

REPORT

Earth Sciences at Leicestershire Museum & Art Gallery

History

The morning of June 19th, 1849 was stormy and wet. By afternoon, however, the sky began to clear and members of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, their friends, and dignitaries of the town of Leicester assembled under the portico of the old Proprietary School on New Walk. The Mayoral carriage arrived and a truly innovatory ceremony began. This was the day on which the Lit and Phil's museum of 10,000 treasures, assembled over 15 years, was presented to an enthusiastic and generous local community.

The President of the Lit & Phil said:

“To you, Sir, as Chief Magistrate of this Town, as the head of the Municipality of this ancient Borough, I, as President of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Leicester, in their name and on their behalf, deliver over to you the whole of the collection . . . to be held by you, and your successors in office, in trust for the public, I hope for ever; being convinced that in the hands of a public body, rather than a private society, this museum will be the best promoted, in contributing the more largely and more efficiently to the rational instruction and amusement of the community at large”.

Leicester was the first English Town Council to open a museum (the Act enabling local Councils to set up museums was passed in 1845) in a mid-19th century local authority 'municipal culture' initiative. By 1880, 180 boroughs and towns in Britain had museums — collections of objects of scientific importance, social significance or artistic merit assembled and conserved for the benefit of all. The Leicester Town Museum is important, both because we still have most of its original 10,000 items, and because its history remains part of the culture of what is now a world-wide museums, arts and records movement.

Subsequently the Town Museum became Leicester Museum and Art Gallery (1881), the City of Leicester Museum and Art Gallery (1919) and finally Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service in 1974. The present Local Government Review may result in another re-naming or reorganization; the hope is that the County museum service, built on the legacy of the Lit and Phil President's 1849 words and now the largest and best in the UK, will keep its integrity.

Collections

Geology, palaeontology and mineralogy collections were part of the original Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society museum. Right from the beginning, too, a majority of the chief curators (honorary at first and later paid) have been geologists, and so Earth Sciences has always been a valued part of the museum's activities. The Earth Sciences collection now comprises some



Leicestershire Museum and Art Gallery.

58,000 items, of which about one third are on computer catalogue and most of the rest at least partly documented.

A published acquisitions policy now formalizes past practice; we acquire, care for, exhibit and interpret collections representing the geology of Leicestershire, first, and then that of Britain. We also have world-wide mineral, display and educational collections.

The principal named and systemic collections include those of George Abbot (Permian limestone nodules), Beeby Thompson (Northamptonshire palaeontology), F. W. Bennett (Charnwood Forest lithologies), T. O. Bosworth (Triassic lithologies and fossils), Montague Browne (Jurassic marine reptiles and fish), S. S. Buckman (ammonites), A. R. Horwood (Leicestershire coalfield palaeobotany), R. J. King (Leicestershire and UK mineralogy), E. E. Lowe (igneous rocks of Mountsorrel, Charnian lithologies), Peterborough district Oxford Clay marine reptiles, C. Trelease (British minerals), W. W. Watts (original stratigraphy and mapping of Charnwood Forest) and H. Willoughby-Ellis (British minerals).

Specialities are the holotype specimens of the Precambrian Charnian fossils, a world collection of minerals including Leicestershire rarities, marine vertebrates from Barrow-upon-Soar, Leicestershire, showing exceptional preservation of soft tissue, meteorites including part of the 1965 Barwell fall, and the middle Jurassic sauropod dinosaur *Cetiosaurus* from Rutland.

Facilities and Services

The well-equipped conservation and preparation laboratory has facilities for cutting and polishing, mechanical and chemical preparation, conservation treatments and casting and moulding. There is a range of optical microscopes with drawing and photographic accessories; specimen photography to publication standard can be undertaken. Microcomputers give access to collection databases and have bibliographical and DTP software.

The library, begun with the collections in 1839, includes a number of valuable early published and unpublished works, complete runs of all the main British geology, palaeontology and museology periodicals and a good working library of textbooks and monographs. We have all the published Geological Survey 1" and 1:50 000 maps and memoirs and complete cover of Leicestershire at 1:10 000.

The museum is a centre for geological site information, as part of the National Scheme for Geological Site Documentation. Records of some 1200 extant and historic Leicestershire sites are available, and we work closely with English Nature and the local Trusts, and coordinate the Leics Geologists' Forum, to ensure a good deal for Leicestershire's geological heritage through site conservation, statutory protection, planning considerations and interpretation. We also offer geological consultancy and advice (an income-generating service) and a complete geological enquiry and identification service.

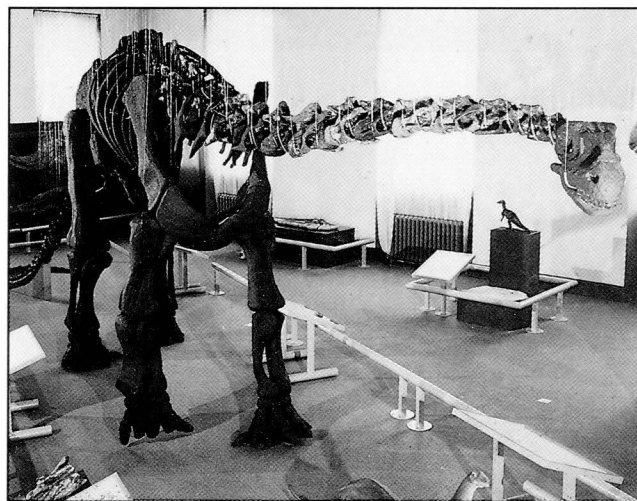
Exhibitions and education

There are two permanent displays: "Lost Worlds", using specimens (including the Charnian holotype fossils) and pictures to build up reconstructions of four past Leicestershire landscapes, and "The Dinosaur", the centrepiece of which is the Rutland *Cetiosaurus* but which includes many other spectacular vertebrate fossils. There are plans to renovate both galleries in 1994-5. A programme of temporary exhibitions includes displays from our own collections and travelling shows from elsewhere.

Education services include workshops, aimed specifically at teachers' National Curriculum requirements, and loans. We also offer a range of talks suitable for clubs and societies.



Charnia masoni holotype.



Cetiosaurus.

Arranging your visit

Leicestershire Museum and Art Gallery is open from 10.00 to 17.30 daily (14.00 to 17.30 Sundays), and is free. Special visits, to study the collections or data on sites for example, are best booked in advance; we cannot guarantee to receive visitors at short notice, but will always try to help. Telephone: 0533 554100 (switchboard), 0533 473080 (direct); Fax: 0533 473011.

The railway station is within 500m of the museum, with regular direct trains from Nottingham (35 minutes), Birmingham (55 minutes), Derby (30 minutes), Peterborough (60 minutes) and London (75 minutes). The bus station is 2km away; local buses also stop at the railway station. By car, the museum is easily reached from the motorways and major roads. The town centre is partly closed to through traffic. We can, on request, reserve a space in the museum car park, especially if you are carrying equipment or specimens.

Photographs

All photographs Leicestershire Museums.

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