

The LEVERIAN MUSEUM

The Leverian Museum came into existence by various ways and byways.

About 1760, being at Margate, a seaside resort in Kent, Ashton heard of a large collection of shells that had arrived at Dunkirk. He at once hired a boat, sailed over to France and bought the whole cargo, consisting of many hogsheads, which he brought home. This appears to have been the beginnings of Ashton's famous museum.



Ashton's interests included ornithology, and he pursued this interest until he had collected nearly four thousand live birds.

These are orioles and Sarah painted many more birds

He also collected stuffed specimens and held a public display of his collection in 1766 at the King's Arms in Manchester. His extensive collections of stuffed rare and exotic included a squirrel monkey, the arctic fox, the flamingo, bird of paradise, saw fish, corals, over 200 warlike instruments - tomahawks, scalping knives and other weapons. These became the basis of the museum which he established at Alkington Hall in 1772. The Leverian Museum was pronounced to be the largest and most valuable

collection of curios, and curios they were because there were birth abnormalities such as a two-headed calf and strange creatures from distant lands that later became extinct. It was valued at one time worth £53,000

The habitat of the monkey is Australia and the web pictures are identical to these.



Squirrel Monkey



Giant kangaroo



There were plants, many strange beetles and beautiful gem stones or rocks. Ashton collected thousands of medals, plaster casts, and more than 200 drawings.

Drawing of the collection of beautiful seashells

On my visit to the British Museum in 1989 they brought up several really huge canvasses of Sarah Stones' paintings. I found them quite disappointing as each canvass showed only one or two shells. But what a delight to see Sarah's painting above, of several shelves filled with so many, many shells. After all, shells were Ashton's first acquisition. ¹



Stag antlers & Swordfish



Ashton Lever owned Alkington Hall. There seems little question that he renovated and added to Alkington to accommodate his ever-enlarging museum. In 1772 there was upwards of 3,000 glass cases placed in three rooms besides four sides of rooms shelved from top to bottom with glass doors on them. A visitor described the museum as occupying four large rooms ranging almost the whole front of the building.

Ashton held open house at the Hall on Sundays with records showing that 34 carriages and as many as 3,320 people

visiting it on one day. When he found he had to place restrictions on visitors he posted this notice:

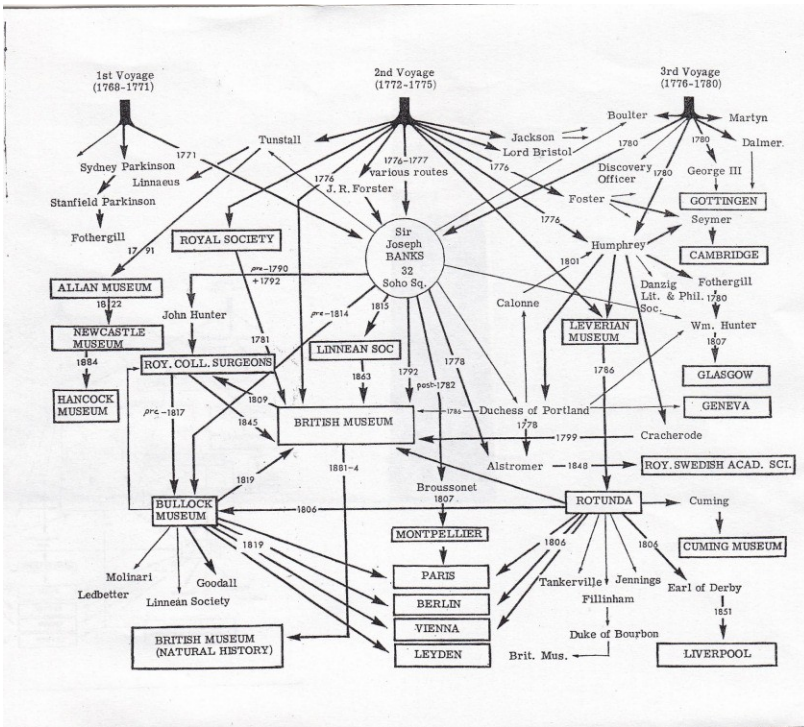
“This is to inform the public, that being tired out with the insolence of the common people whom I have hitherto indulged with a sight of my museum, I am now come to the resolution of refusing admittance to the lower classes, except they come provided with a ticket from some gentleman or lady of my acquaintance.” Later he refused admittance to those who arrived on foot. There followed a delightful tale of a man arriving by riding a bullock!

