the best preserved dinosaur (*Scelidosaurus*) ever found in Britain.

- The Geology galleries are amongst the top 3 visitor attractions in the Museum.
  For the first time in almost two centuries, Bristol is currently without a specialist Geology Curator. The management situation is being debated. No reappointment will be made until well into next year, and considerable doubt hangs over whether the new curatorship will be specialist, or combined with Biology. If the latter happens, one person will be in charge of well over a million specimens, patently not a practicable proposition. The demands of the Geology and Biology disciplines are not readily compatible and in fact conflict in such areas as conservation, access and display requirements.

- The display and storage space devoted to Geology are under pressure, despite the fact that the material includes several National Heritage collections replete with type and figured specimens.

# GEOLOGY AT BRISTOL MUSEUM: A PLEA TO SAFEGUARD CURATORSHIP

***Alan Bentley***

The Wills Building is the current home of Bristol University's Dept of Earth Sciences, and home to the most comprehensive geological library outside London, Oxford and Cambridge. This cathedral-like structure took eleven years to construct (1914 – 1925). It dominates the landscape at the top of Park Street, and perched on its upland Plateau of Brandon Hill Grit (a local variant of the Millstone Grit, the colour of strawberry purée, but quartz-hard and glittering like diamonds in the sunlight), is a stunning feature of the skyline for miles around. Niklaus Pevsner the architectural historian describes it as 'a tour de force in Gothic Revival, so convinced, so vast and so competent that one cannot help feeling respect for it'. To me it encapsulates the standing which the study of geology in Bristol has had for the past century, and should continue to have.

Very close by, and literally attached both in construction and in spirit, is the City Museum and Art Gallery. A glance at the front page of the bbc.co.uk/Bristol/museum website immediately reveals its predominant reputation. Dinosaurs feature prominently at the top, while lower down it states 'It's a geologist's favourite place: see the Museum's collection of rare rocks and stones'.

The Museum may have had to move its image forward to match the times, but its place of affection in my mind harks back to when, as a young teenager, I made pilgrimage there almost every Saturday afternoon. The front sweep of stairs, worthy of a Russian palace, was crowned by glazed oak doors whose brass handles were kept polished to such radiance that you felt you had to apply for permission to touch them.


*The biplane replica in the Museum foyer*

Within the atrium, the overhead blaze from the skylight was diffused, incongruously, by an early biplane which appeared to have been built largely from paper and timber recycled from old bedroom furniture. Out of the glare, the building retreated into cool, gloomy, inviting caverns within which one glimpsed the glint of gold artifacts and the beady stare of exotic animals. Here and there, of particular interest to the teenager, was a pedestal bearing a slightly risqué statue, parts of which seemed to carry a surprising polish. All these delights came wrapped in a slight but persistent aroma of coffee, cabbage and old pine, recognisable in Museums country-wide and probably available in aerosol from a museum commodity supplier. There was an echo and grandeur about the place which evoked city fathers and intrepid explorers in smoking jackets and top hats.

My destination was the first floor mezzanine with its treasure house of crystals, and severe upright cases full of ammonites from Dundry Hill and bones from Aust, all labelled with a painstakingly correct but sometimes illegible italic pen. Each label bore (unnecessarily) the Museum's 'Cb' accession number, as if it were a catalogue of Christmas presents available at the desk. To me it was indeed a catalogue, of the delights which were available simply by paying a small bus fare and applying a hammer to the stones lying around at the destination. Wet hair, muddy shoes and the odd bruised thumb were a small price to pay for the weighty loot stretching the straps of my musty cowhide satchel (but at least those satchels were built to take it).

When my interest in Geology was obviously beginning to compromise not only my performance, but my very attendance, at school football practice, my long-suffering Headmaster decided something had to be done. Appropriately, Bristol Museum came to the rescue. Their Schools Service was second to none, and after a couple of years of one-to-one tuition one afternoon per week, I succeeded in obtaining Grade A in the subject at A-level, even though it was not on the school syllabus. Around the same time, while the Museum was figuring prominently in my life, there was another major event. In 1962 the Centenary Exhibition of the Bristol Naturalists' Society was held there. The BNS have always supported a strong geological faction, and the display set up for this event was spectacular. Not only did fossils from some of the classic collections held by the Museum see the light of day: specimens collected by Charles Moore, Joseph Chaning-Pearce, J W Tutcher (who provided many of the photographs for S Buckman's *Type Ammonites*), Joscelyn Arkell, and the late Tom Fry, but I was able to meet some of the giants of palaeontology of the time who were based in Bristol, including Prof Stenhouse-Ross, C E Leese, Desmond Donovan and Geoff Kellaway.

