

INTRODUCTION

No attempt has been made in this work to enter into the historiography surrounding Banks, or the reasons for the uneven treatment he has received from different writers. It should be noted, however, that views about Banks's relationship with and contribution to the British Museum are mixed. Banks has recently been described as 'tyrannical' and a 'Dictator'.¹ Even those mindful of the debt owed him by London's societies and museums have tended to be critical in their assessments. For example, the great bequest to the Museum of his entire herbarium and library, both exceptional in their content and organization, has been characterized as one way in which Banks hindered rather than helped the Museum and botany, presumably by not completing and transferring everything before he died.² The flow of donations Banks conveyed to the Museum, and his own specialization in botany, will therefore be things to investigate a little further here, as will the coordinated ways in which he worked with staff and visitors at the Museum, using his own assistants and collections to support both. An outline of some of the activities Banks engaged in as a trustee will also be attempted in order to give an impression of how he dealt with officers and collections during his long tenure, and to try to discover whether his involvement can really be construed merely as detrimental and interfering.

At variance with the view of Banks as powerful and arbitrary is another contrasting interpretation. Some have described his contribution at the British Museum as insignificant during the period of his trusteeship. They have wondered 'how it was that a man of such ability and character, who was a leading influence in the scientific world of his time, should not have had a greater impact on an institution that, under Charles Morton, had lost its sense of purpose and direction'. Morton, a physician, was Principal Librarian in charge of the Museum from 1776 to 1799. His administration was apathetic, and probably did impede the Museum, and to this historians have been able to add further reasons why Banks's commanding influence was not more prominently felt. They argue that Banks was unable to exert as much influence at the Museum as elsewhere because he was 'one of a group of trustees subject to a group of official trustees presided over by three Principal Trustees with an archbishop as spokesman'.³ This is certainly true. The Museum's senior hierarchy was indeed cumbersome, and like any cumbersome hierarchy this must

have acted as a check on independent and purposeful action. Worse, as a trustee with scientific interests Banks became increasingly isolated as more politicians and peers joined the board. During his time at the Museum there was a marked decline in the number of trustees who were also Fellows of the Royal Society with authentic claims to scientific knowledge. For someone of Banks's interests and position, this presented yet another and a potentially more serious difficulty.

The Royal Society was incorporated by charter in 1662, and was the capital's major philosophical society. Banks was its President from 1778 to 1820, the longest anyone has served in this capacity, but during his presidency the influence of scientific Fellows at the Museum seemingly waned. This should have diminished Banks's power, adding force to the argument that he was in no position to make a difference at the Museum, but that, in fact, is not entirely the case, for a number of Fellows were still to be found there in these years. However, they tended to be Museum officers rather than trustees, so that in some fields science continued to be well represented. Banks could and did work closely with these officers, and the ways in which he did so are important in understanding how he operated at the Museum. Additionally, Banks tried hard to work with the new trustees, and found clever ways of doing so, especially when the support of Parliament or government was needed. Reference will therefore be made in the following account to some of Banks's political connections, but these were not central to his Museum career, and it is clear that the influence he possessed at a very senior level at Bloomsbury was ultimately limited.

For instance, in 1804 a Welsh friend, John Lloyd, asked Banks to gain him a place as a trustee. Banks was clear about two things. Firstly, he had no authority at the Museum to arrange such an appointment. Secondly, he was loath to try if the person concerned rarely visited London: 'I sincerely wish it may be in my power to Promote your wish of being a Trustee of the Museum tho it will be better for my poor Conscience if it Turns out as it has hitherto done that I have no influence at all for in Truth I Shall not be able to Palliate to myself the impropriety of Choosing a man destined to Reside ten meetings in Wales for Every one he will [be] Able to Attend in London.'⁴ Banks took the responsibility of being a trustee seriously. He did not regard the position as an empty honour, fit only for sharing among those seeking advancement or status. As a trustee his attendance at general and standing committees shows a diligence that deserves some credit, and if the ties of friendship and of class mattered at all to Banks, it tended to be where they could assist the Museum.⁵ Using these, and the political connections that existed, Banks worked to promote the Museum's interests where he could.

More importantly, Banks often acted in less conspicuous ways at the Museum, ways which have not as a consequence been so well recognized. Since Banks could not take overall decisions on his own authority, he worked closely with Museum officers on certain collections, and he channelled a vast array of material to Bloomsbury. These became effective alternatives to being in charge. A multitude of smaller tasks still allowed him to coordinate affairs, and perhaps even extended

his influence more subtly. The current study explores these types of activity, and an important aspect will therefore be the relationship Banks had with some of the Museum officers, and, no less significant, the use they made of direct access to him. In some notable cases he sat side by side with officers working through specimens, while officers could and did enlist his aid in pressing for the purchase of or reorganization of collections. Banks seems to have had more impact at this lower level, and this was due as much to the help he gave as it was to his social and scientific standing.

Although the Museum's officers were frequently Fellows of the Royal Society, unlike many of the trustees, this was not the only reason why Banks had such productive relations with a number of them. It appears that it was his willingness to support their work and careers, especially in natural history, that really gave him a claim to their confidence. It has frequently been asserted that as President Banks dominated the Royal Society, but insofar as this is true it does not seem to have impinged on the Museum's administration.⁶ Indeed, Banks understood the importance of making basic distinctions between the different bodies with which he was associated, not least in the way he distributed collections among them. He always responded warmly to drive and determination in others, highly valuing these qualities. He was also reasonably fair in his dealings, and consulted the officers to obtain information and opinions whenever this was necessary.

