‘Instruments and Institutes: Preserving and Promoting the History of Science’

Seminar schedule, 23-24 June 2014

**Monday 23rd June (Marischal College)**

2:30 pm – 6:00 pm = Welcome at the University Museums Collections Centre + 3 different tours around the stores

7:00 – 9:30 = Seminar dinner at Amarone restaurant on Union Street

**Tuesday 24th June (Sir Duncan Rice Library)**

09:30 – 09:50 = Registration for those who arrive in the morning

09:50 – 10:00 = Welcome

10:00 – 11:05 = **Collections Management + Partnership, Part 1**

- Mike Finn (Leeds University)
  
  ‘Category Mistakes’ in defining the form and purpose of university scientific collections

- Roland Wittje (University of Regensburg)
  
  Top-down or bottom-up? Collecting recent scientific heritage at universities

11:05 – 11:30 = Morning break

11:30 – 12:30 = **Collections Management + Partnership, Part 2**

- Emma Jane Wells (University of St Andrews)
  
  Access all areas – Increasing access to the collection of Historic Scientific Instruments held by the University of St Andrews

- Discussion 1: Deep Storage

12:30 – 13:30 = Lunch

13:30 – 14:30 = **Partnership, Research and Uniting Collections**

- Danny Segers (Ghent University)
  
  From “University teaching and research as sources of academic heritage” to “academic heritage as a source of teaching and research”

- Jack Kirby (Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester)
  
  One size fits all? Increasing access to Manchester’s science collections

14:30 – 15:15 = Visit to Fraser Noble and King’s Museum

15:15 – 15:30 = Coffee break

15:30 – 16:30 = **Collections + Engagement**

- Stephen Johnston (Museum of the History of Science, University of Oxford)
  
  Punks, Geeks and Others: Audience and Engagement in Public Programming

- Discussion 2: Use of instruments for demonstrating (led by Josh Nall, Whipple Museum)

16:30 – 16:45 = Conclusion

16:45 – 17:30 = Visit to Zoology Museum
Abstracts

1. Mike Finn, Lecturer in History of Science, University of Leeds

‘Category Mistakes’ in defining the form and purpose of university scientific collections

University museums holding scientific collections are naturally limited by many factors beyond their control, like acquisitions, funding, space, and people. Yet there are also limits that must be self-imposed, which are crucial to defining a museum’s core activities and objectives. Such self-imposed limits come in response to basic questions about a collection, like: how shall we manage it; what should it include (and exclude); who will be responsible; and, perhaps most significantly, what is it for?

Over recent years, in Aberdeen and Leeds, there have been two separate projects attempting to answer such questions in relation to their respective historical scientific collections. With vastly different institutional settings, the answers are different in each. In this paper, I will outline some of the processes and decisions that the two museums have gone through regarding their scientific collections. In doing so, I will borrow the old philosophical concept of ‘category mistakes’ as a means to illuminate the relationship between a university museum and its scientific collection, and to highlight some of the key problems encountered in the projects at both Aberdeen and Leeds.

2. Roland Wittje, Chair of Universeum Working Group on Recent Heritage of Science / History of Science Unit, University of Regensburg

Top-down or bottom-up? Collecting recent scientific heritage at universities

Scientists and technicians collect scientific instruments and other material of potential historical value throughout universities and outside traditional museums. The challenges facing preservers and curators of recent scientific heritage are legion and increasingly well known, involving quantity of material, size, increasing complexity and specialization of equipment, its black box nature and so on. I argue that a top-down approach carried out by accredited museums is not always the best way to tackle the preservation of recent scientific heritage. We need to work together with scientists and technicians and to develop new ways and practices to collect, preserve and display from the recent past.

Apart from my own experience and practice I will report from the Working Group on Recent Scientific Heritage, which has discussed best practices, strategies and policies for collecting and preserving recent scientific heritage at universities. The Working Group has recently published selection criteria, which provide a roadmap for institutions for making decisions concerning which objects to keep and which objects to discard. We are now working on a similar document on minimum requirements for preservation.

3. Emma Jane Wells, Co-Director – Museum Collections Unit (Operations & Public Engagement), University of St Andrews

Access all areas – Increasing access to the collection of Historic Scientific Instruments held by the University of St Andrews

The collection of Historic Scientific Instruments held by the University of St Andrews is a Recognised Collection of National Significance, spanning the 16th to the 20th centuries. Notably, the collection contains objects acquired for the University by James Gregory in the 1660s and 1670s and Sir David Brewster in the 19th century, among others.

