

# UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

## INTRODUCTION

In 1847, the University Museum Committee, founded by Charles Daubeny (Professor of Chemistry and Botany) and Henry Acland (Reader in Anatomy at Christ Church), began campaigning for a university museum to house research and teaching facilities and to bring together the scientific collections that were scattered across the University. In 1849, the Committee prepared a memorandum calling for a University science museum to bring together and provide for future improvements to the scientific collections held by the Geological Museum in the Clarendon building; the Ashmolean Museum; and the Anatomical Museum of Christ Church. However, this document failed to get the signature of the Professor of Mineralogy and Reader in Geology, William Buckland, who wrote that the campaign was a hopeless cause as Natural History was not considered to be part of the 'proper business of the University'. Without his support the campaign for a museum failed.

The University Museum Committee prepared another memorandum in 1850, prompting Hebdomadal Board to establish a committee to consider the issue. This committee resolved that it was "desirable that a new Museum be built for a collection in illustration of Physical Science and of Natural History"<sup>1</sup>. Finally, in December 1853, four acres of land at the south-west end of the University Parks were purchased from Merton College for the Museum site, and an additional four acres were added the following year. The Museum Delegacy, later known as the Museum Building Delegacy, was established in 1853 to oversee the construction of the building.

The design for the Museum was chosen by an open competition with prizes offered for the three best designs which could be constructed for under £30,000. From the 32 schemes received, two were selected to be voted on by Convocation: a classical design by EM Barry, and a neo-Gothic design by Deane and Woodward. The neo-Gothic design was favoured partly because the style lent itself readily to extension in every direction, and it was recognised before the Museum was even built that extension would soon be necessary.

Henry Acland and John Ruskin also favoured the neo-Gothic style as the most ascetically pleasing and impressive - they intended the Museum to be a cathedral for science, to inspire an appreciation of God's creation.

The founding stone was laid with great ceremony on 20 June 1855 by the Earl of Derby, Chancellor of the University. The building was officially opened in 1860, although various departments had occupied their premises from as early as 1858. The cost of the Museum was covered by the University, using part of the £60,000 accumulated profit of the Oxford University Press that had been mostly earned through printing bibles. A grant of £30,000 for the shell of the building (excluding all decorations, fixtures and fittings) was made by the University for the cost of construction, and the Lucas brothers were engaged as builders.

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<sup>1</sup>from 'Minutes of<sup>1</sup>Hebdomadal meetings, 1841-54', WPgamma/24/6 at page 185.

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The carvings and other decoration on the outside and inside of the Museum were to be paid for by public subscription and forty six carvings were completed between 1858 and 1860. Queen Victoria donated £350 to pay for five statues in the Court of the Museum, those of Bacon, Galileo, Newton, Leibnitz and Oersted, the undergraduates of the University donated money to pay for another two statues, and several other notable figures from both within and outside the University donated money for carving. The entire design was intended to reflect the art of nature, with the wrought-iron ornaments supporting the roof designed to represent trees and plants, and the shafts of the pillars made from the 'important' rocks of the British Isles creating a geological exhibit. However, due to a lack of funds some of the designs for carving and decoration were not completed, and in 1860 only 100 out of 400 capitals and bases had been carved.

In 1857, the Delegates of the University Museum were constituted, and John Phillips, the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, was appointed the first Keeper of the University Museum.

The first occupants of the building were the science departments of the day: Astronomy, Geometry, Experimental Physics, Mineralogy, Chemistry, Geology, Zoology, Anatomy, Physiology and Medicine. Each department had a lecture room and private room, and also work-rooms and laboratories where required. The Chemistry laboratory, designed to look like the Abbot's Kitchen at Glastonbury, was kept separate from the main building because of the fumes it produced. The Museum House, the residence of the Keeper of the University Museum, was built to the south-east of the Museum building.

