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# Geological Curators' Group Annual Report for 2017 as at AGM Nov 2017

*The Geological Curators' Group is a UK-based membership organisation and charity (no. 296050), founded in 1974 to improve the state and status of geological collections and curation. The group is run for its members, by volunteers from the membership, and is affiliated to the Geological Society of London and recognised as a Subject Specialist Network by Arts Council England.*

## 1. View from the Chair

The theme for 2017 for me has been consolidation. After the excellent work of Giles Miller, and Mike Howe before him, it was a difficult act to follow. Whilst it may have seemed a quiet year from the outside, with rather few meetings and training courses, there has been a lot of work going on in the committee to consolidate processes and operation of GCG. This has been across the board with valuable contributions by all committee members and I want to pay tribute and thank all of them. I would like to briefly cover some of the work, though individual reports will give you more detail. I will particularly mention Tony Morgan here, for his unsung work in accurately minuting all our meetings. Incidentally, it was at my instigation that the AGM was moved to a couple of weeks earlier than usual. We will be keen to get feedback as to whether members approve, disapprove or are neutral about this change, in order to determine the date for 2018.

### Website

Perhaps the single biggest advance has been in the overhaul of the GCG website, which Simon Harris has redesigned from scratch to give us modern functionality that we did not have previously. I must pay tribute to Hannah Chalk who kept it going singlehandedly for many years, but we needed to bring the website up to date with rapidly advancing technology. Simon has provided us with a tool that multiple committee members can contribute to. It now allows for payments and subscriptions online, online booking for events and it is gradually being populated with additional resources.

Amongst these are many of the old issues of *The Geological Curator* journal. An ambitious plan to modernise these by making them accessible as single articles or papers through a search function has been feasibility-assessed by Simon and will go ahead as soon as we can secure the modest funding required to pay workers going through the task routine. There is too much to the work for a voluntary or goodwill basis to apply.

### Resources

Another resource that we expect to make public soon is a revised 'Advice booklet' for geology students and their supervisors. It is a modern revision of the 1983 NERC booklet by Steve Tunnicliff, for research students commencing projects, to get them thinking ahead as to the fate of collections they may make. The modern draft is undergoing final revisions to include more content on data as well as that on the physical materials, and we hope to get it endorsed by the Geological Society and by NERC before it gets a wide distribution.

Post AGM, the 'Thumbs Up' leaflet is going to get revised, and a Curry Fund application will be made for a print run. Whilst it is available on the GCG website, Rockwatch would like to send it out in paper form to all their new members in their packs and doing this would be part of the strategic promotion of good curation with a young audience, complementing the 'Be a Curator' activity. It is hoped to run this again, at least at the Lyme Regis Festival in 2018, if enough volunteers can be enlisted. Since many of the committee were already committed to their own museums' presence at the Lyme Festival and the Yorkshire Fossil Festival in 2017 we could not provide a sustainable presence, especially after Luanne Meehitiya sadly resigned from committee due to a change of career.

### **Organisation**

I must pay tribute to Sarah King, who was unable to be here, but whose efforts to make the committee (or Trustees, since we are a registered charity) function efficiently have been heroic. She has been keeping us abreast of governance requirements, and making sure we are compliant. Also, a series of documents such as welcome materials for new members have been produced along with protocols for committee. These are now part of a growing corporate memory in a committee area on the website that Sarah has been developing.

In addition, we have been working on a few policies, so that we have a thought-out position on certain issues, especially if questions arise. I want to thank Alex Peaker and Emma Bernard for work on a social media policy. Also in progress are policies on selling fossils and minerals in museum shops. Emma has also maintained our social media activity throughout the year.

### **Accounts**

Taking over a new job has never been easy and Rachel Walcott has efficiently eased herself into the role John Nudds maintained so well for many years. With a new officer comes new approaches and linked to the website developments we now have online payments, PayPal and other developments that should help make it easier for members to pay subscriptions and event fees, and for the Treasurer to keep control and report on financial trends much more easily than in the past. This can all also only help Cindy Howells in keeping the membership records, but especially in maintaining membership through prompt and easy payments.

### **Publications**

The journal is currently steady, and the delivery to members as pdf/printed copy has generated no particular issues to date. However, the take up of electronic version only has been a little less than might have been expected from responses to earlier surveys about preferences in this regard. With ever increasing postage rates we would encourage the digital choice if people are not emotionally committed to paper. It is possible that we may have to look at two different subscription rates, with a higher charge applying if you take the printed volume. This is becoming the norm in many societies now.

