

9 - The insect collections of the Natural History Museum, London – 250 years of entomology. Daniel Whitmore, Department of Life Sciences, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, SW7 5BD, London, UK .

The Natural History Museum, London, formerly the British Museum (Natural History), is one of the oldest natural history museums in the world. The early collections were part of a miscellaneous 71,000 objects having belonged to the physicist, collector and naturalist Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), and purchased by the nation after his death.

These were initially housed in the newly-established British Museum, but in 1881 a new building was erected in South Kensington for the natural history collections alone, upon the initiative of Sir Richard Owen (1804-1892). Over the 250 years since their foundation, the NHM's collections have grown considerably, reaching the figure of approximately 70 million items. The entomology collections consist of an estimated 30 million specimens representing about one million species. As the museum collections expanded, new parts were added for their housing and most of the original building was used as public gallery space. A first entomology building was erected between the 1930's and the 1950's, to which all the entomological collections were transferred by 1952. This building was destroyed in the mid 2000's to make way for the Darwin Centre, consisting of two modern buildings combining state of the art collections facilities with public engagement needs. One building houses the spirit collections, whereas the second contains modern research and curation facilities and the 'Cocoon', where most of the pinned and slide-mounted insects are held. The collections are kept in controlled temperature and humidity conditions and are subjected to strict Integrated Pest Management (IPM) measures. Besides representing an irreplaceable research tool for taxonomy with its 300,000+ type specimens and historical specimens, including, for example, those collected by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, the NHM's insect collection is also confronted with contemporary tasks such as the mass digitisation and databasing of specimens and the implementation of the museum's recently established DNA storage facilities.



The Natural History Museum's main building (left); Darwin Centre II and the Cocoon (middle); a recently curated drawer of Lepidoptera (right).