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INSTITUTIONS WITH NATURAL SCIENCES COLLECTIONS IN TYNE AND WEAR - A BRIEF HISTORY AND LIST OF MAJOR DONORS

Local Government reorganisation in 1974 resulted in the formation of a County Museums Service for the Metropolitan County of Tyne and Wear. Of the ten Museums brought under the County umbrella, three had collections of biological specimens - South Shields Museum, the Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead and Sunderland Museum. The latter has collections of some significance, and became the focal point for the natural sciences section of the service. Centralisation of specialist collections in the various disciplines took place from the inception of the County Service, and the majority of the natural sciences collections previously stored at South Shields and Gateshead had been transferred to Sunderland by 1976.

The following notes outline briefly the development of the three institutions concerned, and the principal donors of biological specimens.

South Shields Museum

The first Working Men's Club and Institution in Britain was established in South Shields on March 11th 1850, in a schoolroom in Queen Street. By 1865 the membership had grown to 463, and new premises had been leased in East King Street. Although the Institution provided recreational facilities - these included rooms for bagatelle and chess and a large yard for quoits - its main function was as a library, newsroom and centre for debate. Two scientific societies, the South Shields Microscopical Society (founded November 4th 1861) and the South Shields Geological Club (founded October 9th 1862) were established as offshoots from the Institution and a small museum was established to exhibit items 'of scientific and mechanical interest'. Little is known of the personalities, achievements and eventual fates of these two societies. Only the Geological Club's first President, George Lyall, F. G. S. (1818-1896), appears to have had a scientific reputation, being a notable and active member of the Tyneside Naturalists Field Club.

In 1870 the Working Men's Club and Institution amalgamated with the South Shields Literary, Mechanical and Scientific Institution. The latter had been established on November 23rd 1825, in the basement of the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Cornwallis Street. A new building in Fowler Street housed their library and recreation rooms from 1855 to 1859, but as the membership grew it became evident that there was a need for a building with reading and recreation rooms and a hall for public meetings. On August 18th, 1859, the foundation stone of the present museum - then the new 'Mechanics Institute' - was laid by the President of the Institution, Robert Ingham M. P., the building being opened on April 10th 1860.

Following the amalgamation in 1870 the Mechanics Institute, its library and museum were offered by the Literary, Mechanical and Scientific Institution to the Corporation as a public library, subject to existing liabilities of £2150. The offer was accepted and the building formally opened as a public library by the Mayor, Alderman Terrot Glover on October 15th, 1873. The museum was placed in a room on the ground floor and opened to the public on February 24th 1876. Bailey, a local historian, gives a graphic description of the museum - 'a little dingy, stuffy room...that was the museum containing some weird and wonderful exhibits. Then I fancy the museum was largely dependent for its additions upon the well-meaning but doubtful generosity of the busy housewife who, in the conscientious execution of her annual spring cleaning discovered 'bits of things the museum would be glad to have' ". The museum and reference library were moved to the public hall (the former meetings room of the Society) on the first floor in 1898, the extended library being opened by Mr. J. C. Stephenson on 25th August of that year.

Apart from some re-labelling and cleaning carried out by the Area Museums Service in 1967, the museum had changed very little since 1898 when Tyne and Wear County Council took responsibility for it in 1974. Biological and geological specimens formed the majority of the collections, but as the museum had never had specialist staff, let alone a Curator, inevitably these were uncatalogued, unsorted and in extremely poor condition. Storage for biological and geological collections not displayed was a shed at the rear of the building - another addition to the catalogue of nightmare stores. With few exceptions all specimens found here had to be discarded. Details of donations to the museum are traceable in the Minute books of the Library Committee, and the biological items reflect South Shields' connection with the sea, with frequent donations of 'sawfish snouts' and 'shells from a Pacific Island'. Because of the mistreatment and disregard of the collections, few of the surviving items can be traced to their original donor.

Only two collections are worthy of mention. The Runciman Collection of mounted birds and mammals was bought for and donated to the museum in 1921 by Sir Walter Runciman (1847-1937), senior partner of a Newcastle steamship company. This consisted of 60 cases of specimens prepared by William Yellowley (1823-1893), and his sons. William was a pharmacist and taxidermist in South Shields, and had acted as honorary curator of the museum and served as a member of the Library Committee from 1874 to his death. The Percy Hedley Collection of local Butterflies and Moths was donated to the museum in 1902. These two collections have been moved to Sunderland.

