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Compiling 'God's great book [of] universal nature'

The Royal Society's collecting strategies

Jennifer Thomas

This paper will examine the Royal Society's approaches to accumulating objects for its repository from the first reference to the collection in the Society's administrative records in 1663 to 1781, when the repository was transferred to the British Museum. It will become apparent that the Society employed numerous methods to obtain objects for its collection, particularly in the initial and latter stages of the repository's existence. However success in acquiring items was largely reliant on the enthusiasm of the Society's individual members and is likely to have been hindered, particularly in the eighteenth century, by increasing competition for specimens from other collections, not least that of the Society's president, Sir Hans Sloane.

For a scientific institution that prized 'ocular demonstration' and was highly resistant to the 'hypothetical influence of Aristotelian's, Cartesians, Adepts, Astrologers, and Common longitudinarians',[1] building a collection of objects together with a network of observers in the field and experimenters in the laboratory who would provide the basis upon which to found a 'true matter of fact' occupied a central role in the early Royal Society's aspirations.[2] Collecting material, therefore, became a key part of the Society's work and the resulting repository developed into a place not merely to bring together examples from 'God's great book [of] universal nature',[3] but also to provide a space in which to deposit experiments and proof of observations communicated by letter and shown at the Society's weekly meetings. However, the Society did not merely wait passively to receive objects; various proactive strategies were employed to accumulate specimens, particularly in the early and later stages of the repository's existence. Adopting a broadly chronological approach, this paper will attempt to detail these measures and to assess their efficacy, in addition to examining whether and for what reasons any periods of latency in the Society's collecting practices may have occurred.

A brief introduction will review the broad history of the repository with reference being made to a sample of the wealth of literature that has been devoted to the collection's analysis. The repository's history will then be divided into three time periods, of which the first will provide opportunities to examine the numerous collecting strategies employed during its early years from 1663, when the term 'repository' was first applied to the Society's collection, until the death of its first curator, Robert Hooke, in 1703; a distinction will be drawn between proactive and reactive approaches to collecting and, with respect to the former, will focus particularly on the idea of targeted and general requests for objects. Secondly, the middle part of the repository's existence will be explored, a period between 1704 and 1768 – the year following the dismissal of its curator, Emmanuel Mendes da Costa, for embezzling the Society's funds; during this period, the Society relied largely on unsolicited donations and also had to contend with increasing competition for specimens, not least from the cabinet of its own president Sir Hans Sloane. Lastly, the final era of the repository will be examined, covering the period from 1768 until 1781, when the collection was transferred to the British Museum; this period witnessed a major reorientation in the Society's approach to collecting, partly through agreements with the Hudson's Bay Company, which secured an annual donation of specimens, and partly via an exchange with the King of Spain's cabinet – developments through which the Society began to accumulate large quantities of specimens and to develop relationships with donors that would continue beyond the incorporation of the repository into the national collection.

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The first formal reference to the repository appears in the Society's administrative records for October 1663.[4] It was initially curated by Robert Hooke and kept in the Society's accommodation at Gresham College in London. At first the collection appears to have been kept in Hooke's rooms at the College, but by December 1675 work had begun on the College's west or white gallery to house both the repository and the Society's library.[5] The collection was significantly swelled during its early life by the purchase of Robert Hubert's cabinet of rarities, acquired with the aid of a donation of £100 from Daniel Colwall. Nehemiah Grew's catalogue of the collection, *Musæum Regalis Societatis*, was published in 1681, with two further editions appearing in 1686 and 1694.[6] Although initially the repository was praised,[7] by 1702 things appear to have taken a turn for the worse; the collection was characterized by Edward Ward as consisting of 'memorandums of mortality' and 'antiquated trumpery', whilst Frans Burman described the way in which the repository's magnets had been 'carelessly thrown' together.[8] A few years later, in 1710, perhaps the most damning, and most often-quoted, criticisms of the repository were made by Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, who described the majority of the collection as being 'in no sort of order or tidiness', 'covered with dust' and with parts 'utterly broken and ruined'.[9] Following the Society's move to nearby Crane Court in Fleet Street, the collection was transferred to purpose-built accommodation on the site in 1711. The repository's building may have been designed by Christopher Wren and is likely to have been partly financed with the aid of a legacy from Robert Hooke.[10]

During the Society's stay in Crane Court, it struggled to preserve its collections of objects and, in consequence, committees were periodically appointed with a brief to revive the ailing repository. The first, which sat between 1729 and 1734 and whose most notable member was perhaps Sir Hans Sloane, was prompted by an inspection of the repository which found 'the curiosities therein contained were several of them decayed, and the rest of them in Great disorder'.[11] The committee discovered that much of the original collection was either in such a bad condition that specimens had to be destroyed, or that items were missing, having been lost or stolen.[12] The committee also found that not only did they have to consider the state of the objects and either to dispose of them or attempt to conserve them, but they also had to replace the inadequate cabinets in which they were contained and to repair the repository building itself. Once the refurbishment and audit of the repository had been completed, the committee hoped that 'Others may be induced to deposite their Collections here, as a sure means of rendering them usefull to the Publick: and will have the satisfaction to know that what they have collected with so much industry and expence, will here remain safe and entire.'[13] Despite the refurbishment of the repository, however, the levels of donated material seem not to have increased in the manner that the committee had hoped.

