CABINETS OF CURIOSITY

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I have a confession to make. My reference collection is in a bit of a state. It is never been what you might call 'museum quality', unless you know of some pretty low-class museums. Instead, to put it optimistically, it might be described as just about adequately functional. It is housed in a motley assortment of small, ill-matched, shabby cabinets and sundry scuffed storeboxes. I still aspire, perhaps, to a wall of high-end, elegant mahogany units or some choice polished furniture pieces, but price and availability have always outwitted my pockets and my time. Ah well.

To some extent my library is similar. I've picked up books on the cheap, ex library copies, tatty and worn bindings, odd volumes, 'working copies'. However, one of the agreeable aspects of owning battered old books is that they are likely to contain the names and inscriptions of previous owners, owners who actually used them, rather than just had them sitting on the shelves unopened for decades. I know many of their names: authors themselves, of yet other books; bygone entomologists whose reports and articles punctuate the old journals; naturalists and collectors mentioned against prize specimens. Whenever I pick up one of these books I feel a real connection between myself and these long-departed naturalists from a century or more ago.

I also feel a connection through my entomological furniture, even though cabinets are not generally inscribed and the provenance of these unspectacular items is not often recorded. The trouble is, that to many people, cabinets and store-boxes are merely the anonymous receptacles in which specimens are temporarily housed. True enough, the scientific (and historical) value of an insect specimen resides in its tangible existence, its pin and its data label. Specimens move around the collection, around the country or around the world, but the box in which they entered the museum is often derided, or ignored. This, I think, is a shame.

I recently bought some small eight-drawer cabinets from the Natural History Museum. Like many of the odd-sized and inconveniently shaped containers they were surplus to requirements and I got them for a snip (£75–100 each). They were not antique, and not particularly handsome, but the tale that went with them gave them a historical significance well above their dowdy appearance. These were 'type cabinets', so-called because they were specially manufactured in the late 1930s to house the museum's important insect type specimens as a prelude to their evacuation in the event of the war-time bombing which seemed inevitable and imminent.

The eight small drawers, 15″ (38 cm) by 11½″ (29 cm) were housed in rougher, chunkier and sturdier carcasses than might ordinarily be expected, reinforced with metal bars above and below; the thick door carried a latex bolster to cushion the drawers when closed, and to the top of the cabinet was fixed a tough folding iron carrying handle. They were designed to be easily transportable and manoeuvrable.

Elsewhere in the museum, similar logistical problems were being considered for other important collections. Wheeler (2000) goes into some detail about the evacuation of the zoological collections at around the same time. His description of wooden chests (called 'evacuation boxes') built for the removal of fish skins suggests a similar, if slightly larger, construction. In at least one history of the Natural History Museum, (Stern, 1981) wartime evacuation to the Museum's outpost at Tring is quoted. However, some of the zoological collections discussed by Wheeler

Fig. 1. War-time 'type' specimen cabinet from the Natural History Museum. A simple, but stout, construction and carrying handle made the cabinets easily transportable.

(2000) were apparently evacuated to various country houses, which he lists in an end note, and it seems likely that the precious entomological specimens went here too, or to other similar destinations. The spirit jars of the zoology collections were sent to Cart Horse Cave, old stone-workings near Godstone in Surrey, but damp giving rise to mould and fungus attacks on the boxes and labels would have made this entirely unsuitable for insect storage.

The drawers of my cabinets were variously labelled with stickers, painted numbers and barely legible white chinagraph pencil cyphers. Similar ink scrawls decorated the glass, and pencil scribbles the paper linings. Whether any of these marks pertain to wartime type evacuation or subsequent *ad-hoc* use I have no idea, and although I've left some, I've also cleaned some away. I can almost hear future historians groaning. Sorry guys.

Max Barclay, Coleoptera collections manager at the Natural History Museum tells me that although he sells a lot of furniture on behalf of the Museum, few people enquire after its provenance "it is not a question I often get asked", and even though it is very often the former property of someone they knew. Spurred on by the thought of my historical evacuation boxes, I did some of my own asking amongst friends and colleagues, and unearthed a surprising number of other people for whom provenance was very much the added value to their collection's housing.

At the same time that I picked up my 'type' cabinets from Max, my father Alfred Jones also made off with a small cabinet that belonged to Bookham coleopterist,

Fig. 2. 'Feminine' furniture from Bookham coleopterist, Alan Easton, now the property of Claudia Watts.

