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The museums of Glasgow.

Clare Stringer. Curator, Natural Science, Leeds Museum Discovery Centre.

Glasgow is blessed with two excellent natural science collections: the city's and the university's. Where other cities have let one or other of these fall into, at best, 'disrepair', Glasgow has invested and taken pride in both these assets.

NatSCA delegates were treated to tours of Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum and the university's Zoology Museum, Hunterian Museum, Anatomy Museum, Hunterian Art Gallery, Mackintosh House and Special Collections in the library.

The Zoology Museum

During much of the first day of the conference we were fortunate to be located in the Zoology Museum. Based deep within the university's Environmental and Evolutionary Biology department, this one-room gem features everything you would expect from a working university biology museum mixed in with more universally appealing displays. Older, hessian-lined cabinets had been thoughtfully revamped with simple colour-coordinated backdrops. Occupying the same space as some of the large taxidermy, without being cut off by glass, was also pleasant (Fig 1.).

Sadly, it was not quite possible to ignore the temperature. Apparently fifteen years of struggles have still not resulted in the museum being anything but stifling. Fans were employed to keep the guests cool but it was difficult not to wonder what effect the heat was having on the display objects. Some of the taxidermy on open display did have splits in the skin but it was difficult to tell if this was modern damage.

A recent addition to the gallery has been the insect displays. A model centipede helpfully uses its sections as an excuse to show off parts of the entomology collection. Specimens have been grouped into stories – beauties, rarities, form, function, popular culture etc. – with the opportunity to find out more through a large number of display drawers. As is so often the case, the opportunity for layered investigation was one of the reasons that this exhibit was a hit – it was as easy to skim over the areas of little interest as it was to find out more about the absorbing ones. The other feature that made this display a success was, of course, the large number of *actual specimens* it used.

Peppered around the room were other well-thought-out treats. The glass case of living harvest mice provided something slightly out of the ordinary and was a nod to the work on animal structures carried out at Glasgow. The enormous python in the corner and leatherback turtle suspended from the ceiling were both eye-catching. Lastly, a small display on shed tarantula skins had me engaged for far longer than I would have expected.

The Hunterian Museum

Scotland's oldest public museum reopened to the public in May 2007 after a complete redisplay. The work was carried out by an in-house team to a high standard – they have done well with a smaller budget than a lot of recent large museum overhauls.

Centre stage, and rightly so, is Dick Hendry's elephant skeleton. Originally located in the Zoology Museum, the re-hung skeleton now dominates the entrance hall (Fig 2.). Its display is further enhanced by the speeded-up footage of Dick and his team disassembling and then reassembling the elephant – a great way



Fig 1. Inside the Zoology Museum at the University of Glasgow.

to exploit the universal appeal of ‘behind-the-scenes’ activities.

There appeared to be a good deal of respect given to the natural science collections at the university by the displays at the Hunterian (Fig 3.). Whole cases were dedicated to just one or two natural history specimens - their story was not lost in a case full of other objects. The oversize mineral and entomology drawers were inventive and the Thylacine was listed as the top ‘must see item’ of the displays (Fig 4.).



Fig 2. Dick Hendry’s elephant skeleton displayed proudly in the centre of the entrance hall.



Fig 3. One of the displays at the Hunterian.



Fig 3. The recently extinct Thylacine.

The Anatomy Museum

The Anatomy Museum is open to the public by appointment only but it was full of people when we arrived (and not because we had arrived!). Students and visitors regularly visit the balconied room for study and literally out of morbid curiosity. Not for the faint hearted, this extraordinary collection includes William Hunter’s famous plaster and lead casts of the gravid uterus along with a spectacular array of human and animal parts, diseases and foetuses. It was a treat to be admitted – may it never be changed or ‘updated’.

Special Collections Department at Glasgow University Library

This addition to our tour was a welcome one, despite juggling the logistics of getting thirty-odd curators in a lift (you can’t by the way). The Department had kindly put out a display for us of some of their botanical and zoological gems: from old tomes on classification and identification to beautiful hand-coloured illustrations – Audubon’s *Birds of America*, bought on subscription by the aspiring university in the 19th century, being a highlight.

The Hunterian Art Gallery and the Mackintosh House

No visit to Glasgow is complete without some reference to Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The Hunterian Art

Gallery has a reproduction of his house in an annex – crisp white rooms and his distinctive style dominate, of course, and there was more than one whisper of ‘Ikea’. The Art Gallery itself is packed with treasures including an impressive J. M. Whistler collection.

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum

The second day of the conference was held at Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. Re-opening to the public in 2006 after a three year, £27.9 million restoration programme, the museum is now looking fabulous. The stonework shines and the displays are noisy with excited kids and nattering visitors).

As in the Zoology Museum, much of the large taxidermy is on open display. A lot of work was put in to creating psychological barriers to visitors and in some cases these have been a success. Where they have not worked, glass screens have been put up to stop wandering hands (Fig 5). With open display comes the constant worry of pest and light damage and controlling the temperature and humidity. Laurence Simmen, the natural history conservator at Kelvingrove, makes constant checks of the galleries to guard against this but light still pours into the main display areas. Having written that: there are no obvious signs of damage, the taxidermy looks amazing and the public love it.



Fig 5. Glass screen to protect specimens from touching.

Eye-catching centrepieces were a deliberate design feature in the redisplay and they work very well. Orientation was considered complicated in this symmetrical building and so Giant Deer, fighting stags, spitfires etc. can be seen from a good distance away (Fig 6).

Another success at Kelvingrove has been the guided tours. At the leatherback turtle we ran across a very enthusiastic RSPB guide explaining the details of cloacal breathing. The gathered school group were rapt. The museum runs tours daily, a great service to offer new and, especially, repeat visitors.

Kelvingrove’s other great design choice was to start with the story rather than the object. This meant plenty of natural history mixed in with other disciplines. Shark jaws lie alongside shark-tooth swords and the flight of the spitfire is discussed alongside gulls and butterflies.



Fig 5. Large natural history centre pieces throughout the galleries.

All in all the 2008 NatSCA conference was an engaging and very enjoyable event. And how could it not be? - interesting people, interested people, good speakers, passionate hosts and, importantly, wonderful venues.

It was interesting to see so much taxidermy on open display. I think I would be too scared to try it myself but it did look stunning and was certainly appreciated by the visitors.

It is unusual for a natural science museum to have competition in the same city but Glasgow is spoilt. We were lucky enough to be hosted by two institutions with outstanding natural science collections and the displays to boot. Many delegates left with not a little jealousy.

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