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The Interpretation of Botany at Haslemere Educational Museum **- Julia Tanner**

The Botanical Challenge

The particular challenge of displaying botany collections first became apparent to the current curatorial team at Haslemere Museum whilst undertaking a Heritage Lottery funded gallery refurbishment programme, which was completed in 2003. The galleries had last had a makeover in the 1950s and no current member of staff had experience of formally presenting botany to the public. Without doubt it proved to be the most challenging section to re-develop.

The NatSCA 2006 presentation, "Interpreting the Undisplayable" by Leander Wolstenholme, Curator of Botany at The Manchester Museum, struck an immediate chord with our experiences at Haslemere and raised many interesting issues relating to the interpretation and display of botanical collections. The discussion provided valuable points of reference for reviewing botany at Haslemere Museum and examining some common challenges.

The Founding of the Museum

Haslemere Educational Museum was founded in 1888 by Sir Jonathan Hutchinson (1828-1913), an eminent surgeon whose practice was based in London. In the 1860s Hutchinson built a country home in Haslemere, where he had the space to indulge his delight in collecting. This passion was based on his deep conviction that an education could be acquired through the study of objects.

His original museum was opened in the grounds of his home until its success led to its establishment at more central site on the south side of the town in 1895. It was conceived as a museum *for* Haslemere, not simply *of* Haslemere. At its inception it pioneered innovative ideas of museum education and interactivity which were influential at the time and which anticipated many ideas current today.

After his death in 1913, Hutchinson's circle of like-minded friends and scholars were determined to keep his museum going. They convened a new board of trustees that, in 1926, established the museum on its present site.

Haslemere Educational Museum is an independent museum, a charitable trust and a company limited by guarantee. Throughout its history it has been privately financed through its earned income, donations and bequests, with only limited recourse to public funds.

Botany at Haslemere Museum

The Museum has about 400,000 objects in its collections, broadly relating to the subjects of Natural History, Geology and Human History. Natural History specimens account for about two thirds of the entire collections. Botany is the second largest collection (after shells) with approximately 65,000 specimens, primarily from British sources. Most of these, about 80%, consist of pressed herbarium specimens of flowering and non-flowering plants. Other specimens include plant galls, seeds, liverworts, mosses, conifers and wood sample blocks. Of all the collections, botany has the richest field collection data and well recorded donor details. Much of this material's primary value is as a research resource.

Amongst the named collections is the G.J Lyon Collection of all known species of mosses in Great Britain up to 1849. The hard-bound volume is beautifully preserved and includes many rare species. The Colonel Lionel Messel (1899-1971) Collection was donated in the 1950s and consists of wood block samples from around the world. The Joshua Lamb (1856-1943) Collection of British wild flowers was collected in the late 1800s. The more unusual Lightfoot Collection comprises a large selection of vascular plants collected in the 1860s-1870s by a Miss Lightfoot, with each specimen accompanied by a poem. These named collections provide a brief insight into the scope of the botany collection and reflect a concentration of collecting from the 1800s to the mid-twentieth century.

Two-doubled sided display cases and three text panels make up the formal botany display in the Natural



History Gallery. These new displays were developed as part of the Heritage Lottery funded gallery refurbishment programme that was completed in 2003. Living plants can also be found on display in the museum, but not in the main galleries. A permanent display of common wild plants in our reception hall has been a popular feature of the Museum since 1893. 'The Flower Table' gives visitors an opportunity to see a wide range of live species at close quarters and encourages an interest in native plants, some of which are often thought of as weeds. During the winter months few wild flowers are available, so we take the opportunity to stage special interest displays with themes such as 'Herbs and Spices', 'Medicinal Plants', 'Poisonous Plants' or 'Shakespeare's Flowers'. These displays always receive a great deal of interest from our visitors and there is probably much greater scope for development.

A number of Haslemere Museum staff have also committed their botanical expertise to print over the years. At least two previous curators have published books in the field. Ernest William Swanton (1870-1958) was curator for over 50 years from 1897-1948 and took an active role in many fields of natural history, but had a particular interest in plant galls. In 1912 he published *British Plant Galls*, detailing all the gall-inducing species in Britain at that time. Arthur Jewell (1921-2004), curator from 1962-1988, was also an impressive polymath but his particular interest was reflected in his publication of, *The Observer's Book of Mosses and Liverworts*. Although no member of the curatorial team presently has a background in botany (or natural history for that matter), we can nevertheless call upon the expertise of our Honorary Botanist, Laura Ponsoby, who worked for many years at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. She, likewise, has published on botany, including *A List of the Ferns and Flowering Plants of the Haslemere District* (1978) and *Marianne North at Kew Gardens*.

