



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Natural History at the Colchester and Essex Museum

Author(s): Heath, J. J.

Source: Heath, J. J. (1980). Natural History at the Colchester and Essex Museum. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 2 No 6, 255 - 256.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1748>

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.

NATURAL HISTORY AT THE COLCHESTER AND ESSEX MUSEUM

There was an active Natural History section at Colchester during the Victorian period when a number of local collectors and the early Colchester Natural History Society donated specimens to the Museum. These donations included a worldwide series of marine mollusca, collections of mounted birds, birds eggs, skeletal materials, moa bones and the J. Yelloly Watson collection of minerals on which a handbook was published in 1873.

Many of the early curators were all-rounders with an interest in Natural History and actively added to the collections, but at about the time of the First World War, or just after, Archaeology became the major preoccupation and the Natural History collections started to decline, eventually the shells, minerals, skeletal material and eggs were put into store in the boilerhouse and the birds were either burnt, thrown away or exchanged with other museums for archaeological material.

The stored material became dirty, labels were eaten by mice, specimens rotted in the damp and any Natural History material offered to the museum was refused.

During the mid 1950's a number of churches became redundant in the town centre and after some wrangling it was decided to convert All Saints which is in the High Street near the Castle, into a Natural History museum. Clifford Owen, now Deputy Director at Leicester was appointed Assistant Curator in 1957 and served until 1966 when I was appointed as Keeper of Natural History.

During his tenure Clifford Owen rescued the collections from the boilerhouse and other dirty storage areas and installed them in the drier slightly cleaner atmosphere in the old church. He established the first displays and the nucleus of the reference collections, but more important, he established fieldwork as part of the job, with the necessary equipment including cameras and telephoto-lenses, and a proper library was provided eventually by the Borough Council.

He also managed to get an assistant appointed to help with the technical side of the work.

On taking up my post in January 1967, I found that a scheme had already been proposed for the partial re-display of one side of the gallery, this I was able to develop into a complete re-display of the whole gallery, and we replaced all the previous displays except for a salt marsh diorama and a gamekeeper's gallows.

There is now the prospect of the removal of the stores, offices and laboratory to a nearby warehouse block, where we would be able to provide proper facilities for our growing collections and staff, which now include two Assistant Keepers, the technicians job having been upgraded to Assistant Keeper in 1972 and a second Assistant Keeper being appointed in April 1979.

This would be followed by further redevelopment and expansion of the displays and work has been in hand for several years now, accumulating material for this.

It has been a matter of policy from the start that all visitors enquiries are dealt with on the spot where possible, which whilst inconvenient at times does produce a very good customer relationship, and a steady stream of donations, whilst avoiding a pile up of uncollected enquiries.

The existing state of development of the collections is dealt with in the following articles.

J. J. Heath
Keeper of Natural History

The Herbarium at the Colchester and Essex Museum

No herbarium material survived from the early museum collections except for one book of marine algae which belonged to the first Colchester Natural History Society (1872-84). This came to the Museum on the winding up of that society. Most of these specimens date from 1849-50. Another book of seaweeds was received sometime after 1935. It had originally been presented to Cranbrook School in 1871 by Mrs Gray of the British Museum and passed through at least two other ownerships before coming to this museum.

Additional marine algae have been collected locally by the present staff to develop this side of the collections.

Mosses, Liverworts and Lichens are all represented by mainly recent specimens collected by Clifford Owen and other members of staff plus a collection of Lichens from the town's Roman Wall formed by J. F. Skinner in 1978 which included a Lichenicolous Hyphomycete fungi new to the British Isles.

There are a small number of mosses from the British Bryological Society acquired on the death of Dr. Vinter, a local doctor/naturalist in 1960.

Fungi are represented by a small selection of freeze dried specimens and a few dried specimens collected by the staff. The puff balls are in the majority as a recent survey of them is being undertaken by J. F. Skinner of Southend Museum.

The Vascular plant herbarium has a reasonable coverage of the British Flora with a few specimens predating 1950 from the herbarium of G. C. Brown (1889-1967) H. E. Littlebury and Rev. J. E. Hull although in every case these are only minor holdings, with the main herbarium being elsewhere.