MLA Renaissance North West

New Light on Old Bones

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery – Claire Wood

An interdisciplinary study of natural science collections in Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery and Rossendale Museum. Its purpose is to examine the efficacy of using humanities and social science research methods to assist the interpretation of these collections.

A report by Hannah Chalk (University of Manchester), David Craven (Renaissance NW) and Myna Trustram (Renaissance NW)

Foreword

At a time of profound change, it is good to remind ourselves of the distinctive purpose of museums, which is to collect, look after and use collections to address key issues pertaining to the present and future. The New Light on Old Bones project is an excellent example of how a fairly traditional collections area such as natural science can be reconceptualised for current times, and be given a new lease of life.

Much of the focus on collections in recent years has been on rationalisation, on reducing the burden of managing large scale collections, and examining disposal as a legitimate tool of collections management. All of this is entirely needed, and necessary. However, at the same time we must not lose sight of the need for collections to continue to develop. Sustainable development in terms of collections management does not mean stasis; rather it means managed growth in a way that does not damage the museum's ability to look after them.

Although it may seem perverse at a time of contraction, I think that now – more than ever – it is important for museums to examine what sustainable development of collections will look like. I for one would not like to see museums like the Manchester Museum remain as time capsules of Victorian and Edwardian collecting enthusiasm. Rather, I would like to see them beginning to think about how we move on from an encyclopaedic, systematic approach to collecting, which is now unrealistic both in intellectual terms and in terms of resources.

Museums have always changed, which is why they have survived and thrived for so long. Re-examining how we research, interpret and develop natural science collections is an essential part of this.

Dr Nick Merriman, Director, Manchester Museum

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Introduction

New Light on Old Bones (NLOB) was born from conversations between three people interested in promoting greater use of natural science collections in museums. Sam Alberti, then at the Centre for Museology at the University of Manchester and the Manchester Museum, was leading on Manchester's Afterlife of Animals project, an initiative that built on research from the UK and North America about the cultural history and meaning of natural science specimens. David Craven's work with Renaissance North West focuses on improving the use of natural science collections across the region and Myna Trustram manages the research programme for Renaissance North West.

Collaboration on this project seemed an ideal opportunity to marry academic research with practical museum development work. NLOB was developed as a pilot study to demonstrate the efficacy of using humanities research methods on natural science collections, and using the research to inform displays.

The project follows recent initiatives in the UK and elsewhere that treat natural specimens as cultural heritage. Audience research shows that memory of natural science displays is often rooted in local consciousness. Dormant collections can be re-invigorated through research into their rich social and historical meanings. Some museums have invested in such research, for example the Natural History Museum (Centre for Arts and Humanities Research) and Manchester Museum (the Afterlife of Animals) and re-displays across the UK have deployed interdisciplinary approaches to great effect (for example Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow and Weston Park in Sheffield). There is also a body of academic cultural analyses of natural science collections (especially taxidermy and colonial collecting) that has potential for application in museum practice.

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery

Two partner museums were approached for NLOB: Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery and Rossendale Museum. Both met key criteria of possessing interesting natural science collections but lacking specialist staff to lead on traditional scientific-based interpretation.

Two researchers were appointed (Mark Steadman and Hannah Chalk) to conduct the primary research and to work with the museums on developing new interpretation for the collections. Each museum will receive a portfolio of resources to assist it to interpret their natural science collections using the NLOB approach. The portfolios will be based on the collections research carried out at the museums and methods developed during the course of the research.

A recent study for Renaissance London found that natural science was the most popular topic for visitors to London museums[1], with 82% of 3,600 respondents declaring an interest in the subject. It is our view that by taking the approach developed in NLOB, any museum, any member of staff, can meet this public interest in new and interesting ways. This report provides an overview of the NLOB project and what it has achieved to date.

[1]Insight: a survey of the London museums market. MLA Renaissance London 2010 www.mla.gov/renaissancelondon

Natural Science in the North West of England

There are around 8.5 million natural science specimens spread between forty institutions in the North West. A quarter of these institutions have a contracted specialist natural historian, which means in most cases the curation of these collections lies with non-specialists.

