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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: The origins of Sunderland Museum - a further note

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Source: Davis, P. (1980). The origins of Sunderland Museum - a further note. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 2 No 7, 318 - 321.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1777>

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The origins of Sunderland Museum

- a further note

Following publication of my description of the origins and biology collections of Museums in Tyne and Wear (BCG Newsletter 2 (5), p.232-240) I received an informative and helpful letter from Dr. Hugh Torrens. I had referred to the specimen of *Platysomus parvus* mentioned by Adam Sedgwick as being in the 'Museum of Sunderland' in 1829. Dr. Torrens pointed out that this specimen is also referred to by G. T. Fox (1827) in his *Synopsis of the Newcastle Museum* (p.307), where it is stated to be 'in the Collections of the Sunderland Subscription Library' and not that of the Literary and Philosophical Society, as I had suspected. Beckwith (1947) states that the Subscription Library was founded in 1794 (before the Literary Society) and had over 4,500 volumes in 1831 according to Samuel Lewis (1844).

Knowing that the Subscription Library was implicated, a further search of the Library Archives was carried out. Beckwith also mentions a *Catalogue of the Library* published in 1884, which was quickly traced, but provided no reference to the Museum. However, after a prolonged search a *Catalogue of the Subscription Library*, dated 1825, was found which includes a comprehensive *Catalogue of the Sunderland Museum*, with a list of subscribers. This *Catalogue* in the library appears to have belonged to J. W. Kirkby [1] (1834-1902), a noted geologist and former Curator of Sunderland Museum.

The title page states that the Sunderland Museum was 'Instituted 13th March 1810' and presented to the Subscription Library in 1821. The Patroness of the Museum was the Hon. Lady Noel [2], President Stephen Pemberton [3] M.B. and Treasurer/Secretary William Burn [4].

The list of subscribers prefixed to the Catalogue is particularly interesting, and includes a number of local worthies. Of particular note are:

John Armstrong M.D. (1784-1829). A local doctor who contributed a number of papers to the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, the *Medical Intelligencer* and the *Transactions of the Associated Apothecaries of England and Wales*. His 'Lectures on the morbid anatomy, nature and treatment of acute and chronic diseases' edited by Joseph Rix was published in 1834, and a memoir of his life and work, compiled by Francis Boot M.D. was published in two volumes in the same year.

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- [1] See Trans. Geol. Soc. Edinburgh 8, 1902.
- [2] Judith Noel (? - 1822), daughter of Sir Edward Noel, Viscount Wentworth, married Sir Ralph Milbanke of Seaham Hall, Co. Durham, the family assuming the name of Noel on succeeding to the Wentworth estates in 1815.
- [3] Stephen Pemberton (1743-1831) J.P. for Durham and fellow of Oriel College.
- [4] William Sedley Burn (1790-1861) local physician and J.P.

William Reid Clanny M.D. (1777-1850). Ardent scientist and experim-
alist. His miners safety ('Clanny') lamp [1] drawings were laid before
the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society in August 1812, and in
1816 he received the silver medal of the Society of Arts for this work.
He published the first scientific treatise on cholera (1832). He
presented various natural history items to the Subscription Library
including a dolphin, a shark and remoras.

George Townshend Fox (1782-1848). A G. F. Fox appears in the list of
subscribers from 1810-1816, but must surely be G. T. Fox. Rev. Fox, of
St. Nicholas', Durham, married Ann Stote Crofton and settled in South
Shields. The Stote Estate was considerable, and gave George Fox the
opportunity he needed to devote more time (and money) to philanthropic
causes. He was the first President of the Mechanics Institute in South
Shields (hence his connections with the Museum in the town), and a
prominent member of the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society.
Fox advanced £400 to the latter to purchase the George Allan Museum in
1822. His 'Synopsis of the Newcastle Museum, late the Allan, formerly
the Tunstall or Wycliffe Museum' was published in 1827 - and included the
reference to the Subscription Library and Museum in Sunderland. Fox was
also a Fellow of the Linnean Society and a Fellow of the Zoological
Society, and donated numerous specimens (particularly birds) to the
infant Sunderland Museum.

