by September, be undergoing major refurbishment. Tim Henshaw (Bolton Museum) will discuss approaches and problems.
- 12.45pm Lunch
- 1.45pm "Marine Aquaria" Denis Murphy (Liverpool Museum) will talk on "The management of temperate and exotic marine fish and invertebrates in closed systems", including discussion of some new display techniques based on field observations made on the Great Barrier Reef.
- 2.30pm "Vivarium Design for Public Display" Nigel Platt (Cotswold Wildlife Park). Confused by the Tru-lite/Black light controversy (or never heard of it)? Want to know how to provide a vivarium where your animals feel secure but can still be seen? Trade secrets from Nigel ...
- 3.15pm "Sexing and Breeding Reptiles and Amphibians" Adam Wright (Coventry Museum). Everything you wanted to know about reptile sexing but were afraid to ask! Also information on egg incubation and how to elicit a mating response (in reptiles and amphibians anyway!)
- 4.00pm Tea and biscuits
- 4.30pm Discussion
- 5.15pm Depart

Booking forms available now from Adam Wright, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry CV1 5RW. There will be a fee of £3 for the seminar to cover costs of speakers' travel and producing a set of transcripts for each delegate (these will be available on the day).

AGM 87

For those members unable to attend the 1987 AGM, the officers' reports are published below.

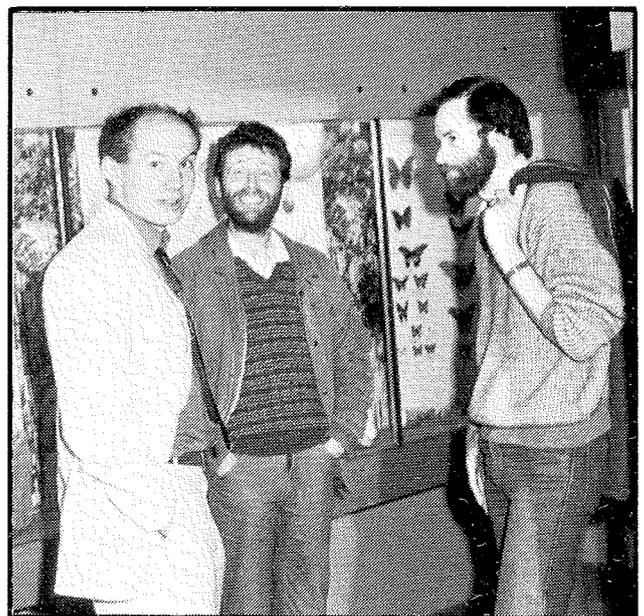
Chairman's report

This report is written as Acting Chairman due to the recent resignation of Tony Irwin. He was elected at our 1986 AGM and has worked hard for the Group throughout the year. However, due to the pressure of other commitments, he felt obliged to resign in February of this year. I thank him for all he has done for the Group, both as Chairman and as a Committee member.

This past year has seen some important events. The National Federation for Biological Recording was launched last April, a body spawned by the BCG; and in July the Museums Association Conference was treated to an excellent address by Peter Davis discussing the role of the BCG (you will all have read this in the last Newsletter).

In recent years the BCG has probably been a little lacking in certain areas. We suffered from poor attendances at meetings and many members seemed reluctant to become involved in activities of the Group by joining the Committee or by contributing to the Newsletter.

We now have an enthusiastic Committee, an excellent new Newsletter with a distinct professional touch, a new journal on the way and today our best attended meeting ever! Even the Museums Association, under its new Director General, seems to be taking a more positive attitude towards us!



AGM 87: Steve Garland and Ray Barnett with Howard Mendel.

Our Committee meetings are always very busy and I could not possibly list everything which is under consideration, but major projects in the pipeline include a Manual of Biological Curatorship (probably the most important publication that we shall ever produce), a meeting on live animal displays in museums at Coventry in the autumn, a new membership drive and a 'Beetle Down' campaign as the first phase of a national drive to publicise our services. Couple all of this with the publication this summer of the Bernice Williams Report on Biological Collections in the United Kingdom, and you can see that the Biology Curators' Group will certainly be very busy striving to further the cause of biological services in museums.

