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LEEDS CITY MUSEUM - its Natural History Collections.

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Abstract

The following is a brief history of the Leeds City Museums, with special reference to the role of the natural history collections in the development of the museum. The paper also attempts to give an insight into the scope of the collections and some of the complex thinking and negotiations which have taken place in the past over the acquisition of material. The paper also includes the first part of a detailed account of the natural history holdings of the Leeds City Museum.

The Museum's origins

The Leeds City Museum was founded by the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society at a meeting held on May 7th 1819. At this meeting a building committee was appointed which decided that land should be purchased and a suitable building erected. The building was ready for occupation in April 1821, at a total cost of £6,150 (Brears, 1989). One of the earliest of the literary society museums in Britain, Leeds was founded after Spalding 1710, Plymouth 1812, and Truro 1818 but before such well known society museums as Manchester 1821, Whitby 1823 and York 1823 (Brears, 1984).

The Society, founded on November 11th 1818, was formed to discuss and expand the knowledge of its members in 'all the Branches of Natural Knowledge and Literature, but excluding all topics of Religion, Politics, and Ethics'. (Kitson Clark, 1924). The building of a museum was a natural priority for the founding members, but there were few other museums at the time and no obvious model for a purpose-built museum existed. The result was that by 1825 the museum had already become uncomfortable and overcrowded, being 'neither sufficiently commodious nor in any respect eligible for the purpose of an increasing and valuable collection'. The Society doubled the size of the museum in 1861-2 by creating a new Lecture hall, and "a vast zoology gallery, library and kitchens, etc." (Brears, 1989).

The Victorian attitude - Science v. Brass

Since the very inception of the museum, natural history material was actively collected in the field, as well as being acquired by purchase and by donation. The quantity of material collected for, and on behalf of, the museum in the 19th century would be considered excessive by today's standards but is

typical of museums and collectors of the period. For example, letters in the archives of the museum indicate that between 1860 and 1895 Mr. M.A.B. Gellibrand of Cleveland, Tasmania and Mr. George Noble of Leeds sold or gave to the museum 20 specimens of the Tasmanian Wolf (Norris, 1985a). It is little wonder that this and many other animals and birds, became extinct when collecting on this scale took place. Gellibrand is also known to have supplied Tasmanian Wolves to other museums and institutions throughout Britain.

It is difficult to ascertain whether the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society had a specific collecting policy or not, with regard to the acquisition of natural history material and/or collections; it is most probable, however, that only cost dictated the acquisitions policy. Either way the museum, unlike similar institutions, did not finance collecting trips either in Britain or overseas. Material acquired by the museum was nearly always by means of donation, and as a result of personal contact by dealers or members and friends of the Society offering material for the collections. Even when specific collections were purchased it often took many months or even years before a purchase price was agreed. Typical of this is the correspondence relating to the purchase of a collection of British and Continental birds which were on loan to the Society from Sir William Mordaunt Edward Milner (1848-1880) the 6th Baronet of Nun Appleton. Sir William succeeded to the estate and titles at the age of 18, and the estate soon ran up enormous debts largely it was asserted, by his brother Sir Frederick who, it is said, had been led astray 'by the falsest of friends'. Sir William died in Cairo whilst a member of the British Army, and the family estates, including his collection of birds became the property of Sir Frederick.

The collection was offered for sale to the museum in 1893 and was valued on behalf of the society by Canon H.B. Tristram. The following is an extract from a letter dated 9 May 1893:

"Gentlemen,

At your request I have carefully gone through the Milner collection of British Birds, with a view to obtain a correct estimate of its market value.

The collection contains 616 specimens of 355 reputed British species of birds. The specimens are by no means all British-taken. In fact, with four exceptions, the examples of rare stragglers or accidental visitors, have been procured from abroad.

The gem of the collection is a fine though badly mounted specimen of the Great Auk, now extinct. This example has no history beyond the fact that it was purchased by the late Sir Wm. Milner in 1856 for £25. Judging by the prices fetched at recent sales, viz £200 & £210, I cannot estimate this specimen at less than £225.

