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Future challenges

- Operations
- Maintain revenue support: to keep admission free
- Snagging and updating: air handling, interactives, displays
- Change the staff structure: increase the use of volunteers, there are now up to 30



Still to do

- Encourage access to the collections by researchers
- Improve the collections information
- Develop more teaching partnerships
- Seeking project funding

Key message: *A specialist collection is no bar to public access*

**Kevin Walsh, Executive Officer (Programme Development)
Oxford University Museum of Natural History
'Feeling Good': a new approach to displays**

Oxford University Museum of Natural History is a listed Victorian architectural treasure, in which we display and present twenty-first century science. A fourteen month project is now complete that has seen a new approach to our fossil galleries, and an entirely new display on the theme of evolution, plus the introduction of a number of touchable specimens. Presenting science to a diverse audience has many challenges, and the project has needed to balance advice from a wide range of specialists.

Oxford University Museum of Natural History is a listed Victorian architectural treasure, in which we display and present twenty-first century science. We are a university museum open to the general public with free entrance, and attract more than 300,000 visitors annually. The museum is divided into four 'collections'. The first and largest of these is Entomology, with over 5 million specimens, including the world's first pinned insect. Zoological collections have over 300,000 specimens, including the only body parts of the Dodo. Geological collections contain over 350,000 specimens of fossils, including the first dinosaur ever to be described. Mineralogical collections contain over 30,000 minerals and 100,000 rocks.

The mission statement of the museum is 'to assemble, preserve and exhibit the University's natural history collections and to promote research, teaching and public education in the natural sciences based on the university's collections'. Much of the emphasis in the twentieth century was on research and teaching within the university, but this century there is an increased focus on public education, which was the main reason the museum was opened in 1860.

A redisplay programme commenced in 1997, and is due to be completed by 2008. The main phase of this was during 2004 and 2005, funded by a £780,000 Millennium Commission/Wolfson grant. The purpose of redisplay was to modernise the displays while retaining the style and grandeur that the Victorian architecture demands; and also to attract new audiences to the museum. This main phase is now complete after fourteen month's work. It has seen a new approach to our fossil galleries, and an entirely new display on the theme of evolution, plus the introduction of a number of touchable specimens. Presenting science to a di-

verse audience has many challenges, and the project has needed to balance advice from a wide range of specialists.

Most exhibits are in glass cases, vertical ones roughly two metres square, and horizontal table cases of approximately 1 by 1½ m. The Lower Vertebrate displays were amongst the first to be replaced. These included our fish, reptile and amphibian specimens, all arranged in twelve vertical cases. One of the controversial aspects of the new Lower Vertebrates was to what extent plastic casts of fish should be exhibited. Several members of staff would have preferred these kept to a minimum, but the zoologists pointed out that a cast taken from a living fish and recreated in full and correct colours is in fact more 'Real' than an incomplete and faded nineteenth century dried specimen. This provides an interesting example of what is considered 'authentic' in a museum context.

We radically changed the way in which we displayed our Invertebrates. Previously we only had fossil invertebrates, but now incorporated recent specimens, both dried and pickled. We also included high quality images of the organisms in their environment, and some models. The constraints of the table cases (depth, temperature range) meant we had to develop a new style of container for pickled specimens. After several experiments we settled on specially commissioned Perspex boxes, with release valves, and a variety of mounting media.

'History of Life' is our stratigraphic palaeontology display, containing 2000 fossils in 34 vertical cases. We made our text more concise and readable, and installed Foamex backing panels and cold cathode lighting. This dramatically improved the appearance and visibility of the fossils. We also commissioned a biological artist to produce reconstructions of animals, and incorporated these into the Foamex back panels. The reconstructions were placed at a low level in the case, so that children could clearly see them. As well as the reconstructions, we included research images (such as Chalk SEMs) and images to show outcrops of the rocks from where the fossils were obtained. Some of these were obtained from free or cheap Internet sites, such as Flickr, sxc.hu and Dreamstime.



Touchables were a major part of the new display



The first touchables were a series of rocks, minerals and fossils, first on display in 2004.

