

Lady Mason

Simon Tait, *Palaces of Discovery*, (London: Quiller Press, 1989) 208 pp. Hardback £14.95.

As one who has been dragged unwillingly to museums in many countries over the last forty years, I can only wish that I had read this book a lot earlier. The word 'museum' to so many people suggests dark and musty premises packed with ill-assorted and poorly displayed specimens which have unfortunately been described to children as educational, a word guaranteed to immediately introduce a wave of boredom.

Under Simon Tait's guidance museums emerge as collections, painstakingly put together and continually growing, initiated with the enthusiasm of wealthy dedicated collectors with a passion in a particular field and a desire to share their possessions and passions with others.

The birth pangs of a museum are often very painful. The Candie Gardens Museum in Guernsey, for example, was opposed by many local residents, who suggested that the space would be better used as a refuge for battered wives. The improvements initiated by the Ancient Monuments Committee to this Victorian unexciting museum, after the roof of the origi-

nal building collapsed, were carried out by successful collaboration between the architect – a designer who saw the potential of the existing bandstand and was able to plan around it – and Mrs. Cole, a trained Museums expert. The result has been extremely successful – Mrs. Cole's belief is that the visitor to the museum comes first, and with the large numbers of tourists who visit Guernsey each year it has been a resounding success.

Simon Tait provides some endearing insights into a number of the museum enthusiasts; Sir Jonathon Hutchinson, founder of the Haslemere Museum, who would walk to his museum at weekends with sandwiches and a bottle of coffee which he would warm on one of the stoves while changing into his slippers and pinafore preparatory to starting work dusting and sweeping; Sir Thomas Sheppard of Hull, whose belief was that the museum's primary role in the community was an instructing and improving one, himself lectured to school children and used ingenuity and perseverance in acquiring specimens of local interest. His *modus vivendi* – the search for sponsors, friends in high places, auction houses, the creative element of never giving

up on an idea until it has had a chance to succeed, distinguishes successors among British museums of all classes. The tragedy was that he lived to see most of what he acquired and created lost to World War II bombs.

One of the most interesting museums described is the Ayr Street museum in Springburn, a depressed corner of Glasgow, where a University graduate, Mark O'Neill, applied to set up a museum – a grim challenge in such strained circumstances. On the day the museum opened, 20th May 1986, 1600 redundancies were announced from the locomotive works which had employed most of the local population. His reply to the torpor which had seized the area was an exhibition about teenagers featuring a rock band and

a pop quiz. He continues to work closely with local history teachers and each year carries out a study of a particular sector from the local community. For example, one study was of the 'Mothers and Toddlers'; the aim being to encourage mothers to review their present lifestyles, celebrate its positive features and in turn, to identify problems and select appropriate solutions.

This book which covers a wide range of museums in the UK – both national, local and independent as well as the more specialised museums – written in a lively and amusing style, would be a splendid companion to a tour of museums in Britain, revealing, as it does with understanding and sympathy, the evolution of the museum and the history of local involvement.

