NatSCA News

Title: Summary of the tour of the Natural History Museum building

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Source: Vaucheret, S. & Harding, B. (2004). Summary of the tour of the Natural History Museum building. *NatSCA News*, *Issue 3*, 29 - 31.

URL: http://www.natsca.org/article/393

Creating motivation amongst conservators is important to guarantee durability of the working group's activities. We don't want it to fizzle out again. Therefore, conservators are strongly involved in the activities of the working group by taking part in various specialist sub-working groups

We think that cooperation with similar associations abroad will serve mutual interests. Having close contacts with people working with similar collections and dealing with the same problems will only make daily work easier. For that reason, we would like to keep in touch with our English and Irish colleagues. If you have any news (i.e. conferences, publications) that could be of interest for your Dutch colleagues, do not hesitate to inform us. We will distribute this through our newsletter and upcoming meetings. If you would like to receive an English copy of our newsletter, which could in turn be interesting for you, please send us an email. We will also inform you about our future activities in the next NatSCA-newsletters.

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Summary of the tour of the Natural History Museum building – Sylviane Vaucheret / Brian Harding

The Natural History Museum Building
From the northern-side windows of the current museum's building, on Merrion Street, it is possible to see Leinster House. Bought in 1815 this building used to be the museum's building and the headquarters of the Royal Dublin Society (RDS). The current Natural History Museum building was purposed-built by the RDS to house the expanding zoological and geological collections, previously exhibited and stored in Leinster house. The foundation stone was laid by Lord Carlisle, lieutenant general Governor of Ireland and president of the RDS on the 7th March 1856, the work being completed in less then eighteen months (which would be impressive in Dublin today). The new Building was formally inaugurated on 31st August 1857 by the attendance of Lord Carlisle at a lecture delivered by Dr. Livingstone on his "African discoveries" on the occasion of the second meeting in Dublin of the British Association for the Advancement of Sciences.

All recent staff regard the period between the museum's opening and Irish independence in 1922 with envy: a sort of golden age for the Natural History Museum when staff were housed together with the collection in a relatively comfortable space.

A cultural building in the political heart of the Irish state
In 1922, the new independent Irish state needed to house its new parliament and Leinster House appeared to fulfil all the requirements - The building previously used by the national assembly and still nowadays known as Parliament House near Temple Bar was bought by Bank of Ireland to house its head-quarters, a very confusing arrangement for new-comers in Dublin! Following the loss of Leinster House the museum staff had to move into the public galleries which were closed to the public for a couple of years as a consequence. From this date on the Museum has suffered from the pressure of being an enclave in what is now the Irish government core. Besides having the Parliament complex on the north and west side, the Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) complex was also added on the south side. As a result more space was lost in this location, although arguably we benefit from the highest level of security a Natural History Museum has ever had. The loss of storage space for the collection was partially made up by the allocation of other buildings, of which not all were particularly adequate.

Our current off-site storage building, in Beggars Bush, Ballsbridge, although not perfect is an improvement in this regard. It is an old, solid, stone-built military barracks and provides a lot of space in relatively good environmental conditions.

Inside the Natural History Museum
The interior of the Natural History Museum is divided into two main sections, the ground floor and the first floor with lower and upper galleries. The ground floor is referred to as the Irish Room containing zoological collections from Ireland (but no snakes of course). This includes a large collection of mounted bird specimens found in all counties around the island of Ireland, a small but encompassing selection of Irish mam-

mals, a large collection of fish and marine creatures along with a good representative selection of Irish entomology.

The first floor is referred to as the Animals of the World section and contains an extensive collection of large mammals from all around the world in taxonomic grouping as much as is possible. The first gallery is laid out in a lineage of evolution from hemichordates to the birds with the majority of this floor being dominated by the birds from all around the world. The second gallery displays a collection of invertebrates, which was laid out in the early 20th century and has changed very little since then in content or display.

On entering the museum, one is welcomed by three impressive skeletons of the Giant Irish Deer *Megaloceros giganteus*, which went extinct about 10,600 years ago. Many of these skeletons have been found in Ireland and the Natural History Museum in Dublin has the largest collection in the world of such bones. This collection has benefited from the exploitation of peatland areas in Ireland for the past 250 years with bone material being discovered in the search for turf. The famous palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould measured all of the antlers for a scientific paper in 1971 and his visit later inspired him to write an essay on the joys of visiting a Victorian-style cabinet museum. (*Cabinet Museums: Alive, Alive, O!* printed in Dinosaur in a Haystack 1991).

The staff (and we would like to think the people of Dublin) are proud and very fortunate to have a museum like this in our city. As there are very few museums of this style left in the world, it is a place that the people of Dublin know very well. It is a place where grandparents take grandchildren to visit knowing that the exhibits have not changed all that much perhaps even since they were young. This sense of consistency has lead to continued interest in the museum with generally an increase in visitor numbers annually. The people of Dublin often affectionately refer to the Natural History Museum as the "Dead Zoo".

