

William Boyd Dawkins and Museums

William Boyd Dawkins came into contact with Thomas Henry Huxley in 1861 when he was appointed to the Geological Survey of Great Britain (where THH held a special post as “naturalist to the Survey”) and in 1869, Huxley recommended Dawkins for the post of curator of natural history at the old Manchester Museum in Peter Street. There began a connection with museums that would last the rest of Dawkins’ life.

The Museum collections consisted of natural history specimens from the Manchester Natural History Society (founded 1821) together with a large and important collection of geological material from the Manchester Geological Society (founded 1838). The latter, by its nature, was in fairly good condition but the same could not be said about the biological material, much of which had to be destroyed. At that time, both collections were more or less ignored by the public, and rarely used by students so Dawkins set about an initial revamp to upgrade and improve their display and to augment the collections to meet specific teaching and learning objectives.

Dawkins’ duties also involved lectures in geology at Owens College, then in Quay Street, Manchester. The archive at Buxton Museum and Art Gallery contains a syllabus for the (1873/4) lecture course on Geology and Palaeontology comprising 90 lectures and demonstrations - a considerable workload, requiring an extremely broad knowledge of geology. By this time he had promoted from ‘Lecturer’ to the newly created post of ‘Professor of Geology’.

The museum collections, which had been moved from Peter Street to Quay Street, were moved again in 1873 to the new college premises in Oxford Road, Manchester. Dr. Wilfrid Jackson (1966), in his biographical sketch of WBD reported, “some amusement among the public as the procession of stuffed animals passed along Oxford Road”, and that the “elephant and giraffe were placed among the geological specimens on the ground floor because they could not be got up the stairs.”



Geology Department of Manchester Museum, Oxford Road (date unknown, probably early 1900s). (Photo: Buxton Museum and Art Gallery)

Later, Owens College and the collections were incorporated in the new Victoria University (founded 1880) and in 1888 a main museum building fronting Oxford Road was opened – where it remains to this day. Dawkins was finally able to put his ideas on the ideal arrangement of museums into action. He continued to promulgate these ideas and published a string of scientific

papers and letters to the press setting out his views – some of these are listed in the references below. Dawkins oversaw the gradual development of the Museum and the enhancement of its collections. He donated a great deal from his own collections including grooved stone hammers and, in 1889, the majority of his cave and river gravel deposit bones from the Pleistocene Age.

Section L.—Manchester, 1915.]

[BRITISH ASSOCIATION.]

The Place of Museums in General Education.

By Hon. Professor W. BOYD DAWKINS, M.A., D.Sc., F.R.S.

The value of museums in general education depends upon their arrangement and their being classified so as to show the true relations of the various objects to one another. I propose to lay before the Section a scheme of classification based on my experience in Manchester dating from 1869 in combining various scattered collections into one museum, which is now of equal service to the University, to the various schools and institutions of the district, and to the general public. What has been done here on a fairly large may be done with equal success on a small scale elsewhere.

Although he resigned his chair in 1909, he remained involved with Manchester Museum as a scientific supervisor in the geology department and as a member of the Committee of Management. Moreover, he served as a member of the Art Gallery Committee for 17 years and in 1928, just before his death, made a generous gift to Manchester Art Gallery of pictures, furniture, cloisonné enamels, and a collection of reproductions representing the 'Dawn of Art'. One of his last public services was the official opening of the new Buxton Museum in 1928 (in the Peak Buildings). At over 90 years of age, he entertained the audience for over 40 minutes without referring to a single note.

Buxton Herald.
27.9.28.

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BUXTON'S NEW LIBRARY AND MUSEUM.

Opened by Sir William Boyd Dawkins.

Exhibits of Prehistoric Men and Animals, and
Valuable Etchings.

Local Mastodon Collection the Finest in the World.

Yesterday was another "red letter" day in the history of Buxton, when Sir William Boyd Dawkins, M.A., D.Sc., F.R.S.A., Hon. Professor of Geology and Paleontology in Victoria University, Manchester, who is over 90 years of age, visited the town and officially opened the spacious and up-to-date new Municipal Library and Museum in the Peak Buildings, on Terrace Road, in the presence of a large and distinguished company of scientists and literary men from the principal museums and libraries of the country.

Sir William was given a civic welcome by properly and to build up that which is of priceless value connected with the history of man in this district and country. Sir William Boyd Dawkins, who we are pleased to see in such a good state of health, was exploring the caves and earthworks of this district 70 years ago, and it is largely due to his efforts that some of these priceless treasures rest in our Museum to-day," he added.

A REMARKABLE SPEECH.

In the October following his death in January 1929, his widow presented his magnificent library of over 400 volumes to the town of Buxton. These, together with a bronze bust and other memorabilia, are now housed in the Boyd Dawkins Room of Buxton Museum and Art Gallery. In addition, BMAG also holds a large archive collection of Dawkins' personal effects – including letters, offprints and notebooks.

The archive includes a number of articles and letters to the Press that demonstrate Dawkins' leadership in the development of the role of the museum in public education. He not only promoted their importance in that regard but was also vocal in the way they should be organised to maximize their educational value (see references below). In developing his ideas about the role and organisation of museums, Dawkins visited most of the great European institutions as well as some in Northern America. While he received recognition and honours for his work in, for example, geology, his critical role in the establishment and early development of Manchester Museum and his championing of museums in general have both been sadly neglected. He deserves to be remembered, and celebrated, for these contributions.

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Dr. Brian Goodwin – June 2014
Buxton Museum and Art Gallery