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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## POSTMAN'S KNOCK - AND HOW TO AVOID IT

Whether curators, keepers or assistants, we all have responsibility to care for and preserve the collections in our museums. This responsibility extends beyond our offices and stores, for wherever our specimens may be, we should take steps to ensure that they come to no harm. One way to protect them is to keep everything locked away, seldom looking at them and certainly never allowing them out of the building, let alone sending them off by post! Specimens will be preserved for posterity this way, but somehow posterity never comes. Instead obscurity and oblivion arrive, inevitably followed by *Anthrenus*.

Alternatively we can take the view that collections are there to be used and enjoyed by all. Moreover with one or two exceptions [extinctions] everything is replaceable, so we can solve all our storage problems with a schools' loan (stick-a-stamp-on-its-back) service. However some of us may feel the need to care for the material in our charge while recognising that lending specimens to specialists at home and abroad is necessary and indeed will enhance the value of the collections.

### PRELIMINARIES

Damage, whether physical or biological, can occur at several stages when a specimen is posted. The damage can be minimised through correct packing and labelling. So, unless you have more faith in your clerical staff than yourself, do all your own packing and labelling. This will take some time (if done properly) but it is time well-spent if the specimens arrive safely.

Most specimens will undergo a return journey, so it is wise to check that the recipient is able to pack and label material correctly. Often he will use the same packing materials and it is helpful to include some ready-to-use labels for the return journey. In any case you will want to know whether the borrower will handle the material while in his care. The best way of doing this is to 'phone someone who has sent material to him previously. Sad facts which often have to be disguised in letters can be quite openly voiced on the 'phone. If there is any doubt as to competence, then seek a second opinion. It may be that you will have to turn down a request to borrow material, and (in extreme cases) will refuse permission to visit and see a collection. Especially beware of requests concerning items of commercial value such as birds' eggs, shells and butterflies.

### PACKING

Biological specimens can be boxed, carded, dried, disarticulated, embalmed, embedded, enormous, mounted, papered, pickled, pinned, pressed, slide-mounted, stuffed or very, very small. All of them may suffer damage through their own activity (termed "rattling about") or from outside. Two levels of protection are thus needed. The first step is to ensure that the specimens are secure and unable to move about during their journey. This normally involves packing them in a small container which is then packed inside a larger box which withstands the exterior punishment.

Spirit: The first rule in packing spirit material is to use as small a container as possible. This is because liquids can be heavy and postage thus expensive. Also if any leakage occurs, it can be damaging for the specimen to be sloshed about in a near-oceanic volume of spirit. Use small, hard-glass tubes with well-fitting polythene or cork stoppers. Fill the tubes to just below the stopper. If they are any fuller, then heat-expansion of the fluid may cause the tops to blow. Use spirit-proof internal labels

which are not so small as to knock against delicate specimens. Very small items should be placed inside microvials within larger tubes which contain the label. Several tubes can be bagged in polythene and placed in a box or tin sufficiently large to contain them and enough absorbent material, such as absorbent cotton wool or sawdust. (This is a post office rule to prevent the leakage of liquids onto other parcels). Larger items in spirit can cause a weight problem. This can be overcome by packing them in several layers of polythene and then in absorbent material within a box. Screw-top polythene jars are also useful. Do not use polystyrene jars. These are easily cracked and are also subject to attack by various preservatives. Label the box with the name of the preservative so that more can be added if necessary on arrival.

Pinned insects: Most damage to pinned insects in the post is caused by one or more coming loose and bouncing among the other specimens, knocking wings, legs or antennae off and into a tidy heap in the corner. To prevent this, it is essential to use a substrate with suitable pin-gripping qualities. Expanded high-density polythene (Plastazote or Polyzote) is undoubtedly the best. New cork and compressed peat are alright. Old cork is suspect. Expanded polystyrene is quite useless. The specimens should be well-spaced (not touching) and cross-pinned if not too small. Cross-pinning involves the use of pins which are angled into the substrate on either side of the abdomen (or stage with micropinned specimens) so that the insect cannot swivel on its pin. Use cross-pins that are longer than the main pin. The pinning box should be constructed of stiff material (wood, tin or hard cardboard) and should be emphatically labelled "WARNING - SPECIMENS ARE CROSS-PINNED". (The excitement of the recipient on viewing the freshly-arrived specimens can easily lead to disabdomened insects). If, after all your trouble, any do work loose, there is a final safeguard. Pin a small quantity of teased-out cotton wool along one edge of the box. This is very effective at entangling escapees. Another item to remember is that your specimens are to be sent into a world full of hundry dermestids and tineids. Some 'anti-biodeterioration' measures are necessary. These can be simply sealing the box with adhesive tape, but to be really safe some insecticide should be included. The most effective agent is a small portion of dichlorvos-impregnated (Vapona) strip on a pin. But please label the lid of the box accordingly.

