



BOURNEMOUTH NATURAL SCIENCE SOCIETY & MUSEUM

A WELL KEPT SECRET – THE BOURNEMOUTH NATURAL SCIENCE SOCIETY

By Ray Chapman

The Bournemouth Natural Science Society is over 100 years old, and has been at its premises in Christchurch Road since 1920. Yet a frequent comment from visitors to our public events and open days is “We have lived in Bournemouth for 30 years and didn’t know you existed!”. What follows is a short description of the Society’s history and activities.

The Bournemouth Natural Science Society (BNSS) was formed in 1903 by a group of Bournemouth people with an interest in the Natural Sciences. There had been two previous Societies in Bournemouth with similar aims. The first, the Bournemouth Natural History Society, was started about 1868 and existed until around 1882 when its activities ceased. The next was started around 1884 and was known as the Bournemouth Scientific and Antiquarian Society. It functioned until 1896 when it too became defunct. Some of the members of this Society tried to resurrect the activities of these earlier organisations; they used to meet in each other’s houses to read scientific papers. The first minutes of a Committee meeting are dated November 2nd 1903 which is when the Society could be said to have really started. The name at this stage was the Bournemouth and District Society of Natural Science. At the end of the Society’s first year there were 112 members, 77 men and 35 women. During that year 18 lectures were given. There were just five sections compared to the 12 functioning today. The Society met at first in private homes until in 1906 a rented room above Thick’s Boot Shop, 122, Old Christchurch Road (now an estate agents) was taken. Lectures were given at various halls around Bournemouth. In 1909, with larger premises required, a move was made to Granville Chambers at Richmond Hill.

By the end of 1912 the membership was 400 (346 in 2009) and the need to house the ever growing collections meant that larger premises were desperately needed. These were found in the new Municipal College building in the form of a large ground floor room. These premises were used until 1919 when, at the end of the Great War, space was required for the expansion of technical education.

A major move was then made with the purchase of an Italianate Victorian building, 39, Christchurch Road, where the Society remains today. The house had been built in the 1870s for the Cassels family, when it was known as “Bassendean”. The princely sum of £3000 was raised from the members by debentures to purchase and refit the house. Work began in September 1919, the formal opening was on 7th February 1920. Ten years later it was felt that the lecture room was not large enough and a large lecture hall was added to the premises. This is still in use today and the original lecture room is now known as the Museum Room. The house is today a Grade 2 listed building and houses the collections in a series of rooms

There is a large garden to the rear of the property; the site was originally part of the native heathland with Scots Pine trees and heathers. The pines were felled mainly in the period 1940 – 1960, having succumbed to storm damage. The garden has been developed by our members with occasional professional help, being planted not just with the more common trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, but also with rare and less common ones.

Being formerly heathland, the acidity in the soil provides ideal growing conditions for calcifuge plants. Among those in the garden are Rhododendrons, Azaleas, various Heathers, Skimmias and Camellias. The garden has hardly changed in character since 1923, although parking spaces in front of the house have increased

considerably, with the previously gravelled area being laid to tarmac. In February 1976, the house acquired Grade 2 listed building status and the garden became part of a conservation area. Among the trees of particular interest are, at the front of the house, an Indian Bean Tree, *Catalpa bignonioides*, with heart shaped leaves and white flowers in summer and a Maidenhair Tree, *Ginkgo biloba*. At the rear of the house on the eastern side is a *Paulownia* sp., whose spectacular foxglove-like flowers appear in May. Also, growing in the lawn is a Dawn Redwood, *Metasequoia* sp. There is a wide variety of shrubs, of particular interest are the scented winter flowering shrubs such as Winter Daphne, *Daphne odora*, *Osmanthus burkwoodii* Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis mollis*, and *Mahonia* sp. Among the summer flowering shrubs and trees, one of the most striking is the Chilean Fire Bush, *Embothrium coccineum*. Growing in the lawn is a *Cornus kousa*; this large shrub produces masses of white four petalled flowers in early summer.

The island bed immediately behind the house has a small ornamental pond at the centre. Despite its size, it provides a habitat for a variety of fresh water invertebrates. 'Pond dips' are organised on BNSS open days and are proving very popular with young people. Among the species found in the pond are fresh water shrimps, water boatmen, cyclops, water fleas, clams and snails. There are also at least three different species of flatworm. In early spring, large amounts of frog spawn are laid by mating frogs. Recently a larger wildlife pond has been created at the rear of the garden to encourage a wider range of animals, for example, newts, frogs and various insect larvae.

To make the garden more attractive to wildlife, a number of hibernation and nesting boxes have been installed at appropriate locations for hedgehogs, amphibians and birds. A bird box with an observation camera has recently been installed on the western side of the building and every spring nesting blue tits can be observed on a TV screen situated in the Museum room.

The collections are a major facet of the Society; they have been collected from many sources. Members bring things that interest them as well as donating their own collections. Other organisations and private individuals have donated significant items over the years and some objects have been purchased.

There is a large collection of birds and bird eggs on display in the museum. Although the collecting of such items is not carried out today, in the days that it was there was little option if close study of animals and birds was to be conducted. It has been illegal to collect wild birds' eggs since the introduction of the Wild Birds Protection Act, 1954 and it is illegal to possess or control any wild birds' eggs taken since that time under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. We retain such things for their scientific value and study. Similarly there are large collections of insects, butterflies and moths. The ability to study a case of variants of a single species is invaluable to the entomologist and we are sometimes asked to provide specimens to other organisations for research.

Possibly less contentious are the shell collections, (although again collection of exotic species is now discouraged or prohibited), both local and foreign with some beautiful examples. The geology collection has some excellent items including the Dent collection of local Barton fossils which were highly rated when purchased by the Society to retain them in the area. Former president Sir Daniel Morris reported in 1914 that 'It was described by Mr. Henry Keeping, curator of the museum at Cambridge, as 'one of the best in the world - probably only equalled by the Edwards Collection in the British Museum and the one in the Sedgwick Museum at Cambridge''.

The botany collection contains specimens dating back many years all neatly preserved and documented. The archaeology exhibits include items from the local area with many fine Neolithic hand axes and other tools. There is also a collection of Egyptian artefacts, known as the Grenfell Collection, including a mummy in its sarcophagus. The mummy has been CAT- scanned and a model of the head may be seen in the hall.

There have been many well known members of the Society over the years. Probably the most notable was Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-author with Charles Darwin of the original papers on the origin of species presented to the Linnaean Society.