It is easy to see this as a failing, and to consider suggesting that museums dispose of these perhaps unloved and unwanted collections. But this fails to acknowledge the local importance and meaning of these collections. It also diminishes the role that non-specialist curators can fulfil. The key to good collections care lies in the approach of the staff. Across the region, dedicated and enthusiastic staff are keen to make use of this material. They learn what they need to know and do in order to make use of the collections.

Some might argue that if a natural science collection has no scientific value then the collection is worthless. NLOB challenges this. Many natural science collections do have little scientific value but their merit lies elsewhere, in their cultural and historic meaning.

There is also a debate about the risks of empowering non-specialists. If a museum can make good use of its natural science collection without a specialist curator, then what is the point in a specialist curator? We feel that the greater risk lies in neglecting collections. If collections are unused, then they are easy targets for disposal. Better to get them preserved and used, and hopefully create demand for a natural science specialist, than allow collections to be lost forever.

So the primary aim of NLOB is to demonstrate to non-specialists how they can make natural history an integrated part of their museum story, how natural science objects can tell a much wider and yet more personal story.

The Afterlife of Animals

Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in cultural aspects of natural science collections. Historically, 'natural objects' in museums have been assumed to simply fit into the broad category of 'scientific stuff' and have therefore remained largely overlooked by academics and curators outside of the natural sciences. The fact that an object is natural does not mean that it can't also be cultural, that is, have meanings derived from its cultural context.

For museum specimens, the notion of an afterlife has become a particularly popular way of acknowledging that natural objects (in particular those that were once alive) acquire their own biographical histories in which their meanings and values may vary. These meanings vary over time but also depend on the individual and the context in which they are encountered. Two particularly early examples of research into the afterlives of animals include 'Nanoq – flat out and bluesome'[2] which explored the cultural life of polar bears and 'The Blue Antelope Project'.[3]

In November 2009, The Manchester Museum hosted a workshop called 'The Afterlife of Animals'[4] which brought together academics from different disciplines but who shared an interest in the cultural, historical and scientific meanings of animals. A variety of creatures were discussed, from 'charismatic' mammals such as Maharajah and Sir Roger (the elephants on display at the Manchester Museum and Kelvingrove Museum respectively), Alfred the Gorilla (Bristol City Museum) and Chi-Chi the Panda (Natural History Museum, London), to sea anemones. The common thread running through all of the papers was the value of addressing the ways in which the meanings of these creatures changes over time and space. The novel approaches that were presented at the workshop demonstrated the potential for such work to breath new life into natural science collections, demonstrating their relevance and the value of preserving them for future generations.

[2]See: Snaebjörnsdóttir, and Wilson (2006) and http://www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/nanoq.php
[3]See: Patchett (2006), Lorimer (2009) and http://www.blueantelope.info/?q=node/9
[4]Alberti (forthcoming) 2011