[Note: 1. The specimen was described in a paper published in 1897 (Grieve, 1897), as "one of the finest skins in existence". 2. The details of the specimen as published in the sixty-first report of the Leeds Philosophical & Literary Society, 1881 are as follows; "Great Auk (*Alca impennis*). - Orkney. Bought in 1856 from the Rev. R. Buddicom, of Smethcote, Shrewsbury, for £28". This specimen is thought to be the specimen purchased by Mr. A.D.

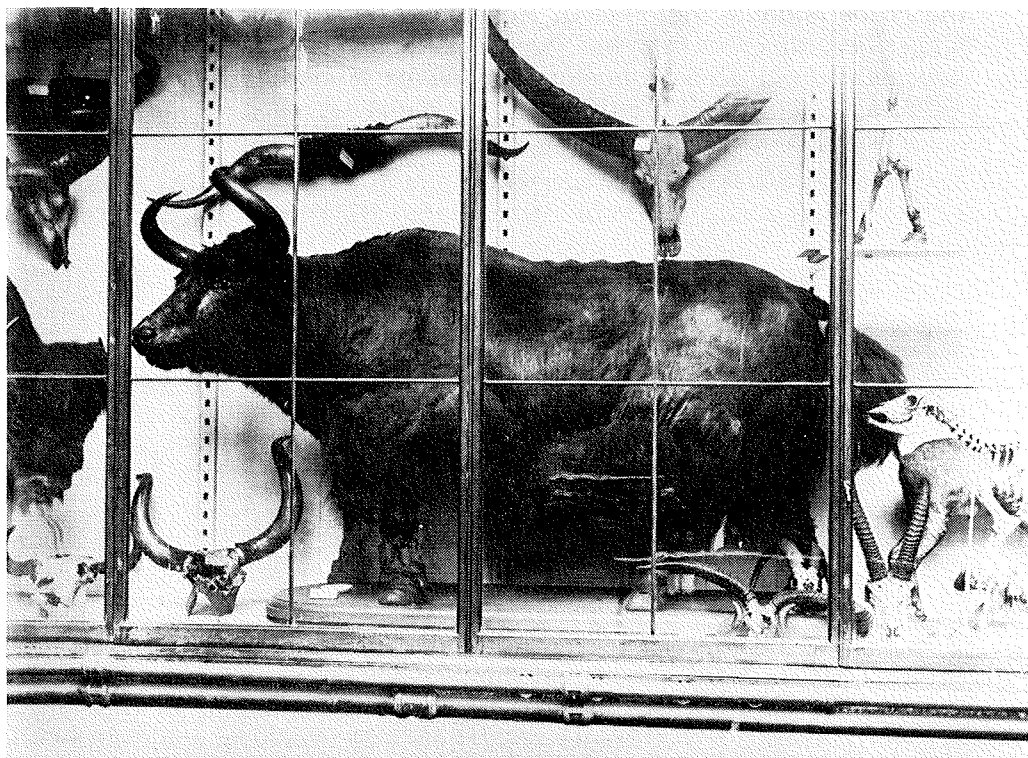


Plate 1. Yak, *Bos grunniens*, Acc. No. LEEDM-C-46-1862, circa 1900. Shot on the shores of the sacred lake of Manasarover in Tibet in 1860 by Capt. Edmund Smyth (1823-1911) and the Hon. Robert Drummond who violated not only British and Indian laws of the time but also the Tibetan religion at one of its most sacred shrines.

Capt. Edmund Smyth was a pioneer of hunting and mountaineering in the Garhwal Himalayas, and was immortalised as Crab Jones in 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'. The Hon. Robert Drummond was a younger son of the Eighth Viscount Strathallan, and the younger brother of the Lieutenant-Governor of the newly-formed North-Western Province.

Bartlett as a 'Northern Diver', and sold to Shaw of Shrewsbury in September 1844. (Hahn, 1963)].

