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## **Oldham Museum : the natural history collections**

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### **Introduction**

This paper is a condensed version of a report produced by the author for Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council whilst he was employed as Temporary Keeper of Natural History between 26th October 1987 and 26th February 1988.

### **Objectives**

- (i) To report on the condition of the collections, detailing their conservation, storage and documentation needs.
- (ii) To assess the importance of the collections, on a national, regional and local level, by criteria such as numbers, age, rarity of species and significance of the collectors.
- (iii) To set down guidelines for the future care and use of the collections.

The aim of this paper is to outline the size, condition and significance of the collections held by Oldham Museum. It also includes information on collectors, dates and localities which will be of use to future users of the collections and may be of help to staff carrying out collection research in other institutions.

### **Method**

The first stage was to identify all the taxonomic groups represented in the collections. The following information was then extracted: storage location; number of species; number of specimens; collectors; localities; dates; unidentified specimens; condition; rarity/importance of the specimens.

This is essentially the information included in this paper, although the original report also contained more details of storage and conservation requirements, curation requirements, display potential and suggestions for the development of a collections policy, as well as the potential uses for the collections in both education and research.

### **An historical review of the natural history collections**

The earliest record of a natural history collection in Oldham is that of a society of botanists mentioned by Holt (1795) as 'established about twenty years ago, begun originally by Dr Haulkyard, George Hyde and John Newton. The society meets nine months in the year and each member contributes six pence a month (the present members are all artificers), two pence of which is reserved for the purchase of books, and the remaining four pence on liquor. They have purchured by this means about twenty volumes, and are possessed of 1,500 specimens of plants, properly classed'. This was probably the society formed at Royton with John Mellow as president.

There were a number of informal natural history groups around Oldham in the nineteenth century ( L. N. Kidd pers. comm.) and the Oldham Microscopical Society,

established by John Waddington and John Radcliffe amongst others in 1864, formed one of the country's earliest microscopical societies. They established a 'Circulating Cabinet of Microscopic Objects' which was exchanged between members with a week for each to examine the contents. The name was adopted in a meeting at 2 High Street on 7th September 1867, and the first formal paper was read in the Club Room of the Lyceum on 13th February 1868 by Mr Pullinger on 'The Microscope and its uses to the Naturalist'. The audience included members of the newly formed Field Naturalists' Society, but this society was short lived and the two societies soon merged to become the Oldham Microscopical Society and Field Club.

In the 1880s, Dr James Yates, a Mayor of Oldham, established a municipal free library in the town and also encouraged the formation of the Museum and Art Gallery. He donated the sum of £1,000 in a bequest for providing better accommodation in the Museum for specimens of natural history and for promoting the study thereof (Kidd, 1977). Thomas H. Hand was the Curator of Oldham Art Gallery and Museum at the end of the nineteenth century and produced a report giving 'Suggestions on the Development of a Museum for Oldham'. He obtained the help of Herbert Bolton (Assistant Keeper at Manchester Museum) to produce a detailed report in 1896 on displaying the geology collection. Bolton planned and rearranged the geology galleries, finishing the work in 1898. The Oldham Natural History Society was formed in 1905, based on the Museum, and many of the society's collections became incorporated into the Museum's collections.

Fred J. Stubbs was Deputy Librarian and Assistant Curator of the Oldham Municipal Library and Museum between 1919 and 1932 after coming from Stepney Museum. He had a wide knowledge of natural history, publishing many papers, and was a good taxidermist, acquiring many notable specimens for the Museum. His 'Nature Notes' were published in the *Oldham Chronicle* and later continued by John Armitage. Armitage, along with Molly Weaver and Fred Taylor, provided much assistance at the Museum and many of the present labels with the bird specimens probably still date from this period. Many of the birds in natural settings, formerly in Oldham Museum, were the joint work of Taylor and Stubbs, while Taylor cleaned and arranged the specimens before they were moved to Werneth Park.

In about 1935, all the collections were transferred to the Werneth Park Study Centre and Leonard N. Kidd became Keeper in April 1948. The Oldham Natural History Society moved to Werneth Park in 1951 and were soon joined by the Oldham Microscopical Society and Field Club in 1959. The two societies held meetings on alternate weeks, but soon merged and the name was officially changed to the Oldham Microscopical and Natural History Society in 1968. For many years these societies have assisted the museum in the collection of material and the compilation of records of the local flora and fauna. The present society is still active today, holding weekly meetings, and indeed the present condition of the collections owes much to the concern of certain members. The geological display was redesigned by Dr R. M. C. Eagar and A. Frost between September 1954 and April 1957. Leonard Kidd, a good entomologist with a particular interest in Diptera, was responsible for building up the insect collections and filling many of the gaps. He helped to produce the *Royal Entomological Society Handbook on Mycetophilidae* (Hutson, Ackland and Kidd, 1980) although his specimens of this group are not in the museum collection. It was his initiative which led to the fieldwork and subsequent publication of one of the first in the recent trend of intensive site studies (Kidd and Fitton, 1971).

