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Haslemere Educational Museum: An Introduction To The Natural History Collections **- Julia Tanner**

Introduction

Two members of staff and one volunteer geologist from Haslemere Museum were able to attend the SPNHC/Realising Standards 2005 Conference at the Natural History Museum thanks to bursaries awarded by NatSCA. For those of us from small museums with limited budgets this was a wonderful opportunity to be updated on the current intellectual climate, learn more about particular programmes and projects, as well as network with international colleagues. As a result, the conference was beneficial in many ways and as much as “Realising Standards”, the conference was also an opportunity to realise our connections and strengths as a professional community and be re-inspired about the work that we do.

Historical Background to the Museum

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

The Museum was established in 1888 by Sir Jonathan Hutchinson (1828-1913). Sir Jonathan was born into a Quaker family in Yorkshire and became an eminent surgeon based in London. In the 1860s Hutchinson built a country house in Haslemere where he had the space to indulge his delight in collecting. His original museum opened in sheds in his garden until its success led it to be established at larger premises in the town. Hutchinson’s collecting was based upon his deep conviction that an education could be acquired through the study of objects. The museum pioneered innovative ideas of museum education and interactivity, which anticipated many ideas current today. After Hutchinson’s death in 1913 a board of Trustees was established that ensured the Museum’s continuation to the present time.

The Museum holds approximately 400,000 items in its collections, over two thirds of which are natural history specimens. Many of the early exhibits were acquired from auction rooms around the country, especially Mr Stevens at Covent Garden. The present-day collections cover a wide range of natural history subjects collected from local, national and international sources.

The Natural History Collections

The most significant collections in terms of quantity are shells and botany. The shells amount to between 80-100,000 specimens and include the R.H. Moses collection of worldwide significance. The botanical specimens mostly comprise of Victorian and Edwardian pressed herbarium sheets. The Miss Lightfoot collection combines poetry with pressed plants of the 1870’s. There are also specimens of plant galls, conifers, mosses, liverworts and wood block samples.

A substantial Edwardian collection of cased birds is of particular quality and interest. Specimens include a passenger pigeon, owls, terns, woodpeckers, sandpipers, gulls, finches and ducks, with some smaller birds forming large group dioramas. The taxidermists include T.E. and F.E. Gunn of Norwich, Rowland Ward of London and James Gardener of London. The collection also includes the Slaines Boorman collection of British birds’ eggs and nests.

The insect collection is made up of butterflies, moths, beetles and flies and amounts to about 70,000 objects. They include the J.J. Joicey collection of foreign butterflies and the Rupert Long collection of British butterflies and moths. Most of these collections are dated to the early 20th century.

The vertebrate collection includes East African game heads and miscellaneous worldwide taxidermy specimens and skeletons. One particularly interesting example on display is the composite moa skeleton comprised of one species type. Pieces of moa eggshell and a single feather are also preserved in the reserve collection. Invertebrates include a collection of about a thousand corals and sponges.

The geology collection covers a wide range of fossils, minerals and rocks. Named collectors include G.F. Walton, J.C. Hawkshaw and John Edward Lee. Many of these collections are stored in their original wooden cabinets. Fossil material includes a specimen from the Burgess Shale and two almost complete Ichthyosaurs skeletons.

The Museum is also home to the Geikie Archive, a unique collection that records the life and career of the distinguished geologist Sir Archibald Geikie (1835-1924), who retired to Haslemere in 1913. At the pinnacle of his career, Geikie was Director General of the Geological Survey of the United Kingdom (1882-1901). He was honoured by numerous appointments and awards, including Knight Commander of the Bath, the Order of Merit and he was the only geologist to have ever become President of the Royal Society. The collection at Haslemere includes his personal and administrative correspondence, field notebooks, illustrative artwork and geological specimens.

The Future of the Natural History Collections at Haslemere Museum

In November 1995, the first natural history specimens were recorded in electronic format. A backlog remains of about 60-70,000 items and this cataloguing project constitutes the main collections priority, expected to take at least another five years.

Despite being a small rural museum, the quality of our collections attracts many research visitors every year and we are committed to encouraging access to our reserve collections. We do not actively collect but the collections are developed through donations. In accordance with our acquisition policy we prioritise the acceptance of locally related collections or those that enhance established subject strengths.

As the custodian of collections we are concerned about the quality of associated data and two particular issues are marked for further attention, namely data cleaning and collections research.

Collections research is particularly pressing, especially in relation to collectors, donors and localities. The focus will be on the most data rich collections in the first instance in order to realise their full research value.

Care of collections will be directed towards improving storage conditions and packaging materials in tandem with improving accessibility.

Attention will also be given to digitisation and online access, although both these issues are long-term targets.

The collections and displays are utilised by our full time Education Officer with the intention of promoting an understanding of the natural world, for the discussion of ecological and environmental issues, and as a basis to encourage further learning.

We remain alert to developments in scientific analysis and interpretation in order to maximise the potential of our collections.

Many ideas gleaned from the SPNHC/Realising Standards Conference have been brought back to Haslemere and will be incorporated into our forward planning.



Burgess Shale fossil (*Marella splendens*)



Composite Moa skeleton (from Enfield site, New Zealand)