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Author(s): Matt Williams

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The Moore Collection: **World class palaeontology in a small museum**

Matt Williams

Collections Manager, BRLSI, 16-18 Queens Street, Bath, BA1 2HN
Email: curator@brlsi.org

Introduction

This talk examined the collection of 19th century geologist Charles Moore with particular emphasis upon a collection from a Lower Jurassic marine coastal fauna of Ilminster, Somerset.

Bath (Royal) Literary and Scientific Institution (BRLSI) was founded in 1824 with the aim of furthering *the advancement of literature, science and art*. It received its Royal Charter in 1837 and rapidly acquired a prestigious reputation, particularly in scientific circles. The modern BRLSI provides its members and visitors with several hundred lectures and discussion groups every year, covering a whole host of subjects including science, philosophy, literature, history and the arts. The BRLSI also cares for, exhibits and facilitates research upon a museum collection which contains archaeological, ethnological, botanical, zoological, mineralogical and palaeontological collections as well as archives and an historic library with a particular strength in natural history. Regular temporary exhibitions, an expanding virtual museum on their website (www.brlsi.org) and, currently, the touring exhibition Nature Collected make the collections publicly accessible.

Bath played an early role in the development of geology as a science so it is no surprise that the BRLSI houses one of the best palaeontological collection in the South West of England. In 1779 John Walcott published *Descriptions and Figures of Petrifications found in the Quarries, Gravel Pits etc. near Bath* in which he described (but did not name) a number of fossils and encouraged the reader collect fossils themselves. Walcott met and was an influence upon the young William Smith, whose surveying work in the area would lead to his *Order of the Strata round Bath*, followed by a geological map of the countryside within a five-mile radius of Bath and eventually resulting in his famous *A delineation of the Strata of England and Wales, with part of Scotland* in 1815.

The BRLSI's first curator was himself a geologist, William Lonsdale, later secretary to the Geological Society of London. Between 1825 and 1828 he encouraged the donation and deposition of specimens and artifacts in order to establish a museum. He personally donated about 800 mineral and rock specimens plus 230 fossils. The bulk of the palaeontological collection, however, was the life work of Charles Moore.

Moore's fossils

Moore was born in Ilminster, Somerset in 1815 (the same year Smith published his famous map). He was the second son of a book seller and was educated in Ilminster Commercial School until 1827 and then the Free Grammar School for a further year. On leaving school he joined the family business, moving to Bath in 1837 to work for Meyler's, a book seller and publisher of the Bath Herald.

Moore had had an interest in geology from early age, later reminiscing: *my half-holidays were often spent collecting the Ammonites with which the beds in the Upper Lias in the neighborhood of Ilminster abound, for the purpose of rubbing down to shew their sparry chambers*. His passion for geology was no doubt diminished for a time by the world of work but it was rekindled during his first residence in Bath. Moore returned to Ilminster in 1844 following his fathers death and ran the family business for his older sister the next nine years, he began collecting in earnest during this second residence in Ilminster.

Returning to Bath in 1853 Moore married Eliza Deare, only daughter of the wealthy John Deare of Widcome. This marriage into money allowed him to dedicate more time to his passion for palaeontology. He joined the Institution the same year and offered to deposit his already large and important palaeontological collection with the condition that he might exhibit them as a free public museum. The next year, 1854, Moore was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society of London.

The use of the BRLSI for his personal museum was a huge advantage to Moore, collectors; without such an opportunity had to use their own homes to house their collections often with disastrous effects on their personal lives (consider Gideon Mantel). Moore's collection grew rapidly, within three years he already had twenty three large wall-mounted Ichthyosaurs and it eventually became necessary to expand the space for display by the construction of a raised iron gantry, completed in 1876.

Moore was a community spirited, religious man and led the choir, played the flute and taught in the Sunday school of the Unitarian Chapel. He was elected as a town councilor in 1858 and represented the wards of Widcombe and Lyncombe until 1874 when he was elected an Alderman. Moore died 7th December 1881 and is buried in the Unitarian Chapel, Lyncombe, Bath.

Moore left his estate and collections to his wife. She sold his collection in its entirety to the BRLSI for £1,100, as valued by the British Museum at the time. The collection was purchased by subscription, this was arranged by Jerom Murch who was BRLSI chairman from 1859 onwards (Murch was also seven times mayor and a prominent Liberal politician who regularly preached at the Trim Street Chapel that Moore was involved in).

The future of Moore's Collection

One of the finest parts of Moore's collection are specimens from what Moore called his *saurian, fish & insect bed*. This locality, referred to here as Strawberry Bank, is site of extraordinary preservation of a Lower Jurassic (Upper Lias, Toarcian, 185 Ma) costal fauna in Ilminster, Somerset. It occurs as a laterally discontinuous band of nodules, no more than 50cm thick, which preserve fossils with very little compression. The site was once a quarry, which Moore fastidiously located by an extensive search after two boys found a fish fossil in an old rubble wall. The locality is no longer accessible and new collections seem unlikely as housing now covers the old quarry site.

Among the specimens there are 121 fishes representing at least four genera, 38 reptiles including two genera of ichthyosaur and one species of crocodylomorph, 25 cephalopods from at least three genera, 8 marine arthropods and 10 un-opened nodules. Most of these specimens have been poorly studied despite their exceptional preservation and the numerous fascinating possibilities they present, such as the chance to study an ontogenetic series within the early teleost fish genus *Pachycormus*. In addition to this there is an extensive collection of smaller un-curved fossils, wrapped to late 19th century papers, from the same locality that were deposited with the Somerset County Museum, Taunton, in 1905. These specimens are part of Moore's collection and almost certainly represent what Moore referred to as over one thousand insect specimens.

Professor Mike Benton and the author are developing a project to, in his words, *promote the Strawberry Bank collection as the jewel in the BRLSI geological collections, and to bring it to as wide an audience as possible. To do this, we must carry out conservation and preparation work on the fossils, and we intend to link this with a continuing research programme at the University of Bristol*. The Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Bristol hosts the largest palaeontology research group in the country, and trains some twenty or more Masters and PhD students each year. As head of this group Professor Benton is in an excellent position to facilitate and supervise work on the collection.

The Jurassic ecosystem of Strawberry Bank, Ilminster project (JESBI) is currently seeking funding to support an expansion of a collaboration that has already involved extensive study of the reptilian remains by both PhD and MSc students (Pearce and Benton, 2006; Caine and Benton, 2009). The project will include the following:

Further detailed **curiation** of all the Strawberry bank Fossils in both Bath and Taunton.

Cleaning and **preparation** of key specimens to expose further anatomical details.

Re-storing of the whole collection in BRLSI (humidity is elevated at the bases of the cases due to minor rising damp).

Research by MSc and PhD students and post doctoral workers at the University of Bristol resulting in high profile papers.

Designation of the Moore collection in recognition of its international importance.

An **exhibition** featuring the prepared fossils and interpretation based on the research from the University of Bristol, possibly accompanied by reconstructions by John Sibbick

References

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For a general overview of the Bath Geologist mentioned see:

Williams, M. Of Canals and Quarries: The Bath Geologists. In: Wallace, J.L. (ed.) 2008. *Innovation & Discovery: Bath and the Rise of Science*. Published by Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution and The William Herschel Society.

For detailed information about Moore see:

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