To reach a wider audience Ashton moved the museum to London. There, in 1774 he leased Leicester House, property formerly owned by King George II and where it became known as the Holosphusikon.



Sarah Stones painting of entrance to the Holosphusikon

It was a distinguished collection by any standard of around 25,000 exhibits, a small fraction of his entire collection. There were a number of natural specimens not to be found elsewhere in Britain and good holdings of British and foreign antiquities. When Captain [James Cook](#) saw the museum he was so impressed that he donated a substantial amount of ethnographic material from his second and third voyages. ²



Ashton charged an admission fee but it did not cover the cost of new exhibits he continued to acquire. The exhibits were also discussed and written about by Fellows of the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries. Lever was himself a Fellow of both Societies.

The success of the museum led to George III and the Prince of Wales viewing it in 1778. A few days later Ashton was knighted at the Court of St. James in recognition of his services to the public. By this time his museum was regarded as second only to the British Museum in London.

A collection such as Lever's is a rich resource for historical enquiry because we can see the intersecting ideas and practices of natural history, visual culture, commerce, and theology at work in it. It is therefore surprising that accounts of his collection tended

to underplay both the scientific and the general 'cultural work' it was doing, emphasizing instead evidence of Lever's apparent eccentricities and lack of rigour. It is true for example, that Lever 'dressed up' as an archer, cutting rather a figure in Fanny Burney's frequently quoted description of a visit she made to the museum in 1782: "thus accoutered as a forester, he pranced about, while the younger fools who were in the same garb, kept running to and fro in the garden, carefully contriving to shoot at some mark, just as any of the company appeared at any of the windows."


This description of Lever can be interpreted, perhaps as playful, with the knowledge that Lever was the first President of the Toxophilite Society³, a group that had been established to encourage archery as a sport and around which there was much antiquarian activity. It seems probable therefore, that when Burney visited the museum, Lever was wearing the Society's uniform as described in the 'rules and orders' of the Society. Lever's work was well known and valued in this field and he was described by one writer as 'the father of modern archery'.

Soon, however, expenses mounted up so Sir Ashton began selling off major portions of the extensive lands he held. In order to relieve him of what was now a burden he obtained parliamentary permission to offer it by lottery, hoping to recoup his losses but he gained less than £4,000. The museum was won by James Parkinson. My understanding was that Parkinson was a dentist but other records indicate he was a law stationer.

The museum continued to be displayed at Leicester House until after Lever's death in 1788. The Leverian Museum under the later stewardship of James Parkinson exhibited some of the 'never seen before' Australian specimens collected by John White. The house was demolished in 1791 after Parkinson had moved the museum to the Rotunda.

Catalogue - Lib. II.

A
COMPANION
TO THE
MUSEUM,
(Late SIR ASHTON LEVER'S)
Removed to
ALBION STREET, the Surry End of BLACK FRIARS BRIDGE.



What Time is unveiling, Science is exploring Nature.

LONDON:
PRINTED IN THE YEAR M.DCC.XC.



Parkinson published a “Companion” to the contents of the museum enabling viewers to be understand the various pieces. The other picture is of the entrance to the Rotunda.

Parkinson eventually auctioned off the contents of the museum in May 1806. It was auctioned over 63 days in 7,879 lots. Christine Jackson's book noted below includes considerable detail about the purchasers and what they paid for the lots. Parkinson realized up to £12,000 from their sale. How much better Lever might have done had he disposed of his museum in that manner rather than through the lottery.

The contents of the museum are unusually well recorded, both from a catalogue created in 1784, and the sale catalogue in 1806, with a contemporary series of watercolours of its contents by Sarah Stone.

The 1806 catalogue, of which I have a very few pages, lists items coming from a few places in England but most from widespread locations: Africa, Brazil, Ceylon, China, Friendly Island, Gibraltar, Holland, Hungary, Jamaica, Madagascar, Martinique, Mediterranean, New Zealand, North and South America, Sandwich Islands, Sweden, West Indies, Martinique. No doubt many of these items were from Captain Cook's voyages, but how on earth were the rest of them obtained? Did Ashton venture to any these places himself?

It is fitting to add here an account of Sarah Stone who painted many watercolours of the Leverian Museum.

