

# Thomas Bell

Thomas Bell was an eminent 19th century zoologist whose collections reflected his wide interests in natural history. Many of his specimens are to be found at Oxford, including some collected by Charles Darwin during his voyage on *The Beagle*.

Thomas Bell was born in Poole, Dorset in 1792. Although he originally trained as a dentist, his lifelong interest in natural history led him to become an eminent zoologist. He was appointed as Professor of Zoology at King's College, London,



By permission of the  
Linnean Society of London

in 1836. Rather than a field biologist, Bell was a great compiler of scientific knowledge, and the groups that interested him most were amphibians, reptiles and crustaceans. Bell published a large number of books and scientific papers, including a description of the reptiles and amphibians collected by Charles Darwin during his voyage on *The Beagle*. His *Monograph of the Testudinata* was an ambitious attempt to summarise the world's turtles, living and extinct; originally intended as a folio in eight parts, this work was never completed. He died in 1880.

## What is 'Learning more'?

'Learning more' presents a series of articles about the Museum and its collections. It is designed for older students, teachers, researchers, and anyone who wants to find out more about particular aspects of the Museum's work and its history.

This article introduces the life and work of Thomas Bell, a major contributor to the Museum's zoological collections.

'Learning more' articles are free, and available to all for educational, non-profit purposes. Unless otherwise stated, the Museum retains copyright of all material used in this leaflet.

## Bell's collections at the Museum

Bell's collections of tortoises, turtles, crocodiles and lizards were purchased by Revd. Frederick William Hope and presented to the University in 1862. In the same year John Westwood bought 52 drawers of Bell's collection of Crustacea including some material collected by Darwin. This was Westwood's personal gift to the University on the occasion of his becoming the first Hope Professor of Zoology in 1861. Charles Darwin wrote to Westwood indicating that he was happy the collection was going to Oxford, and was to be looked after by Westwood.

Over the years, this material has been transferred to the zoological collections, starting in 1899 and finishing as recently as 1975, with the transfer of the dried crustaceans. It was at this time that the long-forgotten presence of specimens from Darwin's voyage was rediscovered!

*Emydura* sp.



*Dilocarinus* sp.

Further details of the Bell collection of dried crustacea can be found by searching the Darwin database.



## Selected references

Bell, T. (1835) Observations on the genus *Cancer* of Dr. Leach (*Platycarcinus*, Latr.). *Transactions of the Zoological Society of London*, Volume 1, 335-342, pl. 43-47.

Bell, T. (1837) *A history of British quadrupeds, including the cetacea*. London.

Bell, T. (1838) *A history of British reptiles*. London.