

COLLECTIONS CARE POWELL-COTTON MUSEUM

Inbal Livne – Head of Collections



Image © Nikhilesh Havel

INTRODUCING THE MUSEUM

The PCM was founded in 1896 with the construction of 'The Pavilion', a single room structure housing the museum's first natural history diorama, depicting Himalayan animals. This was completed in 1905 and has never been changed since that time.



Image © Nikhilesh Havel

Further galleries were added in the 1950s and 1960s by Percy Powell-Cotton's son, Christopher.



The most recent galleries to be built were Gallery 7 and Gallery 8, completed in 1974 and further update in the 1980s.



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COLLECTIONS STORAGE

As the PCM collections grew, new spaces were found to fit the every increasing number of objects. Most of these spaces were not originally built to store objects permanently. The majority of the natural history collections are stored in the crates in which they travelled back from Africa (bottom right), or in huge crates that were built to allow collections to be stored efficiently, rather than accessed (right). Really large items, such as elephant skins, have been placed where a space could be found.

Most of the ethnographic collections are stored in the galleries, in cupboards above and below the display cabinets. Many of these spaces require ladders, or even scaffolding, to access their contents.



TAXIDERMISTRY AUDIT

Why carry out an audit?

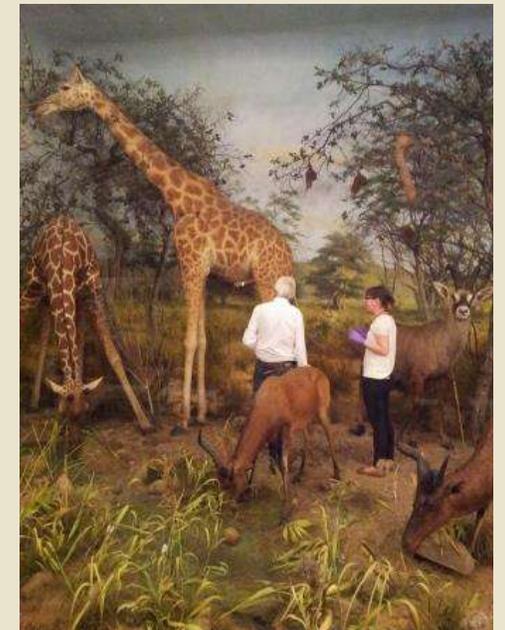
- Previous audit in 2012 suggested majority of display taxidermy in very poor state of repair.
- Cost of repairs suggested well beyond what the museum could afford.
- No scale to suggested repairs – what was most urgent? What could wait?
- Needed to know the true scale of the problem and how best to tackle it.
- No taxidermist on staff / Needed professional advice.

How did we do it?

- Got a grant of £2000 from our Museum Development Officer (Sarah Corn).
- Used the money to pay a professional taxidermist with several decades experience working on historic specimens, big game and fully mounted specimens (David Leggett)
- Created a scaled 'ABC' rating system to clearly explain the level of work required.



Image © Nikhilesh Havel



TAXIDERMISTRY AUDIT

What did we find?

- The majority of specimens were rated between a 'A' and 'B', meaning that necessary repairs were generally limited to ripped ears and cracked hooves.
- General dust was a greater problem than physical repair.
- Where larger work was necessary, this was generally repairs to repairs, rather than evidence of specimens continuing to decline over time.



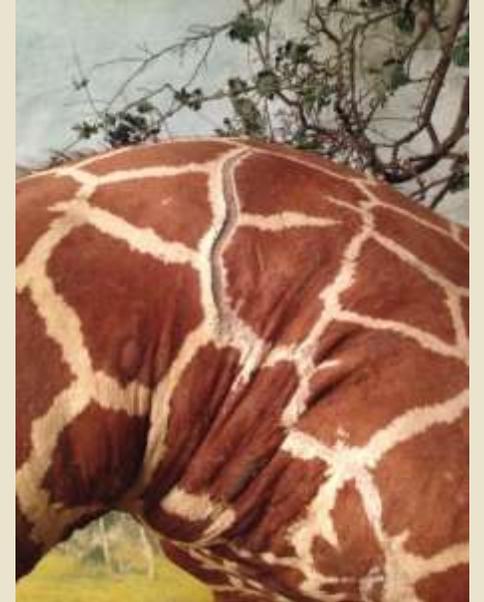
What did we learn?

- By having a professional taxidermist work with the Head of Collections collaboratively, the museum now has new skills and a knowledge base of the display collections within the PCM team. We are now more able to spot any new problems and plan for how to deal with those identified.
- By looking at each animal in detail, we've learned a lot about the specimens themselves, many of which have interesting stories hidden from public view.
- The great public reaction to us working in the dioramas while the galleries were open to the public allowed for some unexpected public engagement as part of a conservation project.

TAXIDERMMY AUDIT

What happens next?

- Identifying the most urgent repairs needed, and understanding what they involved, allows for financial planning. Money can be set aside in the collections budget for the repair of these specimens.
- Having a full report of every specimen means that as computerised catalogue records are created for each specimen, a condition report can be attached to that record and updated yearly. This will increase our compliance with SPECTRUM documentation standards and general museum collections care.
- Understanding the condition of our specimens will allow the PCM to pursue further grant funding for more significant repairs to the historic Kashmir Diorama.



PREVENTATIVE CONSERVATION

Aims of the project:

- Remove pests from animal skin storage areas.
- Audit the animal skins collection for potential pest damage.
- Create an up to date inventory of the collection (approx. 5000 skins).
- Improve the conditions of the stores to reduce the risk of further pest, increase access and improve the quality of the space for those working in it.
- Create better systems of pest management and monitoring with the skin stores that could have an impact on other areas of the museum.

Getting started:

- Applied to the Association of Independent Museums for a preventative conservation grant. Were awarded £9500.
- Recruited a group of volunteers who were specifically trained for the project. This included object handling training, pest awareness and risk assessment (specifically working with chemicals historically used for pest prevention).



PREVENTATIVE CONSERVATION

The project so far.....

- 2500 skins wrapped for freezing and inventoried.
- Removal of large quantities of the chemical naphthalene, which has improved the working environment significantly.
- Creation of a great volunteer project. Only half way through and volunteers

Things we didn't think / know about ...

- ~~what is next!~~ Didn't know how much naphthalene would be found. Didn't plan how would dispose of such large quantities.
- Didn't know how difficult it would be to get a second hand freezer. Ended up getting a new one but has delayed project.
- Wrapped elephant skins and then re-stored them. In hindsight should have wrapped them just before they went into the freezer as bags have torn from weight.



RECORD KEEPING

- Preventative measures, monitoring and good practice in collections care linked to effective documentation.
- Since November 2013 have been creating digital records for all 60,000 objects and specimens in the PCM collection.
- Each piece of displayed taxidermy will have a record, including a conservation record. As a condition check is carried out each year, this information can be tied directly to that specimen through the computerised database.
- All damage noted during the preventative conservation skins project will be recorded in the same way. The museum will therefore be quickly aware of any new damage and be able to act accordingly.