This was increasingly how the trustees as a whole conducted business, especially once Joseph Planta became Principal Librarian in 1799. Planta was very capable, and was a Secretary at the Royal Society from 1776 to 1804. Not long after his appointment the written reports that officers submitted to the trustees started to be retained,⁷ and committees were regularly set up to implement changes arising from successive reviews of the Museum. These procedures were important, and will be described in order to show how the Museum was managed, and how trustees like Banks could work effectively with officers, even when, as with Planta, the relationship was occasionally a little uneasy. The way the Museum was run after Charles Morton provides evidence not only of the organizational pressures felt after 1800, but also of the gradual progress that was made in coping with these pressures.

By the turn of the century an important moment in the Museum's development had been reached. More private collections were being purchased by or donated to the Museum as a public body. This happened in fields where the Museum exceeded what private individuals and societies could sustain, or where there was a deficiency at Bloomsbury that needed to be rectified by particular acquisitions. From 1800 onwards the Museum grew rapidly, but the growth was predominantly of classical and ancient remains, which started to eclipse natural products. This caused internal pressures with which officers were forced to contend, and it also meant that the Museum's structure had to be altered to accommodate the greater range of collections that it held. The main change was to establish specialist departments separately

responsible for antiquities and for natural history. In this way basic distinctions were made between different types of material. Later on this process led to the creation of distinct museums devoted to man-made and to natural products, and some of the collections at Bloomsbury were moved to other locations in the capital.

Such distinctions were not confined to Bloomsbury. Since at least the 1790s Banks's own collecting had concentrated on botany, books and certain natural history manuscripts and illustrations. In other words, he specialized too, but as a private individual. He therefore decided to donate important ethnographic and zoological collections to the British Museum, wishing to see them join other similar collections rather than keep what he would not fully develop himself. This does not mean that everything Banks gave away went to the British Museum. In some cases Banks thought other collectors, like the anatomist and surgeon John Hunter, deserved some of his zoological specimens. Gifts like these were made to those with a specialist interest of their own, in this case because Hunter had created an eminent private collection with many anatomical and zoological specimens in it. Furthermore, Banks occasionally preferred institutions like the Company (later and hereafter the Royal College) of Surgeons over the British Museum. This happened when he thought they might do a better job of storing and using the collections that they received, which again reflects his concern that material he gave away should be of use to research collections of real value.

The relationship between public and private collections was by no means a simple one. Specimens frequently moved from one collection to another, and sometimes onwards again to other collections. John Hunter's museum, for example, was purchased by the nation following Hunter's death, and entrusted to the Royal College of Surgeons. At the College it was placed under the supervision of a board of trustees, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Banks became one of these trustees. He therefore ended up overseeing specimens that he had already given away once: a pattern that repeated itself in the years leading to 1820. Other patterns emerged, and at a general level these concerned the growing size and reputation of certain institutions, each of which performed particular functions in an extended collecting network. Banks was linked to a number of these institutions, and his efforts at this level appear to have been directed towards ensuring that, when they became available, collections of different kinds were appropriately placed.

As with the Royal College of Surgeons, a choice had to be made between bodies like the British Museum, the gardens at Kew and the Royal Society in order to determine which was most suitable to receive material. These choices shaped collecting and collections in the capital, and so they will be discussed in what follows. They also helped to define relationships between the institutions and individuals organizing knowledge in London, here collectively called London Learned Society, determining how this varied group operated as part of a network stretching well beyond the metropolitan centre. This network grew apace during Banks's lifetime, and as it did the quantity and diversity of material arriving in London from

around the world necessitated greater strategic coordination. Institutions had to work in ways that supported one another by developing particular strengths and capabilities, and so there was a tendency to concentrate material in designated repositories. Such a tendency prefigured the increase in the nineteenth century of specialist museums and libraries, but it required additional administrative skill to be maintained. No less vital was the global vision necessary to make the most of the new and distant opportunities to collect that proliferated in this period. Banks's efforts show an awareness of this, and so his strategic manipulation of this wider network will be described in the ensuing account, as will the ways in which London Learned Society operated and changed as that network expanded.

It should be noted that Banks did not sell his collections, or profit from them financially. Instead, he frequently made gifts that enhanced his standing among collectors, gained him positions of seniority in institutions or which furthered learning itself. In return he obtained material for his personal collections, initially through his own travels, and later by exchange or purchase. In these ways Banks's influence over collecting and collections became pervasive. In the present work the emphasis is on what happened to collections accumulating in and around London, and how individuals like Banks tried to coordinate their growth and use. This became more necessary as the costs and technical requirements of maintaining large collections increased. The museum builders of Banks's day were engaged in an enormous task, and their ambitious efforts to order and present knowledge often strained late eighteenth-century resources and skills, not least at a place like the British Museum, where the widest range of material was kept.

In his early career, then, we see Banks as an explorer gathering rich collections, a number of which he gave to the Museum. We see that he made distinctions between different institutions, and this is apparent in the way that he distributed collections. Later in life Banks maintained a remarkable flow of gifts to the British Museum, many coming from colonial contacts as well as from some of the most intrepid naturalists and travellers of the day. He also became a sturdy member of various Museum committees, particularly as the Museum started to adapt to the demands being placed on it in the first decades of the nineteenth century. These were crucial years of financial struggle at Bloomsbury. Space, staff and equipment were frequently in short supply, and managing growing collections in these circumstances presented some serious challenges. Trustees and staff were compelled to take difficult decisions on how best to cope, and some of the more controversial occasions when this was necessary will be described later in this volume. These demonstrate not only the attitudes and practical considerations of those responsible for the collections, but also the pressures that they faced.

In all of this, Banks was one of the trustees whose pragmatism and commitment to Museum affairs did not diminish. He was willing to persevere, and while it cannot be said that he was correct in every decision he took, it still seems worthwhile to examine what he and others did – and why – in order to comprehend