In 1977, The Curator of South Shields Museum, Mr. F.R. Woodward, donated his large collection of freshwater bivalve Mollusca to Tyne and Wear Museums, and this is now housed in South Shields.

Collections from Gateshead - The Shipley Art Gallery and Saltwell Towers Museum

Joseph Ainsley Davison Shipley, a prominent Gateshead solicitor, died at his home, Saltwell Towers, on 4th February 1909, aged 86. In his will he left a bequest of £30,000 to build an Art Gallery, and his collection of 500 paintings to put in it, to Gateshead Corporation. Saltwell Towers, erected in 1871 by William Wailes, a local manufacturer of stained glass windows, was also bequeathed to the town. This building was distinguished by fine wood carving on the doors and panelling executed by Gerrard Robinson (1832-1881), and excellent examples of late Victorian moulded plaster ceilings. Shipley had lived at Saltwell Towers from 1889.

The terms of the bequest were carried out and the Shipley Art Gallery opened to the public on the 29th November 1917. The building was quickly to become more than an art gallery, basement rooms being adapted to display the Ravensworth Bird Collection in 1920, and items of social history and natural history interest being acquired by donation and purchase. The new building flourished, with changing displays, evening lectures and civic receptions.

Saltwell Towers meanwhile, appears to have become something of an embarrassment. The building, often referred to as 'The Mansion House' at Council Meetings, had been tenanted by a number of people, and acted as a childrens hospital for a short period during the Great War. In June 1932 the Council first considered utilising a portion of the house for the purpose of a museum, a suggestion that 'a sum of £100 should be provided to form the nucleus of a collection, and that a sum of £200 per annum would cover the salary of a caretaker/ attendant, including house, fuel and lighting'. A Steering Committee was appointed, alteration work proceeded, and Saltwell Towers Museum

opened to the public on 8th July 1933. The natural history, social history and technology collections were transferred to the new museum, from the overcrowded Shipley Art Gallery.

A number of references are made in Council Minutes and Annual Reports of the museum to dry rot, and its treatment, in Saltwell Towers. However, the following statement appears in the Annual Report for 1968-69. 'In view of the cost of repairing the damage by dry rot in Saltwell Towers Museum, the Committee decided to close the Museum from 12th February 1969. The specimens are to remain there, for the time being, until alternative accommodation is found.' One wonders if a decision to leave 'specimens' unattended would have been taken so readily had they been fine or applied art? - particularly considering that the Museum had been subject to burglary and vandalism just prior to closure. The collections were eventually removed from Saltwell Towers to the basement of the Shipley Art Gallery in May 1969, where they remained until 1976, subject to poor climatic conditions. The remnants of a once interesting and diverse collection were transferred from Gateshead to Sunderland Museum in 1976. Saltwell Towers is still standing, but under the threat of a demolition order.

The following is a brief list of major donors:-

Mounted birds: J. Lawson (1921); Mr. Watson (1922);
Lord Ravensworth (1928 & 1936);
G. T. Tweddle (1933); Mrs. Emley (1934);
Mr. Henderson (1934); Hancock Museum
(1935 & 1947); Mrs. Bell (1936); J. H.
Ritson (1937).

The major collection is that of Lord Ravensworth (Gerald Wellesly Liddell) (1869-1938), his birds regarded by members of the Museum Committee as 'a small museum in themselves'. Some 350 birds and 200 eggs were donated in 1928, when a basement room at the Shipley Art Gallery was converted to a 'bird room', to display them. It is unclear how many specimens were received in 1936, but reference is made to specimens mounted by R. Duncan (1857-98), R. Duncan Junior (1877-) and J. Jackson, celebrated Newcastle taxidermists, and John Cullingford (fl. 1878-1905) of Durham.

Birds eggs: Mrs. Humble (1921); H. Russell Eastcott
(1927); Lord Ravensworth (1928); Mrs.
J. Taite (1935); Mr. C. Bolam (1937); Capt. Nash

Russell Eastcott's collection was unfortunately a prime target for the theft and vandalism which occurred at Saltwell Towers, although

his record books indicate the true extent of his collection.