I hope that you will all support the Group enthusiastically in the future because a strong BCG (and GCG) is surely a vital step towards achieving the higher status and funding for natural sciences in museums which we all desire.

Steve Garland
Acting Chairman

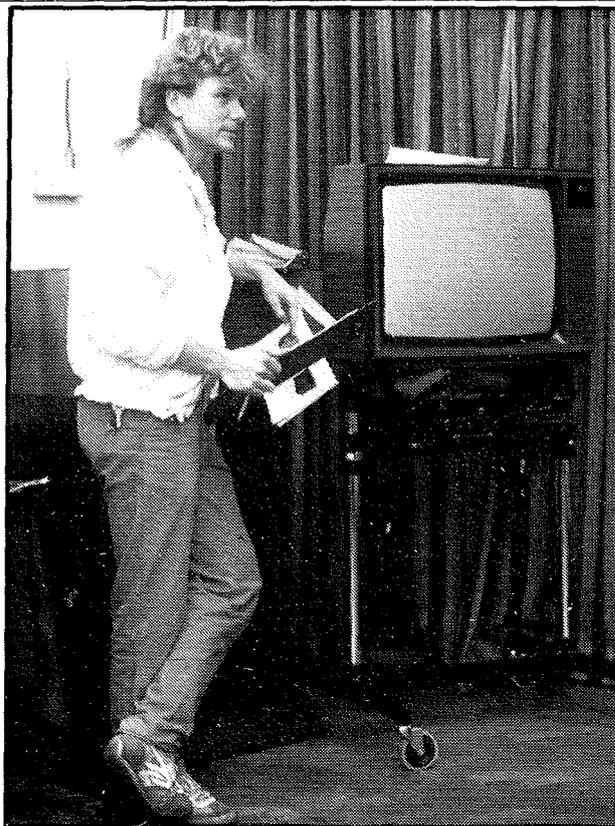
Secretary's report

It has been a busy year for the Committee with five meetings since the last AGM: in May, September, November, February and March. Two meetings were held at the British Museum (Natural History) and three at the Department of Zoology, University College London. The Committee is most grateful to these institutions for their hospitality (particularly the latter for generous volumes of tea and biscuits). Meetings now last about four hours.

Penny Wheatcroft (who did not wish to stand for re-election a year ago) continued as a caretaker Secretary until September when she formally resigned the post. Penny has worked hard as Secretary since 1983, and we are all grateful for her energy and enthusiasm. Her involvement with BCG was not always encouraged by the authorities at the BM(NH). We wish her luck and support her campaign to maintain free enquiry and research facilities at the BM(NH) and we draw attention to her trade union's campaign against entry charges.

I have been Acting Secretary since November. The Committee has been represented by Phil Collins at the Museums Association's Specialist Group Meetings, and a very useful dialogue is developing. The appointment of Graeme Farnell as Director General of the MA seems to have created an enlightened active attitude towards the Specialist Groups. Amongst other things the MA have allocated BCG ten free places at this year's conference, and are keen to support our initiative to run a five-day training course for biologists in November.

Peter Davis represented the Group at the 1986 MA Conference in Aberdeen, and gave a very



AGM 87: Derek Whiteley, organiser of a very successful meeting.

inspired paper, which has since been published. The committee has also been represented by various members at GCG Committee meetings and Diana Smith reciprocates for GCG at our meetings.

Major issues spawned this year, which will occupy much of our time and energy next year include the 'Bernice Williams Report' - we need to comment on the draft before publication and we must take action on the findings of the Report when it comes out. Also curatorial training, a "watchdog" on the disposal of collections, and collections at risk, and our own "Beetle Down ..." campaign.

Despite the fact that FENSCORE and NFBR are taking leading roles in two fields which BCG has traditionally administered (collections research and biological recording), we are still active in these areas. However we are also spending more time covering other topics such as displays and galleries, live animals and plants, education, enquiries, use of collections and others. Some of these have been neglected by BCG in recent years.

General interest in the Biology Curators Group seems to be on the increase, as today's turnout (75) has demonstrated. We have a hard-working committee, a good membership and I hope we can continue receiving your support during the coming year.