As a committee we have had some discussion about the future of *Coprolite*. Thanks, must first go to Helen Kerbey for delivering issues regularly for some years now. She has had to resign for pressures of her own work, and it is therefore a time to review whether Coprolite does the job we want it to do with all the shifts in the ways we communicate amongst ourselves. Additionally, the print and postage costs are proving a challenge. Before a committee member takes on the role of *Coprolite*

Editor as before, we will see if we can deliver a better service to members by changing the format or method.

### **Collections**

Sadly, Mike Howe has had to regularly report more museums where geology or natural science collections are at risk, or worse have been taken out of circulation as curatorial posts are eradicated, especially in local authority museums. Whilst GCG has made representations where relevant, it is frequently too late for interventions, as these plans only become public knowledge when signed and sealed. We will continue to support curators and collections where possible, if they are under threat, but in a wider way, advocacy on behalf of collections and curators before they are under threat is possibly the best use of limited capabilities.

### **Programme**

Zoë Hughes has been doing some great work behind the scenes this year developing our programme, and we now have an interesting schedule shaping up for 2018, which includes joint meetings with HOGG and other groups.

### **Geological Society**

Our relationship with the Geological Society is probably healthier and more alive than it has been for a long time, and I wish to acknowledge their support. We can contribute to meetings of the Science Committee and potentially help determine Society policy in different areas. They have provided an advisory representative, Dr Sally Thompson, who attends most of our committee meetings and acts as a liaison between the Society and ourselves. Given the London or SE England weighting on committee at present, we have been very pleased to hold our meetings in Geological Society rooms all through the year.

### **Relationships with other groups**

We have a MoU with SPNHC and NatSCA. Since the Chairman of NatSCA, Paolo Viscardi, works in the next office to mine it is theoretically easy to discuss matters of mutual interest, but in practice we are both so busy that we struggle to find time to advance planned joint projects like the Wiki or YouTube films of good practice. Fortunately, Isla Gladstone who acts as the representative for NatSCA/GCG on each committee provides practical communication. She has also been re-establishing the blog for the group, which will be a much more significant communication channel for us in the immediate future.

I have attended almost all the meetings of Geoconservation Committee of the Geological Society and see potential for future involvement in more collaborative projects. We previously had a rep from ICON (Adrian Doyle) but it appears it was due to Adrian's personal commitment rather than any natural science or geological commitment from ICON as a body. Nigel Larkin is a member of ICON and will continue to brief GCG of relevant matters as they arise.

Some efforts were made to approach the mainly US based Society of Museum Mineral Professionals (SMMP) regarding mutual co-operation or the possibility of an MoU, but sadly their Secretary was ill and very recently died, so this remains on the table. Other less direct relationships have been tabulated for the Committee for reference purposes and continuity as people change roles.

So, I close by thanking all of the Committee and all members who have contributed to the running of GCG, and I hope that we will see you involved in meetings or activities in the coming year.

*Matthew Parkes*

## **2. Membership and networks**

### **2.1 Membership and reach**

GCG subscriber numbers have been stable for several years. We have had 16 new members since this time last year, as opposed to 6 the year before, but this has as always been countered by a number of cancellations, retirements and deletions due to non-payment. We have members in 20 countries around the world (including the UK), so we are a truly international group, and although we currently don't hold meetings abroad, we have in the past visited several countries in Europe as well as the USA. Membership rates are deliberately kept low, with a concessionary rate option, to encourage as many individuals and institutions to join as possible.

This year we have rolled out online membership payment and renewal, which we hope will complement our existing options and enable more people than ever to join us in the coming years. Membership as ever brings the benefits of two editions of *The Geological Curator* journal a year (plus online access to the most recent issues), regular newsletters, access to a network of museum professionals, and regular, discounted events designed to support museum workers to be confident in looking after geological collections to the highest standards. Even if members prefer to pay by Standing Order or wish to send a cheque, they can still register on our website, and view the most up-to-date issues of our journal.

