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Is there a viable future for herbaria in British Museums?

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In one word the answer is yes.

I arrived at this conclusion after studying six herbaria in Britain, ranging in size from two thousand specimens that could be accommodated on two shelves of a cupboard to collections approaching three quarters of a million specimens and requiring considerably more shelving. A variety of museums containing herbarium collections were visited for the purposes of this study: local authority: Bolton Museum and Archive and Southend Museums Service; university: Manchester Museum; national provincial: World Museum Liverpool; independent: Haslemere Educational Museum, and of course my own place of work, the Royal Horticultural Society’s herbarium at Wisley.

What prompted me to investigate herbaria in British museums? One reason was that, although I work in a herbarium, the RHS is not strictly a museum and I was curious to see how herbaria were accommodated and used in the context of a museum. Were they visible? Were they active? Were they acknowledged within the museum itself? Were they in jeopardy and from what sources?



Fig. 1. *Nymphaea* 'Director G.T. Moore' © RHS Herbarium.

Another factor which spurred my curiosity was a seeming lack of coverage in the museums' press regarding herbaria in British museums. It is almost a subject without a literature. As long ago as 1954 Harry Stansfield, the then Keeper of Botany at Liverpool Public Museums, referred to herbaria as the 'Cinderella of the natural sciences collections'¹ and it has been stated that botany 'occupies in general a very subordinate position in British museums'.² My aim is to show that Cinderella deserves to go to the ball. As Linnaeus said, 'A herbarium is better than any illustration; every botanist should make one.'³

The fact that herbaria are not intended for display sets them apart from other museum objects in the most obvious of ways. Leander Wolstenholme more recently commented in *NatSCA News* on the difficulties of displaying the 'undisplayable'.⁴ His conclusions were supported in a subsequent article by Julia Tanner.⁵ This lack of visibility was one of the concerns raised by the 1987 *Biological Collections UK* report, which also highlighted historical neglect, a lack of curatorial expertise and public unawareness as threats facing the herbarium.⁶ The second part of this paper will look at the various ways in which the selected museums have tackled these challenges.

But before looking at the current state of herbaria in British museums, I would like to start by attempting a definition of the term 'herbarium'; this will be followed by a brief history of herbaria. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a herbarium is 'a collection of dried plants systematically arranged. Also a book or case contrived for keeping such a collection; the room or building in which it is kept'.⁷ The original and highly appropriate name for a herbarium was *hortus siccus*, a dried garden. A herbarium, therefore, is a collection of dried, pressed plants, mounted on paper, on loose sheets or in a bound volume and which may be systematically arranged.

What function does the herbarium perform? Traditionally herbaria performed a reference function, as they still do today. They provided the catalogue and identity of the flora of an area and were and still are used to write field guides or manuals to aid in the identification of plants. For example, the Holmesdale Natural History Society has collections made by J.A. Brewer, including many plants cited in his *Flora of Reigate* (1856) and *Flora of Surrey* (1863). Thus the herbarium is an archive that supports the science of plant taxonomy, that is the science that finds, describes, classifies, identifies, and names plants.

In addition to its traditional role as a reference tool for botanists, the herbarium is increasingly being used by historians, artists, and garden designers. For example, garden designer Lizzie Tulip has been researching the herbarium of Florence Nightingale, the Stovin herbarium, at Middlesbrough Museums & Galleries to coincide with the centenary of Florence Nightingale's death in 2010.⁸

Herbaria have been in existence for hundreds of years. The first herbarium is reputedly to be that of the Italian naturalist, Professor Luca Ghini (1490-1556), who was the first director of the botanical garden at Pisa. He is reported to have collected three hundred specimens and preserved them on paper for the purpose of identification. Ghini introduced 'probably for the first time the technique of pressing and drying plants which could then be attached to cards and filed as a source of reference more reliable than an illustration.'⁹ Thus botanical study could now be conducted all the year round by consulting a collection of dried plants. Ghini also established the practice of field trips as a standard part of the students' training.

In 1530s Italy, at places like Pisa and Padua, it is medicine that is the driving force behind the establishment of herbarium collections; students were taught about the healing properties of plants, animals, and minerals. Unsurprisingly then, the greatest sixteenth century herbalists were physicians. Thus we find the business of self-preservation, and the preservation of the natural world, intimately bound up.

In England the Apothecaries Act of 1815 required all medical students to take an examination in herbal knowledge if they wished to practice as licensed practitioners. Not only were botanists and medical practitioners collecting and amassing their own private herbaria, but people from all walks of life, from local worthies to factory workers, were keen to get out and collect plant specimens for their own herbaria. For example, the wealthy businessmen Charles Bailey and Cosmo Melvill, as well as Leopold Hartly Grindon, who was a working-class man, all ultimately came to donate their collections to the Manchester Museum.

