

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HARROGATE & DISTRICT NATURALISTS' SOCIETY

A history of the Society was first written in 1972 to mark the Silver Jubilee of HDNS by Mrs E.M.S. Newfield with contributions from other Society members. Below is a summary of that document.

The earliest information about the original society comes from a copy of *The Naturalist*, the journal of the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union, for the year 1886 when the inaugural meeting of the Harrogate & District Naturalist & Scientific Society took place on 25th February, at which officers were elected and rules drawn up. The President was William Storey of Pateley Bridge. Vice President was Riley Fortune of Harrogate plus a Secretary, Treasurer and Committee of three with a membership of nearly 70. The members were mainly keen ornithologists and, during the first year, had mounted a successful Natural History Exhibition but, despite their enthusiasm, after publishing their one and only Annual Report for 1886-87, the Society was disbanded. There was apparently no effort made to re-form it even though other Naturalist and Scientific Societies were being formed within Yorkshire at that time. Nevertheless, amateur naturalists in the Harrogate area remained active: John Farrah as a botanist, William Storey recording fauna and Riley Fortune as an active field worker and contributor of articles to newspapers and naturalists' journals. He was a keen protectionist and contributed 'The Vertebrate Fauna of the Nidd Valley' in Speight's *Nidderdale*, published in 1894, which contained a wealth of information about locations with personal notes, on all Orders.

During the next 60 years there were many changes in the way in which life was lived in this country, especially in the countryside. Nationally, mechanisation was responsible for various destructive effects and as a result, in 1919, the first protected area was set up as a Nature Reserve at Woodwalton Fen. The first County Naturalists' Trust was formed in Norfolk in 1926, followed by Yorkshire in 1946 and, at the same time, new local Naturalists' Societies were set up with Harrogate in 1947. The inaugural meeting was held at the Old Church House in Cambridge Road and the name was again 'The Harrogate & District Naturalist and Scientific Society'. It was formed with the objective "of studying natural history in this area in its many branches". The first President was A.E. Winter F.R.E.S. of Scotton with another entomologist, D.M. Jesper, the first Treasurer and Secretary. It was as a result of conversations between these two friends that the Society was re-born, with 19 founder members attending the first meeting and further promises of support. The first subscriptions were paid in December 1947, the date taken to be that on which the Society was re-established.

A.E. Winter gave the opening lecture of the season entitled 'The Biological Control of Insect Pests (with special reference to Greenfly) and he illustrated his talk with his own lantern slides. Other lectures were also given by members or by friends; highlights included George Yeats on 'Geese in Iceland' and Ian Appleyard showing a cine film of 'The Dipper'. The YNU held its Annual Field Meeting in Harrogate area, a most successful event and there followed summer excursions held on the lands of Honorary Vice-Presidents who were local landowners. The first Report, dated 1948, is solely about Ornithology and was produced by A.F.G. Walker and Rev. K. Ilderton with acknowledgements to ten members who had contributed records. There is reference to the severe winter of 1946/47 when numbers of Long-tailed Tits and Wrens decreased markedly. There is also reference to 600-700 Golden Plovers on the Stray in January 1948. A more comprehensive report was produced by the same two recorders the following year, with help in other orders by several members.

The next report, covering two years was not published until August 1951 and includes details of an ambitious scheme to count wildfowl on local lakes and reservoirs which was undertaken in 1950 by 29 counters and carried out monthly. The Society was well organised with a Recorder for each major Order. A Council arranged winter lectures and summer field meetings which were most successful and, by the end of 1951, there were 71 members. The Society was flourishing except that during the years 1951-53, it was in severe financial difficulties when the bank balance once dropped to 7 shillings (35 pence). It was down to the generosity of members, and strict economies, that raised the balance to £29 in 1953, but the next Annual Report was not published until 1955. It was at this time (1953) that several important things occurred: there was an outbreak of myxomatosis, the BSBI began a five-year project to map every plant species in the country, with help from amateur naturalists' societies and, in 1954, a new Act of Parliament for the Protection of Wild Birds became law.