The natural history collections were removed from Werneth Park in January 1976 and placed in their present position: the picture store beneath the Central Library. Leonard Kidd took early retirement in March 1981, when the post of Keeper was frozen. No further work took place until the appointment of the author as Temporary Keeper between 26th October 1987 and 26th February 1988. After a gap of a year it seems likely that two new posts, a curatorial and an exhibitions post, will receive ratification by the Council (A. McEvoy pers. comm.).

## The collections

### Botany

#### *Fungi*

The collection contains only 18 species of dried fungi plus four unidentified specimens. In addition there are 59 plaster models of fungi purchased from Flatters and Garnett (Manchester) in 1923; 31 species are represented.

53 species; 81 specimens.

#### *Plantae*

The herbarium is largely composed of the Squire Ashton collection. This comprises eight wooden boxes containing 491 species of seeding plants and 14 boxes containing 528 species of mosses. The collection dates from 1827-1897 and contains British material with many specimens of local origin as Ashton lived in Oldham.

Other botanical specimens include 30 display boxes showing the flowers, leaves, fruit and timber from British trees. These were purchased from Flatters and Garnett along with models representing the greatly enlarged flowers of 37 species of plants, made by Deyrolles in Paris. There are also 12 tubes of wheat grain from different parts of the world.

At the time of writing the retrieval of particular species is difficult because of the method of storage and the outdated nomenclature and taxonomic order.

Oldham Microscopical and Natural History Society hold a much larger herbarium containing 85% of the British species. The specimens include seeding plants, ferns, mosses, algae, seaweeds and fungi contained in two cabinets and 16 large store boxes in the boiler room of Werneth Park Study Centre. It is largely composed of specimens from J. R. Byron (collection dates: 1870-1897), J. Nield (1825-1885) and J. H. Whitehead (1833-1896), three local botanists who travelled widely. There are also notable recent additions from L. N. Kidd, Rev. C. E. Shaw et al. Over a quarter of the specimens are from Oldham and another third from the rest of north-west England and so it is of great local significance. The Society are keen to see the collection move to a location where it would receive better curation and storage conditions and be more accessible for reference.

1,062 species; c.1,160 specimens.

### Invertebrates

#### *Cnidaria*

The collection contains 21 unidentified specimens of coral.

**Mollusca**

There are over 12,000 specimens in the collection; at least 302 British and 1,709 Foreign species are represented. The specimens come from at least 14 donors, the major ones being Fred Taylor (Oldham), William Moss (Ashton-under-Lyne) and Lilian Bates (Oldham). The majority of the specimens come from Taylor, who published several articles, including *The Land and Freshwater Mollusca of the District between Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham* in 1897. Most of his specimens are local but some are from other areas of Britain and abroad, including at least 127 specimens from Lifu. *Paludestrina taylori* E. A. Smith, 1901 was named after him, although it is now recognised as a synonym of *Bythinella scholtzi* (Schmidt). The William Moss Collection was given by his wife in 1914 and also contains British and Foreign land and freshwater shells. These collections have been combined with specimens from other collectors, but unfortunately many specimens have no labels to indicate which collection they are from. The exception is the Lilian Bates collection of mainly British specimens which are still in the donor's cabinet. At the time of writing the mollusc collection is split up with parts of it in five different cabinets. There are several boxes containing over 500 unsorted and unidentified specimens.

British 302 species; c.6,675 specimens.

Foreign c.1,709 species; c.5,329 specimens.

**Diploda and Chilopoda**

The collection contains 36 tubes of 21 species preserved in alcohol with glycerine, mostly originating from the Oldham area.

21 species; 36 specimens.

**Isopoda**

The collection contains at least six species preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

6 species; 8 specimens.

**Solifugae**

The collection contains a specimen of *Galeodes arabs* from North Africa.

1 species; 1 specimen.

**Pseudoscorpionidae**

There are four local unidentified specimens in the collection. Two are carded specimens and two preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

2 species; 4 specimens.

**Opiliones and Araneae**

The collection comprises 218 specimens of 155 British species preserved in alcohol with glycerine. Most were collected in Oldham by M. G. Fitton, L. N. Kidd et al. There are also at least 16 specimens of foreign spiders, including several large specimens imported with fruit consignments, some of which are preserved in spirit and some dried.

175 species; 227 specimens.

**Acari**

The collection comprises five tubes containing at least three species brought in as enquiries by the Environmental Health Department.

3 species; 5 specimens.

**Merostomata**

There is one specimen present in the collection.

1 species; 1 specimen.

**Insects****Thysanura**

One specimen preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

1 species; 1 specimen.

**Ephemeroptera**

There are 16 specimens of six species in the collection plus a further three awaiting identification. They are mainly local, originating from A. Brindle and L. N. Kidd in the 1950's and 60's.

6 species; 19 specimens.

**Odonata**

The museum has 118 specimens but these are largely unidentified and scattered throughout various store boxes and cabinet drawers in no systematic order. The bulk of the collection was purchased from J. Arkle (Chester) in 1925 and dates back to 1893. The specimens mainly come from the south of England but include some from Northern Ireland as well as some North American species. The small number of recent local additions were made by L. N. Kidd and J. Millward.

c.37 species; 118 specimens.

