

The Cambridge Natural History Society

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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 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 in 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; 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.

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.

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.

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.

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Henry Tribe provides the following correction: *The statement in paragraph 5, line 8, that the earliest minute book dated from 1884 is incorrect. The first book dates from 1857 to 1866 and contains much information on the first nine years of the Society, which began as the Cambridge Entomological Society and became the Cambridge Natural History Society in 1902. We must assume that this volume was mislaid from the Society's collection when Canon Raven wrote his article and was unavailable to him. The next books from 1866-1883 are missing and probably lost, but after 1883 minute books cover every year until they were abandoned in the 1990s.*