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The decline of the specialist numismatic curator (and numismatics?): the UK experience

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This paper examines the socio-political, educational and economic background to the growing loss in the UK of subject specialists amongst museum professionals in general, and numismatics specialists in particular, based on publicly-available data and interviews with relevant personnel. It distinguishes, as a corollary, a separate (but not unrelated) set of problems in those public museums (mostly local, *ie* not national or university-maintained) which have significant numismatic holdings, but no curator with sufficient numismatic experience to adequately manage (or even defend) the collection. It identifies the most vulnerable museums as those with purely local funding, but the national museums and university museums are also suffering, and even specialist mint and bank museums are not immune to the trend, although for reasons more likely to be based around commercial considerations in the case of these institutions. Finally, the paper looks at ways – some existing, others potential – in which this trend might, to a greater or lesser extent, be mitigated, even if the general direction cannot be halted or reversed.

“The Ulster Museum is the latest casualty....Over the last decade or so, curators with numismatic expertise have been lost from museums in Leeds, York and Liverpool. Numismatic expertise is now concentrated more than ever in the National Museums (London, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Dublin) and University Museums (Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow and Manchester), with Birmingham one of the few survivors among the Municipal Museums. Yet there are hundreds of museums up and down the country with significant coin collections” [Blackburn, 2008].

A small telephone survey of six museums with significant numismatic holdings included four of the nine mentioned above as forming the last bastions of numismatic expertise in the UK and Ireland. The curators of three of these four – Birmingham, National Museum Wales in Cardiff and National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh – expressed some considerable reservations as to whether they would be replaced when they retired, so this is a problem that is not going away; and it is more likely to get worse.

The fears of the curators in these three major museums revolve around two principal factors. The first is that museums have operated in a climate of increasing financial constraints in recent years (and this will probably become much worse with the events of recent months), and numismatics could come to be regarded as what accountants call a ‘discretionary cost’, and a poor cousin of archaeology or social and economic history, subjects and departments which can simply be expanded by management to accommodate an orphan numismatic collection.

The second fear stems from the fact that, in each case, the numismatic collection happens to have a comprehensive database. The great push in the UK to have all collections fully accessible on searchable computer databases has made non-specialists feel that subject-specific specialists are becoming largely redundant, and their roles can be adequately carried out by a new class of museologically-trained professionals who can simply move between collections with the help of the relevant database. This is not actually the case. There is an unfortunate seductiveness about databases, but they need specialists to interpret them and bring them to life. Educationalists, who are taking an increasingly powerful role in the organization and presentation of exhibitions, must also keep this in mind.

Before we look at numismatics in particular, we need to identify the changes in priorities within the general museum world which lie at the heart of this sorry saga. The shape of things to come appeared almost 20 years ago with a disastrous corporate plan at the world-famous Natural History Museum in London, which led to the loss of 50 of its 300 scientific specialists, the merging of five individual departments (each of which had justified its own specialist Keeper) into one 'Department of Science' with a single Keeper, and resulted in the damaging separation of curating from research. One particularly trenchant critic, obviously anticipating the (sadly wide-spread) instincts of many modern museum directors, wrote "It is by now something of a tired cliché to compare the latter-day, vulgar transformation of old-established institutions with the ethos of Disneyland. Unless, of course, as in the case of the Natural History Museum in London, the director has just spent £30,000 on sending himself and 17 members of staff to the said Disneyland in Florida in order 'to study management techniques'" [Clark, 1990]. Needless to say, our emphasis here is on the dubious appropriateness of the management techniques to be studied, rather than the cost of the exercise to the limited finances of the Natural History Museum (which was also criticized by the author). A similar experiment at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in the early 1990s led to the dismissal of eight specialist curators and the loss of their posts, resulting in a significant weakening of the relevant departments.