In 1955 the boundaries of the Society's recording area were drawn up, being defined so as not to overlap with neighbouring societies. It comprised a most varied area not only in altitude and habitat types but also geologically, which greatly influences the formations and vegetation thereon. In 1956, the capture and ringing of four Canada Geese at Ripley Park was to lead to the formation of the Canada Goose Study Group of Yorkshire investigating the moult migration of the species to Inverness-shire. The society's first public exhibition was held in the winter of 1957 and gave information on the BSBI mapping scheme, whilst other Orders displayed their own collections with John R. Mather producing a map to show recoveries of ringed birds. The exhibition gave the Society publicity and a small income. Another exhibition in 1962 illustrated the Society's activities, especially in relation to the Birkham Wood Survey, and a number of new members were enrolled.

In the mid-1960s, it was decided that detailed documentation should be made of as many branches of natural history in the area as possible, as a base line against which to compare future changes and the following were produced: "A Checklist of the Birds of the Harrogate Area", "A Checklist of the Macro Lepidoptera of the Harrogate Area" and work to produce a similar document on plants was begun.

By 1968, the membership was at 273 and the Society was functioning well when European Conservation Year came along in 1970, involving the public in general. The Society produced the Valley Gardens and Pinewoods Nature Trail with a booklet written by Miss H.M. Jackson and other members. At the end of the year the membership was almost 350 and it was decided that the meeting place should be moved to the Crescent Room where there would be ample space for large audiences to hear the lecturers who included well-known speakers from national natural history and conservation bodies. It was at this time that it was decided a formal collection of material relating to the Society and its activities should be saved, as being of interest in the future, under the heading of 'Archives'.

Mr A.F.G. Walker was invited to stand as President in 1972, the Silver Jubilee Year, which opened with a Commemorative Dinner. At the AGM the following clause was added to the Aims of the Society "that the Society direct its energies to some practical form of nature conservation".

Some interesting events from subsequent years

1973

'Elementary Plant Identification and Bird Song' was the theme of a Residential Weekend held at Grantley Hall and attended by 32 members; leaders were Miss Helen Jackson, Miss Margaret Sanderson and Howard Jowsey. Areas studied included Spa Gill Wood, Skell Gill, Skelding Moor and

the grounds of the Hall; a total of 71 bird and 150 plant species being recorded. Illustrated evening lectures were given by Howard Jowsey and Arthur Gilpin. Everyone agreed it was a most successful and informative weekend.

1976

The 10 year recording scheme organised by W.H. Jowsey is now complete and the results will be published in map form as "Botanical Atlas of the Harrogate District", for which John R. Mather designed the cover.

1977

Tilcon granted permission for a birdwatching hide to be erected at Farnham GP. to be ready for use in Spring 1978.

Alan Walker produced a booklet "Birds in the Harrogate District".

Yorkshire Water decided that Gouthwaite Reservoir should be a private nature reserve, with a representative from HDNS on committee.

1978

Thanks to the hard work done by Mr R. Evison and his team, the birdwatching hide at Farnham GP was ready for use in the spring.

"*Botanical Atlas of the Harrogate District*", the result of a ten-year recording scheme has been well received by members, also the Nature Conservancy Council, the Botanical Society of the British Isles and Universities.

1979

Members were involved in several surveys concerning Swifts, Wrens and Hedgehogs; also work at Burton Leonard Quarries and the Countryside Commission's Demonstration Farms Project at Hopewell House Farm, Knaresborough.

1980

The Wildlife and Countryside Act became part of national legislation.

In June, 26 members attended the Society's second residential weekend at Grantley Hall. The theme was Moths and Small Mammals and practical work involved the use of a mercury vapour moth trap and Longworth mammal traps. There followed instruction in the identification of the species collected. All participants agreed it was a most successful venture.

