

Sir Greville's Museum and Natural History Collection

Research: FAM volunteer

In 1885 Sir Greville and Lady Emily Smyth converted the some of the stables at Ashton Court into a Museum for Sir Greville's growing collection of natural history specimens. This is the space which we now call the Music Room.



Image: Mb6066©Bristol Culture. Music Room in the 1920s long after the Collection had been donated to Bristol Museums.

No images exist of the room with Sir Greville's collection in-situ.

During Sir Greville's life time his collection grew, and a bungalow was built on the Ashton Court Estate to house the growing collection of specimens. This bungalow later became part of the Redwood Country Club. It was demolished and the site is now part of the Audley Redwood Retirement complex.

Sir Greville's died in 1901. In 1906 Dame Emily donated almost the entire collection to the Bristol Museums and Art Galleries, including one of Sir Greville's Great Auk eggs (the Museum has two, the second one was donated by Esme Smyth in 1945).

All of the exhibits and items from Sir Greville's collection that the Museum holds are identifiable by a label with an intertwined 'G and S' on a red background. Some of the collection is still housed in the wooden cabinets that came from Ashton Court. The majority of the collection is 'in Store'. A few pieces are on display in the wildlife Gallery and these have been described separately.

In 1872 the Bristol Museum moved from its premises at the bottom of Park Street (now the Masonic Hall) to a new building on Queens Road (now occupied by Brown's restaurant).

In 1905 the Bristol City Art Gallery was built next door (now the front hall of the Museum). The space to the rear was built in 1930. In 1893 the Museum had come under public ownership.

The 1905 Report of the Museum and Art Gallery Committee reported:

'The generous gift of 2,000 by Lady Smyth, of Ashton Court, ... , enabled the old library hall to be remodelled. The roofs of both that and the adjoining room were re-slatted, and fitted with four ventilators, the old wooden louvres being removed and their place occupied by glass, the improved lighting of the interior being very marked. A new doorway was made giving access to the Greville Smyth Room from the main floor room of the museum, the new doorway being of American walnut, and the door constructed with plate glass panels, the whole designed to agree with the doorway which gives access to the museum. The balcony is reached by an imposing staircase branching from the first flight to each side of the gallery. An alcove on the landing contains the bust of the late Sir Greville Smyth by Aridieoni. The balustrade of the staircase is continued round the gallery, and carries a series of desk cases projecting into the room and supported at each newell by finely moulded and shaped trusses. The new cases occupying the room are of mahogany, french-polished, and glazed with the best quality of English plate glass.'

