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Council**

Museum

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Museum @ Home Conservation stories

A false ear for an extinct Viking mouse



We have a rare example of a St Kilda Mouse in Bolton Museum's Collections – this is a subspecies of the house mouse that is thought to have arrived on the remote Scottish island of St Kilda with the Vikings. Sadly it became extinct about 1000 years later when the humans it depended upon evacuated the island in 1930.

Bolton Museum's successful *Animals & Us* exhibition in 2016 explored humans' relationship with animals and we wanted to display our St Kilda mouse. Unfortunately it was missing an ear and since the specimen was so rare there was no possibility of ever gaining another. Any conservation we decided to do would have to interfere as little as possible and avoid sticking things to the surface.

The mouse was first carefully brushed with very soft brushes by our conservator to see where the areas of damage were. We then took photographs of the mouse and talked the plan for display through with the team curating the exhibition. The mouse had previously been mounted onto a little black board with an original label showing it came from St Kilda on one side – unfortunately this was both the most important side for display and the side of the mouse with the missing ear.

Our conservator spent a while inspecting the detail of the one remaining ear to understand its shape.

One of the most versatile materials in the conservator's tool kit is Japanese tissue paper. This special paper is handmade and has very long fibres, giving it a lot of strength even though it is very thin. It works on the same principle as fibreglass.

Using delicate dentists' tools and paintbrushes, the conservator pushed two long tabs of Japanese tissue under the skin of the mouse where the ear should have been. No adhesive was needed at this stage as the ear would be so tiny it would be light enough for the tabs to support the weight without needing to be permanently stuck to the specimen. The ends of the tabs of tissue were left exposed:



The mouse with tissue sticking out of hole where missing ear should be.

Next the conservator cut some more pieces of Japanese tissue into tiny tear drop shapes and layered them together like papier mâché using PVA glue. This adhesive meant the ear could be easily molded into shape while the layers were drying. A couple of attempts were needed before a tiny false ear was made that closely resembled the shape of the remaining ear.



Trial false ears. They don't look like much at this stage!

The false ear was then positioned and attached to the two tabs of Japanese tissue using PVA adhesive.



The white tissue ear in place on mouse.

Finally the false ear was tinted to match the mouse's colouring using watercolour paints and tiny paintbrushes.



The false ear partly tinted.

When the new ear matched the original it was ready for display.



The fur of the mouse was given a final brush and it was ready for display.

Here it is on display in *Animals & Us* (the top one of the two rodents in the image). Do you remember visiting this exhibition?



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