



THE SELBORNE SOCIETY
Its Origin and History

by
Michael Blackmore

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Our centenary year provides a useful occasion on which to turn back the clock and consider the beginnings of our Society. Who were its founders and what were their aims? In what ways has it developed or changed since its early days?

Some members may not know that our original title was the Selborne League. The exact date of its formation has been forgotten, but it was created sometime in November 1885 by George Musgrave and his wife Theresa of Torquay, Devon. Musgrave's scientific interests were reflected by his fellowships of the Zoological Society of London and of the Royal Geographical Society, though he does not seem to have played an active role in either of these bodies.

An implicitly obvious 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 seventy editions or reprints (often with the omission of the *Antiquities* or with other variations) during the ninety-two years that elapsed 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. With single-minded industry they wrote to the press and to potential subscribers, explaining that their League had five main objects :

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

These aims laid more stress on protecting the countryside and its wildlife than Gilbert White himself had done, though it could be claimed with some justification that most of the Selborne League's objectives were implied in varying degrees, if not precisely stated, in his classic work.

Whatever doubts a purist might have about equating the League's programme with White's known opinions, it was generally agreed that the title of the organisation was both inspired and inspiring, for it produced in the minds of those who read the book an idealised picture of an unspoilt country parish and its natural objects; or, more fancifully, it conjured up visions of an arcadian landscape belonging to a Golden Age. On those Victorians nurtured on Wordsworth and other poets of the Romantic Revival the Musgraves' proposals made an immediate impact.

It may have been by coincidence that a second body came into existence

almost immediately after the Selborne League. This was the Plumage League, formed on 18th December by the Reverend Francis Orpen Morris and Lady Mount-Temple with the single objective of curbing the excesses of the trade in birds' feathers, then at its height. The founders appealed directly to all sympathetic women to oppose "the display of the dead and distorted bodies of birds" as objects of fashion. They were urged to confine themselves to using ostrich plumes which were obtained without harming the birds.

Both Morris and Lady Mount-Temple were colourful and well-known personalities in the world of animal welfare. The former, a clergyman in Yorkshire, was born near Cork in 1810. An enthusiastic anti-Darwinian naturalist, he became widely known as a fervent and discursive contributor to the correspondence columns of the popular press, but he earned his main reputation as the author of several natural history books, the most important being a six-volume work called *A History of British Birds* which enjoyed large sales and went through three editions. He had also been concerned with the protection of birds since the 1860s and among various projects he helped to organise England's first bird protection society at Bridlington, near Flamborough Head, where thousands of sea-birds were formerly slaughtered at their nests for so-called sport. Besides promoting legislation to protect birds, he was keenly interested in the anti-vivisection movement and, as a correspondent of John Ruskin, he rejoiced when the latter resigned his chair at Oxford (as Slade professor of fine arts) in protest against the university's refusal to end experiments on animals.

Lady Mount-Temple, a spiritualist and vegetarian, had been encouraged by her husband to join Morris in forming the Plumage League. Indeed, Lord Mount-Temple was probably the driving force behind the scenes but he tactfully let his wife enjoy the credit and publicity. Early in his career he had been private secretary to his uncle, Viscount Melbourne, while the latter was Queen Victoria's prime minister; subsequently he held several government posts, becoming first commissioner of works (1860 – 66) during the second administration of his step-father, Viscount Palmerston. He was raised to the peerage in 1880. In addition to being a temperance advocate and a strict follower of Sabbath observance, he was also, like Morris, a staunch anti-vivisectionist and sponsored a local Band of Mercy (a movement that taught children to treat animals with kindness) near his estate at Broadlands, Romsey. Moreover, he took a deep interest in rural conservation (a term not then in general use) as shown by his successful efforts to save Epping Forest as an open space, and by his firm support for the Commons Preservation Society.

Musgrave realised that the influential and socially prominent promoters of the Plumage League could materially advance his own cause, and he therefore asked Morris for his help. But the latter, while not openly antagonistic, remained aloof, anxious to keep his distance from the sentimentality shown by some of the Selborne League's adherents. (Although he joined it, he was later to disclaim any responsibility as a founder because of what he regarded as its

embarrassing accretions. His feeling was shared by several other members and eventually led to the adoption of a more scientific approach).

