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## THE ROLE OF THE TAXIDERMIST

It has taken about 300 years for taxidermy as we know it to develop into its present state. Some would say it has changed little in that time but those familiar with taxidermy in museums are aware of the exceptional quality of many recently prepared specimens. The museum taxidermist today is continually in search of improved methods. It must be realised that a large part of any taxidermist's knowledge is self-taught and that only a lifetime of study in the subject can produce the high quality of specimens on display in a number of our museums. However it is not just an ability to mount animals that produces these results. Due to a sound knowledge of general Natural History it is the taxidermist who is best qualified to design the lay-out of dioramas. It is he also who has the knowledge and capability to produce the model groundwork and plants suitable for each individual display. Familiarity with all species dealt with is of course essential whether they be mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians or plants. The taxidermist then is no longer the "Animal Preserver" of the Victorian era but a scientific craftsman.

Modern technology and materials have influenced the development of taxidermy with polyester resins, alginates and other moulding and casting materials being the most noticeable of these. The last few years have also seen the widespread use of freeze driers though the considerable limitations of these are now realised. The quality and permanence of animals and plants prepared in these machines rarely compares with the results obtained by a competent taxidermist using more traditional methods.

A wide selection of mounted specimens in artistically produced and accurate dioramas is obviously essential for relaying to the public an understanding of the environment. However the present day taxidermist is responsible, more than ever before, for preparing study skins, any of which may become essential for scientific research. These appear to be favoured by many museums largely because of the reduced storage space available. However another factor influencing this matter is the comparative ease with which study skins can be prepared and the mistaken belief that the appearance of these is less important than that of a conventional mount. This results in museum technicians being given the task of preparing skins which while convenient and possibly cheaper can result in deterioration of standards. Freeze driers have also increased the number of study specimens prepared by technicians. The outcome of these changes is obvious, more technicians producing study skins, dried specimens and fluid preparations and less taxidermists. Any reduction in the number of museum taxidermists will inevitably lead to the loss of a skill which has been perfected by generations and will not be replaceable when, after the passing of a few

more, our present collections have fallen into decay.

If Natural History museums are to continue in their role of educating the general public and displaying exhibits rather than purely storing scientific information taxidermists must be encouraged to continue to improve standards and to train other Naturalists in the art.

Chris Stoate  
Natural History Officer  
North of England Museums Service

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A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE MAJOR NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS  
AT THE DORMAN MUSEUM, MIDDLESBROUGH

The present building of the Dorman Memorial Museum was presented to the town of Middlesbrough by the late Sir Arthur J. Dorman in memory of his son, Lieutenant G. L. Dorman and the men of the 3rd Battalion, Princess of Wales Own Yorkshire Regiment, who fell in the Boer War of 1899-1902. This coincided with the gift by the late Sir Alfred E. Pease of a large collection of mammals, birds and other specimens brought mainly from East Africa.

The building was opened in 1904 but in fact there had been a museum movement for some years before this. This movement was mainly in natural history, indeed the Dorman Museum can be said to have its roots in natural history.

In 1868 the Cleveland Literary and Philosophical Society with its connected Field Club decided to establish a museum. Objects were collected in the ensuing years and placed in the new hall of the society in 1877-1878 as exhibits of the Field Club and Science sections of the Society. In 1884 these, (by now large), collections were given into the care of the Free Library Committee of the Corporation. They were stored in various places before being exhibited in rooms in the Municipal Buildings on Dunning Street. These exhibitions were opened to the public in 1890 and formed Middlesbrough's first public museum for ten further years.

Situated at the main entrance to Albert Park, the Dorman Museum was extended in 1968 and there are plans for further extensions in the future to provide much needed storage and display areas.

The Keepers

With its background of natural history the Dorman Museum has naturally enough had a number of naturalists among its staff.