

A History of the Selborne Society

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The title of the Society was originally The Selborne League. It was created in November 1885, by George and Theresa Musgrave of Torquay, Devon.

The purpose of the Selborne League was to perpetuate the name and interests of Gilbert White, whose monograph 'The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne', published in 1789, had gone through more than 70 editions or reprints since his death in 1793.

The Musgraves intended that the new body should do much more than help to spread admiration for the naturalist of Selborne. They explained that their League had 5 main objects:

- Preservation of birds of beautiful plumage.
- Preservation of rare birds.
- Preservation of wild flowers.
- Introduction of harmless plants.
- Preservation of forests and places of popular resort by means of publishing any threatened destruction of them.

By coincidence a second body, The Plumage League, was formed on 18th December of the same year. This had the single objective of curbing the excesses of the trade in birds' feathers. The founders asked women to oppose "the display of the dead and distorted bodies of birds" as objects of fashion.

It soon became clear that the two leagues had overlapping objectives and clienteles. Consequently, they amalgamated in January 1886 as the Selborne Society for the Preservation of Birds, Plants and Pleasant Places.

The Society became a formally constituted body at a Special General Meeting on 26th January 1888 when official rules were adopted. These incorporated the main objects outlined by the Musgraves with a few revisions. Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, was appointed President and the Society's affairs were placed under the control of the Secretary, Treasurer and a Council of twelve members. The minimum annual subscription was half-a-crown or 12½ pence in modern decimal coinage.

Unlike its modern counterpart, the Selborne Society was originally a national body with a London office and several regional branches, amongst which, one of the most active and financially independent groups was the Ealing branch, with over 200 members.

To recruit new members the Society issued, in 1887, a monthly series of penny pamphlets called 'Selborne Letters', which explained its objects and work, but the main organ of communication was 'The Selborne Magazine', which appeared monthly in the following year and covered a wide range of natural history topics and 'Selborniana'. In 1890 the magazine was issued as 'Nature Notes'.

It was the Ealing Branch that eventually showed clarity of purpose by pioneering a project to protect birds in a small area of Middlesex. Robert Read, a naturalist from the Ealing area, was very impressed by the birdsong he heard coming from Perivale Wood as he worked along the Grand Union Canal. The Wood formed part of the Greenford Manorial Estates owned by the Bishops of London and leased for agriculture.

In October 1902, the Ealing Branch formed a committee to establish Perivale Wood as a bird sanctuary and an agreement was made with a helpful farmer to maintain the woodland hedges and appoint a keeper.

Nearly three years later, Harry Quarterman was employed to do this task; he started immediately to coppice the Wood and to protect it against the army of poachers, bird-catchers, egg-collectors and flower-sellers, who had long regarded it as a free hunting ground.

One of Quarterman's duties at the Perivale Wood Bird Sanctuary was to design and make nest boxes that were sold to defray the cost of management. This venture became so successful that many of the boxes were exported to different parts of the world.

Towards the end of 1904, a new and energetic champion began his active role in the Selborne Society. He was Wilfred Mark Webb of Hanwell, who became Honorary General Secretary and later (in 1911) editor of the magazine. After Webb took over the Society, its membership went from strength to strength, the total rising to 2,780 by the end of 1914. When Webb became Editor, he abandoned the title 'Nature Notes' and the journal once more became 'The Selborne Magazine'.

By 1914 the branch was able to rent Perivale Wood from the Church Commissioners. In August that year, the outbreak of war inevitably curtailed the growth and activities of many voluntary bodies and, when hostilities ended in 1918, the Society was quite moribund. Fortunately, in the euphoria of the immediate post-war period, it made a significant move that was to have far-reaching results in the distant future. Perivale Wood, with some adjoining land, was offered for sale in 1920 and the Ealing Branch felt optimistic enough to launch a public appeal which coincided with the bicentenary of Gilbert White's birth. The purchase was completed in 1923 for just over £5,000, most of the money coming from one anonymous benefactor.

Further pasture was bought in 1931 and thus a total of nearly 27 acres were saved for nature conservation. Roughly 19 acres of pedunculate oak woodland with a few ash trees and a predominantly hazel understorey with some hawthorn, the remainder being old pasture, a marsh, a stream and five ponds. Together they represented several types of habitat in a relatively small area.