Carded insects: These should be treated as pinned insects, but push the card as close to the substrate as possible. Also do not cross-pin, but place a single vertical pin between each mount to stop them swinging round onto each other.

Papered and packeted material (Butterflies, lichens etc.): This should be packed snugly, but not tightly, into a tin or stiff cardboard box. Take particular care that papers are not going to open and specimens intermingle.

Loose, dry material (shells, bones etc.): Items should be wrapped individually in tissue or packed in layers of cotton wool within a stiff box (but beware snagging of wool on prickly objects). Small items should be packed in tubes with tissue. Make sure there will be no confusion over labelling.

Plaster or fibreglass models or casts: Although not biological material, they are still specimens and should be well cared for. Packing is best done in tissue or sawdust within a stiff box. Plastic-embedded specimens should be similarly treated.

Bird and mammal skins: These should be securely wrapped in tissue to ensure that the plumage/pelage is undamaged, and then placed in a stiff box. In

some cases it may be possible to use cardboard tubes for packing, but make sure the specimen cannot easily slide backwards and forwards, bending tail and beak alternately! Remarks about including insecticide in pinning boxes may apply equally here.

Bird and mammal mounts: In most cases it is unwise to rely upon the leg wires for support in the post and the mount should be carefully wrapped and packed in tissue within a stiff box.

Articulated skeletons: Tissue, sawdust, shredded paper - anything to prevent rattling and disarticulation should be used, again within a stiff box.

Outer packing: ALL THE ABOVE ARE ONLY METHODS OF INTERNAL PACKAGING. Boxes, tins or jars should now be protected from shock and other external damage by placing them in a larger cardboard box with suitable packing. The size of box and type of packing material depends on the size, weight and nature of the internal package. Light packages can be packed in fine wood wool or shredded paper. Heavier items must be packed in coarse wood wool or foam rubber. Polystyrene chips are not suitable! The reason for this is that, while they protect the contents from sharp implements and crushing forces, they will transmit knocks and shocks through to the internal package. The only occasion when they can be used is when the specimens are not prone to shock damage, e.g. large bones or shells. (see Figure at end)

One exception to the rule of outer packaging is when a single small tube (containing spirit or dried material) is posted. Occasionally I pack this inside a small polythene or tin box with cotton wool and place this in a padded envelope, but for important specimens, the double-box method is safer.

Pressed plants: Herbarium specimens require plenty of stiff card protection. The cards should be larger than the herbarium sheets and should be well-taped around the edges.

Microscope slides: Because the specimen is surrounded by glass, it is quite well-packed already, but the slide must not rattle, touch other slides, nor be liable to breakage. A wooden, plastic, tin or very stiff card slide box can be used. It is placed inside a suitable box or in a padded envelope. Two words of warning are necessary. The first, rather obvious, point is that mounts which are not fully dried should not be posted. Also beware of card wallets which may open slightly and allow the slides to slip out of position.

Archives: Books, letters, photographs and transparencies can also be regarded as museum objects and should be afforded the same care when sent by post. Stiff cardboard packaging should be used for all but transparencies, which are usually sent in the box in which they arrived.

Outer wrapping: The outer box should be securely sealed with sticky tape and marked "OPEN THIS END". The whole should then be wrapped in brown paper which is itself sealed with tape. Finally tie a string around the package in at least two directions.

#### LABELLING

Several labels should be stuck on the outside of the package. The most important is the destination address. This should be on the top and at least one side of the package. Never trust gummed labels. Make sure they stay in place using sticky tape. Type or print the address in full and remember to

leave enough room for stamps.

The sender's name and address should also appear on the package, and I also include my telephone number. In addition the contents should be described. This should be intelligible to a post-office clerk in the middle of a bomb alert. Other general instructions may include "DO NOT BEND", "FRAGILE WITH CARE", "THIS WAY UP", "OPEN CAREFULLY" or "URGENT".

Other labels to go on the outside of the package include a customs label (the little green one) if the material is being sent abroad (including the Republic of Ireland). On this one must declare the nature and value of the contents. The usual entry is "DRIED INSECTS/WORMS IN PRESERVATIVE. FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH. OF NO COMMERCIAL VALUE". I never know whether to fill in the boxes marked "gift" or "merchandise", so just leave them empty. In any case the package may be opened, so bear this in mind when packing, so that repacking by an unsympathetic French customs (Douane) officer is made easy and safe.

