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THE NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS AT NEWPORT MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

The most important collection at Newport, locally, nationally and probably internationally, is the collection of material from the site of the Romano-British town of Caerwent. Regrettably, the natural history collections cannot match this - the only collection of local importance is Geological. This collection was started by R. Gregory Absalom, Ph.D., F.M.A., F.G.S., the Director of the Institution from 1946-1968, who gathered a range of representative rocks and minerals. The important local material being collected by Stephen Locke, B.Sc., F.G.S., A.M.A., Deputy Director from 1968-1972, now Director of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter.

Two great benefactors of the natural history collections in Newport were the Misses M.L.F. and R.E.A. Laybourne who, in 1929, donated a large collection of mounted and cased birds and mammals and a case of birds' eggs which had been collected by their brother, Percy Laybourne, a local solicitor. Most of the material was local being collected over a period of some forty years. Much of the taxidermy was done by a local man called Griffin of Commercial Street, Newport, who later went to work for Roland Ward of London. In the late 1950s, many of the cases were broken up and the specimens removed to help form the new Schools Service loan collection. It is now, regrettably, not possible to specifically identify specimens which were originally in the Laybourne collection. Some of the cases remain intact, as does the case of birds' eggs.

In February 1951 Mrs. H.L. Dean presented us with 84 cases of conchological material representing the personal collection of her late husband, J. Davy Dean. Dean was born in Manchester in 1876 and was engaged for many years as a designer in stained glass. In 1918, after many active years as an amateur conchologist, he was appointed Assistant Keeper in the Department of Zoology at the National Museum of Wales, a post he held until his death in 1937. It seems likely that the collection was donated to us because Mrs. Dean was originally Miss Tassell of Newport. This collection was loaned to the National Museum of Wales in 1970 where it remains to this day. We still have some conchological material; a small collection of shells from Tenby was donated by a Mrs. Coulman in 1919. This was subsequently sorted, boxed and labelled by J. Davy Dean in 1927 - the collection bearing his unmistakable hand.

Sixteen store boxes containing some nine thousand specimens of British Coleoptera were purchased in 1921 from a Mr. W. Bevins, Algakirk, Near Boston, Lincs. Although well labelled and set out, it appears to be a collation of material from a variety of sources collected from 1885-1915. Much of the material was collected in the Epping and Ongar areas.

There is a variety of other invertebrate specimens, mostly foreign, and purchased from Gerrards in the 1920s by the then Curator, W.A. Gunn.

Miss Blanch Clark of Vine Cottage, Usk, on 26 March 1930, presented to us the Herbarium of her late father, James Henry Clark of Woodbank House, Usk. Clark was born in Gloucester in 1818 and set up in business as a printer in Usk in 1834. In 1868 he produced "Sketches of Monmouthshire", one of many guides he wrote and printed, with an appendix which he later reprinted as a pamphlet entitled "The Flora of Monmouthshire". This was the first attempt to produce a complete flora of the county.

Since I was appointed in 1973 the policy has been not to collect specimens from the field to augment the collections. I considered that the proximity of such fine collections at the National Museum of Wales pre-

cluded such activity. Instead, in 1976, with the help of J.C.P., I established the Gwent Biological Records Centre here at the Museum and Art Gallery for the collation, collection and co-ordination of all natural history records for the county.

Bruce Campbell

Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir,

I was interested to read the reports of the April Study Meeting (B. C. G. Newsletter 2(7)) and I was sorry that I was unable to attend what must have been a most interesting weekend. However, I feel that the relevance of some of the topics discussed to everyday work in museums may not be fully appreciated.

In particular I note that Hugh McAllister, whose work I know well, and Tony Fletcher, both discussed the use of techniques which they use in their research, and I have the impression that this kind of work although of interest, is not thought to be of much use in museums. Certainly I do not know of many museums that use either cytological or chromatographic techniques regularly.

If museums are to be seriously interested in a interpretation of their local flora and fauna I believe museum staff must adopt a critical approach to ecology and taxonomy. In this country where our natural history is relatively so well-known a general appraisal, which can be done largely as a desk study, with a gloss of local information is simply not good enough. This means curators should acquire data for their biological record centers which reflects a critical study. The information relating to the ecology and distribution of organisms should be collected, therefore, at the finest taxonomic level possible. The subtleties and interests of a particular area can then be more readily demonstrated and explained. Often morphological characters are either difficult (e.g. in Ivy, Hedera helix s.l.) or impossible (e.g. Scurvy-grass, Cochlearia officinalis s.l.) to use. Other techniques are then important.

At least two of the papers demonstrated these points and I feel that museum curators should use these 'new' techniques much more readily.

E. F. Greenwood

B.C.G. PRIZE CROSSWORD (Newsletter Vol.2 No.6)

Well, no entries were received by the closing date. Actually no entries were received at all. (Was it really too difficult?)

Anyway the tickets were already booked and it seemed a shame to let an all-expenses-paid holiday for two in the Greek Islands go to waste.

So Trisha and I had a lovely time!

Tony Irwin