The second committee formed to restore the repository held office between 1763 and 1765. Emmanuel Mendes da Costa, who was appointed as the Society's keeper of the repository, librarian, clerk and housekeeper, appears to have been instrumental both in urging the need for such a committee to be set up and in carrying out the necessary conservation and audit of specimens.[14] In contrast to the committee of the 1730s, it appears that fewer Fellows were now involved in the work: as has recently been demonstrated, the work was largely carried out by da Costa himself, with oversight from two inspectors.[15] Although da Costa found that many of the specimens had been destroyed by 'time and dirt', he also concluded that 'a very valuable collection of the subjects of natural history' remained.[16] In a similar way to the earlier committee, the Inspectors' Report from 1763 suggested that when the collection had been cleaned and arranged, it was hoped that that 'Gentlemen will be encouraged to add as much as they are able to this collection' and once again assurances were issued that any donations would be 'duely attended to, and preserved with all possible care'.[17] Once again, it seems, these moves failed immediately to attract larger numbers of donations to the repository, although improvements did follow two years later after a reorientation in the Society's approach to collecting. The repository's story ends at the British Museum, where it was transferred in 1781, due to lack of space in the rooms newly allocated to the Society at Somerset House.

Collecting during the early years, 1663–1703

From its inception, the Royal Society wanted to build a 'philosophical store-house', not just of objects but of observations and experiments that together would

provide the basis upon which knowledge might be founded.[18] Thus, at least initially, it was to form part of a comprehensive system of measures intended to work collaboratively to produce a storehouse of knowledge. This – particularly in the repository's early years – appears to have had a direct impact on the Society's collecting strategy. Initially, it seems, the Society aspired to build an encyclopaedic collection and in March 1664 set up a committee 'for collecting all the Phaenomena of Nature hitherto observed, and all experiments made and recorded'.[19] However, as will become apparent, acting concurrently with the urge to collect 'every thing' was a more pragmatic approach to collecting.

As mentioned above, the collection was first significantly added to with the purchase in 1666 of Robert Hubert's cabinet of rarities. Although this provided a substantial core for the collection, the Society adopted a variety of approaches thereafter in order to accumulate further objects; these fell broadly into two categories. The first, which could perhaps be termed as proactive methods, included making requests for specimens, taking plaster-casts of unique objects, employing a collector to find items and more generally financially and intellectually facilitating collecting. The second method by which the collections were expanded was by means of more spontaneous donations in which the benefactors took the initiative: they were not approached directly by the Society and they were offered no financial recompense for the objects given or for the costs involved in transport. Such donations may, on occasion, have been prompted indirectly by the more general requests for objects issued during the Society's meetings or via the *Philosophical Transactions*, which attempted to induce donations by advising potential benefactors that items given to the repository would be preserved 'for after-ages', in addition to their being used for 'considerable Philosophical and Usefull purposes'.[20] Exchanges that occurred during the early period also seem to fall into this second category, since potential exchangers would approach the Society to propose a trade.

With the exception of Hubert's cabinet, the chief way in which the Society attempted proactively to accumulate objects was by requesting specimens. First, requests were made to particular individuals and companies asking for general classes of objects. This seems to have been directed particularly towards those who had some connection to the Society. For example, at the meeting in October 1663, when Hooke was appointed keeper of the repository, a promise made by Sir Robert Moray to provide copper ore for the Society's collection prompted a plea that every Fellow 'that had conveniency was desired to bring in oars of several kinds, to be put into their Repository'.[21] Fellows also approached their friends; Walter Pope, for example, advised the Society in November 1667 that a friend of his in Cornwall had agreed to send 'what fish and fowle were to be met with in these parts'.[22] In addition, as part of his remit as secretary to the Society, Henry Oldenburg wrote dozens of letters intended to establish relations with potential correspondents from around the world and, although Oldenburg's letters were largely intended to invite contributions to the Society's 'philosophical storehouse' in the form of observations of natural phenomena, included in some letters were also requests that specimens might be 'transmitted' to the Society.[23] Correspondence also appears to have had an indirect impact on donations. For instance, Samuel Colepresse, who sent to the Society a letter recording, amongst other things, observations of tidal movements, commented on the fusion of metals and enclosed a paper on minerals, as well as promising to send 'Specimina of every metal, marchasite and weed our country & mines afford'.[24] Finally, the Society approached its patron, King Charles II, for avian specimens in March 1664.[25] Although the Society's administrative records make no mention of birds being received, in July 1666 it did receive 'the skin of an Antilope' which had died in St James's Park.[26]