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the museum world and profession in the UK was in a state of crisis when the New Labour government came to power in 1997. Museums' traditional self-justification for their existence – that they collect, care for, study and interpret objects – had been under siege from all sides for more than 10 years. From the Right, the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had questioned their usefulness to society, and introduced market criteria as part of the evaluation of their work; and the many critics on the cultural Left had attacked museums for being elite ideological institutions that controlled and excluded the masses.

The huge *formal* socio-political shift in the philosophy of museums in the UK came with the publication of a policy document by the Government in May 2000, which effectively rebranded museums as centres for social change, as instruments in the government's agenda of social inclusion. One cannot, and indeed would not want to, disagree with the principle of social inclusion: the problem is, as always in situations of this sort, one of *balance*, the happy medium which reflects a common-sense multiplicity of functions, the avoidance as we would say of throwing away the baby with the bathwater.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, in his introduction to the policy document, acknowledged the need for an equitable balance: "This document includes some excellent examples of what museums...are doing to improve access and to engage specific groups in the community. But I also recognise that action to tackle social exclusion will have to be balanced against their other important responsibilities, such as the acquisition of new material, the conservation and interpretation of their collections, scholarship and education" [DCMS, 2000].

However, the political and economic reality hiding beneath these outwardly high-sounding and reasonable words was soon made clear in the political agenda which accompanied the financing of museums subsequent to the publication of this policy document. State funding for 'scholarship', and what that implies for the maintenance of subject specialisms and specialists within the sector, was definitely *not* part of that agenda. The respected art critic, Anna Somers Cocks, pointed out the consequences of the narrow political vision set out in the policy document in a scathing article in February 2001: "This was the exhibition no one wanted to

sponsor: an examination in theological terms of how the image of Christ was depicted by artists over the centuries. How uncool, how inaccessible, how uninclusive: difficult, old art by dead white European men. But then the public poured in, 355,175 over 3 months, making 'Seeing Salvation' at the National Gallery the most visited exhibition in Britain in 2000, and the fourth most popular in the world. This little fact...will probably, however, come as a shock to...the Dept. of Culture, Media & Sport, where there is one, simplistic idea of how museums should be run. They must be accessible and inclusive. By these criteria, 'Seeing Salvation' would never have happened. Now all the collections in our museums must be appealing to everyone and comprehensible by everyone – or else! And the threat is a very real one. The funding agreements between the Culture Dept. and the national museums now include very precise targets that they are expected to meet...and if they fail, the Government may feel justified in freezing or cutting their budgets. Thus the Victoria & Albert Museum is expected to attract 12% of its visitors from the ethnic minorities and 16% from C2, D and E socially-excluded groups (the scale runs from A to E, where 'E' is the poorest)...The British Museum has to get 11% from ethnic minorities and 14% from C2, D and E socially-excluded groups" [Somers Cocks, 2001].

It is only in the last year that this level of micromanagement by crude, meaningless and unauditible targets has been dropped. However, the spirit of Government policy lives on, as the recent criticism heaped upon Cambridge University's Vice Chancellor, Prof. Alison Richards, makes clear: "Alison Richards...was at the centre of a political storm recently for her quite sensible point that governments should stop viewing universities as if their sole purpose was to be an 'engine for promoting social justice'; 'promoting social mobility is not our core mission...(it) is to provide an outstanding education within a research setting'. Once that might also have applied to museums...Gone are the days apparently when museums existed to display and interpret their collections: now museums are 'seen as central spaces of mutual understanding and cohesion where cultural identity can be developed'. A yawning gulf has opened up in recent years between the once very close worlds of museums and research. But doesn't the success of well-curated exhibitions at the British Museum prove that punters want the good old fashioned approach? Or are they the wrong kind of museum audience?" [Catling, 2008].

