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News from the Royal College of Surgeons: A new habitat for the Odontological Collection Primates

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Introduction

Since the Odontological Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England was deinstalled in 2003, the majority of the 11,000 plus specimens have been kept in storage. This short report will detail the progress of the primate collection. As research demand for the collection escalates, it has become an increasing priority to provide a stable, secure and easily accessible environment for this material. Thanks to a generous donation from the Royal Society of Medicine, Odontological Section, the primate collection has since become the focus of such a storage renewal project. This funding will enable each one of the 3,000 skulls to be individually packed into new lock-lid transparent plastic boxes. Conservation is the foremost concern, although ease of access and an economic use of space are inevitable considerations for new museum storage.

A monkey Reshuffle

Reboxing began in October of 2009 and almost the entire primate collection has been loosely re-boxed into taxon order. The lengthy task began with the great apes last year and has continued down the species spectrum to the lemurs and bush babies. The intention is to regroup the material into a taxonomic sequence, irrespective of pathology, and to improve the storage of this unique comparative anatomy resource so that it rivals research collections across the globe. Over the past year, the primate material has become one of the more actively used reserve collections at the Royal College of Surgeons. Recent research has centred around evolutionary studies and primate pathology. Attempts have been made to generate a wider awareness of this material within the academic community and it is hoped that such use of the collection will now increase.

New Storage

Storage renewal is scheduled to be completed by the beginning of 2011, culminating with the smallest primates in the collection, the mouse lemurs (Fig. 1). Owing to the wide range in species, the recently implemented storage system has had to take skull size into account. Initially the process was straightforward; one box comfortably fits one male gorilla skull or two male orangutan skulls.

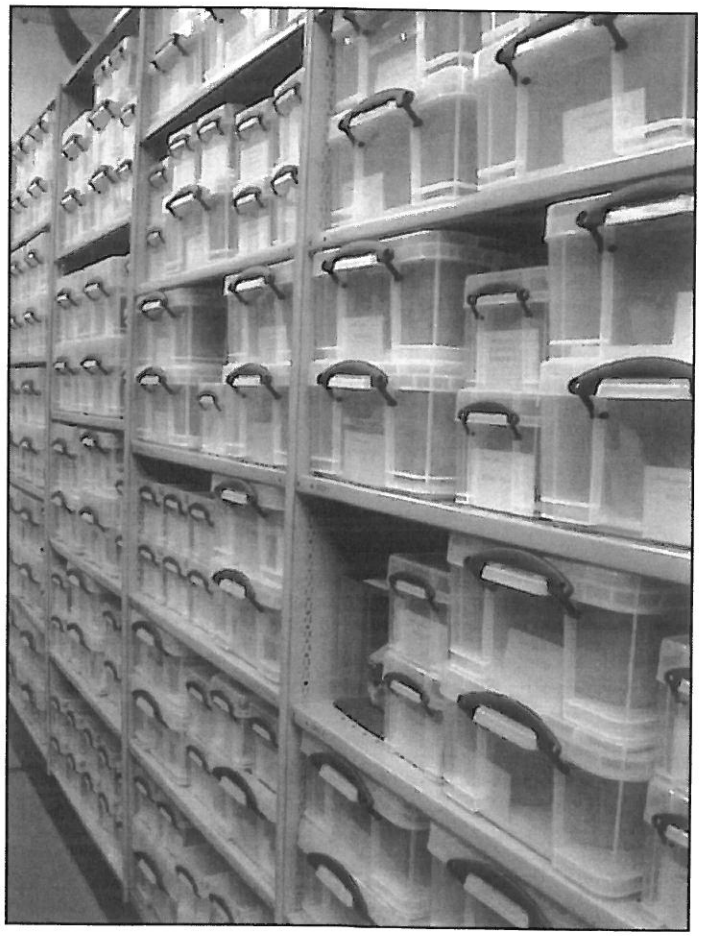

Fig. 1. The new storage shelves and boxes holding the repacked primate material.

However, matters became more complex for accommodating the smaller primates. Subsequently a system was established using correx shelves to form layers within each box that are supported by thick plastazote plinths. A protective plastazote layer then forms the support for each skull, an impression of which is sliced into the foam to hold the specimen in place (Fig. 2). Each layer accommodates six to eight crania, depending on species size. This format prevents any weight being placed on the skulls and maintains minimal movement within each box (Fig. 3).