The rest of the collection I do not value at more than £160.

*There are two birds in the catalogue which might be supposed to be of considerable value. One of these, labelled *Aestrelata lasitata* "The Capped Petrel" if the specimen were what it professes to be I should have valued at a high figure. But it is not "The Capped Petrel" at all, but an allied Pacific species, which is not uncommon, while the "Capped Petrel" is believed extinct. I have valued it at £1. Had it been the genuine bird it might have been worth £20.*

*Another bird, *Rhodostethia rosea* Ross's Ivory Gull, or the Wedgetailed Gull, is interesting, as being the solitary specimen on which is based its claim to be inserted in the list of British Birds. Only*

two other instances of its being taken in Europe are on record - one on the Faroe Islands, the other at Heligoland. This arctic bird is in the winter very different from the much prized summer plumage. ——— I have valued it at £8 only. In summer plumage it might be worth £20. ——— I estimate £385 to be the outside sum the collection would fetch at an auction”.

This valuation was in Sir Frederick's opinion “simply absurd”. In a letter from his London home, 22 Pont Street dated Nov. 26 1893 Sir Frederick writes:

I have now completed my correspondence with Professor Newton and Mr. Cordeaux and other experts, and I am quite satisfied that I have every chance of realizing at least £1,000 by the sale of my collection of birds. When I tell you that I have now two offers of £300 for the Great Auk, and one of £70 for the Cuneate tailed gull, you will see how absurdly inadequate was the offer made by your Society. For the sake of keeping the collection in Leeds I would make some sacrifice, but I could not consider any offer of less than £800”.

In July 1894 this sum was reduced to £700. In August 1894 the Great Auk was withdrawn from the collection and forwarded to Stevens Auction Rooms where it was sold on the 22-23 April 1895 (Chalmers-Hunt, 1976). The bird was, in fact, bought in as it did not reach its reserve price believed to be 360 guineas (Hahn, 1963). The Great Auk was almost immediately sold to the Edinburgh Museum (now the National Museums of Scotland), for the sum of £350, (NMSZ 1895.71). The main collection was finally purchased by the museum in May 1922 for the sum of £250. The purchase of this collection had taken nearly 30 years of correspondence before an agreement was reached on the price to be paid.

The natural history archives also contain details of collections about which such agreements as to the purchase price were not reached, with the result that these collections were never purchased.

Civic Pride - Mayoral and other gifts

Membership of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society was a social “must” if one had ambitions of a political or business nature in Leeds. It is not surprising, therefore, that most members of the Leeds City Council were also members of the Society. A good number of the Mayors of Leeds used their office to acquire material for the collections, either as personal gifts or by persuading others to donate material. The material presented as Mayoral gifts varied according to circumstances. In 1854-5, for example, the museum acquired a fine Crane shot in Scotland from the then Mayor Joseph Richardson, in 1857-8 Peter Fairburn presented five quadrupeds from Australia, in 1870-1 John Barron donated an adult female orang-utan and skeleton of the same, in 1875-6 Alderman Croft gave a Collection of British birds, and in 1891-2 Alderman Boothroyd presented a collection of birds' eggs.

