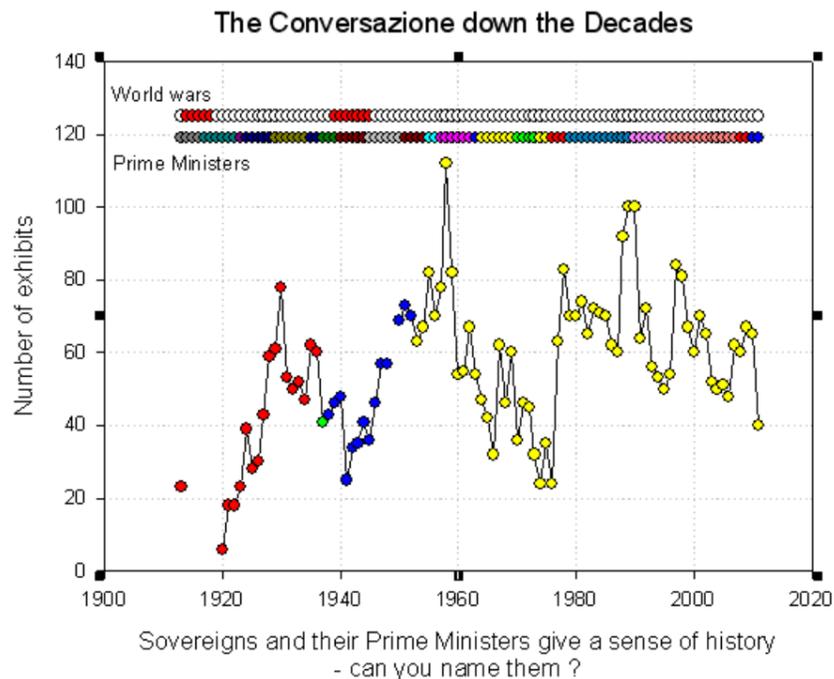


150 Years of the Cambridge Natural History Society

The Society was founded in 1857, and celebrated its 150th anniversary or sesquicentenary in 2007. That year also marked 100 years since the Society first exhibited specimens at a "Conversazione". These three articles tell something of the history of the Conversazione and the Society.



The Conversazione of the Cambridge Natural History Society.

Henry T. Tribe

This event is an exhibition, displayed on laboratory benches, whose coverage includes all aspects of both traditional natural history and modern life and environmental sciences. After a start in 1913 the Great War intervened, and it was 1920 before a second start began what is very possibly the longest running annual exhibition of any Natural History Society. For it kept running throughout the Second World War, survived the perils of ennui which accompany a long period of peace, and will this year reach its 89th consecutive showing. Its host throughout has been the Cambridge University Department of Zoology, to whose succession of Professors the Conversazione owes its stability and continued existence. This symbiotic association with Zoology has now lasted over 100 years, for meetings have been held in the Department or Museum of Zoology right back into the Edwardian era. Every single programme of exhibits including the names of every exhibitor has been preserved, with the one exception of 1949.



A mediaeval alchemist visits the Conversazione

This contribution is an updated account of the brief history that I wrote for the *Cambridge Review* in 1989. It is with some sorrow that I have to record the demise of the *Cambridge Review* - which also published Canon Raven's centenary account of the Society itself. It ceased publication in 1998 after 119 years. In his valediction the last editor, Nigel Spivey, noted that each year in recent memory subscriptions had declined.... "to lose money on the *Review* is not a novelty: the loss is arguably tolerable. To lose readers however, down to a dwindling number of several hundreds - is more conclusive. It seems in Cambridge we are not talking to ourselves, let alone to others."

Meetings of the Society in the Edwardian age often consisted of lectures combined with exhibition of specimens. Some meetings were primarily devoted to exhibits. On 23 May 1907 for example there were eight exhibitors: Mr Lamb, insects; Mr Keynes, butterflies collected in Switzerland; Mr Harding, birds from the fens and Madingley; Mr Pavay-Smith, a newt with larval gills; the Secretary (Mr William Farren) a long series of Acronyctapsi; Mr Fryer, some beetles from Chatteris and also a copy of the book *De Insectio* by Francesco Redi. Mr Imms (who later wrote the New Naturalist volume of 1947 on *Insect Natural History*) gave a short account of the tsetse fly with lantern slides and Mr Harding showed slides depicting Jamaican scenery.

In 1913 the meeting on 27 November took the form of an exhibition by various members. After the formal activity of reading minutes and electing new members "the rest of the evening was spent by a large gathering of members (numbering 56) in an informal inspection of particularly interesting collections of specimens." Twenty-three members exhibited specimens and an abbreviated list of their exhibits was written out in the minute book. The Society was indebted to Prof Stanley Gardiner FRS for allowing the exhibition to be held in the Zoology Laboratory; "the exhibition proved such a success that it will undoubtedly become an annual event... our thanks are especially due to Mr Buxton to whose energetic organisation the great success of the exhibition was due".

On 26 November 1914 however the meeting was in the older style: Miss Gardner exhibited a box of various insects, some of them imported with foreign fruit; Miss Britten exhibited living specimens of trap door spiders and ant lions; Lieutenant Disney exhibited - on behalf of Miss Sutton - a hair-ball from the stomach of a cow, and on his own behalf his own appendix (not in situ). Lt. Disney then gave a lecture 'Fossil digging in western Canada' to an audience of 31 and "enjoyed the honour of being the first member of the Society to address a meeting in uniform".



Discussing the flora of Magog Down

Perhaps the custom of showing exhibits before a lecture took up more time than a lecturer generally appreciated, for in 1915 a rule was made that exhibits would in future be made at the close of meetings. But in early 1915 only 78 members were still in Cambridge, 54 being absent on active service, in February 1916 there were 67 and in February 1917 only 46 residential members. It was then resolved that no further meetings be held for the duration of the war.

The Society reconvened on 13 November 1919. The traditional programme of lectures continued until 27 May 1920 when a meeting was devoted to exhibits by various members. Mr P.A. Buxton had shortly before been elected President, and at his suggestion each member spoke for a few minutes about the specimen he had to show, before an informal inspection of the exhibits was made. Six members, including the President, exhibited, and ten members were present. "The exhibits were of great interest and many were of a very rare nature. They were worthy of a far larger

attendance than was accorded them and it is to be hoped that more interest will be taken at future exhibition meetings". It was!