The research: process, methods and sources

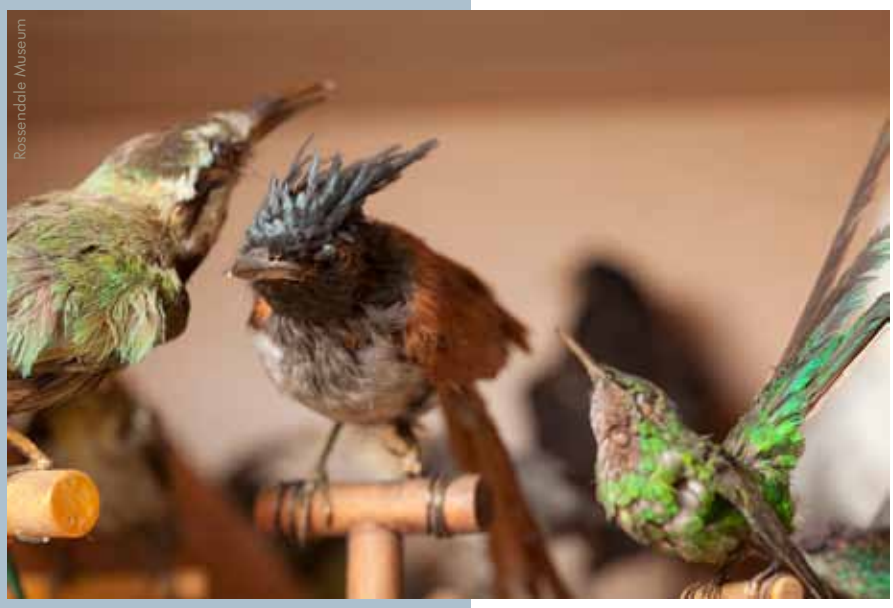
Initially, time was spent at each museum exploring the collections and archives and, equally important, meeting staff who were encouraged to contribute their own knowledge and thoughts to the research process from the beginning.

Alongside these initial encounters with the collections, a substantial amount of archival research was carried out. While secondary accounts do exist in both cases the time spent working through the primary material was an additional opportunity to become more familiar with the museums within the context of the local history of the area.

Newspaper articles were a valuable source of information, as were the early accession registers which provided useful insight into the range of objects that were donated to the museum, as well as the variety of people that donated them. In addition to the standard museum documents such as accession registers and catalogues, less formal documents such as notes, receipts, labels and even packaging material yielded evidence of the histories of both the objects and the museums.

The local libraries in each town, and indeed the librarians were particularly useful for exploring the local activities and societies that were the precursors of the museums. Additional sources can also be found online, and as well as collection databases such as Cornucopia[5] and Fenscore[6], mailing lists for groups such as the Geological Curators' Group (GCG)[7] and the Natural Science Collections Alliance (NatSCA)[8] are useful, not only as sources of information, but also for advice and support from enthusiastic professionals around the country.

Following the initial phase of exploratory research (although this continued in the background throughout the project as new sources emerged), a more personal approach was taken which focused on people, their memories and their experiences. Both current and former members of staff are a valuable source of information and inspiration, and all too often their thoughts go unrecorded. By recording oral histories, and conversations the project adds to the museum's archive in a valuable way. The stories of local people are an often untapped source for enhancing the histories of natural objects in museums, and can add memories and experiences that may otherwise be lost. Photographs were taken throughout the project and a professional photographer also provided high quality images for publications.



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[5]http://www.cornucopia.org.uk
[6]http://fenscore.man.ac.uk
[7]http://www.geocurator.org
[8]http://natsca.info

Whilst a variety of different methods have been adopted, one of the most important aspects of the research methodology has been a self-reflexive approach and a willingness to engage with people as well as with objects.

A researcher's journal has been kept, containing notes and photographs which provide an ongoing record of personal experiences, thoughts and feelings throughout the life of the project, and documents the relationships between the objects, collections, museums and people. One of the researchers described the process:

"We begin with glimpses under dust sheets and end with intimate and specialised knowledges of single objects. During this process our knowledge develops and changes. As disorientation turns into familiarity, photographs move from unspecific images of collections on shelves to studio portraits of single objects."

At times the researchers have adopted an almost ethnographic stance by becoming involved in the day to day activities of the museum. This has enabled them to observe the museum processes and to contribute on a practical level to things such as new displays.

The results of using these methods is that rather than seeing an object as simply, say, a dead animal, a scientific specimen or a museum piece, it can also be seen as a trophy, muse, celebrity, mascot, commodity, technical object or souvenir. Groups of objects can be woven into storylines which begin in the display or store and filter out to the locality, region and in many cases the much wider world. By using similar sources and processes any museum staff can take this approach to natural science or indeed any museum collections.