#### **Membership numbers by type**

	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2015</b>
Personal UK	<b>160</b>	155	155
Personal Overseas	<b>20</b>	22	24
UK Institutions	<b>46</b>	44	44
Overseas Institutions	<b>20</b>	23	24
Honorary	<b>7</b>	6	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>253</b>

Members are reminded of the importance of maintaining accurate contact details, both on the website and with the Membership Secretary, to ensure electronic and physical communication continues to reach them. Members are encouraged to opt for electronic copies of *The Geological Curator* and newsletters (currently *Coprolite*), as this saves GCG a great deal of money that can be ploughed back into the Group. Preferences can be updated online or sent to the Membership Secretary.

*Cindy Howells*

## **2.2. Correspondence and networks**

As an affiliated group, we meet annually with the Geological Society, as well as attending the Geoconservation Annual Gathering coordinated by them. We also continued our representation at the Earth Science Education Forum this year. We continue to have a NatSCA rep on committee, who attends committee meetings of both groups in order to exchange information, in support of the MoU signed with them and SPNHC in 2014.

Correspondence received (email) included: one enquiry for info on a personal mineral collection; one enquiry for use of a *Geological Curator* article; one request for the *Guidelines for the Curation of Geological Materials*; one query from the Oil and Gas Authority about surplus core material. This is the first year that correspondence has been actively logged, but having a new website and committee email addresses has resulted in noticeably more unsolicited correspondence, a reflection of the hard work behind the scenes in making GCG more visible and approachable as a first port of call for geological collections queries.

*Sarah King*

## **3. Events and participation**

2016's Seminar and AGM 'From the shore to the store – The ethics of UK fossil collecting and collections' in Bristol saw a full program of 7 talks, including one from Museums Association Policy Officer Alistair Brown. Over 50 delegates attended, with 19 visiting Redcliffe Caves and Bristol Museum Stores on day two.

Due to reorganisation we have run a reduced events programme this year, but the GCG-supported 26<sup>th</sup> Symposium of Palaeontological Preparation and Conservation (SPPC) was held at the University of Birmingham on the 12<sup>th</sup> September, in conjunction with the 65<sup>th</sup> Symposium of Vertebrate Palaeontology and Comparative Anatomy (SVPCA). SPPC filled a morning of talks and had several posters displayed. This joint meeting is held in a different venue each year, and GCG will be looking at ways to develop this long-standing event in future years.

GCG's events are core to our work in supporting our members, and we thank all hosts, facilitators and contributors, without whom our programme would not be possible.

We are rolling out online booking for events, which we hope will streamline the experience for us as well as event attendees.

As ever, we welcome feedback, and suggestions for future events that would help our members to look after and improve geological collections in their care.

*Zoë Hughes*

## **4. Publications**

### **4.1. *The Geological Curator***

The peer-reviewed *Geological Curator* journal remains a flagship benefit of GCG membership. In 2017 two parts were published. Volume 10, Number 7 (180 pages: 283 to 462) was a special issue of

6 papers about the famous Scottish geologist Hugh Miller and his collections. This was the achievement of a long-planned but much-delayed collation of work by Mike Taylor with Lyall Anderson. Volume 10, Number 8 (52 pages: 463 to 514) is a more standard volume consisting of 4 papers, a Note, an obituary for Ron Cleevly, two AGM minutes and numerous book reviews. Parts from 3 years previously were uploaded to the website keeping a two-year rolling window of the most recent journals available only to members.

Work is in hand with Jeff Liston as guest editor, for Volume 10, Number 9, the first part to issue in 2018, which will be a series of papers on ethics. These will include contributions from the GCG AGM Seminar in Bristol in 2016 along with papers from a session of the European Vertebrate Palaeontology meeting in 2016 on the theme of ethics in vertebrate palaeontology.

Members are reminded that receiving the journal electronically rather than in hard copy saves GCG money in admin, printing and postage, and encouraged to consider this option. Notification of preference should be made to the Membership Secretary.

Succession planning would require that a replacement editor is lined up before the present incumbent retires from the task. Anyone with an interest in taking on the role should make contact with the Editor or any member of the committee.

*Matthew Parkes*

#### **4.2. *Coprolite* newsletter**

*Coprolite* has been published since 1990, and has had three issues a year, giving 83 to date. It covers news, reviews and correspondence, and this year each issue has had eight pages. All issues are available on our website immediately after publication. Most members choose to receive issues by email rather than by post, and this option is encouraged due to the rising costs of print and postage. Notification of preference should be made to the Membership Secretary.

Helen Kerbey, *Coprolite* editor for several years, has decided to step down (see issue 82), and the GCG committee passes on their thanks for her hard work over the years. With our new website and a relaunched blog, we are looking at the future role and format of our newsletter. We welcome comments on what is useful to members in terms of content and delivery.

