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# British Naturalists' Association

The National Body For Naturalists

## Liebig's Chromolithographic Trading Cards in the Andrew Taylor Natural History Collection

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*"My Lord, I've got every cigarette card they ever printed of you. My whole family took up smoking just so that we could get the whole set. My grandmother smoked herself to death so we could afford the album."*

Baldrick to Lord Flashheart, *Blackadder Goes Forth*

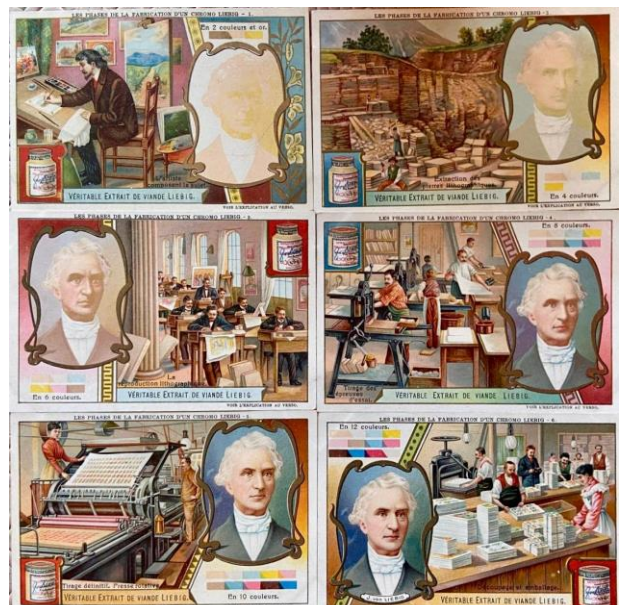
Trading cards have had a long association with packets of tea and cigarettes, however from 1865 to the 1970s the Liebig's Extract of Meat Company, later to become OXO, also started producing its own series of cards. These cards, produced primarily for advertising, covered an incredible range of subjects and provided cheap and accessible education to thousands of people. By the time their production had finished in 1965, the company had produced nearly 2000 sets, with 11,000 individual cards distributed across 14 countries and many sets reproduced in multiple languages. Many of the cards depict natural history subjects, and it is this that has drawn Andrew Taylor to add them to the ephemera section of his collection.

Lithography (using limestone plates rather than wood or copper engraving blocks to produce printed images) was invented in the 1790's by Alois Senefelder (1771-1834), and the earliest published example is from his own work *Vollständiges Lehrbuch der Steindruckerei* (1818), translated in 1819 as *A Complete Course of Lithography*. By 1837 the technique had been developed into chromolithography, which for the first time enabled printing in colour. All earlier forms of colour images in published works required hand colouring, making the process lengthy and expensive, and therefore inaccessible to many. The introduction of chromolithography enabled mass-produced coloured images to be available to all.

By the 1860s chromolithographic books were frequent, and coloured printing using this technique transformed not only publishing, but advertising. Advertising or trading cards first started as cigarette cards - they were initially plain cards used as stiffeners in early cigarette packets - but companies such as H.O. Wills, Players, and Ogdens realised that these stiffening cards could be printed on using the new technique of chromolithography, and that these printed cards might help to sell packets. Tea companies quickly picked up the idea, and the Liebig cards followed shortly after. Liebig had no need for packet stiffening, the cards were simply a marketing tool, but



Treasures of the Sea. Liebig code: S716



The Production of a Liebig Card. Liebig code: S850

one that could also be used to educate the public. Packaging for Liebig products was also larger than cigarette packets, enabling the cards to be some of the largest and most intricate trading cards produced. The front side of the card would be printed with a scene depicting a subject, with information (usually around 75 words) about the subject on the reverse of the card, often alongside an image or logo relating to the product. Most cards were produced in Antwerp, the home of the Liebig's Extract of Meat Company, but they were also produced across the Liebig corporate empire, with subsidiary companies producing their own sets in local languages.

Often little is known about the production of individual sets, or about the lithographers, but one wonderful set, recently added to the Andrew Taylor collection, shows the entire process of producing a Liebig's Extract of Meat Company card - from cutting of the stone slabs, to the artist designing the set, to its printing over the course of several layers of colour - sometimes up to 20 coloured layers might be used to achieve full depth of colour. We do in some cases know a little about the artists who produced the sets. All of the sets are beautiful miniature illustrations, and some contain the signature of the artist. Émile Bayard (1837-1891) crafted numerous French cards showcasing animals, Louis Charles Auguste Steinheil (1814-1885) contributed early botanical and zoological sets, and other skilled engravers and chromolithographers, employed by Liebig's printers, lent their expertise to other natural history illustrations.