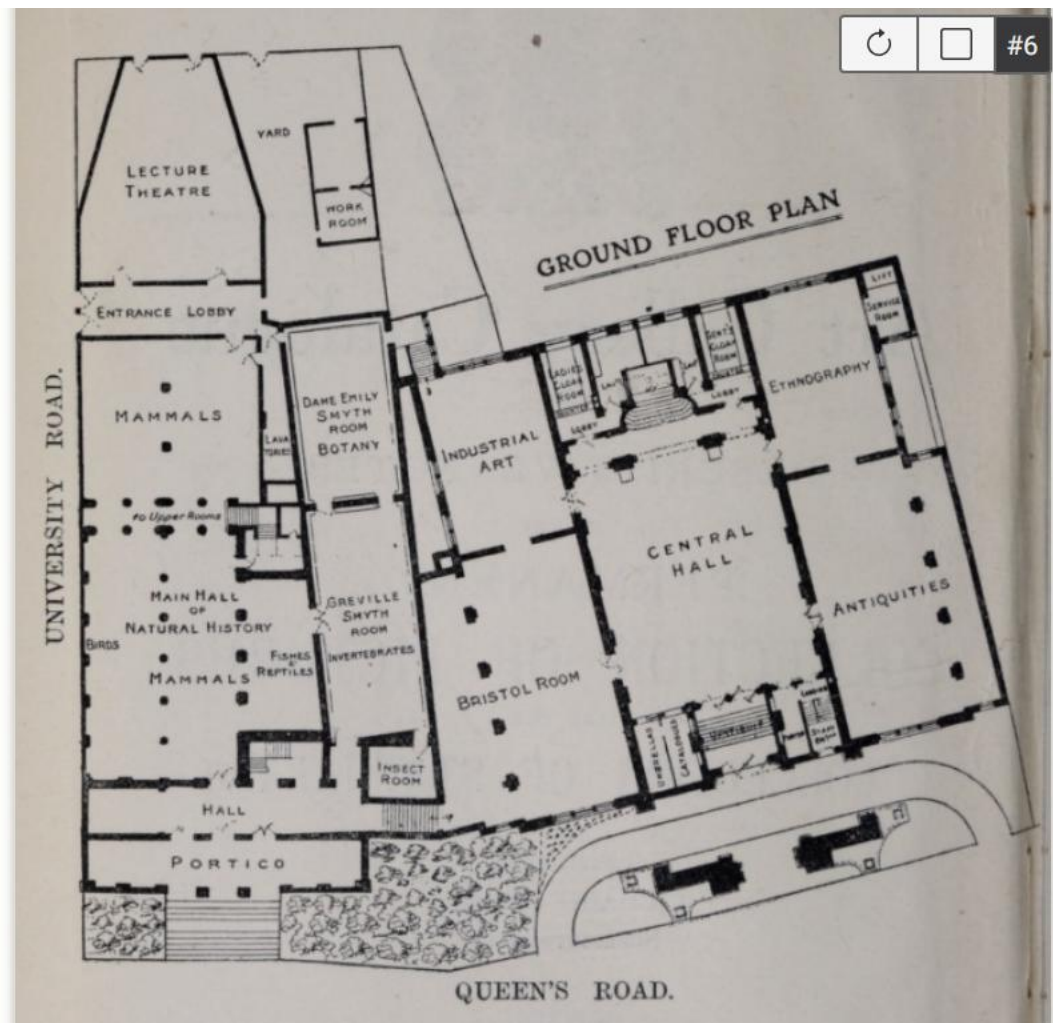


Image: Report of the Museum and Art Gallery Committee 1905 shows the planned arrangement of the Dame Emily Smyth and Greville Smyth Rooms.

Finely drawn artist impressions were created by the artist Charles William Thomas c 1907 to illustrate the rooms.



Image: ©Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives.

The Greville Smyth Room was officially opened in July 1909.

In 1910 Dame Emily made a further donation of £1500 for the fitting up of a companion room for botanical specimens. The Bristol City Council determined that the room should be known as the Dame Emily Smyth Room. It was officially opened in February 1910.

Specific items from the collection were selected for enhancement. For instance, the 1910-11 Museum Report mentions:

"...two pairs of Ptarmigan ... were taken from the Greville Smyth collection if skins and set up amidst natural surroundings ...".

Donations continued to be made by Esme Smyth whose generous cheque funded a visit to Australia by the Museum Director in 1914 to collect corals and marine invertebrates.

The Report for the year ending 30th September 1915 detailed that the Hon. Mrs Smyth had presented:

'the collection of record heads of Scottish Red Deer brought together by the late Sir Greville Smyth ...'.

There were 52 heads in total. This gift was followed in the same year by the gift of a Dingo and a collection of birds' eggs from Caithness.

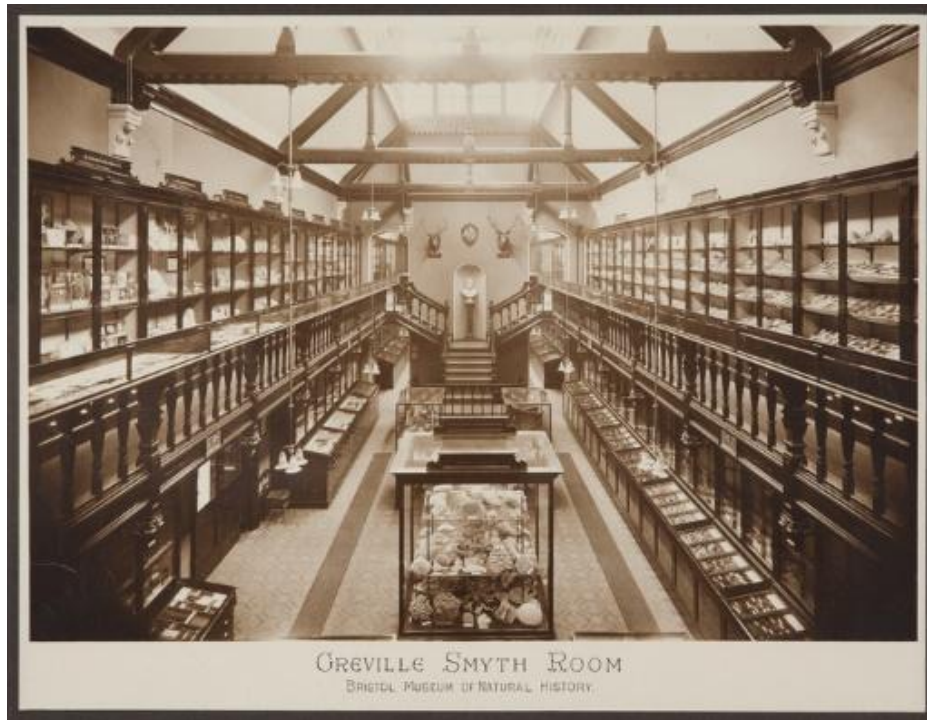


Image: Ah184 ©Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives. The white marble bust of sir Greville, donated by Dame Emily in 1908, can be seen at the far end of the room.

At some point later the matching bust of Dame Emily was also donated.



Image: FAM
volunteer.



Image: ©Bristol Archives 17563/1/32. The Museum showing the Natural History rooms and the connecting corridor to the Art Gallery.

In November 1940 both rooms were destroyed during the Bristol blitz.

In February 1947 the remains of the old museum (with the exception of the undamaged lecture theatre [at the rear] were sold to Bristol University. It was later rebuilt as their dining rooms.



Image: ©Bristol Museums and Art Galleries.



Image: ©Unknown.