*Sarah King*

### **5. Collections support**

#### **5.1. Collections monitoring**

As ever, there are a number of collections that have been affected by restructures this year. Dudley Museum (curated by 2016 Brighton Medal recipient Graham Worton) moved out of its historic building in December 2016, so that it could be sold. The collection is now in the Town Archives, and new displays opened in September this year.

Birmingham Museums Trust luckily escaped potential cuts of £750,000 early in the year, and further good news in the region came in April with the announcement of the Art Fund Museum of the Year finalists, which included the newly-refurbished Lapworth Museum of Geology. Sadly they didn't take

home the top prize, but for a relatively small, specialist geological museum on a university campus to make it through to a shortlist that included Tate Modern is testament to the hard work that has gone into their multi-million-pound refit, and how geology collections can inspire people on a national scale.

Sadly, in August, Gloucester City Council made two curators and a museum manager redundant. The geology and natural history collections have been moved into storage, and remain accessible.

We were pleased to offer our support to the North West Highlands Geopark when their funding was unexpectedly withdrawn earlier this year.

On a more positive note, developments in digitisation and international database aggregation are likely to provide the means for making collections more findable. The British Geological Survey (BGS) has been in discussions to become a UK-wide issuer of IGSN (International Geo Sample Numbers), which would make UK collections more easily accessible at an international level. A number of organisations, including the BGS and the Natural History Museum, are also working with some of the main palaeontology aggregators, such as the Geobiodiversity Database (GBDB), the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF), 'iDigBio' (a key American organisation facilitating the digitisation of biological collections) and the Paleobiology Database (PBDB). These linkages should increase the research use and impact of UK collections, both nationally and internationally.

*Mike Howe*

## **5.2. Care of collections**

For the first time in many years, we have reinstated the Care of Collections Officer (co-opted). This will help us to better support geological conservators and the conservation of geological collections.

## **6. Online activity**

### **6.1. Website statistics for [www.geocurator.org](http://www.geocurator.org)**

A large, high impact project this year has been the relaunch of our website. Please see the **Appendix** for more detail on the project and its benefits to members.

As a result of moving our website operations from a Windows server to a Linux server, we have unfortunately had to change the way hits and visits are recorded, so consequently, this year at least, it is not fair to make comparisons with the previous year's figures. It is also increasingly difficult to filter out genuine visitors from web crawlers and "bots" looking for information - sometimes this may be useful data – "how do I look after my fossils", but sadly increasingly it is looking for bank details, passwords or other vulnerabilities which would allow the website to be hacked. It is one of the major tasks of the Web Officer to guard against this by ensuring the website is secured and by taking regular backups.

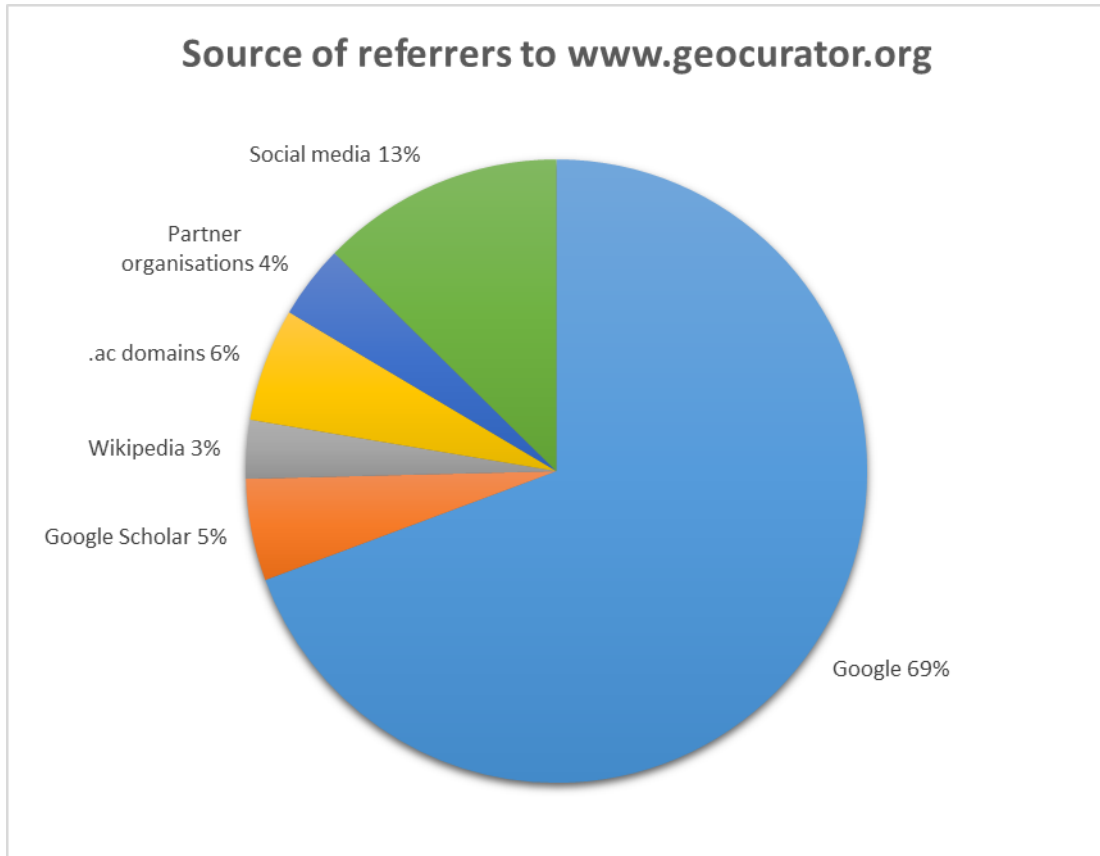
For the months between April and October 2017 (from when the website was properly up and running to the date of this report), the following figures can be reported. As the website matures, we will also be able to report year-on-year figures.

