

Field Report

Natural History Museum (Mineralogy), South Kensington, London Saturday 9th April 2011

On Saturday 9th April 2011 the Section visited the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, London for a 'behind the scenes' tour hosted by Alan Hart. Alan has worked at the Museum both as man and boy and he proved to be a generous and entertaining host.

Fifteen members began their tour in the main mineral gallery in which, like the proverbial iceberg, the specimens on display are a mere fraction of those in the drawers below the display cases. With a rattle of keys a grey crystalline silver ore from Siberia appeared. This is a photo-sensitive mineral that, as Alan showed us, is red in its original form.

Bring on more Siberian crystals! The next was a breathtaking topaz kept in a tailor-made 'hood' lined with velvet. Alan explained how, although currently transparent with a beige/brown hue, exposure to sunlight would turn it blue.

At the far end of this gallery is a vault complete with customary heavy gauge steel door. Immediately on entering your eye is drawn to the egg sized yellow Cora Diamond - possibly for sale, Alan asked us to estimate its value!

Adjacent to this was a pyramid of cut diamonds, mounted on pins, some fluorescent; the Aurora Diamonds illustrate the sheer diversity of diamond colours. Flashy though these are, possibly the most intriguing specimens are the 'fluorite boxes'. Quite what subsequent diagenetic process has occurred is a matter of contention. Basically, minerals form around a large crystal of fluorite that then dissolves leaving the box. The process continues with secondary growth of crystals, sometimes calcite, within the box.



The NHM party plus host Alan Hart

photo Dave Hayward

From the vault we went through a 'secret' door, past a cat sized model nugget of gold (at least, I think it was a model!) and entered a room full of mahogany cabinets; the Russell Collection. An avid and able, both financially and intellectually, collector, Russell assembled a collection of the best specimens. Green crystalline fluorite jostled with the most fragile pyrite 'ladies slippers'.

On this level is a further collection; the Ashcroft Swiss Mineral; Curators take note this must be the most meticulously catalogued example. The location of each specimen is noted on a photograph (only 12 such 'plates' could be carried on an expedition) and accompanied by precise field notes and diagrams. His work was mainly centred in the Alps on sites now covered with chalets and sky slopes!

Also on this floor are the recent acquisitions, mainly acquired at the Tucson and Munich Mineral Fairs. Alan explained that the good stuff is always 'under the table' and a 'museum discount' is asked for and negotiated. What was heart warming was that the collection is still expanding. New acquisitions include a pink spinel crystal (50 pence piece shape and size) and a 'star' rutile from Brazil (this appeared to have been worked in gold by a jeweller); both very beautiful.



A drawerful of goodies

photo Dave Hayward

The basement was a treasure trove of a different kind; a corridor of staff photos with one member present between the years 1911 and 1961 and never making it to the hallowed front row. Further along this corridor are the collections that pay homage to the great men of the past; the collection from the Scott's attempt on the North Pole and other trays from the Beagle.

For some members the highlight was to be found in the next anteroom and the 'meteorite challenge'. Could we identify the meteorites from a tray of rocks? Personally I couldn't but fortunately a fellow member Mr John Webster picked out the correct specimen without hesitation. Examples of all types of meteorites could be handled and examined. The most intriguing meteorite however was the one covered in

Chinese characters and Alan is to send more details about the origin of the meteorite and the meaning of the inscriptions.

The tour ended at 12.30pm and members enjoyed lunch before touring the public galleries or spending the afternoon sightseeing.

Helen Jones



Two more shots from the NHM visit

photos Dave Hayward