

Doing things differently: Dr Brian Bracegirdle, 25 July 2012

When Bradford was being set up it was perfectly obvious that every existing department would be starved of funds. She did ask all of the keepers – I think there were about eight of us at the time – what we thought. I will say we were not enthusiastic. But she went ahead anyway, as we knew she would. But it was nice to be asked.

He was a new broom because he wanted things done differently. He wanted, what I suppose is now the model, many more people doing PR or that kind of thing, than conservators. I think when I was chief of that side there must have been 120 curators, but I think that was going to fall quite dramatically under his directorship. It took some time to establish it of course. And it's no secret to say that he and I did not get on, on a number of things, because I thought we needed curators more than PR people.

I thought everybody thought it was wonderful. There were three kinds of visitor: children being brought, their parents bringing them, and their grandparents bringing them again later. And they came back time after time, maybe only two or three times. But it was a treasure trove, it was magic, you could do things as children – to the extent of course with push-button control that the workshops had to devise a childproof push button which had to be a long brass rod, sliding I think in a gunmetal tube so it could not be pulled out, bent or otherwise interfered with, because the dear young like to stand there testing them to destruction. So it was wonderful. I never met a family leaving. I used to lurk and talk to them all when I was thinking what to do in the galleries. I walked round that museum and looked at every item in every gallery before setting my own up.

I read most of the labels because one or two of the wonderful staff who came from Frank Greenaway, if you wanted them to write a label, would produce a small book. So I said, labels will have a tested reading age of 14 and there will be no polysyllabic word in the first line. And that obtained, and if you go and check in the gallery you'll see that that's so. Derek Robinson was the lad. He liked to put in every fact in the most erudite manner. I said, Derek, you're not writing these labels for your chums in the British Society for the History of Science, you're writing them for a 14-year-old dragged here, possibly on a school visit, and if you want them to read them you'd better write them so that they *can* read them.

My abiding memories are the quality of the people, which is a good thing to remember. I really feel that Derek Robinson, Robert Anderson and Anne Newmark, David – they were all super, dedicated, got on with it and nice to be with and know. Can't ask for a lot more than that in a job can you, really?

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