Most popular page impressions on <a href="http://www.geocurator.org">www.geocurator.org</a> , April-October 2017		
The Geological Curators' Group	Main	20818
Coprolite 79 - June 2016	Previous issues of Coprolite	1066
Thumbs-up leaflet	Promoting good curation	769
Membership of GCG	Membership	707
Geological Collections	Collections	692
GCG Constitution	How the Committee works	670
GCG Committee responsibilities	How the Committee works	618
Committee Profile: Simon Harris	Committee member profiles	533
The current GCG Committee	GCG Committee	503
Brighton Medal 2016 Awarded	News	484
Coprolite 13 - February 1994	Previous issues of Coprolite	398
Lyme Regis Fossil Festival	News	361
Coprolite 19 - February 1996	Previous issues of Coprolite	350
Be-a-Curator stand	Promoting good curation	343
Coprolite 78 - March 2016	Previous issues of Coprolite	339
Royal Cornwall Museum - your help required!	News	338
Obituary: Ron J. Cleevely 1934-2017	News	335
New website launched!	News	334
Building the new GCG website	New site help	333

It is encouraging to see archive material appearing in this list (e.g. *Coprolite* from 1994) as well as more recent items. This underlines the value of retaining our archive and making it available via our website.

In terms of where our visitors come from, where the data is available, the search giant **Google** dominates our traffic. However there are also encouraging signs of traffic coming from academic domains, social media channels (with **Facebook** being the most prominent) and our partner organisations.





Our web server recorded over 55,000 unique visits from nearly 150 countries, the top five being United States, France, Germany, United Kingdom and China and accounting for over 80% of the traffic.

As we continue to develop the website, the committee will use this information to guide us in developing new resources which are of most value to our visitors.

*Simon Harris*

## **6.2. Blog**

The GCG blog has been redesigned and its content has been expanded. Originally launched as an advocacy tool, we are now inviting contributed pieces along a series of different themes. These include pieces about current projects; featuring a geological object of the month; and ‘six questions for a geological curator’ now posed for everyone who works with or is interested in geological collections to bring a variety of voices. As *Coprolite* editor Helen Kerbey has stepped down, GCG are also reviewing how *Coprolite* and the blog will work together in future. The blog is an informal platform to highlight and share the wonderful people and work happening with geological collections. If you would like to contribute please get in touch with Isla Gladstone or see: <https://geocollnews.wordpress.com/about/>

*Isla Gladstone*

### **6.3. Social media**

Social media has become a great way for fast communication of news and events, as well as a platform for queries and more light-hearted communication. As a result of the large uptake of social media interaction, we are working on a GCG social media policy, which will be circulated to membership and uploaded to our website early 2018. We thank everyone who has contributed to keeping our social media presence dynamic during the year.

