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## **A Tiger in a Library**

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### **Abstract**

A group from the Moston Steps Project (a complementary education service) worked with Manchester Museum staff to stage an exhibition about evolution and Charles Darwin. They picked a mounted tiger to be central their exhibition – bringing it into a public space for the first time in decades. The project was interesting on many levels, not least as an example of the different ways in which audiences can engage with the material culture of natural science.

### **Keywords**

Community engagement; Manchester Museum; taxidermy; tiger

### **Introduction**

Surprising things happen to natural science specimens. That a tiger from the Manchester Museum stores was exhibited in a local library in early 2010 was thanks to a combination of serendipity and the power of such spectacular specimens to captivate different audiences. A group of excluded teenagers picked the tiger as part of a project around evolution, giving the mount a new lease of life. Our intention in this paper is to outline the development of the project as an example of public engagement with natural science collections, and to reflect upon what this tells us about the varied meanings of particular specimens.

There is little data available for accession A.2375.8, *Panthera tigris*, in the Manchester Museum's zoology collection. But like its peers in other provincial museums (Andrews 2009), it probably arrived via a colonial acquisition route, possibly thanks to the activities of a Mancunian hunter sending spoils back to his local museum (cf. McGhie 2010). The museum holds the University of Manchester's natural history collections, transferred from the Manchester Natural History Society to the university's predecessor, Owens College, in the early 1870s (Alberti 2009). Like many other natural history collections, its greatest quantitative growth was in the decades around 1900 (Kohler 2006), corresponding with the peak of the British Empire, and it is likely that specimen A.2375.8 arrived during this period. It has been in the Museum's stores since then; shifted when the storage was re-distributed in the 1970s, and again at the turn of the millennium as part of some major building works. Otherwise, specimen A.2375.8 was left in relative peace. (The complete specimen that *is* on display was initially lent to the museum by a hunter, Keith Quas-Cohen, who had previously displayed it in his home.)

The Manchester Museum, like many other institutions across the country, was paying particular attention to the natural science collections (and their Victorian history) during 2009, Darwin's bicentenary and the sesquicentenary of *On the Origin of Species*. As an active partner in Darwin200, Henry McGhie (Head of the Natural Environments Team) co-ordinated a series of exhibitions and events together dubbed 'The Evolutionist: A Darwin Extravaganza' (McGhie, Brown and Horsley 2010), which included learning programmes, lectures, family events, and outreach.

The museum has included natural science specimens in its community engagement offer for some time, for example as part of the 'Collective Conversations' (see Manchester Museum 2010). Especially, natural history is a key component of an engagement programme 'The Museum Comes to You', 2006–11: a series of exhibits and object handling sessions funded by Renaissance North West and delivered at community centres, schools, and events across the city. It was as a result of a project at the intersection of 'The Museum Comes to You' and 'The Evolutionist' that tiger A.2375.8 saw the light of day.

### **The Moston Steps Project**

Museum staff wanted to target groups of young people who would otherwise not have engaged with the Darwin commemorations. With a grant from the Wellcome Trust People Awards, and at the suggestion of

Manchester City Council Youth Service, the museum worked with excluded teenagers who were involved with a Steps Project (a complementary education service), which met at the Moston Youth Centre.

The project aimed to introduce young people to the opportunities and resources available in museums; to encourage them to develop new skills, improve confidence and raise self-esteem; to inspire them to think about the issues surrounding Darwin, his life, work and science and how this impacts on them; and, as a concrete outcome, to develop an exhibition. The museum had previously staged a display at a branch library in nearby Gorton, and thanks to this relationship with Manchester City Libraries, the project secured space in North City Library, close to Moston Youth Centre. The museum thereby hoped to gain a better understanding of young people's needs as visitors and service users; to provide access to some of its collection to audiences that are non-traditional visitors; to provide new community exhibition in an off-site venue; and to strengthen links with Manchester City Council library and youth services.

Over a five month period Andrea Winn (Curator of Community Exhibitions) and Rebecca Machin (Curatorial Assistant – Natural Sciences) worked once a week with Steps members. Together they embarked on several research trips, including visits to museums in Leeds and Bolton. There they compared Darwin-related displays, and looked at ways of exhibiting natural science collections. At local ancient woodland Boggart Hole Clough, the group compared local plant specimens with those that had been introduced from other places. The young people also explored the Manchester Museum's collections, conducted on-line research and worked with artist Chrissie Morgan to develop ideas for their own Darwin exhibition.



**Fig.1.** A Moston Steps participant experiencing the 'Tiger Trail' at Chester Zoo, October 2009. Photography courtesy of Moston Steps and the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester.



At both Manchester and Leeds museums the young people had been fascinated by the tigers on display. A further field trip, to Chester zoo, cemented the role of tigers in the project. The visit was designed to engage them with animals in a more detailed way: working in two groups of three, they selected a species that interested them, gathered some background information, studied their physical characteristics and behaviour and took photographs. They were given the opportunity to write and film a presentation based on this work at the zoo, and then to deliver it to museum staff, youth workers and peers the following week. One group picked bats, but the ‘tiger’ group’s work became the basis for the exhibition.