**Plecoptera**

The collection contains 14 of the 32 British species, totalling 75 specimens, with a further 11 still unidentified.

14 species; 86 specimens.

**Orthoptera**

There are 41 specimens of 14 British species and 18 specimens of at least 12 foreign species in the collection. There are examples of local species but many of the specimens are from southern England. Most of the cockroaches were brought in as enquiries by the Environmental Health Department.

26 species; 59 specimens.

**Dermaptera**

Fourteen specimens are in the collection, including at least one unidentified foreign species.

3 species; 14 specimens.

### *Psocoptera*

There are two unidentified specimens preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

2 species; 2 specimens.

### *Anopleura*

The collection contains ten specimens of three species brought in by the Environmental Health Department and preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

3 species; 10 specimens.

### *Hemiptera*

Four hundred and forty-five specimens of 128 species are present in the collections. They are mostly local, originating from M. G. Fitton, L. N. Kidd and 10 other collectors between 1940 and 1971. There are a further 84 specimens not yet identified, including a few foreign species. The only notable species identified is *Capsus wagneri* which is classified as 'rare' or R.D.B.3 (N.C.C., 1986). There is also an enlarged model of the aphid *Syphonophora rosae*.

135 species; 533 specimens.

### *Neuroptera*

Sixteen species, comprising 40 specimens, are represented in the collection. Most were collected locally since 1943, by A. Brindle, S. Charlson, W. D. Hincks and L. N. Kidd.

16 species; 40 specimens.

### *Mecoptera*

The collection contains eight specimens of two out of the four British species, collected by M. G. Fitton, W. D. Hincks and L. N. Kidd.

2 species; 8 specimens.

### *Lepidoptera*

The main British collection, containing 13,579 specimens of 1,622 species (74% of the British list), is housed in four cabinets but there are a further 19 store boxes containing specimens labelled as 'duplicate' species, although many of these have data and include specimens from different localities and collectors. In addition, there is a cabinet containing 5,064 specimens of the R. Cottam Collection.

The main collection contains material from at least 118 collectors of which the following are the major contributors: F. Bond, A. W. Boyd, S. Charlson, C. Johnson, L. N. Kidd, W. Mansbridge, H. N. Michaelis, R. B. Robertson, W. P. Stocks and A. E. Wright. There are many nineteenth century specimens with some dating back as far as 1815. Only about 8% are from Oldham Metropolitan Borough, but 50% originate from north-east England (excluding Oldham), especially from Lancashire, Cheshire and Westmorland. The remaining 42% are from various parts of Britain, including Wales and Scotland. The vast majority have attached data labels. The collection contains a number of larvae and pupae mostly bought, along with a few adults, to fill gaps, from the entomological dealers Watkins and Doncaster (then in London) and W. H. Harwood and Son (Sudbury). The taxonomic order is now outdated, although not as much as that of the Cottam Collection.

The R. Cottam Collection contains material from at least 28 other collectors but most originate from Cottam (Wilmslow) and his associate J. Taylor. On his request the collection was presented to Oldham by his wife in 1962. The specimens date back to 1845, virtually all being pre-1914, and although they were taken in at least 34 British counties many come from Lancashire and Cheshire, including specimens from Oldham. Most specimens have data with them and some larvae are included in the collections. This is an important local collection and would be best kept as a separate collection, although species additional to the main collection are present.

The 'duplicate' collection contains generally, but not entirely, inferior specimens, i.e. some badly set, some damaged or worn and many lacking data. At least six additional collectors have material represented and those specimens with data should all be regarded as unique, whatever the condition.

The main collection contains an impressive 57 specimens of 18 species now extinct in Britain. Three of these are of continental origin and some lack any data, but at least a third have information proving they were taken in Britain. There are also 208 specimens of 35 'endangered' (R.D.B.1) species of which 45% have data. Because of the outdated nomenclature the examination of the Cottam Collection has not been exhaustive, but it contains at least eight 'extinct' species (33 specimens) and six 'endangered' species (32 specimens). These are not additional species to the main collection except for one notable exception - three specimens of The Many-lined (*Castaconvexa polygrammata*), which has not been recorded in Britain since 1875 (N.C.C., 1987) and the specimens were taken at Wicken Fen in 1870. A total of at least 172 'extinct' or Red Data Book species are represented in the collections (see Table 1).

The foreign Lepidoptera include 2,267 specimens of well over 205 species, but many await identification. This would be a major task, but with the number of specimens involved and their age, some dating back to at least 1897, there may well be rare species involved. There are two major contributions:

- (i) a cabinet and five store boxes comprising the M. H. Millward Collection, presented in 1955. The specimens originate from India, Japan, China and Brazil between 1919 and 1938;
- (ii) 430 specimens of the R. Cottam Collection given in 1910 are from North America, South America, Asia and Africa.

At least 34 other collectors have specimens represented from over 30 different countries in 34 store boxes.

British 1,628 species; 26,335 specimens.

