

STORY OF THE EAST LONDON MUSEUM

(by Miss M. Courtenay-Latimer)

The proposal to establish a museum in East London was seriously considered on the 19th July 1921 at a meeting of a small body of interested citizens, chief of whom were Dr. J. Rattray, Dr. J. Bruce-Bays, Archdeacon Rowley, Monsignor Kelly, Messrs. B.H. Dodd, J. Carnell, W.H. Smale and W.H. Fuller.

The meeting was addressed by the Mayor, Councillor C.J. Neale, who spoke about the desirability of having a museum in the town. After ~~as~~ such discussion it was decided to form a Society to be known as the Museum Society and Dr. Rattray was appointed President.

From records kept it is evident that this Society was beset with many trials and tribulations, but this band of enthusiasts worked ardently towards establishing a museum in East London, and judging from the lists of subscriptions received, the indications are that the East London firms were strongly in favour of having a museum in their town; this gave the Society great encouragement. It also appears that in order to stimulate interest and to raise funds,

lectures and special exhibitions were frequently held.

In May 1922 a site in the area, then known as Selborn Estates, was donated to the Society for the purpose of erecting a museum. It was then decided to approach the Administrator with a view to erecting a building at a cost of £4000. The deputation however, was unsuccessful but the members of the Society were undaunted and continued to proceed with their project.

Early Years

In June 1922 they secured a room at a rent of £6 per month (paid from their own pockets) where a collection of exhibits could be displayed for the public.

It was not until 1924, after repeated appeals, that the Provincial Administrator became more sympathetic and provided the Society with a grant of £240 per annum.

On the 26th October 1926 Dr. S.H. Skaife gave a moving address at a public meeting in East London and stated that from an educational point of view it was essential that East London should have a museum.

The hard and arduous task the workers undertook between 1926 and 1930 can never be adequately expressed in words, but stout-heartedly they continued. They had at this date collected the sum of £2300, and again appealed to the Administrator.

Could any reward for their persistent efforts been greater to the members of this Society, than that of finally seeing the attainment of their object, which was established when Dr. Rattray laid the foundation stone to the museum building on the 16th February 1931. The museum now became a constituted museum with a governing body of a Board of Trustees of which:-

- 4 Members were Provincial Administration Representatives
- 4 Members were Municipal Representatives, and
- 4 Members were Subscriber Representatives.

I was appointed Director to the East London Museum on the 24th August 1931, when I had to arrange for the official opening of the new building, which was held on the 24th September 1931. The growth of the collection had by this time reached a stage where selection was necessary. This proved a most difficult task as much had been loaned and a considerable proportion of the collection was entirely unsuitable for display.

The Schools

As East London was a town with only a moderate population, it was decided we should concentrate on making the museum as popular and educational as possible.

Great efforts were then put into collecting desirable material. My holidays were spent working wholeheartedly for the museum in this way, and with the gradual increase of visitors, personal contacts were made and as a result good material was brought in.

The children received special consideration and every single individual was given every encouragement, hours being spent in lecturing, and examining nature study tests, arranged by the museum or schools in an endeavour to instil and encourage a love of nature amongst the young East Londoners.

When I look back over those early years of building a museum I can but fully realise how the work has benefitted our museum, for not alone was an exceedingly valuable collection gathered together in a short time, but our museum became one of great repute, and although it was small it was soon placed on the same level as many of the older established museums in South Africa.

Kannemeyeria Wilsonii

The first big moment in the museum's early history was the visit of Sir Henry Meirs and Mr. Markham, who took a marked interest in our small collection. It was Sir Henry's encouragement and advice which were responsible for the museum's future success, for shortly afterwards he recommended that I should go to the Durban Museum to work with Mr. Chubb and his staff for a while; this was a most beneficial move, for I was here able to carry out field work and methods of reconstructing specimens with them. On my return I worked with a will and determination to build a truly valuable museum.

In December 1934 a fossil bone was brought in for identification. Mr. Robert Wilson decided that Miss Bess Wilson, his son Eric Wilson, and I should go to Tarkastad to investigate the site. This we did on the 27th January 1935, and we procured the entire skeleton of an extinct reptile, later named in honour of Mr. Eric Wilson, *Kannemeyeria Wilsonii*. This specimen was claimed to be the most complete of its kind in the world.

