

A HUNDRED YEARS OF THE MUSEUM

C. N. GOWING

THE Buckinghamshire Archæological Society was founded in 1847 and an appeal was made for "the collection of materials sufficient to complete and illustrate the topographical history of the County". Although the Society specifically asked for information and illustrative drawings, it was not long before it began to acquire local antiquities as well.

In 1862 the Society moved from a room in Silver Street, Aylesbury, to No. 6 Church Street, a small building which was demolished in December, 1961, and one of the purposes of the move was to enable a permanent museum to be established. The collections seem to have been housed in two rooms and grew comparatively rapidly, but they were of a very general character, as Egyptian material and a collection of dried flowers from the Arctic were, for instance, accepted. This growth led to the periodical need for new cases, and almost inevitably this was met by the generosity of one or more of the Society's members.

Conditions were, however, obviously by no means entirely satisfactory, as at the Annual General Meeting in 1891 Mr. A. H. Cocks spoke of cases of stuffed birds being ruined by the rain coming in, and in 1904 an offer to "lend an oil stove for the purpose of drying the Museum, if the Society would be at the expense of the oil", was accepted.

It is not perhaps surprising, therefore, that it was soon felt that the existing building did not provide the facilities required for a museum. In 1891 there was considerable correspondence in the newspapers regarding the desirability of establishing a County Museum in Buckinghamshire. One of these letters was from the Honorary Curator, and it is worth noting that this office was held by Mr. John L. (later Sir John) Myres, who was afterwards to have such a distinguished archæological career. Space does not permit more than a brief mention of this most interesting letter in which the aims of a County Museum are set out, but two points which he made are of particular interest in the light of recent developments. He stressed the different needs of the student, who required a full and representative collection, not necessarily exhibited, of material from the County, and the general visitor who wanted displays of carefully selected specimens, amply spaced in the cases, which is of course the system of primary and secondary collections introduced in some museums since the last war. He also suggested that the Museum should be associated with the technical education scheme which had then recently been introduced, and that the Curator's post might be combined with a Secretaryship in the

Technical Education Department, thus foreshadowing an arrangement made in 1953.

This correspondence led to a public meeting of influential people being held in Aylesbury in 1891 to discuss the question of setting up a County Museum. After a number of meetings it was agreed that such a museum should be established in Aylesbury, as this town was the geographical centre of the County, but nothing came of the proposal at that time.

A further attempt to establish a County Museum was made in 1902, when the Aylesbury Coronation Committee in an enlightened moment suggested that a County Museum would form a fitting "permanent memorial" of the Coronation, and a deputation, including representatives of the Archæological Society, waited upon Lord Rothschild in his capacity as Lord Lieutenant of the County to discuss the proposal. Nothing resulted from the interview, however, owing to Lord Rothschild's views on the lack of interest shown by the general public in museums and his opinion that the museum would cost a penny rate and would be entirely useless to the town.

There was almost continuous discussion at the Council Meetings of the Society about the need for better premises, and in 1906 Mr. Cocks, who was the Honorary Curator, reported that "there was no more room in the present museum to deposit objects of interest".

It was decided to try to acquire the Endowed School buildings in Church Street for the County Museum, and when these came up for sale a County Fund was opened to raise the necessary money. It was originally intended to purchase the whole property, but an agreement was made whereby the Parochial Church Council should be permitted to buy what is now Church House without the Society bidding against them. The Society therefore bought at auction in March, 1907, for £870, Lot 1, "namely the house fronting Church Street and the Lower School attached thereto", and a small portion of land at the back was shortly afterwards bought from the Parochial Church Council.

Provision in the new building was to be made for a resident curator's flat and it was decided to advertise this post. There were "41 candidates for the curatorship, from broken-down school masters, a book-seller, a sculptor, an insurance-agent and poultry farmer, etc., up to some excellent candidates", and it is interesting to compare this with the six applications received in 1947. In January, 1908, Mr. Edwin Hollis was appointed Resident Curator, a choice which was to prove a most fortunate one.