On 18 April 1921 the President, Mr F.A.Potts, announced that the next meeting would be a conversazione on 12 May - the first use of the word in the Society's minutes. An 'exhibition and conversazione' was duly held at 4.30pm in the Zoology Laboratory by kind permission of Professor J. Stanley Gardiner FRS. Eighteen members exhibited and 125 members and guests attended the very successful meeting. Next year the same number of exhibits was shown, and thereafter the trend was upward. In 1926 "it is unfortunate that the meeting fell during the first week of the General Strike, when very many members were engaged in serving the Nation, but nevertheless it was attended by 96 members and guests, and of the 28 members and 4 guests who had promised exhibits, only four failed to bring them." In 1927 "this is easily the most successful Conversazione the Society has held" - there were 44 exhibits and 250 present. In 1930 there were 78 exhibits and more than 300 visitors, establishing a peak not equalled for 25 years, and this between the hours of 4 and 6pm. In 1931 the Conversazione started at 3pm, exhibits numbered 54, and this general level was retained through the thirties.



Clarke Brunt exhibits carnivorous plants, cacti and succulents

During the Second World War, the Society's activities and the Conversazione carried on. In 1941 the average attendance at general meetings had fallen to 63 - "despite the calls of Home Guard I feel this might be improved" was the Senior Secretary's comment. But the level of the Conversazione was maintained only a little below that of the thirties with the number of exhibits, also low in 1941, steadily increasing through the rest of the war years and after to reach a high plateau in the fifties and culminate in the all-time record of 112 exhibits in 1958.

The fifties were very good years. It was the custom then for the Conversazione Secretary to write quite a substantial report and some delightful passages occur in these reports. Thus, in 1954: "150 Invitation Cards were distributed this year against 125 last, but it should be decided before next year whether it is worth sending out so many, or whether the choice of recipients should be examined more closely. The feeling at the moment is that in many cases invitations were flattering but unnecessary." Also in 1954: "The same number of cakes as last year were ordered, we had a record gate and they went in miraculous fashion. If more were bought next year they would doubtless go at the same speed, but it is unlikely to affect the number of visitors or their enjoyment of the exhibition. Cost of cakes was down a little this year." In 1955 fewer invitation cards were sent out, "about 70 in all, but a number of people who should perhaps have received them were consequently left out. The Senior Secretary very kindly printed these cards on his own printing press and might be persuaded to do so again if asked sufficiently early". In 1957: "In future years a closing date for exhibits should be advertised if not actually enforced. This year several exhibitors' forms reached me as late as the day before the Conversazione, and I had to ask Mr Henderson to duplicate the programmes in a quite unreasonably short time." As late as 1958: "A mere 11% of the exhibits, albeit very good ones, were supplied by women - yet another indication of the deplorable sex-ratio in Cambridge." In 1959: "19% of the exhibits were supplied by women.... perhaps there is a move in the right direction at last....."

During the fifties the Conversazione was an afternoon event, running on Wednesdays in late April to early May from 2.30 to 6pm. In 1959 the hours of 11 to 6 were tried out and the report commented: "This major change of policy was awaited with great interest by those who advocated it, and the general impression, even of those who thought it might spoil the social

occasion, was that it was a good idea.... The morning viewing was leisurely and comfortable... the morning was the time to admire the exhibits and the afternoon the time to talk natural history with old friends, especially over tea. Neither exhibits nor old friends need have been neglected, as often happened in past years."



The tea stall is an important feature of the Conversazione

In the sixties a decline began. The reports died out. From the high plateau the numbers dropped and the trend continued into the seventies until, in 1974 and 1976 there were only 24 exhibits. It was said that everybody was now too busy, that in this day and age students and research workers could not be expected to spend valuable time preparing exhibits for the Natural History Society. But some thought the problem was different: notices soliciting exhibits appeared on notice boards, yes, but no one came to ask in person any more. The author persuaded Council that Conversazione Secretaries should search out exhibitors and he volunteered to find whether people really were too busy, or whether they rather do like to show something that interests them but also like to be asked. They did like to be asked! Within two years the Conversazione was back to the fifties plateau and kept there well into the eighties.

In 1978 an enquiry was made as to possible expansion of the Conversazione into a two-day event, continuing from the Friday (having moved from Wednesday in 1968) to the Saturday. A circular was sent to recent exhibitors to sound out whether they would be willing to exhibit on two days. Of 104 circulars sent, 36 replies showed a preference for a two-day event, ten preferred one day and 58 did not reply. This was considered insufficient mandate for further exploration of the possibility and the Conversazione continued in the traditional manner.



David Barden showed Cambridgeshire ferns in 2008

There was change in 1988. Since the low point of 1976, it had been the custom to have three Conversazione Secretaries, one each in the University Departments of Zoology, Botany and Applied Biology. Mr Tim Benton, who had been Zoology Conversazione Secretary in 1987, had accepted from experience that others might help him to obtain exhibits and manage the Conversazione in a more professional manner. So in 1988 there were three secretaries in Zoology, two in Applied Biology and one in Botany - six secretaries being a larger number than ever recorded in the past. Then the traditional free programme of exhibits, a duplicated typescript which had remained unaltered from the thirties until 1987, was replaced by a printed programme for which a charge of 20p was made. These proved

very popular and about 300 were sold, making a modest profit to offset the expenses of the Conversazione. Both entrances to the Conversazione were manned throughout the day and donation boxes at these entrances brought in another modest sum. The increased pursuit of exhibitors brought in 92 exhibits, the highest number for exactly 30 years and the second highest in the history of the Conversazione.

These numbers were excelled in the next two years, with 100 and 97 exhibits respectively, masterminded by Tim Benton and Ben Holloway in Zoology. The 1990 event included 23 exhibits of the 'Vintage Conversazione'. For Max Walters had discovered that he himself had been Conversazione Secretary in 1940. Fifty years had gone by and he decided to contact all extant 1940 contributors asking them either to contribute an exhibit again or to provide a copy of their own chosen publication written in later life. The response was magnificent: 18 came in person to exhibit and five sent an exhibit.

Over the period 1987-1993 Hilary Belcher took series of colour photographs of the Conversazione and gave sets for the archives. To our knowledge none are available for any earlier event

The very high numbers were not sustained after the exceptionally keen group of organisers based in the Zoology Department moved on. Further, the Department of Applied Biology, which regularly supplied exhibitors, was closed. But more exhibits were now coming from outside Cambridge University. Good events with from 50 to 80 exhibits each year maintained the Conversazione as the major annual event in Natural History into the Millennium and to the present day.



Bees, badgers and otters often feature in our exhibits

In 1993 the Conversazione moved from May to June, because availability of the Zoology Laboratory had changed. For some years there had been a desire to extend the Conversazione to the Saturday, so that people who worked during weekdays could visit it. This important change occurred in 1998 when for the first time in its history the Conversazione extended over two days. In 2003 a further change was the move from Friday & Saturday to Saturday & Sunday. This however lost the visitors from the central laboratories adjoining Downing and Pembroke Streets who formerly spent their lunchtime (and perhaps a bit more) at the exhibition on their doorstep.