It is appropriate at this juncture to quote the most incisive British critic of the current state of our museums, Josie Appleton: "Once a museum puts the *perceived* (our emphasis) needs of the people at the heart of its work, the collection will quite naturally lose its importance and value. A collection is no longer seen as valuable in itself – because it is rare or beautiful, or because it represents something important within a particular field. Instead, its value is imbedded in something external to itself: the immediate relationship it is able to establish to the public, how it will help the museum and its officials connect with the public, or how it will lead to observable changes in the lives of visitors...It is the task of scholarship to assess the relative importance of objects, for what they are in themselves and for the broader artistic, scientific or historical context within which they are to be placed. Collections are evidence – of past societies, of different cultures...The study of works of art develops our ideas about art as such, just as the study of the products of nature develops our ideas about the natural world, or the study of the artefacts of past societies develops our ideas of history. Knowledge is not some arbitrary ideological construct within our minds" [Appleton, 2001].

Sadly, it took the Museums Association - the Museums' arm of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council - some years to recognize that the Government's agenda, and its own rather pusillanimous acquiescence in it, was leading towards undesirable, if not totally unexpected,

consequences. Rather belatedly, it published a major document in 2005, entitled 'Collections for the Future', which raised a number of matters of concern that had been obvious to many of the older school of curators for a considerable time. Two particular ones are of relevance to us here. The first is the - now well-established - entry into the museum world of a new breed of young career professional, the product of one of the many postgraduate courses in museum studies. In the great majority of cases, these individuals have no subject specialism, and the courses themselves are entirely museologically-based (we have it on good authority that, in at least one institution, the postgraduate qualification can be obtained without the need to handle a single object during the course - eloquent testimony to the underlying philosophy and principles): "...while museum studies courses have fostered greater professionalism, the inquiry has revealed some concern about how well they prepare graduates for museum careers, especially in that they offer little scope for developing subject-related expertise"... "Specialist skills and expertise have traditionally been learned on the job, but there are now few posts which offer the chance for junior staff to work alongside more experienced staff, building their skills in a structured way" [Museums Association, 2005].

Nicola Johnson has summed up the dichotomy neatly and elegantly: "...there are two principal routes to entry (into the museum profession). The formally academic route proposes that scholarship is king and any necessary generic museum skills can quickly and easily be learned 'on the job'. Alternatively, the rapidly proliferating museum studies masters' programmes turn out increasing numbers of extremely well-trained generalists, with a great passion for museums, but surprisingly little real love of objects. The young academics are often in danger of learning and replicating the benignly autocratic professional attitudes and behaviours of their institutional predecessors, while the neophyte generalists can quickly be absorbed into a culture in which objects must be subordinated to the political, social and regenerative roles of museums" [Johnson, 2005].

It would be true to say that the first of these routes is very much the minority one, which means that, when taken in conjunction with the age profile of many current subject specialists, the second route and its concomitant personnel are rapidly becoming the dominant force in UK museums.

The second concern relates specifically to the cumulative loss of expertise that follows the retirement of the older generation of subject-specialist curators, whose deep knowledge of the collections is almost invariably accompanied by the ability to carry out research on them, and the skills to interpret objects accurately for a range of audiences: "The museum sector needs to be strengthened...more investment in training, development and succession planning will be needed. In particular, museums need to renew their sources of expertise, both internally and externally"... "As well as capturing and communicating information related to collections, museums must ensure that their stock of knowledge is regularly replenished. Research is widely seen as a luxury by museums, but it is an essential part of their role..." [Museums Association, 2005].

Mark Jones provides a pithy comment on these statements: "Is there a serious expertise deficit?" asks the document (Collections for the Future). Yes, there is. And even worse, there is a complacent acceptance of ignorance...Museum careers now seldom offer time or place for the long, slow acquisition of knowledge. Mobility is held up as a good thing in itself. But whether of function or place, mobility is not readily compatible with profound knowledge of a collection or a subject...We must really ask ourselves why, if we regard knowledge as important, we have progressively demoted specialist curatorship..." [Jones, 2005].

