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Glasgow Museums and Glasgow's natural history societies



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Abstract

This article looks at the relationship between Glasgow Museums – those museums owned by Glasgow City Council (formerly Glasgow Corporation) and now run on their behalf by Glasgow Life – and the various natural history societies that have existed within Glasgow over the last 165 years, and their many important contributions to the collections and staff of Glasgow Museums. This article demonstrates the enormous benefits to museums of working in collaboration with natural history societies and amateur naturalists.

It does not look at other relationships between the natural history societies and the Hunterian or other museums in Glasgow. Nor does it include the Geological Society of Glasgow (founded in 1858) or the (Royal) Philosophical Society of Glasgow (founded in 1802).

Keywords: Glasgow, museum, natural history society, Andersonian

Glasgow's natural history societies

There have been a number of natural history societies in Glasgow. Information about these was published in the *Glasgow Naturalist* (Sutcliffe, 2001), but the following provides an outline of them.

The pre-eminent society was also the first: in 1851, nine “gentlemen interested in the pursuit of natural science” agreed to form a society under the name of the Natural History Society of Glasgow (NHSG) (Anon., 1852). These first members were the eminent local naturalists of their day. The Society grew quickly, holding regular meetings and undertaking excursions within the local area (Figure 1).

Other natural history societies also sprang up, some of them ultimately merging with the NHSG:

- The Glasgow Naturalists Society was formed in 1858, and amalgamated with the NHSG in 1866.
- The Glasgow Society of Field Naturalists was established in 1871. They produced a list of the fauna and flora of Clydeside and the West of Scotland for the 1876 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), which was held in Glasgow (British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1876). By doing so, they produced the first broad baseline for biological recording in the area. They amalgamated with the NHSG in 1879.
- The Glasgow Eastern Botanical Society was started in 1876, by members of a botany class at the Bridgeton Mechanics' Institution, and merged with the NHSG in 1898.
- The Glasgow Practical Naturalists was formed in Kelvingrove Museum in 1883, principally for the practical study of entomology. The society



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changed its name to the Clydesdale Naturalists in 1886 (this had previously existed under the aegis of the Glasgow Philosophical Society from 1850 – 1865), and merged with the NHSG in about 1890.

Two other important societies then entered the scene: In August 1885, 16 gentlemen who had attended botany evening classes run by Rev. Alexander Stoddart Wilson at Anderson's College (later the Royal College of Science and Technology, and then the University of Strathclyde) decided to form their own society. They took the name the Andersonian Naturalists Society (ANS), considering themselves amateurs in comparison with the more academic NHSG, being "a society intended chiefly to foster the love of science amongst young men, those who are only learning the natural sciences, so to speak, and in no way does it pretend to be a rival to the ... Natural History Society of Glasgow" (Andersonian Naturalists Society, 1885). The following year, the Microscopical Society of Glasgow (MSG) was formed by enthusiasts at a geology class, also at Anderson's College.

By the late 1920s, the three remaining societies (NHSG, ANS and MSG) were all pursuing similar aims, and several members belonged to more than one of them. In 1931, the three societies agreed to merge to form the Glasgow and Andersonian Natural History and Microscopical Society (GANHMS). This name was shortened to the Andersonian Naturalists of Glasgow (ANG) in the 1950s, and the Society was then generally referred to as the 'Andersonian Naturalists'. In 1979, the name changed again to the Glasgow Natural History Society (GNHS), as some members of the public were misinterpreting the name Andersonian Naturalists of Glasgow as Andersonian Naturists of Glasgow – with associated connotations.



Figure 1. Members of the Natural History Society of Glasgow on an excursion in the 1890s. © Glasgow Natural History Society.

The Societies and Glasgow Museums: A Mutual Relationship

Glasgow's first city museum (not including the McLellan Art Galleries, which opened in 1856) was the City Industrial Museum, opened in March 1870. It was housed in Kelvingrove House, a former mansion house owned by the Town Council, in what was then called the West End Park (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Kelvingrove House. The original City Industrial Museum © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection.