**Fig. 2.** Manchester Museum staff prepare for the exhibition at North City Library, January 2010. Photography courtesy of North City Library and the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester.

‘We chose to feature the tiger as it is the ultimate predator’, explained one of the young people, ‘a perfect example of successful adaptation. Its famous stripes act as camouflage and its large teeth and claws are perfect for catching prey. The tiger is part of the cat family, just like house cats and lions, but because of evolution it looks and behaves very differently.’ (Hegarty 2010). With their feline choice established, they visited the museum’s stores and selected specimen A.2375.8, which Manchester Museum staff painstakingly cleaned, prepared and installed in new cases purchased with the Wellcome Trust funding.



**Fig. 3.** The Moston Steps: Darwin exhibition, North City Library, Manchester, January 2010. Photography courtesy of North City Library, Ben Blackall, and the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester.

On Friday 22 January 2010 the *Moston Steps: Darwin* exhibition formally opened. The tiger was accompanied by the artworks the participants had made, botanical specimens selected at Boggart Hole Clough, a selection of other tiger specimens (including several skulls), and related objects from the museum. Five of the young people who began the project were present at the launch, which was also attended by 30 others,

including local MP Graham Stringer and Cllr Mark Hackett (who is the local councillor and Deputy Lord Mayor).

The tiger remained on display for three months, during which time it was used for a number of ‘story-time’ events, as well as formal school visits including over 300 children. Furthermore, over 40,000 visitors to the library passed by. ‘The tiger made us walk over,’ one visitor responded to qualitative evaluation undertaken on 5 April; ‘[I was] really interested and impressed by the skulls.’ Another was surprised to see some museum objects in their library; and one who had not visited the Manchester Museum before because they ‘didn’t think it would be interesting. Like the sound of it now.’

The participants’ feelings were mixed; half of the group had peeled away by the end, due to circumstances unrelated to the project. ‘It was interesting and a lot of fun’, recorded one (James) – another merely felt ‘It was ok but science / history is not my subject’ (Jack). But perhaps the best example of what participants took away from the project is encapsulated in a poem one of the group penned (Hegarty 2010):

Tigers can be scary  
Tall dark and hairy  
There’s some that are Indian  
Some are Siberian  
Some brown  
Some white  
But they all have stripes [...]

All these tigers have evolved from evolution  
By they’re dying from pollution  
And mad so what can we do?  
to save a tiger or few.

### Changing Meanings of the Specimen

The tiger, as we indicated at the outset, was already redolent of colonial acquisition routes. Its presence in Manchester is evidence of the city’s significance as a trading centre, and of the Imperial power of Britain. It tells us about Victorian/Edwardian attitudes to nature, and the continued fascination with large carnivores. But in the last year it has also become the materialization of the relationship between the young people and the museum. It is an excellent example of a new use for a historic specimen that combines its scientific, educational and cultural potential. The Manchester Museum is also involved in a project with similar ideals about innovative combinations of past and present, ‘New Light on Old Bones’, which involves the rich collections at Rossendale and Blackburn museums (Steadman and Craven 2010), funded by Renaissance North West.

Projects like these often uncover particular, characteristic meanings of specimens. A common indicator of the affectionate, local role that scientific objects can play is when they are afforded a nick-name, whether pre- or post-mortem. Most collections have examples – Chi-Chi the Panda and Peppy the Polar Bear are among the more famous ‘mascots’ – and sure enough, the tiger in question was quickly (and perhaps inevitably) dubbed ‘Tony’ (on specimens as mascots see Paddon 2010; for biographical examples see the chapters in Alberti forthcoming).

At least for the duration of the project, the tiger also became a work of art. The aesthetic merits (or otherwise) of taxidermy have been debated for centuries: the best mounts are not only valuable scientific specimens but also skilful sculpture. So too the tiger in question is an artwork, even in the secluded store. But during the brief spell in Moston, because of the radical change of context, alongside the (other) art on display the tiger also functioned as a piece of *public* art (see for example Knight 2008). Public works like these are commissioned for a particular purpose and appear in places that fine art normally would not, often for only a limited period of time. But it is not simply the *location* that makes public art public: ‘no more than placing a tiger in a barnyard would make it a domestic animal’ observed museologist Hilde Hein (1996:4), appositely. Rather, it is the process - the intended function - that makes art public, as in the case of the tiger’s appearance in the library.



**Fig. 4.** The tiger went viral: a visitor photographing the display, North City Library, Manchester, January 2010. Photography courtesy of North City Library, Ben Blackall, and the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester.

The tiger's renewed afterlife is thereby very revealing of the cultural meanings afforded scientific specimens. But perhaps its most significant value is in the success of the project. It became an emblem of the hard work, enthusiasm and commitment of the youth workers, young people and Manchester Museum staff. The process of developing ideas for and designing an exhibition has, according to both Steps workers and members alike, had an overwhelmingly positive effect on the confidence and self-esteem on the young people involved, some of whom have visited the Manchester Museum independently with their families and have asked if they can continue to work with the museum.

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