

## **Accompanying Notes for Documentation and Digitisation – Exeter Session**

### **Acquisition Register**

There are some things you should do before getting stuck in to documenting a collection. Firstly, look for a number. If you have an accession number head to the accessions register. This should tell you who donated it, and if you're lucky who collected it and some notes on its history. RAMM has a main register but each department kept detailed records in subject specific registers – this shows a page in the mollusc register and you can see that each shell is individually identified. Your museum might also have a card index that contains extra information.

In this case there are also pencil marks down the side from where someone did a collections inventory and noted down which were present or missing at the time.

### **Archive**

Archival material can provide enormous amounts of background information. Look for correspondence between the donor and the museum – these are letters between Miss Linter the shell collector and FR Rowley the curator, and then later between Rowley and Miss Linter's executor Miss Jewell – also a shell collector. The letter describe how Miss Linter wanted the collection used and displayed and mentioned some of the people she swapped specimens with. Swapping specimens was really common – if you know that a specimen once belonged to someone else it's really important to note this down. Their collection might be in another museum, or possibly in the case of Montagu and Linter who corresponded with some very important zoologists it could be type material.

Another vital reason to look at letters is to look at handwriting – it can be compared to handwriting on labels, notebooks etc. Who wrote what and when is an important part of the collection's history.

Photographs of the collectors always help the public engage with the collection.

### **Probate**

If you're looking into the history of a collector it can be really interesting to obtain their will. Costs £10. Also interesting to look them up on something like ancestry. This isn't only to be nosy. Knowing where someone lived, and whose hands their collection passed through can help interpret collections labels and difficult to read collecting localities. It can also demonstrate that the collection does belong to the museum if you're struggling for other evidence.

### **Original Labels**

More often than not the most important source of information about a specimen is the label. It will hopefully contain information on when and where it was collected, what it is – hopefully the scientific name – and also hopefully by who. This data is a record of what was collected when and this record is important. It makes the specimen unique. So, if you have an entomology cabinet where the insects have been entirely devoured by carpet beetle, don't just throw the whole lot out. Keep the label! – of value as it makes the specimen a record showing where a species has been found in the past which in turn can lead to evidence of change.

Never throw out old labels. Even scruffy bits of paper like this – are in someone's handwriting, or the typeface could be matched to other labels. It is possible to identify collectors just from their handwriting, and in some cases just from the style of label they used. There is a collection of images of labels and handwriting on the conc soc website and there's a geological label database somewhere – worthwhile checking these out.

The labels might have reference to a publication it was mentioned or figured in, or might have a collector's number – even if the label is data poor, a number could suggest the presence of a field note book.

It's important to put all the information in your database, and so long as your specimen is numbered with a unique accession number you can find this information, but it's also really handy to write a label with the data on it to go with the specimen

There are obviously specimens missing – check back to original register or field notebook – when did they get taken off or lost.

### **Curation, Re-Curation and Checking Taxonomy**

If the collection has been in the Museum's possession for some time it is likely to have been curated, reorganised, and re-curated over the years. This might include repackaging, mounting for display, the addition of new labels etc. For example, the card and paper label here is Montagu's original. The typed label might have been added by his son D'Orville at a later date or might have been done by Montagu himself. There are more specimens in here than would have fitted on the card – where did these come from? Does this match the numbers mentioned in the register? The card tray and typed label was done by FR Rowley. The green star was, I think, done by my predecessor to denote that it is a type specimen – look out for coloured stars and dots. All this should be recorded – it is part of the specimen's history. In the same way if you add any new labels maybe include your name or initials on the label for future curators to understand. If you, or someone else, changed the ID of a specimen it's important to include a label with the new ID, the date and who identified it – det or determination slip

Scientific names can be cumbersome if you're not used to them. They consist of a genus followed by a species, and sometimes a sub-species. If there is a name in brackets afterwards this indicates who first described the named and species. If this happens to be your collector, that's another indication you might have a type specimen.

Frustratingly scientific names change.

