



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

---

Title: Prawns in the Game?

Author(s): Atkinson, N. K.

Source: Atkinson, N. K. (1978). Prawns in the Game?. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 2 No 1*, 28 - 31.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1660>

---

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

## PRAWNS IN THE GAME?

### A History of Montrose Museum

At a meeting of the Montrose Chess Club on 15th August, 1836, several members decided to form the Montrose Natural History and Antiquarian Society.

One of the main aims of the M. N. H. A. S. was to institute a museum in the town, and since donations were admitted almost immediately the M. N. H. A. S. applied to the Magistrates and Town Council for accommodation in one of the vacant rooms in the Old English Schools. This was granted, and the museum officially opened on Monday, 2nd January, 1837.

The first Curator was one James Molison, whose natural history collection had been purchased by the society for £10. His duties consisted of attending three days a week (three hours at a time) and stuffing and mounting any skins that might be handed in. For these duties he was to receive 'Four guineas or a copy of Wilson's Ornithology and whatever amount of eyes and materials he required'!

At the time, Montrose was a booming port with many of its sons sea-faring men. Donations of natural history specimens came in thick and fast from all corners of the globe so that after only a few months the committee was expressing concern over the lack of space. On 3rd October, 1838, Lord Panmure became the second President and immediately launched a buildings fund with a donation of £200. By now the temporary museum contained more than 150 birds, British and foreign, 2,200 specimens of entomology, several hundred shells, about 1000 dried plants in the herbarium and many geological specimens.

In 1840 a site was procured and a building of some 40' x 70' square, with a lower and upper gallery complete with balcony was erected. The frontage was of the Grecian order 'as best fitted for a building with few windows, and as combining Elegance with Economy'! The foundation stone was laid on 5th May, 1841 and the building was opened to the public on 27th October, 1843 at a total cost of £847.9s.4d. Nearly 4,000 visitors a year were recorded, and the society flourished.

Most of the members of the M. N. H. A. S. were professional men, including doctors, solicitors, ministers (Scottish equivalent of vicars) all of whom seemed to have ample time to devote to their particular natural history field. These men included the Rev. Dr. Hugh Mitchell of Craig Parish - fossil collector and discoverer of Mesacanthus mitchelli (Egerton) a small spiny fish from the Lower Old Red Sandstone. It is said that he arrived early at a house in order to perform a

christening ceremony. Since the father of the household had not appeared he borrowed a hammer and set off to explore a nearby quarry at Farnell. Here he found this fish new to science and promptly set off home clutching his discovery, forgetting completely about the christening.

Of the botanists, although Robert Brown (Associate of the Linnean Society) was a member, Alexander Croall stands out. On Sir William Hooker's request Croall prepared a set of plants of Braemar for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, 'which he did to their entire satisfaction'. Croall began his career teaching in Montrose, and during this time prepared a 'Flora of Angus and Mearns' as a reference collection for the museum. This included a fair number of local discoveries. Croall added to this collection and others in the museum throughout his lifetime, although he eventually left to take up the post of librarian at Derby Museum. From there he moved to Stirling, where he became the first Curator of the newly erected Smith Institute.

Perhaps the greatest collector of them all was Dr. James Howden, who was Physician Superintendent of the Montrose Lunatic Asylum. Howden was an avid collector of neolithic axeheads and fossil shells from the clays which were used by the local pottery, set up a local bird skin reference collection, and contributed a wide range of specimens, both natural and historical. He was also one of the few members of the M. N. H. A. S. who had definite views on what a local museum should be doing. His speech on the subject, in 1873, is as relevant today as it was then.

His speech is too lengthy and verbose to reproduce here, but is sufficient to say that Howden believed passionately in the museum producing complete collections of the local fauna and flora, was a great supporter of active fieldwork and put education high up on his priority list. Perhaps his views on displays are somewhat extreme, but are nevertheless interesting.

"Though I admit that as a mere show much might be said in favour of a museum, I cannot but think that this is its very lowest and only accidental function . . . . . local museums are in this respect invariably commercial failures . . . we need not expect that our museum will successfully compete in this line with the itinerant penny shows, with their fat ladies, Norfolk giants, and six-legged pigs!"

Howden's comments were paid heed to, at least to some extent, and although foreign material continued to be added to the collections, a much more concerted effort was made by some of the members and successive curators.