For the Conversazione marking the start of our 150th Anniversary, Friday was added as a third day, from 1pm until 4pm. A Reception in the Zoology Museum from 4.30 onward was another anniversary feature, never held before, but a tremendous success. Both the 3-day opening and the reception are to be repeated this year, at the Conversazione marking the end of our anniversary year.

It is most interesting to note the changes which have occurred in the Conversazione over nearly 90 years. The very strong entomological input, and demonstration of specimens in the early years have declined. The period includes enormous advances in technology and experimental methods which have deepened our understanding of natural history. The light microscope has been reinforced by the electron microscope, photography has advanced phenomenally and the computer and internet are bringing about a major revolution in dispersal of knowledge. So traditional natural history is supplemented by highly sophisticated modern life- and environmental sciences. Conservation is now well to the fore and in modern times there has been more participation on behalf of societies and organisations not directly connected with the Natural History Society.

Throughout most of its existence the Conversazione has been run by students in Cambridge University but in recent times there has been input

from the new Anglia Ruskin University, which evolved from the old Cambridge Technical College. Degrees in Natural History are now offered by Anglia Ruskin. Most of the Society's lectures were moved from the Zoology Department in the late nineties and are now hosted by that University.



Shells galore in 2009

There have been great changes in the nature of the lectures and field meetings of the Society's Programmes. In 1969-70, for example, three major lectures per term were held as general meetings in the C.U. Zoology Department, and some 13-15 sectional meeting talks distributed over five sections were held mostly in College Rooms. The two terms were Michaelmas and Lent. By 1991-2 there were 2-3 general meetings per term and 8 sectional meetings in just three sections, these last now being held in the Zoology and Botany Departments, some being lunchtime meetings. Sections died out in 1999.

Easter Term Programmes are recent. They started as late as 1990 with an excursion, a buffet supper and lecture, a garden party and the Conversazione, and continued with a gradually expanding programme until the present day. In 2007 this programme consisted of one lecture, eleven excursions and five surveys of the annually chosen site, here Coldhams Common. The Autumn and Spring terms 2007-8 comprised 16 lectures, in addition to the fungus forays which have been annual since 1997. Close association with the Cambridge City group of Wildlife Trusts added another six lectures to the annual total.

The consequences of this evolution in the Society are that whereas until about 1990 the Conversazione was organised and exhibits were largely provided by Society members and others attached to Cambridge University, now the proportion of input from members in Anglia Ruskin University and Cambridge City is much greater. Indeed, Cambridge City Council has associated with the Society and the Council's 'Cambridge Sustainable City' logo has appeared on Conversazione Programmes since 2004. Nevertheless, the century-long symbiosis with the C.U. Department of Zoology continues and I can write with every confidence that our 89th consecutive conversazione will be held in the elementary laboratory there, by kind permission of the Professor of Zoology, Malcolm Burrows FRS.



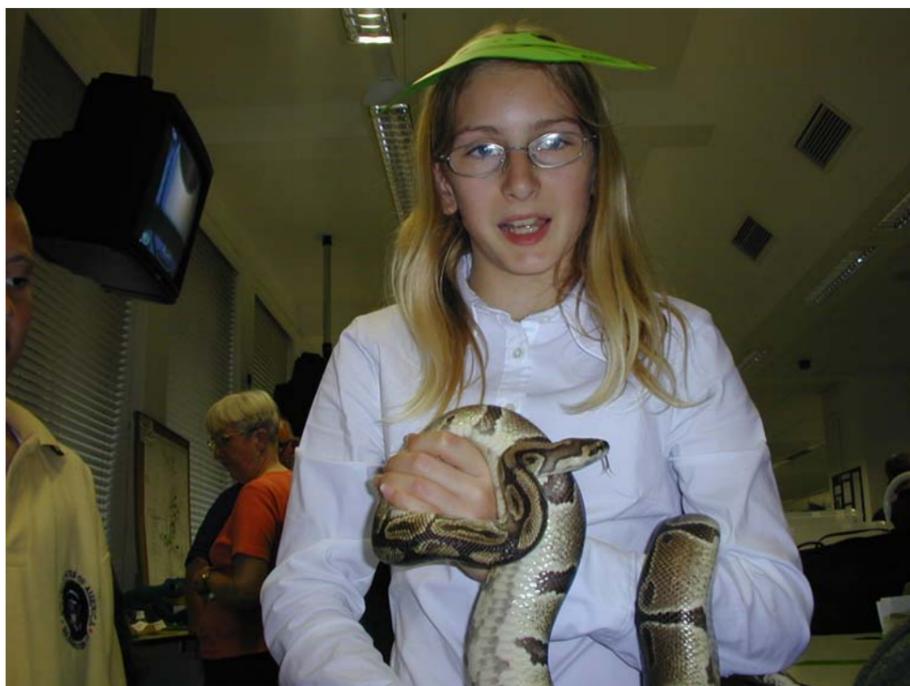
The grassed banks outside the Zoology Department used to be a living exhibit until they were removed by the University

From: **Nature in Cambridgeshire**, No 50, 2008.

The Conversazione of the Cambridge Natural History Society over Seventy Years

A Brief History 1907 - 1989

Henry T Tribe



St Ivo's School used to be regular exhibitors

This event is an exhibition, displayed on laboratory benches, whose coverage includes all aspects of both traditional natural history and modern life and environmental sciences. It is now generally held on the third or fourth Friday in May from 11 am to 6pm in the Elementary Laboratory of the University Department of Zoology in Downing Street and represents the largest annual scientific exhibition in Cambridge. Over these years an average of some sixty exhibits has been shown, the average nearing seventy in the last decade. The May 1989 Conversazione will be the seventieth consecutive event, although as we shall see, the first one was in 1913. Every single programme of exhibits including the names of very exhibitor has been preserved, with the single exception of 1949.



Philip Pugh's surplus shells are sometimes up for grabs

The meetings of the Society in the Edwardian age consisted principally, as they do now, of lectures. Before many of these lectures, however, one or more specimens were shown, and doubtless discoursed upon, to the audience. Thus on 7 November 1907 five exhibits, all of entomological nature, were shown before a lecture on 'Origin of Primates'. A few meetings were primarily devoted to exhibits - on 23 May 1907 for example there were eight exhibitors: Mr Lamb, insects; Mr Keynes, butterflies collected in Switzerland; Mr Harding, birds from the Fens and from Madingley; Mr Pavey Smith, a newt with larval gills; the Secretary (Mr

William Farren), a long series of Acronyctapsi; Mr Fryer, some beetles from Chatteris and also a copy of the book *De Insectio* by Francisco Redi; Mr Imms gave a short account of the tsetse fly with lantern slides and slides were also exhibited by Mr Harding which depicted Jamaican scenery.



