

## Pioneers of Conservation

The Selborne Society and the Royal SPB

Preface .....	1
Acknowledgements (and plea).....	2
1. Early days.....	3
a. Plumage .....	4
b. The Royal SPB.....	12
2. A tale of two societies .....	16
a. Purpose and practice .....	17
b. Membership and influence .....	23
c. 1904 .....	26
3. Personalities, principles, and politics .....	28
a. Croydon and Ealing: E A Martin and W M Webb .....	28
b. Natural History vs. Nature Conservation .....	34
c. Campaigning: confrontation, compromise or cooption? .....	36
4. Divergence, retreat and renaissance.....	46
a. The Selborne Society Ltd as a lecture bureau .....	47
b. The RSPB in its wilderness years .....	48
c. Rescue, revival and renewal – the local Selborne Society and the international RSPB.....	49
5. Conclusion.....	54
References .....	57

# Pioneers of Conservation

## The Selborne Society and the Royal SPB

### Preface

The Selborne Society, born in 1885, and the pioneer of nature conservation in Britain, had an auspicious birth, a promising childhood, a stormy adolescence, and a dull and fitful middle age. A century ago it was a hugely influential national conservation organisation, the first such in Europe. In the mid 1950s, on reaching its three score and ten, it all but died, but was rescued and reborn to become the unique and flourishing local natural history society that it remains today, managing what is, arguably, Britain's first ever nature reserve, Perivale Wood.

The outlines of the story are well known, at least to the Society's present members, and were admirably presented in a booklet by Michael Blackmore<sup>1</sup> in 1985 on the occasion of the Society's centenary. Much of the interest however (and not a little of the devil) lies in the detail. 2004 is a good year to revisit the history of the Selborne Society, because 100 years ago it was at a watershed in its fortunes.

In 1904 the Society for the Protection of Birds, which the Selborne Society had helped to form (and which had already overtaken it in membership and influence) received its royal charter, and became the RSPB. In that year also, Wilfred Mark Webb of Hanwell became General Secretary of the Selborne Society, which he was to dominate for nearly half a century. The story of Webb and of the Ealing branch of the Society are well documented (and form much of the focus of Blackmore's history). Less well documented – until now, still dispersed in the archives – are other stories, in particular, the Selborne Society's relationship with wider events and with other organisations and people. Amongst the latter were Edward Alfred Martin, in 1904 secretary of the Selborne Society's branch in Croydon, where the 'Fin, Fur and Feather Folk', a precursor of the RSPB, had first met.

This booklet focuses on the two decades either side of 1904, from the Selborne Society's formation in 1885 to its transformation into a lecture bureau in the mid 1920s, and in particular, on its

relationship with the (R)SPB over this period. It is a celebration of the Selborne Society, and also of the lives of Webb, Martin and indeed all early pioneers of conservation.

It is also issued in celebration of the centenary of the Charter of the Selborne Society's own fledgling (and sometime antagonist) which has grown so strong in its maturity, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Like the RSPB's own centenary history<sup>2</sup> it is a 'warts and all' account. It documents a period when nature conservation and natural history were awkward bedfellows, sometimes complementary but as often in conflict about ends as well as means. It is a period that also has lessons to teach us about conservation today.

### Acknowledgements (and plea)

Grateful thanks are due to Gina Douglas, Librarian of the Linnean Society; to Ian Dawson, Librarian of the RSPB; to Geraldine MacVeigh, Head of Ealing Library Support Services; and to Mary Kennedy, Nick Ferriday and Marija Anteric, all for access to information and/or comments on early drafts of the text. Thanks also to Pauline and Christopher Marstrand for information on Lilian and E A Martin; to Jon Wilson and Christina Panagi of Birkbeck's Photographic Unit for copying the illustrations reproduced in this booklet and to Christine Davis and her colleagues in the Print Unit for producing it. Last but by no means least, a very warm 'thankyou' to Roy & Rae Hall for their help in researching the history of the Society that they have done so much to sustain over recent decades.

This pamphlet is far from being the 'last word' on the early history of the Selborne Society and the RSPB. It should be seen rather as 'work in progress' which it is hoped will stimulate debate about the early history of nature conservation and its relevance today. Further information and critical comment will be welcomed, and should be addressed to the author [r.clarke@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:r.clarke@bbk.ac.uk).

## 1. Early days

In the preface to his six-volume History of British Birds, the Rev<sup>d</sup> Francis Orpen Morris contrasts the growing popularity of natural history with the more sober reflection on the human condition that might be thought proper for a man of the cloth:

*“The proper study of mankind is man: the favourite study of mankind is certainly birds, beasts, and fishes – Natural History in short”<sup>3</sup>.*

Already, however, one outcome of that more popular study (for Morris as for many others) was an awareness of its unfortunate impact on its object. Morris (a prominent anti-Darwinian and contributor on natural history in the popular press) had, since the first (1857) edition of his History, been working to organise England’s first bird protection society at Bridlington (Flamborough Head) the (Yorkshire) Association for the Protection of Sea Birds *“the first-ever wild-life conservation body in Britain, possibly in the world”<sup>4</sup> p198*. Although natural history was at that time still a predominantly male pursuit, this early move to nature conservation was fed by a second stream, that was not science based but was essentially humanitarian in origin, and one in which women played a major role.

Focused first on humans (in particular on the abolition of slavery) and by extension to animals, this involved active campaigning on issues of widespread concern to the sensitivities of the ‘educated classes’. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals had been formed in 1824. In 1835, it received royal patronage and in 1840 recognition in the form of its Charter (movements to abolish slavery and to humanise work never received such accolades). The RSPCA was primarily concerned with cruelty to domestic animals (including horses and cattle) as well as campaigning against sports such as bear baiting and cock-fighting. However, by the mid nineteenth century, it had become engaged with the issue of bird protection (including egg collecting). It played a leading role together with individuals such as Morris (who was himself committed to a number of causes in animal

welfare and was a campaigning anti-vivisectionist) in the introduction of the Sea Birds Protection Act of 1869.

The 1869 Act was far from the first in bird protection: Sheail<sup>5</sup> documents one of the earliest bird protection acts in 1533 when *“An acte agenst destruccyon of wyldfowle”* sought to protect seabirds by prohibiting the taking of eggs between 1 March and 30 June and to prohibit their slaughter in summer (when the old birds had moulted and the young were not yet fledged to fly) between 31 May and 31 August<sup>5</sup>. Such measures, as with other restrictions on hunting of game, including the introduction of closed seasons, represent (together with animal welfare and natural history) a third and central stream in nature conservation, focused on resource protection.

These three contributory currents to the emergence of 20<sup>th</sup> century nature conservation; resource (particularly game) protection; the ‘scientific’ study of nature (natural history); and humanitarian concern (for human beings and other species), were linked with others. Antiquarianism was an important though variable ingredient. In part, it was (like natural history) a reaction to the downside of industrialisation, but early legislation to protect ancient monuments was also seen as providing an example for the protection of wildlife. Further influences included ‘top down’ movements for social improvement (and social hygiene) and also (though to a lesser degree, at least in the early period) ‘bottom up’ campaigns for access to the countryside. All of these became variously mixed in the course of the history and development of the Selborne Society and the (R)SPB. However, the initial motivating focus was plumage.

### **a. Plumage**

What was new in the 1869 Act was that it was aimed not at sustaining the supply of game birds but on ending the taking of seabirds for their plumage; and it was the outcome of a campaign based on moral arguments rather than one focused instrumentally on resource protection. In the same year, at the British Association meeting in Norwich, Professor Alfred Newton had declared: *“Fair and innocent as the snowy plumes may appear in a lady’s hat, I must tell the wearer the truth – she bears the murderer’s brand on her forehead”<sup>6</sup> p26*.

The 1869 Act helped check the destruction of a number of species including kittiwakes and it produced a temporary lull in the fashion for white feathers in ladies hats. This was short lived, however. The fashion and the concomitant trade in plumage continued to grow and it became from the half century from 1870 a major multinational industry, global in its scope<sup>7</sup>. As it did so, the resource on which it was based continued to suffer. In an August 1885 letter to the *Times*, George A Musgrave of Torquay recorded that between December 1884 and April 1885, the London plumage market had sold 6,828 Birds of Paradise, 4,947 Impeyan Pheasants, 404,464 West Indian birds, and 356,389 East Indian birds of various species. Musgrave declared *"Is there no society willing to care for the beauty of the world... surely some plan can be devised for making a general work of destruction at least unfashionable"*<sup>8</sup>

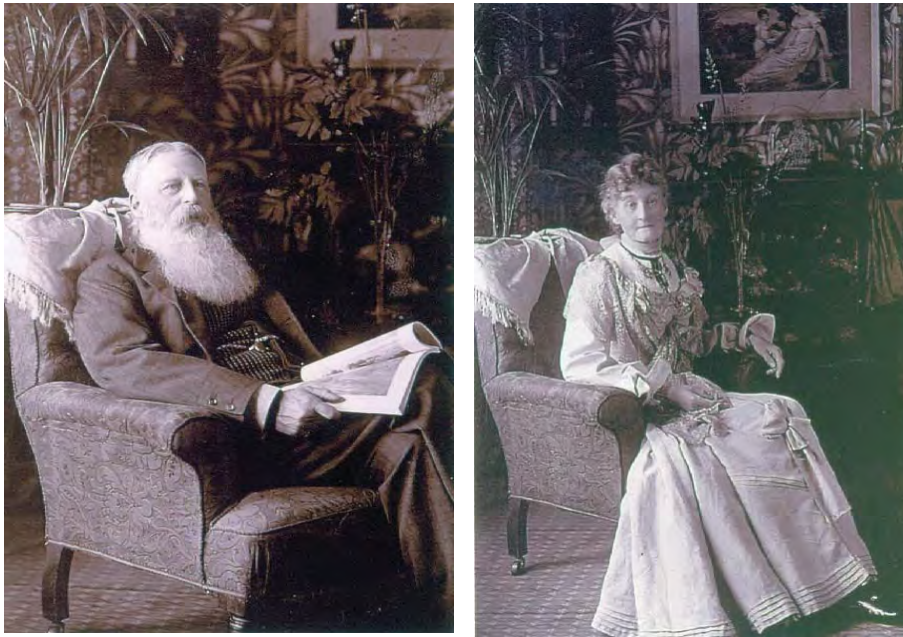
In fact, local societies already existed. Twenty years before the Selborne Society's formation, the RSPCA's Annual Report for 1874 listed the ways *"in which all may lessen the sufferings of animals"* and specifically advised that all could contribute *"by never using for dress or ornament of any kind, birds, butterflies, or sealskins"*<sup>9 p38</sup>. The earliest national bird protection society, prompted no doubt by the RSPCA's exhortation and by Morris's own public agitation on the issue seems likely to have been the 'Dicky Bird Society' of the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle. This started on October 7<sup>th</sup> 1876 and claimed 140,000 child members by January 1888. It clearly also functioned as a promotional vehicle for the Chronicle in which it conducted its business in a weekly column by 'Uncle Toby', its members being required to sign the pledge *"I hereby promise to be kind to all living things, to protect them to the utmost of my power, to feed the birds in winter time, and never to take or destroy a nest. I also promise to get as many boys and girls as possible to join the Dicky Bird Society"*<sup>10 p11</sup>. The Society had a 'Big Book' in which were entered the names of its child subscribers, who could be 'companions' or 'captains', wore a badge of yellow ribbon, and were encouraged to write in to the paper and to draw the figure of a bird onto all their envelopes.

Such populist concern was paralleled by patronage of the great and good. Bird preservation became a major movement of the upper and middle class including *"a number of English aristocrats, out of the pages of Debret"*<sup>7 p52</sup> which developed in the

1880s to oppose the use of ornamental plumage. The basis for a national movement was established.



Fig 1. George and Theresa Musgrave (probably c 1887)



Photos courtesy of the Selborne Society

## Two leagues and a merger

In November 1885, George & Theresa Musgrave formed the **Selborne League**. With the implicit purpose of celebrating the memory of Gilbert White, the league's formal aims were the preservation of birds, wildflowers and "*forests and places of popular resort by means of publishing any threatened destruction of them*"<sup>1 p1</sup>. There is a vision here which anticipates that of the conservation movement today.

