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## The Biology Curator

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work needed to improve the collection, and the storage requirements, have both become much clearer. Although time consuming, this level of documentation has been necessary to ensure the herbarium's future survival and development. If you would like to see the collection, have a full list of the collection, require information to supplement your botanical records or would even like to offer advice, I would be delighted to hear from you. I can be contacted at Oldham Museum, Greaves Street, Oldham, Greater Manchester OL1 1DN. Tel:0161-9114649/Fax:0161-9114669. E-Mail. els.museums@oldham.co.uk

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Bruce Langridge

Exhibition Officer (Natural History)

## Zoology Museum Insect Project (ZIP)

### Hunterian Collections, University of Glasgow Zoology Museum

In February, 1997, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded £118,000 to the Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, for a curatorial and access project involving insects. The purpose of this new initiative is to create a usable resource from the extensive collections of insects which have been acquired over a period of two hundred years by the University of Glasgow. It will be accessible to all for promoting the understanding and enjoyment of the world of insects.

### Background

A brief account of the collections begins with the original bequest of William Hunter (1718-1783), which was the foundation of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. Included with this were five cabinets (totalling 124 drawers) of insects which had been examined by Fabricius (1745-1808) during his residence in England. Fabricius, after Linnaeus probably the most famous of the early taxonomists, described numerous species and the specimens thus identified by him, including numerous types are still present. They are frequently consulted by modern-day systematists.

Two more recent large acquisitions complement this historic material. The large quantity of cabinets and boxes from the Thomas G. Bishop (1846-1922) bequest is very strong in exotic beetles, which he obtained mainly through dealers. At the end of the project the precise value of this collection will be established. It is essentially mid-late C19th and incorporates material from the numerous active naturalists, explorers and scientists of the day. Another local collector, particularly active in field work within the British Isles, was J. J. F. X. King (1855-1933) who left the products of his life-long passion to the University. Again the project will be able to define the true extent of his resource. Added to these major items are a variety of smaller collections and the products of the Zoology students and staff during their projects or research. These latter tend towards the economically important groups such as agricultural pests and disease vectors. Approximately half of the entomological material is already in good quality 'Hills' cabinets. This is a series of British insects (in 420 drawers) and other self-contained elements (160 drawers). In addition there are 200 demonstration drawers that have been built up during several generations of teaching undergraduate courses.

It is the rest of the collections which are in need of re-housing that the curatorial part of this project is to address. Altogether there are estimated to be nearly 1000 miscellaneous media including the ubiquitous cigar box, the far from airtight home-made store box and mixture of styles of old cabinet. The contents of this plethora of containers will be brought together into a hierarchy based on taxonomic sequence with geographical undertones! The level of identification will be variable as there is clearly not enough time within this project to identify each specimen, even if it were possible for one person to have the capability. The next developmental stage in the evolution of the collection from relative obscurity to a significant resource will be to actively seek those who will enhance it. Hopefully this will be achieved through various specialists working on the existing material, adding to it and making recommendations for its improvement as a resource for the future.

### The Project

ZIP (Zoology Museum Insect Project) is funded for two years by the Heritage Lottery Fund which provides for the purchase of the specialised storage units to re-house the collection. This will provide a modern retrieval system, and is installed in a dedicated area with study facilities. A Collections Manager has been appointed on a two-year contract to carry out the work which includes appropriate documentation and the development of new museum

displays. The storage system is based mainly on the specifications established by the staff of the Natural History Museum, London. They developed a good relationship with suppliers of cupboards and drawers to their designs and generously allowed other museums to independently order for themselves using these criteria. This is an ideal situation within which collective purchasing power has the potential to significantly reduce unit costs. This applies also to strip or tray inserts for the drawers — card trays, especially, dramatically decrease in unit price as volume increases. The relative ease with which an entire storage system to modern conservation standards has been created is due to the valuable contributions of various collection managers at NHM, particularly Nigel Ferguson, and to Mike Wilson of the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, to whom our grateful thanks are due. The number of drawers purchased is 1000 and new units have been bought with the capacity to house 1120 drawers. It is the case that the existing 780 suitable 'Hills' drawers described above could be re-housed in these new units. Their dimensions are compatible, and should it be desired the entire collections would then be in the one system if funding was to be raised for that purpose.

