

The Dorset Magazine Dorset Life

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No. 466 January 2018

£2.90

CANFORD HEATH

Its tranquil winter beauty captured

MIGRANT BIRDS

Winter visitors to look out for

DONALD MAXWELL & the Landscapes of Thomas Hardy

SWANAGE

A stunning 6.5-mile walk

PLUS

DORSET'S SAMUEL PEPYS: WILLIAM WHITEWAY

BOURNEMOUTH NATURAL SCIENCE SOCIETY

LYME REGIS'S 'MUCKRAKER-IN-CHIEF'

DORSET ARTIST: IAN HARGREAVES

SWISH OF THE CURTAIN

PORTLAND SEA SALT



The home of natural science

Lorraine Gibson visits an extraordinary building that houses half a dozen sciences and untold thousands of specimens

In a large Victorian house on Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, there is something unusual about the dining room. Instead of bone-china and napkins on the table, there is a cluster of randomly-sized jars, tubular nets and plastic tubs, all topped with what appear to be old, surgical stockings.

The walls flanking the table are lined with floor-to-ceiling display cases, from which the beady, glass eyes of hundreds of stuffed birds stare out. A magnificent, but very dead, osprey dominates. Shot by the Earl of Malmesbury on his Avon Estate in 1822, it is one of many exhibits from the private collection of the man they called the 'shooting earl.' Ironically, through the practice of taxidermy, these birds have achieved immortality of sorts, as well as the respect of ornithologists. The earl has not. All other available space is filled with staunch oak cabinets, gleaming with the patina of age, but, rather than being filled with the gee-gaws one would associate with the Victorian era, they house thousands of perfectly-preserved bugs, butterflies, moths and other exotic entomological creepy crawlies. One could say the Victorians were to wildlife preservation what Donald Trump is to global warming. They certainly seemed to relish gadding about the world finding things to kill and stuff. In fairness, some of this was genuinely in the name of science. The new-fangled camera equipment of the age wasn't exactly travel-friendly. Nor was a competent wildlife artist always to hand. So, killing the creature you wished to study and dragging it back for closer inspection was often the most effective way of doing so. That said, taxidermy was incredibly popular, not to mention lucrative, and the rarer the prize, the higher the price. Tragically, this led to unscrupulous sorts bagging the last existing



specimen of some now-extinct species, or worse, killing off the last handful – bar one, of course - of an endangered breed, thus achieving ultimate rarity. The exhibits stored here, are now all used for the relatively worthier purpose of acquiring a greater understanding of the complexity of the natural world. One collection includes the distinctive *Acherontia Styx* moth and its cousin, the *Acherontia Atropos*, also known as the death-

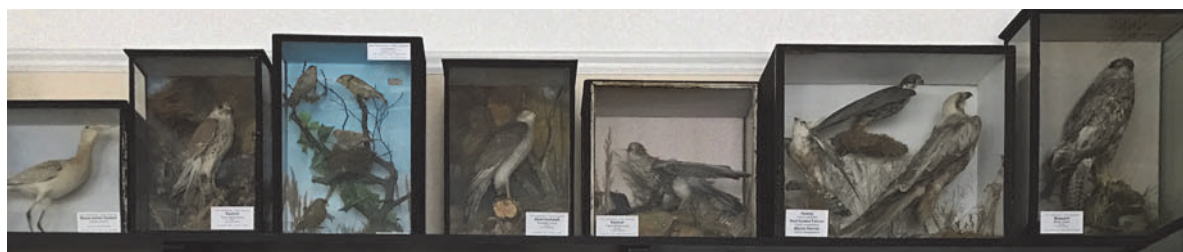
head hawkmoth. Film buffs would immediately recognise this as the one with markings resembling a skull that featured so prominently in *The Silence of The Lambs*. But it's not all about the birds and the bees.

Atop one cabinet is a preserved, surprised-looking tortoise; on another is an elaborately-displayed, fully-

inflated porcupine (or puffer) fish, bearing the dire warning: Beware! Still very sharp now! But back to the table. Within the containers lurks a wondrous array of live critters. Rare moths, beautiful butterflies, twitchy - and awfully large - stick insects, dusty chrysalides, shimmering with the metallic spots that gave them their name (chryso being the Greek word for gold) and a

Above The Porcupine/ Puffer Fish, looking as startled to be in Bournemouth as the latter's denizens were to see it

Inset How could one possibly resist the temptation to do as one is being asked so politely?



Left This is merely a small cropped area from above door height of one enormous collection of stuffed birds in glass cases that the BNSS houses



Left A leaf insect at the BNSS munching its way through lunch

Far left It is astonishing with the BNSS's bright brickwork and bright-green metalwork that it is not more widely known for what it is

Madagascan Hissing Cockroach. This creature, the size of a man's index finger, shows off the holes along its leathery sides that enable it to hiss displeasure. In the hands of its handler, its silence seems to indicate it's having a good day.

This is no ordinary house. This is the home of the Bournemouth Natural Science Society and said handler is its President and Chair Entomologist, Mark Spencer. And this is just one of its rooms, many of which look like Harry Potter sets, all antiquated shadiness with a palpable air of mystery.

