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Collections

Britain's least-known xylarium?

It is well-known that Liverpool Museum offers the public an aquarium, a planetarium, a vivarium and even (behind the scenes) an herbarium. Until the appearance of INDEX XYLARIORUM, in late 1988, almost no-one was aware that the Museum also contained a xylarium.

How to define a xylarium? It is an institutional wood collection, which normally consists of sets of standard-sized reference blocks of timbers as well as random-sized pieces of wood from field collections. It can also include sets of thin sections of timber, and even microscope slides containing prepared sections.

Uses of a xylarium

When it is part of an institutional herbarium, a timber collection can greatly enhance the value of pressed specimens if both are adequately cross-referenced. When the Natural History Museum's timber collections were transferred to Liverpool in 1986, they included a set of New Guinea timbers collected in 1885-1886 by Henry Ogg Forbes; he later became the Director of Liverpool Museum. The timbers were part of a collection whose herbarium specimens had been identified by the Natural History Museum staff, and a catalogue published as a Supplement to the JOURNAL OF BOTANY in 1923.

It included several new species which were described from Forbes' collections, and the existence of timber samples from these type collections was apparently unknown to the botanists who described the new species. This is the sort of problem which inevitably results from storing pressed specimens separately from other voucher material such as wood or seeds. While this in itself is good curatorial practice, the cross-referencing of the two sets of specimens is not always carried through. This is one of the problems which can be overcome when a collection is documented on a computer. Collection numbers can easily be sorted and then matched with numbers in a published catalogue. By doing this, we now know the scientific names of Forbes' timbers; it would have been impossible to have identified the timbers from the wood anatomy alone.

Another reason for developing collections of timber is to provide reference material to which one can refer when identifying wooden objects by means of their anatomical structure. A recent case at Liverpool Museum came from the Department of Ethnology, who received an enquiry from a member of the public consisting of a carved wooden statue, origin unknown. The Assistant Keeper of Botany, Angus Gunn, identified the wood as

Agathis australis, Kauri Pine, a native of New Zealand; this enabled his colleagues in Ethnology to identify the piece as a Maori carving, and thus to give a more complete answer to the enquiry.

Timber identification is also a key area of research on wooden ships, particularly when species unfamiliar to ship conservators are encountered. Samples were recently brought back for identification from the Falkland Islands by staff of the Merseyside Maritime Museum who had been out to examine a Liverpool-built vessel, the 'Jhelum', which was beached at Port Stanley. The data on the different woods enabled a more complete report to be prepared on the conservation of the ship. In this case, too, it was very helpful to have named reference material for comparison.

How to publicise the existence of a timber collection.

INDEX XYLARIORUM is a directory of the world's corporate timber collections, and contains entries on 134 institutions. The 1988 issue is the third edition; previous editions were published in 1967 and 1978. It is edited by Professor William L Stern, of the Department of Botany, Florida State Museum, who circulated a questionnaire three years ago which provided the data on which the index is based.

Very few British institutions are listed: only nine. It is my belief that several natural history collections up and down the country containing significant wood collections have not been included. I was surprised to see no reference, for instance, to the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. The following are included: Bangor (University College of North Wales), Cardiff (National Museum of Wales), Kew (Wood Museum and Jodrell Laboratory, both at the Royal Botanic Gardens), Liverpool (NMGGM), London (Natural History Museum and Horniman Museum), Oxford (Oxford Forestry Institute) and Princes Risborough (Building Research Establishment). It should be noted that this last collection has recently been transferred to the BRE's premises at Watford as a result of the closure of the Princes Risborough Laboratory; this event came too late for inclusion in the third edition of the Index.

Until the publication of this edition, the timber collections of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside could claim to be one of Britain's least-known timber collections, as it was not even included in the previous edition. As nothing had been published about the timber collections at Liverpool, few clues existed which might have prompted the compilers of the index to send us a questionnaire.