### The Public Face

To ensure the greatest possible user value from the project there are a number of interactive elements. New displays will draw on the collections to illustrate the phenomenal diversity and abundance, if not dominance, of the insects. These will demonstrate several aspects of Thomas Eisner's comment that 'Bugs are not going to inherit the earth — they own it now. So we might as well make peace with the landlord'. Incorporated in this will be on-line access to the database that will be created during the project and other computer interactivities. A particular feature within the public displays will be the incorporation of a study collection dealing with various aspects of insect biology for those who wish to delve further. It is also the intention to maintain some live insect displays within the museum.

It is also intended to develop WWW pages to promote the existence of the resource and highlight its strengths to the world community. Thus the specific content of the collection will be made known and then be available for consultation by visitors to Glasgow or through loans.

For any study involving insects, be it ecological, behavioural or systematic, a collection is a tool of immense value. Although in functioning as a university museum it provides a home for the products of research, at whatever level, it is not a graveyard for projects. Examination of a collection, probably put together for an entirely different purpose, reveals many strange morphological phenomena whose function can only be revealed by studying the living animal. So ZIP will provide a starting point for ideas and be integral to the development of teaching and research, not only within Glasgow University's Division of Environment & Evolutionary Biology but also to the community at large. It is the aim of ZIP to create an asset which will be managed for the future comprehension of the insect world — one that has a profound impact on the ecology of terrestrial life on earth including the human species.

ZIP is managed by Maggie Reilly, curator of zoology, Hunterian Museum & Art Gallery, Geoff Hancock has been appointed Entomology Collections Manager. Patricia Andrew, Scottish Museums Council Assistant Director (Curatorial), is the official Heritage Lottery Monitor. Supporting funding of £17,000 has been received from the University of Glasgow Trust.

Contact address for further information is Zoology Museum, Graham Kerr Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ (Tel: 0141 330 4772; Fax: 0141 330 5971) or email [ghancock@museum.gla.ac.uk](mailto:ghancock@museum.gla.ac.uk).

### From The Observer

The text of a letter here reproduced, is a tale of such exquisite pathos that it simply demands a wider sharing. Sent from the Antiquities curator of the Smithsonian in Washington to one of the institution's more regular correspondents. It is, we are told, absolutely kosher. Read it, enjoy and reflect on that fine, fine line between tears and laughter.

Dear Sir,

Thank-you for your latest submission to the institution labelled '93211-D, layer seven, next to the clothesline post . . . Hominid skull.' We have given this specimen a careful and detailed examination, and regret to inform you that we disagree with your theory that it represents conclusive proof of the presence of early man in Charleston County two million years ago.

Rather, it appears that what you have found is the head of a Barbie doll, of the variety one of our staff, who has small children, believes to be 'Malibu Barbie.' It is evident that you have given a great deal of thought to the analysis of this specimen, and you may be quite certain that those of us who are familiar with your prior work in the field were loath to come to contradiction with your findings. However, we do feel that there are a number of physical attributes of the specimen which might have tipped you off to its modern origin:

- 1) The material is moulded plastic. Ancient hominid remains are typically fossilised bone.
- 2) The cranial capacity of the specimen is approximately 9 cubic centimetres, well below the threshold of even the earliest identified proto-hominids.
- 3) The dentition pattern evident on the skull is more consistent with the common domesticated dog than it is with the ravenous man-eating Pliocene clams you speculate roamed the wetlands during that time. This latter finding is certainly one of the most intriguing hypotheses you have submitted in your history with this institution, but the evidence seems to weigh rather heavily against it.

Without going into too much detail, let us say that:

- A. The specimen looks like the head of a Barbie doll that a dog has chewed on.
- B. Clams do not have teeth

It is with feelings tinged with melancholy that we must deny your request to have the specimen carbon-dated. This is