About 200 of the instruments had been catalogued over about a decade in the 1990s and early 2000s – some in great depth, and others in terms of brief description and maker. However, we do not have a specialist scientific instrument curator on the staff, and it was obvious that were we to undertake this task ourselves, it would take a vast amount of time. We were not in a position to assess the importance of the instruments in comparative terms and errors of identification would be likely to creep in. In 2011 and 2012 the Curatorial team at St Andrews set about tackling 4 centuries of backlog documentation in just 9 days – cataloguing, rationalising and making accessible this collection with particular assistance from the staff of the Science and Technology Department at the National Museums of Scotland.

The project had three main strategic aims – to improve collections management practices by fully cataloguing and photographing the collection; to increase public access to the collection through a varied learning and access programme, making information available online and allowing the collection to be greater utilised in research and exhibitions and finally, to increase knowledge and awareness of the collection among our own staff, and to allow NMS staff to gain knowledge of an important element of the distributed national collection.

This paper will outline the project, including the decisions to undertake it, the process of tackling such a large cataloguing task within such a tight timeframe, and finally summarises the key advantages and disadvantages that a partnership project of this nature involved and the positive outcomes that have been achieved since.
4, Jack Kirby, Head of Collections, Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester

One size fits all? Increasing access to Manchester’s science collections

The Collections Centre at the Museum of Science & Industry in Manchester opened in 2001. Designed in a period when widening access to reserve collections had come to the fore as a policy issue, it was the first facility in Britain to offer museum visitors on-site access to integrated artefact and archive collections. Intended to provide a combination of store, showroom and learning centre, it had the objectives of improving the standard of collections care, and improving the levels and standards of access to the collections and information about them.

The improvements in collections care were straightforward; assessing the outcomes of the improvements to access is more complex. Thirteen years on the model is substantially in place, but some changes have been made in response to lessons learned, as well as for operational reasons. The paper draws on substantial evaluation reports and sets the Manchester experience in the context of similar projects. The paper considers the challenges posed by designing a single facility to meet the needs of researchers, the museum’s core audiences of families and independent adult visitors, and museum staff, and the outcomes for each audience from the finished product.

The paper also considers the extent to which provision of access leads to increased learning and engagement for different audiences. It concludes by examining the opportunities and challenges for increasing research use of museums’ collections, and current strategies being delivered in the Science Museum Group to extend research internally and promote research and the collections to an academic audience.

5, Danny Segers, Director of the Museum for the History of Sciences, University of Ghent

From “University teaching and research as sources of academic heritage” to “academic heritage as a source of teaching and research”

By Danny Segers(1), Willem Dedobbeleer(1), Simon Leenknegt(2) et al.

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(2) Interuniversity Platform for Academic Heritage

In recent years a national project was started to map the academic collections at the four main universities in Flanders. The project consisted of two phases. The richness of the collections present at the different universities in Flanders appears to be striking. Opening up those collections to a more general public can also make people within the research community more aware of the academic heritage in their university.

In the framework of the mapping results of the Flemish universities, recent developments at Ghent University will be illustrated. Ghent University has 7 museums, including the Museum for the History of Sciences, but it also has many collections which are not yet embedded into an academic heritage structure. Since the founding of Ghent University in 1817, a number of collections were started for educational purposes. During its existence, other collections grew out of academic research programs. The use of certain collections has changed through the years. Some collections were safeguarded in a museum and now serve other purposes. The collections of our museums are nowadays used for teaching and research projects. Examples are: practical exercises bachelor, master and doctoral theses.

Ghent University is now involved in a project to unite the 7 museums into one general University Museum. This project set a lot of things in motion: a central policy for the preservation of the academic heritage was started, the personnel management for the museum has been adapted, a common system for object registration will be installed soon … This union will highlight the relationships between the mutual collections. Also the relationships between the collections and the core business of the University, namely teaching and research, will be worked out. Examples of research opportunities will be given during the talk, including ones relating to the scientific instruments collection.

6, Stephen Johnston, Assistant Keeper, Museum of the History of Science, Oxford University

Assistant Keeper, MHS Oxford

The Museum of the History of Science was established in the 1920s, drawing on a founding private collection as well as the gathering of items from across Oxford's collegiate university. It is prominently located at the centre of the historic university and on major tourist routes through the city. Nevertheless, until a major redevelopment which completed in 2001, it was relatively unknown. Since then, much effort has been devoted to creating a programme of events and exhibitions which has extended the museum's audience dramatically, both in absolute numbers and also in diversity. This paper reviews the museum's programme, the partnerships that have been fostered and offers some thoughts on the relationship between public engagement and the university's agendas of teaching and research.