Claire Wood

New Light on Old Bones at Blackburn Museum

Blackburn Museum opened in 1874. Panels on the side of the building show famous scientists, writers and artists alongside representations of art, industry, agriculture, and engineering. In many ways, this sums up the museum which holds an eclectic collection covering art, local history, ethnography, Egyptology, manuscripts, and natural science. The museum holds one of the largest collections of Christian iconography in England, and holds an extensive collection of Japanese woodblock prints.

Through annual reports, photographs, newspaper articles and receipts the museum is building up a record of the changing ways in which both the public and museum staff have responded to the natural science objects in the collections. For instance in the 1890s the museum's ethnographic displays and exhibits of British and Foreign Mammals were relocated in order to make way for a display of Lancashire birds. According to the Annual Report of 1891/2 the display consisted of 'About forty cases, with the natural surroundings of the birds reproduced… whilst upwards of two hundred specimens have been made ready for placing in their separate compartments for exhibition in the wall cases'. These displays remained in the museum until relatively recently and evidence of the original structure of the wall-mounted display cases remains in what is now part of the museum's storage space. The bird collection was dispersed in the 1970s, mainly to Lancashire County Museum Service, but in 2009 they were returned in response to public interest. They will form part of a new ornithology display, created in conjunction with the NLOB project.

In common with many other local museums, the natural science collections at Blackburn range from the scientific to the curious. The 'Bowdler Collection' of coleoptera (beetles) consists of over 3000 individual specimens. Each has been carefully pinned down alongside its unique label containing the scientific name, locality and reference number. They are arranged geographically and are accompanied by a hand-written catalogue. This may, at first sight, appear to be a typical example of a natural science reference collection. The exotic and foreign material makes up the bulk of the collection but through the NLOB research it has become apparent that the 180 British specimens are in fact the more important element in the collection. Detailed examination


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"NLOB has been a valuable project for Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. It has not only enabled us to create a new permanent taxidermy display but has also unearthed stories and histories which were previously forgotten. The training sessions provided by NLOB have ensured that the staff at the museum will have a better understanding of collections care in regards to natural science. The use of a blog and the publicity it has generated has helped create a buzz about the collection and the different ways it can be interpreted."

Vinai Solanki, Curator of History, Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery


Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery

of both the catalogue and newspaper articles written by the collector reveals that the exotic material is far less important than originally assumed. The British specimens form the heart of the collection, with the foreign and exotic material simply providing examples for comparison. This discovery along with the fact that the collection was amassed in Blackburn by a local man, who was also a member of the Free Library and Museum committee, suddenly adds a new dimension to this collection.

The NLOB research confirms that the Bowdler Collection has scientific value but that it is also a piece of local history. It is the result of one man's enthusiasm for the subject. Furthermore, and just as Bowdler himself observed, the aesthetic qualities of both the individual specimens and the collection as a whole, make it particularly significant. By classifying such collections as 'natural history', it is all too easy to overlook the other meanings of natural objects. By acknowledging that these 'scientific specimens' are also 'social history items', 'cultural artefacts', 'historical objects', and 'works of art', such collections become more appealing to a wider range of people.


Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery

New Light on Old Bones at Rossendale Museum

Rossendale Museum opened in 1902. It is situated in Oak Hill, a house built in 1840 for mill-owner George Hardman. The Hardmans sold the property to Richard Whitaker, and he gave it to the town for use as a public park and museum. The park contained a gymnasium, cricket ground, bandstand and five small lakes. There was also a small menagerie containing parakeets, budgerigars, rabbits and guinea pigs. The museum itself contains local history, fine and decorative arts, and natural science collections. Some of the rooms are set out in styles of the late 19th Century.

The changing relationships between local people and their natural surroundings has become particularly apparent from exploring both the collections and archival sources at Rossendale Museum. Lantern slides found in the museum's photographic collection show groups of townsfolk taking excursions into the countryside. The recreational use of the surrounding countryside is also apparent from the diaries, scrapbooks, poetry books and photograph albums that form the museum's Yardley family archive. Leisure activities and involvement in societies such as the camera and cycling clubs gave local people an opportunity to engage with and escape to the countryside from an increasingly industrial town.

