

ON MUSEUMS

ADDRESS by the PRESIDENT,

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at the Annual General Meeting, held at Winchester,

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MOST of us who are interested in antiquity, when we find ourselves in a provincial town, on duty or pleasure bent, make a point of visiting the local museum. We may perhaps know something of the skill and devotion expended on such museums by their honorary curators, and something, by hearsay, of their contents, and we enter the building with that hopeful feeling which the remembrance of former depressing experiences cannot wholly remove. We examine the museum as thoroughly as time will allow; we walk through the rooms; we read a certain number of the labels, if the lighting permits; we may even go to the length of buying a museum guide, if there is one; we peer through the glass of the show-cases at row upon row of flint implements, or of urns, or bowls, or Samian dishes, or tiles, or ancient weapons, or bones, very often well displayed, and sometimes well described. And, the duty accomplished, with a feeling of relief we leave, somewhat depressed, to forget our depression, as far as we may, in the cup that cheers.

This depression is due, probably, to a combination of several causes. Amongst these we may mention the dismal appearance of the museum itself; the trouble experienced in finding out what is most worth seeing; in many cases the difficulty of seeing the exhibits or their descriptive labels; the mental confusion which results from the higgledy-piggledy arrangement under which objects of natural history, geology, local history or pre-history may all be found in the same room, in neighbouring cases; and more than all, for the searcher after knowledge, the almost universal absence of any general informative, or educative, principle in the setting out of the exhibits.

It is true, of course, that if the visitor knows what to look for, he may have reason to be content with his visit. If he knows that such and such a museum has a specially important collection of Early Iron Age pottery, or a Saxon ivory, or an important mediaeval manuscript, and is able to find what he is looking for, then the visit has not been wasted. But such a visitor is usually himself a man of knowledge, and is not representative of the normal stranger.

If the foregoing is a more or less true account of the effect of a museum visit upon an educated adult, what are we to say as

to its effect upon a child? It is not too much to say that the average, healthy child has a hearty dislike for museums, although there are exceptions even to this rule. Any day that you may care to visit the Science Museum in South Kensington, you will see a number of children, chiefly boys, thoroughly enjoying themselves, making the wheels go round, and, for the time, becoming in imagination the engineers that most boys, at one time or another, hope to be. In fact, they are in touch with what the Science Museum has to show, and the Museum has the power to arouse their spontaneous interest. They see how the machines work, have some idea as to what they are intended for, and know the sort of man who has charge of the machines in real life. But put the same boys in front of a neolithic axe which is reposing in a showcase, and they will look at it in a spirit of the most perfect boredom.

But at this juncture I can imagine someone saying, "A museum is not meant to interest small boys; and, anyway, the chief object of a museum is the preservation of relics of antiquity for the benefit of the expert." If that is so, and if the chief purpose of a museum is to serve as a store-house, then there is no need to attempt to attract the public at large to such a place; a simple arrangement of cupboards with a reliable catalogue is all that is needed; though a few special treasures might perhaps be exhibited.

But let us suppose that the objector is wrong; that a museum should in fact be arranged upon an informative plan, that it should take its place in a well thought out scheme of education, and then let us see what follows. And here it should be remarked that education is not only for children; we are all of us anxious to keep abreast of what is being discovered, or thought, and that is why we go to so many lectures, and listen to so many addresses, and attend congresses, and support scientific societies. And in any case a public museum invites the public, and those responsible for the upkeep of such institutions are, in most instances, desirous that their museums should be of real interest and benefit to the public that, in one way or another, supports them.

Let us go back to the working machine model at South Kensington and the neolithic axe. Both are human implements; both play an important part in the history of our race. One is presented in a way that arouses interest and curiosity, and ultimately educates. The other is perfectly dull and dead. No person, old or young, could, from a visit to a provincial museum, picture how the man of old time used his axe, or what he used it for, or what he himself was like, or how he lived, or what his dwellings were like, or how long ago he fashioned the axe, or where he came from, or what happened to him in the end, or how we are related to him. We are not, so to speak, put in touch with him in any

vital manner, and it is only those who are gifted with an unusual degree of imagination who can make any picture of him at all. For most visitors the axe is an object of nearly complete uninterest.