#### **6.3.1. Facebook**

We are represented on Facebook in two ways: a group and a page (both called Geological Curators' Group). All content is posted to both. 912 people have liked our Facebook Group and we have 225 members of our group page. Posts typically reach 2000-3000 people every week.

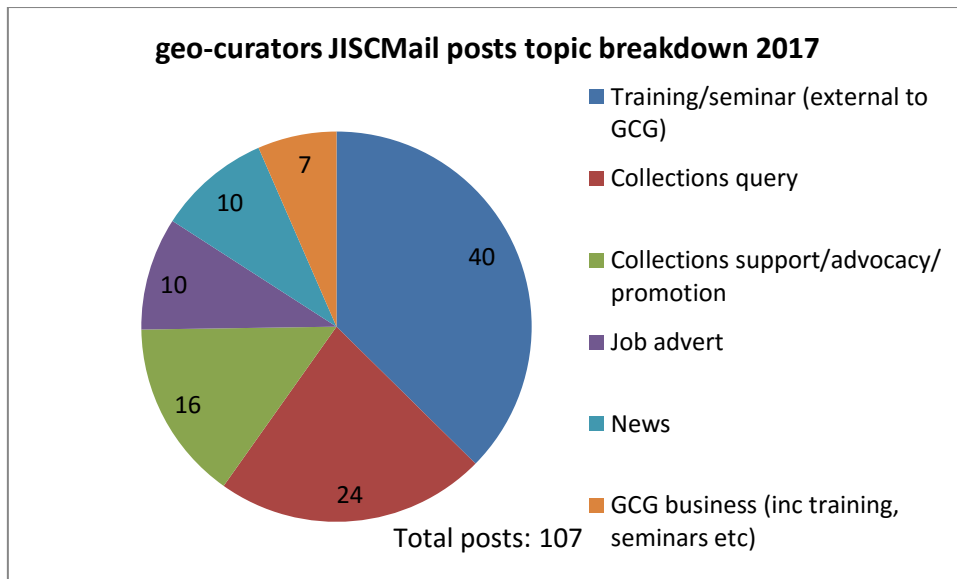
#### **6.3.2. Twitter**

We currently have 961 followers on our Twitter account (@OriginalGCG), which was launched in 2013. Numbers of followers have been steadily growing over the last three years. During October we had 261 profile visits, gained 17 new followers, were mentioned 31 times and had 5,212 tweet impressions. These numbers vary monthly.

*Emma Bernard*

### **6.4. JISCMail**

Since April 2001, GCG has maintained an openly accessible JISCMail list, 'geo-curators'. The purpose of this list is to allow wide and rapid communication of news and information about the sector, as well as for museum workers to pose collections-related questions to a knowledgeable network. There is no requirement to be a member of GCG, but in practice there is much overlap. From 94 initial members in 2001, the list currently has 272 subscribers, and since the 2016 AGM there have been 107 posts. Nearly 40% of these posts have been advertising or discussing training/conferences/seminars, with 2/3 of these from 'iDigBio', the American mass-digitisation project for natural science collections, reflecting their reach and drive with the substantial support of their National Science Foundation. We extend our thanks to all who offered advice and support to list members. Interested parties can sign up to GEO-CURATORS@JISCMail.ac.uk via our website.



*Sarah King*

## 7. Outreach and profile

For some time now, we have had a banner, family activity ('Be a Curator') and various promotional materials available to advertise GCG and its work at appropriate events, such as fossil festivals. We are reviewing the best ways to use these going forward, as well as other ways to advertise GCG to relevant parties. This year, we took the decision not to travel to either the Lyme Regis or Yorkshire Fossil Festivals, but we did take out a full page advertisement in the Lyme programme after a call out by the organisers.

Our banner was displayed at the NatSCA conference and AGM in April, and we approved a request (in 2016) to sponsor the annual Palaeontological Society student conference, Progressive Palaeontology, in Leicester (1-3 June 2017). As inserts for delegate packs, we trialed a draft update of Steve Tunnicliff's 1983 paper, *"I am beginning my research; what shall I do with my geological specimens?" A note of advice*, with comments feeding into a plan to roll out annual copies for all UK earth science departments with new doctoral students. This is a large undertaking, but over time should improve a significant aspect of geological collections development at source. We also offered support to the Geologist's Association Annual Conference (Cardiff, 21-22<sup>nd</sup> October).