Alan Easton (1907–1989). Despite the fact that my father took an active part in the London Natural History Society's survey of Bookham Common during the 1950s, he never crossed paths with Easton: "I knew of him, of course, but he tended to do his own thing and did not attend the LNHS field meetings."

Claudia Watts is very proud to own another of Easton's cabinets. "I don't have any connection with Easton, I'm afraid! I just bought the cabinet from Max at the NHM – mainly because it was just so pretty I couldn't resist it! It was only when I mentioned to another entomologist who it used to belong to (it had a bit of A4 paper taped to the glass saying 'Easton Collection' plus Max told me when I bought it) that I found out more about him and what he probably used to keep in it."

"It's quite small, about 34 inches tall, 12 cork-lined glass-topped drawers that aren't deep enough for Continental pins (I keep hoverflies in it on micro-staging, so the length of pin is not so crucial), ivory handles and an ogee-topped glass insert in the door, which is decorated with marquetry butterflies. Altogether what I would think of as a rather feminine piece of furniture, considering! Definitely one to have on show rather than tucked away in a study like my other one (also from NHM), which is larger and more practical, but not particularly decorative."

Fig. 3. Seven-drawer cabinet from the 'right' Dale collection, now owned by Mick Parker.

Mick Parker, it turns out, has one of J. C. Dale's cabinets, from the Hope Department, in Oxford no less. "It is a seven-drawer cabinet, which used to house Dale's arachnids; it was rendered surplus when for safety reasons the collection was being moved into more pest-proof cabinets. This was the first one that was emptied." Exactly whose cabinet it was proved the clincher for Mick, who would rather it came from J.C. himself (1792–1872), rather than from his son C. W. Dale (1851/2–1906). "Literature that I have read describes C. W. Dale as a bungling incompetent! And needless to say I would be ecstatic to purchase a J. C. Dale cabinet." Luckily, the Hope's Darren Mann provided the provenance: "As far as I know it was arranged by the father [J.C.] and added to by the son [C.W.] . . . The son was a bit of an idiot, his labelling and collections work certainly leaves a lot to be desired!"

The Hope Department also provided Tony Drane with his prized collections furniture: "I am particularly pleased to be the proud owner of Pickard-Cambridge's 40 drawer cabinet that I bought from the Hope department many years ago. George McGavin providing the provenance. While it being totally understandable that large institutions need to rationalise their many bequested collections into a unified system, there is probably a loss of lineage of cabinets in the process. Max's e-mail surprises me somewhat, as I would have thought 'whose cabinet was it?' would be the first question asked by the potential buyer. It is part of the 'romance' of entomological history. The same sort of pleasure as owning a book which once belonged to one of the great past entomologists, knowing they had used it and, if you are lucky, annotated it. Functionality is not all."

Some cabinets do have their history pinned to the carcass. Rex Harvey recalls: "I started with a tabletop six-drawer cabinet given to me by my uncle, and used store

boxes until March 1961 when I bought a huge Brady double sided cabinet with a display or book shelf section in the middle, behind a glazed door. The cabinet had been made for a schoolmaster presumably on his retirement in the late eighteen nineties and it had an engraved silver plaque on the large top which read: 'Presented to John Sharp MA of Paradise House School in respect of our esteem and regard 1896'. The cabinet was sold to me by Richard Ford of Watkins and Doncaster for the princely sum of fifteen pounds and the handyman/engineer 'Old Biddle' said it was too big for them, they were intending to cut it down. I was lucky to own another two Brady cabinets during my collecting life, both eighteen drawer examples for which I paid I recall fifty and seventy five pounds respectively in 1973/5. Tony Pickles now has my 'big' Brady which was cut down professionally in the early eighties to make a free standing sixteen-drawer unit on which the original silver plaque now resides."

Other cases are, perhaps, waiting for similar plaques to be installed. Mike Morris's already has quite a history. "When I was a Cambridge undergraduate (yes, a long time ago!) I was told of a 40-drawer cabinet that was being sold at the Hockerill Teachers' Training College. It had been acquired by a lecturer who had retired and been replaced by an embryologist who was uninterested in entomology. I bought the cabinet (a Watkins & Doncaster job so not an especially good one). However, the price, £10, made it quite a snip, even for those far-off days. It cost a good deal more to get it home! I thought it would do for my leps (I'd not done much with beetles in those days), but it proved to contain an interesting collection of micros, almost certainly (so Michael Chalmers-Hunt told me) the C. W. Corder collection, which of course I did not want to throw out."

