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**Informal adult education between the wars: the curious case of the Selbourne Lecture Bureau**

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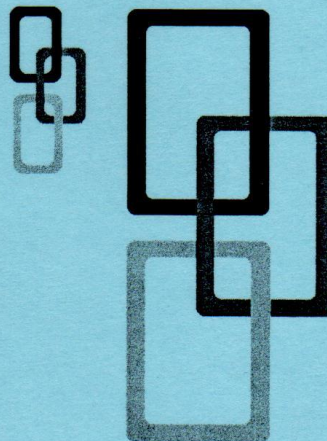


Faculty of Continuing Education

**Richard Clarke**

# Informal Adult Education between the Wars

## The curious case of the Selborne Lecture Bureau



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## **The curious case of The Selborne Lecture Bureau**

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### **Abstract**

The Selborne Society, established in 1885, was Britain's first national conservation organisation, dedicated to the *preservation of birds, plants and pleasant places*. It flourished in the period prior to 1914, but declined thereafter and almost vanished in the years following 1945, to be revived as a small local natural history society in Ealing, West London. Its decline can be attributed to two related causes; its eclipse by the (Royal) Society for the Protection of Birds (which it helped form) and its own focus on adult education as the principal vehicle for achieving its ends.

Between 1919 and 1939 the Society functioned as a national lecture bureau, extending its subject coverage beyond natural history to science, travel and exploration, and antiquarianism. At its height (between 1927–1929) when it acted as agent for the Empire Marketing Board, its annual programme ran to between 1,200 and 1,400 lectures, comparable to the then programmes of the Workers' Educational Association, or of the university Extension movement; the Society's handbook (in which lecturers paid to advertise their biographies and offerings) ran to over 60 pages.

The story of the Selborne Lecture Bureau, the nature of its provision, and the relation of its officers with others (such as those active in its Croydon branch) illuminates a hitherto neglected aspect of adult education between the Wars, which is often presented primarily as the narrative of the

institutionalisation (in the 1944 Education Act) of university extension and voluntary sector workers' self education.

Examination of the rise and fall of the Selborne Society provides a window on a quite separate, parallel stream – gendered, paternalist and essentially conservative in outlook. Education was first seen, if not as a panacea, then at least as preferable to environmental and social action; this was in direct conflict to the principles and campaigning policies of the early RSPB (for which education was a means, rather than an end in itself). This led the Selborne Society into opportunist alliances, most particularly with the Board of Trade, which frustrated the passing of conservation legislation for more than a decade.

Ultimately, as a lecture agency, the Selborne Society became, wittingly or unwittingly, part of an opposition to the movement for social change that characterised the inter-War period. In this, the Selborne Society anticipated what remains today a strong current in environmental education and in lifelong learning.

## Acknowledgements

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# 1. Introduction; adult education between the Wars

The story of British adult education between 1918 - 1939 tends to be told in terms of the rise of university extra-mural provision, including university 'extension', the development of the tutorial classes movement and of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA, its vehicle), and the push for state provision, most particularly by bodies such as the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (formed in 1921 as the British Institute of Adult Education). The period is often presented as a prelude to the institutionalisation of adult learning in the 1944 Education Act (addressed, significantly, to "the people of England and Wales", not just to their children), which laid the basis for local education authority provision and for state funding to the 'Responsible Bodies' of the university and voluntary sector <sup>1</sup>. Moreover, this narrative tends to focus on the movement 'from below' including the transformation of mechanics' institutes (the London Mechanics - later 'Birkbeck' - Institution became a College of the University in 1920), the development of the Labour College movement, the cooperative societies, the working men's clubs and religious organisations <sup>2</sup>.

Within this narrative, it is sometimes recognised that many other organisations outside what Kelly <sup>3</sup> calls the 'charmed circle' of approved associations also had an important role to play but the organisations usually mentioned are generally held to consist of those consonant with the 'traditions' of liberal adult education, with its nineteenth century roots in *"trades unions, Friendly Societies, Cooperative Societies, Mechanics Institutes, Sunday schools, Methodist chapels, and all the various influences that help keep the soul alive in a population living*

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<sup>1</sup> For a considerable period from 1928 <sup>1</sup> until the late 1980s, the (then) Extra Mural Department of London University (now Birkbeck's Faculty of Continuing Education) existed as two distinct 'Responsible Bodies' – the Tutorial Classes section (working as a 'Joint Committee' with the WEA) and the Extension Section (working with local authorities), each with their own staff, and occupying separate accommodation.

*under conditions that degrade the mind”*<sup>4: 170</sup>. Where the significance of other streams (for example, that of scientific and learned societies) is acknowledged this is usually in passing and in parenthesis. Characterised – then<sup>5</sup> as now<sup>6</sup> as ‘auxiliaries’ or even the ‘remoter provinces’<sup>2: 50</sup> of adult education, the significance of such bodies is not always acknowledged.