But now, in contrast, let us picture a new, reformed museum, in which all this is changed. In this museum let us (to give an example) devote one whole room to the neolithic age. At the end of the room we shall have a picture painted by a competent artist of a neolithic camp or settlement, preferably one in the neighbourhood of the museum. Then there will be a picture, or model, of neolithic man himself—there is plenty of material for this—his axes will be shown, hafted as they were when he used them; there will be an exhibit of axes used by modern stone-age men, specimens from Bolivia, New Zealand and elsewhere. An attempt will be made to show the kind of dwellings that he lived in, and the rough pottery that he used. Models, pictures and diagrams will show how he buried his dead in long barrows, and the distribution of these barrows in England. There will be pictures of dolmens abroad, of the Hougue Vie, and other great works of the period, with casts of sculptured menhirs.

Some stress will be laid upon the giving of correct relative ideas of chronology and the time-scale, and of the dates of the probable migrations of the neolithic peoples. A comparison of the different standards of culture will be exhibited somewhat on the lines of that list prepared by Mr. H. Peake for the Newbury Museum. Some space will be devoted to showing how Baron de Geer obtained a date for the retreat of the Ice Cap in Scandinavia. We shall not be too squeamish about giving dates; to make a mental picture we must have some kind of a framework. In matters of detail, care will be taken that descriptions are easily legible; that distribution maps are placed where they can be read; that not too many objects of the same type are shown. Generally, simplicity, directness and ready intelligibility will be aimed at. As much local interest will be provided for as the local material permits, and this will be compared with foreign culture of the same age. The whole room should make a ready appeal to an enquiring youth, or the scheme will have failed.

So far as I know, there is no museum of this kind in England, though something of the sort exists in the United States and, I believe, at Kingston in Canada. Steps towards such an ideal, if it is an ideal, will, however, be found in several towns in this country. For instance, the University Museum at Manchester, which was arranged by the late Sir William Boyd-Dawkins, has a series of connected rooms so organized that the visitor, if he walks in the right direction, will first pass through a section devoted to geology; then through one devoted to the Old Stone Age, and then to the New Stone Age, and then to Ancient Egypt and the

Bronze Age, the Early Iron Age, then Classical Times, and so on to the present day. But, though the sequence is good, the actual arrangement is rather dull.

Then a good step in the right direction was taken some years ago in the little museum in the 17th century Cloth Hall at Newbury. The Honorary Curator is that well-known authority, Mr. H. J. E. Peake. Here there is a row of cases along the wall, under the windows on the left, as you enter. Each case deals with a limited period, thus, Early Bronze Age 1800 to 1700 B.C., and each case contains some objects dating from that period. In every instance nine different regions are treated of, and there is a map for each case. The idea is admirable, but the lighting is so bad that the descriptions, maps, and objects in the cases are almost impossible to see. It is an example of a good idea spoiled for want of money.

The new, small museum at Basingstoke is well worth a visit, because it does, in some measure, show that a museum may become of educational value. The exhibits have been arranged by Mr. G. W. Willis and Mr. J. R. Ellaway, both members of the Hampshire Field Club. The show-cases are few in number, but well lighted, clearly described and really educative. There is a good model showing the geology of the neighbourhood and its relation with the finds of palaeoliths. Approximate dates are put on the cases, such as "Roman 40 A.D. to 400 A.D.," and so on. At the time of my visit, Mr. Willis happened to be lecturing to one of the lower forms of the Grammar School; the boys were evidently interested in what he was telling them. Here is a real attempt to utilize the educative possibilities of a museum, and to make it a means of helping the public to visualize the past.

In any reformed museum it would be a valuable thing to have a good guide; the guide might be the caretaker, and if the guide had the zeal and aptitude of our friend the caretaker of the Winchester museum, the effectiveness of the museum would be increased. But, of course, visitors should be free, if they were so inclined, to wander round without a guide, and the museum would be arranged to be, as far as possible, self-explanatory—a thing which few museums are at present.

In the main, this address is a plea for the abandonment of the idea that an archaeological museum is, and should be, a storehouse of curiosities, a dry-as-dust assemblage of ancient odds and ends. It is a plea for the adoption of the theory that a museum should be a place of lively interest, arranged upon a definitely educative plan, in which each part should have its function in the general scheme, in which each exhibit should contribute to the intelligent appreciation of the whole, from which the ordinary citizen should be able to derive broad and sound notions of the progress of humanity through the ages.