The reality of the Museums Association's fine words remain just that - fine words. As always, the reality of the political agenda underlying the funding of museums dictates the priorities. As part of our work on this paper, we looked at two particular types of jobs being advertised in the *Museums Journal* between July 2005 (just after the publication of 'Collections for the Future') to September 2008. Curatorial or collections management-related posts represented 40% of the total of 429, and posts related to public programmes, education and outreach (social inclusion) represented 60%. Within the 40% were a number of temporary replacements of existing posts due to maternity leave; of the genuinely new posts, many were short-term, with no guarantee of employment beyond the designated period. Almost all of the 60% were new posts, which would generate significant additional curatorial work without - as the statistics show - significant additional curatorial support, thereby taking specialist curatorial time away from collections management and leaving little scope for research on the collections or scholarship.

It is rare for scholarship to be done away with altogether, but where it is still present, it is not encouraged as a core part of the curatorial role; it is largely regarded as an unwelcome distraction, and one that is best left to the curator's own time. What is certainly the case is that the time available for it within the workplace has shrunk rapidly in the face of the ever-increasing demands of audience-related activities within museums. A survey published in 1999 (cited in Appleton, 2001) documented the uneasy sense among curators that their long-established research function was under threat. 80% said that they were not as active in research as they would like to be, and most said that the time available for research had declined in the previous 10 years. It has only worsened in the subsequent decade.

Sadly, underlying these changes is the declining authority of scholarship itself. The insidious and invidious advance of cultural relativism within the Western academic system has disseminated the belief that there is nothing intrinsically valuable held by museums, and that the specialist's understanding of objects has no more validity and value than anybody else's. The last word is best left to Appleton: "If scholarship in museums is neglected, our knowledge will suffer. Museums cannot simply rest on the expertise they have built up over the years. There must be a constant replenishment of that knowledge by scholars who keep up with the latest research and who are ready always to reassess the significance and meaning of objects. If this central task falls into neglect, it will be very difficult to repair the damage done. If, for example, the expert in fossil reptiles has been redeployed to study how people react to fossil reptiles, he is less likely to concentrate on new discoveries in the field. At worst, whole branches of knowledge could go into decline through wilful neglect." [Appleton, 2001].

At this point, the reader will be wondering when the authors will start to relate all the foregoing to the specific case of numismatics. Unfortunately, it would have been impossible to appreciate what has happened to the specialist numismatic curator - and numismatics as a separate discipline - in the UK, without understanding the background to the overall downgrading of the role of specialist curators as a breed.

Numismatics, whilst exciting to those of us involved in it, will never be able to compete for a museum audience, adult or child, with Egyptian mummies or dinosaurs, or even archaeology, a cognate discipline. Its profile suffers from not being a school or undergraduate subject. It is not 'sexy', and it is notoriously difficult to display. These are facts known to all of us. We know that, as an individually-curated discipline, numismatics has declined in our museums, and that in all but the largest collections, a specialist curator, once lost, is likely to remain lost. Numismatics, as a relatively minor subject in museum terms, is never going to be able to stand

out against the general downgrading of the specialist's role in the modern museum. Realistically, the trend cannot be reversed.

In 2007, the Museums Association produced a follow-up document to its 2005 'Collections for the Future'. Its contribution to the two concerns under current review happens to contain items that can be of relevance to numismatics, and will lead us into a consideration of what can be done to help mitigate the effect of the decline in the case of our particular discipline: "The Museums Association will undertake more work around knowledge and expertise. We will explore measures to improve links between museums and higher education, to increase the curatorial support available for collections and to ensure a higher profile for research and knowledge development. The Monument Fellowships programme will be at the heart of this and we will investigate seeking funding for a further major initiative in this area" [Museums Association, 2007].

What is being done, or could be done, to retain numismatic expertise in UK museums? Let us begin with the aforesaid Monument Fund fellowships, which are intended to capture collections' knowledge held by experienced curators who are about to retire. A total of £150,000 spread over two years has been awarded by the Monument Fund, the charitable trust of the Sainsbury family, to fund between 10 and 14 fellowships lasting between 50 and 100 days each. Note that the source of this funding is a charity, not the State. This really is 'too little, too late', and is unlikely to have any more than a marginal effect in the case of numismatics.