It was stated in the Annual Report for 1909 that as there was a bank overdraft of £1,000, "the formal ceremony of 'declaring the new County Museum open' is therefore in the meantime delayed". The Museum was, however, opened to the public during 1908, and the hours of opening were daily from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. or dusk. This illustrates a major change in the function of the Museum with the move to new premises, the adoption of the title "The Bucks County Museum" and the appointment of a resident Curator, as the public had hitherto been admitted to the Museum only on Thursday afternoons from 2 to 4.30 p.m., and before 1904 had not been admitted at all.

The Museum was entered from Church Street and comprised the house,

No. 9 Church Street, and a large hall, 45 feet long by 20 feet wide, which was used for lectures and for exhibiting the more important portion of the Society's collection. The house, on the ground floor, had an entrance hall, two rooms in which miscellaneous exhibits were arranged and a room for the Society's library. The collections at this time, according to the "Resident Curator's Report on the present contents of the Museum", included an important series of local antiquities from all periods except for the medieval, which is not mentioned. The collection of brass rubbings was almost complete, but the number of topographical prints and maps was disappointing. There were also small collections of coins and of tools relating to local industries such as lace-making and straw-plaiting, whilst a nucleus of a collection of local photographs had been formed. On the natural history side, there was a large number of birds and mammals, sufficient to fill the cases on one wall of the large gallery. The Museum also possessed a number of non-local exhibits, including "a very valuable case of Egyptian Antiquities, and a handsomely-arranged case of Oriental birds". These collections have naturally grown steadily over the years, but the categories of material have basically remained the same, except for the fact that they are now almost entirely devoted to objects of Buckinghamshire interest.

In order to provide some variety in the Museum, the first of a long series of loan collections was borrowed from the Royal Albert (now the Victoria and Albert) Museum at South Kensington in 1911, when two cases of antique furniture and Chinese porcelain were received. This is worth recording in view of the fact that the Museum still borrows temporary exhibitions from the same source.

After the war the increased costs of running the Museum led to an application being made to the County Council for a grant-in-aid of the Museum under the conditions of the 1918 Education Act. An annual grant of £100 was made in 1920 on the condition that the Education Committee appointed a representative on the Council of the Society and that teachers could borrow books from the Society's library. Grants were made continuously from then until the County Council became entirely responsible for the maintenance of the Museum in 1957, and it is surprising that the first grant should have been made at such an early date.

Schools at this time were making use of the Museum. In 1920 a number of classes of school children made visits, and in 1921 a collection of palæolithic implements was lent to the County Education Committee for use in schools. Other cases were provided in subsequent years and the Museum is thus among the first to make a practice of providing material for use in schools. An educational visit worthy of note is that of 30 pupils from Chorleywood College for the Blind, who were able to study by feeling such objects in the Museum as could be handled safely, since this must be one of the earliest occasions when the value of museum specimens to the blind was appreciated.

The Museum was fortunate enough in 1921 to receive an endowment when Sir Arthur Liberty left a bequest of £2,000 to the Society, the interest from this sum to be used for museum purposes.

In 1930 there were discussions regarding the custody of documents deposited with the Society, and it was eventually decided to provide a muniment room under the existing yard at the back of the Museum and to take the opportunity to enclose the space over it to provide additional exhibition space for the Museum. A public appeal, as was customary in such cases, was made and at a cost of approximately £2,000 another 550 sq. ft. of exhibition space and a new muniment room were provided. The extension was opened in June, 1934, by the Master of the Rolls, Lord Hanworth.

The death in 1941 of Mr. Edwin Hollis, who had been Curator for over thirty years, was a great loss to the Museum. One of his many interests, which proved greatly to the advantage of the Museum, was in seventeenth century Buckinghamshire trade tokens, and as a result there is virtually a complete collection of them. He was succeeded temporarily by Miss Cicely Baker, whose father had at one time been Honorary Assistant Curator. In 1944 Miss Baker offered to place a part of Ceely House, a private house in Church Street adjoining the Museum, which belonged to her, at the disposal of the Society for a Museum extension. Ceely House was as a result bought by the Society for £4,500 on mortgage, but it was not available for Museum use for some time as it was decided to let most of the building.

In 1946 it was decided to ask for an increased grant from the Education Committee, partly with a view to providing a more comprehensive Schools Service. As a result, Mr. R. C. Sansome was appointed Curator on the understanding that he would also arrange a Schools Service.

