About the Hunterian Museum

Where is the Hunterian Museum?
The Museum is located inside The Royal College of Surgeons of England in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Surrounded by fine Georgian houses, it was once seen as the most fashionable square in London. (See the History learning pack for ideas on exploring the environment around the Museum.)

Why is it called the ‘Hunterian’? Who was John Hunter?
John Hunter was born in East Kilbride and came to London in 1748 at the age of 20. He worked as an assistant in his brother’s anatomy school where he showed great skill in dissection. In 1761 he joined the army and travelled to France and Portugal. There he developed new ideas on the treatment of gunshot wounds, but also spent time collecting lizards and other animals. In 1767 he was elected as a surgeon at St George’s Hospital and in 1783 moved to a large house in Leicester Square, where he developed and displayed his expanding collection of teaching specimens.

Hunter’s collection
Hunter’s museum included nearly 14,000 preparations of over 500 species of plants and animals. As its reputation grew he was given rare specimens from around the world, such as kangaroos brought from Australia on one of Captain Cook’s voyages. Hunter died in 1793 following an angina attack.

In 1799 the government bought the collection and it was placed in the care of the College. The collection formed the basis for a museum, which opened on the present site in 1813. Other collectors added to the Museum and by the 19th century the museum contained nearly 65,000 specimens covering anatomy and pathology, zoology, palaeontology, archaeology and anthropology.

In 1941 the college building was bombed and over two thirds of the collection was destroyed. However, over 3,500 of Hunter’s original preparations survived. The college was rebuilt and the museum opened again in 1963.

The Hunterian Museum today
The museum recently underwent a major refurbishment and re-opened in 2005, creating a museum that is much more exciting and easy to use by everyone, including young children. The new museum shares the wealth of material that has been a source of inspiration to surgeons, scientists and artists for over 200 years. Now anyone can visit and be inspired. You can see the equipment used for the first ‘keyhole’ surgery in England, preserved crocodile embryos, a prototype ‘bionic’ heart, the famous skeleton of the Irish giant, among more than 3,500 fascinating exhibits.