The second form of request aimed to procure specific items. This approach tended to be aligned with the Society's correspondence networks and was directed towards those who wrote to the Society communicating observations. On occasion, an author who wrote to the Society with an account of some natural phenomenon would be contacted in order to secure a sample of the item described.[27] Furthermore, there are instances, particularly in the first eight years of the repository's existence, when natural objects that could not be obtained from their owners might be represented instead by a model or plaster-cast, ordered to be made so that it could take its place in the repository as a substitute for the real object. For example, in June 1670 a cast of a large bladder-stone was taken because the owner 'would not part with it'.[28] The procedure of making replicas of unobtainable items was also

practised for artificial objects: for instance, Hooke was ordered to make a copy of an instrument which measured diameters that had been shown to the Society during one of its weekly meetings in July 1667.[29] After the beginning of 1671, making models of items seems to be more commonly practised for artificial than for natural objects, such as a replica model of John Flamsteed's 'Paris foot' in February 1683.[30]

In addition to the making of specific requests for samples of the items upon which written accounts had been based, it was a common practice during the early period for samples to be included as a matter of course with the texts.[31] It was as though accounts and observations of natural occurrences as sent to the Society might be deemed in some way deficient without the extra explanatory power of the object or some sort of model to provide a complete account of the phenomenon described. Evidently this formed part of the Society's more general desire to authenticate written observations. Accounts of natural phenomena together with experiments conducted on them and observations made on them with the microscope were largely communicated via the reported experience – a temporally and geographically specific event communicated by a trusted observer and often attested to by multiple, credible eyewitnesses, frequently presented in the form of a written account.[32] The observer would resist the temptation of making a universal statement on the nature of the world based on his findings and seemingly it was implicit that knowledge would be produced only when sufficient accounts had been provided on which the 'superstructure' of such knowledge could be erected. In some sense, the object acted as an eyewitness to lend credence to the textual account. Having sight of the material upon which accounts were based allowed the Society to authenticate (or otherwise) the observations and inferences of the author, without the need for assessing their credibility. However, simply seeing the object upon which knowledge was produced at a meeting was not sufficient: the Society appears also to have wanted possession of the specimen or at worst have some sort of simulacrum of it, perhaps in response to notions of prestige, or a desire for completeness.

Results of experiments produced during meetings were also requested as evidence for inclusion in the repository. For example, Denis Papin produced samples of medals he had made in his digester at one of the Society's weekly meetings in April 1685, using 'gelley of bones', to be kept in the repository.[33] A request was similarly made to Nehemiah Grew that as an adjunct to his lectures on the comparative anatomy of animals he should 'leave in the Repository those parts he should from time to time produce upon the occasion of the lectures'.[34] The practice of depositing samples produced during experiments shown at the Society's meetings is not referred to beyond 1699. This could be because it was so commonly practised that it was not deemed worthy of note. More likely, however, is the possibility that it no longer occurred, perhaps because experiments became less frequent during the eighteenth century – particularly those that left material results – or perhaps reflecting a more general shift of emphasis in the Society's scientific activities.

In addition to requests for donations, the Society also attempted proactively to swell its collection by employing as a 'Botanick traveller', one Thomas Willisel. He was paid £30 to spend one year amassing the natural productions of Britain in an attempt to rectify the imbalance between native and exotic specimens in the repository.[35] The Society employed both a targeted and general approach in their direction of Willisel's collecting: during the first ten months of his contract he appears to have been directed by the repository committee to acquire particular items specifically for the collection.[36] However, by the final two months a less tightly focused method is apparent, with Willisel being urged to provide the Society with all natural things from England that were 'yet wanting in the Society's repository'.[37] The Society's direction of this project reflects a pragmatic approach to collecting; it was logical for particular items to be obtained during the first ten months because Willisel had the benefit of time in hand, but by the point at which only two months remained, it was more practical for the Society to be a little less discerning.

The Society also attempted proactively to accumulate specimens by facilitating collecting. This aid could be financial; for instance in April 1664, the Society offered to pay the expenses incurred by members of the East India Company in obtaining and transporting 'productions and curiosities of Nature'.[38] Assistance might also be of an intellectual nature, or perhaps more strictly practical – particularly in terms of giving advice on how best to preserve specimens. For example, as part of a catalogue of animals required for the repository, Christopher Merrett, Walter

Charleton and Robert Boyle were asked to provide advice to potential collectors regarding how best to preserve specimens destined for the repository.[39] Whether the catalogue and directions were ever distributed is difficult to discern, but the evidence they provide for a proactive approach to collecting is clear.

Although in some sense all objects given to the Society may be said to have been solicited by virtue of the presence of the repository and the periodic issuing of general pleas for specimens, a distinction ought to be drawn between the approaches described above, which actively sought out donations, in comparison with more indirect methods in which the Society was given specimens or was approached by parties proposing an exchange. The latter seems to have been a relatively rare occurrence during the early period and in all instances it was the donor who proposed the exchange, while the Society's agreement seems often to have been forthcoming as a gesture of goodwill rather than for speculative purposes, notwithstanding that gains were sometimes made. Most notable of these instances were exchanges made between Sir Robert Southwell, at the time the Society's president, and the Dublin Philosophical Society: Sir Robert exchanged four pieces of amber enclosing various insects in return for some of the repository's duplicate specimens, in order that he might give his son samples of 'a pleasanter sort of natural history than he will meet withal in Books'.[40]