The departments around the Central Court were originally arranged in the following order: to the right of the entrance was the Chemistry department, followed by the Physical, Mineralogical and Geological departments on the south side. To the left of the entrance was the Medical department, followed on the north side by rooms for the Delegates and the Keeper and then the department of Physiology. Beyond the Court the Anatomical and Zoological departments with dissecting rooms were on the north side of the building, and the Chemistry and Experimental Physics departments were on the south side. The east side of the building (at the back of the Central Court from the entrance, where the Pitt Rivers Museum now stands) was left clear as an area for expansion.

Museum displays were arranged in the Central Court of the Museum. In the south aisle of the Court the teaching collections of the Professors of Mathematics, Astronomy and Physics were held, as well as the Mineralogical and Chemical specimens. In the central aisle the Palaeontological collections were housed, and in the north aisle were the Ashmolean Zoological collections and the Christ Church Physiological collections. The Museum was open to members of the University from 10am to 4pm in winter (5pm in summer), and visitors were admitted after 2pm. There was no charge for entry.

In 1860, the collection of scientific books in the Radcliffe Camera was transferred to the Radcliffe Library housed in the University Museum. The Camera was lent to the

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University by the Radcliffe Trustees for use as a reading room. In 1901, the new Radcliffe Science Library was opened on the corner of Parks Road and South Parks Road.

In 1902, the office of Keeper was abolished, and the duties were transferred to the newly established position of Secretary to the Delegates of the University Museum. From 1921, the Keeper's House was used to meet the extra needs of the science departments before being demolished at a later date to provide space for the extension to the Inorganic Chemistry Laboratory.

In 1927, the administration of the Radcliffe Science Library was handed to the University and it effectively became the Bodleian's science library. The new wing, creating an L-shaped building, was added in 1934.

In 1934, the University became concerned at the haphazard expansion of the Museum site and restricted the area for growth by designating the University Parks a private open space. A portion of the Parks, along with the Museum and the existing buildings around it, was designated the 'Science Area'. At this time the Keble Road triangle was bought to provide space for further expansion.

In 1939, the responsibilities of the Delegates of the University Museum were clarified. They were to advise on questions raised by the University, and to report on questions raised by the science departments; to be responsible for the administration of the Central Court of the Museum; to consider applications for the use of the lecture theatre within the Museum; and to prepare the annual report of the Museum and its departments. All proposed alterations to the Science Area were to be referred to the Delegates.

The amendment to the constitution of the Delegates also removed their previous right to supervise the collections. The collections became the responsibility of three professors: the Professor of Geology in the case of the geological and mineralogical collections; the Linacre Professor for the collections of zoology and comparative anatomy; and the Hope Professor for the entomological collections. However, the lack of a single, central authority controlling acquisitions, display and conservation meant that the collections were only added to sporadically and were vulnerable to theft and decay. As a result of the deterioration of the collections, the Committee for the Scientific Collections was established in 1954 to oversee the care and maintenance of the collections under the Delegacy for the University Museum.

In 1962, the Delegates of the University Museum suggested to the Hebdomadal Council that the Science Area should be redefined, and that their number and responsibilities should be reduced. Following a review of its functions and responsibilities the Delegacy for the University Museum was reconstituted as the Delegacy for the Science Area in 1964. The Science Area was defined as the Museum site on Parks Road together with the Engineering and Metallurgy buildings on the Keble Road Triangle, and the buildings on Banbury Road and Parks Road that contained science departments. The Delegacy for the Science Area was responsible for common interdepartmental services; organising the use of the lecture

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theatre; advising Hebdomadal Council on alterations to the Science Area; preparing the annual report; and the maintenance of the fabric of the Central Court of the Museum. Responsibility for the collections housed in the Museum was formally passed to the Committee for the Scientific Collections in 1969. In addition to this, a University lecturer was appointed curator for each of the three (later four) groups of collections. A central director was not appointed, instead one of the departmental curators served as Museum Curator for a period of three years, starting in 1970.