It was agreed in 1948 that admission to the Museum should be free only to members of the Society and to organised parties from schools and other educational bodies. For the first time in the history of the Museum the general public had, therefore, to pay a small admission charge.

In 1949 Ceely House became available for Museum use and it was decided in principle to make such alterations as were necessary to make it suitable for this purpose. A grant of £5,000 was obtained from the Pilgrim Trust towards the cost of this work. The general financial position of the Society, however, made it necessary for an approach to be made to the County Council about the possibility of co-operation in running the Museum and Schools Service. This resulted in an agreement being made in 1951, whereby the Museum was to be administered by a Joint Committee of the Archæological Society and the County Council, consisting of five representatives of each body. There was to be once more free admission to the Museum, and the Joint Committee was to co-operate with the Education Committee in the greater development of a Schools Museum Service. To this end, Mr. T. A. Hume was appointed Schools Museum Officer by the County Education Committee. The cost of running the Museum was to be met by the County Council providing by grants from various sources a sum not exceeding £1,450 a year, whilst the Archæological Society contributed "£300 or such less sum as shall not exceed half the income from subscriptions from the Society", together with £50 from the Liberty Trustees.

In view of the fact that the financial position of the Museum now appeared to be sound, work began on the necessary alterations to Ceely House. During

these an interesting find was made of four Rose Nobles of Edward IV and a bone seal. These were found at a coroner's inquest to be treasure trove and were bought by the Museum. The extension to the Museum was eventually opened in July, 1954, by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres.

Ceely House is itself of considerable interest. It has a fine early eighteenth-century porch and a large room, with a late eighteenth-century plaster ceiling of considerable merit, which is used as a lecture room. In addition, on the ground floor there are a small entrance hall, a small exhibition gallery and a room converted into the Society's library. An early eighteenth-century pine staircase leads to the first floor, where some interesting fifteenth-century roof timbers with mouldings were left exposed to view. On this floor an art gallery and two small closed rooms were formed. In addition, valuable storage accommodation and a flat were provided in the building.

In 1953 Mr. Sansome resigned as Curator and it was agreed that in view of the financial position of the Joint Committee, the County Schools Museum Officer should temporarily become Honorary Curator, with the help of an Assistant Curator who was appointed the same year. This later became a permanent arrangement and was continued when the writer succeeded Mr. Hume in 1960.

In 1956 Viscount Hambleden lent to the Museum the contents of the Hambleden Museum, which consisted of the finds from the Romano-British villa excavated at Yewden, Hambleden, together with other finds from the neighbourhood. This had previously been offered to the Society in 1944, but space had not then permitted its acceptance. The Museum thus acquired a major collection of material of a type which had not hitherto been well represented. At the same time the brass cases from the Hambleden Museum were also lent and these were to prove invaluable, as they now house almost all the archaeological collections.

The Joint Committee in 1956 had a deficit, and after long discussions it was decided in 1957 that the Museum and its contents should be leased to the County Council for a period of 42 years, with an option to break at 21 years, for a rent of £1 per year. The County Council was to maintain the Museum, whilst the Society was to retain its library and Muniment Room and to have the use of the lecture room. The new Museum Committee consisted of five representatives of the County Council, three of the Archaeological Society and one of the Museums Association. Although, therefore, control of the Museum was handed over to the County Council, the Society retained by its representation on the Museum Committee considerable influence on its future development. The advantage of the arrangement was to be demonstrated in 1960, when the County Council agreed to buy Church House, which the Society had, it will be remembered, originally intended to purchase in 1907, for the Headquarters of the County Schools Museum Service. As this is now housed in the Museum premises, this will allow space to be made available for a much-needed Natural History Gallery. The financial difficulties that faced the Society, and also other similar societies who were finding it difficult to pay for the upkeep of their museums in post-war conditions, can readily be appreciated when it is realised

that the cost of administering the Museum was about £120 in 1914, £320 in 1926 and approximately £2,500 in 1956. It is indeed a remarkable tribute to the Society, or perhaps more correctly to the energy and enterprise of a few of its members, that it had for so long not only administered the Museum, but developed it to the point where it was well worthy of its title as a County Museum.