In the case of the Yardley archive, involvement in such activities quite naturally led to an enthusiasm for collecting, but rather than forming large systematic collections, the objects were collected as mementos and souvenirs. Such amateur collections of natural science objects are commonly found in local museums, and due to the lack of scientific rigour with which they were amassed have traditionally been viewed as problematic. Indeed, as 'natural science specimens' they tend to lack any clear purpose or use. However, viewed in their original context, as personal expressions of a relationship with nature and the countryside, these things suddenly become more relevant and valuable in the museum context.

For example, John Lord, a chemist in Rawtenstall and President of the Rawtenstall Natural History Society collected seaweed which, in common with fossil or shell collecting, was closely linked to a bracing day out at the seaside. For many like Lord, collecting was probably as much to do with getting some fresh air and a change of scenery from the often grotty industrial towns they all lived in – than it was a 'scientific' thing. People like Lord made this type of collecting more formal by sticking to just one subject (like seaweeds) and by establishing a formal society, but this was as much to do with healthy and wholesome recreation as it was science. Rossendale Museum was opened within a park, which was established in order to provide public recreational facilities for local people.

"Through NLOB we have gained:

★ An enhanced gallery that would otherwise have waited, probably for years.

★ New interpretation and learning materials.

★ A better appreciation of how much the collection is valued by many people, from the local community, to natural science and taxidermy specialists.

★ Museological discourse on approaches to apply in the gallery.

★ Publicity from the blog and artists' activities".

Susan Liddell, Area Manager Museums (Pennine Lancashire), Lancashire County Council

Rossendale, like many other local museums, is home to quite a substantial collection of taxidermied animals and birds, the majority of which are foreign and lack any detailed documentation. At first sight, such objects appear to be rather out of place in a small Lancashire town. Indeed, in many ways, they *are* out of place, and it has become increasingly apparent, through research into the early development of the museum, that it was exactly because they were *not local* that they came to the museum in the first place.

The first curator at Rossendale acquired an impressive range of natural science material from museums across the country. Cases of Indian birds from Letchworth Museum, a tiger and python from Norwich Castle Museum and, perhaps most important of all, a young African elephant from Liverpool Museum, are just some of the objects that arrived at the museum. The elephant, fondly known by locals as 'Nellie' has become part of the town's history. Memories of touching the elephant and the 'save Nellie' campaign which raised funds to carry out conservation treatment on the discoloured and damaged creature (or as the Rossendale Free Press put it in 1989, to give Nellie a 'face lift') have become part of the object's history.

In a time before television, the museum was a place for local people to encounter some of the more exotic and bizarre wildlife from across the globe. Memories of face to face encounters with such creatures appear to have stuck. By bringing together old newspaper cuttings, documents and photographs and by recording local memories, the afterlives of animals can be traced and preserved, adding new meanings to these objects and revealing their social, cultural and historical relevance.

The highlight of the natural science collection is William Bullock's Tiger and Python. It is a fascinating piece with a rich and still mysterious history. Originally displayed in Bullock's London Museum (the Egyptian Hall) in 1813, the piece (along with the rest of Bullock's collection) was sold at auction in 1819 to a Mr Edward Cross. The following 74 years of the object's history remain largely unknown. In 1893 it reappeared when Lord Hastings donated it to Norwich Castle Museum, from where it was subsequently transferred to Rossendale in 1930. The piece features in the Louvre, Paris, in the form of a gouache painting by Comte Alexandre Isidore Leroy de Barde. The reality, or lack of, in this dramatic scene has been discussed on the NLOB blog[9]. As a result of NLOB, visitors to the museum's natural science gallery will soon be able to find out more about the afterlife of the Tiger and Python, and add their own interpretations of this impressive object.