Self evidently however, the links between ‘political’ and the ‘scientific’ currents in the history of adult education are close and organic (Birkbeck was, after all, founded to promulgate an understanding of the natural as well as economic sciences amongst working people). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, local scientific, literary and philosophical institutes (some of which still exist) in some senses occupied the mid-ground between national scientific societies and working class or community-based education. They continued, particularly in the inter-War period and alongside the university extension and tutorial movement, to play an important role.

The story of the Selborne Society is an interesting one, in part because it did not start off (neither did it end up) as an educational organisation. The Society’s ‘Lecture Bureau Period’ period between the first and second World Wars has not to date been examined, possibly because to historians of conservation it is regarded (as it was to many contemporary members of the Society) as an unfortunate and regrettable deviation from the Society’s initial purpose<sup>2</sup>, possibly because its particular brand of ‘recreational’ learning through single lectures has (probably rightly) been seen as frivolous alongside ‘mainstream’ provision of the period and because in retrospect, its impact on the latter was minimal. However the Society’s provision over this period

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<sup>2</sup> The story of the pre 1914 origins of the Selborne Society as Britain’s first national conservation organisation has been told (in relation to the eclipse by its younger offspring or sibling, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), on the occasion of the centenary in 2004 of the latter’s Royal Charter<sup>7</sup>. The story of the Selborne Society’s post 1945 collapse and revival as a small local conservation society in west London is summarised in an earlier pamphlet produced for the Society’s own centenary in 1985<sup>8</sup>.



(for which its archive material is fullest <sup>3</sup>) was a significant component of inter-War adult education.

At its peak, however, in 1927–1929 (when the society acted as agent for the Empire Marketing Board) it offered between 1,200 and 1,400 lectures each year, rivalling (in size if not in influence) bodies such as the Workers Educational Association and the developing university extra-mural provision of the (Oxford) tutorial class and (Cambridge) extension movement<sup>4</sup>. It fulfilled a role which was later taken over by other organisations, including natural history (and other) societies as well as by the WEA itself, as the latter grew to become an important provider of ‘leisure learning’ for the middle classes.

An examination of the Society’s provision also emphasises a neglected current of adult education; namely ‘recreational’ lectures as a consumer product, embodying false consciousness and reinforcing social norms, which contrasts with the conventional narrative of socially engaged adult learning ‘from below’. Both streams have today become marginalized as a consequence of an increasing emphasis on ‘outcomes’ and (vocational) credentials.

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<sup>3</sup> The Society’s Council minutes, reports, pamphlets and correspondence are mainly to be found in the archives of the Linnean Society in London. In addition, a virtually complete set of the Selborne Society’s journals (from the first (1887) issue of the Selborne Society’s Letters through to the post 1958 Selborne Society Magazine) are held in the reserve collection of the London Borough of Ealing Library Service.

<sup>4</sup> Even with a conservative assumption of an audience of around 15 per lecture, this implies an audience of over 20,000. The number of WEA students (attending lecture series rather than individual events) is probably around 30,000 for this period.



## **2.Early days (1885 – 1914)**

The Selborne Society arose from the merger of two bodies formed in 1885; the (Anti) Plumage League, a loose assemblage of women focused on the protection of birds through ending the trade in feathers as adornments for women's dress, and a Selborne League, formed to celebrate the memory of Gilbert White by campaigning for the 'preservation of birds, plants and pleasant places'<sup>9</sup>. The Selborne Society grew, and spread rapidly, to become a national organisation, supported by a host of prominent intellectuals, aristocrats, churchmen and politicians. Two of its activists, (Sir) Robert Hunter and (Canon) Hardwicke Rawnsley, joined with Octavia Hill in 1895 to form The National Trust as a legal entity to hold the 'pleasant places' that the Selborne Society sought to protect.

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 campaigned against the plumage trade. In May 1891 they too merged, to form a new body that retained the SPB's name and received a Royal Charter in 1904.

Today, the RSPB is Europe's largest conservation organisation, with immense political influence. The Selborne Society is reduced to just a single branch in Ealing, west London (Figure. i). At its peak however, the Selborne Society enjoyed an influence at least as great as that of the RSPB or the National Trust today. Its leaders formed part of an 'invisible college' overlapping in membership with other organisations with similar aims and exerting considerable authority.

At the Selborne Society's Annual Meeting and Conversazione in 1900, James Bryce MP took the chair in place of the Society's President, Lord Avebury (Sir John Lubbock),

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>10: 107</sup>.

The starting point for the research on which this paper is based, was the question why, despite 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. One answer, provided by Mrs (Frank) Lemon, a leader of the Croydon fin fur and feather gatherings and the RSPB's first Secretary (in her history of the organisation, published in the RSPB's journal Bird Notes and News in 1910) is that the Selborne Society, as it grew, accreted other objects to its primary conservation focus including *“the promotion of field-clubs, and the study of natural history in general...”*<sup>11: 39</sup>. This diffusion of effort left a vacuum to be filled by a militant, pledged, campaigning body. This analysis is echoed in Samstag's commissioned centenary history: *“It was probably the very breadth of the Selborne vision that undid it”*<sup>12: 24</sup>.