Derek Whiteley
Acting Secretary

Editor's report

The change in format of the Newsletter initially took a considerable time to organise, at a time when I was heavily involved in exhibition work, and volume 4 part 5 was very late in distribution. Part 6 followed after a more acceptable interval, but I am still behind on the publication schedule; I apologise for this and will try to rectify it in the coming year.

I hope the new style meets with approval from members. The retyping of articles and photo-reduction of typescripts means we are now using space more efficiently, and printing by offset litho gives a much more polished product. The Newsletter is now close to the standard I was hoping to achieve at the beginning of the year and I think it has improved the image of the group both to the public and within the profession.

The changes have not proved expensive. Production costs of the new style Newsletters are significantly less than those of their photocopied predecessors.

It is traditional at this time of year for editors to appeal for copy and I am no exception. Style can be arranged by the editor, but content is very much in the hands of the members. I need contributions from as broad a section of the membership as is possible and as regularly as possible; even single paragraphs are welcome. The production method now used for the Newsletter allows photographs and illustrations to be printed to a high standard and I would particularly appreciate illustrated contributions or illustrations which can be used in their own right.

The leaflets for the proposed Journal of Biological Curation are currently being produced and will be distributed with the next Newsletter. They will be self explanatory when they arrive so there is no need to go into details now. I just want to say that the Journal should be seen in conjunction with the Newsletter and Special Report Series as providing a broad publication base for the Group so that any length or 'weight' (if that is the correct term) of manuscript submitted can be published in the most appropriate format.

The Manual of Curatorship project started with a meeting of the organising sub-committee; an outline now has to be fleshed out so that outside organisations can be approached for grants or sponsorship towards production costs.

John Mathias
Editor

AGM 87

Report of the Working Party on Natural Sciences Collection Resources (The Bernice Williams Report)

Background

The Working Party on Natural Science Resources began life in June 1981 as the Working Party on Taxonomy under the chairmanship of Janet Chamberlain. It had been convened following papers by Phil Doughty and Geoff Hancock on the state of natural science collections at the 1980 Museums Association Conference, and following promptings from the Museums and Galleries Commission who had asked for various facts on natural science collections in the UK which neither the Museums Association nor BCG had been able to supply. Geologists had the Phil Doughty survey and report to quote; biologists clearly needed a similar in-depth survey.

At its first meeting in June 1981 the appointed group changed its title to 'Working Party on Natural Science Collection Resources' and its aims were reported in the MA Bulletin: to identify all natural science collections in the UK and to seek funds to appoint a specialist to achieve that end; to explore how collections gathered in the process of research could be assimilated into public institutions.

Official indications of progress then seem to dwindle. The Working Party is mentioned in the 1982 MA Yearbook and again in 1983 at which time a new chairman was named, Fred Dunning, and there were one or two changes to the composition of the group.

Dr Bernice Williams was appointed to gather the facts and in 1983 she sent out a substantial questionnaire to all museums and other institutions thought to hold collections. The replies were collated into a draft report and circulated to Working Party members and one or two others something over a year ago.

The BCG Committee for some time has been concerned over the lengthy delay between the deadline for questionnaire receipts (January 1984) and production of the final report - despite the fact that Peter Morgan reviewed its findings at the 1986 Museums Association Conference (reported in Museums Journal vol 86 no 3). The data it contains are now at least three and a half years out of date. Some BCG members have also expressed reservations about certain parts of the report, so a discussion on it was scheduled for the 1987 BCG AGM meeting in Sheffield at which all views could be aired and an initiative to the Chairman of the Working Party could be formulated.

The following is an attempted summary of a very wide-ranging discussion.

Discussion

Several members had seen the full report or the summary chapter in its draft form; Geoff Hancock was the only member of the Working Party present. The main criticism voiced was that the report contained so much data, albeit fully analysed, that the major considerations tended to get lost in a mountain of detail. It was felt that a short, cogent addendum to the report, or perhaps separately produced back-up papers for the media and scientific press, should be produced for circulation at the same time that the full report is released. It is understood that the published report will be available in limited numbers only, simply because of its size, and that NERC had offered printing facilities.