Soon after that exchange, the Dublin Society made the suggestion that it might have 'all the Duplicates that can be spared from among the Rarity's of the R. S. Repository, and Musaeum Ashmolianum at Oxford'.[41] By 1687, the Dublin Society's formal meetings had been largely disbanded and a further approach came when they had been revived in 1695.[42] A letter of thanks sent in May 1695 from the Dublin Society to the Royal Society, together with the promise 'to make you all possible returns of gratitude', as well as one sent directly to Southwell, thanking him for the intended donation, suggests that the Dublin Society was successful in acquiring some of the repository's duplicates.[43] If this were the case, one wonders what happened to the specimens following the final disbandment of the Dublin Society's meetings and also what might have become of the items given to Sir Robert.

Finally, the dominant way of acquiring objects throughout the repository's life was from indirectly solicited donations. Motivation for these donations varied, though often, as noted above, they would accompany a written account. It is also not insignificant that there were occasions when gifts for the repository directly preceded the election of Fellows, as in the case of Swedish candidate George Stiernholm, who presented an instrument called a 'Linea Carolina' in November 1669 and was elected Fellow a month later.[44] Further instances occur in which newly elected Fellows would give items to the repository shortly after their election; for instance, John van de Bemde, who was elected on 30 November 1678, gave sand from the Danube and rocks from Mount Vesuvius nineteen days after his election.[45] As the public face of the Society, the repository seems to have provided a means by which a relationship could be established between the Society and would-be Fellows. It also offered the chance for Fellows in the early stages of their membership to take part in the Society's work, by providing a means by which they could immediately begin to contribute and to participate. There are further instances of donors to the repository who never became Fellows, most notably Sir Philiberto Vernatti, governor of the Dutch East India Company at Batavia, who made extensive donations.[46]

Whilst the Society did not wilfully shun thoroughness and during this early period repeatedly aimed at achieving an encyclopaedic collection, a spirit of pragmatism and of making the best of the collecting resources which happened to become available to them appears to have triumphed over the establishment of specific collecting ideologies.

Collecting during the middle years, 1704–68

Between 1704 and 1768, the repository relied largely on unsolicited donations. As mentioned previously, although reports in the 1730s and 1760s regarding attempts to revive the repository stated that improving the condition of the collections would induce donations, generally the Society was rather passive in its approach to collecting.[47] The one exception to this lack of initiative occurred in the purchase of fossils following an advertisement in the March and April 1708 edition of the *Philosophical Transactions*. It stated that recent 'discourses on Formed Stones, and their Origin, are not so clearly understood, for want of a competent knowledge of those Bodies' and that a collection of fossil samples, a list of which, named

according to Edward Lhuyd's *Lithophylacii Britannici Ichnographia*, was appended to the advertisement, could be purchased for the sum of one guinea from Alban Thomas, the librarian of the Ashmolean Museum.[48]

The way in which these fossils were marketed suggests that although the textual and pictorial accounts of fossils provided in various naturalists' works were useful, having physical examples of the bodies was necessary in order to have a complete natural knowledge. This is perhaps the rationale behind the exchange involving Southwell, as discussed previously. A noteworthy connection, however, was drawn between text and object. Although the primacy of the fossil specimen was emphasized to induce purchases, the collection remained inextricably linked to a text since the fossils were named according to Lhuyd's book mentioned above.[49] As a result, the fossils do not stand alone; rather they are contained and mediated by text. This relationship between text and object is evident throughout the life of the repository. In a similar way to the earlier period, samples continued to be given to the Society to accompany accounts of phenomena and experiments during the earlier years of this later phase. However, the relationship between text and object was not one-directional; rather object and text were mutually defining. Whenever an object was sent to the Society, its identity was fixed by text in one of two ways; first by the letter, catalogue or account that accompanied its donation, which provided information on the circumstances of the object's discovery, its name and what it might mean; secondly, even if no explanatory information accompanied the object, its donation would be recorded in the Society's administrative records, usually its 'Journal Book' together with provenance information. The importance placed on the provision of textual information reinforces the notion that although there is a strong sense throughout the repository's life that the text is incomplete without the object upon which it is based to act as a form of eyewitness statement, the object too could be said to be lacking without the explanatory information contained in the text that identifies and validates it. The irony is that, in general, the literature intended to comprehend and to communicate the Society's objects has outlasted the objects themselves.

While the Society as an institution met with little success in attracting donations, its president, Sir Hans Sloane, played an influential role in securing the largest cumulative donation to the repository. From 1722, Sloane arranged an annual contribution to the Society of fifty cultivated dried plant specimens from the Society of Apothecaries at the Chelsea Physic Garden, to be presented in lieu of the yearly rent owed to him in a personal capacity.[50] The Physic Garden's donations resulted in the repository receiving some 2,950 specimens, representing nearly half of the total number of natural objects that came to be transferred to the British Museum in 1781.[51] Sloane's success in encouraging a steady of flow of specimens to swell the collection reveals, perhaps, his own superior understanding of how a collection may be successfully accumulated and reflects too the importance of the efforts of individual members of the Society in the wellbeing of the institutional repository. In a similar way to the earlier period in which Fellows such as Hooke, Grew and Colwall had been instrumental in forwarding the repository (and, as will become apparent, in the later stages of the repository's existence, with members such as Samuel Wegg, Daines Barrington and Joseph Banks), the success of the Society in acquiring objects and administering a well-ordered repository was largely dependent on the enthusiasm of its individual members.

