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## The Biology Curator

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Title: Publications: Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts

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Source: Stansfield, G. (1994). Publications: Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts. *The Biology Curator*, Issue 1, 6.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/590>

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## PUBLICATIONS

**Manual of Natural History Curatorship** – The projected publication date is now the end of September 1994. The Manual will be 352 pages and priced at £45. The original proposal to produce an inexpensive manual in a relatively short time proved unrealistic. Individual contributions far exceeded the brief and in spite of drastic editing the manual is twice the size envisaged. Much of the delay has been caused by the increase in size, the use of free-lance editors by HMSO, and the need to cross-reference the various chapters. There are extensive bibliographies and a comprehensive index, the corrected proofs of which were returned to HMSO on August 1st.

**Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts** – Members might like to know that for a number of years I have been submitting abstracts of papers relating to the conservation of biological and geological collections, drawn from monographs, the *Geology Curator*, *Journal of Biological Curation*, *Collection Forum* to AATA abstracts. The abstracts are printed in the two volumes published annually, and on-line. Suggestions for additional abstracts would be welcomed.

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**Flora Mesoamericana** – The first volume of this seven volume Spanish-language project is now available. In this volume (Alismataceae to Cyperaceae) alone, one new family, two new genera and 104 new species are recorded, making the about 5% of the species in the volume new to science. This ambitious project is an exercise in international collaboration and further details are available in the UK from the Natural History Museum. No price given.

**Hortus Eystettensis, The Bishop's Garden and Besler's Magnificent Book** by Nicolas Barker – published in Nurnburg in 1613 the original book detailed the contents of the Prince bishop of Eichstatt's magnificent garden. Nicolas Barker tells the story of the 25 special hand-coloured copies of this famous book, now in collections all over the world. With 150 reproductions from the original edition. Available price £40 from Turpin Distribution Services, Blackhorse

Road, Letchworth, Herts SG7 1HN or from the British Library if you are passing their shop. The BL copy is currently on display in their Exhibition Gallery, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

## PERSONAL THOUGHTS ON THE LEICESTER NATURAL SCIENCES CURATORIAL COURSE

Being relatively new to the world of curation I was encouraged to attend the natural sciences curatorial course at Leicester University. My colleagues were glowing in their praise of the course when it was held in Sheffield and were intrigued to see how it had developed since.

**Monday** – Participants came from as far afield as Malta and included curators (4) doing the one week course or a part time diploma (2) and students (3) doing full time museum studies.

The course started with a look at the "Historical Context" of Natural History Collections; how fashions and scientific research have formed the material which is in museums today. If all that was too heavy for a Monday morning, the next task was a bit of active research. We were given a famous (dead) naturalist to research over the week and off we trundled with maps to try to find the library and more importantly somewhere to eat!

After lunch Derek Lott from the Leicester museum gave us a colourful slide talk on biological recording and protected species legislation. He made clear the talk was usually aimed to the public, however it was perhaps a little too general for the audience who were already "turned on" to the subject.

Next topic was called "Do it yourself collecting policies". We were asked to group ourselves into national, local or university museums to discuss the ethics of collecting from each view point. The ensuing "discussion" covered who should collect what and where!

**Tuesday** – The field work day. In the morning we visited Ulverscroft nature reserve. This was a joint effort between Derek, Simon and Stephen Grover, a botanist from the Ecology Unit. Derek demonstrated various insect trapping methods, some of which "he had prepared earlier". These included pitfall traps baited with fish heads that even the foxes were not too sure about. Simon and Stephen discussed plant surveying, habitat assessment and management. During which a

large and loud JCB was carrying out some drastic looking habitat management on the reserve. Lunch was at a nearby pub with understanding bar staff. We traipsed into a posh looking restaurant area wearing muddy boots and waterproof coats. Little did they know, I had tubes of live beetles in my pockets.

The afternoon session concentrated on geology. The first site was Tilton railway cutting. The muddiness of the site was fully appreciated by the people who wore trainers rather than boots. Here we looked at geological layering and collected bags of mud (which we later discovered contained microfossils). The second site was Thistleton quarry. Donning our bright yellow hard hats once again we descended into the depths of the quarry. For the non geologists, the surveying meant hitting bits of rock and looking to see if you could find anything.

**Wednesday** – Preservation, Preparation and Conservation day (or the day you get to play with high tech equipment). In the morning we discussed the various techniques used to treat collected material, then we had a chance to try it ourselves. The bag of mud was boiled with an unspecified amount of caustic soda for a long time until we produced a smelly dried out mess, move over Delia Smith! From this you could extract microfossils. The Tullgren Funnel method of insect extraction "encouraged" the insects to move away from a hot lamp and into an awaiting jar of alcohol preservative. Next we attempted to card beetles. A tribute to Derek's skill and experience is how easy he made it look. Even with Derek's handy hints on how to give the beetle a natural pose, my beetle ended up so contorted it looked as if it was breakdancing. Then came a video on the preparation of animal skins. The queasy among us were scribbling detailed notes as a diversion to actually watching the gruesome spectacle. On hindsight it was less gory than I had anticipated.

After lunch we had a tour behind the scenes at Leicester museum. Grace, a geology conservator, talked about conservation problems and preventive techniques and materials. We had a go at removing matrix with an air abrasive pen. After that we had a roam around the collections to look at past and current techniques for conservation & preservation. This included caterpillars