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THE BUTTERFLY COLLECTION OF
THE ROYAL ALBERT MEMORIAL MUSEUM
ITS HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

The first record of any exotic butterflies being received in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum was on 21st April 1904, when a number of unset butterflies from West Africa were presented by a Doctor Gray. This was followed on 4th May 1904, by twenty-six Indian butterflies being donated by a Miss Gray.

On 10th July 1917, the records show that four cabinets of insects were purchased which comprised "exotic butterflies and moths from the collection of Mr. Carter of Torquay". Three years later Col. Talbot presented an unset collection of Indian butterflies and in 1923 collections of Burmese and European butterflies were donated by C. G. Dawkins and Lady Davey respectively.

Between 1926 and 1928 various small collections were received from donors comprising African, American, European and Burmese butterflies, and in December 1930, fifty-six butterflies were received from a Major A. B. Gay of Lapford, Devon. This was to prove the first of many donations, extending over more than thirty years, from a man who was to work at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in a voluntary capacity from 1932 and who, in 1936, was to become Assistant Curator with direct responsibility for the entire natural history collections.

From the earliest days, the exotic butterflies were housed in various cabinets in the natural history gallery, and to these cabinets the public had freedom of access. For this reason a great number of the original insects became badly damaged, so much so that they had to be discarded. In fact it is doubtful if many of them have survived to the present day.

It was one of the first duties of Major A. B. Gay to take the butterflies from public view; to obtain a set of volumes entitled "The Macrolepidoptera of the World" by Doctor A. Seitz, and commence building up a collection of world butterflies following the classification as laid down by Doctor Seitz.

Here it should be said that Major A. B. Gay was a man of independent means with no living relatives, consequently from his own pocket he purchased, over a period of many years, a great many rare and valuable specimens for the Museum, in addition to fourteen 30-drawer cabinets in which to house the collection.

Throughout his period of office Major A. B. Gay was instrumental in obtaining for the museum such outstanding collections as those of Joicey, Hebbert, Symington, Solley and Hall, to name but a few, plus many thousands of specimens presented by the Trustees of the British Museum of Natural History in London.

In 1955 Major Gay was able to arrange for Captain G. C. Woodward's extensive collection of exotic butterflies, housed in twenty-six cabinets, to be donated to the museum, and in 1958 he was equally successful in obtaining the presentation of the F. Blanchford collection of exotic butterflies in eight cabinets.

At one period the collection contained 27 type specimens together with 34 co-types. However, it was considered desirable that the types, with one exception, should be housed in the National Collection and consequently in 1935 they were passed to the British Museum of Natural History for safe custody. Of the co-types 27 specimens were presented to the museum by Major A. B. Gay.

Up to the time of his death, in March 1959, Major Gay had classified and arranged in the consolidated collection all of the butterflies so far received, with the exception of the Woodward and Blanchford collections.

In June 1959, I was appointed Curator of Natural History and, in addition to my routine work, I had the responsibility of classifying and arranging the Blanchford collection - which was the smaller of the two - and this was finally absorbed into the consolidated collection in 1965.

During this time also, six 30-drawer cabinets were purchased to accommodate the expanding consolidated collection. The money for the purchase of these being supplied from the Major A. B. Gay Bequest Fund, and partly from the money raised by the sale of obsolete non-uniform cabinets donated with insects over a period of many years.

Between 1965 and 1973 the American and African species of butterflies in the Woodward collection had been classified and absorbed into the museum collection, but it was not until 1976 that the Woodward Indo/Australian and Palearctic butterflies, numbering 14,933 specimens, were classified and incorporated, and the main consolidated collection completed.

The classification and incorporation of the Blanchford and Woodward collections necessitated a massive and complete re-arrangement of the consolidated collection, and as this work progressed so it became imperative to purchase a further sixteen 30-drawer cabinets, the money for which was, in the main, provided from a generous bequest made to the museum by the late Charles Henry William Griffiths of Taplow, Bucks.

As it stands today, the museum collection houses 58,503 specimens distributed in 1,080 drawers and, because of its magnificent range of species, varieties and the many rarities it contains, ranks as one of the finest collections of world butterflies ever assembled in Great Britain.

The museum collection is always made readily available to professional entomologists and serious students of world lepidoptera, but in all the circumstances, it must be restricted in its use to such specialists.

C. V. Anthony Adams,
Curator of Natural History, June 1959 - Jan. 1979
Ramm, Exeter.

NB: A list of genera, excluding British material, consisting of 113 pages has been prepared and is available from the Royal Albert Memorial Museum on request. Please include £1 to cover postage and packing.

The sad end of old blue

THE MOST secret butterfly site in Britain, known only to be "somewhere in Devon," is still on the top secret list although its most illustrious occupant is now almost certainly extinct.

Insect experts say it may be another year before they can reveal the last hiding place in Britain of the Large Blue butterfly, or *Maculinea Arion*.

In its final resting place in Devon, the last colony of 22 Large Blues produced their eggs as usual this year, but dismayed entomologists found that none of the eggs was viable — and that spelt the sad end of an insect which has topped the "most endangered" list for 300 years.

Successive droughts followed by poor weather during the hatching period provided the final nail in the mini-coffin of the Large Blue which is slightly smaller than its common Tortoiseshell cousin.

Easy catch

One of the butterfly's problems was that it did not mind people. "It was incredibly easy to catch and one collector could get through the whole lot on one site in a day," Dr. Jeremy Thomas of the

Institute of Terrestrial Ecology in Dorset said today.

"They did not in this case because we warded the site all the time. It has always been a rare specimen and there have never been more than 90 colonies in the past 300 years.

"The main factor in its extinction is that their habitat changed in small ways and became much less stable. With the population already low and then nobbled by the droughts they were just unable to cope."

Good condition

Despite the demise of the Large Blue, the Nature Conservancy Council, who have maintained an intensive research programme on the species since 1972, intends keeping the Devon site in good condition in case an unknown survivor should turn up.

Consideration will also be given to re-introducing the butterfly from the Continent. However, the insect is rare there too and there is some dispute in butterfly circles as to whether the British Large Blue is in fact the same as the European Large Blue.

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