At the same time and with a more specific focus, "*Ideas and plans for an association or league of persons, banded together expressly to resist the growing trade in plumage were forming in the minds of more than one bird-lover*"<sup>9</sup>. Morris was already in correspondence with others who were exercised by the matter. These included the Hon Mrs. R Cavendish-Boyle and Lady Mount-Temple who, in December 1885, met to form an **(Anti) Plumage League** centered on the latter's home at Broadlands, Hampshire. With a single objective of curbing trade in feathers for hats, this league was a loose association of women (for whom it was exclusively created) who declared:

*"We, the undersigned, desire in our dress, as in all else, to observe the law of kindness: we therefore protest against the fashion of turning our dresses, bonnets, and hats, into cages, traps and barn doors. We would earnestly beg all who may have heard of our League to join it in spirit, if not in name, and we believe their content of mind will be increased and their beauty not diminished..."*<sup>10</sup>.

Sympathisers were urged to oppose "*the display of dead and distorted bodies of birds*"<sup>1 p2</sup> as objects of fashion; membership included a pledge never to wear feathers. Behind the women of the Plumage League stood a loose assemblage of individuals eminent in intellectual and political circles (including John Ruskin) who were already part of a network of conservation concern. F O Morris supported the League, and in a letter to the *Times* described Lady Mount-Temple as "*a devoted friend to the cause of humanity towards all and every of our dumb fellow- creatures, both in fur and feather*"<sup>11</sup>.

Both Leagues had only the briefest of independent lives however. In January 1886 the Selborne League merged with the Plumage League as the **Selborne Society for the Preservation of**

**Birds, Plants and Pleasant Places.** As Musgrave declared in the Selborne Society's Magazine a couple of years later:

*"As there are many other natural objects, besides birds, which need protection, the Plumage League has been changed into the Selborne Society and its sphere of action extended to the protection of wild plants and places of public interest"<sup>10</sup>.*

Two years after the merger, on 26 Jan 1888 formal rules for the new Society were adopted at a Special General Meeting. These incorporated the objectives of the Selborne League with some revisions, and in the light of what came later, their order is important. They read:

*"To preserve from unnecessary destruction such wild birds, animals and plants, as are harmless, beautiful, or rare; to discourage the wearing and use for ornament of birds and their plumage, except when the birds are killed for food or reared for their plumage; to protect places and objects of interest or natural beauty from ill-treatment or destruction; to promote the study of natural history"<sup>12</sup> Appendix*

Membership of the Society, which was to be governed by a council of 12 members, was open to everyone: *"Persons who subscribe to, or work for, the Selborne Society are considered Members. With a view to obtaining the co-operation of all persons in all conditions, there is no fixed subscription, but only those who subscribe 2s 6d per annum and upwards, are entitled to hold office, vote at meetings, and to receive the reports, and other publications of the Society"<sup>12</sup> Appendix.*

The unspecified subscription meant that membership could be potentially inclusive, though the restriction of active influence to those who gave over half a crown per year meant that some degree of commitment (as well as discrimination in participation) was secured. Moreover, because *"it was hoped each person would form a branch"*, the Society would be able to spread through local initiatives. The Society's Annual Report for 1887 (presented at the SGM) reports that by the end of 1886, less than a year after its formation, eleven branches had been formed, most in Hampshire and Surrey.

### **History repeats itself**

In 1889, four years after the formation of the Plumage and Selborne leagues, history repeated itself with the formation of two

further local societies, the (Croydon) '**Fur, Fin and Feather Folk**' and the (Didsbury, Manchester) **Society for the Protection of Birds**. Both societies were remarkably like the original Plumage League. They were for women only, closely focused on bird protection, and were opposed to the wearing of plumage and to the plumage trade. Members pledged to abstain from wearing plumage, and hoped that their example would be followed by others.

Both bodies lacked the initial influential patronage of the Plumage League, but they were led by individuals who possessed considerable organisational skills and who retained a clear campaigning focus on their primary objectives. (The Fur, Fin and Feather Folk, whose members promised *"to refrain from wearing the feathers of any birds not killed for the purpose of food, the Ostrich only excepted"*<sup>13</sup> did encompass wider concerns with the trade in skins and admitted men as 'honorary co-workers'). Their aims were pursued through a variety of means which ensured that its members could all be active in different ways, including lobbying influential people and maintaining an active public face through writing to newspapers, as well as making links with other organisations with cognate aims. Both bodies formalised membership with a subscription (of twopence) and grew rapidly (in the case of the Fur, Fin and Feather Folk, to 5,000 within the first twelve months).

In early 1891 the SPB and the FFFF whose aims were so similar, agreed to merge, which they did formally in May, to form a much stronger *Society for the Protection of Birds* which was based in London at 105 Jermyn Street. The first meetings of the SPB were held in the offices of the RSPCA. The new SPB's set of rules was an amalgam of its progenitors and much simpler than those of the Selborne Society:

1. *"That members shall discourage the wanton destruction of Birds, and interest themselves generally in their protection;*
2. *That Lady Members shall refrain from wearing the feathers of any bird not killed for the purposes of food, the ostrich excepted.*
3. *That each Local Secretary shall subscribe one shilling a year, and each Ordinary Member pay two-pence (postage free) for Card of Membership"<sup>14</sup> p7.*

At this stage the SPB was still *"so modest and apparently insignificant, that it was greeted with smiles of amusement rather than of sympathy"*<sup>15</sup> p1.

### Complementarity and condescension

This seems certainly to have been the case with prominent members of the Selborne Society. In Nature Notes, the Society's magazine, the Editor, James Britten of the Natural History Museum in Kensington (BMNH) reproduced (under the somewhat patronising title *Birds and Bonnets*) a letter written by (Miss) Hannah Poland and first published in The Yorkshire Post, sent to him by F O Morris, drawing attention to the proposed new Society for the Protection of Birds. Morris, clearly still attached to his early endeavours and unhappy about the Selborne Society's dilution of effort, welcomed the new body and declared:

*"One is always glad to hear or read of any such right minded endeavours, and especially so in the case of a society formed for the furtherance of the object of them. I did my best in that direction some years ago in a letter I wrote to the Times at the request of Lord and Lady Mount-Temple, and headed it 'The Plumage League'. It brought together a large number of supporters from all parts of the country, but mostly – indeed almost exclusively – from the higher and highest circles, from the late Duchess of Sutherland downwards. It was well, very well, as far as it went, but I have heard nothing of it recently; and it seems to me that what is wanted is, mainly, to have some 'head centre' of operations... also a 'name' or 'title'... I do not think a better can readily be suggested than that I have mentioned above, 'THE PLUMAGE LEAGUE'. I hope not a few of your readers will communicate with the lady, the writer of the above-given letter, and encourage her righteous effort in any way they can"*<sup>16 p76</sup>.

In his own postscript as editor, Britten manages to face both ways on the SPB's activism, both welcoming the new Society and at the same time, distancing the Selborne Society from it and in particular from the commitment to activism implied by a pledge, adding:

*"We are much pleased to give publicity, at Mr Morris's request, to Miss Poland's appeal. This is a good opportunity for saying, in answer to a question which has been asked more than once, that no pledge whatever is exacted from members of the Selborne Society... The fact of Selbornians in general being, as such, unpledged, has shown that there is room for an inner*

*association which admits only vowed abstainers from bird wearing"*.

Britten goes on both to put Morris right on history, and adds a rather condescending snipe at the Selborne Society's younger female fledgling cousin:

*"We have always understood that Mr Morris's 'Plumage League' was absorbed as the 'Plumage Section of the Selborne Society. As to the name of such a society, that suggested by Mr Morris is immeasurably the better. To assume such a very ambitious title as 'The Society for the Protection of Birds' for a band of ladies who do nothing but abstain from personal iniquity in the matter of bonnets, may give occasion for the unrighteous to scoff..."*<sup>16 p76</sup>.

History, of course, was to prove Britten wrong, at least in respect of the ambitions of the fledgling SPB. Despite his expectations it seems likely that some at least of the Selborne Society's members – male and female – did respond to Morris's exhortation and made contact with the new 'inner association'. At any rate the SPB continued to grow both in size and influence. Moreover its lobbying in high places was clearly effective and it succeeded in attracting the patronage of some influential individuals. In the June 1891 issue of the Nature Notes, Morris reports a further letter directly from Miss Poland, saying that the Duchess of Portland had accepted the office of President of the Society (in which she remained until her death in 1954) and he declares *"I trust it will go on and prosper"*<sup>16 p154</sup>.

### **b. The Royal SPB**

In October 1891 the SPB issued its first report plus its first publications – two pamphlets and three leaflets. This first Report rehearses the history of the group: *"The Society for the Protection of Birds was formed in February 1889, in the hope of inducing a considerable number of women, of all ranks and ages, to unite in discouraging the enormous destruction of bird-life exacted by milliners and others for purely decorative purposes"*<sup>14 p7</sup>. It went on: *"At first the Society was composed of women only, but several gentlemen have shewn their approval of the Society by joining it as Members, or by authorising the mention of their names as earnest sympathisers"*<sup>14 p8</sup>.



Then followed a list of eminent (mainly scientific) male supporters, and also of over sixty newspapers and journals, which had given publicity. From this point on the SPB combined its lobbying and networking amongst the influential with a populist strategy based on increasing membership, on the premise that the best way to destroy the trade in plumage was by securing large numbers of people who would sign the pledge not to wear it, and thus set an example to others. The Selborne Society's November 1891 issue of Nature Notes acknowledges receipt of the SPB's first Report and that it has already been outstripped in size, saying "We are glad to find from the list of local Hon Secretaries that this Society, whose aims are in unison with, although more restricted than, our own, is very widely spread..."<sup>17 p233</sup>.

The SPB created as many branches as possible, with local Secretaries subscribing one shilling each per annum: ordinary members paid only 2d as a registration fee. The first (1891) accounts of the SPB show an income of £7.13s 8d. This included £2 9s 0d in shilling subscriptions (implying a roll of 49 'Secretaries') and income of £2 5s 2d from the sale of members cards (272 members). The second (1892) Report repeats the rules and lists the names and addresses of 124 local Secretaries (19 of them in London) including, for the first time, several men. The accounts reported income of £26 7s 0½d from the sale of membership cards. Neglecting the halfpence this implies a further 162 cards. The third Report records the adoption, in March 1893, of a constitution with previous rules 1 and 2 endorsed as objectives. It renames the local Secretaries, 'Associates' (still on payment of 1s) and lists all 483 of them, of whom 152 now became Branch Secretaries, stating that "The total number of Members has increased from 5,200 to 9,159"<sup>18 p3</sup>. The 4<sup>th</sup> Report (1894) announced that the number of members had increased "to 11,461, including 1,015 associates". The Fifth (1895) Report recorded a further growth to 13,134 Members and 1,600 Associates. In 1897 the SPB was able to establish its first proper office in London at 326 High Holborn in the premises of Witherby & Sons, with Mrs Lemon as Hon. Sec. and a paid assistant secretary as staff. By the following year the SPB could claim over 20,000 ordinary members, in 152 branches (including one in the United States (in Washington) and another in Germany). In this year the SPB's office moved to premises in 3, Hanover Square, rented from the Zoological Society of London. It had already

become a major national organisation. In 1903, in the first issue of its new magazine, Bird Notes and News, the SPB was able to announce that in the fourteenth year of its existence it has enrolled over 5,000 associates and 'many thousand members'<sup>19</sup>. At the end of that year, commenting on the on the SPB's annual report for 1903 Nature Notes recorded "with interest that the Society [for the protection of Birds] is applying for a Royal Charter..."<sup>20 p91</sup>.

Issues of Nature Notes for 1904 do not record the outcome, however, Bird Notes and News was able to report that "At the meeting of the Privy Council on October 24th 1904, His Majesty the King was pleased to grant a Charter of Incorporation to the Society for the Protection of Birds, under the name of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds"<sup>21 p49</sup>.

The Charter was both a marker of success and a stimulus to further growth and achievement for the RSPB.



Fig 2. The Plumage Section's Crest



Courtesy of the Selborne Society

## 2. A tale of two societies

The development of all voluntary organisations is driven – and their fortunes in part depend - on the actions of particular individuals at particular times. F O Morris was clearly a driving force in the development of bird protection in the mid nineteenth century and his own endeavors played a major part in the development of the movement for bird protection in the second half of the nineteenth century. The early days of both the RSPB and the Selborne Society were likewise dominated by a small number of individuals, in the case of the RSPB, mainly women, and in the case of the Selborne Society, principally men.