Foreign 205+ species; 2,267 specimens.

### *Trichoptera*

The collection of identified specimens is contained in six drawers of a Hill cabinet. It comprises 244 specimens of 78 species whilst a further 72 specimens can be found elsewhere awaiting identification. The specimens have been collected by six entomologists - A. Brindle, D. Bryce, S. Charlson, W. D. Hincks, L. N. Kidd and P. Skidmore. All the specimens have full data and include one 'endangered' (R.D.B.1) species *Hagenella clathrata* and one 'rare' (R.D.B.3) species *Triaenodes reuteri*.

78 species; 316 specimens.



**Diptera**

The main collection is made up of 943 species totalling 3,779 specimens housed in four cabinets and 11 store boxes. There are also 693 unidentified British specimens and 47 unidentified foreign specimens. All the above are pinned or carded specimens but, in addition, there are seven tubes of Psychodidae preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

	Extinct	RDB1	RDB2	RDB3	RDB4	RDB5	Na	N	Nb	Nr
Hemiptera				1					1	1
Neuroptera									1	1
Lepidoptera	19	35	30	75	2	1	65		224	19
Trichoptera		1		1						
Diptera		4	7	30				152		34
Coleoptera	3	29	26	53			176		387	1
Total	22	69	63	160	2	1	241	152	613	56
				295					1062	

Table 1. Insecta: extinct, red data book and notable species in the collections (N.C.C., 1986)

The main collectors represented are A. Brindle, H. Britten, L. N. Kidd, L. Parmenter, P. Skidmore, J. D. Ward and A. E. Wright and most specimens originate from north-west England. Most local specimens were collected by L. N. Kidd, the previous Keeper of Natural History, who specialised in certain Diptera groups and carried out an intensive study of Holden Clough (Kidd and Fitton, 1971). The specimens from L. Parmenter, mainly larger Brachycera, are all species from south-east England which are rare or absent from the Oldham area. The A. E. Wright Collection of Syrphidae (hoverflies) and Conopidae is nationally important and his other entomological collections are held by major museums including Liverpool. He published the results of his work as a *List of Syrphidae of North Lancashire and South Westmorland* (Wright, 1940) and *Some Uncommon Syrphidae from North Lancashire and South Westmorland* (Wright, 1944). The museum possesses reprints of these with additions in his own handwriting. The cabinet containing 1,907 specimens incorporates the collection of his associate, J. D. Ward. A further 31 dipterists have provided British material dating back to 1918. Some specimens have the determination labels of national experts J. E. Collin and E. C. M. Fonseca.

The collection contains eight specimens of four 'endangered' (R.D.B.1) species plus seven 'vulnerable' (R.D.B.2) species and 30 'rare' (R.D.B.3) species.

At least nine collectors have provided foreign material, mainly Indian Tipulidae (crane flies) from P. Susair Nathan and Scandinavian and North American Sciomyzidae (snail-killing flies) from several collectors. There are also models of the egg, larval, pupal and adult stages of the Housefly *Musca domestica*.

British 950 species; 6,218 specimens.

Foreign c.40 species; 55 specimens.

**Siphonaptera**

Of the 47 British species only four are represented in the museum collection in a total of 12 tubes. They are preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

4 species; 12 specimens.

### *Hymenoptera*

There are 665 specimens in the collection from at least 137 British species, but there are just two foreign specimens. In addition there are examples of a wasps' nest and a bees' nest with bee specimens. They are housed in four store boxes with some Parasitica found in the Lepidoptera collections. The specimens originate from at least nine collectors and most were taken locally.

139 species; 668 specimens.

### *Coleoptera*

The main collection, in three large cabinets, is made up of 9,427 British specimens representing 2,016 species. 'Duplicate' species in store boxes, although most have unique data, add at least another 226 specimens and unidentified specimens another 679. The only examples of Coleoptera larvae are three preserved in alcohol with glycerine.

A third of the collection is composed of the important C. G. Hall Collection, comprising over 7,000 specimens all pre-dating 1890. Hall lived in London, Deal and Dover and collected actively in south-east England. The collection also contains many specimens of his contemporaries, i.e. 60 collectors including Dr G. R. Crotch, Rev. W. W. Fowler (Lincoln), H. Harding, A. C. Homer (Tonbridge), E. W. Janson, J. H. A. Jenner, E. A. Newbury, Dr J. Scott, F. Smith and J. J. Walker. These were all well-known coleopterists of their day and the specimens date back at least to 1841. The Rev. W. W. Fowler published the major six volume publication *The Coleoptera of the British Isles* in 1887, the standard work on Coleoptera for many years. At least 136 of Fowler's specimens are in the collection as he regularly exchanged specimens with Hall. A detailed notebook in Hall's handwriting accompanies the collection and contains most of the information, i.e. numbered labels attached to the specimens, refer to the numbers in the notebook. The Hall Collection in two twelve-drawer cabinets was purchased by Oldham Museum in 1924 for £50.