Displaying the Undisplayable

The presentation, "Displaying the Undisplayable", by Leander Wolstenholme indicated some common features and challenges in the display and interpretation of botany collections. In a survey of museum botany displays, Wolstenholme found a commonality of elements within the presentations. The Top Five display items were listed as: 1. Plant Models, 2. Big Seeds, 3. Living Plants, 4. Illustrations, 5. Photo-graphs. The truth of this assessment could be immediately gauged by the knowing laughter from delegates. Haslemere's formal botany display in the Natural History Gallery also reflects the findings. This is interesting given that the curatorial team involved (including myself) had no background in botany, and no specialist scientific or historical basis on which to base display decisions.



This suggests that a common set of challenges using this particular resource generally produces a common set of adaptations. Furthermore, apart from the priority to present a valid 'scientific' botanical message, there is a strong 'aesthetic' impulse, which also drives display presentations.

During the Redevelopment Project at Haslemere, the selection process of objects for these new displays soon exhibited a tension between providing a valid botanical message and the availability of a limited number of "displayable" specimens to illustrate that message. Given that about 80% of our collection consists of pressed herbarium specimens, only a tiny proportion of these (four herbaria sheets) are displayed. In considering the use of more herbaria sheets, it was decided that the visual impact was unlikely to engage visitors to take an interest in the botany display. The rest of the plant world is therefore represented by specimens from the remaining 20% of the collection, i.e. those that are deemed as more "displayable". Where this is not possible (and limits are reached with what can be achieved with Big Seeds!), then the other usual suspects of Wolstenholme's Top Five are employed. In the case of Haslemere, this particularly means photographs and plant models. Overall, less than 1% of the botany collection is on display and it could be argued that the display presents a skewed impression of the botany collections as a whole. In order to counter this sort of criticism the museum is planning to provide further information at the display area

with a more detailed description of the botany collection, its contents and proportions. This may also include a discussion of the choice of objects on display.

The Haslemere display consists of two double-sided display cases and three large text panels. The three text panels rely on the presentation of written information illustrated with numerous photographs. These relate to *Plants and People: Food and Drink*, *Plants and People: Medicines and Materials*, and *British Plants: Places Where Plants Live*. The display cases also employ the latter elements, along with other members of the Top Five, particularly plant models and seeds (big and small). The display cases are thematically divided into four main categories. The types of items displayed in *Seed Plants: Cycads, Ginkgo and Conifers* include a cross-section of a Yew tree, but mainly numerous large pine-cones and seeds. Four drawers below display further pine-cones and photographs of local trees. *Seed Plants: Flowering Plants*, includes the only section where four pressed herbarium sheets are displayed, along with four trays of different types of seeds based upon dispersal techniques. *Plants Without Flowers: Mosses, Liverworts, Horsetails and Ferns*, relies on plant models but also loose dried specimens. *Fungi, Lichens and Algae: These Are Not Plants*, similarly includes plant models, but a little more variety is provided by dried bracket fungus, lichens on wood samples, seaweeds mounted on card and spore prints of fungi mounted on glass. An exception to the Top Five at Haslemere is that there are no botanical illustrations in the displays. Otherwise, the Top Five are well represented, with living plants being found as part of the separate "Flower Table" display.

In terms of alternative means of interpretation, Wolstenholme showed that it is possible to engage the interest of the general public with botany, especially using links to popular culture. This was apparent in the botanical events and workshops that were provided at Manchester, under themes like "Harry Potter" and "Narnia". These hooks can capture the imagination and foster further interest. However, as Wolstenholme made clear, these events were time consuming and labour intensive for a limited increase in access. In twelve busy months of concerted effort to broaden access to the botany collections only 0.0398% of the collection was used (originally stated as 0.038% but since revised). That would mean that only 3.98% of the collection would be accessed in 100 years (if you assume that none of the specimens are re-used or re-displayed in more than one event or display). Moreover, this level of interpretation would surely not be sustainable over a long period of time given the other pressures on limited staff numbers. Wolstenholme's findings serve as a pertinent reminder of the challenges of current collections management and the imperative to increase access.

The Future for Botany at Haslemere

Given the above, Haslemere Museum is also working on further means of interpreting botany other than the formal gallery display and the Flower Table, although most of these options will be self-led due to the aforementioned problems of limited staff numbers and current workload demands. These will chiefly consist of information leaflets and trails of the garden and grounds, though some events and workshops will be tailored to botany as part of regular programming. Further descriptive analysis of the botany collection will also be made available through our website in later 2006.