Amongst the indirectly solicited donations there is continuing evidence of individuals making donations prior to their election as Fellows or soon afterwards: for example, Orlando Gee gave the bill of a 'corvus indicus' seven days before his election on 14 November 1717,[52] and John Ranby gave human foetal preparations to the repository at the beginning of March 1725, three months after his election.[53] Similarly, the donation of objects remained no guarantee of election: for example, a Mr Faulkner who gave 'a large collection of minerals and crystals in twelve boxes' in October 1735 was nominated two weeks later, but failed to attract sufficient votes to gain election to the Society.[54] Would-be Fellows also engaged with the repository long before their election, as was the case with Frank Nicholls, who gave the 'uterus of a foetus' in June 1722[55] but who was not elected until some six years later, in May 1728, and John Senex, who became a Fellow in June 1728, but whose gift of fossils found near Stroud was received in December 1719.[56]

In June 1734, two months after his election as a Fellow, John Winthrop made the most substantial one-off donation of the middle period of the repository's

life with a gift of over 600 specimens, mostly minerals, from New England.[57] This followed the precedent set by his grandfather of the same name, the first governor of Connecticut, a Fellow of the Society who regularly provided written accounts detailing natural and astronomical observations.[58] Winthrop senior's most significant donations were received by the Society in 1670–71. In light of both sets of donations, a dedication to grandfather and grandson appeared in the 1737–8 edition of the *Philosophical Transactions*.[59]

The dedication ended with an expression of the hope that Winthrop's substantial benefactions might be replicated by others in the Society so that the 'Repository may soon become one of the most conspicuous in Europe.'[60] Unfortunately, Winthrop's example appears to have increased donations little, if at all; in fact, by the mid 1740s, with the exception of the Chelsea Physic Garden's specimens, comparatively little was received. It is difficult to discern why this might have been; perhaps the state of the repository deterred potential benefactors, though by 1736 the audit and refurbishment of the repository had been completed. Possibly the change of president was a contributory factor: in 1741, Martin Folkes took over the presidency from Sloane and thereafter seems to have concerned himself largely with the library and archives of the Society.[61] The increasing number of private collections (not least that of Sloane) may have been a further contributing factor, generating increased competition for specimens. Although there is no evidence to show explicitly that rival institutions or private individuals were favoured over the repository, there seems to be an implicit nod towards the superiority of Sloane's collection both by external donors and within the membership of the Society itself. For example, John Thackray notes that in addition to John Winthrop's donation to the repository, he also sent 800 rocks and minerals from New England to Sloane.[62] The fact that Winthrop made donations to a private and an institutional collection alike, indicates that he held the Society's collection and that of Sloane in equal esteem – in fact Sloane received one-third more specimens for his collection than the repository.

This sense of admiration for Sloane's collection is also evident from a donation made by Philip Zollmann to the Society of a collection of fossils at the end of December of 1729. Although Zollmann's gift was for the Society, he asked that his donation might be compared with and named using the fossils in Sloane's possession.[63] Zollman appears to have used the repository's collection to gain access to that of Sloane, by implicitly demonstrating his assessment of the latter's superiority. Furthermore, even within the Society, the quality of Sloane's collection was freely acknowledged. During the tenure of the 1730s committee appointed to improve the repository's state, Sloane's collection was hailed as an exemplar that might aid in the difficulties being experienced by the committee in arranging and preserving the repository's holdings. Consequently, in May 1733, the repository committee arranged a visit to Sloane's cabinet to 'view the manner of the preserving & ranging the severall sorts of curiosities in his collections that they might the better judge what may be proper to be order'd in the Repository.'[64] It appears that the committee found the visit useful, as it was inspired to order 'that Mr Jackson should be sent to, & desired to repair & put the mummy belonging to the RS into the same sort of case as the mummy at the president's, only without casters.'[65]

Sloane seems also to have possessed a more effective network of collectors, for potentially interesting specimens were communicated more rapidly to Sloane's collection than to the Society's. Such was the case with 'a collection of petrefactions' from Derbyshire sent by Moreton Gilkes: Gilkes mentions that he would have sent examples of these earlier, but having heard that collections from the same location had been made by other naturalists and forwarded to Sloane he had been '. . . desirous to re-examine and look a little more narrowly into the place from whence they are taken: that I might be able not only to amuse you with a few of the Bodies themselves, but to give you some account of their Production.'[66] Gilkes was keen to add further information and not simply to duplicate what may have already been communicated to Sloane.