The merger between Morris's Plumage League and Musgrave's Selborne League appears to have been engineered by Musgrave (a fellow of the Zoological Society of London and of the Royal Geographical Society but not an active member of either) as a way of providing support to his own (wider) objectives, since Plumage League patrons were influential and socially prominent. Lady Mount-Temple's husband, who encouraged her to join Morris, had been private secretary to his uncle, Viscount Melbourne when he was Queen Victoria's Prime Minister and he subsequently held several government posts, including that of the first Commissioner of Works (1860-66) during the second administration of his stepfather, Viscount Palmerston. John Ruskin, Robert Browning, Richard Jefferies, W H Hudson and Lord Leighton were amongst the Selborne Society's first members, and Alfred Lord Tennyson (Poet Laureate) accepted the role of President, which he held until his death in 1892.

The merger of the Plumage League with the Selborne League may have appeared a natural one for Mount-Temple and Cavendish-Boyle. Both were already active campaigners on related issues, for example they both supported the campaign to save Epping Forest as a public space and they were both members of the Commons Preservation Society. Even at this early stage however, there was some disquiet about objectives. It seems likely that the issue of boundaries (once it had been agreed that the aims might extend beyond the Plumage League's narrow focus on bird

protection) had already been the cause of some debate between associates of the Society's two founding Leagues.

F O Morris, in particular, appears to have remained aloof. Although he joined the new Society, he disclaimed any responsibility as founder, perhaps somewhat presciently, because of what he regarded as the "sentimentality of the Selborne League's followers" and the Plumage League's "embarrassing accretions"<sup>1 p3</sup>. This view may have been shared by others, because the Plumage League retained its identity, at least initially, under the patronage of Queen Victoria's third daughter, Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, as the Plumage Section of the Selborne Society. Certainly, apart from his letters in 1891 supporting the formation of the SPB, Morris seems to have played no part in the new, national Selborne Society.

#### **a. Purpose and practice**

The issue of ends and means was to dominate relationships between the Selborne Society and its sister RSPB, and, in subsequent decades, to lead to major conflicts within the Selborne Society. At the time however, the problem seems to have been perceived by most within the new Society not so much as one of dissipation of effort as of possible overlap or competition with kindred societies, and the Society's articles included a note:

*"NB the Selborne Society is careful not to trench on the provinces of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Commons Preservation Society, the Kyrle Society, or the Footpath's Associations with any of which it is often possible to act in effective cooperation..."*<sup>12 Appendix</sup>

The variety of organisations cited, ranging from animal welfare through rural access to social improvement indicates something of the range of issues which the Selborne Society saw as falling within its remit. (The Kyrle Society, founded by William Morris, focused on the aesthetic improvement of artisan lives, for example through the loan of works of art to adorn working class homes and to educate their occupants.) It also provides part of the answer to why, despite the congruence of the objectives of the Plumage League with those of the SPB and the significant aristocratic patronage and popular support for the former, the latter should emerge and, having done so, should grow to eclipse the Selborne Society at such an early stage.

The early history of the Selborne Society is one of extraordinary breadth of interest (which grew increasingly broader as time went by) and consequent diffusion of effort. E S Turner refers to the 'catholic interests' of "*the true Selborne Society member*"<sup>22</sup>. Doughty refers to the Selborne League as being, by contrast to the Plumage League, "*kindred in spirit to the Folk-lore Society and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments*"<sup>7 p96</sup>. The dilution of focus from the early campaigning objectives meant that the Society and its founders could demonstrate little success in achieving them. "*It was probably the very breadth of the Selborne vision that undid it*"<sup>2 p24</sup>. As a consequence, there remained a vacuum, a continuing need for a national campaigning body, whose strategy could attract local activists engaging in public actions to protect birds linked to demonstrable outcomes on a national level. As the Secretary of the RSPB herself later declared, of the merger between the Plumage and Selborne leagues:

*"The coincidence of the two societies was somewhat unfortunate. The earlier association was in 1886 merged with the Selborne, but the Selborne League itself expanded shortly afterwards into the Selborne Society, in whose programme the preservation of wild birds and the discouragement of feather-wearing were bracketed with other such excellent objects as the preservation of all harmless wild animals and plants, the protection of places and objects of natural beauty, the promotion of field-clubs, and the study of natural history in general: no personal pledge was required from members, though presumably it was implied. There was therefore again a place vacant for a society which should devote its attention exclusively to the increasingly-important question of the protection of wild birds"*<sup>9 p39</sup>.

The pioneer Selborne Society took on a broad range of issues to do with 'birds, plants and pleasant places'. It was, in its early days, a broadly based conservation body, the first such in Britain (and, possibly, the world). Its successor, the SPB, was a single-issue campaigning organisation, concentrated on birds.

In part this may be attributed to a 'leader and follower' effect (the earlier society taking on all issues leaving its younger fledgling to focus on just one). However, the issue of clarity of focus, and of single-issue politics vs. multi-issue philosophy was also linked to fundamental differences in methods. Sheail emphasises not only

that “*The Selborne Society had a wider range of objectives and could not devote its resources specifically to bird protection*” but also that “*Its members were not required to give a pledge against wearing plumage*”<sup>5 p12</sup>. The Selborne Society had a different attitude to feather wearing, arguing for a ‘reasonable’ approach (which could include the wearing of ornamental features of game birds or domesticated species). Moreover, the absence of a pledge was repeatedly emphasised by the Selborne Society’s (male) leaders. This distanced them from the personal commitments of pledged societies (such as the temperance movement) and from the activism of the women’s’ suffrage movement (as well as from the Society’s precursor Plumage League). There was, effectively a fundamental difference of approach, between compromise (the Selborne Society) and confrontation (the RSPB). This was subsequently to become manifest in major conflicts, both between the Selborne Society and the RSPB and within the Selborne Society itself.

The history of the conflict shows that a variety of influences, including politics, class and gender, were important. Moreover, the early differences between the two Societies are instructive in themselves and illuminating for what came later.

### **RSPB**

The SPB retained its clear focus on bird protection. Other issues or activities were embraced only to the extent that they were related to this primary aim and assisted in furthering it. They were also contested at least in some degree due to the fear that they might dilute it. For example, although the production of Christmas cards as a form of propaganda was uncontentious, there was initial opposition to the development of other retail sales on the grounds that although the income was needed, the sales might become an end in themselves. Land purchases began only in the 1920s and even then were initially entered into reluctantly or by default. The RSPB’s own centenary biographer describes this early fear that the Society might evolve into a “*Royal Society for the Protection of Absolutely Everything Worth Protecting and the Abolition of Everything Else*”<sup>2 p110</sup>.

From 1891 onwards, the SPB raised money from sympathisers by selling pamphlets. Early pamphlets include *Osprey, or Egrets or Aigrettes* (1891), *Feathered Women* (1893) *Lost British Birds* (1894)

*The Trade in Bird Feathers* (1898). In 1898, the SPB produced its first Christmas cards, decorated with pictures of wildlife, with 4,500 sold. In 1906 it commissioned and sold its first nestboxes. Soaps, calendars, and jigsaws soon joined these products. By 1913, linked sales had become “*a distinct and separate branch of the Society’s work*”<sup>23; 24 p16</sup>, setting the pattern for the highly professional visitor services and retail service activities which provide a significant part of its income today.

The (R)SPB continued to seek patronage of the influential but this was combined with an increasingly populist and activist strategy. This included a campaign of writing to newspapers, coupled with a ‘personal’ approach to individuals. Mrs Lemon later recalled how she and other members attended meetings of other organisations to raise the plumage issue. They also noted the names of women who wore plumed hats in church on Sundays and would then write letters (which offenders would receive on the following Monday) which pointed out “*the cruelty of a practice which meant starvation and death for numberless orphaned fledglings*” whose parents had been killed for their plumage<sup>5 p13</sup>. Recognition and respectability (and the Royal Charter) were not allowed to impede campaigning (although they did change the way it was done). Well publicised activities included demonstrations in 1911, during summer and just before Christmas, of paid sandwich men parading in Oxford Street, with leaflets and pictures of egrets – alive and slaughtered for their plumes. These activities were widely reported in the press.

Such high profile campaigning – which bore more than a passing resemblance to the methods adopted by the related anti-vivisection, temperance and suffrage movements – brought opprobrium from some quarters (including some in the Selborne Society) because it was held to be undignified or counterproductive. However it brought results - and approval - from many more.

### **Selborne Society**

The Selborne Society, by contrast, espoused from the start a more genteel style, looking backward both in its celebration of Gilbert White and in the antiquarian tendencies and focus on natural history of its members. This is epitomised in the proclamation of the first issue of what subsequently became its own members’ journal



but began in 1887 as a series of penny pamphlets - the Selborne Letters.

*"It is intended from time to time to issue LETTERS (after the manner of Gilbert White) on the objects and work of the Selborne Society, to be written by members who have a special knowledge of the subject of which they treat... the present letter on the feeding and protection of wild birds in winter is the first of the series, and members are invited to make close and careful observations on the natural food of all kinds of birds which come under their notice at different times of the year, and to send their notes to the Hon Secretary of the Society. The next LETTER will be on the Wild Birds Protection Acts of 1880 and 1881, and their bearing on bird-catching and bird-nesting during the close season... Other LETTERS will follow on birds, trees, and plants, and it is hoped that all the Members of the Society will give this scheme for disseminating a knowledge of practical Natural history their active support, by furnishing facts and information, and by distributing copies of the LETTERS among their friends, school-children, servants, &c"*<sup>25 p1</sup>.

From 1888, the Letters became a monthly magazine, The Selborne Magazine, focusing on natural history topics and 'Selborniana'. From January 1890, under the editorship of James Britten the magazine was issued as Nature Notes. A flavour of the content, which was very different from the bird-focused substance of Bird Notes and News is given by the first issue. As well as an article on the Protection of Birds on the Continent (by 'A Vice- President'), this included contributions on the Introduction of Foreign Weeds (by George Nicholson), on 'The Disappearance of British Plants' (by James Britten) and on 'Curious experience with a Slug' (by Miss A M Buckton), as well as 'New Poems' by Alfred Lord Tennyson, the President of the Society<sup>16</sup>. There are indications of tension between 'scientific' and 'popular' approaches as well as between natural history and a broader cultural antiquarianism. In 1897; Prof. G S Boulger took over as editor of Nature Notes and in January 1909 he reverted its title to The Selborne Magazine which he edited until his death in 1911.

In terms of campaigning, the Selborne Society continued to seek (and it secured) the patronage of the influential, in its later stages almost desperately courting respectability and recognition

through this means. In this, it was equally if not more successful than the (R)SPB because such support involved little commitment or public exposure.

In 1913 the Selborne Society resolved, somewhat hopefully (and unsuccessfully) to follow the example of the SPB and to apply for its own Royal Charter<sup>26</sup>. The Times reported the Society's view that "A Charter would enable the Society to elect Fellows and Associates and fees from that source could be used for extending its work in fresh directions"<sup>27</sup>. In fact, it had by now accreted so many causes to itself that it had already lost direction. The bid for a Royal Charter appears to have been associated with the notion that the Selborne Society could retread itself as some kind of learned society or professional institute, and seems symptomatic of this general lack of strategic purpose.

This attempt on the part of the Selborne Society to seek recognition was in keeping with its own strategy of survival through patronage. Council minutes for 1913 list no fewer than 44 Vice Presidents including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, the Duchess of Bedford, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Sir Edward Grey, the Duke of Rutland, in addition to the Society's President, the Earl of Selborne and a host of lesser notables including Mrs G A Musgrave, the Society's founder<sup>26</sup>. But however successful at securing names for its letterhead, the Society's attempts to maintain any kind of broad national membership base were sporadic and half- hearted. There was no clear strategy for securing any of its aims, and the causes espoused multiplied continually. For the Selborne Society, bird preservation was inseparable from natural history and from the appreciation and protection of nature in general. Natural history was, in turn, but a primary focus of natural science and of environmental education (though the latter term was not yet in use). The protection of nature and the protection of the historic and cultural environment were linked and all were legitimate and necessary concerns. It was not surprising (but neither was it inevitable) that the Selborne Society took them all up.

Birds remained the core, or at least the nominal focus of activity, but were joined by articles (though little direct action) on plant collecting, the development or destruction of open spaces, and landscape protection, including opposition to quarrying on Cheddar



Gorge and resistance to the erection of telegraph poles on commons and open spaces.

