

# Darwin Shrewsbury Festival 2021

## *The Darker Side of Museums: Over Collecting and the Stories we Tell*



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Shropshire Museums cares for over 45,000 geology specimens, (including fossils, rocks and minerals) and around 80,000 biology specimens (including birds, mammals, insects, fish and plants). Our collections include specimens from all over the world as well as many collected locally. This invaluable resource is stored at our Collections Centre in Ludlow; a purpose-built environmentally controlled, museum store with research and education spaces on site.

*Case of Tropic Butterflies (Handling Collection)*

The Victorian era has been described as the start of modern consumerism. Imperialism and industrialisation were both catalysts to a growing fashion for collecting leading to crazes for collecting everything from porcelain to feathers and from coins to taxidermy. However, this collecting fervour had a darker side, sometimes having a devastating effect on the natural world and its resources.

Alongside scientific collecting there was a demand for trophy collecting which consists of amassing 'stuff for stuffs sake' and gaining the prestige associated with having it. The need for specimens to feed the collecting mania led to damage to both the natural and historic environment as sites were raided to fill collectors' cabinets and museum shelves.

Bringing home antiques from your travels had been popular amongst the eighteenth-century aristocracy returning from the Grand Tour or from postings around the Empire. The arrival of the railways and steamer ships made travel easier and, as the middle classes started to enjoy a greater disposable income, the passion for collecting spread. This allowed industrialists and some middle-class enthusiasts to start collecting too. Events like the Great Exhibition and new museums gave people objects to aspire to and accounts of new collecting trends in newspapers and magazines led many to follow, causing a collecting mania for certain objects and specimens.

### **Plumomania: The Feather Craze**



*Huia Bird (SHCMS: Z.00270)*

One example of the effects of collecting mania is the fate of the New Zealand Huia Bird. In Maori culture Huia were considered sacred and wearing their feathers was reserved for those of high status. This had a limited impact upon the population from the fourteenth century onwards, but it was during the Duke and Duchess of York's visit to New Zealand in 1901 that the huia's fate was sealed. As a Huia feather was placed in the Duke's hat as a token of respect, the wearing of a Huia feathers became instantly fashionable in both New Zealand and

England. Hunting of the Huia increased to meet the demand of the fashion market, whilst at the same time deforestation was shrinking their natural habitat. As a result, the Huia population rapidly dropped and by 1907 they were considered extinct.

### **Pteridomania and the Fern Craze**

The zeal of Victorian collectors not only had an impact overseas. It also led to significant reductions in the wild populations of several of the rarer British species, particularly in regions of Scotland and Ireland. The Killarney Fern was almost lost due to over collecting during the Victorian fern craze.

George Maw was a keen botanist as well as the founder of the Broseley-based Maw and Co. pottery firm. His decorative floor tiles were popular across the world. Their designs often reflect his own interests and those of the day. Ferns were a popular decorative arts motif in the late nineteenth century and can be found on pottery, decorative ironwork and a whole range of goods.



*Killarney Fern collected by George Maw (SHRMS: 2018.00193.268)*



### **Scarcity Value**

Sometimes the rarity of certain specimens made them more appealing to collectors. Hunting of Great Auk for pillows had driven their numbers close to extinction by the late eighteenth century. Despite attempts to protect the species, Victorian demand for eggs and taxidermy specimens for collections was intense because of their scarcity. Shrewsbury taxidermist Henry Shaw is known to have sourced and mounted six skins for collectors. However, demand was so high that he is believed to have created several 'cut and shut' Great Auks from bits of guillemots and razorbills! One of these can be seen at Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery.

*Model of a Great Auk (SHYMS: 2013.00096.002)*

### **Telling Tales**

It was not only demand for specimens and objects to display in museums and private collections that had an impact on the world. How they were displayed had an impact too. This applies particularly to ethnographic collections of objects often collected from other cultures which had been forcibly incorporated into the British Empire.

The display approach taken by collectors and curators have shaped how people understood the world. It has reflected and influenced how we have seen other people, both from our own country's past and from other foreign lands. Items such as the African objects from Ludlow Museum were often simply seen as exotic symbols of a poorly developed culture.



*Mende Tribe Sowe Mask (SHCMS: T.00056)*

Sowei masks from this collection are an important part of Mende society in Sierra Leone. Each mask is carved for a specific woman for her initiation ceremony and is believed to represent her individual inner spirit and beauty.

In Victorian, and even some twentieth century museums, ethnographic items were often displayed alongside Natural Science collections rather than exploring their value as artwork or interpreting their social and cultural meaning. This approach further dehumanised the people who made them and made them seem different to, and of less value than, western people and their material culture. This institutional racism has influenced the thinking of generations of museum visitors.

When displaying the Sowei masks today, Shropshire Museums would want to share the artistic and social meaning associated with it. However, we also need to address more difficult stories such as the colonial history of Sierra Leone and how Sowei culture today is dealing with modern attitudes towards FGM which, traditionally, has been a key part of this initiation ceremony.

### Collecting Today

Over the decades, the approaches taken by Victorian collectors have been challenged and criticised. As a museum, our methods of acquisition and display have changed. Our museum staff think carefully about what we collect, how we collect it and why. However, the collections left to us by Victorian collectors are still important to our understanding of the world and are still relevant today. In many cases they are the last surviving fragments of lost species and cultures. We have a duty to ensure that this resource is used in an ethical and open way.

Some ethnographic museum objects are being returned to the communities they were forcibly taken from. For many communities these repatriations have helped them reinvigorate a connection to, and an understanding of, their cultural history. Other objects are being better interpreted in our museums by involving the cultures that made them in our interpretation. As archaeologists we have also learnt to value the knowledge of indigenous people to help us interpret the evidence left by past societies in new ways.

Today, when dealing with objects from our historic collections which are contentious on religious or cultural grounds, Shropshire Museums endeavours to take public opinion into consideration. In such cases we try to explain our actions and decisions openly. This applies to how it is stored and handled and what it is used for. This is a process that will take time to learn to do well and do right and is sure to develop and change over time.

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