

# **Botany Presentation 14/3/09**

## **Introduction and Housekeeping**

- My name is Michelle Hill and I am the Collections Access Officer here at the museum. The collections team consists of three people and our remit is to care for and manage the entire museum collections here. I don't know how many of you have visited before, but the collections are very diverse ranging from natural history, to social and industrial history, fine art, decorative art, ethnology, and archaeology.
- Therefore as I told Peter, I am not a botanist! My knowledge of Warrington botany did increase dramatically however as the result of a collaborative exhibition we did a couple of years ago with the Natural History Museum called 'Natural Curiosity' Some of you may have seen this exhibition. We did receive a tremendous amount of help from the Botany Department at Liverpool Museum and we were very grateful for that. We are very fortunate in that both Liverpool and Manchester Museums have specialist botany sections that we can ask for advice.
- The plan for today is that I will give you an introduction in here, we will then move to have a look at the botany gallery. I need the group to then split into two so that half have a little while to look at the botany gallery and then come back here for refreshments and I will take the other half to look at the painting of John Blackburne, and some other items. We will then swap the groups over before all coming back here. I need to split the group because the room I have the other items in will not hold all of you.

## **Warrington and Natural History**

- In order to put the botany collections in context, I will briefly explore the links Warrington has with natural history.
- Warrington has strong links with natural history. In 1838, the Warrington Natural History Society formed Warrington's first museum with six curators and nearly 3000 specimens. These collections formed the nucleus of the museum's collections.
- There was also an early botanical society in Warrington. The Archives section holds material relating to these societies. One of the earliest references to natural history societies in Warrington is a notebook written about 1808 by James Kendrick, President of the Botanical Society of Warrington. It lists 820 plants and states that was the work of the Botanical Society of Warrington, which was formed around 1806. In 1810 George Crosfield, Secretary of the Society published a 'Calendar of Flora' which is a contribution to noting the various vegetable productions of different districts.
- There were some significant botanists linked to Warrington, some of whom I will discuss later. One very important figure linked to Warrington was Johann Rheinhold Forster. He was appointed to the Warrington Academy in 1768 as a teacher of modern languages and natural history. He was the first person to publicly teach natural history in England.. Warrington Academy was regarded as one of the most progressive educational establishments in England and was considered to be a rival to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. His

specialist area was mineralogy, but he was also a well-known botanist and corresponded with Anna Blackburne, a name we shall come across later. In 1772 he was appointed as naturalist on James Cook's second circumnavigation of the world. By all accounts he was a difficult character being described in Cook's journal of the Second Voyage as

**“Dogmatic, humourless, suspicious, pretentious, contentious. Censorious, demanding, rheumatic, he was a problem from every angle”**

- The Warrington Municipal Museum was established on 10 May 1848 under the museums act of 1845 by joining the town's Circulating Library, founded in 1760 and the Museum of the Natural History Society. The current museum site opened in 1857 and was one of first local authority museums in the country.
- The collections were added to and by 1906-7, over 17,000 natural history specimens were displayed at the museum with nearly 35,000 in cabinet collections.
- As with a lot of museums at the time, many of the collections were gifts or bequests from local benefactors.
- Today the collecting focus of the museum has changed, with more of an emphasis on collecting social and industrial history, rather than natural history
- However the natural history collections still have great significance today, exciting and inspiring visitors and researchers who regularly come to study aspects of the collections.

### **The Botany Collections**

- In terms of botany collections, there are approximately 9250 specimens in the Collections. We have a herbarium collection that largely consists of the William Wilson collection of mosses and a collection of flowering plants, but there is other material in there as well. We obviously have all of the material on display in the botany gallery but apart from that, there is little in store. Most of what is in store consists of the Giles Owen collection of flowering plants, and more samples of wood related to the economic botany collections. When the gallery was redisplayed in the late 1990's, the display of wood samples was reduced. We are in the process of reboxing and improving the documentation of the herbarium at present.

### **The History of the Gallery**

- There is not any record of when the botany gallery was installed originally, but as far as we know, the original gallery was arranged by curators Charles Madeley and his successor G A Dunlop between 1898 and the 1930's. Over this thirty years, specimens were gradually acquired. There are some notes in the Council Committee minutes from 1929 that the then museum curator G A Dunlop reported to the Council Committee that he was planning to change the out of date plant models in the gallery and that he wished to purchase 21

models of British forest trees and models of seedlings, flowers etc. The plant gall collection was certainly on display by 1905.

- The current gallery was redisplayed in 1998, which is before my time. From my understanding, most of the original content remains except for this first explanatory display case. The main changes were that the roof lights were blocked in to prevent further light damage, and new lighting was installed. The cases were stripped back to their natural wood and all the items on display were conserved. This was done at the same time as the geology gallery was also refurbished. The aim being for these galleries to retain a traditional 1930's feel but have modern lighting and improved interpretation.
- The gallery was also renamed 'Plants and Trees' but when the museum front entrance was redecorated a few years ago, the original 1930's lettering was picked out with the original name 'Botany'.