[9]http://newlightmanchester.wordpress.com/2010/11/05/the-reality-of-nature and http://newlightmanchester.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/is-it-real

Summary of the research

Some of the natural science collections at Blackburn and Rossendale Museums have the appearance of a scientific endeavour, such as the Bowdler collection of exotic coleoptera at Blackburn Museum or the Lord collection of seaweeds at Rossendale Museum. However, the NLOB research reveals that the collectors were not simply driven by a desire to systematically gather specimens to answer a scientific problem. The collections can be viewed as personal expressions of an engagement with the natural world specific to the time and place of their collection. They express the physical and cerebral preoccupations of their creators. As such they can be interpreted within a wider context than is often the case with museum displays. The collections have been subsequently categorised as natural science and subjected to museum processes which have disconnected them from their social and cultural contexts. Much of the material was originally donated along with other items which have since been dispersed into differing indexes, databases, departments, sometimes even different institutions.

The NLOB research suggests that such collections emerged from a personal and domestic setting and were expressions of the alienation brought on by the growth of the industrial townships of Blackburn and Rawtenstall (where the Rossendale Museum is situated). The research suggests that such collections have important social and cultural contexts that have been largely ignored because of the epistemological frameworks in which they have survived. Such collections can be linked with activities such as outings and picnics, holidays and excursions, clubs, hobbies, and popular publications of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Rossendale Museum

The New Light on Old Bones Blog

The weblog has been a surprise success of the NLOB project. Not originally in the brief for the researcher, it grew from the process of the research. Initially seen as an experiment, it became a key tool for shaping discussion of the ideas and recording the research process.

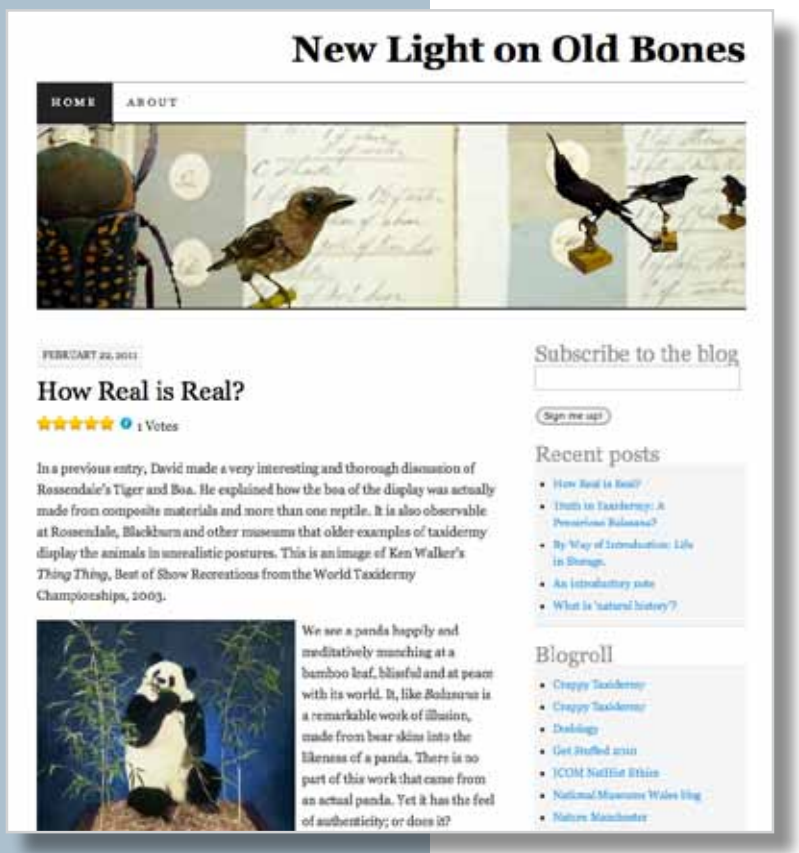
Since its launch in April 2010 there have been 37 unique posts[10], attracting 178 comments from museum professionals, academics, and members of the public. 39 people subscribe to the blog, with many more reading more casually. In October 2010, the blog was nominated for 'Best Arts & Culture Blog' and 'Best New Blog' at the Manchester Blog Awards. With 300 different blogs nominated, making these shortlists was an incredible achievement for an apparently niche subject.