Concern was expressed that the report was now so late that many entries were out of date (by about three years) and, of course, the longer the report is delayed the greater this problem becomes.

The role of BCG in the instigation of the survey and its involvement in questionnaire formulation and general progress were discussed. It transpired that although BCG had been instrumental in starting the whole process, once NERC became the financing body through the agency of the Museums Association, the Group had been comparatively little involved. Geoff Hancock was the permanent link between the Working Party and the BCG Committee, but he had been called on to do very little; the Working Party had met on three occasions and the content of the questionnaire had been discussed at length. The last Working Party meeting had been some eighteen months previous to this discussion. Since then Geoff had received a copy of the draft report for comment, and had returned it to the National Museum of Wales. It was understood that editorial corrections from all members of the Working Party were now being incorporated into a pre-publication version. Those present hoped that this version would be returned to the Working Party members for approval. It had recently been agreed between the BCG chairman and the Director General of the Museums Association that BCG committee should see this pre-publication version of the report for detailed comment.

A number of members present who had seen the full report expressed severe reservations about some of the statements it contained - for example in the area of pest control, use of insect deterrent chemicals and their effects on people. As these comments were based on the first draft only, which had been of only very limited distribution, it was felt that detailed comment of this kind should be reserved until the next version was available and the BCG had been invited officially to express its views.

One major deficiency of the report seemed to be a lack of any proposals and recommendations resulting from its findings.

It was unclear as to who should be making comments of this kind. Members generally felt that a series of recommendations should form part of the published report, but if this proved not to be the case, then BCG should immediately produce a series of recommendations itself, arising from the data made available in the report. Whichever way this worked, members felt most strongly that recommendations should be made available for presentation to the Museums Association, Museums and Galleries Commission, and individual museum governing bodies.

The following letter was sent to the Chairman of the Working Party on 8th May 1987, putting forward the resolution agreed by all those members present at the discussion in Sheffield.

Dear Mr Dunning,

The Biology Curators Group (BCG) is very concerned that the draft Report on the Natural Science Collection Resources (the 'Bernice Williams Report') includes some comments and conclusions which are highly subjective and probably incorrect.

At our meeting on 4 April the progress of the Report was discussed in open forum and whilst most members welcomed the Report and looked forward to its publication after much discussion the following resolution was carried unanimously by the 28 members present:

'The Biology Curators Group strongly urges the chairman to reconvene the Working Party and that the draft Report is carefully examined and edited by the Working Party; with recommendations added before final publication'.

We hasten to add that we feel the Working Party is well qualified and competent to do this job without interference from BCG.

Generally BCG welcomes the Report and we look forward to its publication and to taking appropriate action on its findings in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Steve Garland
Chairman

AGM 88

1988 AGM at Bolton Museum

The committee have two suggestions for subject matter for the next AGM meeting at Bolton Museum: pest control, particularly by non-chemical means or biological publications. The former would, hopefully, break new ground in a complex and rapidly developing area of relevance to us all; the latter would encompass all aspects of museum-based biological publications.

If any members have suggestions for different subjects for the 1988 AGM meeting, or indeed for any other meetings, please let the Chairman know. Otherwise, suggestions (or offers) for speakers on either of the proposed subjects or suggestions for specific topics to be included in the programme should be sent to the Chairman as soon as possible.

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In the Press

The February 1987 ASC NEWSLETTER (vol 15 no 1) features a readable description, department by department, of the American Museum of Natural History which includes the names of curators, the scope of the collections, the main collecting areas and the major named collections; a potted history of the Museum is included. There is also an advertisement for large-chamber freeze-dryers from North Star of Minnesota, suitable for the preparation of museum specimens. The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden (California) is given a similar treatment in the April issue (vol 15 no 2). This is a private non profit-making institution dedicated to the study, preservation and display of Californian plants, founded in 1927. There is a general historical account and a detailed description of the herbarium.