The other collectors with most specimens in the collection are J. E. Cope (dates span the period 1874-1943), T. E. Fowden (1950s and 1960s), L. N. Kidd (1948-1978) and C. Johnson (1960s). The vast majority of these specimens are from Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire, including many from Oldham Metropolitan Borough. Another 30 people have contributed specimens which date from 1930-1980, mostly from the local area. A high proportion of the specimens have full data but, unfortunately, many from the Cope Collection lack such details. Four per cent are from Oldham, 16% from north-west England (excluding Oldham) and 80% from the rest of Britain.

Thirteen specimens of three extinct British species are represented in the collection but, regrettably, none has locality data. Amongst 108 Red Data Book species are 65 specimens of 29 'endangered' (R.D.B.1) species of which 48% have locality data.

The foreign Coleoptera include 2,705 specimens of at least 749 species, but many remain unidentified. At least 19 collectors have foreign specimens in the collection, notably B. D. Cooke, J. R. Dibb, W. D. Hincks, P. S. Nathan and W. H. Millward. They are from most continents, with a particularly good range of species from Australia, West Africa, India and Europe.

British 2,038 species; 10,345 specimens.

Foreign 749+ species; 2,705 specimens.

*Condition of the collection and its requirements*

There has been no infestation of the insect collections but there is damage to some specimens through too close packing in store boxes, notably amongst the foreign Lepidoptera. Some carded Orthoptera and Coleoptera specimens have been detached from their mounts and required regumming; verdigris has attacked some pins. The insect collections are in good condition overall considering the recent lack of curation.

There are still over 4,100 specimens awaiting identification and amalgamation into the collections. The Odonata and Hymenoptera require cabinet storage and arrangement in taxonomic order. Other collections also require revision of the taxonomic status and order of species.

**Vertebrates***Osteichthyes*

There are no spirit-preserved specimens but 105 casts of 66 species of fish. The casts, some on plaques, form part of the A. J. Gear Collection, bought via E. Gerrard and Son (London) in 1932. Gear lived at Westcliffe, Essex and P. W. Horn, an associate of Gear, described him as 'the premier fish modeller, and his work is in all the national museums'. There are also casts from Horn (Stepney Museum) and Flatters and Garnett (Manchester) in the collection. Sixteen cases, comprising 20 specimens, form part of the bequest by the Oldham Central Angling Club, including a 37.75lb pike. An additional three cases from the bequest are still at Werneth Park. A further eight donors have provided cast specimens.

67 species; 14 specimens.

*Amphibia and Reptilia*

The collection contains nine plaster casts, probably all by P. W. Horn, except for an Adder by F. H. L. Whish (Somerset). There are also two dried specimens, ten preserved in spirit (of which at least two have been spoilt by evaporation) two cast snake skins and a skeleton of a Common Frog. In addition there are 24 models showing the 'development of the Frog', which were purchased from E. Gerrard and Son (London).

*Aves**Mounts and skins*

There are 849 specimens of 321 species represented in the collection. These are mainly mounts, but also included are 30 study skins. The collection contains at least 125 foreign species while about 83% of the species regularly breeding in Britain are represented. At least 20% of the specimens originate from the Oldham area.

The birds come from a large number of collections and donors, often a single case or specimen was given, but the following donors presented a significant number of specimens: N. Abbot (Wilmslow), B. Clegg (Oldham), W. Daws (Mansfield), S. Duncan (Hull), J. Platt Hall (Ashton-under-Lyne), Capt. G. A. Schofield (Harrogate), F. J. Stubbs (Oldham), F. Taylor (Oldham), Mrs H. Taylor (Oldham) and Mrs Wrigley (Oldham).

A good number of specimens were also purchased from W. F. H. Rosenberg (Naturalist and Importer of Zoological Collections, London) and F. H. L. Whish (Naturalist and Taxidermist, Lympham, Somerset). Most have some accompanying data, although this is not always complete and is often scattered through several sources. They are stored in display cases, cabinets and boxes with 11 specimens on display in the 'Moorland Life' case in the library. Amongst the mounts are the following notable species:

*Local specimens from the Oldham area* - Red-necked Grebe, Gannet, Bewick's Swan, Honey Buzzard, Hobby, Arctic Skua, Little Auk and Nightingale.

*British specimens (excluding the Oldham area)* - Bulwer's Petrel, Leach's Petrel, Bittern (2), Long-tailed Duck (4), Rough-legged Buzzard, Golden Eagle (3), Capercaillie (2), Great Bustard (2), Stone Curlew, Grey Phalarope, Pomarine Skua, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Wryneck (3) and Chough.

*European specimens (excluding Britain)* - Little Bittern, Glossy Ibis, Red-footed Falcon, Cream-coloured Courser, Long-tailed Skua, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Alpine Accentor, Wallcreeper and Nutcracker.

There are also specimens from other continents, notably North America. Other interesting specimens include a hybrid Red/Black Grouse, several albino and melanistic specimens and an Eider, referred to in several scientific journals early in the century when it was at first considered to be a Pacific Eider (a sub-species not recorded from Europe).