The era of the Howdens and others came to an end at the turn of the century, and after the first World War very few members were as active as their predecessors. The building had gained an extension in 1889 and the Montrose Library (instituted in 1785) in 1907, but nevertheless the society ceased to be the active organisation that it once was.

After the Second World War the M.N.H. A.S. began to encounter financial difficulties, which resulted in a number of sales to help funds. A good many interesting specimens and collections disappeared during the 1950's and few records were kept of the transactions.

In 1958 the museum was totally redisplayed and this resulted in a large number of the natural history specimens being removed, stored away, sold and destroyed. With increasing heating problems, damp, parasites and woodworm a fair proportion of the stored collections were allowed to deteriorate.

The financial situation of the M.N.H. A.S. went from bad to worse, and at the A.G.M. on 17th May, 1972, the 16 members who attended agreed to have the museum and its contents taken over by the local authority. This eventually took place in 1974, when Montrose Town Council became the owners of the museum and its collections. With local government reorganisation coming into effect on the 16th May, 1975, the museums in the hands of all the Angus Town Councils came under the new Libraries, Museums and Art Galleries Department of Angus District Council.

During the last days of the M.N.H. A.S., discussions had taken place with the trustees of the A. N. Balfour Bequest, who agreed to provide funds for the total renovation of the museum. This has now formally been agreed, and work on the fabric of the building is to begin early in 1979.

Since I arrived in April, 1977 one of the main tasks has been to catalogue the District's collections. Although the M.N.H. A.S. did have a catalogue of sorts, and also a fair number of day-books, no comprehensive catalogue was available. A good deal of information was also available in the form of old labels, letters accompanying donations, M.N.H. A.S. annual reports and minute books, and work is still in progress extracting this data and attempting to match it to the remaining collections.

Montrose Museum was closed in September, 1977, to enable work to proceed on both the collections and the fabric of the building. The damp environment of the museum forced us to seek alternative accommodation for the collections and eventually they were moved to rooms in the Town House. The enormity of the task to some extent has been reduced by enlisting the aid of the Manpower Services Commission, initially using

a Job Creation Team to document the collections, and currently a Project-Based Work Experience Programme to further both this work and help towards the planning of the new museum displays.

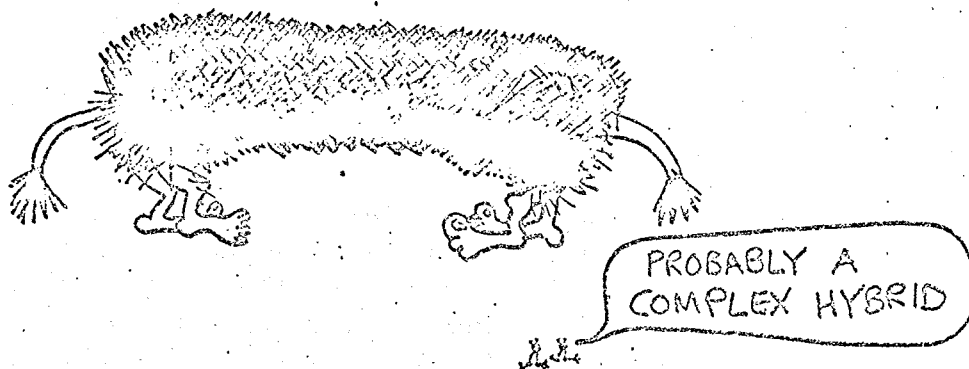
Some idea of the size and scope of the natural history collections is given in the list below. Please note that these figures are estimates only.

Mammals - 200, mostly foreign  
Birds - Mounts 900; skins 200; eggs 2,200; Mostly British  
Reptiles )  
Amphibians ) 300 - Mostly foreign  
Fishes )  
Insects - 3,000, British and Foreign  
Molluscs - 3,000 mostly British  
Other invertebrates - 500 British and Foreign  
Plants - 7,000 Mostly British flowering, with some lichens,  
mosses and seaweeds.  
Seeds, fruits - 300, mostly foreign  
Rocks and Minerals - 3,700, British and foreign  
Fossils - 2,400, British and foreign

Hopefully at the end of another year the collections will be in a reasonably well-documented state, while the museum itself, complete with a new natural history gallery illustrating Angus wildlife, will re-open sometime in 1980.

Norman K. Atkinson, Curator,  
Angus District Museums

-----



*A. Bebbin*