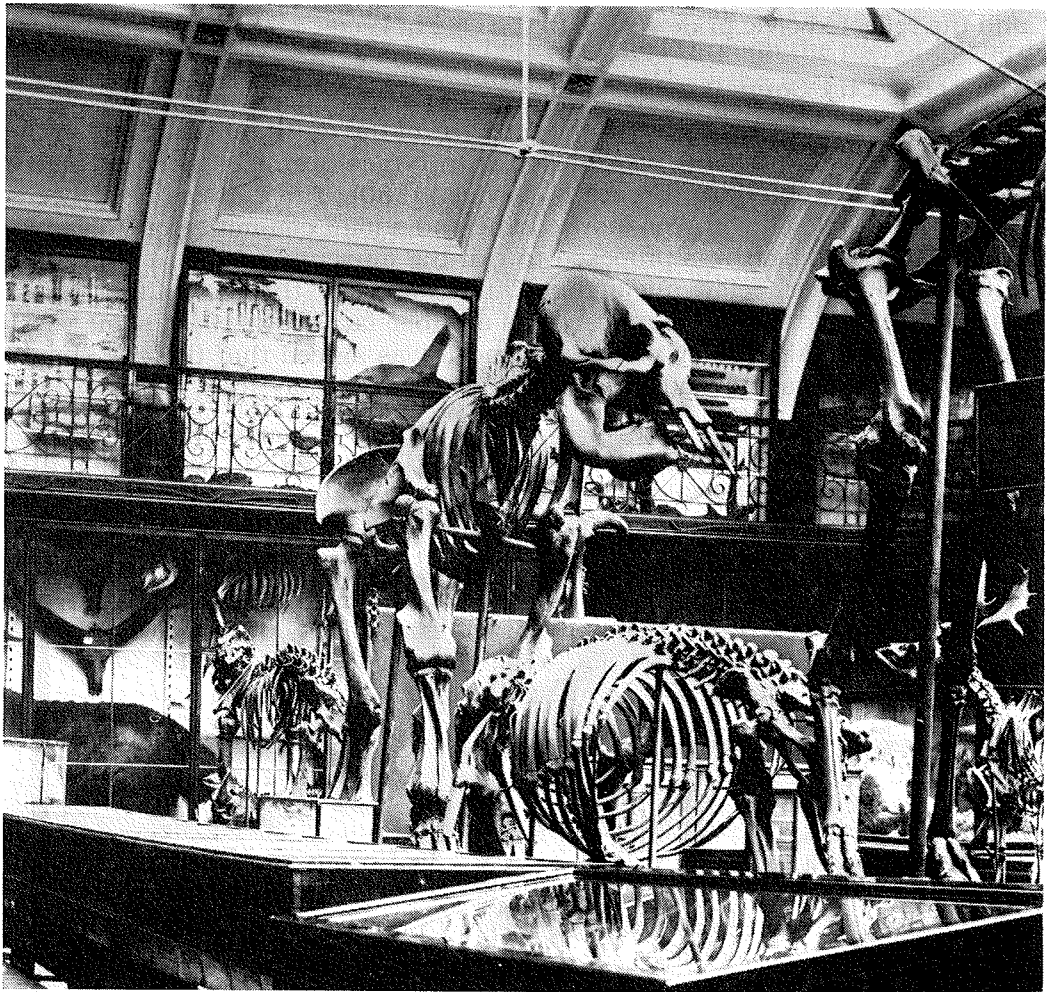


Plate 2. Part of the zoology gallery as displayed circa 1900, showing part of the study collection of skeletons including elephant, walrus and part of the Irish Elk collected in 1847 from Lough Gur in County Limerick. The skeleton of the elk is still on display today at the City Museum. Most of the other large skeletons suffered as a result of the aftermath of bombing in 1941, and have either been lost or dismantled.

In the single year 1858-9 the Society received donations from George Lane Fox of Bramham Park; His Grace the Archbishop of York; J. Spencer Stanhope, Cannon Hall; T.W.V. Wentworth, Wentworth Castle; Daniel Gaskell, Lupset Hall; Joseph Dent, Ripston Hall, The Lord Bishop of Ripon; Sir J.V.B. Johnstone Bart, Hackness Hall; John Wilson, Seacroft Hall; J.C.F. Gascoigne, Parlington Hall; Sir J.H. Lowther, Swillington Hall; Sir Thomas Becket, bart, Somerby Park; Lord Viscount Palmerston, Lord Wharnccliffe, Wortley Hall; The Earl of Effingham; The Earl of Carlisle; Lord Faversham, Duncombe Park; The Earl of Dartmouth, Sandwell Park; Earl Fitzwilliam, Wentworth Park; and Lord Londesborough of Grimston Park. These gifts ranged from a collection of

shells donated by the Earl of Dartmouth to an entire skeleton of a Reindeer from the earl of Carlisle. This social rollcall shows the status of the museum and the reflected civic pride it gave to the City of Leeds.

