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BCG-Trip to Budapest Natural History Museum. October, 2000

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Hungary's records and collections of flora, fauna and fungi have come through a notorious historical period of shifting politics, wars and revolutions. The Museum, founded in 1802 as part of the Hungarian National Museum, was given the basis of its collections through Count Ferenc Széchenyi and his wife Julianna Festetics who collected minerals and plants; the first zoological collection was donated in 1811. Since then the collections have been saved (or not) from disasters (the flood of 1838), including periods of lack of interest and funding, but most survived until the second World War and then the Hungarian uprising of 1956 when a bomb and subsequent fire destroyed between 30-60% of the collections!

The museum is divided into 6 departments, the directorate administer: Exhibition and education, Zoology, Botany and palaeobotany, Anthropology Palaeontology and Mineralogy. Each of the departmental heads outlined the collections under their care, together with a brief history of their main donors and losses in 1956! Before this, however, we were warmly welcomed by the director, István Matkási, who showed us the way all(?) Hungarians start the days work with a 50ml glass of Palinka (fruit-flavoured Schnapps)!! This certainly had the effect of relaxing us but not too much!

The percentage of destroyed collections during the 1956 revolution varied from department to department, the mineralogical and palaeontological collections were the most badly damaged, although entomology suffered with the loss of the entire Diptera collection.

The scientific part of the Museum itself is housed in a former military riding academy and on our arrival we noticed that the courtyard was full of cement mixers, diggers and earth movers which, given the recent weather, muddied our footwear before proceeding indoors! As we moved around the museum and its collections, we noted the large size and importance of their surviving natural history collections. Despite its rather neglected and


chipped 19th century architecture, which will be restored in time the offices have recently been refurbished resulting in harmonious and fully equipped work areas. It is hoped to open fully in 2002.

The display part of the Museum is run by the education and exhibition department and is housed in a nearby building that the government purchased in 1995 for a song since it was just a shell burnt out during the 1956 uprising. This has been renovated and presently displays a large array of imaginative eco-displays from a Noah's Ark, showing zoological biodiversity at an entertaining but educational level to dioramas and hands-on interactive for children. The displays covered the full range of the museums' departments including ethnography and anthropology, botany and paleontology, zoology geology and using real specimens wherever practically possible. Interested careful and sometimes lightly humorous designs and subtle eco-messages but not overwhelmed by a vastness of displays.

The remaining part of the afternoon was devoted (to me) to exploring the botany department housed nearly a mile distant. One would never guess at the destruction of so many specimens in World War II and 1956, although 650K C-P specimens were saved along with 34K 18th century and Linnaean specimens. Since then collectors have been busy, particularly in the flora-rich Carpathian area (known as Carpatho-Pannonicum). Huge herbarium cabinets filled with species of plants and fungi, including many type specimens. We were also shown many botanical illustrations by the botanical artist Vera Csapody who continued working until her death aged 95!

Knowing of my interest in lyophilic-preservation, I was also shown their Christ-beta LMC2 freeze drier with a working temperature of -50°C that could prepare about 100 fungal specimens in one session. -Other techniques for preparing fungal herbarium mounts were also shown. Of particular interest, was that of Herppel-Bohus involving gentle pressing onto cellophane to avoid shrinkage and resulting in perfect flat specimens. This involves some preparation time but had the advantage of preparing fungi to show external and internal morphology without specimens taking up much space.

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

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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.

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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.

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"Death by a Thousand Cuts"

The meeting of the UKIC Archaeology Section December 2000

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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.