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## The Biology Curator

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### Postcard from Margate

After close of business at Bones II in the Natural History Museum, on 25 March 1999, the remaining delegates departed by coach and car to Margate for the next part of the Skin & Bones BCG meeting.

I am glad to report that the social side of the meeting was as lively as ever. After arrival and unpacking at our sea side hotels the group met for drinks and a very reasonably priced and tasty Indian meal. The venue for the second night of our festivities was an unsuspecting Italian restaurant.

We were collected from our hotels by coach for a short trip to the Powell-Cotton Museum. After coffee and biscuits, the group dispersed to view the stunning taxidermy dioramas in the museum. The gasps of amazement were audible! The dioramas are stunning in their quality, scale and the range of animals from Africa and Asia that are displayed. The museum also houses galleries devoted to the ethnographic objects, porcelain and local archaeology collected by Major P.H.G. Powell-Cotton.

A packed day of talks followed a warm welcome from John Harrison, Curator of the Powell-Cotton Museum, and an introduction from David Carter, Chairman, BCG. The BCG AGM was held at lunch time.

#### DAY 2: Skin – The Future of Taxidermy.

*Summary of the meeting held on the 26th March at The Powell-Cotton Museum.*

#### Presentation about the Powell-Cotton Museum

Malcolm Harman, Assistant Curator (Natural History), took us through the life of Major P.H.G. Powell-Cotton and the history of the museum. Major Powell-Cotton travelled extensively in the 19th century, mounting 28 expeditions to explore Asia and Africa. He hunted big game and worked with a network of natural history traders to form his collection of natural history specimens, that includes important collections of the giant Angolan sable and primates. Photographs and data on latitude, longitude, weight and horn measurements were collected with the specimens. Roland Ward Ltd undertook the taxidermy of the mounts. The dioramas were constructed at the end of the 19th century to illustrate the wildlife of Africa and Asia. They contain 500 animals in settings that represent savannah, forest and swamp habitats.

There is a cleaning programme for the specimens on display and the importance of stable relative humidity and temperature for taxidermy was discussed. There was an opportunity to view a display of photographs, letters and other documents relating to the expeditions of Major Powell-Cotton and to the taxidermy by Roland Ward Ltd in the museum.

#### Victorian attitudes to animals and taxidermy

Dr Pat Morris reminded us not to judge 19th century taxidermy by the standards of society today and that museums should preserve the specimens, attitudes and ideas of the past. Characteristic Victorian taxidermy includes anthropomorphic taxidermy, mounted pets, hunting trophies, the use of animals to make furniture and comparative studies of birds and mammals that may be rare and protected under the law today.

#### A working taxidermist's view of the profession today

Kim McDonald spoke about modern taxidermy and the future for the profession. In 1976 the Guild of Taxidermists was formed to promote and teach the art of taxidermy, support the legal acquisition and handling of specimens and guide the professional conduct of taxidermists. The future of taxidermy rests upon educating members of the public about taxidermy and the productive use of legally acquired specimens, for instance, for educational purposes.

#### The educational value of taxidermy in museums

Carol Leverick, Schools Operations Manager, Natural History Museum, told us how the real objects in museums can engage people and how education using taxidermy can be based upon observation of specimens, practical tasks and national curriculum topics. However, people need a context for what they are seeing. For example, children often ask "Is



it real ?" – they could mean "Is it alive ?" – a very different question. It is also important to remember what these objects may not be telling us – for instance, information about the behaviour or movement of animals.

### The real natural history

Dr James Brock, Keeper of Natural History, Horniman Museum, talked about the real natural history – our natural history collections in museums. Natural history museums and their curators have a poor public image. To improve this image museums need to explain why they have such collections and what curators do with them. People often do not realise that real natural history specimens are used in education, supporting conservation initiatives, and in research that leads to the understanding of systematics, biodiversity and evolution.

### Taxidermy – an outsiders view

Maurice Davies, Assistant Director, Museums Association, felt that taxidermy in museums was a wonderful and popular resource. He urged museums to do that resource justice by improving the presentation and interpretation of such material.

A lively debate followed the presentations. The subjects discussed included attitudes to taxidermy, zoological material and past collecting; interpretation of natural history collections, access to collections and research in natural history museums.

### DAY 3: Tour of the Powell-Cotton Museum Stores

On day three of the meeting the remaining BCG delegates and members of the Taxidermy Guild viewed the storage areas behind the scenes at the Powell-Cotton Museum. The museum has large collections of animal skins and osteology, including important collections of skull material. This material is invaluable for research purposes because of the data collected with the specimens. Malcolm Harman, Assistant Curator (Natural History), told the group about ongoing initiatives to improve storage of the collections. As with most museums, there is a perennial lack of space for storage. The tour ended with a visit to Quex House.

For further information about the Powell-Cotton Museum please contact the curator, John Harrison, at The Powell-Cotton Museum, Quex Museum, House & Gardens, Quex Park, Birchington, Kent CT7 0BH. 01843 842168.

Sarah Kenyon

Natural Sciences Curatorial Officer

Saffron Walden Museum.

## The Scarce Hook-tip Moth *Sabra harpagula*

From its discovery in 1837 to its apparent demise in 1938, the Scarce Hook-tip Moth *Sabra harpagula* was only known from Leigh Woods on the edge of Bristol, the southern side of the Avon Gorge. Until it was found in 1962 in the Wye Valley the moth was thought to have become extinct, happily it still thrives at the latter locality but it has never been seen again in Leigh Woods.

As part of a project mapping the past and present status of moths in the Bristol region, I would be extremely pleased to hear from any museum or individual who has specimens of this moth in their collections. I am particularly keen to receive data from Bristol specimens but even if you do not have time to extract the data I would very much like to know if you have specimens.

The moth was never very common at Leigh Woods and it should be possible to build up a database of virtually every Bristol specimen still extant. It is hoped the information gained from them will also shed light on which years were good seasons for the moth and how successful the old collectors were in breeding them. Details of the method of capture would be particularly useful as would knowing of blown larvae or other life stages.

If you can help please contact:

Ray Barnett, Collections Manager, City Museum & Art Gallery, Queen's Road, Bristol BS8 1RL Tel.: 0117-922 3600 E-mail: ray\_barnett@bristol-city.gov.uk

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**Copy Dates: 8th January for March, 8th May for July and 8th September for November**

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