Magog Down is a frequent destination for excursions and Lucy Evans usually brings an interesting exhibit showing the flora of the down

In 1913, quite a large meeting on 27 November took the form of an exhibition by various members. After the formal activities of reading minutes and electing new members, 'the rest of the evening was spent by a large gathering of members [numbering 56] in an informal inspection of particularly interesting collections of specimens'. Twenty-three members exhibited specimens and an abbreviated list of their exhibits was written out in the minute book. The Society was indebted to Professor Stanley Gardiner for allowing the exhibition to be held in the Zoological Laboratory; 'the exhibition proved so successful that it will undoubtedly become an annual event ... our thanks are especially due to Mr Buxton to whose energetic organisation the great success of the exhibition was due'. However the Great War intervened. On 26 November 1914 the meeting was in the older style: Miss Gardiner exhibited a box of various insects, some of them imported with foreign fruit; Miss Britten exhibited living specimens of trap door spiders and ant lions; Lieutenant Disney exhibited - on behalf of Miss Sutton - a hair-ball from the stomach of a cow, and on his own behalf his own appendix - not in situ. Lieutenant Disney then gave a lecture 'Fossil digging in Western Canada' to an audience of 31 and enjoyed the honour of being the first member of the Society to address a meeting in uniform. Perhaps the custom of showing exhibits before a lecture took up more time than a lecturer generally appreciated, for in 1915 a rule was made that exhibits would in future be made at the close of meetings. But in early 1915 only 78 members were still in Cambridge, 54 being absent on active service; in February 1916 there were 67 and in February 1917 only 46 residential members. A meeting then resolved that no further meetings be held for the duration of the war.

The Society reconvened on 13 November 1919, a year after the Armistice. Up to February 1920 the membership increased by 66 to a resident membership of 125 - 'not in the history of the Society have 66 members been elected in one year'. The traditional programme of lectures continued, with, on 27 May 1920, a meeting devoted to exhibits by various members. Mr Buxton had shortly before the meeting been elected President, and at his suggestion each member spoke for a few minutes about the specimen he had to show, before an informal inspection of the exhibits was made. Six members, including the President, exhibited, and ten members were present. 'The exhibits were of great interest and many were of a very rare nature. They were worthy of a far larger attendance of members than was accorded them and it is to be hoped that more interest will be taken at future exhibition meetings.' It was. On 18 April 1921 the President, Mr F A Potts, announced that the next meeting of the Society would be a conversazione on 12 May - the first use of the word in the Society's minutes. An 'exhibition and conversazione' was duly held at 4:30 pm in the Zoology Laboratory by kind permission of Professor J Stanley Gardiner. Eighteen members exhibited and 125 members and guests attended the very successful meeting. Next year the same number of exhibits was shown, and thereafter the trend was upward. In 1926 'it is unfortunate that the meeting fell during the first week of the General Strike, when very many members were engaged in serving the Nation, but nevertheless it was attended by 96 members and guests, and of the 28 members and four guests who had promised exhibits, only four failed to bring them'. In 1927 - 'this is

easily the most successful *Conversazione* the Society has held' - there were 44 exhibits and 250 present. In 1930 there were 78 exhibits and more than 300 visitors, establishing a peak not equaled for 25 years, and this between the hours of 4 and 6 pm. In 1931 the *Conversazione* started at 3 pm, exhibits numbered 54, and this general level was retained through the thirties.



Julia Napier exhibits a selection of caterpillars

During the Second World War, the Society's activities and the *Conversazione* carried on. In 1941 the average attendance at general meetings had fallen to 63 - 'despite the calls of the Home Guard I feel this might be improved' was the Senior Secretary's comment. But the level of the *Conversazione* was maintained only a little below that of the thirties with the number of exhibits, also low in 1941, steadily increasing through the rest of the war years and after to reach a high plateau in the fifties and culminate in the all-time record of 112 exhibits in 1958.

The fifties were very good years. It was the custom then for the *Conversazione* Secretary to write quite a substantial report and some delightful passages occur in these reports. Thus, in 1954, '150 Invitation Cards were distributed this year against 125 last, but it should be decided before next year whether it is worth sending out so many, or whether the choice of recipients should be examined more closely. The feeling at the moment is that in many cases invitations were flattering but unnecessary.' Also in 1954: 'The same number of cakes as last year were ordered, we had a record gate and they went in miraculous fashion. If more were bought next year they would doubtless go at the same speed, but it is unlikely to affect the number of visitors or their enjoyment of the exhibition. Cost of cakes was down a little this year.' In 1955 fewer invitation cards were sent out, 'about 70 in all, but a number of people who should perhaps have received them were consequently left out. The Senior Secretary very kindly printed these cards on his own printing press and might be persuaded to do so again if asked sufficiently early.' In 1957: 'In future years a closing date for exhibits should be advertised if not actually enforced. This year several exhibitors' forms reached me as late as the day before the *Conversazione*, and I had to ask Mr Henderson to duplicate the programmes in a quite unreasonably short time.' As late as 1958: 'A mere eleven per cent of the exhibits, albeit very good ones, were supplied by women - yet another indication of the deplorable sex-ratio in Cambridge.' In 1959: 'Nineteen per cent of the exhibits were supplied by women, which compares favourably with the eleven per cent of last year. Perhaps there is a move in the right direction at last ...'

During the fifties the *Conversazione* was an afternoon event, running from 2:30 to 6:00 pm. In 1959, the present hours of 11 to 6 were tried out, and the report commented: 'This major change of policy was awaited with great interest by those who advocated it, and the general impression, even of those who thought it might spoil the social occasion, was that it was a good idea ... The morning viewing was leisurely and comfortable ... the morning was the time to admire the exhibits and the afternoon the time to talk natural history with old friends, especially over tea. Neither exhibits nor old friends need have been neglected, as often happened in past years.'

In the sixties a decline began. The reports died out. From the high plateau the number of exhibits dropped and the trend continued into the seventies until, in 1974 and 1976 there were only 24 exhibits. It was said that everybody was now too busy, that in this day and age students and research workers could not be expected to spend valuable time preparing exhibits for the Natural History Society. But some thought the problem was different: notices soliciting exhibits appeared on notice boards and were sent to Secretaries of Biological Departments who sent round circulars, yes, but no one came to ask in person any more. The author persuaded Council that *Conversazione* Secretaries should search out exhibitors and he volunteered to find whether people really were too busy, or whether they rather do like to show something that interests them but also like to be asked. They did like to be asked! Within two years the *Conversazione* was back to the fifties plateau and kept there well into the eighties.



Melbourn Mushroom club and a selection of their finds

In 1978 an enquiry was made as to possible expansion of the *Conversazione* into a two-day event, continuing from the Friday to the Saturday. A circular was sent to recent exhibitors to sound out whether they would be willing to exhibit on two days. Of 104 circulars sent out, 36 replies showed a preference for a two-day event, ten preferred one day and 58 did not reply. This was considered insufficient mandate for further exploration of the possibility and the *Conversazione* has continued in the traditional manner.