Timber collections are an important asset to a Museum, and knowledge of the existence of named sets of timbers is one of the ways in which Biology curators can help to provide a public service. I hope this article will

prompt any other museums holding such collections to write to Liverpool Museum for a questionnaire. The results will be summarised in a later issue of the BCG NEWSLETTER. It will be some time before another edition of INDEX XYLARIORUM is prepared, and if this exercise helps to dispel the impression that Britain has only nine institutional wood collections, it will have been worthwhile.

John Edmondson
Keeper of Botany, Liverpool Museum

Museum development in Buckinghamshire

As Museums Year gets under way, Buckinghamshire County Museum is marking the occasion in what at first sight seems a very perverse way. On 31st March we are closing most of the museum building to the public.

That the two events should coincide was not a deliberate choice on our part. Circumstances have forced the timing on us; if we do not move out of the premises soon to allow renovation work then we will have to be evacuated before too long anyway.

The County Museum is situated in an attractive old quarter of Aylesbury and occupies a group of buildings dating from the fifteenth through to the nineteenth century. A recent structural survey showed serious defects in the fabric of the buildings. A considerable amount of money needs to be spent to restore them to meet the terms of the County Council's lease from Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society. The option of carrying out restoration work in stages so that the museum could remain open was considered to be too impractical and potentially harmful to the collections. Reluctantly, we have had to accept the prospect of moving staff, fittings and one hundred thousand objects to a temporary home for some three and a half years while the structural repairs are carried out.

A positive side to all this upheaval is the opportunity it presents to take stock of the museum's assets and to make a radical plan for the future. It allows us a virtual clean sweep of the displays. We have the chance to install modern galleries around a coherent display policy instead of having to change things in a piecemeal way. This will of course require large sums of money in addition to the one million pounds which may have to be spent on building renovation. We have no illusions about this being available from the County Council's budget. Much of it may have to come from grant-aid and business sponsorship.

Not all of the museum galleries will be closed on 31st March. The recently fitted 'Aylesbury Gallery' and Temporary Exhibition gallery will remain open to the public throughout the closure period. At our temporary premises six miles away in Halton, the museum service should resume some sort of

normality after recovering from the move itself. Visitors and enquirers will still be welcome to come and consult the staff and to make use of the collections. The Department of Biology and Geology is shortly to gain a 100% staff increase in the form of an Environmental Records Assistant, which will free the Keeper of Biology and Geology to carry out more work on the collections and to prepare for the new galleries. We hope to keep a high profile in the local community by setting up travelling displays, organising special events, and distributing a regular newsletter.

Buckinghamshire County Museum has received a lot of attention during the past year. Soon after Colin Dawes was appointed as County Museums Officer (to succeed the retiring Curator, Christopher Gowing) he was asked to undertake a major appraisal of the Museum Service. This comprehensive survey was presented to the Library and Museum Sub-Committee in December last year. Running almost concurrently with this was an exercise by the Area Museums Service for South Eastern England called the 'Aylesbury Special Project' (nicknamed the 'White Tornado'). AMSSEE allocated £10,000 grant-aid towards a series of seminars and advisory visits by specialists, concentrating on Buckinghamshire County Museum's problems and making suggestions for ways forward. AMSSEE's main report did not pull any punches and it was no surprise to be told that there was a great deal of work to be done on the natural history collections. Ancillary reports by specialist advisors did contain much constructive and detailed advice on how to improve matters in the short and long term. With an extra member of staff for Biology and Geology there is actually a chance that significant improvements can be made while we are at Halton.

One way or another the staff at Buckinghamshire County Museum have had a traumatic year, with the big migration still to come. No doubt there will be new developments to report in future issues of the BCG Newsletter once we have all got over our shell shock. Watch this space!

Kate Rowland
Keeper of Biology and Geology
Buckinghamshire County Museum

Free to a good home!
(Genuine offers only considered)

Disembowelled Red Deer, complete with guts cast in resin and tastefully painted arrow hole. Reclining on side, good set of antlers. Previously used in a display showing prehistoric hunting techniques.

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