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ACCESS TO COLLECTIONS NSCG / BCG / GCG CONFERENCE

Conference in Scarborough, Yorkshire, Monday April 3rd - Tuesday April 4th

The National Museums and Galleries of Wales Collections Centre at Nantgarw

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The Problem of Space - or lack of it

As with every other museum there has ever been, NMGW is short of adequate storage space. This has always been so and will probably always continue to be so, for changing reasons. The pressures on storage space for us are for the following obvious reasons:

- all departments have historically acquired collections that they are unwilling or unable to dispose of,
- all departments continue to actively (and often passively) collect by acquisition, bequest, field work collecting, archaeological excavations etc.,
- modern exhibitions tend to use fewer objects from the collections and take up more space.

Not so obvious pressures are from:

- the number of non-curatorial staff needing accommodating and financing. In the NMGW non-curatorial staff have increased by approximately 150% in the last 20 years,
- improved conservation standards require better conservation storage, which always takes up more room, and should not use the worst storage areas such as basements, attics, or the field next-door,
- requirements for better access to the collections leads to fewer objects in the storage systems and stores.

The problem gets worse

NMGW has been aware of the increasing space crisis for some years, but has lacked the funding to do much about it. Our position was not relieved when substantial new building to the NMGW Cardiff occurred in the early 1990's, and the space was used for new offices and galleries, and little extra storage space. The position became critical in the mid 1990's for the following reasons:

- developments in Cardiff Bay forced us to sell the Industrial and Maritime Museum and re-house its collections,
- temporary storage in rented buildings and 'grace and favour' stores belonging to Cardiff Bay Corporation were expensive and/or on insecure short lease. This could have jeopardised our Registered Museum status,
- sub-basement areas in NMG Cardiff were deemed unsuitable for storage (which they had been up to then) as the space was needed for an air conditioning plant, some areas were prone to flooding, and safe access was a problem under H&S legislation.

A possible solution - if albeit a compromise

With the sale of the Industrial and Maritime Museum, the NMGW had funding to develop a new museum in Swansea in partnership with Swansea County Council. It also made available a sum of money sufficient to hire or purchase a storage building for the displaced collections. The problems facing us were :

- there was no suitable funding of a sufficient size available for rent or purchase within a 30 mile radius of Cardiff. (Avonmouth is strictly speaking within that radius, but transport problems across the Bristol Channel proved "challenging").
- we were keen not to have just a repository but a building where the collections could be better appreciated, conserved, documented and accessed. The name Collections Centre was deliberately chosen.

In Nantgarw, the Welsh Development Agency were building speculative light industrial units for sale to suitable applicants. These buildings had office space and facilities and a large open area of 3000m² with excellent access at the rear. This proved large enough for the transferral of the Industrial and Maritime collections with space for staff to service it.

NMGW purchased the building and transferred the collections into it in 1998. After a period of reorganisation it was made available for public visits. However, having a building which was owned by the museum allowed us to develop long term ideas and plans.

Future developments

The Collections Centre is currently closed as we are now building an Archive Resource Centre within the present building. This is to house the NMGW accessed archives, collections documentation and the administrative archive of personnel, finance etc., files. The building is due for completion in September 2000 and will have digitisation facilities, conservation laboratories and visitor research access.

The site owned by NMGW at Nantgarw covers approximately 10,000m², and it is our intention to extend the present Collections Cen-

tre to provide a further 5000m² of high quality storage. Our criteria for its use are :

- it is not a dumping ground for unwanted collections,
- any collections transferred there must be in an acceptable standard and must have departmental staff responsible for its upkeep,
- material that could be of interest to the public should be made so, perhaps on an 'open storage' basis.

The lessons learnt

Our experience over the last few years with the Collections Centre and its current and future developments has been very positive. There have been a number of useful and salutary spin-offs. Some of them are:

- it has made us re-think collecting policies,
- it has made us re-evaluate our existing collections especially with regard to conservation and disposal issues,
- neglected collections have been recognised as having value.
- resource issues in improving collection standards have been properly addressed.

Before Nantgarw we thought a light at the end of the tunnel meant somebody with a torch bringing you more work. Now we hope that we have a focussed and realistic opportunity to preserve and present our collections in a manner that they deserve.

