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A Personal View

- Rosina Down – Quietways, Debden, Saffron Walden, Essex. CB11 3LS

SPNHC 2005 Realising Standards Conference for me started on Monday afternoon as I have visited all the field trip venues several times and had some completely unrelated research to do that day.

Having registered by the skin of my teeth I had a nostalgic trip to the Polish restaurant Daquise near the NHM, which I first knew when I worked in Chelsea in the early 1960's (yes I am that old). I happened to sit next to one of the over 100 delegates from N. America. His wife recognised the very smart SPNHC bag. The contents of the bag included a pen and paper, so no excuser to avoid taking notes; a beautifully presented book "Nature's Connections – An explanation of Natural History" by Nicola McGirr and a camera. I was delighted to discover in the book a photo of R.E. Grant, for whom my former Museum is named, acknowledged in his rightful place as an important early influence on Darwin and a brief account of Richard Owens attempts to undermine him. I was not so thrilled to see that the camera was a disposable one though.

The icebreaker party had excellent food and lots of networking, meeting old friends and discovering new ones. It was good to see Chris Norris over from AMNH who reminded me I was around when he started in the profession! Walking back into the Darwin centre from the Face to Face photographic exhibition (a must for all those who love great Apes) I saw evidence of the NHM's pest infection problem as a mouse ran across the floor and disappeared under a showcase, highlighting one of the disadvantages of food and specimens in the same areas.

Lord May's Keynote speech was both informative and challenging. Reminding us that Taxonomy and Systematics were fundamental and underpinning to everything in life, he challenged us to stop using the outdated methods which still motivate too many of us. He stressed the need to be preserving what we have and making it more accessible, co-ordinating collections, developing new techniques and following the Astronomers' example who would have done it all by now. I felt that the numerous and very varied contributions to the conference went a long way to doing just this, covering as they did such a wide range of collections and solutions. However, not all the advice given always works, the Smithsonian's Carol Butler suggested communications to non-collections people should be factual not emotional.

This reminded me of an eminent UCL Professor who only agreed to the re-siting of RE Grant's microscope and other precious specimens from a showcase where the sun streamed in through the window in the college history exhibition when I jumped up and down and refused to follow his instructions, all conservation arguments having failed.

The evening poster session provided some very useful practical methods and once again networking was much in evidence. My visit to the Wandsworth store resulted in one of the highlights of the conference for me when we were shown the freeze-dried Whale heart prepared by Reg Harris at the NHM. Reg had been a predecessor of mine at the Grant museum and taught me most of what I know about Zoology Museum techniques. It was really good to know that his work is still cherished. It was also good to hear that the temperature in the building was set to the good of the specimens and not those who worked with them.

As always one comes away from a conference filled with enthusiasm for all the imparted ideas and then reality sets in, time, money and staffing restraints. However, there is room for optimism with more Natural Science Curators and Conservators in positions where they can really influence decisions locally and nationally. In spite of Lord Mays' criticism things have moved on a page in the 20 years since SPNHC's formation, although it was disturbing to discover so many Natural Science posts had disappeared or failed to attract candidates, and that the last Area Museum Natural Science lab closed this year in Scotland. At least with modern technology the task of updating the 1981 state and status of Geology collections took far less effort than it took Phil Doughty.

My thanks to Rob Huxley and his colleagues for an excellent Conference and to NatSCA for my Bursary.