Possibly the most significant specimen is the Bulwer's Petrel, the second to be recorded in Britain; only four have ever been seen, and this represents a previously unpublished record (see Appendix 1). A number of specimens listed in the Accession Book are no longer in the collection.

There are also a small number of skins:

*Study skins* - Red-necked Grebe, Slavonian Grebe, Storm Petrel, Red Kite, Marsh Harrier, Little Crake, Purple Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Roseate Tern, White's Thrush, Aquatic Warbler, Icterine Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Rustic Bunting.

#### *Eggs, nests and pellets*

The egg collection contains about 6,150 specimens representing about 1,362 clutches from 239 species. The major part of the collection originates from Fred Taylor who lived in Oldham. The bulk of his collection (216 species, 1,075 clutches, 4,835 eggs) is housed in a cabinet designed and built by him and his son. More eggs, including others from Taylor, are contained in small display boxes. Besides collecting his own eggs, he acquired specimens from at least 113 other collectors and details of these, along with full data on most clutches, are meticulously recorded in two large volumes (cabinet specimens only, although the display boxes usually have data written on the base). His collection contains eggs from a large number of scarce species, both British and European, and many from areas where particular species no longer breed. The main feature of the Taylor Collection is the large number of Cuckoo clutches i.e. 193 clutches containing Cuckoo eggs of 54 host species, plus several sub-species. These include a number of surprising host species such as Treecreeper and Snow Bunting.

The eggs from other collectors, at least 14, are stored randomly in display boxes. The other major collectors include Norman Abbot and Henry Hoyle, although eggs from the latter are labelled but apparently 'not reliably'. There are at least 17 species additional to those housed in the Taylor cabinet.

Amongst the eggs in the Taylor Collection are the following notable species:

*British specimens* - Storm Petrel, Leach's Petrel, Garganey, Red Kit, White-tailed Eagle, Hen Harrier, Golden Eagle, Hobby, Peregrine, Quail, Stone Curlew, Kentish Plover, Dotterel, Whimbrel, Greenshank, Red-necked Phalarope, Roseate Tern, Little Tern, Wryneck, Woodlark, Marsh Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Bearded Tit, Crested Tit, Red-backed Shrike, Chough, Hawfinch and Cirl Bunting.

*Foreign specimens* - Slavonian Grebe, Black-necked Grebe, Gadwall, Scaup, Long-tailed Duck, Honey Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Rough-legged Buzzard, Osprey, Baillon's Crake, Great Bustard, Avocet, Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Green Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Black Tern, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Fieldfare, Redwing, Savi's Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Brambling and Snow Bunting.

Amongst the other eggs are the following species:

Calandra Lark, Rufous Bush Chat, Cetti's Warbler, Great Grey Shrike, Lesser Grey Shrike, Rose-coloured Starling and Scarlet Grosbeak.

There are also 74 nests originating from F. Taylor and 29 of these contain clutches of eggs. They include the following notable species: Great Reed Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Bearded Tit, Red-backed Shrike and Cirl Bunting.

Also included in the collections are 26 bird pellets, from Barn Owl, Little Owl, Robin, Rook and some unidentified.

#### *Condition of the collection and its requirements*

The bird specimens are generally in good condition considering their age with only 26% regarded as 'poor'. The specimens date back to 1815 with most having been taken in the nineteenth century. Although many are of historical interest their age is often shown by the unnatural positions in which they are set, so reducing their display potential. There has been no policy to accept recent legally obtained casualties but there is a need for fresh mounts and a larger representative local collection of study skins plus osteological material and other remains.

There is no catalogue of the collections at present so it is difficult to locate quickly all the items from a particular species e.g. mounts, skins, eggs, nests, pellets etc. To document them fully, however, a good deal of detective work needs to be done to gather together all the facts relating to a particular specimen. Many have labels with them but these are usually incomplete and, more significantly, not even attached to the specimens so some may have become mixed. Many specimens have obviously come from 'broken-up' cases but these have often been regrouped into different combinations, probably by F. J. Stubbs, a previous Assistant Curator. Often several specimens of one species have been grouped together on the same base but, unfortunately, any data accompanying them can no longer be assigned with reliability to a particular specimen. With some work it may be possible to resolve these problems by studying available information and comparing taxidermists' styles. There is a variety of scattered data available: on the base of specimens, data labels, accession books, minute book, correspondence file or from literature such as Stubbs' *Birds of the Oldham District*. This really needs gathering together so that all the information on age, sex, plumage, locality, date, collector, donor and taxidermist is combined.

Mounts/study skins:	321 species;	849 specimens;
Eggs:	239 species;	6,150 specimens;
Nests:	61 species;	74 specimens;
Pellets:	4 species;	26 specimens;

#### *Mammalia*

Thirty species of mammals are represented in the collection by a total of 83 specimens. In addition there are a few small mammal skulls and a cow 'fur ball'. At least 12 of the specimens are of local origin and the specimens come from at least 15 different donors

Collectors include: W. H. Doeg (Manchester), J. Platt Hall (Ashton-under-Lyne), F. J. Stubbs (Oldham) and F. H. L. Whish (Lympsham, Somerset). The more interesting British species include: Greater Horseshoe Bat, Polecat and Pine Marten. Unfortunately, some of the specimens have been badly 'bleached' by prolonged exposure to daylight.

