

Cheshire Museums and Art Galleries

No. 3.

Vernon Park Museum, Stockport

By J. R. RIMMER, B.E.M., A.M.A., CURATOR.

THE Municipal Museum, Stockport, is situated in Vernon Park close to the north-eastern boundary of the town. The view from its upper windows is still one of beauty, presenting a delightful expanse of country extending for miles over a luxuriant valley, and marred only to a minor degree by the encroachment of modern building estates. Towers and spires of distant churches, and several mansions embosomed amidst magnificent trees, add charms to the landscape, and the panorama has a fitting boundary in the surrounding hills of Cheshire, and the mountains of Yorkshire and Derbyshire, the windings of the river Goyt adding not a little to its attractions.

It is a substantial building of brick with stone facings, and the first part of it was presented to the Corporation in 1860 by the then Members of Parliament for the Borough, Messrs. John Benjamin Smith and James Kershaw. Soon after its opening, it is recorded that "so large were the number of works of art and science, along with objects of virtue and taste immediately presented, and so rapidly was the building filled, that in 1865 the Corporation considered it necessary to build a new wing as large as the original structure." From later records we are informed that the extension was filled by 1868. Phenomenal growth you might say ! But was it in the right direction ?

Like so many other museums throughout the country, the museum at Stockport was born of the interest in scientific discovery which was current in the mid-nineteenth century and which reflected itself in the many natural history and antiquarian societies, philosophical institutions and mechanics' institutes of the day. Except for the desire, nay even obsession, to collect almost anything which could be termed unusual, many of these early museums appear to have had very little idea of their function or purpose within their own area. Exhibition of all possessions was their aim, a policy which unfortunately resulted, all too often, in a distressingly monotonous similarity between so many of them.

Much of the heterogeneous material garnered by many of the enthusiastic, though often unqualified, early curators has suffered considerable physical damage from the primitive methods of preservation which were then considered adequate, or because of insufficient recordings of data concerning the date, place and conditions of taking, and is now of very little scientific value.

Stockport has however, also like many other museums throughout the country, realised of recent years, that the day of the museum as a general storehouse is over, and that to justify its existence, it must fulfil a clearly defined educational and cultural function within its own locality.

It has been said with much truth that museums, like human beings, are better for restricting their diet to what they can digest, for both readily show the signs of gluttony. In view of this, our museum has selected a target which it considers worthy, and at the same time capable of attainment. That of collecting, comprehending, conserving and presenting to the public only material which will illustrate, firstly, the geography and geology of the neighbourhood, secondly, the plant and animal life to be found in the local countryside and finally, the history of man in the area and his success in winning a livelihood from his surroundings. Although we are attempting to cover in detail an area with a radius of approximately fifteen miles from the centre of the town, no hard and fast rule is being made and specimens from other parts of the country which would be useful in illustrating any particular theme within our scope, are equally acceptable.

In order to form some sort of a background to our scheme, the whole area has been divided into sections and as complete as possible a pictorial survey of each section has been built up. Every available illustration, whether it be an old print, engraving, oil-painting or photograph connected with the area was sought, photographically copied and then enlarged to a standard size. This collection has proved invaluable in our work and is continually being extended by the addition of present day photographs.

Against this background, and similarly zoned or sectionalised, is being built our collection of local historical and natural history material.

Naturally much of the material already on exhibition fell completely outside the scope of our newly determined policy, and has therefore either been placed in storage or exchanged for material from other museums to the mutual advantage of both.

The work of transforming an old style general type of museum to one which is purely "regional" or "local" in character is necessarily slow, but much progress is being made and already important sections have been completed dealing with, the bird life, the origins of local government, the early industries and transport in the area, as well as the early history and development of the town of Stockport. Particular attention and care are being paid to the most adequate and up-to-date methods of preservation and restoration of all materials in our possession, and to the complete recording of all data concerning their origins, as well as full details of any treatment considered necessary.

The old idea that display should demonstrate possession and little more, has been changed for the more modern view that it should substantiate ideas. A happy medium between the old style overcrowded cases and the ultra-modern shop window methods, where a minimum of objects is shown, has been sought, and specimens have been carefully selected for the part they can play in the illustration of a particular theme or idea. Wherever possible, models, photographs and diagrams have been interspersed with actual specimens in the displays for the purpose of making the story more complete and intelligible.

Although there is much yet to be done, the museum is already proving more attractive and popular to a much wider public, and perhaps more particularly to students and the many schools within the town.

