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THE HISTORY OF THE MAPLES' BIRD COLLECTION AT SPALDING

The Spalding Gentlemen's Society's collection of birds and eggs is believed to have been based on the collection of Thomas J. H. Brogden of Spalding, (born 1863, died 1899). In the "Lincolnshire Free Press" of 18th April, 1899 there appeared the notice of the sale of the late Mr. Brogden's effects including "the valuable library of books, and collection of stuffed birds and eggs. The latter was probably one of the finest collections of British birds eggs ever collected in the British Isles by an amateur, including about 236 varieties. The stuffed birds were also a remarkably fine lot". The press report records that the books sold well, "but for the collection of birds and birds' eggs very little was offered, and they were unsold. A proposal has been made that they be purchased for Ayscoughfee Hall, as a nucleus of a museum".

For some time Brogden, a solicitor in Spalding, was Hon. Secretary of Spalding Gentlemen's Society. It is believed that his collection was acquired by Ashley Kilshaw Maples, a fellow ornithologist and also a solicitor in Spalding, (born 1868, died 1950). Maples was elected Hon. Secretary of the Society in 1899 and continued to occupy the post until 1935. From 1930 to the time of his death he was President of the Society. It is known that Maples had a fine collection of stuffed birds and eggs at his home prior to the formation of a Bird Museum in Spalding. Forays along the Norfolk coast resulted in considerable additions to the collection.

On 27th January 1927 the Society accepted transfer of part of the buildings of the former Spalding Mechanics Institute, situated in Red Lion Street, Spalding. A Deed of Trust dated 2nd October 1936 relates that the original portion of the Institute was transferred to the Society, together with an adjoining portion, which had been purchased by Maples in order to extend his private bird museum in 1934. According to the local press "the collection of birds in the Mechanics Institute was opened for public inspection by Mr. A. K. Maples (Secretary of Spalding Gentlemen's Society)" on 23rd June 1931. Approximately 2000 specimens were displayed. On 23rd February 1934 Maples presented his collection to the Society. On that date he also asked the Society to appoint a small committee to look after the building and the collection. Messrs. J. W. Hayes, B. Smalley, C. H. Naylor and J. F. Alexander were appointed. The Society's minutes record that the building was first opened to the general public as the Society's Bird Museum on 25th October 1934, and that "several hundred people passed through; the admission was free".

There is a lack of information for the period from 1936 to 1946, except for the occasional reference to election of members of the Society to serve on the sub committee as the original members died. The Bird

Museum was closed throughout the war years (1939-45) and was reopened for public viewing on 18th July 1946. The local press records that, as in former years, Mr. Maples acted both as curator and guide to all visiting parties.

At a meeting of the Council of the Society on 4th October 1946 Maples reported on "a magnificent gift of ornithological specimens, which he had received from Lord Lilford, and which he proposed to hand over to the Society for the Bird Museum where they would be known as "The Lilford Collection". Due to lack of space it was proposed that the Society should purchase additional premises adjoining the Bird Museum, however it was reported a year later that negotiations had proved fruitless. For some considerable time the Lilford Collection was stored at Maples' home. Maples continued to acquire additions for the collection, and in July 1947 some 140 cases were obtained from the late Lord Lilford's collection. It is understood that during this period Maples was a close friend of Mr. Moody, the curator of Lilford's aviaries. Regrettably there is no record in the Society's archives of the contents of the various cases acquired in 1946 and 1947.

From about 1934, and possibly earlier, specimens acquired by shooting or from other collections were mounted by Ben Waltham, a self-taught taxidermist. One press account relates that Waltham mounted over 2500 specimens for Maples during the first 17 years of his employment. Ben Waltham continued to work as taxidermist for the Society after the death of Ashley Maples, and retired in 1969.

After Maples died in February 1950 it became necessary for the Bird Museum sub committee to re-organise itself. This it did under the Chairmanship of A. H. Smith supported by Messrs. Alexander and Smalley, (members of the 1934 committee) together with Messrs. D. Frost and J. A. Prentice. Mr. George Bailey, the Society's Secretary acted "ex Officio" as secretary for the new Bird Museum Committee. The first motion passed was that Ben Waltham should continue as taxidermist for the rate of 2/6 per hour!

In May 1950 Major Stuart Maples of Salisbury donated his collection containing two cabinets of skins, three of eggs and four loose drawers of assorted skins and eggs, the collection to be transported from Salisbury to Spalding by the Society. Resulting from this large donation, and due to the problems presented by the Lilford collection, part of which was still in store, the Council of the Society agreed to purchase Mr. Collier's premises next to the Bird Museum as soon as possible. Apparently this purchase was never executed, and on 13th December 1950 arrangements were made to obtain the use of a room in Elsom's warehouse in Albion Street (formerly Lee & Green's premises), for the storage of all the material which could not be accommodated in the Bird Museum. Mr. Raymond Hastings, a member of the Society's

Council was asked to approach the Urban District Council, of which he was Clerk, to ascertain if some of the birds could be put on display in Ayscoughfee Hall. By March 1951 Messrs. Smith and Frost had brought the Salisbury collection to Spalding and this collection of skins and eggs was placed in store in Elsom's Warehouse. In September 1951 the Urban District Council agreed to accept the British birds for display, and by August 1952 all the British material had been catalogued by Mr. Edward Flaxman, junior, and reference charts and sketches prepared by B. Smalley.

