

Exhibition

Reliving past glories

On the night of May 10, 1941, the Luftwaffe dropped more than 700 tons of bombs and thousands of incendiaries on London, in what was one of the worst raids of the Blitz. The damage to the city was catastrophic, and amid the fire storm, the Royal College of Surgeons took three direct hits. More than two-thirds of the College museum's collections were laid to waste. As Sir Arthur Keith, a former conservator of the Hunterian Museum, wrote: "I learned that the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons had been reduced to a charred mass on the preceding night. All that my predecessors and I had laboured to bring about had been wiped out overnight."

Having come so close to annihilation, it seems fitting that the Hunterian Museum should host *Lost Museums: Nature And Medicine On Show*—a brief but fascinating stroll through the unfamiliar streets of a long-lost London, and into the plush private residences and grand gallery spaces of seven colourful characters who rose to fame on the back of their museums of natural history and anatomy.

The Hunterian is a little gem of a museum, with row upon row of exhibits all beautifully displayed. Their variety hints at a diverse provenance—with many finding their way to the Hunterian from museums and collections that have long since vanished. This rich history aroused the curiosity of the Hunterian's curators and their meticulous exploration of what these lost museums were like, who built them and why, and ultimately what fate befell them, forms the basis of this absorbing exhibition.

Building up a natural history or anatomy collection worthy of the name is no easy feat, and each lost museum cost their proprietors at least a small fortune in time and money. So why did they bother? The answers turn out to be almost as diverse as human

nature itself: vanity, status seeking, a wish to educate, a desire for profit, an insatiable curiosity, and—appropriately enough—exhibitionism, all play their part. Take the story of John Heaviside, a surgeon at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London in the early 19th century. Eager to embellish his reputation as a

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learned gentleman and connoisseur of curiosities, Heaviside spent his inheritance building up one of the most extensive anatomy collections in the UK, which he used to entertain a select audience. Heaviside had the entire ground floor of his imposing residence refashioned to show off his curios to their best advantage, and the result is shown in a beautiful illustration by John Howship as part of the exhibition.

The spectacle won Heaviside many admirers, but he was by no means universally acclaimed by the anatomists of the day. Among them was William Clift, conservator of the Royal College of Surgeons, who summed up his personal take on Heaviside with this deliciously barbed comment: "Most of [His] best specimens were purchased at sales; Mr Heaviside being rather a collector than an anatomist, his descriptions were generally vague and pompous and occasionally bordering on the marvellous, apparently quite unintentionally." Clift would, nonetheless, later purchase some of Heaviside's collection for the Hunterian when it was put up for sale in 1929.

At the other end of the spectrum was one William Bullock, a businessman and consummate showman. Using the wealth he had amassed from his work as a goldsmith in Sheffield, Bullock built up a huge collection of antiquities and

curios, which he displayed in Liverpool before moving to London in 1809. An adept promoter, he was one of the few collectors who turned a profit from charging an admission fee, and one of the keys to his success was the Egyptian Hall he had built on Piccadilly in 1811, with an outrageous façade styled on an Egyptian temple. Bullock recognised the importance of novelty in drawing in the crowds, and replaced his original collection with a series of temporary exhibitions in the Egyptian Hall until 1825. The edifice remained a Piccadilly landmark until its demolition in 1905, making it one of the last museums in the exhibition to be consigned to history. All the more reason then to appreciate the Hunterian while you can, because as *Lost Museums* charmingly reminds us, nothing lasts forever.

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London's Lost Museums: Nature and Medicine on Show
Qvist Gallery, Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons, London, UK, until July 2, 2011. See <http://www.rcseng.ac.uk/museums/exhibitions>

For more images from this exhibition see <http://fb.thelancet.com/T4W>



The Royal College of Surgeons' Museum by Thomas Hosmer Shepherd (c 1842)