The men at the top: William Henry Flower
By James Hatton

By the time he was appointed as director in 1884, Flower already had a reputation for brilliance. After studying medicine at University College London, he had served in the Crimea as an army surgeon in the battles of Alma, Inkerman and Balaclava. But he was invalided home, and his health never fully recovered. After a stint as demonstrator in anatomy at Middlesex Hospital and then curator of the Hunterian Museum at the impressively young age of 30, a position previously held by Richard Owen. Success followed success, and at the age of 39 he was appointed the Hunterian Professor, taking over from Thomas Huxley.

Flower was an evolutionist and undertook influential work on the brain in man and apes that supported evolutionary theory. He was held in esteem by comparative anatomists and zoologists across the world, but was equally famous for the design and execution of his exhibitions, and was branded by one of his peers as the prince of museum directors.

When he took the directorship at the Natural History Museum he had to deposit a bond of £2,000, presumably to ensure his seriousness about the job. His starting salary was £1,200, so the size of the bond was substantial. Unlike the Hunterian, where he had complete control over exhibits, life was dramatically different here. There was a wider array of personalities to contend with and a much heavier load of administrative duties to carry. In fact, when he was appointed, nothing was stated explicitly about working on exhibits, his forte. The Trustees wanted someone to manage the Museum in a way that Owen had not, and they gave Flower the title of Director rather than Superintendent to reflect that. He was a more or less instant success, a testament to his strong but tactful personality.

At the time of Flower’s appointment, each of the departments was responsible for their own exhibition galleries, but Owen’s retirement had left no one in charge of the Central Hall’s so-called Index Museum, the area of the building introducing visitors to all the main groups of plants, animals, fossils and minerals. Flower promptly claimed it. He arranged the bays as introductions to the other galleries, serving to illustrate leading points in the structure of each large group. In the galleries, specimens were arranged in systematic order, but in the Central Hall they were arranged for the purposes of comparison.

When Albert Günther retired in 1895, Flower made the bold move of taking over as Keeper of Zoology, which he did on top of his role as Director. He immediately set about rearranging the zoological galleries, completed the bird gallery and created the whale room. He de-cluttered the galleries, ensured that each specimen was ticketed with an easy-to-read label, and placed stuffed animals side-by-side with the skeleton, important parts of its internal structure, and remains of extinct allies, in order to give the displays depth and context. All this would have been impossible without the unflagging energy of assistant secretary Charles Fagan, the administrative engine of the Museum for many years.

Flower became a public figure. Lectures he gave were crowded and he became famously vocal in his thoughts on women’s fashion, prompting Beatrix Potter to write, ‘I wonder what Sir W Flower’s speciality is besides ladies’ bonnets.’ He was aghast at the slaughter of birds so that their plumage could be used to decorate hats, saying about the egret that ‘one of the most beautiful of birds is being swept off the face of the earth under circumstances of peculiar cruelty, to minister to a passing fashion’. Concerned about the popularity of corsets and high heels, since they deformed the body and feet, he wrote a book called Fashion in Deformity.

His ambitiousness as Director rivalled Owen’s, and his administrative efficiency and talent for exhibition work made him one of the most successful and influential of Museum directors. His successor, Edwin Ray Lankester, said that under Flower the Museum became a delight to the eye, and the visitor was ‘charmed by the harmony and fitness of the group presented to his notice’. A devotee of Darwin, the marble statue by J E Boehm was installed under Flower’s directorship in 1889.

Flower resigned in August 1898, following a bout of ill health, and died the following year, on 1 July 1899, at the age of 67.