

Sheffield Biological Records Centre

A Brief History

by Derek Whiteley

SBRC was formed in 1964 by David Spalding, Keeper of Natural History at Sheffield City Museum. He built up a huge 5"x3" card index of sites, species, literature references, museum specimens and naturalists. Some (but not all) of these records are published in a series of papers in the local journal, *Sorby Record* during the 1960s. The cards still exist in the Natural History Archives at Weston Park Museum. A large Ordnance Survey map formally on the office wall had sites marked with coloured pins to designate different categories e.g. geological, botanical, ornithological, nature reserves, SSSIs etc. At this time the recording area was a 20-mile radius from the City Museum.

David Spalding also started a project to collate information on local birds. The project became a WEA class, and a team continued the work for some years after Spalding had left for Canada. Eventually the avifauna was published (Smith 1974) and the record sheets deposited in the Natural History Archives at the City Museum, now officially named Weston Park Museum.

Under the Keepership of Tim Riley from 1968 the 'data bank' as it was then known, continued to grow, with the establishment of biological site files, stored in A4 hanging files in drawer cabinets for easy use. Peter Davis, who joined the museum staff from the Peak National Park Authority in 1973 helped to expand these files using his local knowledge. I replaced Peter in 1975 and continued the work. (My first museum task was to map out the habitats at Wharncliffe Wood). Around this time Tim Riley decided to concentrate efforts on the Sheffield Metropolitan District as a new records centre had just been established in Rotherham by Bill Ely, and developments were taking place in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The name *Sheffield Biological Records Centre* also came into being in the mid-1970s, at a time when local BRCs were being developed in many museums across the country.

The museum also established a Sheffield Geological Records Centre, and this still exists and is active under the management of Gaynor Boon at Weston Park Museum

In 1978, two full-time staff were employed for a year, under the government's Job Creation Scheme, to develop the biological and geological site files. Steve Garland was the biologist whose job was to visit, photograph and

record sites in the SMD. Consequently, the site files expanded quickly and new species files (for example, moths and beetles) were set up on 8"x5" cards (Garland & Whiteley 1980).

During the period 1979 to 1997 there was an active policy to publish reviews of Sheffield wildlife, as joint publications with Sorby Natural History Society. This was supported by museum managers and Sheffield City Council. *The Moths of Sheffield* (Garland 1979) was the first of its kind in this series.

In 1979/80 two full time staff (Krys Zasada and Eluned Smith) were employed for a year under the government's Special Temporary Employment Project to survey freshwater sites in the SMD (Zasada & Smith 1981). Photographic colour slides from this survey and the 1978 survey are stored in the museum's Natural History Archives.

As the biological site files grew, the demand for information also grew. The museum, as a Local Authority public service was able to offer an information service to a full range of organisations and individuals (Garland & Whiteley 1984). A particular demand came from colleagues in other City Council departments for information relating to the developing Green Belt plan, UDP and land management purposes.

By 1985 this demand was beginning to outstrip staff resources and in 1986 the Sheffield City Ecology Unit was created with two full time staff and administered by the museum to enhance and develop this service. Dr. Ian Rotherham was appointed the first City Ecologist. In the days before computerised databases, the City Ecology Unit staff concentrated on site and habitat recording, management and interpretation, whilst their colleagues in the curatorial part of the museum continued the work recording species. Together the two parts functioned as the Sheffield Biological Records Centre. Fieldwork by the City Ecology Unit generated masses of new information particularly on habitats, sites and plants. Curatorial staff concentrated on recording invertebrates.

Of course there was a two way flow of records between species and site files and this was made easier in 1991 with the arrival of RECORDER software and a 386 computer (state of the art in those days) grant aided by Nature Conservancy Council. In 1994 a colour information sheet and marketing leaflet *Sheffield Biological Records Centre* was published and freely distributed by Sheffield City Council.

In 1997, following years of severe budget cuts, the museum managers decided that they could no longer afford to maintain the City Ecology Unit, and it was transferred to Sheffield City Council's Leisure Services Directorate. The physical move to Meersbrook Park followed, together with the City

Ecologist, Jean Glasscock, and most of the records, maps, ecological library and ecology functions. For some months there was a difficult period when the SBRC function was split between buildings and departments and this situation was further complicated by a radical change in museum administration a few months later.

In April 1998 Sheffield City Museum was transferred from a local authority function to the Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust, in a ground breaking move. The new Trust showed no interest in running the Sheffield Biological Records Centre as a service but preferred the role of a recording 'node'. Subsequently the SBRC was reunited with the City Ecology Unit in 1999 and based at the Meersbrook Park offices where it remains today. By chance it has followed a parallel route to the Rotherham Biological Records Centre which left Rotherham Museum some years ago and is now administered by Green Spaces Unit (Environment and Development Services).

Since 1999 the site files have expanded to 20 filing cabinet drawers, and benefited from a complete overhaul. As a manual system, retrieval of site information is quick and efficient, and is a source of pride for the Centre. We get good feedback from its many users.

A major project undertaken in 2005-2007 was the revision of SINC (Sites for Nature Conservation) boundaries and schedules for the new UDP

In recent years computerisation of species records has also progressed well and we now (February 2009) have over 250,000 records on RECORDER 3. This includes substantial datasets from the Sorby Natural History Society which formally supports the SBRC. Current aims are to finish inputting the backlog of paper records in the site files by April 2009 then to transfer the entire dataset to RECORDER 6 at a future date.

Large volumes of records and information continue to be collected as part of the ongoing work of the City Ecology Unit.

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