Coelacanth Caught

During November/December 1936 I journeyed to Bird Island, an ambition I had since childhood. Here I was able to gather a very valuable collection of seabirds, together with seaweeds, gorgonia and a really good marine collection. These specimens were kindly brought back to East London by men on the fishing trawlers, whom I had got to know whilst on the island. After my return to East London their interest did not flag, as they continued bringing in anything they found of interest and it was through this bond of assistance that on 22nd December 1938 the Coelacanth was trawled, and brought to the scientific glory it later received.

On getting it to the museum the problem was to identify it, as up to this stage the museum had no library books of their own, as the books I possessed

were my own private books, and there was nothing dealing with fish. However, in desperation I appealed to Prof. J.L.B. Smith, who after much writing and telephoning came over and identified the specimen, which then startled the world. He named it in my honour on account of the difficulty I had in saving it for science. At this stage in the museum's existence I did not even have a container big enough to house it in, as we just could not afford it. The little Cinderella Museum thereafter made history and became a place of repute. Hundreds of people flocked to see the fish, and were amazed to see the collection the museum housed. In this freshly awakened appreciation the museum became a living institution and greater strides were made.

Milestone - G.G. Smith

During the year 1942 our Chairman, Dr. J. Bruce-Bays, had to retire on account of his health, and in his place Mr. G.G. Smith was appointed. This marked a milestone in the history of the East London Museum, for where I had worked along single-handed, Mr. Smith and I now discussed our museum and its future progress, its handicaps and its possibilities.

Mr. Smith, a methodical conscientious business man, left no stone unturned with the building up of the museum. The collection by this time had completely outgrown the existing building. Negotiations were then made by the Technical College with the Museum Board that the museum vacate the ground, provided a suitable piece of ground could be found on which to build a new museum. Final arrangements were made and the new building was commenced on the 4th March 1949.

Mr. Smith and I now put our whole life into planning the new museum. The new museum was much larger than the old one - the galleries now

talled 10 altogether. It became our idea to place the beauty of nature before the community the museum served. This we achieved by building panoramic cases in the various galleries, which were a huge success. Our museum became a place of combined art and science and in no time its fame spread, bringing thousands of visitors per year to see our displays.

The New Building

The new museum was opened by his Honour Mr. Carinus, the Cape Provincial Administrator on the 28th November 1951. The museum now became one of the places of interest to visit in East London and its scientific work behind the scenes spread to countries far beyond the shores of Africa.

During these years of activity the educational side was never neglected and we pressed for a Guide Lecturer to teach school children. The museum was fortunate in having the able services of Miss D.H. Marillier, who built the school service up, and left on her marriage a well established school service to Mrs. C.P. Botha her successor.

During the year 1953 Mrs. N.B. Lambert was appointed Secretary/Bookkeeper and with her capable and conscientious assistance much valuable work was achieved. In February 1956 Mr. Errol Hayden was appointed as Learner Taxidermist - this appointment was very beneficial to the museum as Mr. Hayden took a keen interest in his work and was soon proving himself an able worker.

Between the years 1953 - 1958 museum running became almost impossible. With repeated requests from the five Provincial Museums, the Province then decided to arrange for a Museums Commission to go into the Provincial Museums requirements thoroughly. A Committee was then elected as follows:- Mr. Levyns, Dr. D. Hey, Mr. P. de Wet, Miss Jane Blake, Dr. Rennie, Mr. G.G. Smith and Mr. J. Skead.

From this Commission and enquiry a very much more satisfactory financial arrangement was made as from the beginning of 1958 by the Province. In this Province paid Salaries and half Maintenance. This closer co-operation with the Provincial Administration also brought about an increase in staff with the following appointments:-

Mr. B.O. Futter as Senior Technician, 1958,
Miss M.M. de Lange as Scientific Officer
(Ethnology) in 1959, and
Mr. D.H. Kennelly as Temporary Conchologist
in 1961.

With the increase of the museum staff greater achievements were carried out. Many special exhibitions in the gallery, which was named in honour of Mr. G.G. Smith, were staged, all of which brought vast crowds to the museum. With the popularity of the museum the collection once again grew greater than its exhibition capacity, and in 1960 negotiations were made to the Province for the final completion of the building which would add another six galleries to the existing museum, plus offices. It was also decided to build a new Lecture Room at the back, where it would be more easily accessible for schools and aged people.

The Museum Lecture Room had during these years become a source of cultural activity to the City in that once a month cultural meetings are conducted by the museum, and other cultural bodies use the lecture room for their monthly meetings.

Thus the museum, to date February 1963, has achieved great strides in its endeavours to save for posterity all natural science as well as the historical remnants of the buildings of East London as a city and for these records we have been indebted to those friends who have so generously contributed to our success.

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