Sloane's museum appears also to have provided an alternative collection in which specimens described in *Philosophical Transactions* might be lodged. As was discussed previously, in the years leading up to 1700, samples tended either to be sent to or were requested by the Society to accompany accounts of natural phenomena. However by 1700, examples can be found in which the written description would be given to the Society but samples of the natural phenomenon were forwarded instead to Sloane's collection. Thackray notes that Abraham de la Pryme gave fossil shells to

Sloane, but his account of the specimens went to the Royal Society, whilst samples of asbestos were sent to Sloane and similarly the description to the Society.[67] Although Thackray expressed the generous hope that Sloane might have given the Society first refusal, there is no evidence to suggest that this occurred. In fact, it seems that a value-judgement was being made, consciously or otherwise, which determined that text was appropriate for the Society but that the objects should go to a specialist collector, like Sloane.

This divorcing of specimen and textual account that the Society had been so eager to keep together during the earlier period became increasingly manifest during the eighteenth century. For instance, a paper presented to the Society by Matthew Maty in April 1768, on lava and other substances emitted by Mount Vesuvius, included samples of the material to illustrate Maty's argument. However, whilst the material was shown at the Society, the samples themselves were given by Sir William Hamilton to be lodged at the British Museum, on the day following Maty's lecture.[68] In addition, Maty also mentions that samples had been sent to the Society the previous year 'for the purpose of analysation', which suggests that elements of knowledge were in some sense generated at the Society, in addition to its role in disseminating the resulting data in textual form.[69] The role of the Society in the production and dissemination of the findings based on Hamilton's objects supports recent characterization of the Society in the eighteenth century as 'the central institution . . . for the legitimisation and arbitration of scientific activity in Britain'.[70] Hamilton did however send a painting of the Vesuvius eruption together with 'many specimens of salts and sulphurs' from the volcano to the Society a year later.[71] In addition, both the Society and the British Museum received a 'mushroom stone' from Naples from Hamilton in June 1769.[72]

Notwithstanding the crossover between donations from Hamilton, the founding of the British Museum may have had a negative impact on the numbers of specimens given to the Society. Judging from the Museum's 'Book of Presents', begun in 1758, although it was not given large quantities of natural history specimens, certainly between 1758 and 1768, the Museum did receive significantly more than the repository. However, the falling-off in objects donated to the Society may not have been due solely to increased competition or the worsening state of the collection, for it seems also to reflect a lack of enthusiasm on the part of Fellows of the Society for their own collection. It may also have been due in part to a more general reorientation in the Society's work.

Collecting during the final years of the repository, 1769–81

Following the committees of 1764 and 1765, charged with improving the state of the repository, donations appear to have begun to rise, though perhaps not as dramatically as the Society might have hoped. With fewer donations than expected and the dismissal of its curator da Costa for embezzling funds the previous year, by the end of 1768 the repository found itself staring into something of an abyss. The New Year ushered in a reorientation in the Society's approach to collecting, however, as a result of which the repository began to experience a minor renaissance – albeit rather short-lived. The catalyst for change came from what may initially appear an unlikely source. In 1768, the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to allow the Royal Society to send scientists to observe the 1769 transit of Venus at the Company's Churchill Bay trading post. Given the culture of secrecy surrounding the Company, this was a major coup and, as Glyndwr Williams has noted, the treasurer of the Society and later president of the Hudson's Bay Company, Samuel Wegg, played a key intermediary role in agreeing passage for the scientists and in facilitating the observations.[73] Some association between the Society and the Company had existed prior to Wegg's involvement; several Fellows held financial interests in the Company and the Society had often corresponded with them on a range of scientific and ethnographic subjects, but there were certain areas of information to which the Society was denied access, particular regarding the Company's charter trading territory.[74] It has been argued that given Wegg's dual positions, he was able to negotiate improved relations by promoting a more general co-operation between the Company and the Society.[75] As Richard Glover notes, this led to Wegg introducing biologist Charles Pennant to Company employee Andrew Graham, on leave from his Canadian post in London, in 1769; Graham later took responsibility for collecting and compiling a series of donations from Hudson Bay to the Society.[76] Together the three men appear to have

conceived the idea of developing a collection of natural objects from the Hudson Bay area and depositing them in the Society's repository. The Company gave four donations in total between November 1771 and November 1773, comprising a variety of natural material, including avian, mammal and plant specimens.[77]

The Society's success in securing specimens from the Hudson's Bay Company seems to have engendered a renewed enthusiasm in the repository and dedication to building the collection. Consequently, as part of a repository committee's report, read in March 1772, which was intended to be concerned with arranging recently acquired material from Hudson Bay, suggestions regarding additional trading companies that might be approached to donate objects were included and various heads of state and other individuals were identified with a view to building up a collection of natural history that 'might be worthy of the Museum of the Royal Society, and perhaps become a national honour'.[78] For example, it was proposed that enquiries should be made with the East India, Levant, Russia and Africa Companies as to whether they too might be prepared to make an annual donation of specimens, possibly based on a list of 'desiderata' issued by the committee.[79] The committee appears to have been eager to stress that such donations would be useful not only to studies of natural history, but also to 'commerce and manufactures'.[80]

