

Darwin's Unseen Specimens & Artifacts

Denise Rimmer

The purpose and theory behind my project is to bring unseen slides into the public domain by making beautiful images from historically important material. I hope to produce an exhibition accompanied by a book, to engage public interest in our history and scientific relevance of specimen collections as well as micrography and photomicrography.

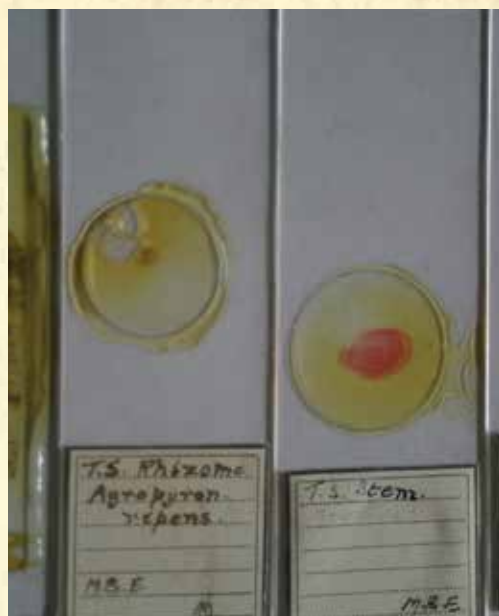
This project began during my final photography degree year, in which I focused greatly on photomicrography. I've always been interested in macrophotography and love to look closer at things; even when I go out to photograph landscapes I end up looking at leaves, bark, earth etc. Natural, abstract patterns in nature are fascinating; especially when you realise not everybody notices them. The next step for me was obvious: to go even closer and look through the microscope, something I'd always wanted to try.

My tutor at university got hold of a microscope from the science department for me to try some photography with, well I was hooked. I just played about with anything that light could be seen through or anything I could cut thin enough. From this I decided to look for my own microscope, wanting to spend more of my own time trying to obtain images through the microscope. It was after this that I got thinking; I knew I wanted to create a project around my new interest but what to photograph? I needed something to fulfill many criteria in order for it to be the success hoped for and to get across the way I felt about seeing things in a new way.

This was when there was a touch of serendipity and I was lucky enough to come across some boxes of old botanical microscope slides dating from the 1920s to the 1950s that were being given away through a recycling site. It seemed like fate and truly did work out better than I could have imagined. After some trial and error on the micrography side, and various adaptors in order for me to use my SLR camera, I started to make some beautiful images. As well as the aesthetics of the images I managed to produce from these discarded slides, I was intrigued by the history of them. It occurred to me that they were probably not viewed for many years and could have easily ended up in the rubbish bin. At the time I managed to get some ideas from a Doctor of Botany at the Natural History Museum who was



Figure 1. Salvaged slides originally from The Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew.



kind enough to speculate on where the slides may have come from and what they might have been used for. This gave me some depth to the images before me.

From those images I created two exhibition pieces and a book of which I was extremely proud but what interested me most was the reaction I received. I found that it was the initial beauty of the images that grasped people's attention, then followed by curiosity as to what the image was of, followed by the history of the slide itself.

My degree was not long enough to explore this subject fully, so I decided to continue on the journey I'd started. New subject material was needed and when thinking about this I realised that actually, something very relevant to society could be achieved here by making the same kind of images from historically significant slides. Where better to start my search than the Natural History Museum, Science Museum and the House of Charles Darwin; one of our most famous and influential historical figures. It was Down House that replied to my queries first and this resulted in a meeting with the

curator Annie Kemkaran-Smith, who revealed to me that there were some of Darwin's own slides that were un-exhibited and might be available to me. It was at this point that I applied to the RMS for help, as I felt such important specimens as Darwin's deserved more capable means than I had available to me. The help I have been awarded by the RMS has significantly increased my ability to complete this project and, therefore, bring into public view something not seen before in microscopy.

I am at the stage in this project where I have carried out a 'first shoot' of slides I had previously picked out, as having possibilities. Unfortunately, it was obvious from an initial photography session that there would not be enough material here to compile anything with enough substance. However, there are other artifacts at Down House that I will be including in this project as well as text from the curator. I am now in correspondence with the Natural History Museum and Cambridge University and will be visiting Cambridge University shortly to view what of Darwin's slides they may have available to me. I have to say that all these institutions have been more than helpful and I would encourage anybody seeking help with their own projects to contact them.

I am presently reading papers made available to me and various books on Darwin, including Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture (Jonathan Smith, Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Charles Darwin and the Beagle Collections in the University of Cambridge (Edited by Alison M Pearn, Cambridge University Press, 2009), in order to substantiate the historical importance of the slides I may be using and the theory behind the specimens and my work. During my time so far on this project, it has come to light (as far as I know) that none of these, and possibly other important slides, have been photographed and exhibited for public display in the way I am proposing. The slides themselves have been photographed of course but not the actual specimen, which in my opinion is the most

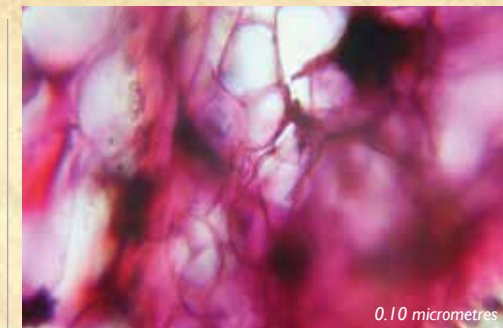


Figure 2. *Araucaria Imbricata*, 18th November 1930.

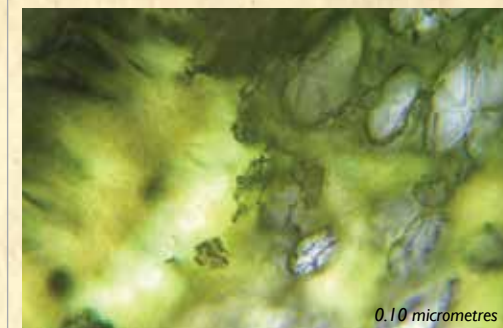


Figure 3. *Juglans regia* 1920 -1950 (no exact date).



Figure 4. Marked as Owl Glandular Stomach by Darwin at Down House, Kent, UK (Date unknown).

interesting part of the slide. After all, the collectors of the specimens did not make the collection in order to look at the slide itself but to view and gain information from the specimen. This may be the start of a much larger project, covering not just more of Darwin's slides but also more of our most important historical collections.

Denise Rimmer BA

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