An extension to the Radcliffe Science Library, including a reading room (the Lankester Room), was built underneath the lawn in front of the Museum between 1972 and 1975.

In 1992, the Delegacy for the Science Area was wound up, as it was felt that their duties would be better carried out by the Buildings Committee, the Curators of the Parks, and the newly established Security Committee. The Committee for Scientific Collections continued to be responsible for the Museum itself.

In 1995, the General Board established a committee to review the University Museum, chaired by BW Cunliffe (Fellow of Keble). Its terms of reference were "To review the organisation, staffing and management of the museum, its relationship with other bodies, its roles in teaching, curation and research, and its obligations to its local, national and international public; and to make recommendations". As a result of this review several changes occurred. The University Museum was officially renamed the Oxford University Museum of Natural History in 1996; the Committee for Scientific Collections was replaced by the Visitors of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History in 1997; and the post of Director of the University Museum of Natural History was created in 1998.

In 2002 the Committee for the Museums and Scientific Collections was established, with the aim to facilitate co-ordination between all the University's museums and collections.

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### **Keepers of the University Museum**

1857-1874	John Phillips
1874-1883	Henry Smith
1883-1902	EB Tylor

### **Secretaries to the Delegates of the University Museum**

1902-1908	Sir Henry Alexander Miers
1908-1909	Gilbert Charles Bourne (acting secretary)
1909-1911	Henry Balfour
1911-1925	Herbert Lister Bowman
1925-1928	Thomas Vipond Barker
1928-1955	Sydney GP Plant
1956-1964	GES Turner

### **Secretaries to the Delegates of the Science Area**

1964-1977	GES Turner
1977-1987	A Marks
1987-1989	PR Lever
1989-1992	<i>Vacant</i>
1992	JP Hart

### **Secretaries to the Committee for Scientific Collections**

[c1954-1964	<i>Unknown</i>
1964-1966	JM Edmonds
1966-1968	J Zussman
1968-1971	MWR de V Graham
1971-1977	GES Turner
1978-1983	JM Allard
1983-1989	RM Hobby
1990-1997	SE Eeley

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### **Curators of the University Museum (after 1990 known as Principal Curator)**

1970-1971	N Tebble
1972-1975	FB Atkins
1975-1978	TS Kemp
1978-1980	WJ Kennedy
1980-1983	FB Atkins
1983-1986	TS Kemp
1986-1989	WJ Kennedy
1989-1992	SJ Simpson
1992-1995	FB Atkins
1995-1998	TS Kemp

### **Directors of the University Museum of Natural History (and Secretary to the Visitors)**

1998-2003	Keith S Thomson
2003-	WJ Kennedy

### **Curators of the Entomological Collections**

1973-1981	MWR de V Graham
1981-1985	MC Birch
1986-2005	SJ Simpson
2005-	DJ Rogers

### **Curators of the Geological Collections**

1973-1976	JM Edmonds
1976-2003	WJ Kennedy
2004-	ER Seiffert

### **Curators of the Mineralogical Collections**

1975-1997	FB Atkins
1997-2003	<i>Vacant</i>
2003-	DJ Waters

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### **Curators of the Zoological Collections**

1970-1971            N Tebble  
1973-                TS Kemp

### **Bibliography**

*The Architecture of Deane & Woodward*, Frederick O'Dwyer (Cork, 1997)

*The History of the University of Oxford Volume 8: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Brian Harrison (Oxford 1994)

The website of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, at  
< [www.oum.ox.ac.uk](http://www.oum.ox.ac.uk) > .

These records were transferred to the University Archives in 1971, and catalogued under the reference code UM. They were completely recatalogued and given numbers under the reference code MU in 2007. A concordance of old and new reference codes has been prepared. The records are arranged as follows:

MU 1	DELEGACIES AND OTHER COMMITTEES
MU 2	ACCOUNTS
MU 3	CORRESPONDENCE AND OTHER PAPERS
MU 4	PLANS, DRAWINGS AND MAPS

*Compiled August 2007*