Concern with the protection of 'wild places' had already been manifest in a practical way by the formation, in October 1892, of a sub-committee to explore ways of protecting Perivale Wood in West London, where membership was concentrated. (The story of Perivale Wood, with which the Society is so closely identified today, is in many ways a parallel one, distinct from the events recounted here and merits telling in a separate future publication.) The following year, in 1893, Canon H D Rawnsley & Robert Hunter (both of whom were, from the early 1890s, regular contributors to Nature Notes) formed a Society for Checking the Abuse of Public Advertising, whose aims included the regulation of eyesores of roadside hoardings that were then beginning to appear <sup>28</sup>. Together with others including Octavia Hill, they also began to work on the establishment of a body to hold land in trust for its protection. This resulted, in 1895, in the formation of The National Trust. The Selborne Society became one of the 'representative' members of the early National Trust, a status it retained until 1907 at the end of Dudley Buxton's Chairmanship of the Society. In September 1896, Nature Notes carried an appeal by (Canon) H D Rawnsley, reporting the first Annual Meeting of The National Trust. Rawnsley began by listing the speakers at the AGM declaring that *"it cannot be denied that this, the youngest born of our patriotic societies that aim at preserving beautiful and historic Great Britain to future generations, lacks support of men who carry weight with the public mind. But its aims and claims are as yet comparatively unknown"* <sup>29 p181</sup>. Rawnsley emphasised the overlapping membership between the Selborne Society and the Trust (The Trust's AGM had been addressed by Dr Dudley Buxton who was the Selborne Society's representative), before going on to appeal for donations to fund the repair of Alfriston Clergy House (the Trust's first built property, which it purchased in 1896), and to secure Barras Point in Cornwall.

### **b. Membership and influence**

The (R)SPB's growth in membership and influence was part of a virtuous circle, both the product of growing awareness of the conservation cause and the promoter of that awareness. In fact the fashion for plumage had already begun to plateau out if not decline, before the formation of the Plumage League and the SPB, and the

latter was able to benefit from a trend which could not entirely be attributed to its own efforts. The SPB's 4<sup>th</sup> Report (1894) declared (generously ceding some of the credit for this success to others in addition to itself) that:

*"...the decline in the bird wearing fashion, which began with us in the autumn of 1893, still continues. In London, it is now possible to walk the length of a fashionable resort like Bond Street, without seeing a gentlewoman sporting a stuffed bird, or portion of a bird, in her head gear. Perhaps the efforts of this and of kindred societies are beginning to tell"* <sup>30 p5-6</sup>.

The (slower) growth of the Selborne Society could also be seen as part of a more general connection between enlightened behaviour and the wider understanding that it sought to impart through its activities. Throughout these early days there was certainly liaison and a degree of coordination between the two societies in their mutual endeavours. In 1899 the SPB was invited by the Selborne Society to be represented on the latter's own governing body: The SPB's Report for 1899 stated that:

*"Fully recognising the extent to which Bird Protection is furthered by the Selborne Society, especially in its monthly organ Nature Notes, the Committee have pleasure in reporting that an invitation to attend its Council meetings has been accepted by Mrs F E Lemon, as representing this Society"* <sup>31 p10</sup>.

It is not certain whether representation was reciprocated, but the close relationship was already producing results 'on the ground'. In the same (1899) report, the SPB announced that it had, along with the Selborne Society and a number of others (including the newly formed National Trust) joined the Parliamentary Amenities Committee <sup>2 p133</sup>. *"The object is to obtain concerted action between Members of Parliament in both Houses on matters relative to the preservation of the natural beauty and wild life of the country"* <sup>31 p10</sup>.

Links 'on the ground' by the activists and ordinary members were complemented, in more elevated circles, by those who lent their names to the societies' endeavours. Patronage of the cause and its societies by prominent individuals (aristocrats, scientists, literati and politicians) was undoubtedly as important as the direct popular appeal of the cause to the societies' members. The total number of such influential patrons may not have been great but the number and variety of organisations through which it was exercised

magnified their impact. At the Selborne Society's Annual Meeting and Conversazione in 1900, James Bryce MP took the chair in place of Lord Avebury (Sir John Lubbock, the Society's President), who was unwell. In an impromptu address he

*"agreed with Sir Robert Hunter that the existence of so many Societies with cognate aims was a great source of encouragement in well-doing to those who were endeavouring to defend Nature against those plagues and pests which sought to worry her out of existence. It was a considerable advantage to have the moral force of all these on their side, for though they were largely made up of the same members – (laughter) – still it looked well, and gave an impression that the whole brigade could be turned on to attack any single grievance"*<sup>32 p107</sup>.

### **Legislative success and subversion**

A major perceived milestone was passed in 1899 when Queen Victoria confirmed an Order that certain regiments should no longer wear 'osprey' plumes as part of their ceremonial regalia. This achievement though apparently small was nevertheless symbolic. It was also a clear outcome of the value of working together, or at least coordination behind the scenes. The SPB's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Report (1898) reports Sir John Lubbock asking the Under Secretary of State for War in the House of Commons to abandon the use of feathers in military uniform and regalia. Mr Brodrick's reply to Lubbock's request was "yes"<sup>33</sup>. Such success, which, despite the affiliation to the Selborne Society of many of the individuals responsible, was primarily credited to the SPB and contributed significantly to its public prominence.

Other achievements followed. In 1905, reporting the RSPB's first annual conference since the granting of its charter, the Selborne Society's May Nature Notes does not directly acknowledge the awarding of the SPB's Charter. Instead, it notes that *The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds... has much useful work to record, including the passing of the Pole-trap and St Kilda Acts*<sup>34 p931</sup>.

Such legislative achievements were in fact milestones in the RSPB's success (as they have been for the RSPB more recently, for example in respect of European legislation). Mrs F Lemon's own early history of the RSPB in 1911 concludes:

*"That Bird Protection in Great Britain is in a wholly satisfactory condition no one can suppose. It has to be remembered, however, that the Bird Protection movement in Britain is not fifty years old. The advance of public opinion within the last twenty, the last ten, even the last five years has been definite and striking. Given the united efforts of all who value bird-life, and the time should not be far distant when knowledge, common-sense, sentiment and humanity combined, procure a sound, comprehensive and comprehensible Act for the protection of birds"*<sup>35 p87</sup>.

Such an Act was a long time coming, in part due to Selborne Society's own attitude to legislation. In 1908 the RSPB introduced an Importation of Plumage (Prohibition) Bill to Parliament. The Bill failed, due to the opposition of the plumage industry, in which the RSPB argued that the Selborne Society was complicit. Despite further attempts on the part of the RSPB to get such a bill through Parliament, legislation was not passed until 1921, thirteen years later. Effective legislative protection of birds of the sort anticipated by Mrs Lemon had to wait even longer, and did not come until after two World Wars. It was implemented in the UK in the form of the Protection of Birds Acts of 1954 and 1967, and on a European scale in the 1979 Birds Directive (which was consolidated in Part 1 of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, the excellent – and virtually the only worthwhile – part of this Act).

### **c. 1904**

The broad prospectus of the Selborne Society enabled it to continue to attract members and patronage, although the former in no degree comparable to the SPB. Nature Notes included from the late 1890s, regular snippets about the SPB. A somewhat rueful report of the SPB's ninth Annual Report (1900) notes that 22,000 members of the SPB have been registered and 2,325 subscribed in that year, with a "satisfactory balance" in hand. This, said the Editor, "makes us inclined to envy our sister organisation as does also the statement that the[ir] local branches now number 144. We are, however, in such complete sympathy with the objects of the Society that we can as heartily rejoice in its success as in our own"<sup>32 p96</sup>.

If 1904 was a milestone for the RSPB, for the Selborne Society it was the turning point, and the start of its difficulties. For a

time, membership continued to grow. By 1907, the Selborne Society was able to report 1,712 members in more than 15 Branches spread from Brighton to Blackburn, in addition to its 'Central' branch. The exact number of branches is difficult to ascertain from one year to another as they split, amalgamated or otherwise changed their names, but in 1907 they appear to include the Central branch, plus: Bath; Birmingham; Blackburn; Brent Valley & Richmond (later, Ealing); Brighton & Hove/ Richard Jefferies; Croydon & Norwood; East Riding of Berkshire; Farnham; Hammersmith & Fulham; Hampstead; Hanger & Shere; Kensington & Bayswater; Rape of Lewes; Rother Valley (Midhurst); Sutton ; Wimbledon and Putney. However, membership was only around a tenth the size of its younger royal cousin, and branches were clustered in the south-east. The Selborne Society's membership reached a peak of 3,092 just before the outbreak of the 1914-18 war from which it never recovered. By 1922 it had fallen to 1,211 and although small increases to 1,222 and 1,255 were reported in 1923 and 1924, it declined year on year thereafter. At the outbreak of the Second World War, in 1939, membership was a mere 433. By the conclusion of the war, in 1945, the Society had virtually ceased to exist (the next recorded figure, in 1957, shows a mere 25 members).

The story is more than one of 'success' and 'failure'. The issue of breadth of purpose and clarity of focus has already been addressed. It was perhaps understandable (though by no means inevitable) that given its early location in the history of British conservation, the Selborne Society should dissipate its efforts on any issue that appeared relevant to its leadership. But over the period, the trajectories of the SPB and of the Selborne Society continued to diverge considerably in areas other than size and influence, their paths setting courses which led to major conflicts in the short term and to such different positions a century later. An examination of this process raises issues to do with the complex interplay between personalities and policies.

### **3. Personalities, principles, and politics.**

#### ***a. Croydon and Ealing: E A Martin and W M Webb***

Much of the (R)SPB's early success must be credited to the enthusiasm and drive of its women founders, most particularly Lemon and Poland. It is interesting that subsequent to the merger, nothing is heard either of Mrs Phillips (in whose Croydon house early meetings of the FFFF were held) or of Mrs Williamson (of 'The Croft' in Didsbury, Manchester, home to the first meetings of the SPB).

The Selborne Society's men seem to have been likewise determined individuals. At least part of its divergence from the SPB seems attributable the fact that in the few years before the latter's formation, when it stood alone as a pioneer of conservation, Musgrave's determination that it should reflect his broader interests succeeded in attracting a greater degree of support than did Morris's view that it was likely to achieve more if it focused on birds. Musgrave himself was clearly a forceful character. By 1904 the Selborne Society had acquired two others.

#### **Wilfred Mark Webb**

For almost half a century from 1904, the Selborne Society's fortunes are associated with one individual, Wilfred Mark Webb of Hanwell.

In 1904, Webb replaced Musgrave as Hon General Secretary of the Selborne Society and (in 1911) he became Editor of the Magazine. Webb's association with the Society (or at least with Perivale Wood which became the focus of its endeavours in the post 1945 period) seems to have begun at an early stage. There is a story that Webb's interest in natural history, and in the Wood was kindled in 1875, when at 7 years of age, he was shown a long-tailed tit's nest by Robert Read, a local naturalist. The period from 1904 to the outbreak of War in 1914 was one in which Webb single-mindedly imposed his vision on the Society's structure and activities.

Within a year of Webb's appointment, the strains had begun to show. In July 1905, the secretary of the Ealing Branch (Mr H W

Ravenshaw), resigned, whereupon his duties were undertaken by Mrs (Wilfred Mark) Webb. The following year, in 1906, a renegade competitor branch arose from the Hampstead branch of the Selborne Society. Lodged in the Council minute book for Dec 12 1906 is a letter from Dudley Buxton, Chairman of the Selborne Society's Council, written from 20 Hanover Sq, in respect of a circular sent out by the Hampstead Branch of the Selborne Society stating that it has been decided to dissolve the Hampstead Branch and to form a new Society with name of '**The Hampstead Selborne and Archaeological Society**'. Buxton's letter says that

*"In the first place it would seem that the circular was not issued by the members of the Hampstead Branch as a whole but by certain members, who as far as it is known, have taken no measures to ascertain the wishes of the Branch which has always been strongly represented on the Council, and that in any case the break-away is unconstitutional"*<sup>36</sup>.

Buxton quotes a passage from the Circular in which its signatories state that they have been subjected to "*annoyances at the hands of the Society's present administration*" and that their activities "*have been requited invariably by detraction*"<sup>36</sup>. A second letter dated 29 Dec 1906 is from James E Whiting, former Sec. of the Hampstead Branch to Dudley Buxton severing all connections with the Selborne Society<sup>37</sup>. Most of the Selborne Society's Council meeting in Jan 22 1907 was taken up with the Hampstead issue. The 'resignations' of 18 Hampstead members are accepted, but the Minutes record that "*there were thirteen members still loyal to the Hampstead branch*"<sup>38</sup>. Initially, at least, the new Hampstead breakaway appears to have been quite lively, with local reports of its activity continuing to 1917.