The mid-nineteenth century also saw an explosion in the formation of local botanical societies, which were the origins of many herbaria found in museums today. All the museums in this study were founded in the nineteenth century. Many local floras were also published in the nineteenth century, and Webb and Colman's *Flora Hertfordiensis* of 1848 was described by Dony as being 'as much verse as botany'.¹⁰ This

comment evokes the 1870's herbarium collection of a Miss Lightfoot, which is housed at Haslemere Educational Museum, and in which every pressed plant is accompanied by a poem. It must be admitted that not everybody has been enthusiastic about herbaria: in the twentieth century, the esteemed C.D. Darlington, Professor of Botany at Oxford, believed that herbarium specimens should be burned!

Present

After this rather brief and selective tour of the past I would like to return to the present. I found museums and their curators who cared for their collections and indeed were devoted to them. I have chosen three broad themes to illustrate the various ways in which herbaria are playing an active role in the life of the contemporary museum. The themes chosen are: scientific function; display; new developments.

Scientific function

There was plenty of evidence that the herbaria in this study retained a scientific function.

This was certainly the case at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley which houses a collection of approximately eighty thousand specimens. (Fig. 2) In 1964 the Council of the RHS decided to formalise the remit of the RHS Herbarium by declaring it to be a dedicated horticultural herbarium. As one of the world's few specialist horticultural herbaria, Wisley is a vital horticultural reference tool for both RHS botanists (who use it daily) and visiting researchers.



Fig. 2. RHS Herbarium, Wisley © RHS Herbarium.

Despite being small, compared with Kew's six to seven million specimens, Wisley does have an international reputation, especially when it comes to the practice of maintaining nomenclatural standards.¹¹ These are the equivalent of type specimens, but for named cultivars (cultivated varieties). A nomenclatural standard is the herbarium specimen or illustration of a cultivar which forms a permanent record of the distinguishing characteristics of that cultivar. Whilst the concept of standard specimens was first proposed in 1959 it was only in 1998 that the practice of designating standards really took off as far as the RHS was concerned with the appointment of one full-time member of staff dedicated to this research project. The RHS Herbarium is the world's foremost institution in this respect. The herbarium has over 5,000 nomenclatural standards.



Fig. 3. Standard portfolio for *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' © RHS Herbarium.

The herbarium specimen is the nomenclatural standard. Information on the label gives the name, description, location and date of collection. Supporting information in the portfolio includes: a photographic transparency showing form and colour, features lost when the plant is pressed; first place of publication, in this instance a nursery catalogue and other supporting literature. All standard specimens are placed in green-edged folders.

Another traditional function of the herbarium is that of supporting the publication of a local flora. Botany staff have been working on an updated Wisley Flora to be published in 2010 to mark the centenary of the first Wisley Flora. Voucher specimens have been collected.

The herbarium at Southend Museums Service is small, comprising some two thousand specimens. There is no dedicated botanist as such but the Museums & Galleries Manager, John Skinner, is a trained botanist, and as he proudly told me David Bellamy was his lecturer at Durham University. The focus of this collection is local (Essex) flora. It is this curator's interest that keeps the Southend herbarium alive and vibrant. He is also a keen lichenologist and mycologist and as such the museum has a good collection of these. The Museums and Galleries Manager has good relationships with the vice county recorder and local botanists who contribute to the herbarium. The earliest herbarium specimens date to the 1820s and are formed from the collection of Christopher Parsons (1807-1882), a gentleman farmer, who recorded all the common plants of his time. Many of these three hundred and sixty-nine specimens are now agricultural rarities and are of significance for their historical interest such as *Agrostemma githago*, corn cockle. (Fig. 4). The museum has a recreation of a Victorian naturalist's study loosely based on Christopher Parsons. (Fig. 5)

Display

When visited all of the museums studied had herbarium specimens on display in the public galleries. For example, at Manchester herbarium specimens collected in the nineteenth century from Lindow Common were used in ‘Lindow Man: A Bog Body Exhibition’. These included sphagnum moss, *Sphagnum cuspidatum* and bog rosemary, *Andromeda polifolia*.

At Bolton Museum the natural history galleries were peppered with invitations to the public to visit the herbarium. Incidentally Bolton Museum’s first curator was William Midgeley, who made his first pressing at the precocious age of four.

An interesting and unusual feature at Haslemere Educational Museum is the presence of a flower table, which features numerous examples of living plants. This occupies a prominent position opposite the reception desk, and has been a feature of the museum since 1893. (Figs. 6 & 7)

Fig. 4. *Agrostemma githago*, corn cockle, collected by Christopher Parsons, 1825 © John Skinner, Southend Museums Service.



