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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Past, Present and Future of Aberdeen University Natural History Museum

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Source: Watt, K. R. (1978). Past, Present and Future of Aberdeen University Natural History Museum. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 2 No 1, 24 - 27.*

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1659>

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Michael A. Taylor
Keeper of Natural Sciences

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY
NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

THE PAST

The Natural History Museum was founded in 1841 when William MacGillivray took up the post of Professor of Natural History at Marischal College. The museum was fortunate to have had such an eminent curator in its infancy (MacGillivray is the author of "The History of British Birds"), for he brought to the post a formidable reputation and considerable experience, which he had acquired as conservator of the Museum of the Edinburgh College of Surgeons.

MacGillivray and his successors, like Prof. J. W. H. Trail and Prof. J. A. Thomson, through their own collecting efforts helped to build up the museum's collections. As it was a teaching museum the collections were not restricted to any particular taxonomic group or geographical area.

THE PRESENT

Museum Policy

Since 1971, when the Zoology Department and its museum moved from

Marischal College to its present new, purpose built accommodation in Tillydrone Avenue, the current policy has been to reduce the number of specimens on display and increase the amount of explanatory and interpretive material. While the policy of the museum is still mainly to provide a service for the teaching side of the university it has been broadened to include visits from primary and secondary schools and other educational institutions. This has not been easy as the nature of the displays is strongly slanted towards undergraduate use. To help overcome this problem the museum has developed some work sheets for "O" and "H" Grade classes.

The Staff

The staff at present consists of:-

The Curator	Prof. Dunnet
A Lecturer in charge of the museum	Dr. Thorpe
A taxidermist/cabinet maker	Mr. Bisset
A receptionist/typist/printer and a technician in charge of invertebrates	Mrs. Rebecca Mr. Watt

The Displays

The displays, which are located in one hall (ca. 900 sq. m.) with a gallery above, cover all the major groups of the animal kingdom with most emphasis on the mammals and British birds. It has taken about seven years to complete the existing displays since moving into the present building. We have now started to redisplay some of the older exhibits to make them more relevant to the students needs. In addition, around the gallery, we exhibit some of the collections made by the honours students.

For the past one and a half years, four graduates and two school leavers have been employed under the Job Creation Programme in redisplaying the exhibits. In particular they have developed an audio/visual package covering the reptiles on display. This unit is simple to operate by the students and consists of a Kodak S-AV 2000 Carousel slide projector linked to an 8 track continuous loop tape deck, containing the commentary and the coded pulses to automatically change the slides and switch itself off. A second unit has been bought and the programme being developed will cover the amphibians. Eventually we hope to have most of the displays linked to an A/V programme.

Recently we experimented by putting on a temporary exhibition about Linnaeus, which is currently touring Britain. As this has been quite successful we hope to acquire further temporary exhibitions.

In addition the museum also exhibits some live animals; mainly reptiles and amphibians, which prove a great attraction with visiting schools, since there is no zoo in Aberdeen.

Storage

The museum is fortunate in having air conditioned storage for the bird and mammal skins as well as the insect and egg collections. However, as with most museums we are now running out of space, with the result that the large mammal skeletons and the wet collections do not have suitable storage.

The Collections

Unfortunately many of the original collections presented by Professors MacGillivray, Trail and Thomson can not now be traced, since many of the older specimens in the collections have lost their labels or been poorly curated at some time. No doubt some of the collections have been broken up and used for teaching purposes. The following are some of our existing good collections.

The Hay Fenton Collection of bird eggs

This is a very valuable collection as it consists of 10,478 specimens, all in clutches, belonging to 389 species of birds from all over the world. In particular there is a Great Auk egg, purchased in 1908 for 190 guineas with the inscription "Pingouin" - believed to be the handwriting of Dufresne, the keeper of the King's cabinet in Paris. Also present is an egg of Wilson's Petrel, obtained by Dr. Bruce while leader of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition of 1902-04, from Laurie Is., S. Orkneys. The collection is extremely rich in the eggs of birds of prey as well as there being an exceptional series of cuckoo eggs with their foster clutches.

The MacGillivray Collection of British birds and their eggs.

The MacGillivray Collection of foreign bird skins from Upper Canada, N.S. Wales, S. America, India & Europe.

M. A. Murray Collection of Indian bird skins

H. O. Forbes Collection of bird skins from New Guinea, 1882-85

Forbes-Leith Collection of foreign bird skins

Dr. John Flux Collection (1960) of mammal skins and osteological material - mainly hares (about 190 specimens)

A Collection of Wild Cat skins by various collectors from 1958 onwards (60 specimens)

James Duncan Collection of British Lepidoptera and their larvae.

James Duncan was a well known northern naturalist, resident in Aberdeen from 1900-1930. His collection consists of about 10,000 specimens representing some 750 species.

Robert Dawson Collection of molluscs from the north east of Scotland (date 1870).
The Dove Salt Collection of British Mollusca made about 1880
containing over 1800 shells of 290 species.

We also have a collection of the first Bird Ringing Records ever made in Britain, Aberdeen University being one of the centres where the practice of ringing birds first started.

THE FUTURE

Recataloguing of the museums collections will shortly begin using the M. D. A. record cards. Extra staff we hope will be recruited for this task through the Manpower Services Commission.

The Displays will continue to be changed and brought up to date.

Storage

A start has been made to the reorganisation of the old insect collections and new cabinets have been acquired which will house the growing Coleoptera, Hymenoptera and Diptera collections. A similar reorganisation of the wet stores is also being undertaken.

Biological Recording

An effort is being made to make the museum a Biological Records Centre for the region. The university museum would be a suitable place to set up such a centre as there is no natural history museum in the city to take on this task. In addition the museum is building up extensive local collections with records coming in from the university field centre at Culterty and from the honours students who each year donate between 20 and 30 collections of mainly local fauna.

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