<u>Mammals:</u>	Lord Ravensworth (1928); Hancock Museum (1935); Messrs. Pape & Sons (1935)
<u>Entomology:</u>	Mrs. Humble (1921); R. Swinburne (1933); Mr. Haig (1935); Mr. Hepple (1937); Mr. Ridley (1940); W. B. Charlton (1947)
<u>Mollusca:</u>	Mr. Carrick (1939)
<u>Flowering plants:</u>	H. Warlock (1933); Miss R. Dodds (1940)

Sunderland Museum

Until quite recently, it was a long held belief that the origins of Sunderland Museum lay with the formation of the Sunderland Natural History and Antiquarian Society in 1836. However, Tim Pettigrew, Assistant Keeper of Natural Sciences, recently discovered a reference to a Sunderland Museum of 1829 in a paper by Adam Sedgwick (1829) where (p118) in describing the fossil fish of the magnesian limestone he states 'To this list may be added the fossil fish found at Pallion, and described by Dr. Clanny and Mr. Winch. The specimen is preserved in the museum of Sunderland, and has been referred to the genus Chaetodon, but this cannot be considered as well ascertained till a more elaborate figure of the fossil has been published.' This specimen (the holotype of Platysomus parvus (Agassiz)) is still in the collections. It is assumed that the museum referred to by Sedgwick is that of the Literary and Philosophical Society (founded 1795), and further research is now being carried out to determine the nature and extent of this Museum.

Sunderland Natural History and Antiquarian Society was founded on 17 November 1836, and the original Committee (listed by Bowley (1896)) includes a number of prominent philanthropists and naturalists. The Earl of Durham George Frederick Darcy (1828-1879), Edward Backhouse (1781-1860), Edward Backhouse jnr (1808-1879) and Robert Vint (1807-1890) were all to support the museum and donate significant collections to it. The Society collections grew rapidly, accumulating first of all in the passages of the Subscription Library, afterwards in the rooms of the Literary Society in Villiers Street, and eventually under the wing of the Literary and Philosophical Society in the Athanaeum building in Fawcett Street (possibly the time of merger of the two Museum collections).

In May 1846 the collections were transferred to Sunderland Corporation, which appears to have been one of the first two local authorities to implement the 1845 Museums Act. Colchester Corporation also decided to establish a public museum in the same month as Sunderland, but as this was not open to the public until 1860, Sunderland would seem to have a good claim to be the oldest local authority museum in the country. The Natural History and Antiquarian Society produced a report which surveyed the collections about to pass to the corporation. These were mainly natural history items, birds, mammals, insects, plants and geology, and the report itself was an extremely enlightened document, stressing the educational potential of museums and the value of having a collecting policy.

As the collections in the Athenaeum continued to grow, frequent complaints were made regarding the lack of space, and in September 1877 the erection of a new Museum and Library Building was approved by the Borough Council. The foundation stone of the Borough Road building was laid on 24 September 1877 and opened to the public on 6 November 1879. This building remained unaltered until 1964, when large extensions to the rear of the building provided much needed storage, display space and office accommodation.

In 1974 the Museum came under the Tyne and Wear Museums umbrella, and a new generation of displays started with the opening of the Local Wildlife gallery in 1977 - in the same room which had housed the natural history exhibits from 1879. Redisplay of the gallery necessitated reorganisation of storage areas, a problem heightened by the rescue of material from South Shields and Gateshead. Only the modification of the basement area for the geology and coral collections now remains to complete this reorganisation.

List of major donors with date:-

Flowering Plants - Thomas Robson (1893); E. Backhouse & 'JB' herbarium (1894); Rev. W.S. Harrison (1895); Rev. A.M. Norman (1898); Miss H. Panton (1903); Rev. W.J. Wingate (1912); D.C. Ungley (1960?); M.H. Oates (1960's); E. De Vesian (1974); R. Maycock (1978); Wallis (1978); G. Graham (1977/8/9)

Although the majority of the Edward Backhouse (1808-1879) collection (some 20,000 natural history specimens) came to the Museum in 1907, a small, yet interesting collection of plants was donated in 1894. The 'E. Backhouse' herbarium includes specimens collected in the late 18th century and has been attributed in the past to Edward Backhouse (1781-1860), although this appears doubtful. The 'JB' herbarium is equally problematical, being attributed at one time to James Backhouse

of York (1825-1890), although a comparison of handwriting has now discounted this.