1987

40th Anniversary. The Editorial bemoans 'the loss of fine Ancient Woodlands, old hedges, the draining of marshes and filling in of ponds, the up-grading of agricultural land and the consequent loss of plant and animal species. Worked-out gravel pits left by mineral extraction may have an ornithological bonus, but are not a substitute for ancient woods and pastures'.

Council and the membership had involvement in: the proposed southern by-pass route, Gouthwaite Reservoir management, wildlife at the Fountains Abbey National Trust property, the Conservation field team work at High Batts Reserve and Throstle Nest Farm, Nidd Gorge Project Steering Group.

1988

The facts of the proposed route of the Southern By-pass were presented in detail, especially those concerning Birkham Wood.

In October, 26 members led by June Atkinson, had a most successful birdwatching weekend at Seahouses, Northumberland.

1989

A third Public Enquiry took place, with the same objections presented to the Southern By-pass being routed through Birkham Wood.

At March 1990, adult membership was 481 and junior membership 105.

1990

Council approved the use of a liner in the newt pond at Farnham GP, in order to maintain the water level during breeding.

1991

In view of the instability in the Farnham newt pond base, installing a lining will not go ahead and permission will be sought from the owner to construct a new pond on adjacent ground.

Dr. Kinnear completed a compilation by the late A.F.G. Walker, reviewing the status of Birds in the Harrogate District covering the period 1948-90.

1992

The new pond at Farnham South Lake was lined and then filled in August, with the help of much man-power.

Society members joined a very successful multi-discipline tour to the Spanish Pyrenees in June and, later gave an account, with the use of slides, at an evening meeting.

Junior Section children and leaders were featured in a Tyne-Tees TV presentation from Throstle Nest Farm Reserve.

1993

The Junior Section celebrated 21 years with an open air meeting at Studley Park.

1994

Council agreed to an extension being built on the Farnham hide.

The boundary to the Society's recording area was changed to take in 'Colsterdale' and an extension in the north-east to include Sharow.

The Ornithological Recorder requested a computer program to assist with processing records.

A publication "The Natural History of Farnham Gravel Pit" was compiled by June E. Atkinson, edited by John R. Mather and sponsored by Tilcon.

1997

In May, the Golden Jubilee Dinner was held and in September, a weekend field trip to Blencathra, in the Lake District took place. This involved several quite successful field outings.

A series of walks, to which the public was invited, was organised in our area.

The Junior Section had a Silver Jubilee Party marking 25 years of continuous involvement with young people.

A few dedicated volunteers completed the construction of a Sand Martin wall at Farnham GP in time for the arrival of the migrants in spring.

Winter meetings in future are to be held in the Lecture Theatre at Harrogate College.

1999

A Management Plan for Farnham South Lake has been completed and is in operation
An increase in the cost of hiring the Lecture Theatre at the College has necessitated a change of venue to the St. Robert's Centre, Robert Street for winter lectures.

2001

The Swale & Ure Washlands Trust was launched in October, with the history of the project and future plans being the subject of the meeting.

"Birds of the Harrogate District" written by John R. Mather was published in October.

2002

Farnham Members' Weekend, organised by June Atkinson, took place in July and was very successful.

A second Residential Weekend took place at Blencathra in September and was a worthwhile event.

2003

It was sad to see the demise of an active Junior Section due to lack of support.

2007

In January, a Pacific Diver, the first to be recorded in the Western Palearctic, made a three week visit to Farnham GP, attracting birdwatchers from around the country and abroad and resulting in a donation to the Society's funds from car parking contributions.

Our 60th Anniversary was marked in October by a dinner at the Millstones Restaurant, attended by 85 members and guests, with Dr. Jeremy Greenwood of the BTO as the guest speaker.

2012

The Society's own website went 'live' in August.

FOOT NOTE

Alan Walker, the President in 1972, wrote an introduction to the Society's Silver Jubilee Booklet and finished with the following:

"Like a century first wicket opening stand, the foundation has been solidly laid; may those who follow ensure that the innings continues to flourish".

A sentiment echoed by all!

Compiled by Ann Mettam

Aided by Dr. John R. Mather.