PRESS RELEASE

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Darwin's 'lost' fossils found

A 'treasure trove' of fossils including plant specimens collected by Charles Darwin, have been rediscovered. The fossils, which have been 'lost' for 165 years, were unearthed in an old cabinet at the British Geological Survey's vast fossil collection. They have now been registered and photographed and are available for viewing by the public through a new online museum exhibit released today: http://www.bgs.ac.uk/discoveringGeology/geologyOfBritain/archives/jdhooker/

Dr. Howard Falcon-Lang, a palaeontologist at Royal Holloway, University of London, made the discovery. He recalled, "While searching a cabinet for fossils from the Bristol Coalfield, I spotted some drawers marked 'unregistered fossil plants'. I can't resist a mystery, so I pulled one open. What I found inside made my jaw drop!"

Dr. Falcon-Lang continued, "Inside the drawer were hundreds of beautiful glass slides made by polishing fossil plants into thin translucent sheets. This process allows them to be studied under the microscope. Almost the first slide I picked up was labelled 'C. Darwin Esq.' This turned out to be a piece of fossil wood collected during Darwin's famous *Voyage of the Beagle* in 1834!" (This was the expedition during which Darwin developed the first inkling of his theory of evolution).

Just one of the lost fossils collected by Charles Darwin BGS©NERC

Joseph Hooker, a botanist and Darwin's best friend, was responsible for assembling the 'lost' collection whilst he worked for the British Geological Survey in 1846. Other specimens discovered include fossils that Hooker had found during an intrepid circum-Antarctic voyage in 1840. Still others came from the cabinet of the Rev. John Henslow (Darwin's mentor at Cambridge), whose daughter later married Hooker.

The fossils became 'lost' as Hooker failed to number them in the formal "register" before setting out on an expedition to the Himalayas. In 1851, the "unregistered" fossils were moved to the Museum of Practical Geology in Piccadilly, before being transferred to the Geological Museum, South Kensington in 1935, and finally onto the British Geological Survey HQ near Nottingham fifty years later. With each move the significance of the fossils gradually became forgotten.

Dr. Mike Howe, Chief Curator of the British Geological Survey said, "The Survey's sample registration system is similar to that used by Darwin on the Beagle, and dates back to 1848, so Hooker's collection was only a year or two too early to be included. Howard's discovery provides important information on the intriguing relationships between key scientists of the day, and we are pleased to make photographs of the slides available to academics and the public"

Dr. John Ludden, Executive Director of the Geological Survey said, "This is quite a remarkable discovery. It really makes one wonder what else might be hiding in our collections."

Ends

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Notes for Editors

The following are available for interview:

- Dr Howard Falcon-Lang, Royal Holloway, University of London
- Dr Mike Howe, British Geological Survey

For additional information go to: www.bgs.ac.uk

Photographs are available from our ftp server:
ftp://ftp.bgs.ac.uk/pubload/cjmi/Darwin%20Fossils/

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Courtesy of the British Geological Survey (BGS©NERC)

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