	Species		Specimens	
	British	Foreign	British	Foreign
Fungi	49		81	
Plantae	1,062		1,160	
Anthozoa		15		21
Mollusca	302	1,709	6,675	5,329
Diplopoda	11		20	
Chilopoda	10		16	
Thysanura	1		1	
Ephemeroptera	6		19	
Odonata	37		118	
Plecoptera	14		86	
Orthoptera	26		59	
Dermatera	3	1	11	3
Psocoptera	2		2	
Anopleura	3		10	
Hemiptera	128	7	529	14
Neuroptera	16		40	
Mecoptera	2		8	
Lepidoptera	1,628	205	26,325	2,267
Trichoptera	78		316	
Diptera	950	40	6,218	55
Siphonaptera	4		12	668
Hymenoptera	137	2	665	3
Coleoptera	2,038	749	10,345	2,705
Isopoda	6		8	
Solifugae		1		1
Pseudoscorpionidae	2		4	
Opiliones and Araneae	171	4	222	5
Acari	3		5	
Merostomata		1		1
Osteichthyes	67		114	
Amphibia and Reptilia	9		48	
Aves	200	135	6,750	350
Mammalia	28	2	81	2
	6,993	2,871	59,958	11,424
	9,864		71,382	

Table 2. Numbers of species and specimens represented in the collections.

### Geology

The geology collection was not included in the job description for the post of Temporary Keeper because of the short time period available. The following details were extracted from a report by Herbert Bolton (Assistant Keeper at Manchester Museum) in 1896, and information collected by A. C. Howell (Bolton Museum) whilst carrying out research for the North West Collection Research Unit in 1978, and have not been checked.

The original museum collection contained a fair selection of Coal Measure fossils and the nucleus of a collection to illustrate the local geology. This was considerably boosted by the acquisition of the Nield Geology Collection. The latter is of 'considerable importance and contains many specimens of high value and of great interest to geologists', according to Herbert Bolton. Hopefully this still applies today. It is certainly rich in all forms of Coal Measures fossils. With the subsequent addition of other specimens, notably minerals, there appears to be a good series of specimens to illustrate the Oldham and District geological history.

There has been no accessioning system used, although L. N. Kidd has compiled a rough list of specimens, but a proper cataloguing system would be most beneficial.

Storage conditions are inadequate with the specimens stored in polythene bags and, therefore, susceptible to pyrite disease if the humidity is high. Most specimens are stored on top of one another and could suffer damage through attrition.

Mineral Specimens		608
Rock Specimens		82
Fossils: Plantae		130
Protozoa		6
Parazoa		16
Coelenterata	- Corals	52
Arthropoda	- Trilobites	41
	- Crustacea	9
	- Others	17
Mollusca	- Gastropods	229
	- lamellibranchs	285
	- Cephalopods	117
Brachiopoda		245
Bryozoa		7
Echinodermata	- Echinoids	55
	- Crinoids	17
	- Others	1
Stomochorda	- Graptolites	8
Fish		68
Reptilia		28
Other Vertebrates		62
	Total	<u>2084</u> specimens

Table 3. Numbers of geological specimens represented in the collections.

### **Biological records**

There is a card index system listing local natural history records obtained from publications or by personal communication, but not the collections, and listed according to species. The index is stored in eight rectangular wooden boxes under the following titles:

- Local Vertebrates
- Local Diptera and Siphonaptera
- Local Invertebrata (except Insecta)
- Local Lepidoptera
- Local Cryptogamic Plants
- Local Hymenoptera and Remaining Insect Orders
- Local Coleoptera

Within each box there are subdivisions into families and then into species, both stored in alphabetical order. There may be as many as 40,000 individual records; most would benefit from the addition of grid references for contribution to recording schemes (may only be possible to 10km square) and then computerisation so that information on sites, dates, collectors, etc. would be easily accessible.

### **Library**

An excellent library of natural history reference books, identification keys and scientific journals has been built up but was removed from the Natural History Department and is now in the basement store of Royton Library. If further work is to be carried out on the natural history collections it is important that these are returned so that they can be used in conjunction with the specimens. There are over 1,250 books and 650 volumes of journals.

### **Lantern slides**

There is also a collection of 479 lantern slides, some from life, some from prepared specimens and some from book illustrations. They depict plants, insects, views, birds, amphibians, fish, mammals, local geology, marine invertebrates, trees and reptiles. The photographers include J. Armitage, D. R. Byram, T. Hirst, E. Openshaw and R. Stubbs.

## **Summary**

### **Collections**

- (i) The museum possesses large and important collections which cover all aspects of natural history. The size of the collections, i.e. 71,382 specimens, ranks them fifth in the North West Area (behind Liverpool, Manchester, Bolton and Warrington).
- (ii) The collections contain a high proportion of specimens from the Oldham area and collected by Oldham naturalists. There are a number of collections of regional, or even national importance, e.g. C. G. Hall Coleoptera Collection; F. Taylor Oology and Conchology Collections; A. E. Wright Syrphidae and Microlepidoptera Collections. The overall high percentage of nineteenth century specimens also increased the collections' significance.