The posts range from broad questions about museum practice, through to object-specific questions. Often, an object or image is chosen to provoke debate, and the ideas generated through the comments have influenced the project. These discussions highlight the range of opinions that apparently simple questions such as 'Is it real?' and 'What is natural science?' can generate.

The blog also strengthened the research findings about the role of natural science in local communities. Through the blog similar stories about this at Blackburn and Rossendale have been discovered in other museums.

Visit the blog yourself at http://newlightmanchester.wordpress.com

The pilot project finishes in March 2011 but the blog will continue through 2011/12.



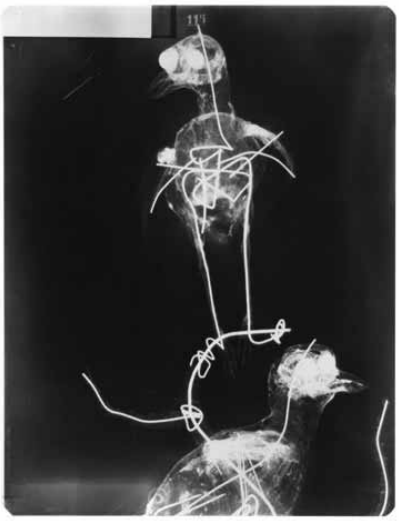
[10]At the time of writing in February 2011

New Light on Old Bones and Treacle Theatre

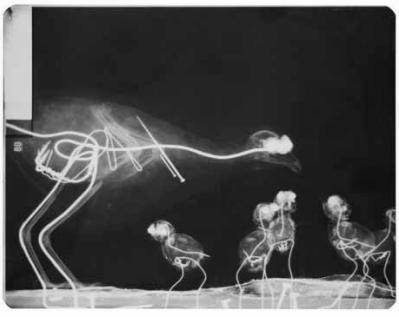
Kaspar Wimberley and Susanne Kudielka (also known as Treacle Theatre) are artists who explore experimental structures for performance, engage in new forms of artistic collaboration and develop new strategies for audience interaction. They were invited to join the 'New light on Old Bones' project at Rossendale Museum in order to offer a different perspective on the research and to explore ways in which people might interact with the museum, inspired by the natural science collection.

Over a period of six weeks they are experimenting with inter-disciplinary and site-specific approaches, drawing on interviews with local residents and background research. Amongst the projects are:

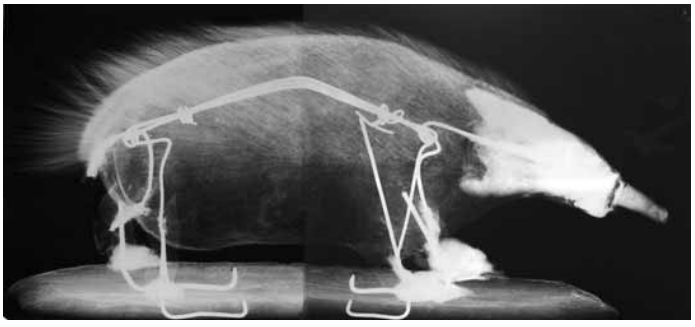
- ★ The natural science collection at the museum has been x-rayed, to create a series of provocative and beautiful images that touch on the afterlives and mortality of the animals on display.
- ★ A community-compiled paper will be made that explores ways of interpreting taxidermy, each edition relating to a specific item in the collection. This paper is then used at the local chippy; an alternative form of marketing that reaches new audiences, and playfully connects the museum and the research with the community.
- ★ The flowerbeds in front of the museum are replanted to include a collection of herbs and plants that are referenced within the museum's natural and social history archives. DIY teabag kits are then created that draw on this research, and invite visitors to go out and fill their teabag from the herb garden.
- ★ A series of obituaries or birthday announcements are made in the local newspaper relating to the taxidermy exhibits at the museum. An unconventional form of local marketing that explores the afterlives of the animals on display, and questions existing attitudes towards the taxidermy collection.



