

What Can We Reasonably Expect Museums to Provide or Allow?
FoMRHIQ 74, January 1994, Comm. 1212

I have to admit that the urge to write this Comm was inspired by receiving one from Michael Ransley which appears elsewhere here, which is naughty of me, but it does also express things that I have been feeling for some time.

I am, of course, writing it from the viewpoint of a museum curator, and I do have to say, at the outset, that I have quite often been annoyed by what many of you expect of me.

I provide, and maybe bigger and richer museums would provide, but in the case of the Bate Collection, it's "I provide", a plastic caliper gauge; Korg pitch meters; cloth dress maker's measuring tapes or, for longer instruments, surveyor's plastic tape; small hole gauges; T-gauges; dentist's mirrors; torch with perspex light guide, or even without a guide; screw drivers for key axles; pusher to remove axles for keys in blocks. I don't suppose the list stops there, but these are things that I keep at the Bate to do my own work there and which I have fished out of drawers in the Bate workshop for visiting instrument makers in the last few months. Am I now expected to buy paper measuring tapes for the benefit of makers who come to the museum? We do provide disposable gloves, but that's because any gloves you brought would be dirty from being carried in your cases.

It is a considerable and continuing surprise to me how many instrument makers come to look at and measure instruments without providing themselves with basic equipment such as the above. Some of it does derive, of course, from the fact that the museum community doesn't like metal tools, but surely everybody knows this? Whatever we think about discs and T-gauges (and I'll come back to this in a moment) we none of us allow the normal metal caliper gauge, which has very sharp corners and edges. But I can't begin to count the number of people whom I have had to stop from using one, and to whom I then have had to lend my own plastic one. I could, I suppose, be tough and say "Out" but I've only done that once. Incidentally, Harry Vas Dias came up the other day with a caliper gauge with digital read-out instead of a dial, which can be zeroed in any position; why not sheath such a gauge with plastic and zero it to suit? It might be the odd hundredth of a mill out, but so what? Breathe on the wood you're measuring, and it's moved more than that.

Many people have brought plastic discs for measuring bores, and some of those discs have had edges as sharp as any scraper. "Oh but we must have a sharp edge – how else can we get a definite position?" How else can the bore of our instruments get chewed up, they mean. To my mind, the steel T-gauge with rounded edges (the Mitutoyo is better than the Stanley) is a hell of a lot safer, and I suppose that that has most often been the reason that I've fished mine out. Safer still would be a strain gauge like Rod Cameron's, and I have thought of buying one of these, and Rod has very kindly offered to make one available. But why should I, or the Bate, spend several hundreds of pounds on something for visitors to use? OK it would protect our instruments, but what would protect them even more is to say no measuring – this is why some museums do say just that.

I don't (I know I should) stand over someone the whole time he or she is here. If it's someone I don't know, I do watch for a while, but I've too much work to do to be there all the time. Then I drop in from time to time. Sometimes I find the maker sticking plastic tape on the instrument – "Oh it doesn't mark" – or putting blutak or similar substances on – "Oh it all comes off". It doesn't all come off and it does mark. If you need to cover a hole, plumber's PTFE tape is non-adhesive and really does not mark (OK, that's another thing that I provide). But anything adhesive, when you take it off, look through a microscope or powerful lens and you'll see traces

on the surface, where it has left a deposit, and look at the tape and you'll see particles that it has pulled off the instrument. As for blutak and its allies, they always leave oils.

As for putting paper on the instrument and taking a rubbing of the fingerholes or maker's mark or anything else, you might as well take a rasp to it. Look at the fingerholes of any instrument and you'll see straight away whether it's been used and how much. The wear on the surface is the result of being touched by the skin of the fingers. Not rubbed, players don't rub their fingers up and down, they put them down and lift them up. Not by a stick of carbon, but just by soft skin. Would anyone in their senses take a wooden stick and rub it up and down along the instrument? And can you tell me what's the difference between a wooden stick and a carbon stick down the middle of a pencil? It does really help if makers think a bit before they come to us. Think of what it is reasonable to do to an instrument. Think of what tools you're going to need and whether they are going to be really suitable. To pick up one of Michael's analogies, imagine you're measuring a baby and think what a devoted mum might allow you to use. Just remember that some of us curators are even more paranoid about our instruments than mums are about their babies. After all, babies heal, and anyway they don't last more than a century at best, and instruments don't heal and are already a couple of centuries old or more!