There was a change in 1988. Since the low point of 1976, it had been the custom to have three *Conversazione* Secretaries, one each in the University Departments of Zoology, Botany and Applied Biology. Mr Tim Benton, who had been Zoology *Conversazione* Secretary in 1987, had accepted from that experience that others might help him to obtain exhibits and manage the *Conversazione* in a more professional manner. So in 1988 there were three secretaries in Zoology, two in Applied Biology and one in Botany - six secretaries being a larger number than ever recorded in the past. Then the traditional free programme of exhibits, a duplicated typescript which had remained unaltered from the thirties until 1987, was replaced by a laser-printed programme for which a charge of 20p was made. These proved very popular and about 300 were sold, making a modest profit to offset the expenses of the *Conversazione*. Both entrances to the *Conversazione* were manned throughout the day and donation boxes at these entrances brought in another modest sum. The increased pursuit of exhibitors brought in 92 exhibits, the highest number for exactly thirty years and the second highest in the history of the *Conversazione*.

What kind of changes have occurred over these years? If we compare the new programmes with the old we find some differences, but they relate more to techniques than subjects. There were no electron microscopes in those days, nor were there computers. The very strong entomological input of the early years has declined. Conservation has come in. In modern times there has been more participation on behalf of societies and organisations not directly connected with the Natural History Society. No affiliations are

entered next to the names of exhibitors in the early programmes; relevant to this is a passage from a letter which Dr George Salt, who first exhibited in 1936, wrote to the author in 1979.



Small-life Supplies bring enticing bugs and cages!

In the thirties, most people took three years over Part I [of the Natural Sciences Tripos]. If they were going on to Part II, they did Part I in two years and then had two years for Part II, with no examination at the end of their third year. People doing Part II in Botany or Zoology were the mainstay of the Society, and in their third year often produced excellent exhibits for the *Conversazione*, as also did research students. The change to a one-year Part II ruined it as an education, and the *Conversazione* became more professional as the proportion of exhibits by research students and staff became much greater. School exhibits and the attendance of school parties is a post-war development.

The records of the *Conversazione* are, as has been noted, fairly complete. Recently a new dimension has been added to the archives. A set of colour prints of the the 1987 and 1988 events has been taken by NHS member Dr Hilary Belcher. None are to our knowledge available for the pre-war era, or indeed for any of our *Conversazioni*.



The Cambridge Beekeepers display is always fascinating!

This year the seventieth consecutive *Conversazione* of this town and gown society will take place - subject as ever to permission being granted by the Professor of Zoology - in the University Department of Zoology. Originally held in a relatively small laboratory, since 1934 it has been held in the large Elementary Laboratory, central in Cambridge and most perfectly suited for the occasion. This event will doubtless include objects of traditional natural history as well as the most recent of biological research, together with mineral science; the geologists, the Sedgwick Museum and Institute of Astronomy are no strangers to the *Conversazione*. 'Natural history' is sometimes regarded as old fashioned and redolent of the past. Certainly it has long been defined (since the sixteenth century) as the systematic study of natural objects, animal, vegetable and mineral. In those

days the study was by unaided observation; in 1989 it is conducted in all the ways made possible by the application of scientific method: still by basic straightforward observation, but also by observation reinforced by the many advances in instrumentation made down the years - for example the optical microscope, electron microscope and computers. Some say that 'natural history' is old fashioned and projects an ancient image - even that the Society should change its name; but by what collective may we replace it? Rather, it seems to me, we should rightly and proudly uphold natural history in Cambridge, a place of tradition. When was the last text book of science given a title of natural philosophy? Yet the Cambridge Philosophical Society, its title also redolent of the past, flourishes with the most modern science in the world. So should we continue to put on the best annual exhibition of traditional natural history, modern life sciences and modern environmental sciences in the Cambridge year, to complement the thirty or more talks on these subjects given each year and to represent the Society's annual 'At Home'.



Visitors and Exhibitors at the 2000 Conversazione

The Society is always looking for new members, new ideas, new exhibits and should anyone of the readership of the *Review* be now learning of the society's existence in Cambridge, then please come and join us - perhaps an exhibit for this year's *Conversazione*?

From: **The Cambridge Review** March 1989

A History of The Cambridge Natural History Society from 1857 to 1957

Charles E Raven

On this centenary celebration of our Cambridge Natural History Society the speaker privileged to commemorate its foundation and comment upon its history ought to find his task easy. A hundred years is not a long period for a City and University like ours. Several students have worked on the story; Cambridge if anywhere ought to be a storehouse of history. But the total evidence is fragmentary and woefully incomplete. Here it is:

In the *Entomologists' Weekly Intelligencer*, May 9, 1857, there is an article predicting that Cambridge will soon follow Oxford University by the foundation of an Entomological Society. Notices of the October and November meetings appear in the same periodical; and a list of its first officers appears in the *Accentuated List of the British Lepidoptera* published by the Oxford and Cambridge Societies in 1858, and this list has a note that the Society was "established May, 1857." These names - Charles Cardale Babington of St John's, President; F Barlow, Thomas Brown, Joseph William Dunning, Fellow of Trinity, Vice-Presidents; Alfred Forbes Sealy, Caius, Treasurer and Secretary, whose rooms in 70 Trumpington Street were the meeting-place of the Society - can be supplemented by the list of nineteen Cambridge entomologists printed in

The Entomologists' Annual for 1860.

Of this list T Brown was a correspondent of Edward Newman and contributed notes on *P. machaon*, *Argyamis*, *Latonia*, *Thecla W-album* and *betulae* and *P. dispar* in Cambridgeshire to his *British Butterflies*.

Dunning read a paper at the meeting on October 30, 1857, on a beginner's difficulties. Barlow exhibited and distributed *Galleria cereana* on November 27; Sealy sent up reports of the meetings and showed various insects at them.

Sealy's departure to India, where he spent a long period of service in Madras, may explain the lack of any early records. The only references yet traced in the



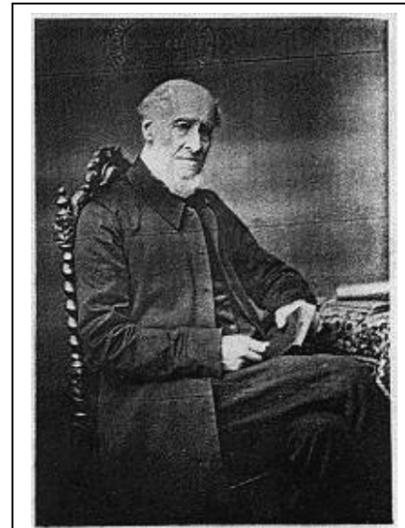
The Bee Moth *Galleria cereana*

magazines are a notice of the Annual Meeting on February 8, 1878, when William Alexander Forbes of St John's was elected Secretary; and of a similar meeting on February 8, 1885, when the Society numbered 24 and John Brown was President. The earliest minute book is a slim volume covering the years 1884 till 1892; and this was only followed in 1895 when a larger book is the first of a tolerably complete series.