The herbarium is a major growth point, due to the association with the Durham Flora project, and its co-ordinator the Rev. G. G. Graham. All voucher specimens for the Flora, which is now nearing completion, will be housed at Sunderland.

Bryophytes - Sunderland Natural History and Antiquarian Society (1850); E. Backhouse (1894); Miss H. Panton (1903); A. J. Campbell (1908); W. J. Wingate (1912); Angus Haw (1933); Rev. G. Graham (1977/8/9);

Fungi - E. Backhouse (1907); A. M. Norman (1898)

Marine Algae - W. M. Wake (1880); A. M. Norman (1898); Edward Backhouse (1907); W. J. Wingate (1912)

Non-British Ferns - M. N. Chevalier (1893); Colonel Lake (1899); Edward Backhouse (1907)

Diatoms - C. T. Trechmann (1966)

Anthozoa - (Scleractinia) Dr. D. Redpath (1901); J. Morgan (1902); J. Potts (1909); Durham University (1977)

Mollusca - (British) Percival Vernon (1882); A. S. Thompson (1882/83); Joseph Taylor (1889); Wilcox (1898); L. Hartman (1902); E. Backhouse (1907); I. Sharpe (1910); Rev. E. P. Blackburn (1962); C. T. Trechmann (1964); R. Lowe (1979)

Mollusca (non-British) E. Backhouse (1907); Rev. E. P. Blackburn (1962)

Some 4000 foreign shells were included in the Backhouse donation, and a significant number are labelled 'ex-Reeve' and 'ex-Cumming colln'.

Insecta

Lepidoptera (Foreign) Mason (1877); Beckwith (1881); F. T. Toft (1885/88); Miss Marshall (1897); A. M. Long (1898); Rev. Walter Andrews (1905); E. Backhouse (1907); Earl of Durham (1907); Rev. J. W. Brent (1908); A. Ritson (1908); Miles Moss and Walker Binns (1948); Shipley Art Gallery (1976).

The Backhouse material includes specimens collected by Alfred Russell Wallace from the East Indies, and James Backhouse (of York) from

South America.

- Lepidoptera (British) J. Bell (1881); J.W. Corder (1898, 1903, 1908); C. Boyat (1907); E. Backhouse (1907); J.W. Prince (1908); Dowsey & Richardson (1914); Harbottle (1914); Nat. Hist. Soc. Northumberland & Durham (1950); J.W.D. Magog (1953); C.T. Trechmann (1964); M. Milburn (1956); J. Newton (1965); D.A. Sheppard (1977); T. Jefferson (1979)
- Coleoptera (British) Rev. W.J. Wingate (1911/12); A. Harbottle (1913); J. Gardner (1915); Rev. H.J. Holme (1929)
- Coleoptera (Foreign) J.W. Corder (1898); Earl of Durham (1907); ?W. Peacock
- Diptera (British) Rev. W.J. Wingate (1911/12); C.T. Trechmann (1964)
- Hymenoptera (British) A. Harbottle (1913); C.T. Trechmann (1964); D. Sheppard (1977)
- Hymenoptera (Foreign) Earl of Durham (1907)
- Odonata (British) A. Harbottle (1913)
- Odonata (Foreign) Earl of Durham (1907)
- Phasmida, Dictyoptera & Hemiptera (Foreign) Earl of Durham (1907)
- Birds Robert Cameron (1876); Magog (1878); F. Toft (1886); N. Chevalier (1893); J.L. Scott (1921); M. Platt (1919); W. Rowe (1927); De Costa (1927); Hedworth-Williams (1935); T.W. Parrington (1962); C.T. Trechmann (1964)
- Birds Eggs G.C. Heslop (1874); J. Lintell (1878); F. Corder (1880); Duncan (1880); W. Rogerson (1881); R. Cameron (1886); E. Backhouse (1907); B.B. Mewburn (1907); J. Potts (1909); J.W. Bell (1919); Webster (1926)

Mammals W. Rowe (1927); W.J. Potts (1963, 1964)

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Peter Davis
Sunderland Museum

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