The March 1987 CURATOR (vol 30 no 1) contains a description by Tony Tynan of the Abel's Ark exhibit at the Hancock Museum - a novel and inspirational way of displaying big game heads out of their usual hunting context. In the same issue is a paper describing 'Watrous Trays', a storage system for disarticulated and dissected insects. Essentially, the system allows for the disarticulated bits of an insect to be stored with what remains of the original specimen in its correct taxonomic position in a tray in a standard entomological drawer. The measurements of the tray system quoted are those of the Cornell drawer system, but they can be easily modified for Hills-type or non-standard drawers.

The spring 1987 issue of the JOURNAL OF BIOLOGICAL EDUCATION (vol 21 no 1) carries an interesting description/review of the Charles Darwin memorial at Down House, Downe in Kent - a small museum maintained by the Royal College of Surgeons and not widely known. In the same issue there is a directory of biology-based audio-visual aids suppliers which gives names and addresses of organisations marketing tape-slide presentations, videos, films, posters, models, computer software and other items which may have display potential.

A brief note in HABITAT (vol 23 no 4) gives the news that a complete mapping package for use with the BBC-B microcomputer is now available for species mapping. Up to 2520 species can be handled and the package will produce standard format dot maps; other functions include the production of species lists from individual grid units. Details from Dr A.J.C. Malloch, Dept of Biological Sciences, University of Lancaster, Bailrigg, Lancaster, LA1 4YQ.

WATSONIA vol 16 (January 1987) includes a brief description of the Bournemouth Natural Science Society, updating the somewhat misleading entry in BRITISH AND IRISH HERBARIA by Kent and Allen (1984). The main collections are named and described in outline and their significance is given. The 'cleaning-up' efforts of an honorary curator in the 1930s or 1940s, who apparently thought no taxon should be represented by more than a single sheet, resulted in the loss of a large number of voucher specimens collected by J.F. Rayner for his SUPPLEMENT TO FREDERICK TOWNSEND'S FLORA OF HAMPSHIRE AND THE ISLE OF WIGHT (1929). I wonder how often that story can be told!

The British Arachnological Society is starting a new spider recording scheme in conjunction with the Biological Records Centre. The organisation is described in BRITISH ARACHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER no 48 (March 1987). New record cards should be available by now. Anyone interested in contributing should contact BRC at Monks Wood for introductory literature and a supply of the new cards.

For anyone redesigning conservation laboratory workspace there is an article in STUDIES IN CONSERVATION (vol 32 no 1) by R.M. Organ on 'An Adaptable Compact Modular Bench' which describes and gives plans for a well thought out, safe (for objects and personnel) but very flexible workbench. As well as work surfaces it allows for small tool storage, temporary object storage, water, air, vacuum and electricity, facilities for removal of solvent vapours and a space for writing reports.

Volume 21 pt 2 of the GLASGOW NATURALIST carries an obituary for Charles Palmar, Keeper of Natural History at Glasgow Museum from 1949 to 1984, who died in 1986.

The BULLETIN OF THE AMATEUR ENTOMOLOGISTS' SOCIETY for February 1987 has as its 'Featured Museum' the Booth Museum of Natural History in Brighton. This is an excellent review of the history of the museum and includes a list of the major entomological collections it holds.

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The PROCEEDINGS OF THE 1985 WORKSHOP ON CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS was published in 1986 by the Royal Ontario Museum. It contains an important paper by Frank Howie called 'Conserving Natural History Collections: some Present Problems and Strategies for the Future'. The state of natural history collections, particularly in the UK, is reviewed and, to pick out just one of many pertinent points, some interesting comparisons are made between expenditure on natural history conservation and on fine art conservation (less than £100,000 compared with 15 to 20 million pounds per annum). The paper points out the deficiencies in status and funding of natural history conservation in general and suggests a series of priorities for improving the plight of natural history collections in the UK.

For anyone who has ever speculated on the origins and structure of the International Council of Museum (ICOM), there is an easily digestible summary of its role and activities in the ICOM INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR CONSERVATION NEWSLETTER no 5 (February 1987); ideal for Diploma students.

Subscription rates are £6.00 for individual membership and £10.00 for institutional membership. Contact Adam Wright, Herbert Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, for application forms.

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