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February 5, 2018

Dr Janet Owen
Chief Executive
Hampshire Cultural Trust
Chilcomb House
Chilcomb Lane
Winchester
SO23 8RB

Dear Dr Owen,

We have recently learned through the press and personal contacts of the Trust's decision to dismiss 13 full-time curatorial staff, including the person with responsibility for the natural sciences collections, and to replace them with a team of five more generalist staff to conserve, curate and generally manage the collections. Our understanding is that none of these staff will have specialist knowledge of handling scientific collections. We are surprised that this radical change was undertaken apparently without attempting to communicate with, let alone consult with, users of those collections. These people have also been significant contributors of new material and have helped with cataloguing, identification and refereeing of material and organisation of workshops and other events. However, we are hoping that you will be able to reassure us that suitable arrangements are being made to maintain and protect the collections and ensure their long-term future. With this in mind, we have set out a number of questions below.

As botanists with responsibilities for the archive of botanical records in the county, our personal concern is with the fate and future management of the herbarium at Chilcomb House. As we're sure you know, this is a collection of national importance. It includes herbaria (such as the early 19th century collection of William Bromfield) which are of historical and cultural significance to the county and country. Many later collections include voucher specimens for Hampshire plants that are not duplicated elsewhere, and therefore form an important part of the growing evidence base for the history and distribution of our county flora, as well as important material for taxonomic studies. For example, we have personally added over 1000 voucher specimens to the collection in recent years.

Our main concerns are about the practicalities of managing and maintaining the herbarium under the new regime, as follows. We have included more detail about what we see as the main responsibilities under some of these headings in footnotes.

Accession

- Who will be in charge of accession procedures¹?
- How much time will professional staff be able to devote to accession work?
- How often will they be able to carry out accession work?
- How will they organise calling in of experts when required?

Maintenance of herbarium

- Who will be responsible for carrying out preventive and reactive maintenance²?
- How much time will professional staff be able to devote to these activities?

Access

- On what basis will access to the herbarium be available? (E.g. by appointment, regular weekly slots)
- Will users and voluntary staff have access to the MODES database?
- Will necessary tools (e.g. microscopes) still be available and maintained?
- Who will deal with requests for loans, and on what lead time?

Materials

- It has been practice up to now to supply standard materials for mounting specimens to herbarium contributors, the justification being that it ensures a consistent professional approach and in the long run saves staff time and trouble. What will future policy be?

Training and outreach

- Will there be a member of staff who is available and competent to encourage understanding of the uses of a herbarium, and to organise training in good handling practice?
- Will it still be possible to organise training days based around the herbarium led by expert volunteers?
- Can these take place on weekends, if so?
- Will other facilities on site (such as the large meeting room) continue to be available for such events?

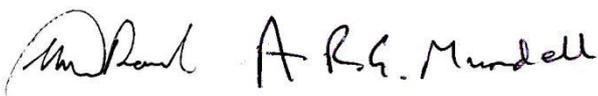
We appreciate that there are tasks within these activities in which volunteers can continue to play an important part, but we can't see how the overall job of protecting and enhancing the herbarium's resources can be accomplished without a substantial commitment of a permanent staff member with a good background in natural science and the curation of biological collections. We will be pleased to hear your views on this.

Which brings us to a broader cause for disquiet, beyond the practicalities. This turn of events has led us to read some of the background documents produced by the Trust to promote its aims and conduct its business. It is very noticeable in reading the 2015 Strategic Plan that there is no mention at all of the scientific collections, except perhaps for a single line referring to a "Collections centre providing first-class stewardship and digital access", which sounds promising but rather vague, and does not explicitly mention the scientific elements. As far as we can understand them, the stated goals and objectives of the Trust have very little to do with a herbarium or an invertebrate collection, which are unlikely to "change lives", "deliver vibrant, world-class cultural experiences", provide a lucrative revenue stream or appeal to large numbers of people. Their primary value lies elsewhere. Looking at the latest Annual Report and Accounts, we note that the charitable aims of the Trust make no mention at all of natural heritage or scientific collections, nor do the plans for the coming year. We therefore have to wonder whether the Trust sees itself having any significant role in, or commitment to, the maintenance and enhancement of these collections?

We would appreciate your frank and realistic answer to this. It seems to us that if the Trust doesn't consider the herbarium important enough to devote the necessary professional resource not only to maintain it in its present state but to enable it to be enlarged, enhanced and used for many years to come, it would be better to arrange for it to be passed to another institution which is still dedicated to maintaining life science collections. It doesn't appear that you would be contravening any part of your formal charitable purpose in doing so. We understand that the collections remain the property of Hampshire County Council and we obviously don't know the details of your contractual arrangements with HCC, but we imagine that a renegotiation would be possible. This would surely entail moving the herbarium collection outside the county, which would be a great sadness and inconvenience for county botanists, ourselves included, and a blow to county pride for many concerned with our local natural heritage; however it seems to us a better course than setting it on a path to slow decline through under-resourcing.

We look forward to hearing your response on these points, and given the little time remaining for the curator currently responsible for the biological collections to complete a handover of responsibilities, we hope you will be in a position to come back to us shortly on the practical questions. We should add that this is an "open letter" in that it will be circulated to other botanists and naturalists within and beyond the county so that they can be informed of the issues and outcomes. We would like to be allowed to treat your response in the same way, but we will certainly respect your wishes if you do not want a full disclosure.

Yours sincerely,



Martin Rand

Tony Mundell

cc: Alan Lovell, Chair of Trustees, Hampshire Cultural Trust

1 Accession tasks

- Receiving new material for the herbarium
- Ensuring that it is in an appropriate condition for accession
- Ensuring that material has been collected in a lawful manner, where appropriate
- Organising any required remounting
- Cataloguing material
- Carrying out necessary quarantine and hygiene procedures
- Organising correct placement within the herbarium store

2 Maintenance tasks

- Ensuring the continuous and satisfactory operation of protective measures (e.g. temperature control), ensuring that faults are dealt with in a timely way
- Carrying out random spot checks on collection for infestations
- Dealing with any infestations that occur
- Ensuring return of loan material in good order and re-running quarantine and hygiene procedures
- Educating users in proper handling of material