The first curator was James Thomson, who was appointed just prior to the museum opening in February 1870. Thomson was a natural historian, which makes his appointment surprising, given it was originally called the City Industrial Museum. He probably had no experience as a curator, and had previously been a gamekeeper at Dunmore Park, near Falkirk (famous for the Pineapple, now a National Trust for Scotland property), and latterly at Blairquhan Castle, Maybole, in Ayrshire. His appointment may possibly have been influenced by references from individuals such as John A. Harvie-Brown, an eminent Scottish ornithologist and member of the NHSG, who had known Thomson since at least the early 1860s. There are several letters from Thomson to Harvie-Brown in the latter's correspondence, now in the collections of National Museums Scotland.

Thomson was already acquainted with the NHSG, and had submitted a "very interesting series of British birds' nests and eggs, which had been sent for exhibition..." in April of 1869 (Anon., 1869). He lost no time in becoming directly involved with the Society, and was appointed a corresponding member in April 1870.

According to the NHSG Constitution, "Persons from whom information upon natural history subjects may be expected shall be eligible as Corresponding Members. ...Corresponding Members shall be entitled to attend all Meetings and Excursions of the Society. They shall not be entitled to vote at any meetings, nor to use

the Library, nor to receive the printed Proceedings. They shall not be liable for Entry-money nor Annual Subscriptions. The Council, however, shall have power to grant all the privileges of Ordinary Members to Corresponding Members, in such cases as it may think fit.” (Anon., 1873b)

Thomson was soon showing specimens from the museum’s collection at meetings, an early example of outreach. In February 1872, he exhibited some Moa bones and flint scrapers (GLAMG-1870.44). Glasgow Museums’ natural history register gives very little information about these specimens:

Description: Moa bones, New Zealand
From whom received: Mr Arthur
Address: Helensburgh

However, the Proceedings of the Society were published regularly, and thus often provide additional information about specimens that was never written down in Glasgow Museums’ registers. In the case of the Moa bones, the following is recorded in the Proceedings:

“Mr James Thomson exhibited a valuable series of bones of the Moa from New Zealand, and several flint knives and scrapers which had been discovered in the mound from which the bones had been taken. These excited considerable interest, and the Chairman remarked that the series formed a valuable addition to the Kelvingrove Museum.” (Anon., 1872)

Likewise, two “bernicle [sic] geese” were exhibited in 1873 (Anon., 1873a). Again, the accession register entry says very little, but the Society’s Proceedings tell us that one of them had face and chin markings with a strong rufous tint. This information might have allowed staff to recognise un-numbered specimens as being one of these birds, but unfortunately these specimens no longer exist.

Sadly, Thomson died on 2 December 1875, aged only 54. Clearly, he was well respected, as the Museum’s annual report in 1876 states: “...During the few years he held office, Mr Thomson devoted himself with the greatest enthusiasm to the interests of the museum, and the condition in which he left the collections bear ample testimony to his care and diligence.” (Anon., 1876a). The Society remembered him ‘...By his urbanity and obliging disposition, he gained the esteem of all with whom he came in contact, and in the occasional meetings of the society held in the rooms of Kelvingrove Museum, he always endeavoured, even at much trouble to himself, to promote the comfort and convenience of the members.’ (Anon., 1876b)

Robert Gray (a founder member of the NHSG, and author of the *Birds of the West of Scotland* (Gray, 1871)), wrote to James Lumsden after Thomson’s death:

“I am sorry indeed for poor Thomson’s family. As you remark the museum authorities will not easily fill up the vacancy. I suspect Thomson hurt himself through hard work in the building. He was often at work at four in the morning and I fear that many a Sabbath was devoted to the collection. I hope his successor may just have the half of his taste, knowledge and energy.” (Gray, 1875)

The curator and his family at that time ‘lived over the shop’ in the museum. With the death of Thomson, his wife, Mary, son, and three daughters became homeless. Subsequently, several members of the Society issued an appeal on her behalf:

“A number of friends of the late James Thomson, Curator of the Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow (formerly of Dunmore), learning that his Widow and Family are left totally unprovided for, are desirous, out of respect for his talents and moral worth, as a suitable tribute to his memory, to raise a sum of money to assist the Widow in maintaining herself and her Family. Mr Thomas Chapman has kindly consented to act as Treasurer; and friends sympathizing with this object are requested to forward their subscriptions to him...” (Chapman et al., 1876).

Unfortunately, there is no record of how successful the appeal was.



Figure 3. John MacNaught Campbell F.Z.S. (right) with Wm Young R.S.W., in Kelvingrove Museum. © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums and Libraries Collection: The Mitchell Library, Special Collections.

