

## Nature Diary 8

I have always enjoyed hunting around in the wild for anything that stimulates my Natural History curiosity. Over the past year this has become difficult due to Covid house arrest and the recent bad weather. Victorian gentry were avid collectors, some bringing back items from their Grand Tours. The clergy were also enthusiastic collectors so much so that some species were brought close to extinction. They often commissioned bijouterie cabinets, beautiful pieces of furniture to display their exhibits. In time some collections became the foundations for museum collections. My bijouterie cabinet is a shelf in my Ikea bookcase.

When I look around my study I see plenty of evidence of past hunting expeditions in some surprising places. A rich source of prey can be found in junk shops. In these places refined hunting skills are still required to find little gems amongst the cracked cups, chipped glasses and faded pictures. When I find my prey I examine it carefully before going in for the kill. This involves assertive but courteous haggling with the dealer to establish a fair price. Then I carry my quarry home.



One of my prize finds is Nigel, a rhinoceros beetle who is looking down at me as I write. I know he is dead but so is Roy Rogers' horse Trigger and he had him stuffed. Nigel shows clearly the characteristic four wings of flying insects. He has a wing span of over six inches. He grew up as an enormous grub munching rotten wood in a log in a tropical forest. They are now reared in captivity for sad people like me to buy so the wild population is not affected. I also have a smaller species which I found in an antiques market in Bruges.

Fossils are always great finds amongst the junk. I have a lovely Ammonite. These shells were the homes of squid like creatures living in the Cretaceous Period 201-66 million years ago. Mine is the size of a crusty roll but they can be huge, one specimen was over six feet across.



I have always wanted to find a fossil Trilobite and sure enough patient foraging captured one in an antique centre in Heanor. They look a bit like large woodlice and lived in the sea in the Cambrian Period but became extinct about 250 million years ago.



I have a perfect sea urchin fossil given to me by one of my pupils when I was a primary school teacher. It has sentimental value. My pupils often brought me treasures. One boy presented me with the inside of a music box. He said his Dad was a plumber and he 'finds' things. I declined the gift gracefully.

Bones are always good things to find and I have a nice skull of what I thought was that of a badger because I found it close to a badger's set. Subsequently I found it was a fox's skull.



I also have a piece of fossilised coral I found whilst on holiday in central France hundreds of miles from the sea.



One of my prize captures was a horseshoe crab found in an antique centre. They have ancient ancestry and are more closely related to spiders than crabs. They live in warm estuarine waters and are eaten in the Far East, what's not, and used as fishing bait. Mine is about hand size but they grow to the size of dinner plates. The most remarkable thing about them is that they have blue blood which is hyper sensitive to the presence of bacteria. It is in demand in clinical laboratories to check for bacterial contamination. Almost certainly it is used in the production of the Covid vaccines.



These horseshoe crabs are donating blood. They will be returned to the sea to recuperate. Don't forget to shout out 'thank you Limulus polyphemus' when you have your next vaccination.