The Leeds City Council

In 1904 the Society reviewed the progress of the museum and came to the conclusion that unless it was moved into larger premises it could never achieve its full potential (Brears & Davies, 1989). The University of Leeds offered a suitable site on Woodhouse Lane and a joint committee of University and Society members was proposed to run the museum as a joint University Museum. However, before any action could take place, the Leeds City Council expressed its interest in the museum as a public facility. In 1918, some years later, the University finally pulled out and it was agreed that the city should take over the museum and its collections. This officially took place on July 18th 1921.

In 1937 a design was commissioned for a new combined library and arts building which was to occupy a 90,000 sq. ft. site adjacent to the Town Hall. The outbreak of war in 1939, however, brought the whole project to a halt.

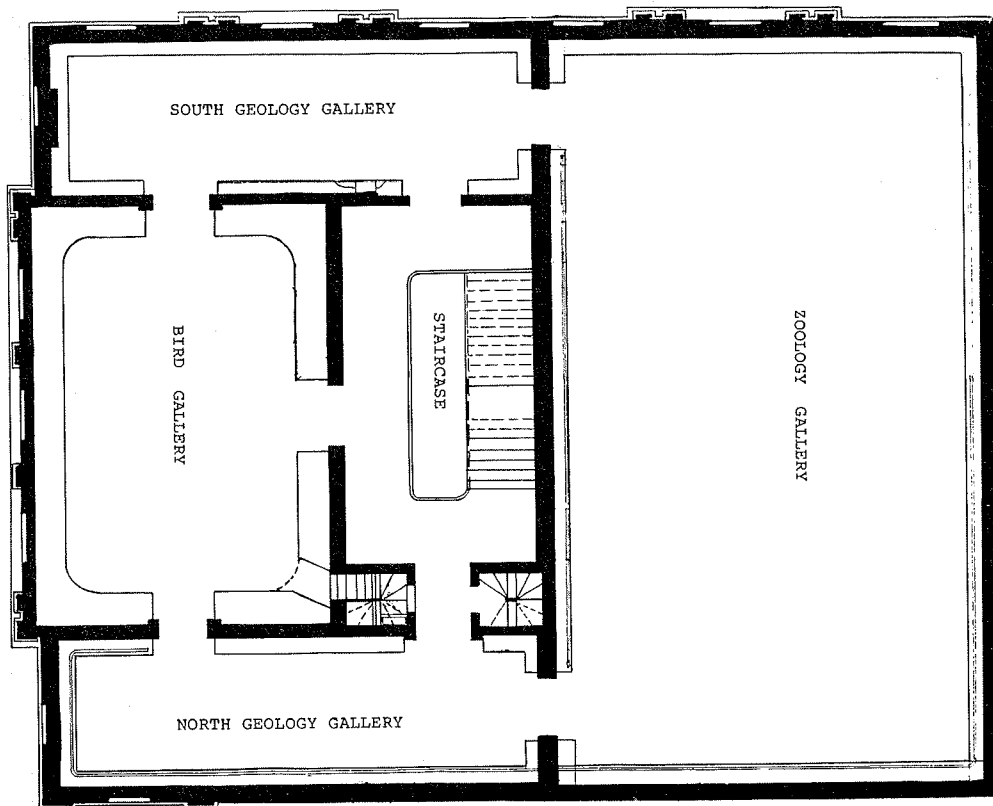


Plate 3. In 1961-2 the architects Dobson and Chorley created a new lecture theatre and a huge new zoology gallery as part of the remodelling of the museum building. This plan shows the scale of the project and the relationship of the bird gallery to the new zoology gallery. The bird gallery was totally destroyed by the 1941 bomb.