Almost immediately after their formation it became clear that the two leagues had overlapping objectives and clientele. Consequently they amalgamated in January 1886 with widespread approval (and with Morris's perhaps qualified consent) as the Selborne Society – its full title being the Selborne Society for the Preservation of Birds, Plants and Pleasant Places. The Plumage League did not lose its identity entirely; it became the Plumage Section of the Selborne Society under the royal patronage of Queen Victoria's third daughter, Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein.

The Society could not be described as an organised body until its special general meeting on 26th January 1888 when official rules were adopted. These incorporated the main objects outlined by George and Theresa Musgrave with a few revisions. Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate, was appointed president (a post he held until his death in 1892) and the Society's affairs were placed under the control of a secretary, treasurer and council of twelve members. The minimum annual subscription was half-a-crown.

Unlike its modern counterpart, the Selborne Society was originally a national body with a London office and several regional branches, among which one of the most active and financially independent groups was the Ealing division of the Lower Thames (Brent Valley) Branch with over 200 members. It first met in July 1888 with the Duke of Cambridge as its president.

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 addition to its journal the Society concerned itself with several other activities, some of which were rather removed from its original objectives. For example, it sent representatives to the annual meetings of the National Society for Checking the Abuse of Public Advertising – a body that campaigned against the display of garish hoardings and posters in rural areas. The Selborne Society's interest in footpaths and rights of way, and its opposition to various official actions affecting metropolitan parks and commons, showed a vigilant spirit; but such efforts tended to blur the original priorities and some members feared that the Society had "too many irons in the fire". It was the Lower Thames (Brent Valley) Branch that eventually showed clarity of purpose by pioneering a project to protect birds in a small area of Middlesex.

* In 1890 the magazine was issued as *Nature Notes* and edited by James Britten of the British Museum (Natural History) until he died in 1897. Professor G. S. Boulger then became editor until his death in 1910.

The inspiration for this idea may have come from Robert H. Read, a local naturalist, who often walked along the bank of the Grand Union Canal making a list of birds which he published in 1896. He was especially impressed by the bird-song he heard coming from Perivale Wood (anciently called Broadhedge or Braddish Wood) which formed part of the Greenford manorial estates owned by the bishops of London and leased for agriculture.

In October 1902 the 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 Brent Valley Bird Sanctuary (as it was then called) was to design and make nest boxes that were sold to defray the costs 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.* There is a pleasant story that in 1875, when Webb was a boy of seven, Robert Read showed him a long-tailed tit's nest, thus helping to implant the enthusiasm for natural history that inspired him for the rest of his life.

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 although Webb continued to direct the Society's affairs with customary dedication and efficiency, it began to lose members and influence. When hostilities ended in 1918 the organisation (which had been incorporated in the previous year) was barely managing to exist, but 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 was offered for sale in 1920 with some adjoining land (now called the Paddock, Pond Field and Little Elms Meadow) 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 £5000, but this amount did not signify a real resurgence of energy by the Society because most of the money came from one anonymous benefactor.

A pasture called Willow Mead, on the southern side of the wood below the railway embankment, was bought in 1931. Its eastern end acted as a

* After Webb took over the Society its membership went from strength to strength, the total being 1801 in March 1906, rising to 2780 by the end of 1914. The Ealing Branch alone had 361 members in 1908. When he became editor he abandoned the title *Nature Notes* and the journal once more became *The Selborne Magazine*.

convenient 'buffer zone' against the imminent development of new houses in Sunley Gardens and Selborne Gardens; but a plan to acquire a further piece of meadow along the boundary between the Paddock and Horsenden Lane South unfortunately came to nothing. This land was later developed as a wartime industrial site (which was supposed to be temporary but in fact became permanent) and a community centre. Nevertheless, a total of nearly twenty-seven acres were saved for nature conservation. They comprised roughly nineteen 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 previous one to the Selborne Society and its work at Perivale Wood. Not only did it entail the loss of the keeper on active service, but also the absence of Wilfred Mark Webb (on censorship duties) and of other helpers who had done much to keep the organisation alive during the 1930's. Fortunately, Webb's son Geoffrey was able to visit the wood regularly and keep 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, virtually ceased to exist during hostilities and its disappearance removed the main source of revenue. When peace returned in 1945 Webb tried to revive the flagging fortunes of the Society, but he was now a septuagenarian in failing health and no longer able to make the impact he wished. He died in January 1952, saddened by the recent death of his son. In his heyday he had made a distinguished contribution to the Selborne Society, and the fact that it ceased to function as a national body should not be allowed to obscure its merits as one of the pioneers in promoting sanctuaries or what are now generally called nature reserves.

