

Two Exciting Discoveries in the Natural History Museum

One of the joys of working with collections is that serendipitous things are always happening! In our bid to understand more about the scientific value of the 1,420 eggs of the Newall Egg Collection, we invited over a team from the Natural History Museum Bird Section based at Tring to visit the Museum and see our eggs first-hand. Although our egg collection is all but digitally catalogued now, thanks to the excellent work of former cataloguer Roddy Fisher and, just recently, our new intern Katie Birmingham, we still lacked any real understanding of the provenance of the eggs, and the meaning of the handwritten markings applied to each of the eggs themselves. In that respect, the visit was a little disappointing, because though our visitors were able to give us a fascinating insight into the world of egg collectors and how valuable such collections can be in the right hands given the relevant associated data, they couldn't unlock the meaning of the hieroglyphics themselves.

Happily, though, one of the visitors was Alison Harding, the Ornithology Librarian, who is in charge of the amazing collection of books, prints and drawings amassed by Lord Rothschild and held at Tring. Following the visit, she was able to alert us to the existence of a book written by a 16-year-old Eton boy, Alexander William Clarke-Kennedy, published by subscription in Eton in 1868. Its title is "The Birds of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, a contribution to the natural history of two counties by an Eton boy" (see right). The publishers were Ingleton and Drake of Eton.

It lists 225 species across the two counties and represents a serious act of scholarship. It must have required an even more serious amount of

correspondence with keen ornithologists across two counties! If that isn't notable enough in itself, it is all the more remarkable because it is generally acknowledged to be the first bird book ever to be illustrated with photographs.

Clarke-Kennedy's book came about twenty years before the cameras were devised that made field photography a serious proposition. Late-Victorian cameras used stable plates which could be handled easily and not require the immediate use of a dark room. In contrast, his four photographs are small hand-tinted albumen prints of stuffed birds, quite possibly taken from the Thackeray Collection of birds that, in 1850, formed the initial natural history accession to the College Collections, pre-dating the Natural History Museum in Eton itself by 25 years. The birds featured

include a Long-Eared Owl, a Hoopoe, a Hooded Crow, and a Black Tern.

Clark Kennedy (1851 - 1894) was in Mr. Stone's House from 1865-68. He became a Captain in the Coldstream Guards but also a Fellow of the Linnean and Zoological Societies (FLS, FZS). The book was dedicated to HRH Prince Leopold (1853 - 1884), 4th son of Queen Victoria, 'in remembrance of many happy hours spent with him at Windsor Castle.' Fortunately, the Curator was able to purchase a copy of the book online, and it is illustrated below. So if you are passing the Natural History Museum one Sunday afternoon, do drop in and have a look.

You may remember that in my opening paragraph, I mentioned serendipitous things, in the plural. You may be wondering what the second piece of



A drawer from the Newall Egg Collection

serendipity could have been. As it turns out, the Curator's Office was professionally decorated last summer. The hundreds of books that completely lined the quaint office that lies atop Queen Victoria's Archway at the entrance to Queen's Schools, were painstakingly taken down by the decorator so that the painting could be duly carried out. Then, very kindly, the lone workman offered (much to the Curator's surprise and delight!) to put them back on the shelves. In September, once the Curator had stopped admiring his smart and shiny new office, he began to notice that one or two volumes were very definitely out of place. Letting his obsessive/compulsive nature run riot, further reorganisation of volumes by the Curator then led to the discovery of a small number of hand-

written notebooks that all relate to the Newall Collection, including the original register itself. Previous Curators had been unaware of their existence, and any such records were thought to have been lost without trace. In natural history museums, finding the original object register is pretty much the equivalent of finding the Holy Grail!

Needless to say, work is now ongoing to relate the data on the eggs that still exist (some have been lost, and damaged, over the years) to the information that we now hold concerning who collected the eggs, where from, and when. Potentially, the scientific value of the Newall Egg Collection has now increased significantly, and the fact that the information will soon be available in our electronic database to

ornithologists from round the world, including those from Tring, is something well worth celebrating.

George Fussey