*Sarah King*

## 8. Accounts

See separate sheet

*Rachel Walcott*

***\*Please print your own copy of this document if you need it; GCG is working to reduce paper waste. Thank you\****

## **GCG information**

The Geological Curators' Group can be found at

- [www.geocurator.org](http://www.geocurator.org)
- <https://www.facebook.com/GeologicalCuratorsGroup/>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/376700195784835/>
- <https://twitter.com/OriginalGCG>

## **Committee for 2017**

- Chair: Matthew Parkes (National Museum of Ireland)
- Secretary: Sarah King (York Museums Trust)
- Treasurer: Rachel Walcott (National Museums Scotland)
- Membership Secretary: Cindy Howells (National Museum Wales)
- Programme Secretary: Zoë Hughes (Natural History Museum)
- Minutes Secretary: Tony Morgan (National Museums Liverpool)
- Journal Editor: Matthew Parkes
- Newsletter Editor: Helen Kerbey (Mineralogical Society)
- Collections Officer: Mike Howe (British Geological Survey)
- Web Officer: Simon Harris (British Geological Survey)
- Ordinary Member: Luanne Meehitiya (Birmingham Museums Trust)
- Ordinary Member: Emma Bernard (Natural History Museum)
- Ordinary Member: Alex Peaker (Dinosaur Isle)
- Co-opted member (NatSCA representative; Blog Editor): Isla Gladstone (Bristol Museum and Art Gallery)
- Co-opted member (Care of Collections Officer): Nigel Larkin (Natural History Conservation)

## Appendix

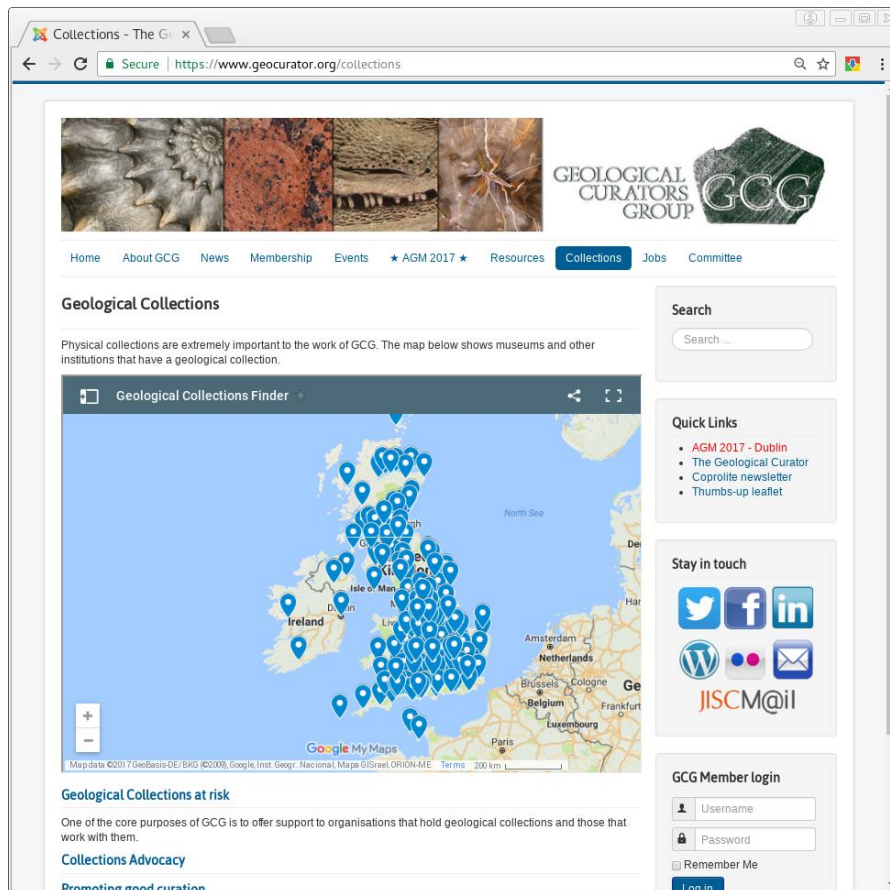
### Relaunching the Geological Curators' Group website

The primary focus of my activities in the role of Web Officer this year has been to perform a complete overhaul of the group's website at [www.geocurator.org](http://www.geocurator.org). The design of the old website dated back to 2005, and as well as the desire for a new look, the committee wanted to implement a number of features that were not supported.