But what of the sets themselves? Each set released would be around a theme, usually with 6 cards in a set. You were encouraged to trade cards with friends and neighbours to complete your collection, and albums could be purchased to hold the cards so they could be kept and treasured. A person could effectively build up a miniature encyclopedia if enough cards were collected.

The themes range from very general subject areas, to very specific. There seems to be little overall limit to what could be depicted in a set. Some sets focus on history (kings and queens, castles etc.), some on fashion, some on literature or music, and some on engineering or vehicles. It should be noted here that some of the subjects are very much a product of their time, and offer the perspective of European colonial empires on both nature and global human cultures. Some depict cultures and people from around the world in a way that we certainly would not do today, a subject which gives food for thought when looking at imagery from this time period. Others capture historical attitudes to activities such as whaling and hunting.

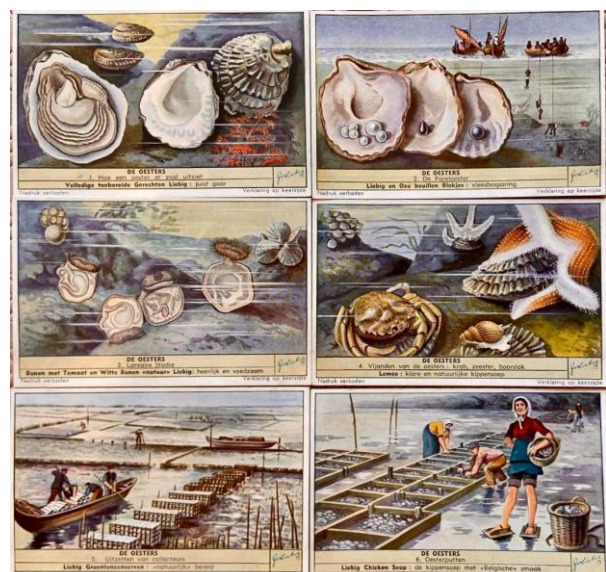
The subject of natural history represents a relatively high proportion of the cards, either specifically, or related to a wider topic. The earliest natural history card set is S40\* on *Butterflies and Flowers*, with *Flowers I* and *Flowers II* as S45 and S46 and *Birds I, II, III,* and *IV* following shortly after as S61-64. Some are quite whimsical, such as *Insects and Children* (S91) which depict scenes such as a child fencing with a bumblebee, boating in the shell of a brown-lipped snail,



The Sea Down to 900 Metres. Liebig code: S1360



Shells on Our Shore. Liebig code: S1489

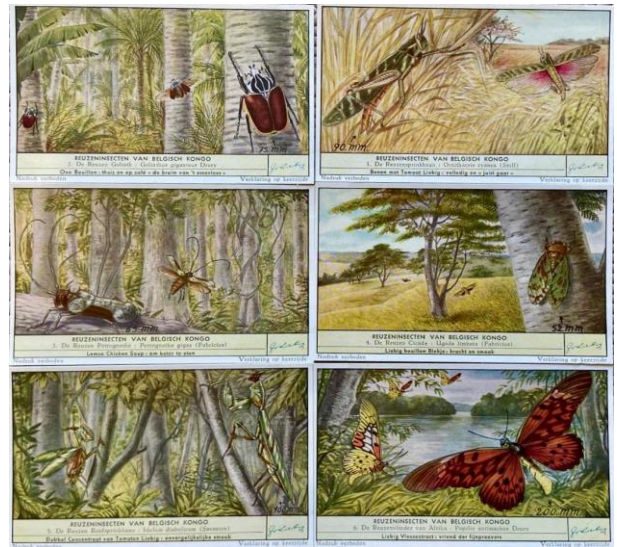


Oysters. Liebig code: S1596

and listening to a grasshopper play the cello. Later however these quite ornamental cards tended to become more educational, with subjects such as *Protected Birds* (S1804), *Astronomy I and II* (1840 & 1841), *Marine Parasites* (S1727), and *Owls* (S1761). In total, 240 sets are directly related to natural history, many of these in the later, more educationally focused, sets. Further card sets also indirectly include natural history themes, for example there are several sets relating to hunting and agriculture. A comprehensive list of all the card sets, alongside images, can be found at <http://www.cartolino.com/liebig/list.html> and a list of the natural history sets, including those found in the Andrew Taylor Natural History Collection, can be found at the end of this article.

Andrew's collection of natural history has been developing for the last 40 years, and the ephemera collection has been running alongside this. The ephemera collection includes letters, stamps, original prints, lithographs, copper plate engravings, illustrations, and a range of trading cards all related to natural history. The trading cards section includes tea, cigarette, and cigar cards as well as the Liebig's Extract of Meat Company cards which have their own unique style and charm. In total, the collection now holds 47 complete sets of Liebig's cards, not including duplicates in different languages. While this is far from complete, and some of the sets are now very rare, particularly the earlier cards, it represents nearly 20% of the natural history cards, spread across almost the whole of the time period of their production. The collection provides a fantastic insight into the understanding of natural history and natural history education over time. The oldest set in the collection is set S545 *Whaling*, and dates from 1898, while the most recent (*Strange Insects*) was produced in 1965.

