Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Collections: The University of Liverpool herbarium: recently acquired by Liverpool Museum

Author(s): Edmondson, J.

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Collections

The University of Liverpool herbarium: recently acquired by Liverpool Museum.

Arranging the transfer of an herbarium of around 80,000 sheets is never easy. However, I am happy to report that it can be done - even when one is reliant on using the same cabinets in the new store that were in use in the old.

The Liverpool University herbarium was first divided in 1974, when pressure of space in the Hartley Botanical Laboratories (on the University campus) led to the transfer of the British phanerogams and some cryptogamic material to the Museum. At the same time the rest of the herbarium, totalling (as we now know!) some 70,000 flowering plants and ferns and about 10,000 bryophytes, was installed at the University's Botanic Garden at Ness, South Wirral.

In the early 1980's a development plan for the Botanic Gardens was implemented which involved upgrading the catering and other visitor services. Despite major building work at the garden involving the construction of a new visitor centre/lecture theatre, conservatory and toilet block, it was clear that until the herbarium could be removed from the main building - which was due to house a restaurant, new offices, and other facilities - these subsequent improvements could not be started. In 1981 the bryophytes were transferred to the Museum; by 1984 we were ready to begin the big move of the remaining herbarium to the Museum.

The collections were stored in two main types of cabinet. The first, which had been the main form of storage prior to the 1960s, is a three-tier wooden cupboard internally divided into 2 x 4 pigeon holes. The second, which had been purchased at the time that FLORA EUROPAEA was forging ahead in Liverpool, was a metal Roneo-Vickers herbarium cabinet with internal 2 x 6 pigeon holes and magnetically dust-sealing doors. These were stacked into a double-sided block of 21 units (3 high), and they had all to be unbolted and emptied before they could be moved with difficulty. The wooden cupboards could be moved easily empty.

Folding cardboard boxes were pressed into service; the herbarium material was transferred in groups of two to four bundles per box, each box being numbered in sequence. No attempt was made, at the time, to reorder the sequence; this came later. We must have made about 15 to 20 round trips to Ness with the Museum van, carrying a mixture of empty cabinets and specimen boxes, Once the metal cabinets had been re-erected, in the former "History of the Ship" gallery at William Brown Street, material could be packed away temporarily in sequence. By using the wooden cabinets (which had formerly housed bryophytes) as overflow storage it was then possible to rearrange the material in the sequence of FLORA EUROPAEA. We took this opportunity to merge the Museum's European collections with those from Ness, and to do the same with the non-European University material which until then had been stored in the family sequence of Bentham & Hooker's GENERA PLANTARUM.

The biggest job was the stamping, numbering and re-ordering of the material. With the assistance of a temporary member of staff, it took just over six months of continuous work. It proved possible, at the same time, to extract duplicates for exchange purposes; some of the collections already held at the Museum were duplicated in the University herbarium. We also formed a fairly accurate picture of the composition of the herbarium collections.

The University herbarium European material was arranged in order of FLORA EUROPAEA, so it was relatively simple to incorporate the Museum's European holdings. Being able to arrange a collection according to an up-to-date taxonomic treatment is a tremendous advantage, even though the work involved in putting plants into the correct folders is very considerable. Even where material is "fully" and "well" named, the names often bear little resemblance to those now in familiar use, and a considerable botanical library would be needed if one were to follow up and research every taxonomic conundrum. Fortunately one can always resort to the taxon of universal rank, "Indet.".

Although most of the herbarium is now adequately curated, one section continues to pose considerable problems. We call it "the research material". This is what remains of the experimental material grown by research students, often consisting of badly-pressed vouchers bearing nothing more than a slide number (for cytological vouchers) or a name from a botanic garden seed list. While I fully endorse the desire of the Research Councils to ensure that voucher material is deposited long-term in a recognised institution, it is a pity that so few resources are available to curate these collections. Students finishing off a Ph.D. are generally disinclined to put the curation of their material as a number one priority; I know, having been one myself! Perhaps we need, as curators, to liaise more closely with students and to submit them to some training if we are to achieve proper standards of curation for the "research material" which so often remains in University collections, unmounted and certainly unloved.

John Edmondson
Keeper of Botany
Liverpool Museum