#### GO UP TO THE GALLERY FOR A LOOK AROUND

##### Gallery:

- The museum displays were largely based on evolution and the botany gallery is no different.
- In the first case, you can see a picture of the gallery how it was before the refurbishment.
- Around the centre of the gallery are the display cases containing the plant galls.
- There are other sections on classification, propagation of species, British forest trees and uses of the plant. This is divided up into various sections; beverage, clothing, dyes, pharmacy, utensils, domestic appliances and tools, fibres and tanning materials. The tanning materials section is interesting because of tanning was also done in Warrington.
- The Brendel flower models came into the collections in 1898. They were bought directly from the German manufacturers, based in Berlin. Liverpool Museum have a large number of these, as do the University of Aberdeen. They are often of interest to artists who are fascinated with their structure.

HALF OF US WILL NOW GO AND LOOK AT THE PAINTING OF JOHN BLACKBURNE, AN EMINENT WARRINGTON BOTANIST AND SOME ORIGINAL MATERIAL. THE REST OF THE GROUP WILL GO WITH MIKE IN ABOUT 10 MINUTES FOR SOME REFRESHMENTS. I WILL THEN SWAP THE GROUPS OVER

- **John Blackburne by Hamlet Winstanley**
- This painting was acquired at auction by the museum in 2000. The museum managed to rescue the portrait and bring it back to Warrington after finding out from a local history enthusiast on the morning of the sale at Sothebys that it was coming up for sale. After investigations and a letter to the local press from a lady who cleaned offices just around the corner from the museum, it was discovered that the painting had been hanging on the wall of one of the offices since 1969!

- John Blackburne was born in 1693 and became Lord of the Manor of Warrington from 1764. He lived locally, at Orford Hall and was an eminent botanist and horticulturalist. He was particularly known for his extensive garden and collection of exotic plants such as grapes, tea, coffee, cloves, pepper, sugar cane and cotton. He apparently grew enough cotton to make a dress for his daughter Anna
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- He is probably best known for his 'pine stove' that was the first in England to produce ripe pineapples. X rays at Liverpool Conservation Centre showed that there may be a pineapple or leaves of a pineapple that have been painted over, visible in the lower right hand side of the painting. The painting may also show the earliest representation of a Lancashire greenhouse.
- John Blackburne lived to the ripe old age of 93, and apparently even aged 80 he was taking visitors around the garden and quoting the Latin and English names of all the plants.

#### **Anna Blackburne:**

- John's daughter Anne, also known as Anna was one of John Blackburne's nine children.
- She shared her father's scientific interests and developed her own natural history collection.
- She corresponded with the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus who named a type of bird after her, **Sylvia Blackburniae**
- Johann Rheinold Forster, tutor in natural science at Warrington Academy dined regularly at Orford Hall and read his entomology lectures to her. He also named a plant family after her and her father, **Blackburnia pinnata**
- At Orford Hall, she assembled a large museum of natural history
- After her father's death she moved to 'Fairfield', a house closer to Warrington where a room was set aside for her collection.
- She died in 1793 and is buried in the family grave at Winwick.

#### **Meeting Room**

##### William Wilson collection:

Here we have part of our William Wilson herbarium collection. This was donated in 1900 by Thomas Glazebrook Rylands, one of the executors of his will. T G Rylands himself was very interested in botany, especially a type of algae called diatomaceae. In 1838 he became a Corresponding Member of the Botanical Society of London

- There are 44 boxes of flowering plants and 37 boxes of mosses. The mosses are a duplicate set to those in the British Museum, now in the Natural History Museum. We are in the process of reboxing the herbarium collections and doing some more detailed documentation. The Wilson collection of mosses is one that we get most enquiries about.
- Wilson was a world famous botanist specialising the study of mosses. He was an early member of the Warrington Natural History Society and later became President.

- He corresponded with John Stephens Henslow (who became Professor of Botany at Cambridge University) and sent him specimens of rare plants.
  - Henslow was working on a research project about the nature of species and Wilson became a contributor to the project and gave about 900 samples. The theory Henslow developed was passed onto his Cambridge students, especially Charles Darwin. This is the framework that Darwin took with him on The Beagle and helped to shape his ideas re evolution.
  - He corresponded with leading European botanists as well as so called 'working class' botanists in Lancashire and Yorkshire
  - In 1846 he agreed to work with William Jackson Hooker and Thomas Taylor to revise their book on the mosses of Britain. The revised volume, Bryologica Britannica was published in 1855 and Wilson was named as the sole author.
  - Wilson hoped to revise this work but died before he could complete this work.
- We also have some other items (SHOW OTHER ORIGINAL MATERIAL).