

West Midlands Meeting
Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery
13th October 2006

Present:

Jon Radley, Warwick
Don Steward, Stoke
Michael Vanns, Ironbridge
Jane Arthur, BMAG
Jon Clatworthy Lapworth

Apologies for absence:

Daniel Lockett - Shropshire County Museum Service
Rosemary Roden - Worcester geology collections
Kate Andrew - Hereford

1. Review of recent activities and developments

JR reported with regards to the geology collections at Warwick. The main work had involved checking and maintaining existing collections. A small amount of collecting of local Jurassic material had been carried out. Storage space is a major issue/problem at Warwick although some minor additions to storage equipment/furniture had been made. There are some documentation issues and the recently collected material requires documentation. Geology and Natural History Collections had been utilised for numerous temporary exhibition work at the museum, and also at libraries etc.

DS reported on the situation regarding Natural History at Stoke. Slow progress had been made with *MODES* documentation, and with regards to geology collections there had been few developments to report. Plant collections had been worked on in connection with a county based publication, and work had been carried out on the herbarium and mosses. The museum is closing for a period of 3 months due to work on air conditioning, and this will involve temporary moving of collections. Some collaborative display work had been carried out with Leek, but, not involving natural history. An update was given on the Renaissance West Midlands project to fund a 2 year traineeship in geological curation (Don emailed details to the group back in June 2006). This project will be based at Stoke, but, the trainee will spend periods at other museums, and hopefully look at orphan collections in the region. Hopefully the trainee will remain in the region, in some capacity, on completion of the project. The project has been delayed due to human resources and single status issues, which should hopefully be resolved soon. Whilst not related to natural history, a *Dr Who* event at Stoke had resulted in excellent visitor numbers.

JC reported on developments at the Lapworth Museum of Geology. AHRB Project Funding had been obtained for a *Remedial and preventative conservation of historical palaeontology collections in the Lapworth Museum of Geology* project. This had also allowed for curatorial staff to have geological conservation training with Caroline Butler at the National Museum of Wales. The project also funded a radio-telemetric environmental monitoring system for the stores and main display area. SRIF-2 funding had been secured for a new Lapworth Museum Archive Room and Map Facility. This included new storage furniture, air conditioning, IT equipment allowing digitisation, and better access/research facilities. Documentation backlogs remain a problem; however, work on the new MIMSXYG documentation and collection management software/database had been on-going. A searchable online database was being launched in conjunction with the Barber Institute of Fine Arts & University Collections, and is due to go live on 20th October 2006. The Lapworth is very disappointed that the University has recently decided not to proceed with the project with BMAG to transfer the BMAG NH collections to a new facility at the University. Although it was still hoped that the geological

collections and some other natural history collections would still be transferred (long-loan) to the Lapworth.

MV gave details of the 19th Century collection of George Maw (Broseley, Tile Maker) which is held by Ironbridge. The collection had been worked on by Rosemary Roden about 8 years ago, and is predominantly petrological material which is well documented and includes Maw's original information. The material is not on display and Ironbridge has no plans for the collection at present.

JA confirmed that the project, developed in recent years by BMAG & the Lapworth Museum, for a new Museum/Natural History Centre at the University of Birmingham had been rejected by the University. This means that the situation for the BMAG Natural History Collections is as it was back in 2002. A more positive development was the proposed revamp of exhibitions at *ThinkTank* which is looking to expand and redevelop the Natural History content, although funding is still to be secured. It is hoped that information gathered during the project proposed with the University, can be utilised in the *ThinkTank* project.

2. Information supplied by Kate Andrews regarding the views of non-attendees.

Some points were made:-

Re-Rosemary Roden's comments regarding Worcester's collections:-

- *Malvern Tunnel Collection*. Those present were not familiar with this collection but, thought that it was significant material and the proposed documentation project was something that could be followed up.
- *Displays*. It was agreed that the lack of permanent natural history/geology at Worcester was very disappointing, and the material now in store is very significant. JR thought that the suggested temporary display relating to the geology and natural history of the Malvern & Abberley area should perhaps be a permanent display, particularly given the standing/status of the Geopark.