After Thomson’s death, James Paton, from Edinburgh, was appointed Curator. John MacNaught Campbell

(Figure 3) was appointed as an Assistant Curator, and he succeeded Thomson in curating the natural history collections. Campbell, who was also responsible for the archaeology collections, was to remain in the post for 49 years, until 1925.

Like Thomson, he and subsequent natural history curators all supported the various natural history societies in Glasgow, and continued to exhibit specimens and provide a venue for meetings.



Figure 4. Collared Peccary (GLAMG-1880.24). © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection.

On 27 April 1880, Campbell exhibited a specimen of a Collared Peccary (*Dicotyles tajacu*) (now [*Pecari tajacu*] (Linnaeus, 1758)). Glasgow Museums' register is short on details: it states only that the specimen came from Dutch Guiana (Suriname), and was a female. However, after some general remarks on peccaries, Campbell told the Society a great deal more:

"The individual now exhibited – a female – was brought alive to this country, and after its death was presented to the Kelvingrove Museum. In a letter, which I received a few days ago, [which unfortunately no longer exists] its former owner says, "When it left Surinam it had its mate shipped with it, but, unfortunately, the male died on the voyage. When it came here in the month of May last it was rather low in condition, but soon picked up. It was very tame, and fond of being caressed or scratched, followed those that looked after it; but it was not often allowed to walk about in the yard, as it sometimes attacked the fowls, and sometimes succeeded, which made the dairy-woman declare 'it had a blood-thirsty nature.' After it had been a month with me, I had a Berkshire young boar placed beside it, but it never got in season, although in general they seemed very friendly. At first it ate the food before allowing the Berkshire to taste, but as the latter got stronger than it, this was reversed, and it had to be fed separately. It knew strangers readily, and did not care

for them being near it, and, if they offered to touch it, raised its bristles and snorted, and, if they persisted, it ejected a most offensive matter. After the severe frost it began to fall off in condition, though it took its food, and never seemed to be ill till a few hours before it died." (Anon., 1880)

The Societies' Contributions to Glasgow Museums

The Constitution of the NHSG (Anon., 1873b) includes a clause relating to donations to the Society. Any donations "...may be presented to one of the local museums." The Society also made a point of making specific collections for Glasgow Museums. A formal written agreement for the NHSG to hand over specimens of plants and invertebrates to the Town Council was signed and approved by both parties on 6 October 1881 (Anon., 1881). In the 1880s, the NHSG donated several collections to Glasgow Museums. These included botanical and entomological specimens. The museum's annual report for 1883 reported "The Natural History Society of Glasgow continues to make steady progress in the formation of the British type collections of invertebrate animals and plants for the museum, towards the preparation of which the special committee of the society has already devoted a large amount of time." (Anon., 1883). The Society of Field Naturalists had previously also donated material to the collection in 1873. An entry in the Museum's register for that year states: "Specimens of Botany, being the third lot from the Society of Field Naturalists."

A strong link between the NHSG and Glasgow Museums was formed through Charles Kirk, probably Glasgow's best taxidermist, from 1896 until his death in 1922. He was a member of the Society and exhibited many specimens at meetings. He also produced some wonderful taxidermy for Glasgow Museums, and wrote a paper for the *Scottish Naturalist* relating to fish in the museums' collections (Kirk, 1913).

Another long-standing contribution to Glasgow Museums was from ANG member Dick Prasher (1899 – 1980). From 1964 to 1980, every week during the summer months, Dick would get the train from Dalry, in Ayrshire, to Glasgow, where he would be collected from the station, along with his filled vasculum containing fresh examples of local plants. These would be put into jars and formed a highly informative display of wild flowers on the plant table in the Natural History Gallery. He also passed on valuable identification skills to museum staff. On arrival, Dick would change into his 'museum slippers', officially provided for when he worked in the museum. In 1979, he received an MBE for services to the environment in the west of Scotland (Stirling, 1981).

