



History of the Grant Museum

Robert Grant

The beginnings with Robert Edmond Grant (1827-1874)

The Grant Museum of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy was established in 1827 by Robert Edmond Grant (1793-1874) to serve as a teaching collection at the newly founded University of London (later University College London). Grant was the first Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy in England and upon arrival at the University found no teaching materials with which to conduct his courses. He immediately began to amass specimens, material for dissection, diagrams and lecture notes and these form the basis of the museum today.

Grant was born in Edinburgh and studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. He was best known, however, for his work on marine invertebrates, in particular sponges, sea pens and molluscs. His work on sponges established once and for all that they were animals. It was he who coined the term Porifera, and in 1828 John Fleming (1785-1857) named the sponge *Grantia* for him. It was this work and his radical evolutionary views that influenced the young Charles Darwin during the latter's second year at Edinburgh University (1826-1827).

At the age of 35, Grant moved down to London to take up the chair at the University of London and he stayed there until his death in 1874 reputedly never missing a lecture. On his death bed, Grant was persuaded by a colleague, William Sharpey (1802-1880), to leave his considerable collection of books, academic papers and natural history specimens to the

College. This ensured that successive generations of students would have access to his knowledge. His personal papers, however, have never been found.

Grant died of dysenteric shock on 23rd August 1874. He is buried at Highgate Cemetery.

Robert Grant's biography is available through the [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#).

His successors (1875-2005)

Grant was succeeded briefly by Sir William Henry Allchin (1846-1912) but in 1875 it was Sir Edwin Ray Lankester (1847-1929) who took over Grant's chair and the running of the museum. Lankester did much to build the Museum collection, moving it to new premises and creating a detailed printed label catalogue. This catalogue however contained not only specimens to be found in the museum but also those that Lankester hoped to add to it.

E. Ray Lankester was hugely influential both as a teacher and a scientist. As Jodrell professor of Zoology he taught many students who later went on to become famous zoologists themselves including, W. F. R. Weldon (1860-1906) who went on to succeed Lankester to the chair at UCL. As a zoologist his work was wide ranging and he was the first to show the relationship of the horseshoe crab or *Limulus* to the Arachnida. His *Limulus* specimens can still be seen in the museum today.

When Lankester left to take up the Linacre chair of Comparative Anatomy at Oxford in 1891, the museum continued to grow under Weldon who added a number of extremely rare specimens. Weldon is perhaps best known for founding the science of biometry with Francis Galton (1822-1911) and Karl Pearson (1857-1936). Weldon followed Lankester to Oxford in 1899.

Museum in 1880

Edward Alfred Minchin was the next to take up the chair, also developing the museum and introducing a card catalogue. He was followed in 1906 by J. P. Hill, an embryologist who

added to the museum from his own embryology collection. The palaeontologist D. M. S. Watson succeeded Hill in 1921 and in 1948 the museum came under the care of a dedicated, professional curator. Reg Harris was the first to take up this post, followed by Roy Mahoney in the 1950s, Rosina Down in 1971 and Helen Chatterjee in 1995. The present Curator, Mark Carnall came to the museum in 2005.

The museum today

In over 170 years much has befallen the museum. In 1884, a ceiling collapse destroyed a number of specimens, the 1890s saw more ceiling collapses and flooding and in the 1970s the roof was completely missing. During world war two the whole collection was evacuated to Bangor and on more than one occasion the museum has been under threat of closure. In recent years, however, the museum has gone from strength to strength.

Grant Museum today

The Grant Museum not only represents the history of biology and biological teaching at UCL, with the collections of E.Ray Lankester, D.M.S Watson, J.P.Hill and Francis Mussett but it has also become a 'museum of museums' as material from other London institutions ended up at UCL either as transferrals to UCL zoologists or when other London Universities closed down their zoological collections.

Today the Grant Museum includes collections from:

- **Gordon Museum:** A collection of animal brains from the comparative anatomy collections at King's College London.
- **Expedition Material:** including a very small collection of specimens from Discovery, Challenger and the Great Barrier Reef expeditions.
- **Imperial College London:** in the 1980s the entire fossil, skeletal and spirit specimen collection was transferred to UCL.

- **Napier Collection** Primatology and fossil hominid material donated from the Royal Free Hospital Anatomy Department in the 1990s.
- **Negus Collection** A collection of sectioned heads prepared at the Ferens Institute of Otolaryngology
- **Queen Mary, London** formerly Queen Mary College London. Including fossil material, casts and zooarchaeological material
- **The Royal College of Surgeons** A selection of invertebrate comparative anatomy material from John Hunter's collection.
- **The Royal Free Hospital Anatomy Department Collections** including a number of comparative anatomy skulls, limbs and partially prepared specimens.
- **University of London Loan Collection** Presumably this collection was once available for all of the London University colleges to borrow. In 1910 the collection including many articulated vertebrate skeletons was transferred to UCL.
- **Zoological Society** Over the last few hundred years there was a constant donation of material from the London Zoo to UCL for preparation, teaching and research.

The museum also holds a number of wax models used in teaching and around 20,000 microscope slides from scientific research material through to sets of microscope slides that students would borrow for a year.

In 1997 the collection was renamed in honour of its founder Robert Grant and moved to the Darwin Building. In March 2011 the museum was moved again to the impressive location in the Rockefeller Building, in the space formerly occupied by the medical school library.

A history of the new home has been compiled by [Dr Joe Cain](#) (UCL Science and Technology Studies). The museum continues to be used as a teaching collection, as it was in Grant's day, but is now accessible to more people than ever before through outreach, events, schools work and through the public displays.

A modern timeline:

- **Nov 1997** – Opened in UCL Darwin Building as Grant Museum of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy
- **Nov 1999** – The Collection's first regular public opening hours: Wed and Fri 1-5pm
- **2005** – Extended public opening hours to Mon-Fri 1-5pm
- **July 2010** – Closed in Darwin building
- **Mar 2011** – Re-opened in UCL Rockefeller Building
- **Oct 2012** – Extended public opening hours to Mon-Sat 1-5pm