X-ray of jays at Rossendale Museum (x-ray by Dr Pat Morris)



X-ray of partridge with chicks at Rossendale Museum (x-ray by Dr Pat Morris)



X-ray of echidna at Rossendale Museum (x-ray by Dr Pat Morris)

Where do we go now?


Claire Wood

The NLOB project was conceived as a pilot for wider 'Afterlife of Animals' work. Dissemination of the findings so far is showing that there is considerable appetite for exploring collections using the methods outlined here. There is rich potential for small museums to work with research institutions on the historical and cultural significance of their collections.

There are many questions that could be posed. Are there similar impulses in current museum practice, or in the wider community, to those that created the existing collections? How should we collect natural science objects today? If the collection and display of the natural world was a response to social values during the industrial revolution, then what is the post-industrial motivation? If we root curatorial practice in present day attitudes, will it help us connect with communities and make collections more relevant? By understanding the motivations of current amateur naturalists and collectors, we can better position ourselves within the community.

Clearly our responses to these questions will be driven by the perilous state of the globe's ecosystems in the 21st century. Museums across the country are using their collections to contribute to the debate and to help find solutions to these problems.

We write this at a time of cutting back of investment in museums and galleries across the country. The Renaissance in the Regions programme, which has funded this research, has shown how collaboration can drive significant development in museum practice. With reduced resources this ability to collaborate becomes all the more important.

From the outset we knew that the process of doing the research was as important as the outcomes. Thus the presence of the researchers in the stores and the relationships developed between the researchers and the museum staff both contributed to the research. At one point we collected a fascinating group of people around the table – a geologist, biologist, artists, arts manager, taxidermy historian, local history curator and a social history curator. One might call this the relational side of the project and it is the relational aspects of the natural science collections that this research has brought to the forefront. Their role in the lives of their collectors and subsequent handlers is what the multidisciplinary approach elaborates. NLOB has revealed an enthusiasm for these objects which museum processes and displays do not always demonstrate. The danger of natural science museum processes is that the multiple meanings of objects are obscured in the serried ranks of scientific specimens. Hopefully 'new light' can continue to be poured on these collections


Rossendale Museum

Resources

Useful websites and societies

Russel Society http://www.russellsoc.org/

Natural England http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/

Wildlife Trusts http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/

Woodland Trust http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk

RSPB http://www.rspb.org.uk/

Geological Society http://www.geolsoc.org.uk/

Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust http://www.wwt.org.uk/

North West Naturalists Union http://www.northwesternnaturalistsunion.org.uk/

British Trust for Ornithology http://www.bto.org/

National Federation for Biological Recording http://www.nfbr.org.uk

North West Biodiversity Network http://www.biodiversitynw.org.uk/

The Society for the History of Natural History http://www.shnh.org.uk/

National Biodiversity Network http://www.nbn.org.uk/

The British Historical Taxidermy Society
http://www.britishhistoricaltaxidermysociety.co.uk/main.htm

Natural Science Collections Association http://natsca.info/

Geological Curators Group http://www.geocurator.org/

New Light on Old Bones http://newlightmanchester.wordpress.com

Curiosities http://www.naturallycurious.co.uk

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Acknowledgements

We would like to particularly thank Hannah Chalk, Sam Alberti and Mark Steadman for their invaluable contributions to New Light on Old Bones.

Many other people have contributed to the project including: Steve Baker, Stephen Barnes, Gill Brailey, Sandra Cruise, Paul Flintoff, Nick Harling, Julie Harvey, Kirstin James, Susan Liddell, Henry McGhie, Pat Morris, Henry Moseley X-ray Imaging Facility, Adrian Norris, Laura Rodgers, Vinai Solanki.

And all the staff at Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, Rossendale Museum, the Manchester Museum, and the many contributors to the blog.

Librarians and archivists at Blackburn and Rawtenstall were an invaluable source of information.

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Published by Renaissance North West 2011

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