Fig. 5. A Victorian naturalists study, Central Museum, Southend-on-Sea © John Skinner, Southend Museums Service.



Fig. 6. The flower table, Haslemere Museum, early twentieth century. © Haslemere Educational Museum.



Fig. 7. The flower table, Haslemere Museum © Haslemere Educational Museum.

New Developments

All of the museums visited found that artists were being inspired by the herbarium collections. As the editor of *Museum Practice*, Javier Pes comments, ‘Artists’ interventions are all the rage, especially in non-art museums.’¹²

A novel and imaginative way in which the work of the herbarium has been brought to a wider audience has been through the appointment of an artist in residence in the Liverpool Botanical Collection. Jyll Bradley’s appointment has been made possible by Liverpool’s status as European Capital of Culture in 2008.

Bradley's work is, as she states, 'often concerned with 'worlds' that are going through difficult periods of self-reflection. These are places and institutions which superficially seem outmoded, but which in fact are very much alive, albeit desirous of re-invention.'¹³ The Fragrant Project, as the artist entitles her on-going work with plants, is interdisciplinary, mixed media and site specific.¹⁴ Bradley sees Liverpool's botanical history as one of dispersal, given that the collections (herbarium, library and garden) have been dispersed and are now in three separate locations. The artist felt that the herbarium was the dried memory of the original garden. She perceived that through herbarium specimens a direct link to the past may be established via connections made with human handwriting and the plant. Each sheet is a story waiting to be told.¹⁵

There is no doubt that Bradley's work has raised the profile of the collections at Liverpool.¹⁶ People are now forming links between the dried and living gardens: for the very first time gardeners from the Liverpool Corporation have been to the herbarium. A major product of the residency was the show garden, 'Mr Roscoe's Garden', which won a silver medal at the Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show in 2008. (Fig 8) The garden celebrated the life and work of William Roscoe, founder of Liverpool's botanic garden, and the plants came from the Liverpool Botanic Gardens collection. Several herbarium specimens were also included in the display. After leaving Chelsea, the garden gained yet a wider audience by touring to the Bluecoat (an art gallery in Liverpool), and then the Tatton and Southport flower shows.



Fig. 8. Mr Roscoe's Garden, RHS Chelsea Flower Show, 2008 © RHS Shows.

The culmination of Bradley's work was the publication of a book on her research, and also an installation entitled, 'The Botanic Garden' held at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. This installation consisted of five large panoramic images, the recreation of a virtual garden. One of the images shows herbarium staff preparing herbarium specimens. The artist likens the images to gardens of the mind.¹⁷

Manchester Museum has had a research programme with Arts Council funding for artists, the Alchemy Project, which has given artists access to the museum's and university's collections, 'placing particular emphasis on the articulation of research and the creation of new work.'¹⁸ As Leander Wolstenholme says, 'We have more artists coming in than we do botanical researchers.'¹⁹ This was demonstrated by the fact that on the day I visited two artists were working with the collections, but no scientists.

One of these artists was Gaenor Deacon. In addition to pencil drawings of herbarium specimens selected by the curator, she also wrote a blog about her activities in the herbarium. She tells how she stood outside the herbarium on the Oxford Road, taking photographs and handed out handmade invitations to the herbarium to passers-by. (Fig. 9) She blogs, 'I am taking the connection between the herbarium and the local community one step further by physically presenting the public with an invitation to the herbarium. Perhaps I am fulfilling the collecting process by collecting people to visit the herbarium.' Sadly, she found that the term herbarium was not understood, and that people simply did not know what it was or what it did. Although nobody took up the offer of visiting the herbarium at such short notice the herbarium is certainly accessible and welcomes visitors.



Fig. 9. Handmade invitation to the herbarium, Manchester Museum – Gaenor Deacon © Gaenor Deacon.

Patricia Francis at Bolton Museum finds informal learning sessions involving groups with no botanical knowledge or notion of what a herbarium is to be an effective way of promoting the herbarium. She finds that in these sessions it is helpful to approach the subject of collections from a social history perspective i.e. the people behind the collections and the times in which they lived, rather than from a purely plant perspective. For example, a herbarium specimen is rendered far more interesting if we learn that it was collected by a local shoemaker; where and how did he live, and what happened to him?