- (iii) The majority of the collections have come to the museum through donation. Such donations were prompted by the belief that the museum would act as a safe custodian and would use the collections for the education and enlightenment of future generations.
- (iv) It is nigh on impossible to assess the monetary value of the collections, as comparable collections rarely, if ever, come up on the open market. Furthermore recent legislation actively restricts the sale or trade in particular specimens. It is safe to say, however, that the collections are in themselves unique, and consequently irreplaceable; taken in this context they are priceless.

### **Curation**

- (i) 'Natural history specimens left to themselves will suffer infestation by insects and damage due to humidity changes, and gradually cease to be a problem as they crumble away to dust. Simply ignoring specimens until they are ruined is not an acceptable curatorial choice' (Wheatcroft, 1987). Natural history collections, therefore, require regular inspection and curatorial attention. This has only taken place in recent years because of voluntary assistance, but such help cannot be relied upon indefinitely.
- (ii) Documentation is vital to ascertain the complete pedigree of specimens and to show their relationships with collections elsewhere. Ideally, it should be a pre-requisite of any other work and there are also important security and legal implications to be considered.
- (iii) Storage and environmental conditions are not ideal. Some collections are overcrowded, causing a certain amount of damage and retrieval difficulties for conservation, documentation and research work. Most specimens require exacting storage conditions because of their shape, size and fragility.
- (iv) A certain amount of conservation and restoration work is required on the collections. Complete reorganisation is also necessary for the collections to be of maximum use for reference and if further specimens are to be added. The present storage location of the natural history collections in a comparatively small area of the Art Picture Store effectively precludes rearrangement by taxonomic order. Furthermore, well over 3,000 specimens remain to be identified.
- (v) Enquiries to view the egg collection should be refused unless close supervision can be guaranteed, as a number of egg thefts have taken place from museums without permanent natural history staff. Such restrictions should equally apply to other collections, as butterflies and other specimens have also been stolen from museums in recent years.
- (vi) As the collections belong to the people of Oldham, there is both an obligation and a desirability to put specimens on display. They should only be used, however, if there is expertise available to advise on their suitability for display. If this is not available, damage may occur to important specimens and some of those loaned out in past years cannot be traced. Furthermore, there are less obvious problems with unsupervised loans, such as old bird specimens which have been treated with arsenic soap and may pose a health hazard.

### **Collections policy**

- (i) In the past there has been no obvious collections policy and both foreign and British specimens have been readily accepted. However, future acquisitions should be controlled in line with an approved collections policy. This need not be rigid and, indeed, specimens from other parts of Britain can be useful for comparative purposes but, first and foremost, future collection should concentrate on the Oldham Metropolitan Borough. There is great potential for studying local sites and collecting specimens and data from these areas. There is also a great need to help people understand and appreciate the wildlife that can be seen in their local area.
- (ii) Data collection should be extended and ideally computerised as this is a logical extension of the information associated with museum specimens on data labels. It can prove invaluable when putting on displays, answering enquiries and producing publications as well as contributing towards conservation issues. In the long term such data should be made available to the national archive, e.g. Biological Records Centre.

### **Research**

- (i) A large natural history library has been built up over the past hundred years, principally to assist with enquiries and research on the collections. The library thus contains much information which bears a distinct relationship to the collections and should be returned to be used in conjunction with the specimens.

### **Recommendations**

- (i) That Oldham Museum retains the full range of its natural history collections.
- (ii) That a Natural History Department is established with adequate resources to both care for and give wider access to the collections.
- (iii) That a collections policy for natural history be adopted to encompass both the future acquisition of specimens and the collection of related data.
- (iv) That the natural history library be rehoused alongside the natural history collections.

### ***Editor's note***

Lists of associated collectors for the insect, bird, bird egg and mammal collections were supplied but have not been reproduced here. They are available from the author on application.

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## Appendix 1

### Details of Bulwer's Petrel

The Bird Collection contains a specimen of Bulwer's Petrel (*Bulseria bulwerii*) with a label on the base as follows:

'One of two birds that was taken on the fishing boat belonging to John Humphreys, Mousehole.

They was purchased on Sunday and was ordered to be set at liberty by Mr. Baily. One got back to sea but the other was recaptured near Scilly October 2nd 1897'.

The specimen was originally in collection of the late William Daws of Mansfield, Notts (Case No. 141 also containing 3 Storm Petrels and a Leach's Petrel). The case was bought intact from the dealer C. H. Gowland, Naturalist, 'Tadorna', Pensby Road, Barnston, Wirral in 1932 for £3.00.

There are only three confirmed records of this species in Britain: Yorkshire (May 1837, February 1908) and Cork (August 1965) and, therefore, this is a new British record and the second in chronological order. Because of its rarity details of the specimen have been submitted for acceptance by the British Ornithologists' Union and subsequent publication of the record.

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