

## Documentation News

edited by Kate Bartholomew

*Amanda Gill recounts her work as a documentation assistant with the Cumbria Documentation Project Pilot Study*

My nomadic existence began on 10 October 1992 and ended on 28 January this year. In the few months in between I resided in three different dwellings and worked in five museums of disparate character. You may well ask why.

It had been decided that a Cumbria Documentation Pilot Scheme should be established to find out the length of time it would take to address a documentation backlog within various museums and, in the process, satisfy Museums and Galleries Commission registration requirements. In short, it was a feasibility and time-and-motion study documenting 3,000 items from five disciplines in 12 weeks.

### Keswick

My first port of call was Keswick Museum and Art Gallery where I began documenting literary works and letters written by Robert Southey, the famous 19th-century Poet Laureate. (I had not actually ever heard of him and, to my shame, can now recall only one of his less erudite ditties: the Teddy Bears' Picnic.) By the end of week one the problems had begun: my throat seized up. In week two the computer seized up. By week three the work schedule had joined them. Solutions: I went to the doctor and continued working manually, ironically at a faster rate, until the new laptop computer arrived.

### Kendal

Week four saw me back on the road heading to a new abode and to Abbot Hall Art Gallery and Museum in Kendal. Here, the focus of the project was the Clay collection of Harden drawings and watercolours. What a feast for the eyes! In fact, they were so much of a feast that it was hard not to become so totally engrossed in their exquisite beauty that I forgot the true purpose of my being there.

### Maryport

On arrival at the next venue, Senhouse Roman Museum in Maryport, I was shown the numerous archaeological artefacts to be documented. At this point it forcibly occurred to me that I needed to brush up my 'O' level Latin in order to make some sense of the inscriptions. I mention this to encourage all those who possess the said qualification: one day you may well require it in the course of duty.

### Carlisle

I had always thought that a snail was a snail. Not so, as I was soon to discover at Tullie House, Carlisle. Here I was introduced to tubes and boxes full of shells of different colours, shapes and sizes. Somewhat mesmerised by molluscs, I found myself immensely grateful to the collector who had had the foresight to record detailed information about his collection; but then he had been a former curator...

### Workington

The fifth and final museum on the documentation trail was the Helena Thompson Museum in Workington. Here was an Aladdin's cave of social history, ethnographic and decorative art items, all beautifully packaged and stored, and waiting to be unearthed.

Unearthed they were. It was rather like reaching into a lucky dip, not quite knowing what to expect next, and I encountered some weird and wonderful objects: a mummified head, numerous 19th-century opium pipes and snuff boxes, and a large creepy-crawly of unknown provenance and identity preserved since the mid-1800s in a glass jar, all of which served to confirm my very darkest suspicions about the Victorians.

I also chanced upon a number of diaries written by members of the Thompson family during the mid-to-late 19th century and was sorely tempted just to sit and read them – such is the voyeuristic tendency of the social historian. However, numerous peeps into the pages revealed an abiding preoccupation with little more than health matters and the weather.

The project came to an end and I packed my bags for the last time, said my goodbyes to Cumbria and headed south, still reeling from the effects of weeks sitting in front of a computer screen.

How had we fared? The project had been enjoyable, though exasperating at times owing to various hiccups which thwarted progress. 3,000 items proved to be an elusive number to reach within the timescale and simply proved that the theory of documentation work did not necessarily quite match the practice.

*Contributions to this column are welcome, and should be sent to the address below*

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## HELENA THOMPSON MUSEUM & WORKINGTON HALL



## SENHOUSE ◦ ROMAN ◦ MUSEUM MARYPORT



## ABBOT HALL ART GALLERY