The Second World War and its aftermath

At 3 a.m. on the morning of Saturday 15th March 1941 disaster struck; the museum received a direct hit. A bomb crashed through the roof of the bird room, destroying the front half of the building. When the museum re-opened on 23rd June 1942 only the 1860s extension remained. The bombing of the museum resulted in the loss of many rare and valuable items, including most of the mounted skeletal material and a quarter of the museum's bird collection. By the early 1960s it was realised that the museum would have to be demolished, as the foundations had been severely damaged by the bombing and the wall of the building had started to move outwards. These structural defects finally forced the museum to close to the public in January 1966.

A temporary solution

The former Police Department Offices in the Municipal Buildings had become vacant and plans were made to move the museum into this temporary accommodation. The site of the old museum was far too small to redevelop as a museum and, being centrally situated, was a valuable asset. Thus the old museum was sold, demolished and the site was redeveloped as a bank. A new museum was opened by H.R.H. The Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon on 6th November 1969. The original intention was that the museum would be housed in this temporary accommodation for a maximum of 10 years - over 20 years later the museum is still there, with less display space than was available in the 1860s.

The gathering in

In the late 1940s an appeal was made by the Leeds Museum for birds to replace the 1,000 or more lost because of war damage. This resulted in several hundred specimens from other museums and institutions being transferred to Leeds. In 1950 alone, Leeds received 58 cases of birds from Scarborough, 70 cases from West Hartlepool, 4 cases from Winchester Museum, 50 cases from Northampton as well as an unknown number purchased from Whitby Museum and sundry gifts from other institutions and private individuals. In recent years large quantities of material have come into the collections as a result of other museums and institutions rationalising of their holdings. In 1977 the museum acquired the bulk of the bird collections from Swindon Museum and large sections of the herbarium from Leeds University in 1980 plant collections from the Wellcome Institute, in 1982 foreign zoological material from Salford, in 1985 the zoological collections of Wakefield Museum, in 1987 botanical and spirit collections from Malham Tarn Field Centre, and in 1990 the natural science collections of the Bankfield Museum in Halifax.

Present holdings

The present holdings of the natural history department are in excess of 300,000 specimens, 74,232 of which have come into the museum's collections

between 1980 and the end of 1991. The count for 1992 is, at the time of going to press, in excess of 8,000 specimens.

The Leeds City Museum is fortunate in being able to provide for the general public such an extensive and important resource, with material from all parts of the world available for study. The local authority should be congratulated for holding on to this material during periods when other institutions held such items in poor regard, and disposed of their collections. In particular, the large quantity of foreign material currently held by the Leeds City Museum is now exceptional within provincial museums.

Past curators

Over the 173 years of the museum's existence there have been many outstanding curators, whose special interests were in the field of the natural sciences: John Atkinson, Curator 1820-1828, Henry Denny 1825-1871, Prof. L.C. Miall 1871-1891, Edgar Waite 1891-1893, Henry Crowther 1893-1928, and David Owen 1947-1957. Departmental Keepers have also included John Armitage 1952-1970. These, and many other outstanding naturalists, have helped with the collection, identification, documentation and storage of the collections as staff, volunteers and donors.

The Collections : I. Vertebrates

Mammals

The mammal collections are small in numerical terms, but they take up nearly half the total storage and display space within the museum. The collection includes such large mounted items as tigers, yak, bison, polar bear, Brown, Himalayan and Black Bears, hippopotamus, Arabian Oryx, zebra, gnu, wild boar, several seals and sealions, and even a Giant Panda.

Many of these large animals could easily have been lost to the museum, due to neglect, poor documentation and inadequate storage. Fortunately, staff were able to justify the retention of this part of the collections (Norris, 1988), and a programme of cleaning and restoration has revitalised much of the material. The collection is also very strong in the number of primates it contains, this includes several chimpanzees, orangutans, gorilla and many other smaller species from all parts of the world. A travelling exhibition called "Monkey Business" was recently produced by the Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council based entirely on the Leeds collection.

