

New galleries: David Wright, 23 July 2012

Well it was terrific, actually. I had no particular desire to work in museums earlier on, and when I left university I didn't have any particularly clear idea of what I was going to do next. I had some vague thoughts of medicine, but then an aunt sent me an advert for a museum assistant post in the Science Museum. So I applied – just on the off chance – got an interview, and immediately knew that this was going to be the place for me. There was just something about it.

The Chemistry Department, because it had been involved in quite a lot of gallery work, was used sort of as a nucleus for a new department, which was the Wellcome Museum of the History of Medicine. In 1976 it had been decided that the Science Museum would take over the Wellcome historical medical collections on permanent loan. I was transferred across to that, and I was in fact in charge of the transfer of the bulk of the reserve collections from a very big warehouse in Enfield to the Science Museum. At the same time as that we were also opening the Wellcome medical galleries, which opened in 1980 and 1981 respectively. I was effectively exiled from September 1977 until September 1982, when we finished the transfer project. Quite a lot of people who worked on that are still in the Science Museum, particularly, for example, Heather Mayfield, who went on to much greater things later.

When we took over the collection, or when we were starting to take over the collection, there were a group of cataloguers based at the Wellcome head offices in Euston Road, quite a small group, where the conditions were very comfortable indeed – there was a smashing restaurant there, there were libraries, there were comfy

chairs, good working conditions and all the rest of it. And then you had the other party under me out at Enfield, where there was virtually no climatic control in a windowless warehouse, everything was filthy dirty and it was a horrible place to work, quite honestly. The result was that for the out-stores I had to adopt a very sort of draconian approach to running the staff, because in a situation [where] it's dead uncomfortable, it's not a pleasant job, the only thing we could offer is an unmatched degree of experience working with museum collections, which would probably be a very useful thing on the CV of anyone who'd done it, because then, as now, people like the idea of working in museums.

I'm incredibly fortunate. I couldn't have had a job I liked more. I couldn't have been more fortunate. There is nothing I would rather have done than work for the NMSI doing the sort of jobs that I did. Yeah, it was great. I wouldn't, overall, despite the fact I moan a bit, have changed any of it. I was jolly lucky and I'm very grateful.

An Oral History of the Science Museum Group, 1973-2000