Minerals bring new sparkle to museum
28 Nov 2007 | 09:46 GMT | Posted by Matt Brown | Category: Uncategorized

The Natural History Museum has unlocked ‘The Vault’, a new showcase for the most spectacular minerals in the collection.

Henry Nicholls
The Mineral Gallery at the Natural History Museum is unique: it’s the only exhibit at the South Kensington site that has remained essentially unchanged since its doors opened back in 1881.

The Mineral Gallery, on the first floor of the east wing, is the only area to retain the same layout since first opening in 1881. Copyright © Natural History Museum, London.

Situated on the first floor of the east wing (overlooking the ice rink), this Victorian vision is often empty and never full. That may soon change, because you’ll have to walk through it if you want to reach The Vault to see the most valuable minerals in the museum.

“We had a large brainstorming session to come up with the name,” says Alan Hart, mineralogist at the museum and the curator of the new permanent gallery. Adjectives were flying around the room: bright, sparkling, spectacular, intimate. “But in the end,” he says, “you’re just stepping into ‘The Vault’.”
It should be worth doing so just to experience the juxtaposition of the old and the new: the Mineral Gallery contains some 14,000 specimens in row upon row of low, oak cabinets, which allow an uninterrupted view of The Vault at the far end of the gallery.

This intimate space contains around 120 of the most precious specimens in the mineral collection. The focal exhibit is the famous Aurora Diamonds, 296 coloured gemstones that have been on loan from a couple of New York collectors since 2005.

They first appeared in the museum’s popular ‘Diamond’ exhibition that ran until February 2006. When they subsequently moved into the Minerals and Meteorites gallery, Alan Bronstein—one of the owners of the diamonds—stated that “gems like these were not meant to be imprisoned in a dark vault for the momentary pleasure of a few eyes”.

Ironically, it is in The Vault that the Aurora Diamonds now find themselves, although Bronstein and co-owner Harry Rodman are confident that the bright, white gallery with spectacular glass cases and digital displays will draw and dazzle the crowds. “We believe the Aurora Diamonds and public are best served by the collection being on display there for as long as possible,” says Bronstein. The loan to the museum is, he says “for an indefinite period and may eventually become permanent”.

Plenty of other treasures are on show alongside the Aurora Diamonds, says Hart: the world’s largest pink morganite, a headlamp-like topaz, a flawless lime-green chrysolite and a Burmese ruby still attached to its surrounding deposit. The Vault should enhance the profile of the mineral collection and give the museum a new space to host exclusive out-of-hours functions, says Hart. It may also attract other spectacular loans from private collectors like Bronstein, he says.

Alongside the precious gems, there will also be objects with considerable historical sparkle. Take, for example, a mould, cast and replica of the original Koh-i-Noor Diamond presented to Queen Victoria in 1851. It’s only these that reveal the size and cut of the stone before Prince Albert had it trimmed into a more fashionable, oval
shape, says Hart.

*Mould and cast of the Koh-i-Noor. Copyright © Natural History Museum, London.*