

A BLOG BY RACHEL OWEN - CURATING THE SPIRIT COLLECTION AND STUFFED BIRDS AT TULLIE HOUSE

Hi! Let me introduce myself – my name is Rachel Owen and I'm a first year Wildlife Media student at the University of Cumbria. I'm taking over this blog today to tell you about a really exciting opportunity I was a part of involving Tullie House's Spirit Collection on the 3rd February.

I've always loved museums and found them to be extremely important places of cultural and historical learning. Back home in Coventry I've been a part of the voluntary team at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, with a particular interest in the Archives and Conservation. I was involved in the Rootes Project which involved collating and cataloguing images and press cuttings relating to the local transport industry, giving me a wealth of knowledge about the city's industrial heritage and classic cars (I'm still waiting for a round on British Cars of the 20th Century to feature on *Pointless*). When I heard that a similar opportunity was taking place at Tullie House there was no way that I was about to miss out.

I arrived early on the Saturday morning and met the team that I'd be working with for the day. We were an eclectic bunch made up of two students, a retired surgeon, an ex-museum worker and a mycologist, as well as two of the Tullie House staff, Debs (Muscat) and Simon (Jackson). I'd expected that we would all be working on the Spirit Collection for the entire day but Simon surprised us by saying that we would split our time between cataloguing the Spirit Collection and ensuring that the taxidermy collection was still in top condition. As the curator it's vital for Simon to ensure that the collection, even when not on display, is well cared for. I was delighted at the opportunity as I've never had the chance to handle a taxidermy collection before. I also spotted Driggsby the Fin Whale who is now on display in the museum!



For the first session I joined the taxidermy team checking for signs of infestation or damage. I was absolutely astounded at the quality of the collection some of which had been put together by naturalist Ernest Blezard. There was a huge range of specimens including mammals, small birds, waders and birds of prey (my favourites) which had been meticulously preserved. Some even included examples of the flora and fungi that would be found in the natural habitat of the specimen. The most important part of the work we did was noting down the condition of any specimens we were concerned about. Fortunately there weren't many of these, and the ones we did find we think are probably related to how the specimen was captured or preserved. Needless to say, it's better to be safe than sorry with such an important collection.

After a tea break I switched to join the team on the Spirit Collection and got to work on recording all the information we could get from the labels, such as when the animals were collected and where they had come from. The diversity of the specimens was amazing, and there were even some tropical lizards and invertebrates that had come to Cumbria in banana shipments. The condition of some of the pieces were a bit worrying; some of specimens had become dehydrated and some jars had their seals broken so the creature had almost completely decomposed. But in the grand scheme of things, the majority of the collection was still in fantastic condition which was just amazing. The most amusing part of the day for me was when I dutifully catalogued all the information on a label provided for a dogfish, but when I looked at the specimen in the jar I realised that it definitely was not a dogfish. Talk about missing the obvious.

Once we'd finished for the day the staff decided that they would let us take a look their entomology collection. This was yet another incredible collection that's hidden away in the museum and I felt so privileged to be able to see it – Simon estimated that there were over 200,000 specimens in that one room alone. My favourites were definitely the tropical butterflies. I know that our native British butterflies are amazing, but the colours and the patterns on the rainforest species were just breathtaking. We then got into an interesting discussion as to how these historic collections have such high value for modern day research. The mitochondrial DNA can be used to help determine how species develop which is extremely useful information to have when undertaking projects that reintroduce them to different areas in the country.



This was a really exciting day for me and a great opportunity to apply my university learning in a real-world context, as well as continuing the heritage work that I love to do. I definitely recommend getting involved! It's a fabulous look at the inner workings of the museum and helps you appreciate the hard work all the staff do to keep such wonderful places running. Thank you so much to the staff at Tullie House for having me!