Not all the historical cabinets are fancy pieces of carpentry. Dafydd Lewis has a 20-drawer cabinet, "quite well made for a DIY job – has a glass front, drop-in drawers etc. I bought the cabinet at Kempton Park [Amateur Entomologist's Society Annual Exhibition], David Lonsdale told me he thought it had been made by Peter Cribb." Cribb (1920–1993) was a stalwart member of the AES, and often cited by people as the stimulus for their interest in entomology.

Amongst the genuinely interesting historical connections, there are also prosaic observations about seemingly unremarkable cabinets. When prompted, Garth Foster reported that: "My 32-drawer cabinet – on its back some holes made by a dart. Jon Cooter can explain." The mystery deepened when Mr Cooter rebutted: "Alas, I cannot offer any explanation and have no memory of throwing darts at it . . . . Are you certain it's not woodworm?" To which the reply: "The possibility that it might be woodworm certainly reduced its purchase value!" At which point the email spat ceased.

Some of the oddest tales come from cabinets picked up outside of the entomological community. Michael Darby acquired his from the Victoria and Albert Museum. "My early professional life was spent in the V&A. My two 40-drawer cabinets came from the Metalwork Department which had acquired them for the storage of jewellery. The intention was to remove the glass tops and line the drawers with velvet or similar, but fortunately that never happened."

"The cabinets were from the NHM. Their date has always been a bit of a puzzle to me. The quality of the cabinet work suggests c.1870 but one is lettered 'HEMIPTERA' in what appears to be an older style. It would be wonderful if they transferred from Holborn to S. Kensington, i.e. were originally 18th century but I have nothing to prove that."

My father's first insect cabinet was originally used to stock fishing flies, rather than Diptera. "On audit for my firm [he was an accountant] I went to Cogswell and Harrison, who sold guns and other accessories, in about 1950. I noticed a cabinet

Fig. 4. Once used to house fishing flies and as a work bench to paint duck decoys, this 60-drawer cabinet has been renovated and rejuvenated for insect storage by Alfred Jones.

with many drawers which was being discarded. It had been used as a bench for painting duck decoys and was spattered with paint. They said I could have it for thirty shillings (or that was the carriage, or both). At home I scraped off all the paint and varnish (assisted I think by my mother) with the old-fashioned double-sided razor blades – you had to be careful not to cut yourself. It was then clear varnished, and the knobs painted black. Eventually I made a door to it as the drawers were not glass-covered (and still are not). The cabinet was made of solid beech wood and very stoutly constructed. There were 60 drawers of $12'' \times 9\frac{1}{2}''$ internal measurements. At first all my insects were kept in it, with plenty of space over. On marrying in 1957 my wife took up Lepidoptera and gradually took over the whole cabinet which stands in my study now with her collection.''

From my own collections miscellany, the item that holds the strangest historical connection for me is a small, shallow, delicate, almost flimsy, 10-drawer glass-fronted cabinet. It belonged to R. Lovell-Pank, who, according to the brief biography given during the 1986 BENHS Presidential Address (Baker, 1986) was an actor and tourist guide and interested in the Lepidoptera. He died on 12 September 1985, at (or shortly after) the BENHS meeting held that day at the rooms of the Alpine Club in Mayfair's South Audley Street.

It was the joint meeting of the BENHS and London Natural History Society and the lecture hall was packed. At some point during the exhibits and communications portion of the meeting there was a loud cry of ''Can someone help this man?'' as a member of the audience collapsed onto the floor. Chairs and benches were hastily pushed back and several people gathered round to administer CPR and whatever other medical help they could offer. It was a baking hot day and I remember busying around trying to open some windows as we waited in the stifling heat for the ambulance to arrive.

No mention of Mr Lovell-Pank's illness occurs in the dry write up of that meeting (Anon, 1986), but after a short break Paul Sokoloff, who as Vice-President was

chairing the meeting, made an announcement. It was felt that since the evening's lecture was to be about British butterflies, and that as Mr Lovell-Pank was a keen lepidopterist, he would have wanted the meeting to continue. I was always rather impressed that Ken Willmott was able to continue with his talk in the slightly surreal circumstances. A few weeks later Peter Baker, then President of the British Entomological and Natural History Society, was helping dispose of the Lovell-Pank collection and I was able to buy the empty cabinet. I never knew Mr Lovell-Pank, possibly never even spoke to him, though I was a regular attendee at London indoor meetings by then, but now always remember him, and that roasting September day, whenever I open one of the drawers.

