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Project Title:

Science at the seaside: pleasure hunts in Victorian Devon (2014–17)

UOA: 27 - English Language and Literature

300-Word Statement

The different elements of this output – a co-authored chapter, a co-curated permanent exhibition with a written guide, workshops, an educational activities programme, and the digitization of c.2000 museum objects – derive from research undertaken as part of a North Devon FLAG-funded project, 'Science at the Seaside: Pleasure Hunts in Victorian Devon' (October 2013-August 2015). During 1850–80, many prominent writers and naturalists visited Ilfracombe on the North Devon coast, and several, such as George Henry Lewes, George Eliot, Charles Kingsley and Philip H. Gosse, published accounts that helped to foster the national taste for popular science and natural history. This project, a collaboration between Ilfracombe Museum, Bath Spa University and the University of Exeter, proposed a new and original understanding of the interlinked growth of popular science and coastal tourism in this period, with the different outputs producing original insights into the Victorian fascination with natural history.

The project's methodology drew on recent scholarship in the History of Science demonstrating that scientific knowledge is not abstract or universal, but is spatially conditioned. It innovatively combined material culture with scientific and literary writings on the seashore; for example, items and ephemera from Ilfracombe Museum provided examples of seashore specimens collected and how they were presented, exhibited or turned into handicrafts such as pressed seaweed or shell-work. Objects for the new permanent exhibition were recontextualised using recent research on Victorian natural history, while circa 2000 items from the museum archives, reflecting the growth of the area as a tourism resort, were digitised and made publicly available for the time.

The co-authored chapter demonstrates the important role played by the scientific and imaginative appeal of the remote North Devon coast, and argues that this helped to foster the Victorian fascination with the littoral space of seashore and its biodiversity.