Such problems could be put down to conflicts of personality or to leadership style, or simply to the accidents of time. Nevertheless, subsequent difficulties raise more fundamental issues of policy, of broader relevance to the history of natural history, to the origins of nature conservation and to strategies of conservation organisations today. The issue of strategy and tactics has already been touched on. This seems to be the outcome of a complex relationship between personalities, gender and class. There is a related and prior issue that is rooted in the equally complex streams in the history of nature conservation, in particular the tension between

'scientific' natural history, and 'humanitarian' concern for animal welfare.

### **Edward Alfred Martin**

Both issues – the importance of active conservation over observer 'science' and of committed campaigning against compromise and co-option were promoted (unsuccessfully) by Edward Alfred Martin, Webb's opponent in the conflicts that were to follow Webb's appointment as the Selborne Society's Secretary in 1904.

As both societies – and in particular the (R)SPB – grew, overlapping membership amongst its influential patrons was paralleled by that amongst their less august members. Within the early SPB, individuals such as Hannah Poland and Mrs Lemon appear to have played an active and influential but (compared to the leaders of the Selborne Society) never a dominant role. There appear to be few records of the individuals involved in the early Fur, Fin and Feather Folk (or indeed of the circumstances of its creation in 1889) but that it was formed in Croydon may be significant. Mrs Edward Phillips, in whose (Croydon) house the Folk met, was a near neighbour of Mrs Lemon (who lived in Redhill) as well as a prominent member of the very active SPCA group in Tunbridge Wells<sup>9 p37</sup>; it seems likely that both were part of a wider circle of activists on the plumage issue. Certainly, the rapid growth of the group (a total of 5,000 within the first twelve months) suggests pre-existing networks. At this time, women were excluded from most other kindred societies (including the SPB's 'learned' complement, the British Ornithologists Union, which did not admit women until 1909). The exclusion of men except as 'honorary co-workers' and the pledge of abstinence that the (R)SPB (and the FFFF) required from its members may indicate that this network included parallel movements of suffrage and temperance. This hypothesis is reinforced by what is known concerning Edward and Lilian Martin.

By 1904, E A Martin was secretary of the Selborne Society's Croydon and Norwood branch as well as a Councillor of the Society. A Croydon branch of the Society was in existence at least by 1898. It seems to have existed in parallel (and indeed may have been coterminous) with the local (R)SPB branch, which emerged from the Fur, Fin and Feather Folk, and of which E A Martin was also a



member; continuous runs of both Nature Notes and Bird Notes and News were amongst Edward's effects after their death.

In character and standing, there are strong parallels between Martin and Webb. However, if the tradition of Gilbert White and the 'Selborne cult'<sup>39</sup> was responsible for moving them, it clearly did so in different ways. For Webb, it was progress through science (perhaps more accurately, education and natural history; Webb did no original scientific research). For Martin, who had a number of original scientific papers to his credit, science (and education) were necessary, but not sufficient; political engagement was also required.

Martin was (like Webb) a middle-class professional, the Superintendent of Croydon Post Office. He ran the Post Office with such efficiency as to leave him time for these outside activities which included a weekly natural history column for the Croydon Advertiser which he wrote at work. He is remembered as a large man of absolute determination and enormous obstinacy, who (like Webb) would never admit defeat or let a matter drop once he had set his mind to it. Where he appears to have differed from Webb is in both his science and his politics. Martin was a founding member of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), and corresponded with William Morris. A keen amateur geologist, Martin was an evolutionist and catalogued the complete collection of Grange Wood museum. He was variously chair or secretary of the Croydon Natural and Philosophical Society (and a founder of the South Eastern Union of Scientific and Philosophical Societies). He produced more than forty scientific publications, ranging from investigations into the formation of dew ponds, to studies of Anglo-Saxon remains around Croydon, and including a bibliography of Gilbert White. (Martin's 1934 *A bibliography of Gilbert White* was republished with additional material by Dawsons of Pall Mall in 1970).

As a radical liberal, Martin campaigned for free access to libraries and parks. In the late 1890s he led a major campaign against the threatened destruction of Croham Hurst, a Pleistocene raised beach of great geological significance with considerable wildlife and archaeological interest. This culminated in 1901, when Martin, together with George Bernard Shaw and the rev Bernard Muggerridge (grandfather of Malcolm) led a march of '1000 artisans' from Croydon Town Hall to the Hurst, with the result that its owners,

Whitgift School, who had intended to sell the Hurst to a developer, passed it instead to the Borough of Croydon, in whose possession it remains today as a public open space.

Martin's Croham Hurst achievement was recorded in the Selborne Society's own sixteenth Annual Report as follows: "*Since the last Annual Meeting, the movement, largely the work of our colleague, Mr E A Martin and his fellow members of the Croydon Branch, for the preservation of Croham Hurst has been crowned with complete success, that beautiful little piece of woodland having been purchased by the Corporation of Croydon, so that it will be maintained for ever in its natural state*"<sup>40 p3</sup>. An earlier 'citizens action' led by Martin included taking down fences and occupying the grounds of One Tree Hill (in Forest Hill) to prevent it being enclosed as a golf course.

Edward and Lilian Martin's grand-daughter (from whom some of the above information is derived) remembers her own mother, Christobel, describing the boredom of long suffragette meetings held in their house. During one of these (presumably around 1908-10) Christobel, bored of sitting on the stairs waiting for a meeting to end, pushed a cat through an airbrick in an attempt to disrupt the meeting. Like the organisations they supported, early anti-plumage campaigners were not without their own contradictions. Although a member of the Fur Fin and Feather Folk, and firmly opposed to the use of birds wings as ornament, Lilian Martin accepted the wearing of feathers (on the grounds that they were naturally moulted) and was the proud owner and wearer of a silver fox fur, complete with head. As far as drink was concerned however, both Edward and Lilian Martin signed the pledge – and kept to it all their lives<sup>P Marstrand, pers com</sup>.

### **Politics, gender and class**

Beyond the early gender bias between the Selborne Society and the SPB, and the liberal – conservative axis (Martin was a liberal, Webb a conservative in political orientation), it seems likely that there were wider and more complex linkages between the two societies and late Victorian politics.

The RSPB and the Selborne Society both anticipated distinct facets of the conservation movement today, but they did so in very different ways. The RSPB (with other bodies such as the Humanitarian League) gave voice to a clear stream in conservation

thought which gained currency in the 1920s and 1930s, and is a coherent current within 'alternative' politics and green philosophy today. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, feminists were active in suffrage and animal rights campaigns alike<sup>41</sup>. It seems likely that a number of the SPB's founding members were also active in the suffrage movement, as well as in other campaigns, especially around temperance and social improvement. Certainly there are similarities both in the language of action (including the 'pledge' of 'abstinence' from plumage wearing) and also in campaigning tactics.

By contrast with the SPB, the Selborne Society not merely avoided confrontation with commercial plumage and millinery interests but seems to have seen them as the vehicle for advancing its cause. It sought to secure its wider objectives through a mixture of education (for the middle classes, if not for the masses), and the exercise of influence 'behind the scenes'. Once its formative period was over it seems to have been dominated by male officers. In this way the implicit philosophy of the Selborne Society in many ways anticipated much of today's 'mainstream' conservation – science based, accommodationist in stance (indeed, positively courting close links with the commercial 'enemy') and focused on education as the principal vehicle for achieving change.

The SPB and the Selborne Society (and within the latter, Martin and Webb) took opposed positions on two issues in particular which confronted both RSPB and the Selborne Society in their early development.

The first of these is the complementary but often conflicting relationship between natural history and nature conservation. To the extent that the nature conservation derived its primary initial impetus from animal welfare rather than natural history, its relation with natural history required accommodation of some kind, and this took different forms in the two societies.

The second question is the relation between ends and means, in particular the issue of confrontation versus compromise with the 'enemy' and the role of direct action. The relation between patronage, popular appeal and political engagement is not a simple one and again, developed in contrasting ways within the two organisations.

Both are issues facing conservation NGOs today. Both emerged early on in the history of the Selborne Society (the first at its 1904 Annual General Meeting) as contentious issues that threatened to tear the Society apart. It was at this meeting that Wilfred Mark Webb FLS was appointed as Honorary Secretary (with an allowance of £25 per annum for secretarial help). The conflicts went well beyond mere individual preferences. They represented fundamental differences of philosophy and approach in which the RSPB, who took a contrary line to the Selborne Society on both issues, with the result that the two organisations ended up on different sides of the conservation/ natural history divide. Effectively, for a period at least, the RSPB represented the radical, and the Selborne Society the conservative face of the emerging movement for nature protection.

### ***b. Natural History vs. Nature Conservation***

Most histories of nature conservation involve some form of periodisation. Lowe, for example identifies three phases in the development of British conservation; 'natural history and humanitarian' (1830-1890); 'preservationist' (1870-1940); and 'scientific' (1910- 1970)<sup>42</sup>. This early history of the Selborne Society and the (R)SPB, covering the two decades either side of 1904, includes all these elements. Each element extends backwards and forwards considerably beyond Lowe's time envelopes. More importantly, the history of our two organisations shows that the 'natural history' and 'humanitarian' elements were distinct and conflicting (rather than complementary) streams.

From their beginnings, both the Selborne Society and the SPB through their journals were exhorting against the widely accepted perception by naturalists that it was necessary to kill animals (particularly birds) in order to study them. The decades prior to the establishment of the Selborne Society and the RSPB were critical to the development of conservation awareness in the UK. The Sea Birds Protection Act of 1869 was parliament's first-ever legislation directed specifically at wildlife protection. It was ineffectual and largely ignored; Allen records a member of the Tamworth natural history society who, on learning of an Osprey seen over the town in 1870, complained that "*someone who should have known better let it go*"<sup>4 p197</sup> but it set the context for the Wild Birds protection Act of 1880 (which extended theoretical protection to the capture and sale

of wild birds as well as the taking of eggs). However even in the 1890s, such formal concern still focused on birds. The need to protect other groups, as well as their habitats was only beginning to be recognised.

Both the Selborne Society and the (R)SPB started as bird protection bodies, however the latter did not have natural history as a significant contributing stream, and remained focused on birds, and its intense and high profile activity here meant that early pressure to broaden out into other areas was limited. The Plumage League was effectively an early precursor of the SPB, but its merger with the Selborne League effectively frustrated any prospects of development as a significant force, at least for legislative change; the Selborne Society emerged with a broad remit and tension between conservation and natural history was inevitable.

In 1904, the year of the RSPB's Charter, this tension erupted into open conflict.

The main issue at the Selborne Society's 1904 Annual Meeting concerned changes that the Council had made to the rules of the Society, apparently without consulting the Society's members. The Society's first aim as originally laid down at its formation in 1888 had been the preservation *"from unnecessary destruction, such wild birds, animals and plants, as are harmless, beautiful, or rare"*. This was followed by a second objective of discouraging *"the wearing and use for ornament of birds and their plumage"* with an important exception for birds killed for food or specifically reared for their plumage. The third was *"to protect places and objects of interest or natural beauty from ill-treatment or destruction"*. Promotion of *"the study of natural history"* came last in the list.

Three months before the 1904 AGM, the council had unilaterally altered the aims of the Society to move the 'study of natural history' previously the last of its four aims, to the top of the list. In moving that this was unconstitutional, E A Martin declared that there was

*"a great danger of the Society developing into a purely Nature Study Society. Nature Study was an excellent thing, but there were plenty of societies which studied natural history and sometimes from a very cruel point of view. As they stood out distinct from everybody else in wishing to protect Nature, as well as to eliminate the illimitable collection of objects, they*

*should make a firm stand against anything which would do away with the great aim of the Society, viz., the protection of Nature from spoilation"*<sup>43 p135</sup>.

Martin proposed that the original aims be reinstated (effectively, to return conservation to the top of the list and put nature study last). However, his amendment was not seconded and the amendment fell.

The stage was set for the transformation of the Selborne Society, Britain's first national conservation organisation (hitherto seen alongside the SPB as a bird protection body, but with much wider aims of conserving all nature) into an antiquarian and natural history society. In the process, the Selborne Society was reverting to an earlier tradition, that of mid nineteenth century naturalist and antiquarian field clubs.

### ***c. Campaigning: confrontation, compromise or cooption?***

The second issue which confronted the Selborne Society (as it confronts all voluntary conservation bodies today), concerned the degree to which aims should be compromised by political expediency. Like the first, this issue also surfaced at the Selborne Society's 1904 AGM, as a second resolution proposed by E A Martin, in respect of the same amendments introduced to the Society's aims by Council without consulting members. Martin tried to reverse the Council's insertion of the words *'or are known to be injurious'* to the exclusions to what was originally the first Object of the society. He argued that *'known to be injurious'* left the door open to individual interpretation. He argued:

*"The introduction of the words... was an early step in the tendency of the Society to go the wrong way and reduce itself from a protective Society to one that would merely be a Natural History Society"*<sup>43 p135</sup>.