The idea of attempting to induce donations of natural history by emphasizing the commercial utility of benefactions was perhaps fuelled by a letter sent by Johann Rheinhold Forster and read at a meeting of the Society a month earlier, in February 1772, on the subject of dying porcupine quills using an unnamed plant-root found in the Hudson Bay area.[81] He described how his findings had led him to '[endeavour] to excite the Hudson Bay Company to import quantities of these roots sufficient for dying' and that it demonstrates 'what improvement our manufactures may receive from a due cultivation of natural history'.[82] This was not an isolated instance. A little over a year later, in May 1773, the Committee of Natural History wrote to the Hudson's Bay Company to advise it of further natural items that might be used in manufacturing.[83] They found buffalo hides 'to be as good a material as the skin of the Russia Buffalo for Bookbinding' and advised the Company on how to preserve the skin for safe passage to London.[84] They also made a pair of stockings and a hat using the neck hair of one of the hides.[85] Finally, the Committee recommended that a swan specimen donated to the repository should be given instead by the Company to an importer, because the scarcity of swan's down for powder-puffs meant that it might be a commodity that the Company could export.[86] However, it appears that the plan to attract donations from trading companies did not bear fruit, for almost a year later, in January 1773, the Committee renewed its request 'that applications may be made to different companies . . . for the natural productions of most parts of the Globe'.[87]

Of all the suggestions made in the report, the Committee suggested particularly strongly that the King of Spain should be induced to send South American and Californian specimens, given the limited British colonial presence in the region, and that such specimens might be exchanged for natural objects from the British Empire. The Society contacted the Spanish ambassador, Victor Ame Philippe Ferrero de Fiesque Masseran, with this suggestion. Once agreement was reached in principle, Daines Barrington was eager not to lose momentum and so began obtaining items in the hope that it would 'be a beginning of the scientific commerce between the two countries';[88] he further suggested that 'some spare duplicates in the British Museum' might be used to form part of the exchange.[89] Still, it was not until February 1775 that two cases were transferred to Customs House for transit to Spain.

It is unclear whether the Society ever received any objects in return. In his *History of the Royal Society*, Weld records that the receipt of a letter regarding the exchange, sent in 1774 by the Marquis de Grimaldi, was closely followed by the arrival of cases containing natural objects for the museum.[90] However, Weld is likely to have relied on anecdotal evidence, for no such receipt appears to have been recorded in the Society's administrative records. Although the intention was that 'this kind of reciprocal Traffick and exchange shall be kept up for the future', seemingly this did not extend beyond 1775.[91] Soon after this date the repository's future was placed in jeopardy following its omission from plans by architect William Chambers for the Society's projected new accommodation at Somerset House.

Targeting trading companies and heads of state was not a new strategy and had been evident in embryonic form during the early years of the repository. What was different in the later period was the tenacity,

enthusiasm and relative success with which the idea was pursued. The committee charged with building the Society's collection had a much clearer idea of what the repository was lacking and a more coherent sense of what a collection of objects ought to contain. Perhaps it is no coincidence that such an approach coincided with an increasingly systematic approach to natural history and to taxonomy in general. What is also interesting is the relationship between the British Museum and the Society: the suggestion that duplicates from the British Museum ought to be sent to the King of Spain's cabinet in order to secure objects for what was technically a rival institution, notwithstanding their closeness intellectually and in terms of personnel, surely in some sense threatened to undermine the national collection, although there seems to be no suggestion that the relationship was perceived in this way. Additionally, between 1770 and 1775, comparison of the number of bird and mammal skins and botanical specimens received by the British Museum in comparison with the Society demonstrates that the national collection received significantly fewer items than the repository. The largest collections received by the British Museum were from Anna Blackburne in July 1771, who also donated a collection of North American birds to the Society in the following year; a collection of animals from Dominica from a Mr Grant (forename not stated) in August 1771; and two donations from the Royal Society itself in February and December 1772 containing duplicates of the Hudson Bay specimens.[92] Donations of dried mammal and avian material to the British Museum were greater in number than to the Society between 1775 and 1776, when the Museum attracted three large donations from the Cape of Good Hope and the South Seas, two given by Forster and one by James Cook.[93] None the less, over the last ten years of the repository's existence a comparison of its 'Donations Book' to the British Museum's 'Book of Presents' suggests that the two received a more equal flow of natural history specimens than might at first have been expected.

The legacy of the relationships that the repository built with its donors also seems worthy of note. The Chelsea Physic Garden donated specimens directly to the British Museum following the repository's transfer in 1781. This led to the Museum receiving some 750 plant specimens between 1782 and 1796, a donation that would not have occurred without the repository. The importance of the links forged between the Society and the Hudson's Bay Company may also have proved important in encouraging donations from the Company to various institutions in London during the early nineteenth century. John Richardson and William Swainson's 1829 work *Fauna Boreali-Americana* notes that the Hudson's Bay Company's regular donations to the Society 'served to acquaint the residents with the value set, in England, upon the natural productions of the northern regions; and collections, chiefly of birds, have continued to be transmitted annually to London up to the present time.'[94]

Following these donations to the Society, the Company also seems to have built its own collection as part of its Hudson Bay Museum, likely to have been held at Hudson Bay House in London.[95] Possibly in the absence of the Royal Society's collection, the Company gave to institutional collections such as the British Museum, which received donations of specimens in 1819, 1831 and 1832, a number of which remain extant. The Hudson Bay donations acted as a catalyst, not merely within the Society in changing its approach to collecting, but also within the Company, encouraging it to become more open and willing to provide specimens for British naturalists.

