

# Behind the Scenes:

An interview with Dr. Jason Head, Lecturer at the Department of Zoology and Curator of Vertebrate Palaeontology at the University Museum of Zoology

*How is the refurbishing and moving of everything into the new museum space even going?*

It's certainly been a huge challenge. I showed up here just over halfway done, so I walked into the middle of the process. As of now [22nd June 2017], half of the academic staff have moved in. Most of our collections – the spirits collections, our skeletal and fossil collections – have moved back into their new spaces. We are basically ploughing on full speed ahead to finish up the exhibit space and to get everything ready to go.

*Did you visit many museums when you were a child?*

As a child, I would go with my family to the Museum of Natural History at the University of Michigan. Because my mother was from Washington DC, every summer we would visit her family and go to the Smithsonian, where I would spend my time at the [National] Museum of Natural History. I ended up doing my undergraduate at Michigan working at the museum, and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian – I was very privileged and lucky to be able to actually work at two of the places which have been so influential to me.

*How long have you been the curator of vertebrate palaeontology at the University Museum of Zoology for?*

I am just coming up on the end of my second year. Most recently before, I was at the University of Nebraska and before that, the University of Toronto. This is my fifth natural history museum!

*As someone with so much experience, what do you think the purpose of museums is in the modern day?*

I've said this before, and I say it without irony or sarcasm – I truly believe that natural history museums can save the world. We are at a very unique moment in human history where we have basically come very close to eradicating nature. There are 'wild places' in the world, but there is really no nature left if we're finding human chemical signals even at the bottoms of abyssal trenches and at the top of our atmosphere – there is no natural habitat where we have made no modification at some level. As we start to plan out the future for a growing human population, shrinking wild places and what that means for the quality of life for human beings, what we need is data on the recent and deep past of Earth's natural ecosystems – and the only places we find that now are at natural history museums. So, when I say natural history museums can save the world – literally, natural history museums can save the world.

*I suppose that explains why you've worked in five of them.*

Well...yeah. >laughs<

*How do you think museums have changed in recent times with this conservation message? The Natural History Museum in London recently replaced its Diplodocus skeleton in its main hall with a whale and some more modern species. The University Museum of Zoology has of course been reorganised and refurbished – has it changed its*

Charles Darwin on his beetle collection, in his autobiography: "...no pursuit at Cambridge was followed with nearly as much eagerness or gave me so much pleasure as collecting beetles"



*And the whale skeleton?*

The whale went up without a hitch – it was rather amazing! It is 150 years old, so it's the exact same age as the museum, and is a beautiful attraction both to students and to the public. I actually use it in my teaching, as it's a very powerful and engaging way to talk to students when you're standing under the skeleton - you want to tell the story of vertebrate evolution and you're looking at one that's 70+ feet long [21+ metres]. It's our logo and it's a great way to welcome people into the museum.

The flipper of an elephant seal. Whilst a seal's hind flipper's are used for propulsion, front ones like this are used like rudders, for steering





*approach in a comparable way?*

Conservation and the human ecosystem are new issues dealt with primarily through research and collections. Exhibits in most museums are generally still focussed on either things like holistic approaches to looking at biodiversity - which is the primary objective of our exhibit structure - or telling a narrative about the history of life through time, which is what you would see a lot of at the Sedgwick Museum across the street, where you have much more of a palaeontological approach.

*Is this the right approach for museums to take? Or, if you had ultimate control, would you emphasise conservation in the University Museum of Zoology?*

I think it's not 'either or', because we do need to educate the public as to how we've radically resurfaced what's left of the natural world and how we've changed ecosystems...but we also have to give them the classic education on things like the history of life and biodiversity. So including issues of more immediate concern and impact is important - and we do some of that as you'll see when the museum opens up to the public - but we also have to give them the inventory of life's diversity at the same time. We're a zoology museum, we focus on animals - a large part of the exhibit is basically demonstrating the diversity of animals alive today and in the past.

You mentioned the Natural History Museum in London - that's a stand-alone museum. It has a particular audience, which is the general public. We are a university museum, which means that while the public is a part of our audience, a large part of that public are the students at Cambridge. We use the collection more for teaching, more for interfacing with students and using it as a tool to help people develop an advanced education and understanding of the natural world, in addition to providing an experience to the public which aren't Cambridge students or staff. JM



## The Fin Whale



**"I went to Pevensey to see the whale, and when I got there, I could only see its tail/The tail was so long and the smell so strong it made people sick to stay there long."** A skipping rhyme chanted by children by the whale carcass at Pevensey, 1865

In November 1865, a 70 foot whale washed up on Norman's Bay, near Pevensey. Being one of the largest mammals in existence, let alone in the North Sea, the finback whale was greeted by public amazement. Before the University of Cambridge acquired the skeleton in 1866, an estimated 40,000 visitors made the trip to its 'foul smelling' body, with songs and artwork quickly appearing. Since, it has been in the possession of the Museum of Zoology; until 2013 hanging eerily on the public walkway of the Downing complex.

Now, following 5 weeks of bone-by-bone dismantling, and many more for rehangng, the extraordinary creature has been redisplayed: suspended it in all its glory in the new lobby of the renovated museum, with a glass front to retain its place in the public eye. It now has a new backdrop of Rowena Whitehead and Chris Watson's 'ocean scape', a piece of music inspired by the whale. This otherworldly creation contains fragments from the whale's skipping rhyme sung by children from Pevensey schools, the sound of weddell seals, humpback whales and crustaceans in their natural habitat, traditional songs to sea deities such as the Yoruba goddess Yemaya, as well as poignant recordings of the sea on Norman's bay today.

In addition to being a dramatic space, the whale's position on the façade of the new museum is a powerful reminder to us that we need to protect and conserve the creatures on our planet. Finback whales are listed on both Appendix I and II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, but, despite there being only approximately 100,000 in existence, they are still today targets of harpooning and whaling.

The Museum of Zoology is still raising funds for the whale's conservation through the twitter campaign #raisethewhale. You can find stop-motion videos of the whale being dis- and re-mantled at the Ocean Song website: <https://oceansongproject.wordpress.com/MD>



Weighing in at more than 300 pounds and at a length of over 10 feet, Komodo dragons are the world's largest lizards