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THE LIVERPOOL CONFERENCE

THE FUNCTION OF LOCAL NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

INTRODUCTION

United Kingdom museums contain a great wealth of Natural History material, including many specimens upon which our system of biological nomenclature is based. The controversial works of Darwin and the earlier publications by Linnaeus of a rational system of nomenclature did much to revive and encourage an interest in collecting natural history specimens during the latter half of the 18th and throughout the 19th centuries, and because of Britain's extensive commercial interests overseas British collectors were particularly well placed to collect not only locally but to enrich their collections with exotic material.

Originally the majority of Natural History collections were in private hands and these collections grew to reflect the particular specialist interests of the collector. Only comparatively recently have these collections been transferred to public ownership. Collectors, because of regional affinities or personal loyalties, frequently offered their collections to local museums: or, more often, collections were disposed of by relatives of deceased collectors who did not appreciate the importance of the material. As a result the museum curator might have received into his care collections of quite diverse groups many of which were outside his own field of expertise, and might not have been informed of the full importance of the material he was receiving. Consequently important Natural History material is dispersed throughout a wide variety of museums in Britain. In general, where their importance is realised these collections are well cared for, regardless of whether the institution housing them is large or small. It is the unrecognised historically important material which might currently be at risk, and there is an urgent need to locate and document these collections before they are allowed to deteriorate or become irretrievably separated from their associated documentation. Many of these collections may contain type material, the importance of which to taxonomic research cannot be overestimated, and all such historical collections must be regarded as the property of science.

It is hoped that by drawing together museum professionals and museum users, this conference will stimulate both these groups to renewed efforts to locate these "lost" collections and make them available for research.

W. A. S. 7.8.77.