Lord Avebury, the Selborne Society's President (who as Sir John Lubbock had promoted the 1880 and 1881 bird protection bills in Parliament) did not oppose Martin's amendment directly. Instead he diverted the discussion to what (men) who saw women wearing plumes could do, namely to write to the Society's Council who *"might undertake to send the offender one of their appropriate leaflets"* (a watered down version of one of the SPB's own

successful campaigning tactics). This time, Martin's amendment was seconded (by Mrs F E Lemon, Hon Sec of the SPB) and was put to the vote. It appears to have received some support but by no means enough. The Selborne Society's 1904 Council minutes record that it was lost by a large majority.

Clearly, though, the matter rumbled on. The RSPB did not ignore these goings-on within its sister society, with whom relations were clearly now distinctly cool. In July 1904, Bird Notes and News declared:

*"Many people will regret that the Selborne Society, which in former days was a declared opponent of bird-trimmed millinery, and was regarded as working in the matter on similar lines with the Society for the Protection of Birds, has somewhat changed its attitude. The second 'object' of the Society was until recently stated to be: **'To discourage the Wearing and use for ornament of birds and their plumage, except when the birds are killed for food or reared for their plumage'**. The wording of this is now altered as follows: To discourage, etc., **'birds and their plumage, except when the birds are killed for food, reared for their plumage, or are known to be injurious'**. The words in italics (ours) are, unfortunately, a begging of the whole question, as they leave each person to decide according to the extent of his prejudice or the limit of his knowledge what bird is or is not 'injurious'..."*

<sup>44</sup> p36

Disquiet within the Selborne Society was such that its Council was forced to summon a Special General Meeting (held on 22 November 1904), *"to discuss a proposed amendment of the Rules, which will virtually restore the 'Objects' of the Society to their previous form, although the wording is somewhat simplified"*<sup>45</sup> p221. However, by the time that the meeting was called, this resolution had merely been altered to change the wording of *"birds and their plumage, except when the birds are killed for their food, reared for their plumage, or are known to be injurious"*<sup>45</sup>, to *"the skins and plumage of such birds as are not domesticated"*. The greater issue of the relative priority of natural history and conservation in the aims of the Society was not addressed. The Council's amendment was passed, and the new aims of the Society became:

*"To promote the study of Natural History. To preserve from needless destruction such wild animals and plants as are*

*harmless, beautiful, or rare. To discourage the wearing and use for ornament of: (i) the skins and furs of such animals as are in danger of being exterminated; (ii) the plumage of such birds as are not domesticated. To protect places and objects of natural beauty or antiquarian interest from ill treatment or destruction. To afford facilities for combined effort in promoting any of the above or kindred objects"*<sup>46</sup>.

In effect, the contentious issue of compromise on bird protection was avoided (for a time, at least) but the original conservation priorities of the Society were not reinstated. The Selborne Society, a pioneer of conservation retreated from bird preservation and also from conservation in general, into natural history and antiquarianism.

Within these limitations, it was still capable of raising its voice, as a kind of forerunner of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE; 'Preservation' was subsequently replaced by 'Protection') of which it became a founding member in 1926. However, the issues addressed were many, and action on them limited. Amongst the topics (besides reports on local activity on birds) covered in 1904 issues of Nature Notes are; countryside access, footpaths, rights of way, telegraph poles, clearing of wayside verges, commons encroachments, metropolitan parks, and roadside advertising – all issues on which the Selborne Society had been engaged – in its own quiet way – for almost two decades. One new threat concerned a proposal to construct a light railway from the base to the summit of Snowdon. The September 1904 issue of Nature Notes declared of this:

*"The beauty spots of Britain are a national heritage. But... all final decision as to their fitting treatment is left in the present case to such small local bodies as the Betws-y-Coed Urban District Council and the Trewydir Parish Council. Our experience of such little local bodies is that they are generally veritable Esaus, ready at a moment to barter their birthright for a mess of pottage"*<sup>47</sup> p185.

The problem was that such commentary reflected the personal opinion of prominent individuals within the Selborne Society and was not part of any concerted campaigning focus. Some of those (such as E A Martin) who wished it to take a more proactive campaigning role remained in the Society and continued to push for a more activist stance, and the conflict between conservationists



and conservatives escalated, particularly over the central issue of plumage<sup>48</sup>.

### **‘Economic Preservation’ – in bed with the enemy?**

The government’s response to the activities of the (by the end of 1904, Royal) SPB and to rising public concern about the plumage trade was to try to bring representatives of the millinery trade and conservationists together.

In 1912, the Board of Trade enlisted the support of the Selborne Society in establishing a ‘Committee for the Economic Preservation of Birds’ (CEPB). The CEPB included representatives of the millinery trade, the Textile Society of the London Chamber of Commerce the Zoological Society and the Selborne Society – but not the RSPB. Although invited, the RSPB boycotted the Committee. As Allen puts it, as far as the SPB was concerned:

*“There was a readily identified enemy: the plumassiers and milliners; and there was a single clear-cut issue to help arouse emotions”*<sup>4 p198</sup>.

There were also important social differences from the bird campaigns of the mid- century. Allen says, somewhat disparagingly *“This time round there were also far more people on the search for something to protest about”*. And many of those people were women.

*“Inclined to hysteria, often absurdly impractical, the new abolitionists acted as a kind of Salvation Army for British natural history, winning influence in quarters which could never have been penetrated by quieter methods”*<sup>4 p198</sup>.

It seems that for the (male dominated) Selborne Society, those ‘quieter methods’ were greatly to be preferred. But the issue was not just one about practice, it was also a matter of principle. The CEPB’s position on plumage was to condone the wearing of feathers not just of game and pest species, but of other birds too, provided that the supply could be maintained. Bird protection was to be achieved not by confronting the plumage industry but by supporting the millinery trade’s efforts to switch sources from wild to captive bred species<sup>2</sup>. In this way, the CEPB was *“a British equivalent of earlier millinery rapprochements undertaken by certain state Audubon Societies in the United States”*<sup>7 p125</sup>. For its part the CEPB labelled organisations such as the RSPB ‘purist’ (the

equivalent term used in the United States by the plumage industry against campaigners was ‘faddist’ and ‘sickly sentimental’<sup>7 p55</sup>).

Well before the formation of the CEPB, the Selborne Society had begun to cultivate relations with the plumage trade, and this had prompted disquiet amongst some members. In 1910, James Buckland (a prominent member of the Selborne Society and also member of the International Committee for Bird Protection) wrote to the Society’s Chairman (D Buxton) withdrawing from his agreement to submit a series of articles on destruction of plumage birds to the Selborne Magazine because of

*“the appearance in its pages of an advertisement of a book published in the interests of those who slaughter and exterminate bird life for coin”*<sup>49</sup>.

Buxton’s reply was unapologetic, declaring that the advert is a straightforward one *“and as it appears to me, quite colourless”* – it may be written from the standpoint of the dealers, he said, but *“If this is so, the more we encourage fighting in the open the better for the cause, as facts are facts and you are prepared to meet the dealers’ statements... Advertisements are not payment for puffs, at least in the Selborne Magazine”*<sup>50</sup>.

Even earlier than this, the Selborne Society had established a position contrary to that of the RSPB in respect of the Importation of Birds Bill which, in 1908, had been promoted in Parliament by the RSPB. The Society’s Council meeting in April 1908 debated the Bill and proposed its own amendments, favouring ‘old’ natural history over ‘new’ bird protection, which would water down the Bill’s provisions in favour of ‘science’. These amendments would make it easier for birds to be imported to natural history or other museums, and for scientific purposes, and in particular

*“make it easier for bona fide scientific dealers in skins to obtain a license as through their efforts many additions were made to scientific knowledge & from them museums obtain their specimens”*<sup>38</sup>.

Support for the CEPB was in keeping with this analysis (as well as with the economic pragmatism of the Selborne Society). In 1913, the Selborne Society’s Council Minutes report that the Secretary together with two other members had met with *‘three members of the Plumage Trade’* and together proposed forming a Committee with the following objects

*“to unite for practical purposes all those interested in the world’s Avifauna from the scientific, asethetic (sic) and commercial points of view [and] to consider and suggest to those interested the best means to protect, maintain and encourage the increase of all useful species including those used in the feather trade, so as to ensure a regular supply without endangering any”<sup>26</sup>.*

Clearly the arguments of the plumage trade’s representatives had been persuasive, because the Society’s members at the meeting proposed that

*“If as a result of the Committee’s investigation it is found that the species used for trade are neither in danger of extermination nor serious reduction and are not necessary to agriculture, this Committee does not and will not make any objection to the use of plumages of Wild Birds for millinery or decorative purposes, and will not directly or indirectly support any [sic] Bill that penalises British trade and leaves Continental trade untouched.*

*The Committee will as far as possible discourage irresponsible attacks upon the trade in feathers and will publicly deny those charges and allegations published in the press which this Committee may find in the course of its investigations to be untrue or unfounded.”<sup>26</sup>.*

The Selborne Society’s Council at least, appeared to be won over and gave sanction for the Selborne Society to be represented on the CEPB, with reservations, saying that

*“although the Council would no doubt be guided by their reports, it would give no pledge with regard to its own action during and after the investigations of the Committee”<sup>26</sup>.*

The RSPB continued its attempts to persuade the Selborne Society to change its position and to support their own efforts to get the ‘plumage question’ discussed in Parliament. It wrote again to Webb in June 1913, asking for help, but to no avail. The Selborne Society’s Council recorded that on hearing that *“the late Lord Avebury [the Selborne Society’s President, who had died a month or so previously] had written a private letter to Mr Asquith and that as the ‘Committee for the Economic Preservation of Birds’ had been in touch it was decided to take no further action”<sup>26</sup>.*

In the view of the RSPB of course, the CEPB had been formed precisely *“for the purpose of delaying and impeding legislation dealing with the plume-trade”<sup>51</sup>* – in particular to obstruct the Importation of Plumage (Prohibition) Bill which the RSPB had introduced to Parliament five years earlier (in 1908), and which the Government had declared its intention to revive and present in the coming session. In December, the RSPB’s Council therefore resolved

*“that the Hon Secretary be empowered to take any step which might appear desirable to frustrate the efforts being made by the Plumage merchants with regard to the London Chamber of Commerce”<sup>52</sup>.*

The response of the Selborne Society was to seek an even closer relationship with the Plumage Trade. In the same month its own Council agreed that the CEPB should *“give an address on the Plumage Question”* after the Society’s annual Conversazione <sup>26</sup>. Its minutes for the following February include a report on an attempt by the CEPB to secure international agreement on the part of the plumage trade to restrict the use of some species. Webb and two other members of the Selborne Society had met with others within the CEPB and reported that as a result, leading London merchants had signed an undertaking putting certain birds on a protected list <sup>48</sup>. This was clearly an attempt to secure voluntary agreement to offset legislation, as well as to secure a ‘level playing field’ for the international activities of the plumassiers. There was predictable unease within the Selborne Society at this, however Webb’s activities received support, the Council resolving:

*“That the Council of the Selborne Society, having received the Report, while not departing in any way from its policy of discouraging the wearing of plumage is of opinion that its object of preserving birds which are harmless, beautiful or rare, may for the present be best accomplished by such international arrangements as are being made by the Committee for the Economic Preservation of Birds”<sup>48</sup>.*

RSPB supporters in the Selborne Society made one last attempt to get the Society to change its attitude. Council Minutes in April 1914, report receipt of a resolution from E A Martin (for the AGM on June 22):

*“That the members of the Selborne Society at this annual meeting of the Society desire to express their regret at the*

*support given by the Council to the Committee for the Economic Preservation of Birds, and also hope that the Council will give every support to the Plumage Bill now before Parliament”<sup>48</sup>.*

Martin’s resolution proved unsuccessful, as did the RSPB’s attempt to secure legislation. The Plumage Bill, first promoted in 1908 was not eventually passed until 1921, and no significant voluntary agreement was secured in its place. With the defeat of Martin’s 1914 resolution, the Selborne Society - the pioneer of conservation in the UK - became, in the eyes of some and for a period at least, its enemy.