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SHORT COMMUNICATION

***Myrmedobia exilis* (Fallén) (Hemiptera: Microphysidae) new to Oxfordshire (VC23).** – On 2 July 2010 whilst beating juniper, *Juniperus* spp. (Cupressaceae), at Beacon Hill, Aston Rowant, in the Oxfordshire Chilterns (SU727972), I took a single male specimen of this tiny, seldom-encountered bug, formerly known as *Myrmedobia tenella* (Zetterstedt). Massee (1955) does not list this species for Oxfordshire, and I could not find a published record in the national entomological literature, although Woodroffe (1963) reports the species from litter under juniper at Coombe Hill, in the Buckinghamshire Chilterns, 15km to the north-east. (The apparent record for Oxfordshire in Woodroffe (1962) is corrected in Woodroffe (1963).) The Oxfordshire recorder, Mr John Cambell, subsequently confirmed this species as being new to the vice-county list. On 29 August of the same year whilst suction sampling moss amid the downland turf, using a Halfords car vacuum cleaner (Ryan, 2011), I took a second specimen at the site, this time a female. The moss was about 50m from the junipers beaten earlier in the year and both specimens presumably came from the same population. The moss species sampled were *Pseudoscleropodium purum* (Hedw.) Fleisch. (Brachytheciaceae) and *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus* (Hedw.) Warnst. (Hylocomiaceae).

I have since found a second Oxfordshire site for this bug, also in the Chiltern Hills, at the Warburg Reserve near Henley (SU716880), managed by Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). On 26 June 2012, two females were taken whilst suction sampling moss using a Vax LiFE handheld vacuum cleaner (Ryan, 2012), under trees along the edge of a farm track passing through the reserve. The mosses sampled here were *Thuidium tamariscinum* (Hedw.) Schimp. (Thuidiaceae), *Eurhynchium striatum* (Hedw.) Schimp. (Brachytheciaceae), *Kindbergia praelonga* (Hedwig) Ochyra (Brachytheciaceae), *Brachythecium velutinum*

(Hedw.) Schimp. (Brachytheciaceae), *Mnium hornum* Hedw. (Mniaceae), *Thamnobryum alopecurum* (Hedw.) Gang. (Neckeraceae) and *Isothecium alopecuroides* (Dubois) Isov. (Lembophyllaceae).

There is a single report in the national entomological literature of the bug from the neighbouring vice-county of Berkshire, from Bagley Wood, south of Oxford, in the 1980s (Campbell, 2008). To this I add three more recent records for the vice-county: Park Wood (BBOWT Moor Copse), along the banks of the River Pang, near Pangbourne on 29 June 2010 (two males) and The Holies (National Trust), Streatley, North Wessex Downs on 8 July 2010 (three males) and 25 June 2012 (five males and seven females, reared from nymphs). These additional records were all from suction sampling moss under the cover of trees, using the previously mentioned appliances. At the former site, the species of moss were not noted, but at the latter, a single species was sampled, *Polytrichastrum formosum* (Hedw.) G. L. Smith (Polytrichaceae).

Southwood & Leston (1959) reports the bug as being associated with moss, especially *Polytrichum commune* Hedw. (Polytrichaceae) and *Rhytidiadelphus triquetrus* (Hedw.) Warnst. (as *Hylocomium triquetrum* (Hedw.) Schimp.) (Hylocomiaceae), growing in open clearings or under conifers on acid or sandy soils. These comments suggest a range of mossy situations in which the bug might be found, which my own records indicate are even broader in scope. Neither of the moss species named by Southwood & Leston were sampled at the three sites where the particular mosses were noted and there are no overlaps in the moss species noted at these three sites. At one of the sites under trees (The Holies), collecting was confined to a small area, and the tree cover was determined as oak (*Quercus* spp., Fagaceae), birch (*Betula* spp., Betulaceae) and beech (*Fagus* spp., Fagaceae), with no conifers in the immediate vicinity. This site, like Beacon Hill and Warburg Reserve, is on chalk, in contrast to Southwood & Leston's reported soil types. Clearly, it is difficult to pin down the precise habitat requirements for the insect. Presumably, wherever this carnivorous bug finds a microhabitat with invertebrates upon which it can prey, it is likely to take up residence, regardless of whether this is in a wet, sheltered, lowland wood such as Park Wood, or on a dry, exposed, upland chalk down such as Beacon Hill.

I am very grateful to John Campbell for his help establishing the status of this species. The insect specimens were identified using Péricart (1972). Some images of the bug can be found by searching Flickr (*http://www.flickr.com*). – R. P. RYAN, 38 St John Street, Oxford, OX1 2LH (email: *RobRyanBugs@yahoo.co.uk*).

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