Accumulating objects was a process subject to a series of negotiations and exchanges and the reputations of both the repository and the Society in general were pivotal in securing such donations. Equally important was the enthusiasm of Fellows in encouraging and making donations. Although in the repository's initial years, the Society was fairly successful in accumulating objects for its collection, by the eighteenth century the rise of private collections in addition to the establishment of the national collection in the mid-eighteenth century, meant that competition for specimens was high and pickings became slim for the Society. The absence of a clear collecting strategy, particularly during the middle phase of the repository as outlined above, is also likely to have hampered the Society's ability to attract donations. Given that the Society discovered it would have to relinquish its repository upon moving to new premises at Somerset House, its most proactive, focused and most successful spell of collecting was short-lived, but the legacy of collecting, in addition to the Society's success in attracting high-profile and substantial donations, may perhaps prompt a re-evaluation of current perceptions of the repository in the latter stages of its life, particularly in comparison with the British Museum.

Address for correspondence

Dr Jennifer Thomas, Queen Mary, University of London - Centre for Editing Lives and Letters, Arts Research Centre, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS.
jennifer.thomas@qmul.ac.uk

Notes and references

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2 Letter from Henry Oldenburg to Sir George Oxendon, in Royal Society (RS), Original Letter Book, vol. 2, 6 April 1667, p. 2.

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4 For the first reference to the Society's repository see Thomas Birch, *The History of the Royal Society for Improving of Natural Knowledge* (London, 1756–7), vol. I, p. 125. This is also mentioned in Michael Hunter's 'Between cabinet of curiosities and research collection: the history of the Royal Society's "Repository"', in his *Establishing the New Science. The Experience of the Royal Society* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 123–55, at p. 125. Hunter has provided the most extensive accounts of the Society's museum and focuses particularly on the repository's early years between 1663 and 1710. In addition to the above-mentioned, Hunter has also discussed the repository in, 'The cabinet institutionalized: the Royal Society's Repository and its background', in *The Origins of Museums. The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford, 1985), pp. 159-68, and in his *Science and Society in Restoration England* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 66–7.

5 See Hunter, op. cit. [Between cabinet and research collection] (note 4), pp. 139–40 for a discussion of the repository's early location.

6 Nehemiah Grew, *Musæum Regalis Societatis, or a Catalogue & description of the Rarities belonging to the Royal Society & preserved at Gresham College* (London, 1681). Subsequent editions were published in London in 1686 by and 1694.

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11 RS, Original Council Minutes Book, vol. 3, 20 August 1729, p. 28. The committee for restoring the collection is also discussed in Simpson, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 194-99.

12 RS, Original Council Minutes Book, vol. 3, 18 February 1734, p. 134.

13 Ibid., p. 139.

14 As noted by G. S. Rosseau and David Haycock, 'The Jew of Crane Court. Emmanuel Mendes da Costa (1717-91): natural history and natural excess', *History of Science* 38 (2000), pp. 127–70, esp. pp. 144–6. Da Costa is also mentioned by Simpson, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 199-200.

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24 RS, Original Letter Book, vol. 28, 6 March 1667, pp. 222–3.

25 Birch, op. cit. (note 4), vol. I, p. 393.

26 Ibid., vol. II, p. 104.

27 Ibid., vol. III, p. 160 where Birch describes a small bone 'voided by William Throckmorton'. The manuscript entry in RS, Original Journal Book, vol. 3, 21 March 1667, p. 78 adds that that the Society was eager to obtain it for the repository.

28 Birch, op. cit. (note 4), vol. II, p. 439.

29 Ibid., vol. II, pp. 188-9.

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31 For example John Locke's 'An account of one who had horny excrescencies or extraordinary large nails on his fingers and toes', *Philosophical Transactions* 19 (1697), pp. 694–6 was accompanied by samples.

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37 Ibid., vol. II, p. 426.

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40 Letter from Sir Robert Southwell to Thomas Henshaw, RS, Original Letter Book, vol 8, 25 February 1681, p. 178 and Birch, op. cit. (note 4), vol. IV, p. 134.

41 Letter from Robert Plot to Huntingdon, RS, Original Letter Book, vol. 9, 10 March 1684, p. 146.

42 Letter from George Ashe to Sir Robert Southwell, RS, Original Letter Book, vol. II, bk. ii, 12 February 1695, p. 38.

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95 Ibid., p. xii. My thanks to Stuart Houston for his counsel regarding the location of the Hudson's Bay Museum, though I have yet to find documentary evidence to suggest that the Hudson Bay Museum was at Hudson Bay House.