A Victorian Style Museum as a Window to the Modern World

The Natural History Museum is today one of the only places in Dublin outside of the classroom whereby children and adults learn and find out about current happenings with regard to wildlife and the environment in Ireland. The recent reintroduction of the Golden Eagle into Glenbeigh National Park, Donegal is often covered on tours to highlight the fact that there are groups of people working on important environmental issues in the country. This usually contrasts quite well against the accidental introduction of the American Mink or the Zebra Mussel into Ireland which are also exhibited in the museum. Visitors often learn more about our native animals in Ireland whilst often quashing myths at the same time e.g. all badgers have TB or the earwigs favourite breeding area is the human ear. In this sense the museum is very relevant to the public in Dublin.

Like in all museums, signage is a definite issue with labels written in a style much more attuned to the Victorian era. Making these labels more appealing to the modern visitor yet holding on the authenticity of the museum's general feel is difficult but it is hoped that a compromise can be found between curatorial and education staff on such issues.

One of the key attributes of having " a museum of a museum" is in maintaining some of the exhibits in very much their original appearance even though information panels or the mounted specimen itself may be incorrect. Such an example can be found on the first floor of the museum with a display of "the anthropoid apes" in a case that has not been opened since 1911 when the entrance to the museum was changed and a wall was built behind the cabinet blocking entry. The Orang-Utan on display is nothing like the real thing and probably indicates that the taxidermist had never encountered a beast like it before with his imagination being stretched to the limit. This specimen however is by no means a negative and should be celebrated in the context of the museum that surrounds it.

By the time that a person has visited the last case on the top floor, you have passed by about 10,000 animal specimens, which in truth is only a tiny proportion of the national collection, which is estimated to contain roughly 2 million specimens.

A very restricted but historically-charged behind-the-scenes

As a result of the museum's history the "behind the scenes" in the main building is very much restricted to office spaces (4 offices for the 5 members of staff), library (1 room, over-flowing into all the offices) and the housing of the most fragile parts of the collection: the Blashka models (in the main office) and the insects collections (1 room). The vast majority of the collection is housed in the off-site storage building in

Beggars Bush.

The only part of the zoological collection still housed in the Museum's building is the entomological collection. This holds an estimated 1 million pinned insects along with a few cupboards of spirit materials and microscopic slides. Like the rest of the collection it holds a very high number of foreign specimens and specimens of historical value but in recent years the focus has been principally on Irish species. The insect collection was indeed very much part of the museum's collection from its very origin, with the acquisition in 1792 of the collection put together by Nathanael Leske from Germany (also called the Leskean collection). This collection was bought mainly for its minerals and geological specimens but also contained dry shells, other zoological, entomological and botanical specimens. However, this is a very important part of the entomology collection not only for its historical value, but also because Gmelin worked on it prior to its transfer to Dublin and described from it many new species. Thus the Natural History Museum inherited many type specimens.

A second very important historical step for the entomology collection was the presentation, in 1882, by the board of Trinity College Dublin of A.H. Haliday's entomological collection, which incidentally included many Diptera collected by Charles Darwin during his voyage on the Beagle. Unfortunately, whereas it is a very nice historical legacy, the scientific value of these specimens got somewhat lessened by the fact that Darwin sent them first to a Coleopterist who set up to prepare them as he would have his usual specimens: by boiling them to relax them before mounting. The Diptera being more delicate than Coleoptera suffered quite badly from the process. To this was added a number of years of neglect of the entomological collections of the museum. Our current entomologist was the first appointed by the independent Irish state in 1975 inheriting a collection that had not received professional care since the early 1930's.

The general state of the collection was very cramped, resulting in some damage to the specimens – sometimes several insects were pinned on the same pin, above one-another. This was added to the usual problems encountered in entomological collections: pest infestations, verdigris and out-dated Latin names. The entomologist set to curate the whole collection, starting with Irish material. About 90% of the core collection is done by now (180 cabinets) but a great number of individual collections, not incorporated into the core of the collection could still be in need of curation. These are currently kept in their original wooden boxes and the present plan is to seal each box in a plastic enclosure. The hope is that in time they will then be incorporated with the rest of the collection into the wooden cabinets.

The Blaschka models are another very important feature of our collection. They consist of biological glass-models of remarkably accurate craftsmanship. Leopold Blaschka and his son Rudolph were from a traditional glass-craftsmen family, allegedly from Venice. They started doing biological, scientific models in the 1860s. The 500 or so models held in Dublin are exclusively zoological models and were bought between 1878 and 1886. They represent examples of the earliest work of the Blaschkas. Although many other institutions hold such models, the collection in the Natural History Museum in Dublin is the biggest in Europe and the biggest collection of zoological models in the world –the biggest collection is held in Harvard and consists of botanical models, made at the very end of the Blaschka career. Another noticeable fact is that of the 500 models about 350 are on display in the gallery, fulfilling their original goal of providing a way of showing the public invertebrates, such as colourful anemones, that are usually difficult to preserve in a manner that respect their original appearance in their natural habitat.

Conclusion

Like many other natural history museums around Europe the museum in Dublin was built at the end of the 19th century but is probably unique in the fact that has kept to this day its Victorian style.

The staff of the Natural History Museum in Dublin endeavour to try and maintain this cabinet style whilst still ensuring that the museum plays a role in education and science in a 21st century Ireland.

We hope that NatSCA members who had the chance to visit Dublin during the last conference enjoyed their visit and we would be delighted to hear feedback on all aspects of what they've seen. We also hope that those who couldn't come will find the time to visit us in Dublin in the future.