The Second World War proved to be even more damaging than the First to the Selborne Society and its work at Perivale Wood. Not only was the keeper killed on active service but also Wilfred Mark Webb and many of the active helpers, who had kept the Society alive during the 1930s, were called away on war work. Fortunately, Wilfred's son Geoffrey was able to visit the Wood regularly and kept the hedges and fences in some sort of repair.

A Lecture Bureau which had functioned for many years before the war, providing a regular income from the commission charged on lecture fees, ceased to exist, removing a main source of revenue. When peace returned in 1945, Webb tried to revive the flagging fortunes of the Society, but he was old and in failing health and died in 1952. In his heyday, he had made a distinguished contribution to the Selborne Society and the fact that it has ceased to function as a national body should not obscure its merits as one of the pioneers in promoting sanctuaries, now generally called nature reserves.

By now, most of the branches had ceased to function and the Society's future depended on the small remaining nucleus of members whose interests centred on Perivale Wood. After several years of inadequate management, its hedges and fences were in a state of decay. Trespassing and vandalism were rife and uncontrolled shooting was reducing the wildlife. Even so, the range and quality of its animals and plants were sufficient for the Nature Conservancy to notify the area as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in December 1957, thus giving government recognition to the importance of the Wood to nature conservation.

In 1958 a new chairman, Tom Bartlett, a new Secretary, Major G. A. Cattley, infused fresh purpose into

the organisation by developing the educational potential of the Wood. Groups of pupils from local schools began meeting there regularly for open air lessons in natural history and an intensive management programme was initiated soon afterwards. A Junior Section was started in 1964 with its own programme of activities.

The Selborne Magazine made a welcome reappearance in 1958 but was eventually superseded by a cyclostyled newsletter in 1970 which continues today.

The Society's affairs became somewhat neglected after Major Cattley's retirement and Tom Bartlett's death but the permanent secretarial duties were taken on in 1974 by Roy Hall who remained Secretary until his death in 2009. Thanks to Hall's efforts, the Society soon regained its vigour, mainly because he encouraged a wide range of indoor meetings and field excursions that appealed to differing tastes and attracted more members. He gave illustrated talks on Gilbert White, The Selborne Society and other natural history topics to many local societies which raised additional income for the Selborne Society.

In 1974, the Chairman Mrs Pearl Small, with the Society's solicitor, redrafted its Memorandum and Articles of Association and also established Perivale Wood as a statutory local nature reserve.

A workbook 'On the Trail' for teachers and pupils visiting the Reserve was published in 1970 and in the early 1970s, the job of conducting school parties around the Reserve was taken up by John Alden, who did this until his death in 1998. Today, Nic Ferriday continues to do this valuable work.

In 1973 'Wildlife in the Suburbs', a booklet about the Reserve, was published by Peter Edwards and Kevin Roberts. Second and third editions were edited by David Bender and it is still available from the Society.

Another educational initiative, which started in 1970, has been the means of introducing natural history to many hundreds of people. This takes the form of an Open Day at Perivale Wood, usually on a Sunday at the end of April or beginning of May. This annual event now attracts about 1500 visitors, who are welcome to wander through the Reserve and enjoy the carpets of massed bluebells. Open Day also produces useful revenue.

By 1974, apart from the Ealing branch, the only other active branch of the Society was that of Selborne Village. The main aim of both branches was the encouragement of interest in natural history and the perpetuation of Gilbert White's memory. But in their secondary aims they differed; the aims of the Ealing branch were centred on Perivale Wood whereas those of the Selborne Village branch were more concerned with the amenities in their own vicinity. The two branches agreed to separate; the Selborne Village branch became the Selborne Association and the Ealing branch continued as the Selborne Society. Close contact between the two branches has been maintained ever since.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the decision to acquire Perivale Wood had far deeper implications for the future than could be realised at the time. If the Wood had not been established as a nature reserve, the Selborne Society might well have come to an end after the Second World War, instead of developing into the healthy organisation of over 1,000 members that it is today.