\*The alphanumeric codes used for the Liebig cards are the Sanguinetti catalogue numbers, also given at <https://www.cartolino.com/en/liebig-cards.html>



Large Insects of the Belgian Congo. Liebig code: S1644



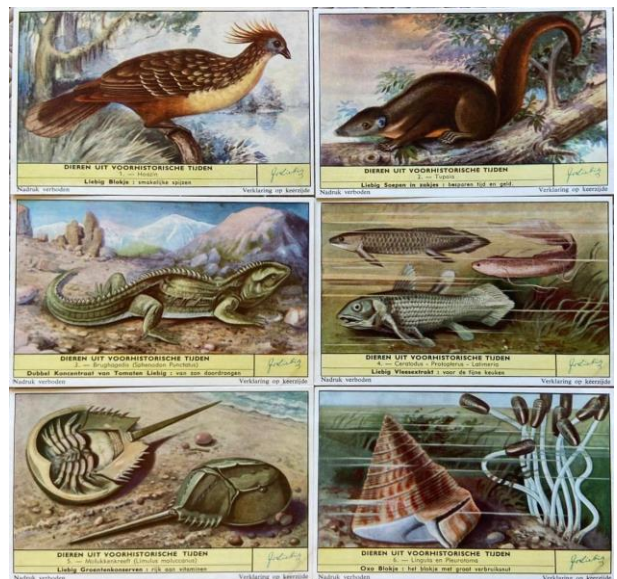
Pond Life. Liebig code: S1673

The trading card collection, alongside the wider natural history collection and its associated library (located in North Staffordshire) is available to BNA members for study and research. For more information contact Andrew at [andrew4040@hotmail.com](mailto:andrew4040@hotmail.com) or Stephanie at [stephanieholtnaturalhistory@outlook.com](mailto:stephanieholtnaturalhistory@outlook.com)

Andrew Taylor FLS received his FBNA in 2024. His article "The Taylor Collection" was published in *Country-Side*: Volume 36 no. 5, Winter 2024.

Stephanie Holt FLS received FBNA in 2009 and was awarded the David Bellamy award at the 2024 National Encaenia.

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Prehistoric Animals Still Surviving S1705

**Table 1 - The Liebig's Extract of Meat Trading Company Card Sets  
in the Andrew Taylor Collection of Natural History**

<b>Set Title</b>	<b>S Number</b>	<b>Date</b>
Whale Hunting	S545	1898
Treasures of the Sea	S716	1903
The Production of a Liebig Card	S850	1906
Ants	S1263	1932
Geological Periods III	S1296	1934
Strange Trees	S1306	1936
The Spider's Constructive Art	S1308	1935
The Beauty of Aquatic Flowers	S1329	1936
The Sea Down to 900 Metres	S1360	1937
Sea Mammals I	S1430	1941
Bizarre Fish	S1433	1941
Useful Plants of the Congo	S1434	1941
Mosquitoes	S1447	1942
Medicinal Plants II	S1451	1943
Western European Beetles	S1476	1949
Shells on Our Shore	S1489	1950
Life on the Heathland	S1511	1951
Giant Flowers	S1536	1952
Exotic Fruit	S1537	1952
Marine Algae Encountered on Our Coast	S1557	1953
Antelopes	S1559	1953
The Sea Shore	S1592	1954
Oysters	S1596	1954
Fish That Make Nests	S1597	1954
Monkeys II	S1604	1954
Australian Mammals	S1612	1955
A Walk in the Sand Dunes	S1622	1955
Climbing Plants	S1624	1955
Cacti II	S1625	1955
Harmful Congolese Pests	S1637	1956
Caterpillars	S1639	1956
Large Insects of the Belgian Congo	S1644	1956
Insect Eaters	S1645	1956
Rodents	S1655	1956
Congolese Insects Harmful to Agriculture	S1668	1957
Unfamiliar Plants	S1672	1957
Pond Life	S1673	1957
Marine Plankton	S1674	1957
Parasitic Insects in Agriculture	S1689	1958
Spiders	S1695	1958
Luminous Animals	S1704	1959
Prehistoric Animals Still Surviving	S1705	1959
Inedible Fish	S1715	1959
Coffee	S1727	1960
Marine Parasites	S1729	1960
Insects' Nests	S1732	1960
Leonardo Da Vinci, Inventor	S1778	1962
Strange Insects	S1792	1965