Important to have correct and up to date ID – is it a rare or extinct species? Is it protected by law? Is it poisonous? If so, note it down in your database

### **TYPE SPECIMENS:**

<http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/blogs/museumcollections/what-type-specimen>

[http://sciweb.nybg.org/science2/herbarium\\_imaging/typedefinition.asp.html](http://sciweb.nybg.org/science2/herbarium_imaging/typedefinition.asp.html)

A **type** specimen is a specimen selected to serve as a reference point when a species is first named. As a result, these specimens are extremely important to biologists who are attempting to determine the correct application of a name.

**Holotype:** The single specimen designated as the type of a species by the original author at the time the species name and description was published.

**Isotype:** A duplicate specimen of the holotype.

**Syntype:** Any of two or more specimens listed in the original description of a taxon when a holotype was not designated.

**Isosyntype:** A duplicate of a syntype.

**Paratype:** A specimen not formally designated as a type but cited along with the type collection in the original description of a taxon.

**Lectotype:** A specimen chosen by a later researcher to serve as if it were the holotype. It is chosen from among the specimens available to the original publishing author (the isotypes, syntypes and/or paratypes) of a scientific name when the holotype was either lost or destroyed, or when no holotype was designated.

**Neotype:** A specimen chosen by a later researcher to serve in place of a holotype when all specimens available to the original publishing author of a scientific name have been lost or destroyed.

**Topotype:** A specimen of a plant collected from the same locality as the holotype and usually on a different date. A topotype has no formal standing. = locotype

**Cotype:** A term formerly used for syntype and sometimes (erroneously) for isotype and paratype. This is an old term that was used loosely and is not used by today's taxonomists.

**Generitype:** The type specimen of a genus. It is designated by using the type for the name of a particular species within that genus. For example, the generitype for *Aster* is the type for *Aster amellus* L.

### **Ask an Expert**

There is a lot you can do even if you're not an expert in the subject area of the collection – you can transcribe labels, take photographs etc. But if you know any experts they can really really help. RAMM was lucky. We had budget to buy in some of Graham Oliver's time. He is a mollusc expert, has a lot of experience researching this kind of collection and also knows who to ask when he doesn't know the answer.

But if you've got a British insect collection that you're working on, for example then I'd recommend that you contact your local record office. They are likely to know who the local recorders for butterflies, or bees or crickets or whatever it is are. In my experience they are often happy to offer their time for free. They often know about the local historic collectors and they should be able to help you check the correct identification of the specimens.

## Photography

Unless you're a practised photographer, taking good object shots can be tricky. But even basic photos can be really useful, especially if it saves you having to rummage through the collections to check what's written on a label or simply what it looks like. However, it's worth doing the best that you can.

On the left is a professional shot of one of RAMM's works of art on paper – this was taken after the work had been conserved – useful to have a comparison, documenting any conservation work is really important, and also for sale through RAMM's print on demand site. As a result the file size is a whopping 75MB. For most purposes a high res jpeg of around 5 MB will do the trick.

You'll notice he's included a colour card with a grey scale – handy to correct any white balance issues in Photoshop afterwards but not essential. Colour cards can be bought from photographic suppliers but they are expensive and will fade if not looked after properly.

Having a size scale IS important. The photographer has just used a paper one – you can print them off the internet but use a ruler to check they are accurate. We buy ours online from an archaeological supplier – thick, plastic, foam backed – durable and will stand on their side. Depending on what I'm doing I often position the scale bar so it can be cropped out of the image if I'm just wanting a pretty shot for something.

On the right is a photo I took in less than ideal conditions, yet it does the job. There's a scale. All the labels can be read and the bird is more or less in focus. This is actually a specimen from National Museum Liverpool and they didn't have a dedicated photography set up. I used a clean piece of cartridge paper and set up two spotlights and played around until there wasn't too much shadow. I had enough light to do this hand held but if lighting is poor a tripod can be essential.

If you're photographing shells or fossils or taxidermy take photos of all sides. Also useful to photograph areas of damage.

Last essential thing – numbering! If you can see the accession number clearly on the label then great, if not include a scrap of paper at the edge of the image with the number on that can be cropped out – if you're doing lots then laminated paper and ohp pens that will wipe off can be really handy. Number your image files sensibly so that you can find things. We use the accession number for the primary image and then add shot1, 2 etc. for subsequent angles or for lower resolution or edited images. If you have a database that can link to images your numbering and storage method might be dependent on the software's requirements.

Make sure your images are backed up!