Thomas Robson (1779-1853). Son of Stephen Robson of Darlington (1741-
1779), Quaker botanist and author of *The British Flora* (York, 1777).

Tipping Brown M.D. (?1759-1811). Founder and President of the Subscrip-
tion Library, respected medical practitioner, philanthropist and Freemason.
President of the Physical Society, 1779-1781.

The list of subscribers indicates the reasons for the eventual presentation
of the museum collections to the Subscription Library in 1821. From the
initial subscribers list of 36 in 1810, membership had fallen to 5 nine
years later, and presumably the museum was facing severe financial problems.
Unfortunately the Catalogue does not indicate where the Museum was housed
during its first eleven years, although it is suspected that as the
majority of subscribers were also members of the Subscription Library, the
collections may well have been housed in their spacious building in High
Street.

The Catalogue makes entertaining reading, with its full quota of curios-
ities. It is divided into sections listing specimens from the Animal
Kingdom, Vegetable Kingdom, and Mineral Kingdom, the latter making up the
bulk of the list. A further section on 'antiques' (mainly ethnographical
items) completes the text. Of the biological specimens none of the
original specimens listed can be positively identified.

The majority of specimens listed do not have a donor's name attached, but
those that do help to indicate the major interests of the subscribers.
J. B. Taylor and Bernard Ogden were blatant herpetophiles, whereas the
fish collections obviously occupied the talents of Messrs. W. Taylor and
T. Wilkinson. The donation of major collections does not appear to have

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[1] The original lamp, and a collection of insects made by C. Caldcleugh
at the Cape of Good Hope in his possession, were donated to Newcastle
Literary and Philosophical Society.

been a feature of the early days of the Museum, the only large donations being geological material, principally local minerals, made by the Patroness, Lady Noel. The specimen of *Platysomus parvus* is listed as specimen 171 'Brown Dolomite, or Magnesian Limestone, with the petrification of a fish, also counterpart of ditto - from Pallion Quarry, near Sunderland - J. Goodchild'.

The following summarises the history of the Museum:

- 1810 Sunderland Museum instituted 13th March.
- 1821 Museum presented to the Subscription Library and housed in their premises in High Street.
- ? Collections transferred to Literary Society, Villiers Street, and then to the Athanaeum Building, Fawcett Street.
- 1836 Formation of the Sunderland Natural History and Antiquarian Society (17th November) under whose guidance the museum flourished.
- 1846 Museum transferred to Sunderland Corporation, though still housed in the Athanaeum.
- 1879 Museum and Library moved to new premises on Borough Road.
- 1974 Museum administration transferred to Tyne and Wear County Council.

What of the Subscription Library, whose members had been so involved with the Museum? It was just one of a number of attempts to provide reading matter in Sunderland, competing with the Circulating Library, the Wesleyan Library (1803), the library of the Mechanics Institute (1825) and even a Pier Library (formed 1844, subscription ha'penny a week) organised expressly for the workmen engaged on the construction of the pier! The Subscription Library was certainly the most durable, thriving in the 1870's even in competition with the Free Public Library which had been established in 1858. Only in 1938 did the Subscription Library doors close, when its premises and stock were auctioned.

As Hugh Torrens indicated to me, perhaps the most interesting fact to come from this look at Sunderland Museum is that at least one of the numerous subscription libraries which became so fashionable in the late 18th century served not only as a receptacle for books but also for objects - a somewhat sideways evolution of museums which deserves further investigation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Hugh Torrens for drawing my attention to the involvement of the Sunderland Subscription Library, and to the Local Studies Librarians at Sunderland for their help and patience.

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Peter Davis
Sunderland Museum

A
CATALOGUE
OF THE
SUNDERLAND MUSEUM,

Instituted 13th March, 1810,

AND

PRESENTED TO THE SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARY,

1821.

Patroness.—The Hon. Lady Moel.

OFFICERS, 1821.

President.—STEPHEN PEMBERTON, M. B.

Treasurer and Secretary.—WILLIAM BURN.

Sunderland:

PRINTED BY REED AND SON,

1825.