Accession registers have often proved to be unreliable, with single line entries being common. A great deal of research has been undertaken in recent years to fill in the background information on specific animals and collectors. This research is still in progress and the author would be pleased to know of the whereabouts of the veterinary records from Belle View Zoo, Manchester, as well as any information which might be available about a travelling exhibition which was staged by the Canadian Government and toured Britain and Europe just prior to the second world war.

The mammal collection mainly comprises single, or small groups of specimens and numbers about 250 items. The bulk of the skeletal collection

was destroyed by the bomb in 1941. The only collections as such are: the collection of mounted heads put together by Mr. A. Hailwood of the Manchester Creamery, Broughton which was acquired by the Royal Museum and Libraries, Peel Park, Salford in 1908 and subsequently transferred to Leeds when the Buile Hill Museum, Salford disposed of its mounted animals in 1982, and the Whittaker collection of Yorkshire Bats. Detailed research has been undertaken on a number of the larger exotic mammals and short notes published on the following: The Giant Panda (Norris, 1981), Mok the gorilla (Norris, 1984), the Leeds Tiger (Norris, 1985b), The Hippopotamus (Norris, 1985c) and the Yak (Norris, 1986).

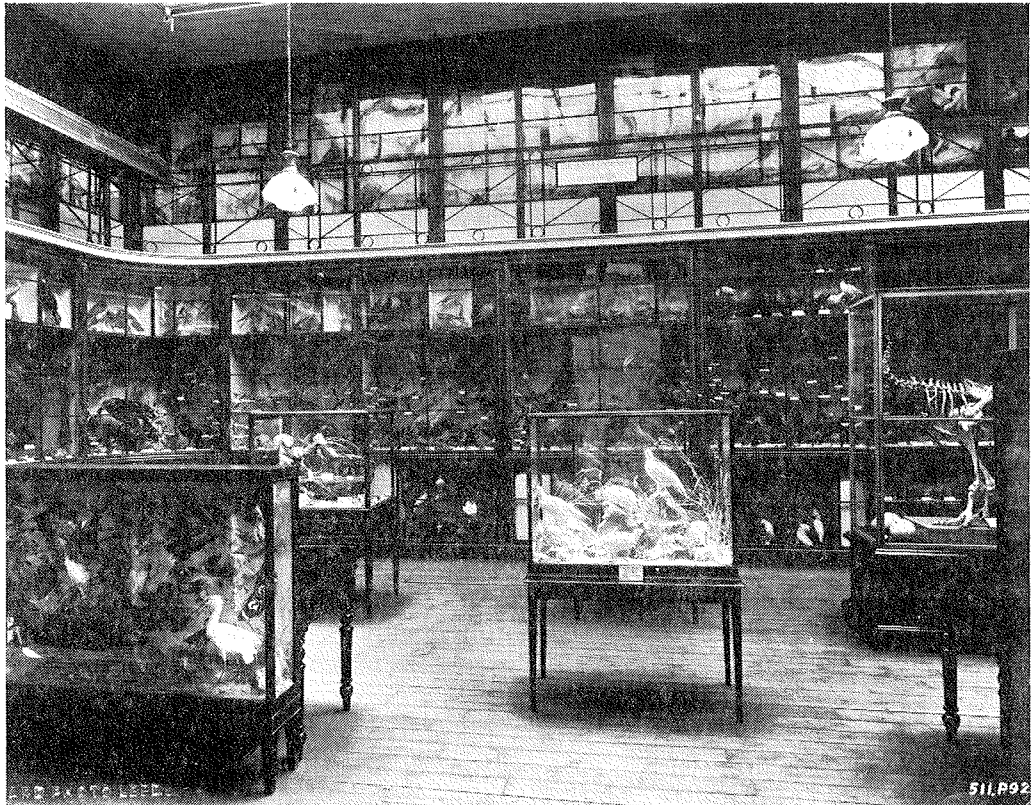


Plate 4. The bird gallery, as remodelled by Watson and Pritchell of York, who added the mezzanine gallery in 1926. The photograph dates from circa 1900, and shows part of the large collection of birds on display at this period. The mezzanine gallery holds the Sir William Milner collection of British Birds.