Trying to forge closer links between universities and museums represents a pious hope that expertise can be found within universities that is no longer available within museums. Expertise undoubtedly exists within higher education, but the right sort of expertise is not necessarily available at a convenient distance to a particular museum. Perhaps a more proactive approach is required within the four university museums, with curators offering teaching on both undergraduate and postgraduate modules in subjects other than Classical Archaeology and Ancient History: History of Art, Economics and Economic History, even Politics, for example. This would not only raise the profile of numismatics within the relevant university, but might also act as seed corn for the discipline.

The recent proposed revision of museums studies courses by the Museums Association will help to regain a proper sense of balance in terms of the museum's role. Sadly, a generation has been lost through courses that have failed to champion the primacy of the object. Graduates of this unbalanced agenda now occupy major positions in the museum world, and will continue to have influence for many more years. One must also express the hope (but with little confidence) that the same common sense now starting to emerge in the profession will prevail amongst the political paymasters.

Moving away from museums-based initiatives and suggestions, and widening the remit, what else might be done?

The Royal Mint has produced an Education pack aimed at Key Stage 2 pupils (7-11 year olds). Its purpose is to raise awareness of coins, and to highlight the significant role that money plays in our heritage. This is achieved using a broad range of lesson plans based on the core school curriculum, covering both the Sciences and the Arts. The pack can be used in both schools and the education departments of museums. This is a welcome initiative, and we have to hope that catching children's interest and imagination at an early stage will lead to increased interest in

later life.

A year or so ago, numismatics failed to gain Specialist Subject Network status in the UK. This would have provided public funds for a pooling of numismatic expertise, benefiting many local museums that had previously lacked access to such skills. There might be the possibility of gaining this status at some point in the near future. In the meantime, the recent questionnaire put out by ICOMON might lead to similar benefits; see [LINK TO ICOMON WEBSITE HERE](#)

The UK's Portable Antiquities Scheme, set up to complement the Treasure Act 1996, is actively promoting its role as a learning tool and facilitator in respect of such objects, amongst the commonest of which are coins. Its excellent website is aimed not at the higher education or museum world, but at any member of the public who happens to have an interest in the objects displayed within its 'pages'. The staff employed by the Scheme includes several specialist numismatists. One hopes that the Scheme can continue to receive an adequate level of state funding to enable it to continue its valuable work, which has the happy corollary of developing and retaining numismatic expertise.

Local numismatic societies could also play a larger role than is currently the case. Levels of particular expertise within any one society will be variable, but the scope of expertise can be surprisingly wide, and their comprehensive geographical spread makes them very accessible and on occasion useful in unexpected ways. The Secretary of the British Association of Numismatic Societies (the umbrella organisation in the UK) was recently approached to recommend someone from a local society who would be capable of identifying the 17th century Bargrave collection of over 1000 coins and medals in the care of the Canterbury Cathedral Archives.

This paper has been concerned with the effects of government policy and trends on large municipal, national and university-based museums in the UK, where subject specialists have been the norm. However, we must not forget the small public museums, often incorporating an art collection, which rely on purely local funding. Such institutions often have coin collections - in some cases, of several thousand specimens. Understandably, they have never merited a specialist curator, but, in the past, many have had a sympathetic museum manager who has appreciated the collection and made it accessible to interested people. The majority of these cultural institutions now form part of large local authority bodies which also include complexes for leisure and sport – activities that are much more popular with the majority of local voters and taxpayers than visiting cultural attractions. These are the most vulnerable museums, in terms of both management and access to numismatic material. And we must also not forget mint and bank museums, which are subject to a completely different set of pressures from those considered here, pressures that come from commercial considerations affecting the parent institution, which the recent collapse of global markets has put into sharp relief.

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