

History of the earthworm collections at the Natural History Museum, London

(Oligochaeta)

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Abstract. The Natural History Museum London houses one of the largest and most historic earthworm collections in the world. Despite some periods of inactivity, largely due to international events and a lack of general enthusiasm by collectors worldwide in some eras, it has continued to grow. Periods of rapid expansion of the collection coincide with eras of resident Oligochaete researchers at the Museum, however, the general growth can be in part attributed to Oligochaetologists world wide and the assistance they provided each other and their respective institutions, something they continue to do to this day. This paper highlights the periods of growth, explains the times of inactivity and highlights the collection for future depositions and further utilisation by researchers worldwide.

Key words. Natural History Museum, collections, earthworms, history, oligochaete.

Introduction

‘One of the richest earthworm collections can be found in The Natural History Museum London’ (CSUZDI 2000). The Natural History Museum’s earthworm collection has arisen through the work of many individuals, ranging from eminent scientists and aristocrats, to civil servants and visiting students as well as interested members of the public who have sent material to the museum for identification. In its early days the Museum benefited from the worldwide reach of the British Empire in acquiring parts of its collection, and the expeditions of the 20th century were a source of new material (e.g. the Mount Everest expedition 1924 and various expeditions of the Zoological Society London). In the post-Empire years after World War II, worldwide scientific cooperation has allowed the work of the NHM to continue, while the historical collection remains an important resource for scientists undertaking determination work. As with any collection held within a major institution, and with such varied sources of acquisition, its growth has been through periods of acceleration and decline. The times of prosperity correlate to times of resident active researchers promoting depositions and undertaking determinations in the collection and external collaborators making highly significant contributions.

Study of the Oligochaeta has never had the support and popularity of other more photogenic taxa. At times of major exploration the Mammal section at the Museum was inundated with new finds from all over the world, and other invertebrate groups too prospered such as the Insects: ‘Numerous specimens, chiefly Vertebrates and Insecta, were selected and obtained for purchase from the collections sent home by travellers in foreign lands’ (GUNTHER 1912) however this was not always the case for the Annelid section. In fact in 1932 Oligo-