Birds

Like the skeletal material, the bird collections took the brunt of the damage when the museum was bombed, resulting in the loss of over 1,000 mounts and skins. Many of the salvaged birds also proved to have lost their documentation and it is difficult, in many cases, to state categorically whether

or not Leeds has a particular specimen. A typical example of this is the specimen of Ross's Gull purchased by the museum as part of Sir William Milner's collection. It was previously thought that this specimen had been on display in the bird gallery when it was bombed in 1941. Recent research into a Ross's Gull found in the collections of Wakefield Museum, however, suggests that it is probably the Leeds specimen (Densley, 1988). It may be impossible to prove beyond all doubt, but the specimen was probably on loan to Wakefield from Leeds. Very little documentation on loans in or out of the Leeds collections survived the aftermath of the bombing.

At present, the collection contains some 3,935 skins and mounts and over 10,000 birds' eggs. The collection includes material from the following collectors:

Mounts and skins.

Hirst, J.C., 216 mounted birds from all parts of the world, including many rare and extinct species such as the Passenger Pigeon and a pair of Huias from New Zealand; Mountain, C., 120 mounted birds; Milner, Sir William, Bart., 100 skins and mounts are still extant out of the original 615 purchased in 1922 and these include some extinct species such as the Carolina Parakeet and the Eskimo Curlew; Todd, J., (?), 64 mounted birds.

Eggs

The extant egg collections are comprised mainly from the material collected by 8 egg collectors, as listed below. The bulk of this material came into the museums collections as a result, directly or indirectly, of the restrictive legislation regarding the collecting of birds eggs which became law on the early 1950s. Most of the pre-war egg collections did not survive the 1941 direct hit, the shock waves shattering the eggs. For example the collection of Mr. W.T. Crampton of Roundhay Leeds, donated in the year 1903-4, was reduced by the bomb from over 1,700 eggs to just over 100 today. A great deal more research is required into these collectors, and their collections, to bring these into line with other aspects of the museums collections.

Arundel, Maj. W.B., fl.1895-1907, 132 clutches, 469 eggs; Booth, H.B., (1866-1941) 221 mainly single eggs. U.S.A. & Australia; Caley, George C., (1891-1968), 114 clutches, 509 eggs; Campton, W.T., fl.1897-1951, 42 clutches, 107 eggs; Rhodes, C.E., fl.1884-1942, 369 clutches, 1673 eggs; Roper, J.G., fl.1901-1937, 221 clutches, 991 eggs; Schluter, W., fl.1886-1909, 139 clutches, 575 eggs; Woodhouse, F.H., fl.1889-1959, 42 clutches, 197 eggs; and many other smaller collections.

Fish and lower vertebrates

The Leeds collection contains only small numbers of lower vertebrates and very few mounted fish. However, some interesting material is contained in these holdings. This includes a Ganoid Fish from Africa which appears to be the same specimen that was on display in the Calvert Museum in Leeds (an

early private museum c. 1825-1874), a description of which appeared in *A companion to the Leeds Museum of Natural Curiosities, Antiquities, works of Art &c.* printed by Edward Baines and published in 1826. Other interesting and useful parts of this collection include a small collection of some 43 packets of otoliths presented to the museum by Dr. Adrian Rundle.

The spirit collection also contains over 150 samples of British freshwater fish collected as part of a study into the allozyme variation and phylogenetic relationships of Asian, North American and European populations by Dr. Robin Lawson of the California Academy of Sciences.

The collection of reptiles and amphibians is mainly limited to mounts of tropical lizards. The museum did hold a sizeable collection of reptiles and amphibians in spirit, but these were lost in the bombing.

Invertebrate Collections.

The invertebrate collections comprise, in numerical terms, the largest part of the Leeds City Museums Natural History Collections. This part of the collection also contains some of the most important material held by the department, both historically and scientifically. In the next paper I will be discussing these collections and the many people involved, in both the collecting of material and the gathering together of these collections.

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