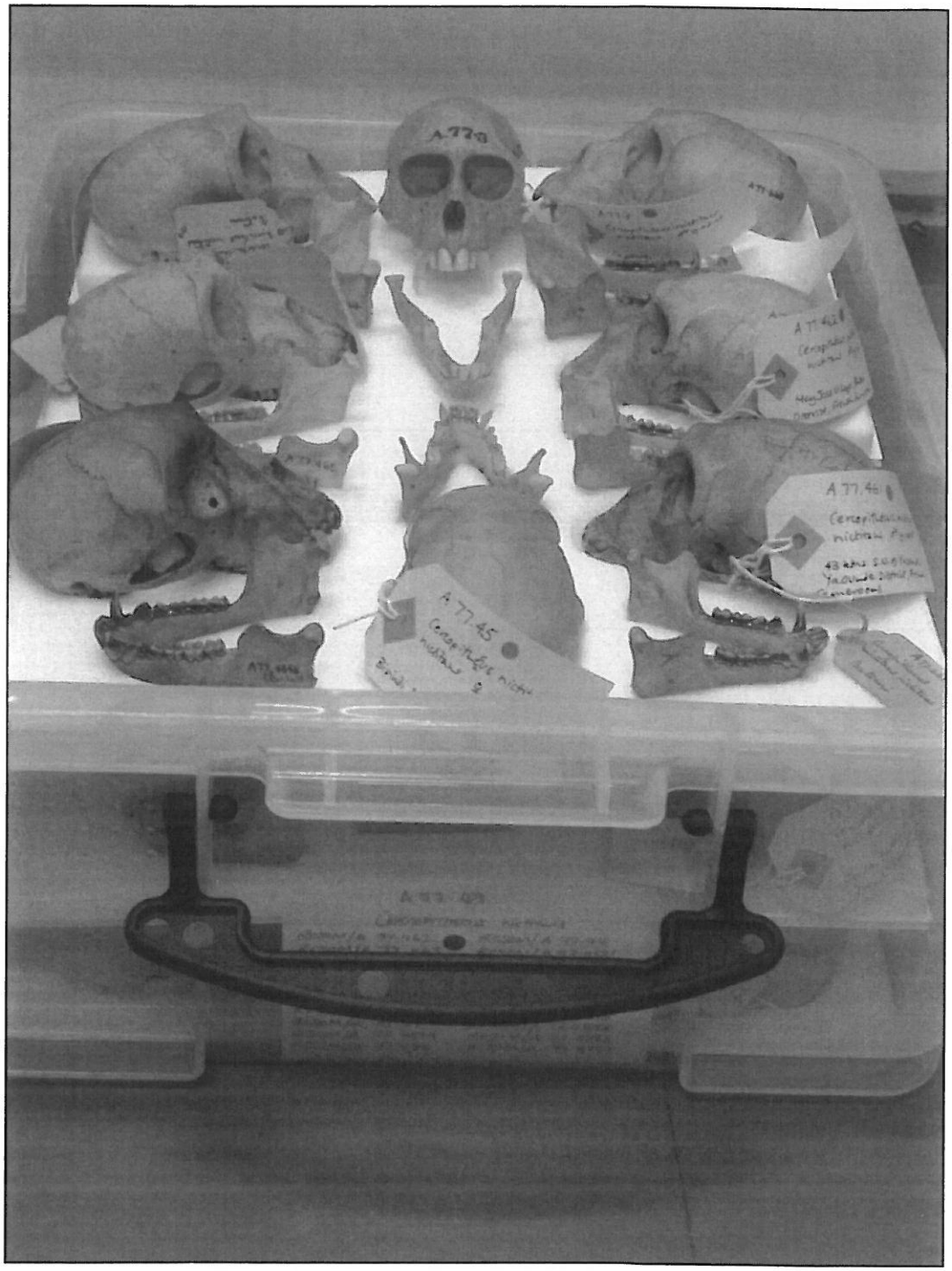

Fig. 2. *Cercopithecus nictitans* monkeys in their new storage of lidded plastic boxes, supported on plastazote.

Fig. 3. *Cercopithecus nictitans* monkey skulls in their new storage, showing the plastazote and corex levels.

The online catalogue details all of the material held within the museum's collections (http://surgicat.rcseng.ac.uk/). The reboxing and recataloguing of the primates is an ongoing project and use of the collection by researchers continues as usual.