**Figure 3. Wilfred Mark Webb (n.d.)**

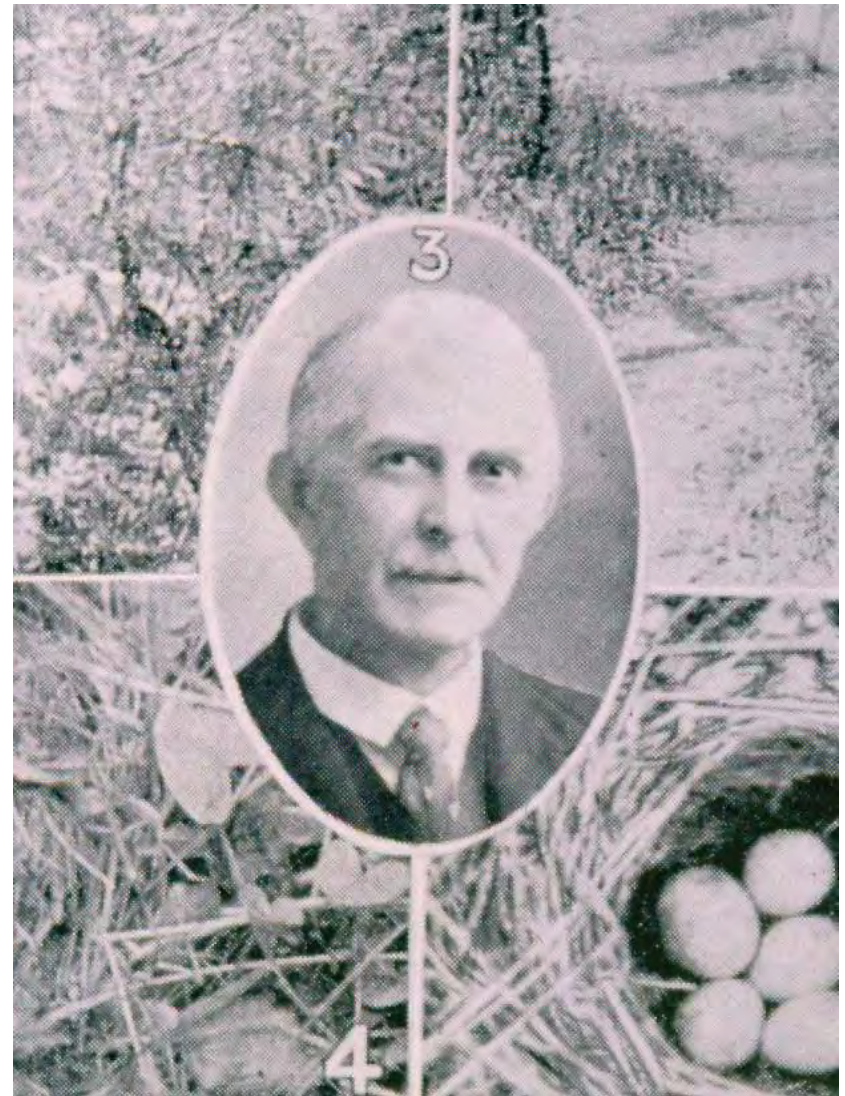


Photo from *Birds and Country* Summer 1962) reproduced courtesy of the Selborne Society.



Figure 4. Lilian and Edward Martin (c. 1930?)



Photo courtesy of Pauline Marstrand.

#### 4. Divergence, retreat and renaissance.

1914 and the onset of the first World War in some ways could be said also to mark the end of the early history of our two societies, the Selborne Society, and the RSPB, and of the period of conflict between nature conservation and natural history. For almost the next fifty years, until well after the end of the Second World War, the RSPB and the Selborne Society went their separate ways, and in general, contact between the two societies was minimal.

Difficult relations with the RSPB did not altogether preclude joint action on other matters however. In 1923, the two societies ran a successful joint campaign to stop shooting on Metropolitan Water Board reservoirs, which subsequently became *de facto* bird sanctuaries. Moreover, the Selborne Society's opposition to the RSPB on the plumage question did not stop it attempting to secure legislation in other areas. Several Bills were drafted, mainly related to wild plant protection, including one in 1933 which would entirely ban the uprooting of a small number of plants identified in a schedule and which would forbid entirely the picking, uprooting or possession of any wild plant without the landowner's consent. These measures never reached parliament. However the proposals are, in outline, similar to those eventually enacted in Section 1 of the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act (the former measure, complete protection for a small number of wild plants as well as some animals other than birds, was enacted in the 1975 Conservation of Wild Plants and Wild Creatures Act). By contrast, the RSPB was successful in some areas. In addition to the 1921 Import of Plumage Act, it succeeded in promoting the 1933 Protection of Birds Act (in force May 1934) which regulated trade in and taking of wild birds for aviculture.

The inter-War period was not only a period of divergence, but also, for both bodies, one of decline. Ironically, it was also a period of major concern and activity over wildlife and the fabric of the countryside. A number of countryside organisations such as the CPRE and the Ramblers, as well as the British Trust for Ornithology were established during this period; there was also major activity at a policy and governmental level, which laid the basis for the major post 1945 legislation, for example on wildlife protection and the



establishment of protected areas such as nature reserves and national parks. Neither the Selborne Society nor the RSPB had (as organisations) any great influence on any of these developments.

The story of both societies over this period, are interesting though very different, but also tangential to our main focus here and space allows only a brief summary.

#### **a. The Selborne Society Ltd as a lecture bureau**

In place of campaigning, from the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 onwards, the Selborne Society substituted natural history and education. By the end of the War, it had virtually become just a lecture agency, registering itself with London County Council as an employment bureau and (in 1918) becoming a limited company. The coordination and brokerage of lecturers remained its principal focus for more than the next quarter of a century, right through to the end of the Second World War in 1945. The peak of this activity was from 1927–1929 when the society acted as agent for the Empire Marketing Board, offering between 1,200 and 1,400 lectures each year. Of these, around one quarter were on natural history topics, the remainder on science, travel and exploration; the Society's handbook (in which lecturers paid to advertise their biographies and offerings) ran to over 60 pages.

In parallel with this commercial activity, the Society tried to maintain itself as a membership organisation but with little success. From a membership peak in 1911 of 2,986 members, Council minutes report a continuing loss of members and closure of branches. This decline accelerated during the First World War and continued throughout the inter-War period (during which a number of former branches severed their links with the parent Selborne Society and became independent natural history societies).

By the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, membership had shrunk to just 433. Only the Selborne and Ealing branches retained any semblance of local activity. The former increasingly became a local amenity body, focusing on village preservation. The latter ran in parallel with the Lecture Bureau and retained its emphasis on natural history due largely to the purchase in 1922 of Perivale Wood (following a public appeal and a large anonymous donation) as a permanent memorial to Gilbert White. At the conclusion of the War, the Society had virtually ceased to exist.

#### **b. The RSPB in its wilderness years**

If the Selborne Society had lost its way as a conservation organisation, it should not be thought that the RSPB was doing much better. By the mid 1930s, the RSPB nationally was an organisation in crisis. The RSPB's own 1989 centenary biography, commissioned as a 'warts and all' history, summarises the situation well. The RSPB had become

*"an organisation run by elderly people. Many of them were those worthy pioneers who founded the Society in 1889. Their early contribution had been almost beyond praise: they, respectable ladies and gentlemen, had fought in the face of fashion to change public attitudes and the use of wild birds' feathers in hats.*

*"Socially, the membership of the Society was well established as an upper middle class organisation with a sprinkling of aristocracy. Indeed, the Vice-Presidents' list read like a combination of Debrett, Crockford's and the more senior parts of the Army List. The Council was scarcely less grand, which was just as well in the early days when the Society needed influence if it was to achieve anything"<sup>53 p158</sup>.*

Attempts were made to modernise the organisation and to bring new blood to its leadership, Max Nicholson, in his 1926 'Account of the State of our Bird-life and a Criticism of Bird Protection' acknowledged the worthy motives of the RSPB's members and praised its early achievements, but declared also that it had become irrelevant and incapable of significant impact in the cause of bird conservation, writing 'all bird lovers must hope that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds will pull itself together'<sup>54</sup>. Ten years later, in 1936 following a particularly stormy AGM, Julian Huxley (then President of the Zoological Society) led a commission to investigate the organisation of the Society and to report on necessary steps for renewal. At the outbreak of the War in 1939, the RSPB's membership stood at just 4,852. This was less than the 5,000 odd registered at the end of the SPB's first year of existence and (though still ten times that of the Selborne Society which had 433 members at this time), less than a quarter of the 20,000 recorded in 1889.

***c. Rescue, revival and renewal – the local Selborne Society and the international RSPB.***

For the Selborne Society, the Second World War proved near fatal. Its decline into obscurity had been such that its existence, let alone its survival, is ignored or unseen by most historians. David Elliston Allen's history of British natural history dispenses with the formation of the Selborne Society in a single sentence<sup>4 p198</sup> and then goes on to discuss the RSPB at length. It is perhaps because of this that some have assumed that the Selborne Society was subsumed by the RSPB<sup>55 p322</sup>. Webb, in his seventies attempted to revive the Society, and produced its last lecture prospectus in 1949, but with little success. The two remaining branches in Ealing and in Selborne existed largely only on paper.

The Selborne branch began to grow again after the war with the primary aim of amenity enhancement for local residents, although celebration of Gilbert White was retained as a third aim. It finally severed any remaining links with the Selborne Society in 1974 to become a separate organisation, the Selborne Association.

The Middlesex (Ealing) branch retained the name of the Society as well as its archives. After Webb's death in 1952 the Selborne Society Council was re-formed, with T L Bartlett (previously honorary librarian) as Chairman and the Revd Dennis Paterson as secretary. Work focused on the management of Perivale Wood (which was in a parlous state) and on building the membership of the Ealing branch which in 1957 recorded a mere 25 members. In March 1958 (with Major G A Cattley as secretary) the first issue of the renamed Selborne Magazine restated the objects of the Society's aims (interestingly, asserting conservation as a priority over natural history along the lines of the motion proposed by E A Martin more than half a century previously) as:

*"To perpetuate the memory of Gilbert White*

*To protect places of interest and natural beauty*

*To conserve such wild birds, animals, and plants as are harmless, beautiful, and rare*

*To encourage the study of Natural History"*<sup>56</sup>.

Subsequent growth was slow, but steady and received a boost in 1973 when a small group of members led by Pearl Small as Chairman and Roy Hall as Secretary, took up the reins and gave the Society new direction focused on its major asset, Perivale Wood. In

this they were assisted by others who had committed a good part of their lives to the Wood, (including John Alden who for many years ran educational visits to the wood and liaised with local schools) as well as by an influx of 'young blood' (most particularly Peter Edwards who with Kevin Roberts began a programme of scientific monitoring). These individuals combined expertise in natural history, knowledge of conservation, and a commitment to education in equal measure. In 1974 the wood was declared a statutory Local Nature Reserve under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. This was a designation rarely used until the late 1980s until which Perivale Wood was one of only two such in London, the other being Old Park Wood in Ruislip (which the Society had earlier tried unsuccessfully to acquire as its second Reserve).

In this way, thirty years ago (and seventy years after the turbulent events of 1904) the Selborne Society appeared at last to find a relatively stable 'ecological niche', which it retains today as a independent local natural history society with a small but diverse and active membership, with strong links with the local community, its links with the past maintained by its ongoing stewardship of a 'time capsule' oasis of wildlife in suburban London, Perivale Wood, Britain's first nature reserve.

The last reminder of the Selborne Society's previous glories (and of its earlier key role in conservation) was the celebration of the Society's centenary in 1985. This was marked by the Post Office with the issue of a set of 5 stamps to mark the joint centenaries of the Selborne Society and of the Charter of the Royal Entomological Society<sup>57</sup>. Arguments within the Selborne Society continue, of course, but in general relate to matters of local concern, are friendly in the main, and where they do reflect wider conservation issues, they rarely cause contention (or attract interest) beyond the perimeter fence of the Reserve.

If the 1939-45 War nearly finished the Selborne Society, for the RSPB, it provided a much-needed boost that laid the basis for its post-war growth. The RSPB's reported membership in 1942 was 3,558, only slightly less than at the start of the War; it seems likely that there was a general growth of war-time interest in birds fostered in part by the activities of Peter Scott and Viscount Alanbrooke. It emerged from the War with a membership (in 1946) of around 6,000

which, as Samstag says, "*suggests that a large number joined or rejoined to celebrate peace*"<sup>2</sup>.