The Museum's garden and grounds has been a particularly under-interpreted resource of 'living botany'. However, a number of recent developments have begun to remedy this issue and are inspiring ideas for further interpretation. The Museum's original herb garden was lost many years ago when the building was extended. In 2001 we built a new Victorian style herb garden and have more recently developed a Herb Garden Booklet for visitors which contains information about the history of herbs, a summary of uses and an identification chart. Last year we also produced a Ten Tree Trail leaflet, which takes visitors on a guided tour of ten trees in the museum grounds and provides brief notes about identification, geographical origins, practical uses and associated folklore. A Garden Moss Trail identifies different types of mosses and locates them in the museum garden. Workshops for children such as, "Natures Colours and Patterns" and "Be A Nature Detective", already engage with our living resource and encourage observational skills and an appreciation of the variety of plant life. Other related workshops are being considered for all ages. Links are also made between the garden or "live specimens" and the museum galleries, in order to make the visitor/user experience more holistic. For example, a living ginkgo tree in the museum grounds is linked to a fossil ginkgo leaf from the Jurassic Period on display in the Geology Gallery. This facilitates discussion of other topics such as evolution, extinction of species and biodiversity, making links between different themes in order to indicate the inter-relatedness of subjects.

Furthermore, the history of our landscaped garden and grounds is interesting in its own right. The museum was relocated to its current site in the High Street in 1926. The original building dates back to an ancient burghage house of the 16th century, but over the years the building has been rebuilt and extended. From 1798 the Rev. Robert Price lived at what was then known as Burgage House. His brother was Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829), the champion of rational landscape gardening and author of, *An Essay on the Picturesque*. It is assumed that Uvedale assisted his brother in planning the layout of the grounds. The plan included a ha-ha between the lawn and the field, the planting of numerous trees, and a pond with a gazebo above it commanding a view of the Weald, features which still exist today. The Museum has plans to usefully employ this history as a tool for the further interpretation of our living botany collection. Plans include a booklet about the early history of scientific collecting and the associated introduction of non-indigenous species to British gardens e.g. with reference to specimens like the monkey puzzle trees in the museum grounds. The booklet will also provide information about the botany collection held by the museum, thereby encouraging further access by appointment to the reserve collections.

A number of other information leaflets relating to botany are currently in production. These will be made available in "Want to Know More" files displayed in the Natural History Gallery. Titles include "Ferns", "Flowers and Trees", "Grasses, Sedges and Rushes", "Seed Dispersal" and "Understanding Flowers By Families", amongst others. These leaflets will explicitly relate to specimens on display or in the museum grounds. Readers will be alerted to further specimens in the reserve collections, therefore encouraging increased access by appointment. Further sources of information will be provided in terms of references to botanical publications, sites of interest (e.g. RHS Wisley in the local area) and options for further study (e.g. Field Studies Council).

Every year the Museum undertakes a number of temporary exhibitions of items from the reserve collections. A botany display is overdue and therefore part of current programming. The rotation of objects in the permanent gallery cases is also being considered as part of the imperative to broaden access. The Museum also provides a joint lecture series throughout the year with the local Haslemere Natural History Society. The subject of these lectures sometimes relates to botany and in the future the museum would like to provide small temporary displays to illustrate the lectures. Another regular feature may also benefit from further development, and taking inspiration from Wolstenholme's paper there is scope to broaden the displays of the traditional Flower Table with links into popular culture. This may take the form of films such as 'Jurassic Park', but also making links to regular high-profile events such as Springwatch and the Chelsea Flower Show.

About 40% of the botany collections remains un-catalogued. Over the next few years the museum will be tackling this backlog as part of a Collections Management Project and as an objective of Accreditation. This will provide a greater understanding of the collection and therefore facilitate access. Plans for the more distant future will hopefully result in an online catalogue of the collection, which will enable extensive access to detailed information.

Conclusion

Wolstenholme's finding with regard to the Top Five botanical display items is well reflected at Haslemere. This suggests that common challenges of display produce a common set of results, given the nature of the botanical collections.

Challenging though it may be at times, Wolstenholme showed that it is possible to interpret our botany collections for the general public and make that interpretation interesting and engaging.

The challenge to increase access to the reserve collections should not be underestimated and any directives calling for even greater access to these collections must be reasonable, given current staffing levels and responsibilities.

The ideas raised in Wolstenholme's presentation have encouraged further ideas for display and interpretation of botany at Haslemere, as part of an ongoing process of improvements.

Perhaps botany as a subject of learning and enjoyment would benefit from the establishment of a dedicated organisation to engage with the general public and encourage participation, much as Rockwatch does for geology.