A constellation of major events have carried the Museum's geological links into the present time, from Sir David Attenborough's tribute reception for Prof. Hugh Torrens (1990), to the recent Sea Dragons exhibitions which have brought world-wide acclaim.

How can it possibly be, then, that an institution of such grandeur, whose possession of specimens, tradition of teaching, and links with great researchers drawing from the very well-spring of British Geology, feels its heritage threatened? Earlier in this piece, I recognised the need for Museums to move with the times. However, this need is not met by throwing out the family jewels. Quoting from I Strachan (*Special Papers in Palaeontology, 22*, **Pal. Ass 1979**, pp 72-73). 'In this age of specialization, it is perhaps harder for geologists with other interests to give palaeontological work its proper place and more difficult for the palaeontologist to explain the relevance of his work to his colleagues. It is all too easy to assume that the fossils which have already survived for 300 million years can last a bit longer in the cellar while the expensive electronic machine which will be on the scrap heap in 10 years' time needs cosseting with dozens of attendant technicians. Perhaps heads of departments all need to remember that a heritage of fossils built up over a century or more cannot be replaced like a piece of machinery and, unlike that machinery, its potential value for research can grow continually provided that some attention is bestowed on it'.

I would like to add to those wise words, that the blind ratings-pursuit of current fashions and fads is no substitute for the upkeep of a strong foundation of tradition which the serious scientist can rely upon. Museums have fallen into this trap before, and it has proved to be their death-warrant. The science of Geology is greater than the sum of its parts, and should transcend such populism. To quote once again, this time from George P. Black *(Special Papers in Palaeontology, 40,* **Pal. Ass. 1988**, p 107). 'Biological conservation is based on ecology, and ecology (like geology) by itself has little attraction for the general public. On the other hand geology,

ecology (unlike geology) can readily be slanted to appeal to that somewhat sentimental "love of nature" held by the majority of the population. It thus can evoke a ready and widespread response, especially if presented through emotional, rather than scientific concepts. Biological conservation has always had this option of enlisting the support of the general public by moving away from its science base. It is an option, however, not open to geology'. Unfortunately in the current climate, attempts in this direction are being compounded by the marketing of fossils as sculptured (and sometimes faked) artifacts, decorated and presented in a way which tames and totally removes them from their status as natural and awesome objects. One of the greatest contributions which can be made to science by Museums such as Bristol, with fine historic collections, is to put them back into context. This includes demonstrating that even Victorian-type specimens, prepared to standards which would be considered aesthetically inferior nowadays, retain a gravitas and relativity to source which is lost in the pretty objects in fossil shops. A fossil is a building block of the landscape (both ancient and current) which yielded it – and Bristol Museum is documented world wide for its strength in material from local temporary exposures, some of which produced type specimens.

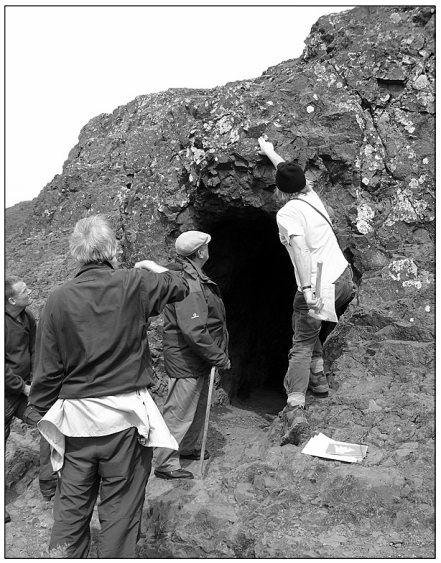
So please, Bristol Museum, get your priorities right: engage a specialist Geological Curator to continue to safeguard this national treasure. One of the most heartening sights on a visit to the Museum is to see the excitement and enthusiasm of children running from case to case with eyes aglow. Although the Museum is undoubtedly brighter and warmer than it was in my youth (and the coffee is infinitely better), the point is that the visit will sow the seeds of enquiry in the minds of a few of those kids. Like me, they will want to see more, they will get themselves invited to the mahogany-lined paradise of the basement to see the conservators at work, trip over sea-monsters barely freed yet from their stony coffins, and touch the calf-bound tomes of immaculate copper-plate lithographs which illustrated them for the first time. We need the next generation of scientists to grasp just how big this is – in every sense. This is the grand science – this is what distinguishes Geology from the fairground which is threatening to engulf it.

# Ledbury Hills Field Trip

***Photographs by L Drummond-Harris***

*View looking south from the Herefordshire Beacon*

*Bob, Richard and Shaun study the geological map of the area.*



*Dave Green points out gas bubbles in this large block of lava at Clutter's Cave, also known as Giant's Cave or Waum's Cave after the spring that once lay beneath it. The cave was probably a medieval hermit's dwelling.*