



## Guidelines for collectors

A collection of rocks, fossils or mineral specimens can be both educationally and scientifically valuable; but only if it is arranged and looked after in the correct manner. Many amateur collectors in Britain own unique and valuable collections but they have only done so by learning to become skilled curators. The following guidelines apply to any size of collection. This information has been extracted and updated from Appendix C of the book *Essex Rock* (1999).

1. The cleaning of specimens should be carried out with great care. Tap water and a soft brush are all that is usually required but with some specimens (e.g. chalk fossils) dry cleaning may be more appropriate. Specimens from the foreshore should be thoroughly soaked in fresh water to remove any salts.
2. Soft matrix adhering to a specimen can usually be removed with a knife but instruments such as dental tools are much more useful (if they can be obtained). The removal of harder matrix requires a small hammer and chisel and a degree of skill. Electric engraving tools can also be useful for this purpose. Remember to wear eye protection when carrying out this work. If you think a specimen is likely to be rare or important, seek the advice of a museum or a geological society.
3. Fossils containing pyrite (e.g. London Clay fruits and seeds) are often very unstable and after thorough cleaning in fresh water should be dried and stored in airtight containers. There are a number of ways of treating such fossils to delay decomposition but many are costly and difficult. The important thing is to reduce the humidity inside the containers and this can be done by adding a bag of silica gel obtainable from photographic shops.
4. Under no circumstances should a specimen be varnished or otherwise treated to 'improve' its appearance. If treatment is necessary to consolidate a fragile specimen it should be carried out using a treatment that can be removed at a future date for retreatment. PVA adhesive (diluted with water) can often be used with some success and UHU adhesive is suitable for repairs. Fragile fossils from Ice Age sites (e.g. mammoth tusks) often present severe problems and advice should be sought from a museum or geological society.
5. Specimens should be provided with a label giving the exact locality where found (including the Ordnance Survey grid reference if possible), the geological formation and the date of collection. In the case of fossils found in a cliff face the particular horizon (i.e. the position in the cliff or excavation should also be given. It is important to note down this information **at the time of collection** so that it is available when writing permanent labels at home. To note the name or species is of secondary importance as the specimen can always be identified at a later date. In the case of purchased specimens the date of purchase, price and name of the retailer should be given. Old labels may be of historical interest and should be retained.
6. There is a high risk that a label may eventually be lost or misplaced and one solution to this problem is to put the specimen and label in a sealed box. However, a much better solution is

to actually to mark the information on the back of the specimen. **The most important information to note down about a specimen is the place where it was found and the date it was collected.** Using a computer it is now easy to print and cut up tiny labels that can be stuck on the back of specimens with glue (UHU or similar). This label could simply say "Walton Naze 3/4/09". For the same reason the common practice of merely numbering specimens and recording the information in a catalogue is also not recommended as the history of geological collecting is littered with instances where the collection has survived but not the catalogue. A catalogue could, of course, be used to provide more information about a specimen and its locality.

7. The collection should be kept in a cabinet with close-fitting drawers in a cool part of the house with low humidity. If a suitable cabinet cannot be obtained an excellent alternative is a number of shallow cardboard boxes with lids. Each specimen should be contained within a card tray or plastic box lined with foam or tissue where necessary. Cotton wool is not recommended as it adheres to specimens.
8. Try to specialise and so create a collection that will be of greater educational and scientific value. Collect from a particular part of Britain (e.g. Essex), or from a particular geological formation (e.g. London Clay).
9. Personally collecting specimens is the most satisfying method of obtaining them but do not rule out opportunities for purchasing or exchanging them to enhance your own specialist collection. Membership of a geological society will put you in touch with fellow enthusiasts.
10. Specimens which cannot be identified should be referred to a museum or geological society. Many specimens of scientific value have probably been lost to science because this has not been done. If the specimen is unusual or rare a museum may ask you to donate it but you are under no obligation to do so.

## EQUIPMENT SUPPLIERS

**Geo Supplies Ltd.** <http://www.geosupplies.co.uk>

*Equipment for the geologist and collector including a wide selection of local geological guides.*  
49 Station Road, Chapelton, Sheffield S35 2XE. Telephone: 0114 245 5746

**Northern Geological Supplies Ltd.** <http://www.norgeo.co.uk/>

*Equipment for the geologist and collector including specimen labels and folding card trays.*  
66 Gas Street, Bolton, Lancashire, BL1 4TG. Telephone: 01204 388754

**UKGE Limited** <http://www.ukge.co.uk>

*Equipment for the geologist and collector including a good selection of storage boxes.*  
Unit 10 Fountain Way, Reydon Business Park, Reydon, Southwold, Suffolk, IP18 6SZ  
Telephone: 0800 0336 002

**P & M Boxes (Leigh-on-Sea) Ltd.**

*Suppliers of large cardboard boxes with lids for storage purposes (minimum order required).*  
32-34, Maple Avenue, Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, SS9 1PR. Telephone: 01702 478279

**Brunel Microscopes Ltd.** <http://www.brunelmicroscopes.co.uk>

*Stereo microscopes for collectors*  
Unit 2, Vincients Road, Bumpers Farm Industrial Estate, Chippenham, Wiltshire SN14 6NQ.  
Telephone: 01249 462655

**Watkins and Doncaster** <http://www.watdon.co.uk/the-naturalists/>

*Naturalists' supplies. Geological field equipment, specimen boxes and cabinets.*  
PO Box 5, Cranbrook, Kent, TN18 5EZ. Telephone: 0845 833 3133.