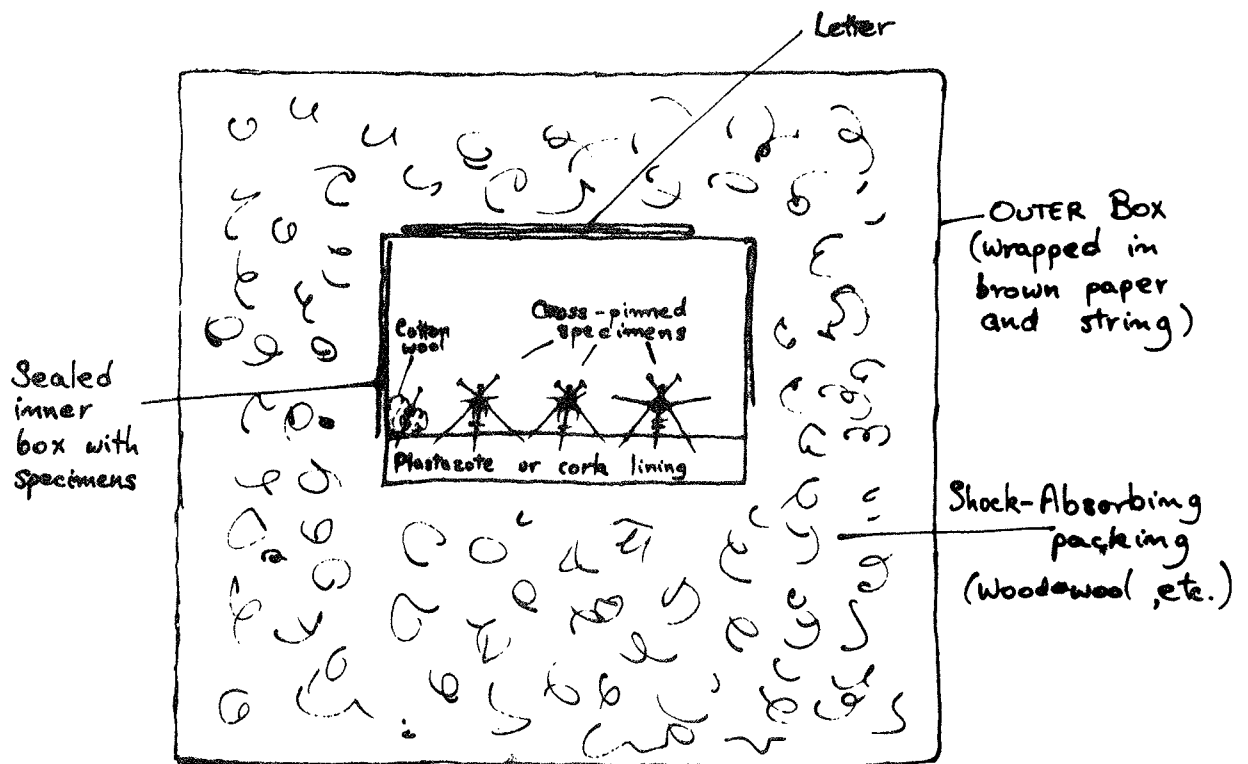
If the specimens are important, e.g. type specimens, it is advisable to send them by registered post. In this case the package must be sealed with wax or gum.

#### FINALLY

Do not forget to include your letter with the specimens, inside the outer box, preferably taped to the inner package. It is surprising how frequently a letter posted several days before the parcel can arrive several days after it. In most cases you will include a loans form with the specimens. This can be used to acknowledge safe receipt of the package, but often it is better to include a pre-stamped postcard to indicate that all is well. Also make two inventories of the material. One you can use to check the material when it is returned, while the recipient needs one to remind him what to send back.

All the above thoughts on posting apply equally well to sending specimens by other means - bus, Securicor, British Rail etc. Some of these may be more suitable, especially for larger items. However the best means of transporting material around the country is by hand and this is the method I use whenever possible. It is not without its dangers however ..... leaving specimens in the pub or on the train ..... and then there was the time when a storebox full of wasps tumbled gently down an escalator at South Kensington. No, they weren't cross-pinned!

Tony Irwin,  
Castle Museum,  
Norwich.



Package containing pinned insects.

BOOK NOTICE.

The papers from the conference which we jointly held with the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History on the History of Museums and Collections in Natural History have been published (J. Soc. Bib. Nat. Hist., 9(4); 365-670). This is an excellent collection of papers only lacking in that the paper by A. P. Harvey, being an historical review of natural history publishing in museums, which was not read because he was understood to be ill, is not included. I was disappointed that this was not read at the meeting and got on my hind legs at the time and said so, also enquiring as to whether or not the text would be included in the published proceedings to which the answer was in the affirmative. The other mild criticism is that nowhere in the volume are the BCG or the GCG mentioned as joint organisers and sponsors of the meeting. The price of the volume is £20.00 to non-members.

E.G.H.