The Reverend Dennis Paterson succeeded Webb as secretary. He was supported by a few local helpers, among whom Charles Poulter gave notable service, undertaking various tasks which included the secretaryship from November 1954 (when Paterson became chairman) until 1956 when the latter agreed to resume the duties of secretary after an unfortunate incident which must be mentioned briefly for the sake of historical truth. One of the Society's officers, who was also a solicitor, misappropriated £375 of its funds together with some of his clients' money. In spite of this setback the organisation remained solvent, but its membership was barely viable with only twenty-five subscribers in March 1957.

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 more or less in a state of decay. Trespassing was rife,

most of the nest-boxes had been destroyed by vandals, 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 (SSSI) in December 1957, under the provisions of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, thus giving government recognition to the importance of the wood for nature conservation.

The year 1958 proved to be a turning point in the Society's fortunes when a new chairman, Tom Bartlett (who had previously been honorary librarian) and a new secretary, Major G. A. Cattley, infused fresh purpose into the organisation by developing the educational potential of the wood. In the following year 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. Membership now began to increase, reaching 408 by October 1967. A junior section, which started in 1964, was responsible for its own programme of activities and had a special news bulletin, *Cygnet*.

The Selborne Magazine had also made a welcome reappearance in 1958, first as a four-page leaflet and later as a section of the quarterly journal *Birds and Country*. It came out independently again in 1967 with eight pages, but because of rising costs it was eventually superseded by a cyclostyled newsletter.

On Major Cattley's retirement in 1968 A. H. Austin became secretary, a position he held until 1973, when he was forced to resign after a road accident. Unfortunately, the Society's affairs had become somewhat neglected, but Charles Poulter again agreed to take on the secretarial duties temporarily, being relieved in the following year by Roy Hall (the present secretary). 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. His talents were complemented by those of the chairman, Mrs Pearl Small, who had taken up office in 1973. Her practical knowledge and experience (much of it gained through long service in the London Natural History Society) proved to be of particular value later that year when R. S. W. Pollard, the Society's solicitor, redrafted its Memorandum and Articles of Association, which had been in force since 1917. She also showed great skill in discussions with the local authority, and her efforts came to a successful conclusion on 26th October 1974 when the London Borough of Ealing established Perivale Wood as a statutory (local) nature reserve * under section 21 of the 1949 Act, thus strengthening its protection against change of use or adverse development.

The Society's educational effort with schools has already been mentioned. It should be added that a work-book entitled *On the Trail*, for teachers and

* The Society had already decided in 1972 to drop the name *bird sanctuary* and to call its property *The Gilbert White Memorial, Perivale Wood Local Nature Reserve*. The term *nature reserve* has a wider meaning than *bird sanctuary* and is more appropriate to the aims of modern nature conservation and practice.

pupils visiting the reserve, was published in 1970. It was written by Leslie Edwards (treasurer from 1968 to 1975) who, with Thelma Marchant at the Borough of Ealing Education Office, did much to promote this part of the work. The conducting of school parties in the reserve was taken over in the early 1970s by John Alden, who has continued it to the present time.

Educational activity with the general public has developed in two main ways. A handbook, edited by Tom Bartlett (to replace one produced in 1911 by Wilfred Mark Webb) was published in December 1962. Then *Wildlife in the Suburbs* by Peter Edwards and Kevin Roberts appeared in 1973 and was followed by a second edition in 1981.

The other educational initiative, which started during European Conservation Year 1970, * has been the means of introducing natural history to many hundreds of people. Taking the form of an Open Day at Perivale Wood, usually on the first Sunday in May, this annual event attracts about 800 visitors who are welcome to wander through the reserve. Carpets of massed bluebells (at their best in early May) make an impressive show, and if the weather is warm the woodland bird-song provides an added attraction. Open Day incidentally produces useful revenue.

Two specialist committees supplement the overall work of Council. One is responsible for arranging management and conservation tasks on the reserve and was formed in 1970. The work is carried out by volunteers, usually headed by the long-serving honorary warden, Len Lewinton, who was appointed in 1965. The other committee, set up in 1975, organises the many field and indoor meetings, excursions and social events that are run for members.

Looking back on our history we can see, with the benefit of hindsight, 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, thus providing a continuing focus of interest and endeavour, the Selborne Society might well have come to an end after the second world war instead of developing into the healthy organisation of nearly 700 members that it is today.

* The Year was planned as a special project by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. Its purpose was to spread greater awareness of environmental issues and problems.