This ignorance of our early years is the more surprising because our first President, C C Babington, then called "Beetle Babington", later the famous Professor of Botany, and in 1860 author of *The Flora of Cambridgeshire*, kept a voluminous journal I which accounts were given of the meetings, expeditions and adventures of all this period of his life (cf *Memorials*, pp 185-94), but without a single reference to the foundation or the activities of the Cambridge Entomological Society or to his presidency of it.

Indeed with so meagre a record of allusions to our foundation and with the clear evidence that for its first thirty five years it was by name and mainly also by membership limited to entomology, we might have had no clear right of descent from it had not William Farren, the famous Cambridge naturalist and furrier, whose father, William Farren, junior, of King's Old Gatehouse and afterwards of 10, Rose Crescent, was an original member, become our Secretary; and in 1907 proposed to revise the rules of the Society. These were the originals, approved and dated 1857; and when this was mentioned the President, Dr Shipley, the famous and hospitable Master of Christ's, declared "So this present year is our jubilee; we must celebrate it."

Obviously the Society sprang from two parents. There had been for at least ten years before 1857 a Cambridgeshire Naturalists' Club of which John Stevens Henslow, the only senior man from whom Charles Darwin had got any encouragement and who was Professor of Botany till 1861, was a mainstay. To this Club, which seems to have been small and informal, Babington in his *Journals* constantly refers in regard to the meetings and expeditions organised by it and which he regularly attended. Among its members were Simeon Hilary, Fellow of St John's, F J A Hort, afterwards Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity, and then a keen student of brambles, and W W Newbould, curate of Comberton, "father of Huntingdonshire botany". But the numbers seem never to have been more than about a dozen, and their main purpose was to organise excursions and share the cost of hired transport. Its other parent was the group of entomologist of whom the Rev. Leonard Jenyns of Gamlingay fame;



The Rev Leonard Jenyns

William and Charles Bree; the Rev. H Harpur Crewe of Trinity, then a curate in Suffolk and famous for this study of the Eupitheciae; and the great lepidopterist, Frederick Bond, were the most influential. Entomology was at this time a very popular and flourishing pursuit. J O Westwood, author of many handbooks and doyen of the insect-loving world, had been given the Royal Medal by the Royal Society; H T Stainton was publishing his *Manual of British Butterflies and Moths* and was preparing the second volume of his monograph of the *Tineira*; Henry Doubleday, the Quaker grocer of Epping, whose empty molasses barrels originated the practice of sugaring, and

the Rev. Joseph Greene, author of *The Insect Hunter's Companion*, whose records of pupa-digging had inspired comic songs, had opened up new types of collecting; the weekly numbers of the *Intelligencer* show how keen and how wide-spread was the interest. And Cambridge with the fens and the chalk, the meres and the brecksand, *P. machaon*, *P. dispar* and *T. pruni* was a much favoured centre. Its Entomological Society could always rely upon distinguished visitors.

So our Society was founded - first as the Cambridge Entomological Society; then (in the 'eighties) as the Entomological Society and Field Naturalists' Club; and finally, after much debate, in 1892 as the Entomological and Natural History Society.



The Society on a visit to Wicken Fen in 2002

During its first thirty years of life the Society was principally devoted to insects. Much excellent work was done on the micro-lepidoptera; and other orders, coleoptera, hymenoptera and neuroptera, were fairly sedulously collected. The great invasion of *V. antiopa* in the autumn of 1872 first introduced Alfred Jones, dentist and lepidopterist, to the Society to which he gave good help for thirty years, during much of which time the meetings were held in his rooms, 59 Trumpington Street. William Warren made a reputation over the study of *Bryophila impar*. Lamps were introduced on Wicken in the late 'seventies; and Solomon Bailey, the sedge-cutter, began to supply-hire them to collectors. In 1884 G H Raynor, afterwards devoting his life to the breeding of *A. grossulariata* and supplying material for L Doncaster's researches into the sex-linked mutant *A. lacticolor*; J Tarbat, whose collection, rich in South of England

lepidoptera, is in our museum; and A H Evans, author of the volume on Birds in the Cambridge series and of a Flora of the county, were members. In 1892 A M Moss, famous for his work on the Sphingids of South America, was president; William Bateson, the discoverer of Mendel's work and David Sharp, whom some of us knew as a veteran entomologist, were elected members at the same meeting; and William Farren, already mentioned, became secretary.

Readers, or at least the older ones among them, will forgive me if I spend a few minutes in tribute to the man who first introduced me (as he did very many others) to the Society, who for a generation embodied its quality for us, and who, whether at its meetings or in his taxidermist's business in Regent Street, was always ready to give friendship and help, reminiscences and stores of knowledge to any potential field-naturalist. His long lean figure, his long nose and beard, his alert and smiling eyes and his unforgettable voice - these with his unique knowledge of the flora and fauna of East Anglia and his readiness to share all that he had with us - gave him a remarkable influence. His father, himself an admirable collector of lepidoptera, a rosarian, and I believe a professional photographer, had given him all the necessary technical training. In 1884-85 they had rented a cottage at Wicken and young William lived on the fen. In the 'nineties he started in business as a naturalist and taxidermist and began to study plumage-changes, the sterna and shoulder-girdles of birds and the trachea of male ducks. Early in the new century he became a pioneer of bird-photography and, like Herbert William Richmond of King's College, succeeded in getting admirable pictures of the stone-curlew. At this time he was taken out to Spain by Edwin S Montague and came back with first-rate material for lectures on the marismas of the Guadalquivir. Much of his work appeared in J E Marr and A E Shipley, *Cambridgeshire*, and in the volumes on the Natural History of Wicken Fen; many of his photographs in one of the most beautifully illustrated of bird books, the four volumes edited by F B Kirkman. For some years I hoped to persuade him to leave us a full story of his adventures; and it is a delight that in 1947 I was able to take him out to see his first waxwings feeding on berries off the Milton Road. It was to him more perhaps than to any other that the continuous growth of our Society and its expansion from insects to the whole range of zoological and botanical studies are principally due.