These touchables included a large ammonite, a fossil tree, large specimens of pyrite and quartz, a stromatolite, a meteorite and gneisses. The second touchables display led on from a temporary exhibit entitled 'Feeling Good!' This was initially aimed at Blind and Partially Sighted people, and contained a variety of objects, including taxidermy. It proved popular not only with the visually impaired but also with many other visitors, so we decided to make it into a permanent exhibit. To this end we constructed two large tables with a dozen or so objects, each on wooden bases, attached to the tables. We sourced material for the Touchable Tables from mineral fairs and taxidermy companies, as well as more unusual sources, such as a cheetah, which came from HM Customs. The two Touchable Tables contain a variety of objects – birds, beasts and rocks, including the ever-popular British small mammals – a fox, a badger, an otter and a rabbit.

Not every one approves of touchable taxidermy, some museum professionals have described it as gratuitous fondling, or taking touchy-feely too far. However, we believe that touchables are fully justified for educational reasons – that the visitor not only uses different senses, but also gets a much better idea of size, shape and texture. We think this closer contact with the collections breaks down barriers, and the Touchables have proved almost universally popular with our visitors. As part of the formative evaluation of the Touchables exhibit we held a session with a girls' school to gauge reactions to a stuffed Shetland Pony we hoped to in-

clude. The reactions were entirely positive to having the specimen on display, but we did learn from the group that they wanted information on the animal and its name. Hence Mandy the Shetland Pony who died peacefully at Knaresborough Zoo, in 1982, is now fully labelled.

One of the positive benefits of the renewal of our History of Life fossil displays has been a change of audience. Previously they were mainly used by undergraduate Earth Science students, now this group has been augmented by school students using the displays as a resource for art. Not to be outdone, we have also used the arts in our science teaching – a recent Evolution workshop for sixth-form students included a theatrical performance.

One evaluation technique we use is an open comment Visitors' Book. This has revealed a hugely positive response to our new displays, and especially to our Touchables.

The benefits of our new approaches to display have been several, including a doubling of visitors in the last five years, the winning of The Guardian's family friendly museum of the year award, a real enthusiasm for the new displays from a wide range of audience types, and an increase in donations by tens of thousands of pounds.

Louise Cracknell, Interpretation Manager – Darwin Centre Phase 2

Emma Freeman, Interpretation Manager – Special Exhibitions

Michael Harvey, Interpretation Manager – Gallery Development

Darwin Centre and beyond – access to collections and access to ideas at the Natural History Museum

The Natural History Museum is embarking on a range of substantial redevelopment projects over the next five years, and beyond. In 2002, the first phase of the Darwin Centre was opened, giving museum visitors an unprecedented level of access to both the museum's Zoology collections, and to its curators and researchers. 2008 will see the opening of the second phase of the Darwin Centre Project, one which is more ambitious in scope and builds on the lessons learned from Phase 1. In parallel to the work being carried out on this project, the Museum is also planning a longer-term redevelopment of its permanent galleries while maintaining a yearly series of major temporary exhibitions. In this session, staff from the Museum's Interpretation and Design department will explore the challenges inherent in developing a museum for the 21st Century, and the approaches the Natural History Museum is taking to dealing with them.

New public spaces at the NHM – changes and challenges

Last year, the UK government produced a consultation paper setting out its vision for museums and their role in 21st century life (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2005). Among its recommendations is a call for the opening up of collections to greater public access. In parallel to questions about collections access, the paper also asks how museums can strengthen their commitment to education as a core priority and how a strong research culture can be built within the sector.

These are questions that museums have been exploring for a long time. Over the course of three brief papers, we will briefly explore how some of these themes relate to the Natural History Museum, with particular reference to the ongoing Darwin Centre developments and to future plans for the use of collections in new permanent and temporary exhibitions. In doing so, we would also like to explore some broader questions about the relationships between researchers and collection managers and their colleagues in front-of-house, education and exhibition development, and about the museum's aspiration for an increasingly 'specimen rich' public experience.

In the coming years, there are many different aspects of the Museum's on-site visitor experience. In terms of gallery spaces, there are special exhibitions – the NHM offers a new one of these each year – so these need to work very much in the here and now. In the medium term, the Museum is developing a public offer for Darwin Centre Phase 2 – which is scheduled to open at the end of 2008. And in the long term, our per-