The selected cases of birds, containing approximately 850 specimens, were moved into Ayscoughfee Hall during 1952 and on 6th October were inspected by members of the Bird Museum Sub-Committee. Thus after a period of 53 years the proposal put forward at the Brogden sale in 1899 became a reality. On 28th October a Joint Committee was formed consisting of members of the Urban District Council and the Society; Flaxman was elected Chairman and Smith became Secretary of the new committee. The collection, formally known as "The Ashley Maples' Collection of British Birds" was officially opened on 5th February 1953 by F. T. Baker, Curator and Deputy Director of the City and County Museum, Lincoln.

In 1954 the collection of ornithological books and the eggs were moved from the Albion Street store to Red Lion Street where space had become available in the old Bird Museum following transfer of most of the British birds to Ayscoughfee. In that year the old museum was opened again to the public to show the collection of foreign birds and Maples' small collection of British mammals. Also in 1954 the Trustees of the late William Dent (a former member of the Society) donated "a fine collection of eggs housed in a beautiful cabinet".

Due to problems of maintenance connected with the property, the Society's officers made extensive enquiries during the next five years, in an attempt to dispose by sale or loan to museums all of the specimens with the exception of the collection at Ayscoughfee. In 1959 several duplicate cases of British birds and a selection of skins were loaned to the Gibraltar Point Bird Observatory. The ornithological books were transferred to the Society's main museum in Broad Street, 'by wheel-barrow', and on 14th September 1960 all the remaining duplicates of the British birds, the study collection of 550 skins (mostly of British species), the eggs and the foreign birds were transferred to Leicester Museum, initially for a loan period of ten years. However, due to lack of suitable quarters in Spalding this loan period became considerably extended.

In January 1956 Smith resigned as Secretary of the Bird Museum Committee and E. W. Flaxman became the first formally elected Hon. Curator of Birds. He, in turn, was succeeded in May 1960 by

D. Frost the present Curator of Birds.

In 1962 the cases at Sycoughfee were completely relabelled, and in 1963, following a check of the exhibits a missing waxwing was replaced. Ashley Maples' friend and taxidermist, Ben Waltham, retired in 1969, after being associated with the collection for at least 35 years, and was succeeded by J. Brannan, a local naturalists. In 1969-70 it became necessary once more to relabel the cases due to vandalism.

In May 1970 the Curator and Taxidermist, in association with South Lincolnshire Nature Reserves Limited, staged the first Tuliptime Exhibition, supported by a display relating to fenland wildfowling. Exhibitions in 1973 and 1974 were supported by the R. S. P. B. and the Wildfowl Trust, together with an excellent display of ornithological photographs taken by S. Bayliss Smith. Also in 1974 the collection of birds was supplemented by loan, from Leicestershire Museums Service, of the Hurst Collection of British Birds. A further Tuliptime display in 1975 was supported by the Nature Conservancy Council and S. Bayliss Smith's photographs. It was during this period of annual exhibitions that P. Moore, the District Council's Parks Superintendent became involved in assisting with the curation of the collection at Ayscoughfee. Brannan resigned as taxidermist in 1976.

Once more, in 1976, part of the bird collection was placed in store, this time as a result of renovations and repairs to the building. Also, several of the cases were in need of attention due to damage from children and wood-worm. The Society was fortunate when, in 1978, the South Holland District Council decided to make more use of Ayscoughfee Hall for museum purposes, and began to re-organise the bird collection. The Council was also able to obtain the services of Ian Holmes, a local professional taxidermist, for several months on a full-time basis to re-groom and disinfect the specimens and remount those that had been removed from worm-eaten cases. Early in 1979 some of the loan items were withdrawn from the Leicestershire Museums Service in order to replace missing items.

Very little is known about the origins of most of the specimens in the Ayscoughfee collection, except that many came from the Lilford donations. Research is in hand to obtain more information on the contents of the early Brogden collection and on items not obtained from other collections. Probably the most interesting specimens so far identified include

Two male long-tailed ducks, believed ex Brogden, and shot in the R. Welland estuary in December 1895,
One adult snow goose, one of three shot at Wexford
November 1871.

Three black-winged stilts; shot by Atkins,
Cowbit near Spalding, no date.
Three Pallas' sand-grouse; three of several
taken by Brogden in S. Lincs in 1888,
& a taxidermist's model of a Great Auk.

The writer would be glad to hear from anyone having any information relating to the original Lilford collections. It is believed that many of the species may have been bred in captivity, in particular the birds of prey and the wildfowl. It is known that some were obtained from Rosenburg, London, and that a few were shot in Portugal and the south of France.

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BIRMINGHAM NATURE CENTRE

The Natural History Section of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is famed for its fine life-size model of the carnivorous dinosaur Tyrannosaurus rex, complete with sound effects. A distance of two miles from the Museum on the edge of Cannon Hill park you can see by way of contrast another side of the department's enterprise in the shape of the Birmingham Nature Centre.

In 1972 Birmingham Zoo, which was managed by an investment company, closed down, and an opportunity arose for the City Council who owned the four acre site, to develop it as some form of leisure garden. It was due to a far-sighted leisure services committee inspired by the knowledge and fertile imagination of Peter Hanney, late Keeper of Natural History, that a Nature Centre was proposed to replace the zoo. During 1973 plans were drawn up for a Nature Centre, which would be a free public amenity aimed at enabling the people of Birmingham in particular to gain some knowledge and enjoyment from nature and the countryside. The ideas were both novel and realistic, and were widely acceptable to the Director of Museums, the General Manager of Parks, and the Leisure Services Committee, each of whom was to play a significant part in realising this ambitious project. A leisure service's sub-committee working party was soon formed to steer a course for the Centre, and included councillors with a genuine concern for the success of this new venture.