

## Who was Evelyn Cheesman?

Evelyn Cheesman OBE was an English entomologist best known for her solo expeditions around the South West Pacific. During her trips, she collected over 70,000 specimens of insects, plants and other animals for the Natural History Museum.

In 1917, Cheesman became the first female assistant curator of the Insect House at London Zoo. She brought the run down Insect House back to life and was so successful in her role that she was made the first female curator at London Zoo in 1920.



## Evelyn Cheesman (1881-1969)



Lucy Evelyn Cheesman  
'The woman who walked'

## Key vocabulary

**curator:** a keeper or custodian of a museum or other collection.

**entomologist:** a person who studies or is an expert in the branch of zoology concerned with insects.

**evolutionary:** relating to the gradual development of something (a species).

**expedition:** a journey or excursion undertaken for a specific purpose.

**fauna:** the animals of a particular region or habitat.

**governess:** a woman employed to teach children in a private household.

**OBE:** An abbreviation of 'Officer of the Order of the British Empire'. An award given in the UK for a special achievement.

**specimens:** used to refer to something that is an example of a particular thing.

## Expeditions

In 1923 Evelyn went on her first expedition, to the Galápagos Islands. On the ship, she learnt important new skills for collecting including how to skin and preserve lizards and birds, and mount mosquitos for Museum collections. From the Galápagos she went on to collect in the Marquesas Islands and Tuamotu Atolls in 1924 and an expedition to the Society Islands in 1925. When she officially left the zoo in 1926, she made many further expeditions in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) and South West Pacific including New Guinea and New Caledonia. At age 48, Cheesman embarked on her first expedition to collect insects and small animals for the Natural History Museum. She went back time and time again to the South West Pacific and in different seasons and as a result her collections tell us a great deal about species dispersal, extinction, climate change and of course the biogeography and the evolutionary history of those islands.'

## Early Life

Raised in rural Kent in an Edwardian home, Cheesman's passion for fieldwork began in the nursery. Her early expeditions involved collecting flowers and moss, as well as glow worms to work out what made them glow. Cheesman had set her mind on becoming a vet. However, the law made this tricky because in 1906 the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons wasn't yet admitting women!

When WWI started, Evelyn was employed to use her German language skills, which she had acquired working as a governess. At this time she would often spend her lunch hours in the peace and quiet of the Natural History Museum.

When the law finally changed in 1919 to allow women to train as vets, lawyers and civil servants, she had already moved on to her work at London Zoo.



## London Zoo

In 1917, when she was 36 years old, Evelyn Cheesman accepted the position of Assistant Curator of the Insect House at London Zoo. The Insect House was in a poor state about the war and she set her mind to revitalising the exhibition. With a net and the help of local school children, she set out to re-stock with British fauna.

Soon the Insect House flourished and her entomological work got her noticed. In 1919, she became a fellow of the Royal Entomological Society of London and in 1920 she was the first woman to be hired as a curator at London Zoo.

## Timeline

- 1881** Evelyn Cheesman was born in Kent
- 1917** Became assistant curator at the insect house at London Zoo
- 1920** Became the first female insect house curator at London Zoo
- 1923** Explored the Galapagos Islands
- 1924** Visited the Tuamotu Atolls and Society Islands
- 1926** Left the zoo and ventured to the South West Pacific
- 1929** Collected specimens for the National History Museum in New Guinea and New Caledonia
- 1953** Final expedition to Vanuatu
- 1955** Awarded an OBE

## A Collection That Keeps Giving

Cheesman's final expedition was to Vanuatu in 1953, at the age of 73 after a hip replacement. In 1955 Evelyn Cheesman was awarded an OBE for her contributions to entomology. In an interview given at the time of the award, she is reported to have said, 'We drop down, or get run over, but we never retire.' She continued to work at the Museum, writing and classifying specimens, until her death in 1969. More than 40 years after her death, scientists are still identifying new species and making discoveries among the specimens she collected. Scientists also continue to name new species in Cheesman's honour, with at least 69 examples present within the Museum's insect collection alone. There are three damselflies which bear Cheesman's name: *Ischnura cheesmani*, *Indolestes cheesmanae*. Plants named after Cheesman include the Galápagos tomato (*Solanum cheesmaniae*).