

THE CENTENARY OF THE CURTIS MUSEUM

By W. HUGH CURTIS, F.S.A.

THE Centenary of the Curtis Museum at Alton was celebrated at a meeting held in the Assembly Rooms, opposite the Museum, on Saturday, September 10th, at 3 p.m.

The audience numbered about 140 and, due to lack of space, came by invitation. The Chair was taken by Col. Jervoise Scott, D.L., of Rotherfield Park, and addresses were given by Sir George Dyson, Chairman of the Carnegie U.K. Trust, and by Dr. D. B. Harden, Keeper of the Department of Antiquities, The Ashmolean Museum, who deputised for Dr. Wallis, President of the Museum Association. Mr. W. Curtis Green, R.A., proposed a vote of thanks on behalf of the family to the Hon. Director, Mr. W. Hugh Curtis, and in the course of his remarks said he was probably the only person present who could remember the Founder, William Curtis. The others on the platform were Mr. A. G. Stickland, Vice-Chairman Alton U.D.C., Major R. G. Bignell, Chairman of the Friends of the Museum, and Mr. W. Hugh Curtis.

In the audience were representatives of other museums, Societies interested in museums and several descendants and relations of the Founder's family.

The Chairman gave a short history of the Museum and how it came to be founded. The first member of the Curtis family to come to Alton was a Quaker doctor who in 1720 occupied the house next to the Crown Inn on Normandy Hill. His eldest grandson, William Curtis, the well-known botanist, was born at Alton in 1746, and a much younger first cousin of the botanist's, another William Curtis, was Jane Austen's medical attendant when she lived at Chawton. It was his second son, William, who founded a branch of the Mechanics Institute in 1837 and the Museum in 1855.

The Chairman traced the growth of the Museum which was at first chiefly cared for by the Founder and his youngest brother, Dr. John Wright Curtis, who died in 1864. The Founder himself lived until 1881 when his eldest son William followed him as Hon. Curator and was in turn succeeded after his death in 1924 by his son, the present Hon. Director.

Sir George Dyson spoke of the purpose and work of the Carnegie Trust and outlined the Trust's attitude to museums under three main headings. Firstly as repositories of the history of our civilisation, he said they appealed to the imagination. To understand the present one must know something of the past.

Secondly, museums were essential to science and to exact knowledge of any kind. The third aspect the Trust had in mind was the aesthetic or artistic one. He did not mean merely collecting

works of art, but the art which existed when any good craftsman made anything. The Trust had made grants to increase the appeal of the museum as a display and as a public amenity, but before doing so they wished to feel fairly certain of the museum's continuity and of adequate curatorship—one with imagination and ideas—and that the museum undertook with reason to follow the policy which experts advocated. The grant of £700 to the Curtis Museum was about an average and the Trust had made hundreds of grants of that kind.

Sir George Dyson spoke of the future and the financial problems ahead. He thought museums should as far as possible be regional, and when as in this Museum they were under the County Council the regional form was already there. He congratulated the Museum on a century of admirable history and wished it another century of even greater prosperity.

Dr. Harden also congratulated the Museum and all who had had anything to do with keeping it going. He spoke of the changes that had taken place in museums in the past hundred years, and people might say they collected indiscriminately in the early days, but he wondered if they were not interested in everything, while to-day they had different ideas. A great interest in adult education was growing up a hundred years ago, but there was also a desire for entertainment. There was then no radio or cinema and people had to create their own entertainment. There was little else for them besides the museum and perhaps the picture gallery to which they could go. In those early days exhibits were crammed into the museum cases.

He thought the education impulse in museums to-day was even stronger than it was 100 years ago, and perhaps there was a tendency to emphasize too greatly the educational side, and not sufficient mention of entertainment. He described the present as a professional era, financed more and more by local authorities and staffed by paid curators. "We can no longer run our museums on a voluntary basis." He referred to the work of the Museums Association which had done so much for museums up and down the country, and he congratulated Mr. Curtis and Mr. Christopher Gowing, the Curator, on the admirable arrangement and lay-out of the Museum.

Mr. W. Hugh Curtis proposed a vote of thanks to the Chairman and the speakers, which was seconded by Mr. A. G. Stickland.

At the rear of the hall was a small exhibition of drawings and photographs illustrating Alton in the past 100 years, and a case containing several items connected with the Founder.

After the meeting teas were served and many people visited the Museum. The Exhibition was open to the public on Monday, September 12th.