A further development is the significance herbaria can play in the study and observation of climate change. As the Keeper of the Herbarium at the British Museum (Natural History) has recently said:

'We used to think of British botany as something that was pretty much done and dusted, but now with climate change these [herbarium specimens] are becoming incredibly important. Among other things they offer an invaluable time series. You can mine them for flowering cycles, carbon content, density of stomata on leaves which changes according to the amount of CO₂ in the air - all of that.'²⁰

As Miller-Rushing and others concluded in 2006, ‘Analysis of such collections [herbaria] should dramatically increase our understanding of how climate change affects biological systems at many previously unexamined localities and for a wide range of species.’²¹ A plant flowering significantly earlier or later than in the past might well point to climate change but this change can only be observed if there is a record of the past. For example, Karen Robbirt comments that the estimated 2.5 billion herbarium specimens worldwide are ‘a largely untapped resource at present, but one which may prove invaluable to conservation science.’²² Robbirt’s PhD study ‘aims to evaluate the long-term changes in flowering time over a period of more than 200 hundred years for a range of species of British orchid, based on more than 2000 herbarium records.’²³ So far analysis of such herbarium data is suggesting that some orchids are flowering significantly earlier.²⁴ With ever-increasing concerns about the effects of climate change the role of the herbarium has never been more relevant.

Of course effective acquisitions policies are crucial if herbaria are to continue recording environmental change. Several of the museums visited had labyrinthine acquisition policies, making additions to the collections extremely difficult. This is obviously a concern.

Attitudes towards specimen collection are still ambivalent, being seen both as quaintly old-fashioned and destructive. However, as Clive Stace reassures, ‘only a small part of the plant is needed for diagnostic purposes, and rarely are underground parts essential.’²⁵ Herbarium specimens provide a vital record of plant identity and distribution over a period of time, and act a bit like an electronic tag in the modern criminal justice system: what is the plant, where has it been, and where is it now. The military orchid (*Orchis militaris*) is a good example of the importance of curating herbarium specimens. (Fig.10)

It was recorded in old floras as occurring in Kent but the majority of modern floras dismissed these records as misidentified lady orchids. However, the Bolton herbarium has a specimen of this rare plant from Kent, what turns out to be the first Kent record, spotted by Patricia and verified by Francis Rose. It dates from 1836 and is a Joseph Woods specimen. ‘Checking identifications and distribution data against museum collections’, Pettitt argues, ‘is essential for groups that present difficulty in identification.’²⁶



Fig. 10. *Orchis militaris*, the military orchid, Bolton Museum © Bolton Museum & Archive Service.

At Bolton primary school children conducted an ecological project in which they examined the Thomas Greenlees collection. This project won the National 2007 Rolls-Royce Science Prize. At Haslemere a more hands-on approach was adopted involving garden backpacks containing a flower identification sheet and magnifying glass. The internet is also proving an increasingly valuable tool, enabling the public not only to access the herbarium collections, but also to interact with them in ways such as cataloguing. The internet may well be the solution to the problem of 'displaying the undisplayable'; it is certainly bringing the contents of the herbarium to a wider audience.

What has become clear is that, in the future, herbaria must provide more than they did in the past. As the *Collections for the Future* report insists, 'Museums must take steps to ensure that more of their collections are used.'²⁹ Their traditional role as a reference tool, vital though that still is, is no longer enough by itself. Museums have recognised this and are in a superbly strong position to bring the role of the herbarium to a wider public and by doing so ensure a viable future.

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- ⁸ 'This early herbarium should be of major interest to those who study the history of garden plant introductions as many of her [Florence Nightingale's] specimens come direct from the nurseries that were at the forefront of developing suitable strains from wild plants brought into the country by the great plant collectors of the day.' K. Sedman, Senior Curator - Middlesbrough Museums & Galleries, e-mail to RHS Herbarium, 10 June 2008.
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- ¹³ Jyll Bradley. http://jyllbradley.net/artists_statement, 4 September 2008.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ J. Bradley, artist, conversation with author, 5 September 2008. She writes in her book about *Lilium arboricola*, 'the worlds first known tree-dwelling lily' discovered by Frank Kingdon Ward in Burma on a Liverpool sponsored plant hunting expedition in 1953. It 'caused a sensation and flowered in only two places in England – in Liverpool and at RHS Wisley, being lost to cultivation. ... It has never been seen since and the only image I have found of it is of the Liverpool flower.' J. Bradley, *Mr Roscoe's Garden*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), no page number. The pressing, held in the Natural History Museum, was made by the plant hunter's wife Jean, whom the artist went and visited and showed her the image.
- ¹⁶ This is an unintended by-product on the artist's part. The artist's aim was 'to make really good art' J. Bradley, conversation with author, 5 September 2008.
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²⁹ Museums Association, *Making Collections Effective*, (London: Museums Association, 2007), p. 18. This is a far cry from Professor Weiss addressing the Museums Association in 1892 who emphatically stated that 'the herbarium ... is not instructive to the uninitiated – that is, to the general public.' F.E. Weiss, 'The organization of a botanical museum', in *Museums Association Report of Proceedings with the Papers Read at the Third Annual General Meeting held in Manchester, July 5, 6 & 7, 1892*, ed. E. Howarth & H.M. Platnauer (Museums Association, 1892), 25-38, (p. 29).

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