Members and friends of the Society at Wicken Fen in 2002

In the decade before the first world war the Society, now definitely the Cambridge Natural History Society, began to develop not only a large membership but a vigorous and well distributed influence. C G Lamb, David Sharp, G F Harmer and A E Shipley had been presidents. A C Haddon, A C Seward, L Doncaster, J Stanley Gardiner, J C F Fryer, G F Keynes, Hugh Scott and indeed most of the biologists and geneticists in residence were members; and Mendelism had given a new direction and a universal enthusiasm to their researches. None who remember the epic encounter between Bateson and Poulton, or who turn back to the correspondence columns of *Nature* will fail to realise how passionately the new findings on heredity had aroused the rival champions to *odium scientificum*.

It was indeed an exciting time for the field naturalist. In the previous generation his almost sole concern was with collecting; the Linnean emphasis upon taxonomy, and Huxley's concentration upon anatomy and physiology, had left almost no room for study of the living animal. The suggestion, recently revived among us by a historian of science, that all true science is of the laboratory and that the student of the living organism stands to the scientist as the novelist stands to the historian, did not sound

so absurd at a time when there was still a widespread conviction that birds and beasts and even men were ultimately only robots, by-products of physics and chemistry, whose behaviour was of no real worth as a subject of serious study. But at the beginning of the century the tide had begun slowly but surely to turn, and though the gulf between the men of museums and the men of the open air was still wide, the liveliest minds in biology were already moving towards a denial of the antithesis, towards ecological and psychological problems and to that sense of wholeness which is now influencing every department from medicine to nuclear physics.

In our society the decade of genetics was broken by the war; and after it by the reaction against a too rigid determinism and an insistence on nurture and habit. The much-debated reception given to Kammerer in April, 1923, was perhaps due more to the vigour of E W Macbride than to any widespread revolt against mechanism, and in any case was sadly misplaced. But obviously the replacement of egg-collecting by bird-photography, and of the filling of insect-cabinets by breeding experiments into the character and origin of mutations meant a change in the character of natural history. As biology began to concern itself with the study of living organisms in its natural environment to seek for technical methods by which this could be scientifically pursued, the field-worker came inevitably into a position of greater respectability. Expeditions, now for observation rather than for hunting, became a main concern; and the preservation of flora and fauna shifted from herbaria and taxidermy to the creation of nature reserves and the development of objective recording and interpretation of the data obtained from their inhabitants. The long series of papers on the Natural History of Wicken Fen, edited by J Stanley Gardiner from 1925, is a clear proof of our Society's vitality.

It was natural that in such a period of extension the Society should be led to develop not only wider fields of interest but more specialised and sectional activities. It would be improper to refer to the remarkable achievements of its recent years - though the mention of ecology and quaternary research in botany or of the study of bird and insect behaviour in zoology is at once to recall the names both of the outstanding pioneers and of a number of enthusiastic and very competent students. It is all to the good that the old Cambridge Entomological Society should have been expanded into its present structure of semi-independent sections and supplemented by the Bird Club and the organisations for exploration and travel far outside Britain. But the spirit which inspires and holds together these widely ranging pursuits is the same authentic passion which from the days of William Turner or Thomas Penny or John Ray has made this place a nursery and training ground in the service of Natural Philosophy and has sent out from it a succession of persons duly qualified to promote this primary and universal study. Turner, author of the first bird-book of the modern age; Penny, pioneer of insect study; Ray, greatest naturalist of all time - it is for the continuance of their work that our Society is the trustee.



A CNHS excursion to Paradise fen

And for the future? If, as I often think and say, Natural History widely interpreted might well become the finest of all instruments for the training of children, and if its pursuit has educational value for developing observation, memory and range of interests; for promoting aesthetic and moral as well as intellectual qualities, then we may see what is still too often regarded as a harmless hobby or even a sign of eccentricity take the place in cultural life which some of us believe it to deserve.

Reprinted from THE CAMBRIDGE REVIEW, October 12, 1957 from a paper read to the Society on May 8, 1957

The Cambridge Natural History Society One Century Ago

Henry Tribe

How was the condition of the Society 100 years ago? By 1901 it was still the Cambridge Entomological and Natural History Society but in 1902 its name was formally changed, on a motion by Dr Sharp seconded by Mr W. Farren, to the Cambridge Natural History Society.

The Minute Books of Nov. 1900 to May 1907, and May 1907 to Jan 1913 and the Council Minutes 1896 - 1925 give us a picture of the Society as it was in Edwardian Times. Each meeting has its handwritten entry in the Minute Books as has each year's Annual Report. Loose-leaf sheets found between pages of the minute book were summaries of papers and discourses handwritten by speakers for the Hon Secretary to enter in the minute book. There were ten of these (two asking 'Will this do?') and they were transcribed word for word. (Mr Doncaster submitted a printed paper for his talk on colour inheritance in cats, but the Hon.Sec. neither transcribed nor abstracted it!)

We begin at the Anniversary Meeting of 8 February 1901 (as the first February meeting of the year was then known). The Society comprised a President, 3 Vice-presidents, an Honorary Secretary and Treasurer, 3 Council Members and a Librarian. The last year's President expressed his wish that the proposed compilation of a Fauna of Cambridgeshire might not be allowed to fall through. Mr Bonhole then read his paper 'Notes and observations of birds at their breeding haunts' which was given a 2½ page handwritten report.

There were 10 meetings in 1901 and the Annual Report of 1902 stated that the proceedings and state of the Society compared very favourably with previous years. Meetings were on the whole far better attended and there was a welcome increase in the number of exhibits. Resident membership was 41 in 1901 as against 29 in 1900. Eight papers had been read, compared with two in the previous year, five being illustrated with "magic lantern slides".

The Fauna (and Flora) matter took up time at 4 meetings, requiring so much time in one meeting that the speaker had to curtail his discourse. At five meetings members exhibited specimens: thus (for example) on 10 May, three exhibits were shown: some larvae of the common swift moth preserved in spirit, with *Cordyceps* fungus growing from them; a spirit-preserved specimen of a newt from caves in the Adriatic and from the taxidermist Mr Farren an almost white song thrush and photographs of birds nests. On 18 October there were some lepidoptera from Natal; a preserved larva and living pupa of *Sphinx convolvuli* from near Cambridge, plus some photographs, and some beautiful paintings of mollusca, done from specimens taken near Montreal.

In 1902 most meetings consisted of exhibits for examination and showings of lantern slides although the above-average number of exhibits was chiefly the work of a few people. Sometimes the exhibits were followed by a paper or discourse. Meetings were in the rooms of Alfred Jones ('dentist and lepidopterist', Raven, 1957) in Trumpington St. until 1902 when they moved to Dr Shipley's room in the Museum of Zoology. In these early years of the century we have a picture of comparatively few members, almost all with college affiliations, presented with a variety of specimens for examination and discussion. The meetings were more formal than today. Minutes of the previous meeting were always read and confirmed, new members were proposed and seconded, financial matters discussed, votes of thanks proposed, and (at the annual meeting) the Annual Report was read.