From 1963, under Peter Conder as secretary, modernisation of the RSPB's internal structures established a sound organisational and financial footing for steady future growth. By 1965, membership was almost 30,00 and it had grown to almost 7,000 by 1970. Interestingly, although the 'reborn' Selborne Society had a membership of less than 5% of this, 1970 also saw a symbolic link between the two organisations when Robert Dougall, the BBC television newsreader was elected president of the RSPB (of which he had been a member for 20 years). Dougall was born in Croydon in 1913 and seems likely to have become interested in birds in the 1920s when he attended Whitgift School, which at that time had a very active Selborne Society branch. Today the overlap in membership continues to the extent that the majority of members of the Selborne Society would consider themselves supporters, if not members of the RSPB. However it is likely that relatively few members of the RSPB have ever heard of their predecessor, the Selborne Society!

In the mid 1970s the RSPB's membership took off. In part, this was due to 'external' factors, including a more affluent and mobile population, and one increasingly interested in environmental issues. In this the RSPB's growth parallels that of The National Trust and is a reflection of broad social changes as well as of the RSPB's own endeavours. The RSPB ran an excellent campaign together with the British trust for Ornithology against organochlorine insecticides and the havoc that they (and other intensive farming practices) were wreaking on British bird populations. This was coupled with good internal administration and the ability to capitalise on (and promote) public awareness, in particular through excellent relations with the media.

By 1978, membership had topped 250,000. A decade later, by the time of its own centenary in 1989 it had doubled to 500,000. It is now well over a million. Not only is the RSPB a dominant force in British conservation, it has also had a profound international impact, both through direct action in bird conservation overseas and through the promotion of international legislation (the RSPB can claim the major credit for the promotion of two of the most significant European legislative achievements, namely the Birds and Habitats directives). Its public face is characterised by shrewd political savvy

and careful attention to its public image. For example, the organisation is careful not to associate itself with any cause that cannot be directly related to the cause of nature conservation. It also seems anxious to downplay its earlier aristocratic associations. One will search its publications, press releases and public presentations in vain for any celebration of its 'Royal' status (there is much on the centenary of the establishment of the RSPB in Scotland, but nothing on its 1904 Charter).

Fig 5. The Selborne Society's Centenary Cover (1985)



Reproduced courtesy of Rae and Roy Hall.

## 5. Conclusion

Voluntary organisations, like the individuals of which they are comprised, are products of their time and help to shape their times. Archives help us to understand the present, as well as the past. Both our societies were formed in the late Victorian context of an emerging awareness of the need for conservation, particularly of birds. This was fed by a number of streams but in particular by natural history and by humanitarian concern for animal welfare. Although complementary these were two disparate elements and not easy bedfellows.

The (R)SPB was from its earliest days pre-eminently (and despite or perhaps because of the eminence of some of those who lent their names to it) a political (and in many ways populist) campaigning organisation that only later in its development (and reluctantly) accreted to itself the scientific and land managing element aspects which are key elements of its activities today. Its forerunner, the Selborne Society focused precisely on those latter elements; any campaigning was low key (it preferred to claim influence behind the scenes) and its style was above any appeal to populist sentiment.

If there was a single distinguishing feature of the two societies it was, at least in the early period, the broad but sometimes bumbling focus of the Selborne Society against the single mindedness of the (R)SPB. Today the Selborne Society is a small local natural history society, 'amateur' in the true and best sense of the word. The RSPB is a highly professional national membership organisation whose influence extends well beyond the UK conservation scene.

The contrasts today between the Selborne Society and the RSPB could not be greater. The RSPB has over a million members in numerous branches: the Selborne Society less than a thousand, in just one. The RSPB is a highly efficient corporation with regional offices, running some 140 reserves covering over 111,500 ha, attracting more than 1m visitors per year. The Selborne Society has just one reserve, some 11 ha in extent, which is open to the public on just one day per year, attracting about a thousand visitors. The



RSPB employs more than 1,000 full, part-time and contract staff and attracts many more volunteer days besides; the Selborne Society has no paid employees, and survives on the dedication and commitment of a handful of committee members. The RSPB has enormous political influence well beyond the UK and Europe (and has played a leading role in helping to chart European and international legislation), and is perhaps the most important national NGO in world conservation policy. The days when the Selborne Society could claim to influence national affairs are well in the past. Even at a local level it eschews political involvement and prefers to concentrate on what it does best; managing a wood and its wildlife; and providing opportunity for its members and the local community to engage with natural history in its own small bit of suburban London. What it did become, and is today, is a warm and welcoming local voluntary society comprised of an exceptional range of individuals, focused on practical conservation and nature education in its most precious asset, Perivale Wood.

What set these two sister organisations on their twin paths was not accident, though the personalities of individuals played a distinct part, but their differing 'sense of the times' and clarity of purpose. The Selborne Society reflected its times; the RSPB was clear from the outset that it needed to change them, albeit within a limited frame. The Selborne Society tried it all – campaigning, land ownership, education, a social club, a scientific/ learned society, even an employment agency and achieved none of them at a national level. Ironically, its younger cousin, the RSPB succeeded in all of these (with the exception of the last), though largely as accretions to its primary purpose.

In his *Nature Conservation in Britain* (1969, the 49<sup>th</sup> volume in the Collins *New Naturalist* series), Sir Dudley Stamp celebrated the way that the new science of nature conservation had consigned "*the old naturalist, who was basically a collector of dead specimens*" to the dustbin of history<sup>58 p67</sup>. In his update of Stamp's work (2002, volume 91 in the series) Peter Marren challenges the emergence of institutionalised corporate, top-down policy-led conservation (he also claims that "*there is also a dangerous popular perception that wildlife means birds*"<sup>59 p314</sup>). He declares that "*Perhaps the time has come to release field-based natural history from the belly of the conservation industry, where it has been confined these past 30 years... we should affirm that there is more to nature than nature*

*conservation*"<sup>59 p316</sup>. Local natural history societies such as the Selborne Society are doing just that.

In 2004, both organisations, the Selborne Society and the RSPB survive as healthy, vigorous, and thriving – but very different, indeed, unique – organisations. Together, they stand at either extreme of an extraordinary range of voluntary conservation bodies that is such a strength of the UK conservation scene today.

## References

1. Blackmore, M., *The Selborne Society: Its Origin and History*. 1985, London: The Selborne Society.
2. Samstag, T., *For Love of Birds. The story of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds 1889-1988*. 1988, Sandy, Beds: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.
3. Morris, R.F.O., *A History of British Birds*. 1857, London: John C Nimmo.
4. Allen, D.E., *The Naturalist in Britain: A Social History*. 1976, London: Allen Lane.
5. Sheail, J., *Nature in Trust: The History of Nature Conservation in Britain*. 1976, London & Glasgow: Blackie.
6. Anon (Mrs F Lemon), "The Story of Bird Protection Part III". *Bird Notes and News*, Autumn Sept 29 1910. **IV** (3): p. 25-36.
7. Doughty, R.W., *Feather Fashions and Bird Preservation. A Study in Nature Protection*. 1975, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
8. Musgrave, G.A., in *The Times*. 1885. p. 6.
9. Anon (Mrs F Lemon), "The Story of Bird Protection IV". *Bird Notes and News*, Winter, Dec 20 1910. **IV** (4): p. 37-39.
10. Selborne Society, *Selborne Magazine*, 1888. (5): p. 8-9.
11. Morris, F.O., in *The Times*. 1885. p. 14 col 6.
12. Selborne Society, *Selborne Magazine*, 1889. **II** (1).
13. Evans, D.E., *A History of Nature Conservation in Britain*. 2nd ed. 1997, London: Routledge.
14. Society for the Protection of Birds, "Report". 1891, London: Society for the Protection of Birds.
15. Lemon, M.F., "History of the Society". *Bird Notes and News*, April 1903. **1** (1).
16. Selborne Society, *Nature Notes*, 1891. **II** (16).
17. Selborne Society, *Nature Notes*, 1891. **II** (23-4).
18. Society for the Protection of Birds, "Report". 1893, London: Society for the Protection of Birds.
19. Society for the Protection of Birds, *Bird Notes and News*, 1903. **1** (1).
20. Selborne Society, *Nature Notes*, 1904. **XV** (173).
21. Society for the Protection of Birds, *Bird Notes and News*, 1904. (8).
22. Turner, E.S., *All Heaven in a Rage*. 1964, London: Michael Joseph.
23. Law, P., "Misunderstanding the past, misleading the present". *Ecos*, 1997. **18** (3/4): p. 9-15.
24. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, "21st Annual Report". 1913.

25. Selborne Society, *Selborne Society Letters*, 1887. (1).
26. Selborne Society, "Minutes of Council", in *Selborne Society Minutes of Council 1912-1918*. 1913.
27. in *The Times*. 1913. p. 6.
28. Clapp, B.W., *An Environmental History of Britain Since the Industrial Revolution*. 1994, London: Longman.
29. Rawnsley, H.D., "The National Trust, Its Work and Needs". *Nature Notes*, 1896. **VII** (81): p. 190-191.
30. Society for the Protection of Birds, "Report". 1894, London: Society for the Protection of Birds.
31. Society for the Protection of Birds, "Ninth Annual Report". 1899, London: Society for the Protection of Birds.
32. Selborne Society, "Annual Meeting and Conversazione". *Nature Notes*, 1900. **XI** (126): p. 101-110.
33. Society for the Protection of Birds, "Eighth Annual Report". 1898, London: Society for the Protection of Birds.
34. Selborne Society, "Notes and News". *Nature Notes*, 1905. **XVI** (185).
35. Anon (Mrs F Lemon), "The Story of Bird Protection VIII". *Bird Notes and News*, Winter, Dec 21 1911. **VI** (8): p. 85-87.
36. Buxton, D., "Letter", in *Selborne Society, Minute Book 1907-1911*. 1906.
37. Whiting, J.E., "Letter to Dudley W Buxton Esq", in *Selborne Society, Minute Book 1907-1911*. 1906.
38. Selborne Society. "Minutes of Council Meeting". in *Minute Book 1907-1911*. 1907. 20 Hanover Square, London: Selborne Society.
39. Worster, D., *Nature's Economy: a history of ecological ideas*. 1985, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
40. Selborne Society, "Sixteenth Annual Report 1901-1902". 1902, London: Selborne Society.
41. Kean, H., "The Feminist and Socialist Response to Vivisection". *History Workshop Journal*, Autumn 1995. **40**: p. 16-38.
42. Lowe, P.D., "Values and institutions in the history of British nature conservation", in *Conservation in Perspective*, A. Warren and F.B. Goldsmith, Editors. 1983, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. p. 329-352.
43. Selborne Society, "Annual Meeting and Conversazione". *Nature Notes*, 1904. **XV** (175): p. 121-142.
44. Society for the Protection of Birds, *Bird Notes and News*, 1904. (6).
45. Selborne Society, "Selborniana". *Nature Notes*, 1904. **XV** (179).
46. Selborne Society, "Objects of the Society". *Nature Notes*, 1904. **XV** (179): p. 221.
47. Selborne Society, *Nature Notes*, 1904. **XV** (177).

48. Selborne Society, "Minutes of Council", in *Selborne Society Minutes of Council 1912-1918*. 1914.
49. Buckland, J., "Letter to Chair of the Council, Selborne Society", in *Selborne Society, Minute Book 1907-1911*. 1910.
50. Buxton, D., "Letter to James Buckland Esq", in *Selborne Society, Minute Book 1907-1911*. 1910.
51. Society for the Protection of Birds, "Bird Protectors vs Plume Traders". *Bird Notes and News*, September 1913. **V** (7): p. 97-112.
52. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, "Minutes of Council". 1913.
53. Hammond, N., "Conservation and sister organisations: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds", in *Enjoying Ornithology: a celebration of fifty years of The British Trust for Ornithology, 1933 - 1983*, R. Hickling, Editor. 1983: T & A D Poyser. p. 158-164.
54. Nicholson, M., *Birds in England: An Account of the State of our Bird-life and a Criticism of Bird Protection*. 1926, London: Chapman & Hall.
55. Micklewright, S., "The Voluntary Movement", in *Conservation in Progress*, F.B. Goldsmith and A. Warren, Editors. 1993, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. p. 321-334.
56. Selborne Society, *Selborne Magazine*, 1958. **LXX** (1).
57. "Insect Beauties", in *The Times*. 1985. p. 4 Col E.
58. Stamp, S.L.D., *Nature Conservation in Britain*. New Naturalist. Vol. 49. 1969, London: Collins.
59. Marren, P., *Nature Conservation - A review of the conservation of wildlife in Britain 1950-2001*. New Naturalist. Vol. 91. 2002, London: Harper Collins.