Yet, most people have never heard of the society, let alone visited this unique museum. With its typically-ornate Victorian brickwork and unapologetically-bright-green trim, it is by far the road's most distinctive building, however,

according to the Society, most passers-by never notice it.

Its labyrinth of rooms, stuffed to their rafters with an eclectic and extensive collection of curios, exhibits and artefacts, are, literally, priceless. Not only is there a wealth of educational information, resources and references but a rich seam of expertise, just waiting to be tapped into.

Its patron is Chris Packham, the outspoken wildlife crusader, who, being obsessed with snakes as a boy, convinced his parents to visit Bournemouth in search of an alleged plague of Smooth Snakes. 'Walking through the manicured Winter Gardens there was no more disappointed herpetologist in the land. 'I sat on a bench and strained to imagine those halcyon heaths of yesteryear, had an ice-cream and went home. 'I've never been one for nostalgia.'

Which is why he admires the Society, with its dedicated band of volunteers and why he's full of praise for its pragmatic approach to conservation, accepting habitats evolve, and that, while the Smooth Snakes may have gone, the wildlife present in the town today, helps make up for that.

Following its recent accreditation with museum status, Chris said: 'The BNSS has a remarkable collection – a treasury of the world's life and history. It is a place where you could lose yourself for days and still return for more fascination. 'But the greatest riches of the society lie not in this repository, but in the extraordinary knowledge, the unconfined enthusiasm and the continued passion of its members. 'Nowhere else on earth could an assemblage of naturalists, geologists, paleontologists, historians, astronomers and archaeologists work together in one building.' The collections have been garnered from many sources. Members bring things that interest them, some donate their collections. Other organisations and private individuals have donated significant items and some objects have been purchased. As well as the birds, a large collection of bird



Left Keith Paternotts, entomologist and restoration expert points out a death-head hawkmoth

The home of natural science

Right As well as evolution, the BNSS covers man's progress. These Kimmeridge shale 'coins' are a by-product of the manufacture of rings from the coal-like Kimmeridge shale



eggs are on display -another result of times when options for the close studies of animals and birds were limited. It has been illegal to collect wild birds' eggs since the Wild Birds Protection Act of 1954 and also illegal to possess wild birds' eggs taken since that time; the Society retains such objects for their scientific value. Similarly, the large collections of insects, butterflies and moths. The ability to study a case of variants of a single species is invaluable to the entomologist.

Above right Not your average, everyday woodland scene: badger, otter, weasel, mink, stoat, marten and a flat little mole stand frozen beneath a tree with a decapitated sika deer's head in it



The geology section includes the Dent collection of local Barton fossils, purchased by the Society to keep them in the area and the botany collection contains specimens dating back many years; the archaeology exhibits include many local items with some fine Neolithic hand axes and other tools. Among its range of Egyptian artefacts, known as the Grenfell Collection, lies Taheema, a young, female mummy, in her sarcophagus, which has been CAT- scanned and a life-like model of her head watches you from a case in the hall.

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 Society began as a group of naturalists, meeting in one-another's homes; the first available minutes from a meeting suggest it was formed in 1903, with 117 members. As the era's appetite for examining the natural world grew, so too did the Society's numbers and after a few temporarily-rented meeting venues, the Italianate Victorian building they call home today was purchased in 1919. Its large garden, lovingly developed and tended by members, still plays an important role. Among the more common trees and shrubs, there is an Indian Bean Tree with heart-shaped leaves and white flowers in summer and a Maidenhair Tree, *Ginkgo biloba*. A *Paulownia* sp. offers a

spectacular foxglove-like flower display in May and growing in the lawn is a Dawn Redwood. There are scented flowering Winter Daphne, Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis mollis*, and *Mahonia* and one of the most striking sights is the Chilean Fire Bush.

Behind the house, an ornamental pond is the perfect habitat for a variety of fresh water invertebrates, making pond dips a must during their open days. Among the species to be found are fresh water shrimps, water boatmen, cyclops, water fleas, clams and snails. There are also at least three different species of flatworm and in early spring, large amounts of frog spawn are laid. To attract further wildlife, hibernation and nesting boxes have been installed and a bird box with an observation camera means nesting blue tits can be observed on a screen inside the museum.

It seems fitting that among the many illustrious members of the Society over the decades, probably the most notable was Alfred Russel Wallace, who, with Charles Darwin, was co-author of the original papers on the Origin of Species.

But what really makes the museum itself so unique, so memorable, is the manner in which some of its exhibits are displayed.

A huge, dramatic diorama of taxidermy in the main stairway's atrium is riveting due to its downright oddness and the sarcophagus in its glass case, with its decorated cover tucked practically underneath in its own special container seems somehow amusing. But quirkiest of all is the Cupboard of Curiosities. Where else but here would you open a door that reveals jam jars of creatures suspended in formaldehyde, a cat skull and discarded snake skins in plastic Chinese takeaway tubs?

Below A duck-billed platypus must have been, in a world without TV and the internet, a big draw in the earlier days of the BNSS



• Bournemouth Natural Science Society is at 39 Christchurch Road, BH1 3NS. **It is open to the public 10.00-4.00 on Tuesdays**, and to groups (by arrangement only) at other times. Call 01202 553525, or visit www.bnss.org.uk for more details.