By 1903 the proceedings and state of Society compared fairly favourably with previous years "though the meetings on the whole have not been as well attended as might be". Where recorded for 1902 attendances ranged from 11 to 18. But the Annual Report of 1904 recorded that the 1903 session had been a "down". The fixture card had announced 13 meetings, the minute book recorded seven. At the first meeting which failed "four of us assembled to hear Mr Wallis read a paper, the reading of which paper it was decided to spare Mr Wallis - for half an hour we sat on the table, waiting for someone to turn up and discussing the chances of Cambridge in the forthcoming Varsity boat race, and sports. At the first meeting in May we again met, all 4 of us, and again sat on the table this time gloating over the results of the Contest discussed at the last meeting." Two meetings out of 4 were successfully held in the May term, "after two more futile attempts - attended by 4 members - at which we sat round the fire and were much entertained by Mr Baker's recital of his adventures by land and water - especially water - on his recent bird photographing expedition in the United States of America" However "In spite of the general slackness some important business has been transacted, the management of the scheme for forming a collection of the fauna of Cambridgeshire has been taken over by the Council of the Society. Chiefly by the energy of Mr F.C.Morgan, whose final departure from Cambridge for his home in Canada is a great loss to the Society. A cabinet has been acquired to hold the Collection and by kind permission of Dr Harmer is placed in the Annexe of the Zoological Museum. An appeal has been made for a special subscription to defray the cost of the Cabinet, an appeal that has had a liberal response from several members. The amount received together with the funds in hand has enabled payment to be made for the cabinet before closing the account book for the year, leaving us however with the small balance in hand of £1 " 8 " 7."

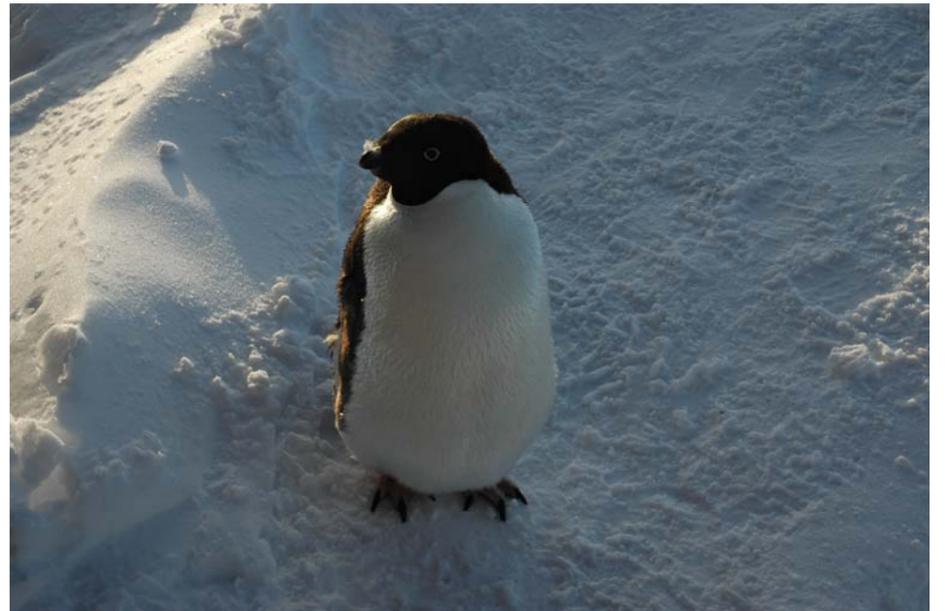
Thereafter however was 'decided improvement'. Membership steadily increased from 47 in 1905 to 93 in 1910, and attendance at meetings rose to an average of about twenty. Names and addresses of all new members were entered into the minute books. Over the nine decades of the Edwardian period, 154 members of colleges (all male) were elected but only 9 town members, just two of whom were ladies.

A very noteworthy town member was Mr William Farren, the taxidermist in Regent Street, whose central position in the Society was emphasized by Charles Raven (1957). He was the combined Secretary and Treasurer from 1892 to 1896, for a short period in 1901 and then was elected again in 1903 and held the post until 1919. He was elected Hon Treasurer in 1921 when Mr MGS Perkins became Hon Secretary.

It was noted at the meeting of 15 November 1905 that there being no paper the President (Dr Shipley) gave an interesting description of his fine collection of portraits of past and present Professors and introduced each with "the poker and an entertaining anecdote." We have a cosy coal-fire image of what was essentially a college Society whose town secretary was a professional naturalist.

The Annual Report of 1907 noted the very conspicuous absence of specimens exhibited by members. This was much to be regretted as "the exhibition of most simple natural object may lead to interesting and instructive discussion". By then the fauna collection was progressing slowly. Mr Tottenham of St Johns College had specially collected and contributed a large number of Coleoptera, a few birds had been added, and Mr Fryer had filed a large batch of records of Lepidoptera.

On 16 May 1907 a special meeting in the large lecture theatre of the Botany School was held to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Society, when a past President Mr Theobald gave his lecture on Sericulture and Silkworms. "There was a fair attendance of members and friends, including Mr John Brown the only surviving original member". In his Annual Report of 1908 William Farren noted that after the vote of thanks, with the aid of light refreshments the meeting then became social. However, "the faunal collection makes but slow progress".



An Adelle penguin, Halley, Antarctica

The meeting of the decade was in 1908, when at the Anniversary Meeting of 13 February, 140 persons attended Dr Edward Wilson's lecture on the birds and mammals of the Antarctic, again held in Botany's large lecture theatre. But ordinary meetings had outgrown "our old and comfortable quarters in Mr Shipley's room where we had been most kindly allowed to have meetings for 5 years" and were transferred to the Hopkinson lecture room in the Engineering Department, which "though fine and truly commodious was perhaps too large". The Library had been moved from Mr Jones' address in 1904 and "dumped" in Dr Sharp's room in the Zoology Museum.



Emperor penguins and a seal on Antarctic pack ice

The Era closed with 93 members in 1909, ten meetings and average attendance of 26. Among distinctions conferred on members during the year may be mentioned that Mr C.E.Raven (see 1957) was now Dean of Emmanuel. "Two members of the Society have been returned to Parliament. Mr Montagu retained his seat in West Cambridgeshire and Mr G.H.Verrall was elected for the Eastern Division of the County. Mr Verrall has practically assured the preservation of Wicken Fen for all time and Mr Montagu with others is actively engaged on a scheme which should convert Hickling Broad and the surrounding marshes into the most important bird sanctuary in the country. Financially we are in a sound position in spite of an unusually large number of members in arrears..... our balance in hand is £4 " 4 " 5½."

Reference. Raven, C.E. (1957) The Cambridge Natural History Society. *Cambridge Review* October 12.

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