

samples, but an important one has no prospect whatever of being dealt with.

It must be honestly faced that the work which needs to be done will only be done if it can be paid for, so permitting the employment of staff appointed to the task. In this institute we are training students who will be able to undertake such analytical work; but who will employ them? Whether this is recognized as a legitimate call on the museums, on an enlarged Ancient Monuments Laboratory or on privately organized establishment is a matter for discussion, but in any case finance will have to be forthcoming.

It may be observed that one of the factors which has contributed to this crisis has been the increase in the number of excavations made necessary by the increasing development of our countryside. This is an outcome of our national policy of development, and responsibility for it should be accepted in this light.

Yours faithfully,

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SIR,—In your issue of February 22, 1969, you published a letter from Mr T. F. Profitt of the Institution of Professional Civil Servants about the ministry's Ancient Monuments Laboratory.

This ministry, like all other Government departments, has to conform with the Government's manpower policy on the size of the Civil Service. Our problem has been to allocate the manpower resources available to us between many competing claims within the department.

However, because of our concern about the laboratory a survey was carried out toward the end of last year and, as a result, the complement has already been increased from eleven to seventeen—with the object of enabling the laboratory to clear within a reasonable period the present backlog of work. Action is also being taken towards accommodating the various parts of the laboratory as a single unit. You may be aware that these facts were announced by the Minister to the House of Commons on March 10, 1969, in reply to a question from Mr Peter Jackson, MP.

It is our intention to achieve these improvements as quickly as possible, but there may be some difficulty in finding the accommodation required for the laboratory, which must be close not only to the Ministry's Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in Westminster, but also to the British Museum and the learned societies with which the laboratory must be in close and regular contact.

Yours faithfully,

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These letters refer to an article in *Nature* (221, 206; 1969) and subsequent correspondence (*Nature*, 221, 785; 1969).

### Birds Room at the Museum

SIR,—At the end of the last century the Bird Room at South Kensington was the most famous centre for systematic ornithology in the world, having a distinguished staff, and being the favourite meeting place of an outstanding generation of amateur ornithologists. The catalogue of its contents prepared at that time remains a great classic of its subject. Since then its standing and our own position in the subject have progressed steadily

downhill. For a while the Rothschild Museum at Tring seized the lead, and then it was lost abroad with the sale overseas of the Rothschild Collection of skins in the 1930s. In recent years it has taken considerable persistence to penetrate the Bird Room at all, and, while good work is still done there, one feels that the staff do not always receive the recognition and encouragement that they deserve. The collection has ceased to grow in the way that it used to (indeed, it seems possible that at the present time part of yet one more of a series of collections, the Hewitt Collection, first offered to the museum, may end in being sold elsewhere), and many other museums, some of them in much smaller countries, now produce a larger output of ornithological work.

There has already been one national outcry when this down-grading of the status of the Bird Room was accompanied by a proposal to remove it to the partly empty Rothschild Museum at Tring before the war, when I am told a petition was circulated among our leading ornithologists in favour of keeping it more easily accessible in London. In the circumstances it now seems rather ironical that the only public protest at the renewal of this proposal has come not from ornithologists but from a Member of Parliament, Mr Allason, on grounds of economy because it is proposed to pull down part of the existing Tring Museum to rebuild the Bird Room there (*The Times*, January 30). There are, of course, several arguments in favour of moving the Bird Room to Tring, including the presence of a magnificent and too long neglected ornithological library, the proximity of the headquarters of the British Trust for Ornithology, and easy access by road from other ornithological centres such as Oxford, Bedford, Sandy and Cambridge. On the other hand, I would have thought that there are even more arguments in favour of keeping the national Natural History collections together in London, including a need to maintain intercourse between people working in different departments, access for all to the general library and the different departmental libraries, and ease of access and accommodation for the great majority of the people in this country and abroad who wish to work on the collections.

It is said that the Bird Room was originally installed in its present quarters in the entomological block at South Kensington for a strictly temporary period until a new extension could be built for it beyond this at the far north-west corner of the South Kensington Museum site. Since then the library and the mammals have been rehoused but the birds have been left in an increasingly overcrowded block until a new administration hit first on the idea of moving them out to Tring, and then of rebuilding the Tring Museum to accommodate them. If any new building needs to be done, it is not clear why it cannot be done at South Kensington. The majority of the visitors to the Bird Room are busy people who have other business in London and cannot afford the time for the laborious train journey to Tring, where the station is moreover still a long way from the museum and there is little accommodation in the vicinity. It is said that another department would have been prepared to move into the Tring Museum as it stands. Much time has been lost already because the proposal to move the Bird Room received so little public discussion, but now that Mr Allason has questioned its wisdom on grounds of economy it seems time that, at the eleventh hour, attention should be paid to its justification in terms of policy as well. It does not seem wise to break up the national Natural History collections and exile important parts of them to remote places in this way.

Yours faithfully,

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