It is felt that all museums have their regular visitors and in order to meet the needs of this class as well as the casual visitor, the museum is endeavouring to stage frequent temporary exhibitions of a topical nature i.e. the "Then and Now" exhibition staged during the Festival Year; "Oil, its origin and uses" at the time of the Persian oil dispute; "Speed of Animals" at the time of the late John Cobb's attempt on the water speed record, and at present, preliminary work is being done for an exhibition entitled "Coronation Regalia and Personalities" to take place during the Coronation period. This introduction of topical exhibitions is not only attracting considerable attention to the museum, but also helps to avoid what possibly might be one of the dangers of a "regional" museum, that of being too specialised and having a rather one-track outlook.

Another problem arising from our change of policy was concerned with how best to impress on the public the new purposes of the museum and how to change the rather strange ideas linking museums with dust, must, static display and places to go into only when it rains—a legacy of our earlier museums—which undoubtedly it had. This problem has been tackled with considerable success in two ways. Firstly it was considered important, and incidentally far simpler, to produce a museum-conscious public by starting with the school children, whose views on museums were perhaps not yet deeply rooted. Every facility was made available to encourage their use of the museum service. This included, organised visits to the museums with a brief talk by the curator; visits were made to the schools to explain our new ideas; lectures were given to teachers' associations; articles were published in the local Youth Handbook; close co-operation was made with and advice given to local visual aid committees, and a carefully prepared School Loan Scheme or Service has been built up, based mainly on the requirements of the teachers, and linked closely with many of the extremely fine series of school broadcasts.

Because of the rather isolated position of the museum on the north-eastern outskirts of the town, the second group of people — the adult citizens — proved more difficult to approach, but considerable success has been attained through a comprehensive series of talks — over 200 up to the present date — given to the majority of the social and educational organisations throughout the town. In addition to this an attempt has been made to "take the museum to the people." Some of the temporary exhibitions mentioned earlier have been staged in the centre of the town, and a number of small displays have been specially prepared for use in shop windows. This latter method has been particularly successful and has proved mutually beneficial both to the shopkeepers and the museum. A further method which has considerably helped us in this campaign and for which I have at all times been grateful, has been the regular publicity given by both local newspapers to our endeavours.

The results of our efforts in this direction are slow but sure. They are clearly reflected not only in our increased attendances but also in what is perhaps equally important, a considerably increased quality and more selective type of material being offered for our collections. The general public is certainly realising that the museum is no longer a repository for their unwanted possessions, and that it is indeed a privilege to have an item accepted either for our display or study collections.

Sections in the museum which are at present being reorganised to conform to the new policy and methods of display include:— the local mammals with an introductory case dealing with their evolution and anatomy; local industries with the stress on hatting, cotton and engineering; the evolution of modern firearms; amphibians and reptiles of the area; forms of punishment used in Stockport during the Middle Ages and local butterflies and their caterpillars.

If one had to choose one item only for which the museum is known both locally and throughout the country, it would undoubtedly be the famous window to be found in the north wall of the ground floor room. It is about six feet high by three feet wide and is composed of some 250 pieces of translucent fluor spar of the variety found in the Blue John Mines at Castleton, and was made and presented by the museum's first curator, the late Mr. John Tym.

Of recent acquisitions, the Echalaz Bird Collection, which consists of over 80 beautifully prepared habitat groups with painted backgrounds, is certainly the most popular with children and adults alike.

Our study collections, like the exhibition material, have needed much treatment, but with the addition of many recent acquisitions are now becoming a centre of keen interest. They include an herbarium, a fine collection of archives, bird study-skin, geological and zoological collections and a very recently acquired collection of lepidoptera.

Finally, the museum possesses a fine collection of paintings representing many of the early continental schools, which were originally on loan from the museum's earliest benefactor, Mr. John Benjamin Smith, but which were later presented by his executors.

The hours of opening are as follows:—

Open Weekdays. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (April to September).

" " 10 a.m. to dusk. (October to March).

Open Sundays. 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. (April to September).

" " 2 p.m. to dusk. (October to March).

Book Review

“Timber Building in England”

By FRED H. CROSSLEY, F.S.A.

Although not dealing solely with a Cheshire subject, the attention of readers of “THE CHESHIRE HISTORIAN” is drawn to the above book, published by Batsford, 1951 (Price 30s.) There are two main reasons for this: firstly, no student or admirer of Cheshire buildings can afford to do without it, and secondly, because its author is our greatest living authority on Cheshire buildings, and in particular the old Churches of the County. It is not surprising, therefore, that for the Cheshireman a good deal of added charm is found in its many references to Cheshire buildings, and in the magnificent series of illustrations which adorn the book. Apart from the one possible exception of boat building, the whole field of timber construction is dealt with from the earliest evidences of the art to the styles appearing at the end of the 17th century.

It is well that a book of this type should appear and be read at a time when through the action of misguided councils, hard-up landlords and indifferent tenants so many of our timber houses are disappearing from the Cheshire scene. May it, before it is too late, help to educate Cheshire people to appreciate and to preserve what they have so richly inherited.

M.H.R.