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Great British Mollusca Types Project: A Union Database for the U.K.

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM



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Participating staff from partner museums: Richard Sutcliffe (Glasgow Museums); Maggie Reilly (Glasgow Hunterian); Tony Hunter (Liverpool); Dan Gordon (Newcastle); Rebecca Machin & Clare Brown (Leeds); Rachel Petts (Manchester); Holly Morgenroth (Exeter)

THE PROJECT

Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales (AC-NMW) and The Natural History Museum (NHMUK) are developing a universally accessible database connecting the Mollusca type collections of nine museums for the first time. Funded by the John Ellerman Foundation (Regional Museums & Galleries Fund), staff at seven partner museums in six UK cities, each lacking a malacological curator, are being trained to recognise, research and interpret molluscan type specimens in their collections.

WHAT IS A TYPE?

Nomenclatural "types" in natural history collections are the original specimens used to describe species. Types are required and sought out by researchers, but many curators today are insufficiently specialised, or lack resources, to attend to their research and curation. Such types risk being "lost" to an international scientific community unaware of their location.



Part of the collections examined during the visit to Manchester Museum, February 2017. If only types were always to be found in labelled drawers!

THE PARTNER MUSEUMS

The participating museums (see map) were all known to have significant collections of mollusc types in varying stages of curation and research, but all lacked specialist malacology curators. Few of their types were traceable online or in print, and fewer still had been photographed. There was no platform available to bring this historically and scientifically important information together across Great Britain.



Examining the collections at Manchester Museum, February 2017

TRAINING

A key part of this project is capacity building and sharing skills amongst the partner museums. To kickstart the project, we ran a group workshop covering how to research types and work with mollusc collections.

Participants at the training workshop at AC-NMW, Cardiff, June 2016



JOINT RESEARCH

From October 2016, we began the process of visiting the collections at each of the partner museums. We worked with the curators to locate known and potential types. These specimens were loaned to AC-NMW or NHMUK for specialist photography, databasing, and further taxonomic research. Where needed we also carried out minor curation or conservation.



Examining the collections at the Great North Museum: Hancock, October 2016

Manchester loan all packed up and ready to go!



WHO IS LEADING THE PROJECT?

AC-NMW holds Britain's second largest mollusc collection and has conducted world-class malacological research since its inception. Our core resource is the Melvill-Tormin collection, famous as the second largest private shell collection ever made consisting of over 1,000,000 shells from all over the world.

NHMUK holds one of the largest and most diverse mollusc collections in the world, an estimated 68,000 types in a collection of over 7 million mollusc specimens.



Left to right:
Jen Gallichan (AC-NMW)
Anna Holmes (AC-NMW)
Ben Rowson (AC-NMW)
Jon Ablett (NHM)
Harriet Wood (AC-NMW)
Andreia Salvador (NHM)
The project team leaders from AC-NMW and NHMUK

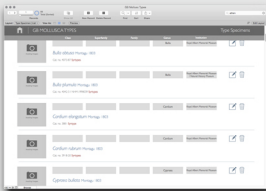


AC-NMW Mollusca types database

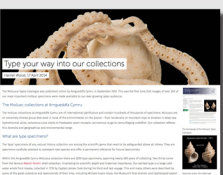
DIGITISATION & ONLINE PRODUCT

In 2012, AC-NMW made over 400 of their Mollusca types available on a new online database. The database has been accessed by over 4000 people from 113 countries. This access has stimulated the use of these types in research projects. Enquiries have increased dramatically, with specimens being cited in dozens of primary publications, in studies of molluscs from all continents as well as those that are part of Britain's own wildlife. As a result, AC-NMW staff have learnt more about their holdings from visitors to the site and attracted new depositions.

AC-NMW's resource will be used as the model for the new database. Once all of the research is complete, all of the findings, complete with specialist photographs and key details, will be made available on the database, each specimen clearly linked back to its holding institution.



Screenshot of the new database with the first records entered, February 2017



Blog post on the AC-NMW mollusca type collections

THE RESULT

For the first time, data from these 9 institutions will be recorded permanently on an internationally accessible online database, with potential for future expansion as other UK museums add their Mollusca types. Curatorial skills will be developed at regional museums, which are transferable to other natural history collections. Relationships between the museums will be strengthened and enhanced for the potential benefit of all participants and their audiences. Collections will be much more accessible, highlighting the global significance of UK national and regional museum collections.

DISSEMINATION

The project will conclude with a workshop at NHMUK, reuniting participants to share our results and experiences. This will also be open to other interested parties, including the public, members of Britain's three malacological societies, and potential future partners. For wider dissemination, we plan to run talks, attend conferences, and encourage the publication of papers.

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

This project has broader benefits not just for specialists, but also for the wider public audience. Natural history type specimens have the potential to spark the imagination. Many have social history, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions as well as their scientific ones. Making links between objects can help enrich local and national culture and encourage participation and debate. As well as their main use for globally important scientific study, the high-quality images and other products of research will be suitable for use in many contexts - exhibitions, social media, events, merchandise and publications.

LATEST NEWS

• June 2016: We held a two-day uniquely specialised training workshop at AC-NMW covering many aspects of types and malacology. Staff from six partner Museums travelled to take part

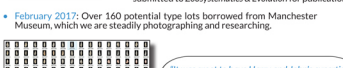
"...reminds me why I got into museums..."
"...best workshop I've ever been to..."
"...makes me feel like a curator again..."

• October 2016: We worked on finding and identifying type material in the Angus, and Alder & Hancock collections at the Great North Museum, Newcastle. Most of the fluid types need basic remedial conservation, which will be carried out whilst on loan to NHMUK.



• November 2016: The Montagu collection from Ramm, Exeter was brought to AC-NMW for researching and photographing. Results of this research have now been submitted to Zoosystematics & Evolution for publication.

• February 2017: Over 160 potential type lots borrowed from Manchester Museum, which we are steadily photographing and researching.



"It was great to have Harry and John's expertise on a visit to Manchester Museum. The images and universal database produced from this project will be an invaluable resource for research enquiries..."

• The type records for Exeter and Manchester are now on the database and accessible to the project team. We will be publically launching the website in April 2018.

• Visits to Liverpool in May, and Leeds in July are scheduled. We hope to be visiting both of the institutions in Glasgow in the autumn.



Some of the first types imaged from Manchester Museum

From a paper submitted on the Montagu types at Ramm, Exeter and NHMUK, London