My knowledge of Sarah Stone has been increased by the acquisition of the book, "*Sarah Stone Natural Curiosities from the New Worlds.*" It was published in 1998 in London and compiled by Christine E. Jackson. The dust cover states that: "Though now little known, the Lever Museum was a major feature of the fashionable culture of eighteenth-century London and its story is here told for the first time. "There is no record of her birth although a younger sister of hers was born in London. A portrait of Sarah Stone was published in the *Universal Review* in 1890 well after her death and is shown in the above book.

In 1789 Sarah Stone married Captain John Langdale Smith. She was almost 30 at the time of her marriage. Some of the images she has drawn are credited to her using her married name Mrs.

Smith. A watercolour of a "fossil crinoid" is recorded as - "the first drawing Miss Stone did for me. Ashton Lever". Sarah continued to paint at the Leverian Museum throughout the 1780s and started painting the ethnographical items in 1783.

Sarah's daughter, Eliza Jane was born in 1792 and probably died in infancy. A son, Henry Stone Smith was born in 1795 and married in 1816. Of their 9 children only one married, having a daughter, Florence Sophia Nightingale, the only great grandchild of Sarah. Sarah died in 1844 at the age of 82.

Visual records of Leverian zoological material include ninety-three watercolours by Clara Stone of 1781-85 BMNH—the British Museum of Natural History and twenty-eight watercolours and pencil drawings in the Sedgwick Museum of Geology, Cambridge. Also her Sketchbook No. 1 with 132 watercolours is in the Australian Museum, Sydney. A bound volume of water colours by Thomas Davies (1737-1812?) once owned by Lady Brassey, is now in the Hastings Museum and shows Cook artifacts that are in the Leverian Museum.

One of the Australian Museum Research Library's greatest treasures is a collection of 132 water colours bound in red morocco, unpublished, bearing no title page except an attribution written in pencil: 'A collection of drawings by Sarah Stone of the principal objects of curiosity in Sir Ashton Lever's Museum, consisting of natural history, the arms ornaments and dresses of the inhabitants of New Zealand and other countries discovered by Capt. Cook'.

Sarah Stone's work is the last record of a prominent eighteenth century collection recorded at a time when exploration of unknown territory was yielding artifacts and specimens never before seen.

The following are extracts from a long article by Clare Haynes about the Leverian Museum. Her comments and those quoted by her from others who visited the museum, give a glimpse into the incredible thought behind Sir Ashton's

presentation of his collection. He planned it to be enjoyed by the casual observer as well as by those deeply thoughtful like himself. Clare obviously was one of those with "an informed appreciation of Lever's collection".

"The first floor of the museum had a huge diversity of objects varying in size, shape and texture. On the walls of the hall hung weapons of all sorts including spears, bundles of arrows and pistols. On the staircase walls and floors were animal parts - feet, horns, teeth along with stuffed crocodiles and an elephant. In the cabinets were seeds, plants and birds' nests.

Adjoining rooms were marked by curtain swags suggesting special objects lay within these rooms. There nearly all the exhibits were in glass cases. Each contained a large diversity of one class of item. For instance three rooms contained only birds. There were seventeen rooms, each with the name of the dominant item - such as Hippopotamus, Monkey, Ostrich, Wardrobe and Antique. In addition to the dominant item was a contrasting one such as musical instruments or starfish. This contrast might emphasize the contrast between soft, brightly coloured birds and hard-textured browns of fossils.

The following description portrays a viewer's impression of the museum: "Nothing can have a finer effect than the richness of this view at first entrance. The length of the prospect, the variety of objects and the beauty of the colours give sensations of surprise and delight and the magnificent reality of the natural world." And another comment - "Impressions follow one another so fast with all the wonders of nature. All the incredible artistic conceptions of form and colour, pleasant and unpleasant, are so tightly packed, that the mind and eye are quite dazzled by them, and in the end both are overwhelmed. Sir Ashton's house can indeed be called a temple of nature, where every possible mark of her miracles and good works is preserved."

Daines Barrington, an English lawyer, antiquary and naturalist, in a letter to Lord Sandwich in June 1780 requested that all the specimens from Cook's third voyage be sent to Lever,

'[they] can no where receive such complete justice as at Leicester House, which from the vast additions lately made, may be truly said to be a national honour.'~ "

I find it strange that nowhere in web accounts of the museum is there anything similar to the above. We can be grateful that Clare Haynes has documented all this.

Footnotes

¹See first page of this chapter, The Leverian Museum.

²This map (a repeat of that in the first chapter) was sent to me by Peter Whitehead, and explained there.

³See chapter on Toxophilite Society.