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## **Hidden Treasures: Natural History exhibits at the Royal College of Surgeons**

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### **Abstract**

The Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons of England opened in 1813. The collection of the anatomist John Hunter formed the basis of this museum, and this remains the case to date. Approximately two thirds of the museum collections were destroyed during the Second World War, but acquisitions have been made since this devastation, which have broadened the collections. This article briefly discusses the variety of the natural history material within the College collections, and describes three recent temporary exhibitions which have enabled the general public to view material usually kept in store.

For two centuries the Royal College of Surgeons (RCS) has held a large and varied collection of natural history specimens, the majority of which has been on display in the College's Hunterian Museum. Upon its opening in 1813, the museum became one of the most extensive of its kind, filling five large gallery spaces. The basis of the museum was the collection of the eighteenth-century anatomist and surgeon John Hunter, which had been previously donated to the College. A significant proportion of this core collection was animal preparations, as the roots of science and surgery and John Hunter's interest were in comparative anatomy. The zoological aspect of the collection was then expanded during the following century. Past curators such as Richard Owen and William Flower studied, repaired and documented these specimens, with the intention of maintaining and exhibiting them for their current and future generations (Blandy and Lumley 2000). Eventually, the triple height space of gallery five became dedicated to comparative anatomy, where the full skeleton of a male sperm whale was suspended from the ceiling (Fig.1).



**Fig. 1.** Photograph of room 5 of the College Museum, taken around 1910.

Bombing of the RCS in World War Two resulted in devastation not only of the majority of these collections, but also the College building itself, which then prompted the transfer of many specimens that had been left unscathed. Prior to this destruction, the collections were immense, and the one third that remains is still of sufficient size to fill the museum. Fortunately, donations made since the bombing have diversified the collections further. In the 1940s the odontological collection was permanently transferred as a goodwill gesture towards reconstitution of the museum (Miles 1964). This was followed by the acquisition of animal material collected by the anatomist and primatologist William Charles Osman Hill (1901-1975) in the 1970s. The aim of this short article is to indicate the range of natural history material held within the RCS collections and record some recent temporary displays that have incorporated these specimens.

### Recent developments

The Hunterian Museum underwent a large refurbishment project in 2003-2005 and since then a larger proportion of the zoological specimens has been kept in store, although still available for research. Given its location, the main themes of the Hunterian Museum are the history of surgery and its more recent practice. Animal and, on occasion, plant specimens were once dissected, prepared and analysed by surgeons to gain insight into the intricacies of biological forms and the comparisons between the species. Pathological specimens were also collected to help understand the processes of development and the malformations that can ensue. It is this collection of prepared specimens which forms the central gallery of the Hunterian Museum today and bridges the gap between surgery, zoology and botany.

The newly opened Grant Museum of Zoology is a near neighbour of the Hunterian Museum. This stunning new venue has diverse, eye-catching displays, where every cabinet is peppered with specimens creating a visual feast. The Grant Museum is proof that where conservation or space is not an issue, it is better to display rather than store. Having attended the recent NatSCA conference based at the new Great North Museum: Hancock in Newcastle, I found the most engaging displays to be those that presented a 'menagerie' of specimens, where there was a wealth of information for the eye to process. Drawing inspiration from such establishments, the three temporary displays here at RCS have a high concentration of specimens which enables a wider range of items to be removed from storage and put on display.

### Temporary Exhibitions

Promoting the museum to a wider audience is an ongoing endeavour that everyone in the sector can relate to. The most immediate solution at our disposal is a varied exhibitions programme that unearths stored treasures and places them directly in public view. Recent displays at the Royal College of Surgeons have therefore focused on the natural history specimens with the intention of diversifying the permanent displays. In an attempt to promote the wider collections of the RCS three temporary exhibitions have since gone on display. All three cover themes within natural history and perhaps more importantly, each exhibition has presented the opportunity to display specimens that have previously been kept in store for at least five years, if not longer.



Fig. 2. Examples of odontological ivories.

### Ivory; treasures from the Odontological Collection

*Ivory* went on display last year and occupies two cases within the college entrance hall. This small exhibition shows a selection of items taken from the odontological collection's 250 ivories (Fig. 2). Rather than focus on the immediate connection ivory has with the tusks of elephants, this small exhibition shows the range of ivories grown by both terrestrial and marine species. To connect *Ivory* to the College, a few specimens detail the pathology and repair of these essentially oversized teeth. As the home of both the Faculty of Dental Surgeons and the Faculty of General Dental Practitioners, it was hoped that by tying in the two themes the displays are made relevant to the function of the College and yet of interest to a wider audience.

### Extinct

*Extinct* was installed in cases on the lower floor of the Hunterian Museum in January of 2011, and included some of the Museum's rarest specimens (Fig. 3). The popular theme of the exhibition has encouraged a fair amount of press interest. Having *Extinct* within the museum itself has slightly diversified our audience, and encouraged those with a natural history interest to discover that a medical museum can and does include a wider range of items other than those related to surgery and human anatomy. Furthermore, this small temporary exhibition has enabled the display of a range of fossils, skeletal material and wet preparations that have lain in store for several years now.

### BIG

The opportunity to install our most recent natural history exhibition *BIG*, came about when a long term loan was returned to the institution from which it was borrowed, leaving a lofty yet narrow entrance case empty. Our solution was to select the largest and most complete skulls currently held in store, which could then be carefully cleaned and erected onto public display. Since February of this year, five huge crania have been exhibited, some of which had remained in store for decades. After some initial scrubbing these two common hippos (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*), southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*) and killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) were erected onto tiered shelving and will now remain on display in the entrance hall of the RCS throughout 2011.



Fig. 3. Thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) spleen.

All three exhibitions have generated positive feedback. But perhaps more significantly, each display has presented an opportunity to revive the stored material which has both unearthed hidden treasures for the public to view and encouraged some specimen cleaning. The odontological collection in particular forms a research source and being able to exhibit some of this material between dissertation seasons has enabled us to generate further interest in this usually unseen collection. These exhibitions have also presented an opportunity to demonstrate the diversity of the RCS collections and disprove the myth that a medical collection is one dimensional.

### Acknowledgements

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### References

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