

My life as a geological curator

The life of a museum curator is very varied. **MATTHEW PARKES** explains why he finds his work so fascinating

Work experience student Jessica Hanon holds a large quartz crystal from Dublin.



Where do geological curators work?

Specialist geological curators are found mainly in the bigger national museums. In smaller museums, they're a rare breed. More usually it's natural science curators who care for the museum's entire natural history collection. I'm the only geological curator in the Natural History Museum in Dublin, where my job involves working on a variety of geological collections – rocks, minerals, gemstones, meteorites and fossils of all kinds.



Moving the collection.

Looking after collections

The heart of the curator's work is caring for (curating) collections. This involves record-keeping as well as checking that the specimens are in good condition. New acquisitions get registered into the museum's database records and its paper-based registers, and labels are written for the specimens. In my museum we are in the middle of moving our collections from an old building to a modern storage building that's better suited to housing them. Another big project involves rescuing a collection of 5,000 minerals.

The GSI drilling



Collecting, rescuing and research on new specimens

This can be variable! At the moment I'm doing research on an ancient volcanic island at Bellewstown in Ireland, working there with the Geological Survey of Ireland – and their drilling rig!

Fossil sea urchins

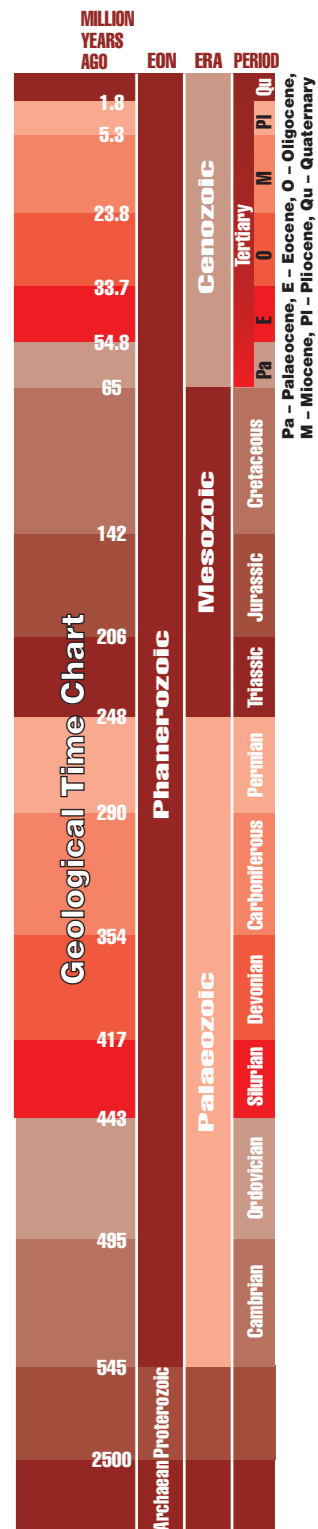


Found on rocky coast

Recently a large team got together to rescue a rare example of fossil sea urchins, with their spines still attached. They'd been found on a bit of rocky coast and the outcrop was likely to get destroyed by the winter storms.



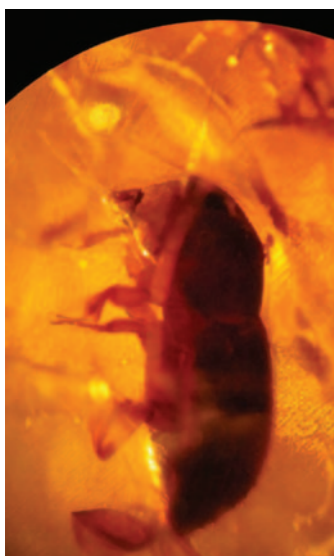
Each section of fossiliferous slab had to be carefully excavated and lifted so it could eventually be reassembled like a jigsaw.



Photos by Matthew Parkes, Patrick Roycroft, Sarah Gatley, Angela Jiménez-Sanz and Nidia Álvarez Armada

Education and outreach work

One of the most fun activities for a curator is giving workshops and events for the public. This is an opportunity to show off parts of the collections which are not normally on display, and for the public to see behind the scenes. The last one I did enabled 20 people to examine pieces of copal, an amber-like material, which contained many different insects.



An insect embedded in copal.

Answering enquiries from the public

It's challenging for a museum curator to be always on hand to answer enquiries from museum visitors. It can be anything from identifying a fossil for a young collector to organising a week-long research visit for foreign scientists to do detailed study on a particular collection. Curators are always keen to help young enthusiastic collectors to identify their finds, so don't be nervous of asking for help from your local museum.

Exhibitions

Developing new exhibitions is a big project involving many people other than the curator. In my museum, we have no geology gallery so we focus on temporary exhibitions to remind the public that we do have geological collections. One day we shall get a new building to display them permanently. This year, because I haven't any indoor display space, I'm working on an outdoor 'Rock Garden' exhibition of some of Ireland's most interesting geology, displayed as large boulders.

Expect the unexpected

I know I'm lucky to have a job I really enjoy (almost) all the time. No day is the same and I look forward to going to work every day. There are often completely unexpected things that turn up, but that's part of the challenge. Perhaps the life of a geological curator is one that would suit you too?