After surveying a number of options, we chose to use a popular open source content management system running on our hosted servers. The decision was also taken at this time to carry out the work in-house which as well as saving a considerable amount of money has meant that the website continues to evolve through a series of small changes rather than only having one chance to get the specification right.

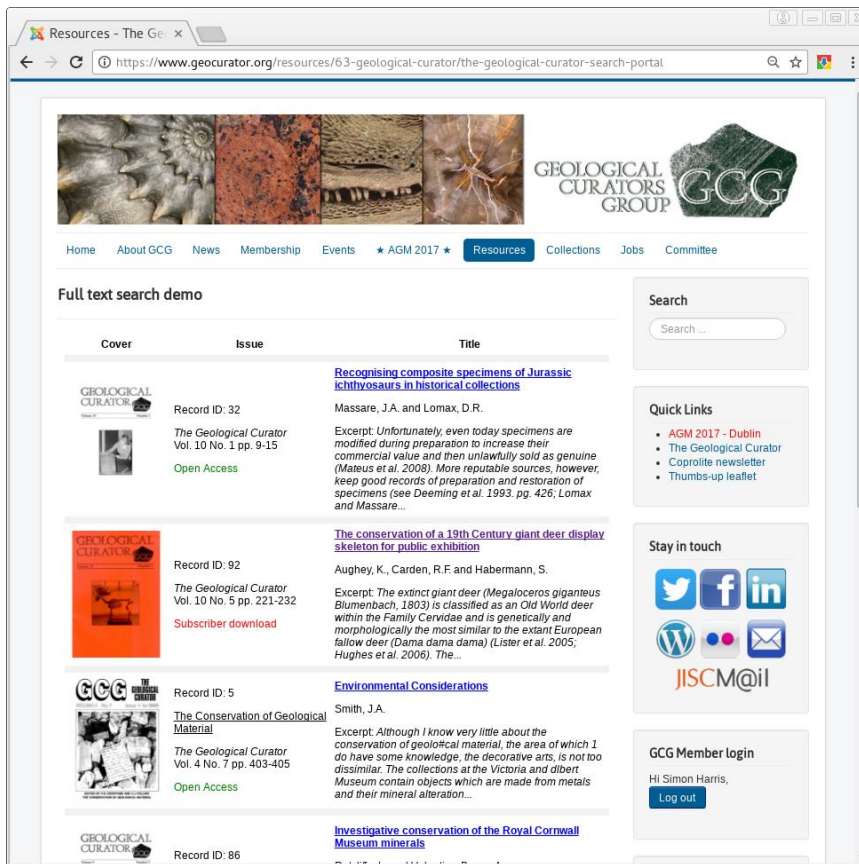
Rather than describe every feature in detail, readers are invited to visit the website and explore the features. However, there are a couple of features worthy of further description here:

- ◆ **Online subscription and event sign up.** This new facility considerably widens our membership offer – not only does it remove the hassle associated with writing and posting cheques, but it completely removes barriers for overseas subscribers. It is possible for anyone, anywhere in the world, to securely create their subscription and only minutes later to be able to download the most recent editions of *Geological Curator* and *Coprolite*.
- ◆ **Map-based geological collections finder.** This has replaced the old text listings on the site. As well as being very easy to update, much of the information is drawn directly from Google Maps search engine data, which means that whilst we have a little less control on what is displayed, on balance the information is far more likely to be accurate.



There is much potential still to be realised in the website, although it should be remembered that content creation is a time consuming and sometimes costly task. One project which I would like to see launched next year is a full text index of the full archive of *Geological Curator* and *Coprolite*. Whilst back issues have been available on the website for many years, and have to some extent been indexed by search engines, much useful information remains hidden in early editions of the journal.

By generating an index by hand, we can be absolutely sure of its accuracy, and certain errors (for example, the less-than-perfect text recognition in some places) can be corrected. Each paper or article takes between 5 and 10 minutes to index – however multiplied over nearly 1000 items requiring indexing, this translates to several weeks of work. The committee are currently investigating ways in which this work might be carried out in an efficient manner.



I hope the coming year will see further improvements to the website – please use and explore it, and direct any suggestions for improvements to the committee.

Simon Harris, 15<sup>th</sup> October 2017

Web Officer - [webmaster@geocurator.org](mailto:webmaster@geocurator.org)

Images: Upper: Screenshot of the new website, showing the map based collections finder. Lower: Prototype version of a journal search portal, showing article level searches and access controls implemented.