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CELEBRATING MOTHER'S CENTENARY IN DONCASTER

On the evening of 9th February 1880, John Maw Kirk, Doncaster's Chief Librarian, Fred Milner, a local artist and Matthew Henry Stiles, the leading pharmaceutical chemist in the town, met at Kirk's house to discuss the formation of a microscopical society. A month later, when they held the first official meeting under the title of Doncaster Microscopical Society, they had already attracted a membership of about 30 enthusiasts.

From its inception the society had an illustrious membership and as time progressed and changes of emphasis or fashions occurred, so the organisation changed its name. Within a matter of months it became the Doncaster Microscopical and General Scientific Society, as a concession to those within its ranks who were not microscopists, and before the close of the century even the word 'Microscopical' was dropped from the title. By then Kirk had passed on and Milner had left the district, but the other founder member Stiles remained as a leading figure throughout the society's half century; indeed he wrote a history of the society to mark the occasion. It was not until the early 1960s that fashion dictated the final name change to Doncaster Naturalists Society.

Although quite a vigorous society throughout much of its hundred years it has never excelled the splendour of its first few decades. The 1880s and 90s were inspiring times for the membership included several savants, including J. Mitchell Wilson the area M.O.H., the prominent locomotive engineers John Shotton and Patrick Stirling, many local solicitors, civil engineers, architects, ministers of religion, private school teachers, professional photographers etc.. But as specialisation became increasingly imperative, new daughter societies formed, like the Doncaster Camera Club in 1894, and the Doncaster Engineering Society during the First World War.

During that period, members of the society carried out some notable studies and some excellent scientific careers were started under the influence of its members. A notable example of the latter was Thomas Hill Easterfield who, as a teenager in the society in the 1880s carried out a masterly study of the Boulder Clay in a local brickpit, following this up a few years later with a remarkable study of the chemistry of river pollution, under the guidance of Mitchell Wilson. A few years later, after a distinguished period at Cambridge he was appointed Professor of Natural Sciences at Victoria University in New Zealand, finally becoming Director of the Cawthorn Institute there. He was in the forefront of biochemical research.

Another person to receive great help through the society with its strong geological interest at that time, was William Sawney Bisat who along with his close friend and advisor in the Doncaster Society, Henry Culpin, was to achieve such distinction in his studies in Carboniferous stratigraphy.

Strangely enough one of the major influences on Bisat, apart from Culpin, was George Grace; "strangely" because he was only in Doncaster for a very short time where he was Principal of the Technical School, but it was just at the time that Bisat was a pupil there. Grace regarded Bisat as one of his star pupils long before the latter had made his reputation. Throughout life Bisat acknowledged his indebtedness to Grace.

Doncaster in the late 19th century lacked a museum and some felt this was scandalous in a modern town. In fact, a century earlier, Doncaster possessed a museum, albeit a private one run by William Beilby. In the 1830s, when the town's population was only 10,000, there were three; the Doncaster Lyceum, and two private museums run by John White and the famous taxidermist Hugh Reid. After Reid's museum closed in the 1850s, Doncaster had been without one, despite the persistent campaigning of Lepidopterist John Riley Hawley, a very highly respected Doncaster figure who had been successful in having a Free Library established in mid century after many years of pressure.

Riley was never to see his dream realised but his campaign was perpetuated by Fred Milner who, unlike Riley, outlived the Doncaster Philosophical Society which operated from 1865 to 1874, and carried the flag into the Donaster Microscopical Society. Here the seed landed on fertile ground, being eagerly taken up by two political radicals whose love of oratory was perhaps exceeded by their devotion to science, namely Dr. Herbert Henry Corbett and Samuel Edgar. Both well versed in the affairs of local government as Labour councillors in local wards, these men were able to carry Riley's dream to reality. Commencing in 1896 they were elected to negotiate with the Doncaster Corporation on behalf of the society along with Stiles, Mitchell Wilson and others, and in 1900 a room was set apart in the Guild Hall as a museum. When in 1908 larger premises at Beechfield House became available, the museum was greatly expanded and in June 1909 Corbett was asked to officiate as Honorary Curator, a request which he happily accepted.

Corbett was one of those rare individuals who rapidly achieved note in whatever field he chose to work. As far as local natural history studies were concerned he concentrated on those fields which were not covered by others. For a time when geology was on the wane in the society he leapt into this subject and achieved great distinction. This appears to have resulted in wider enthusiasm and he then appeared to concentrate on botany. Although he died in 1921 there are those still living in Doncaster who remember him with great affection for his unbounded enthusiasm and companionship.

Corbett's curatorial duties only lasted until September 1911 when the first full-time professional curator, E. Cornish Senior was appointed. The impersonal face of bureaucracy caused Corbett some annoyance at the time of the changeover, but he and his society colleagues continued to take an interest in their museum, and this happy relationship between museum and society remains to this day.

So the mother of Doncaster Museum is just 100 years old and society and museum are joined in the centenary celebrations. One function is an exhibition lasting a few days only, but the other will provide a more lasting momento. A booklet, under preparation, reviews the growth of science in the Doncaster area since Tudor times. Research for this publication has been quite multidisciplinary and has provided innumerable ideas for museum displays; certainly enough to occupy the child until its centenary in 2,000.

P. Skidmore
Doncaster Museum.

CONFESSIONS OF A BALD EAGLE !

During January 1979 Chris Devlin of Doncaster Museum's natural history staff designed and constructed a spectacular display featuring some of the world's larger birds of prey. The centre piece of this avian extravaganza is a rather splendid American Bald Eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus), mounted in what is better described as a heraldic rather than a naturalistic pose.

The origin and history of this prize specimen is something of an enigma, there being no label, and as far as I can see, no specific mention of it in the museum's accession registers. Long serving members of staff can only remember that during the late 1950s or early 60s it had been on display in a glazed mahogany cabinet (now destroyed) in Doncaster Museum's former premises at Beechfield House, and was probably therefore part of the Sir William B. Cooke collection, which formed the nucleus of the mounted bird exhibits - though I can find no conclusive proof of this.

In re-displaying the eagle its base had to be removed, giving an opportunity to search for any clues as to the bird's past. There were no taxidermists labels or inscriptions of any kind, though a damaged corner which revealed that the modeller had used newspaper in its construction gave promise of dates and possible clues as to the provenance of the taxidermist if not the bird.