Re- Daniel Lockett's comments (Shropshire County Museum Service)

- *A cross region project*- looking at similar objects/collections, for example trilobites suggested by Daniel, was welcomed.
- *Shared Temporary/Travelling Exhibitions*- This idea was welcomed, and it was thought that it could be beneficial across the region. However, there are obvious practical issues with such projects- Funding, staff time in preparation, co-ordination of the project etc.

Re- Kate Andrew's comments (Hereford)

- *Lack of Curators*- it was agreed by all, that there is a lack of NH curators in the region. There are probably people who could be appointed, but, the posts are lacking.
- *Malvern Tunnel Collections*- As stated above, it was agreed that this would be good if a project focussing on an important collection/site was sought, and could benefit various institutions within the region.
- *Regional Natural History Store*- Generally agreed by those present to be a non-starter/not feasible.

3. What are the big and seemingly intransigent issues?

Everyone agreed that there were still major problems widespread across the region in terms of, documentation issues, storage issues, accessing expertise,

On a larger scale, there are major issues relating to buildings, staffing (a general lack of people and overstretching of curatorial staff for other duties.), political issues and lack of political will. It was thought that funding can obviously be very problematic, but, some of the other issues mentioned above are just as important and challenging.

4. Blue sky big scale answers?

Regional centres of well funded, and staffed, natural history core expertise including curatorial and conservation skills. But, this should be linked closely with other areas of museological practice, for example education and outreach.

In terms of large projects for the national implementation grant for the SSN, various areas were highlighted:-

- *National Advocacy*- This needs to take place at a high level and target high profile figures who will be supporters, and act as champions, for natural history in museums
- *Loss of research potential, data and specimens in neglected/orphan natural history collections*- JA raised concern regarding this issue, and suggested that we need a national body to take the lead on this problem. They need to develop a strategy for getting champions and advocates on board and pilot some advocacy material. They should also look at raising the profile of NH collections, and linking into the ever popular TV wildlife programmes. Although this has been a bit of a dead loss to date (viz the BBC last year), is there still potential here if it can be developed on our terms?
- *Fenscore*- This could be revisited as a national project, although it could come with a great deal of associated 'baggage'. We could try and make it more user friendly and update the material acquired post 1992-3 on a regional basis.

5. Small scale projects

The Portable Antiquities Scheme was discussed, and it was agreed to be very successful. A similar scheme tapping into natural history was regarded as difficult to envisage working, and being of any benefit.

JA stressed the need to link any smaller projects into other larger projects.

It was agreed that more needed to be done to bring together the natural history subject specialist network (NHSSN) within the region and improve and advance how it functions. Perhaps the money available for SSN's via MLA West Midlands (see email from Philip Kiberd forwarded to group by JC in July) could be used to strengthen the SSN, and fund the time of a co-ordinator to develop the network? However, the co-ordinator would still require more input from other members of the group. The group should aim at 3 meeting per annum and hopefully funding would also cover travel expenses incurred by members of the network.

More networking by the NHSSN with other related groups in the subject area is essential, and could include:

- Working with Malvern & Abberley Geopark, and Hereford & Worcester Earth Heritage Trust. The NHSSN should act as advocates for the role, and importance, of relevant natural history collections in museums. We should look at developing joint funding bids with these potential 'partners' and attempt to tie in with their objectives so that we can 'ride on their coat tails' and access some of their funding.
- Similar partnerships should be built up with groups producing Geodiversity Action Plans in the region, and groups such as University Biological Recording Centres.

Promoting the importance of collections with these related groups is vital, as is general natural history advocacy.

6. Implementation Model (institution or organisation based)

Due to unforeseen developments and changes at institutions, it was agreed that the implementation model should be **organisation based**.