In 1951 ANG celebrated the centenary of NHSG with an exhibition entitled 100 Years of Natural History in the Centre Hall of Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (Anon., 1952). In 1985, another exhibition – this time celebrating the centenary of the Andersonian Naturalists Society – was also held there, and GNHS organised an associated excursion, and a centenary dinner (Figure 5). This exhibition was opened by Professor Blodwyn Lloyd Binns, then the longest serving member, who had joined the Society in 1934. When she died, in 1991, she left her entire estate (then worth £200,000) to the GNHS. The Blodwyn Lloyd Binns Bequest now uses interest from the capital to pay for a wide variety of projects and research, and to give grants (Downie, 1998). Glasgow Museums has benefitted from some of these grants, for a variety of projects: biological recording projects for Glasgow Museums Biological Records Centre; cataloguing of botanical collections, including the former Strathclyde University herbarium (which Blodwyn Lloyd Binns had herself worked on), and contributions towards some of Glasgow Museums' natural history publications.



Figure 5. Dressed in period costume, members of Glasgow Natural History Society celebrate the centenary of the Andersonian Naturalists Society in 1985. © Glasgow Natural History Society.

The most recent GNHS publication paid for by the bequest was about John Scouler (1804 – 1871), first President of the NHSG and a special research interest of Blodwyn Lloyd Binns (Nelson, 2014). On the cover is Glasgow Museum's specimen (G.1955.76) of 'Scouler's auld heid', *Hibbertopterus scouleri* (Hibbert, 1836) – an extinct Carboniferous Eurypterid (giant sea scorpion) from Bathgate. An appendix lists specimens relating to Scouler in both Glasgow and Hunterian Museums.

GNHS's regular publication, *The Glasgow Naturalist*, is a quality peer-reviewed journal dating back to 1909. It is a very appropriate journal in which to publish items

relating to Glasgow's collections, and the majority of Glasgow Museums' natural history staff have submitted papers over the years.

A number of individual members of GNHS and its predecessors (or their families) have made notable personal donations to Glasgow Museums over the years. These collections include:

David Robertson Collection (1902.168 and 1914.52)

Robertson (1806 – 1896) was known as the 'Cumbrae Naturalist', and set up the 'The Ark', the fore-runner of the University Marine Biological Station (UMBS) at Millport on the Isle of Cumbrae. Several thousand marine invertebrates, including material from HMS Challenger, were donated to Glasgow Museums by Robertson's widow in 1902. Further material, and her own algae collection, were donated by their granddaughter in 1914. The remainder of Robertson's collection from the UMBS was transferred to Glasgow Museums (NH.2014.1) and the Hunterian Museum in late 2013.

Thomas Gray Collection (1910.7)

Thomas Gray (1820 – 1910) was one of the original founder members of the NHSG. His mollusc collection, which he bequeathed to Glasgow Museums, was, he believed, "the finest and most complete of either public or private to be found in North Britain [Scotland], and contains nearly seven thousand species from all parts of the globe, several of which are unique, many of considerable rarity..." (Sommerville, 1910).

Stirton Collection (1927.8)

James Stirton (c.1833 – 1917) was President of the Glasgow Society of Field Naturalists, and described many new species of both mosses and lichens. His daughters split the collection between Glasgow Museums and the British Museum (Natural History) (now the Natural History Museum) after he died.

Lumsden Collection (Z.1940.38)

James Lumsden (1851 – 1911) was a knowledgeable ornithologist, a close friend of John A Harvie-Brown, and author of the *Birds of Loch Lomond*. His collection of bird skins was given to Glasgow Museums by his son in 1940.

MacKechnie Collection (B.1981.72)

Robert MacKechnie (1902 – 1978) was a prominent Glasgow botanist. His extensive collection was split between Glasgow Museums and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh after he died in 1981.

Clifford Edwards Collection (Z.2010.19)

Clifford Edwards (1913 – 2009) was a professional biologist based near Oban from 1969 until his death. He left his collection of insects, together with his library, to the GNHS in 2010. Like their predecessors, they decided to pass this on to Glasgow Museums.

Peter Macpherson Collection (B.2016.3)

Peter Macpherson (1925 – 2015) was the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland recorder for VC77 Lanarkshire. His family have recently donated his herbarium to Glasgow Museums, and given a substantial bequest to the GNHS, some of which will be passed onto Glasgow Museums to curate the collection.

Conclusion

This article contains evidence of the mutual benefits to museums, local societies and amateur naturalists of working together. In Glasgow, the city's museums and natural history societies have had a very good relationship for nearly 150 years, and hopefully this will continue for many years to come.

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