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## The new Natural History Section at St. Helens Museum & Art Gallery

Although the new Local Authority Museum and Art Gallery opened to the public in October 1980, completion of the natural history displays was delayed, and they were not opened until 7th. September this year. The section, which comprises twelve separate cases, relates to the fauna of the local Sankey Valley Park, which follows the route of the Sankey Navigation (the first canal to be cut in England). It was used up to 1963 but thereafter fell rapidly into a state of dereliction until 1976, when plans were drawn up to create a pleasant piece of open countryside which would attract wildlife that had once been plentiful.

The Park's Chief Ranger gave the writer substantial assistance in developing the theme of the displays and the following habitats were selected to be represented: 'reedbeds', 'meadows', 'ploughed land', 'hedgerows', 'colliery spoil' and 'rough ground', plus 'ponds' and 'woodland', which were assigned two cases each. 'Parks and Gardens' and 'lakes' were added so that species found throughout St. Helens Borough could be included in the section. 65 vertebrates are displayed, of which 7 mammals and 7 birds were purchased between 1978 and 1981 and were mounted at the North Western Museum and Art Gallery Service by James Dickinson, Natural History Conservation Officer. He also designed the internal layout, provided naturalistic 'supports' and fixed all the vertebrate specimens. Photographic backdrops produced by the Museum Technician, Peter Gillett, give added realism to these habitat displays. There are 105 invertebrates on show, which were selected and fixed by Dr. Ian Wallace, Keeper of Invertebrate Zoology at Merseyside County Museums. This collection comprises bees, beetles, bugs, butterflies, caterpillars, cocoons, flies, grasshoppers, moths, nymphs, pupæ, spiders, and molluscs, and have all been presented to the Museum. Each case has a timber mounted habitat sign mounted externally (as are the labels) and the specimens are identified by means of outline drawings and alphabetical and numerical keys. There are also descriptions of the habitats and maps to indicate their extent and location within the Valley Park. Posters relating to flora and fauna, and aspects of wildlife conservation have been mounted between the cases. The latter are front-loading and are lit by fluorescent tubes concealed above diffusers and covered with anti-ultra violet light sleeves. Additional illumination is provided by reflective spot lamps from a ceiling track.

Worksheets on British mammals, birds, butterflies and moths have been prepared by the writer aimed at ten-year olds.

A large number of natural history specimens will continue to be kept in permanent storage. Of the vertebrates, British mounted birds form the largest group. A recent stock check indicated a total figure of 261 (excluding the 47 on display) but in several instances there are duplicates and triplicates of species. The largest collection of British birds ever presented were the 40 cases of approximately 85 specimens given by a local firm of corn merchants, Messrs. Thomas Foster & Sons in 1938. 29 birds caught in the Solway and Cumbria were provided between 1904 and 1926 by Linnaeus E. Hope, Curator of Carlisle Art Gallery and

Museum. In 1939, 10 mounted specimens and 3 skins were obtained from Miss. G. V. Barnard, Curator of the Castle Museum, Norwich, in exchange for an American Tapir which came originally from the City of Liverpool Museum. The remainder were presented by local families or individuals.

Non-British birds of worldwide distribution total 98 mounted specimens with no duplicates, although there are different types of humming birds, toucans, tanagers, parrots etc. In 1910 S. F. Harmer, Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum (Natural History) made it known that he had duplicate birds available for distribution to other institutions. 33 foreign birds have been identified as coming from this source. 24 more, principally from South America, were presented by Bootle Corporation in 1926.

There are 13 British mammals on display and only a miniscule collection in store comprising a few red squirrels, rabbits, brown and white Scottish hares, a mole, an adult fox and cub, an otter and a polecat. The sole non-British mammals are an American ocelot and an Indian tiger and tiger cub. There is a miniscule collection of fish comprising 3 pikes, one European and two New Zealand brown trout, a bream, single specimens of Barbados bull, cow and porcupine fish, and one thornback ray.

There are no vertebrate skeletons in the Collection but there is a small group of British bird skulls, two sawfish snouts, antlers of the roe and fallow deer, an Indian Elephant's molar and a horse's molar. The bird egg collection is very small and consists of British examples stored in five drawers plus some loose ones. Four of the drawers comprise a local collection of Daniel Critchley dating from 1897-1903.

The invertebrates in store comprise 633 mollusc shells, the vast majority donated by various local individuals between 1896 and 1927; 41 corals presented by a Mr. J. Morgan of Worthing in 1902 (on loan to Manchester Museum since 1974); 39 invertebrates and amphibians (mostly British) stored in fluid and all purchased from Gerrard & Haig Ltd. in 1972; and 5 cabinets of lepidoptera. The latter are mostly British specimens but include a small number of unidentified foreign butterflies, some still enclosed in folded papers from the country of origin. The only provenanced insects are those in the collection of Daniel Critchley and include specimens caught in the St. Helens area (Carr Mill, Moss Bank, Rainhill and Bold), elsewhere in Merseyside (Huyton, Roby, Wallasey, Prescott, Hightown, Kirby Moss [= West Kirby]); Delemere Forest, Warrington, Aldershot, Pembroke and the Isle of Man between 1893 and 1920.

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