A study of the archives of the Selborne Society and those of the RSPB shows a more complex picture, however, of a fundamental tension between education and political action. The former was represented in the Selborne Society by an initial focus on natural history, later expanded in scope to cover a broad and eclectic range of 'scientific' and 'geographical' subjects. The latter was represented within the RSPB by its campaigning focus against the plumage industry. The details of this conflict during the early years (1885 – 1914) of the RSPB and the Selborne Society have been examined elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, however a brief summary is necessary here as the basis for

understanding the second phase of the Selborne Society's existence as a lecture bureau.

On its formation in 1886, the Selborne Society embodied several key strands of modern conservation: the protection of species from unnecessary harm, the preservation of their habitats, and recognition that the intrinsic value of nature was matched by its value for human recreation and enjoyment. When formal rules for the Selborne Society were adopted (at a Special General Meeting on 26 Jan 1888) a fourth object was added: education. In the light of what came later, the order in which the Society's objects are presented is important. They read: "[1] *To preserve from unnecessary destruction such wild birds, animals and plants, as are harmless, beautiful, or rare;* [2] *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* [3] *to protect places and objects of interest or natural beauty from ill-treatment or destruction;* [4] *to promote the study of natural history*" <sup>13</sup>Appendix

Even at the time such a breadth of focus caused concerns amongst some of its founders, particularly some of those associated with the precursor Plumage League who saw dangers of diversion from their primary concerns with bird protection. In 1904, three months before the Selborne Society's 1904 AGM, its Council had unilaterally altered the aims of the Society to move the 'study of natural history' - i.e. education, previously the last of its four aims - to the top of the list.

The change seems to have been associated with the election as the Society's Secretary of Wilfred Mark Webb, a long-standing member of the Ealing Branch of the Society. It was opposed by Edward Alfred Martin of the Society's Croydon Branch, who 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>14: 135</sup>. Martin proposed that the original aims be reinstated (effectively, to return conservation to the top of the list and put nature study last). He also objected to a second change which had excluded from the categories of birds deserving of protection those which *“are killed for their food, reared for their plumage, or are known to be injurious”* because he felt the last phrase was subjective and left the exclusion open to abuse. He was overruled on both counts. The RSPB did not ignore these goings-on within its sister society, with whom relations were by now distinctly cool. In July 1904, the RSPB’s journal, 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”*<sup>15: 36</sup>.

The conflict was not just about priorities, nor was it principally a matter of personalities, although these were important; Webb was a conservative, Martin a radical liberal. If the tradition of Gilbert White and the ‘Selborne cult’<sup>16</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 scientific papers to his credit, science (and education) were necessary but not sufficient. Political engagement was also required. 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 tertiary marine formation of great geological significance with considerable wildlife and archaeological interest. This culminated in 1901, when Martin, together with George Bernard Shaw and others, led a march of ‘1000 artisans’ from Croydon Town Hall to the Hurst, with the result that its owners, Whitgift School (in which, co-incidentally, there existed a flourishing branch of the Selborne Society), 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. 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.

The conflict also manifests other elements in the early history of conservation. Lilian Martin (Edward's wife) was a suffragist, and suffrage meetings were held in their Croydon house, which also seems likely to have been a meeting place of the Fin Fur and Feather folk, the early precursor of the SPB, as well as of the Selborne Society, of whose Croydon branch Edward was secretary. Edward and Lilian were also teetotal and there are clear parallels (in the literature of the early SPB) between the 'pledge' of abstinence from alcohol and feathers. In effect the conflict within the Selborne Society, and between it and the RSPB represented two distinct streams in conservation. One was humanitarian in origin, with strong radical/nonconformist/feminist overtones, the other, science based, paternalistic and reformist, sought to achieve its ends not by confrontation, but by education, influence and compromise.

A few years later these differences were to erupt into open conflict. In 1908 the RSPB introduced to Parliament an Importation of Birds Bill, which would virtually outlaw the import of wild birds or their plumage to Britain. The Selborne Society proposed its own amendments which championed 'old' natural history over 'new' bird protection, in particular to *"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>17</sup>. The Bill was referred back. This allowed the Board of Trade to enlist 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, the London Chamber of Commerce, the Zoological Society and the Selborne Society, but not the RSPB. The CEPB's purpose, according to the Selborne Society (whose offices and letterhead it used) was to secure voluntary agreements with the plumage industry *"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>18</sup>. In the view of the RSPB (which boycotted the Committee) however, the CEPB had been formed precisely *“for the purpose of delaying and impeding legislation dealing with the plume-trade”*<sup>19</sup>. E A Martin again tried to get the Selborne Society to change its position, proposing a motion (at the June 1914 AGM) *“That the members of the Selborne 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>20</sup>. Martin’s resolution proved unsuccessful, as did the RSPB’s attempt to secure legislation. The Plumage Bill was not eventually passed until 1921, thirteen years after its introduction to Parliament during which no significant voluntary agreement was secured in its place. And the Selborne Society – the pioneer of conservation in the UK - became, in the eyes of some and for a period at least, its enemy.

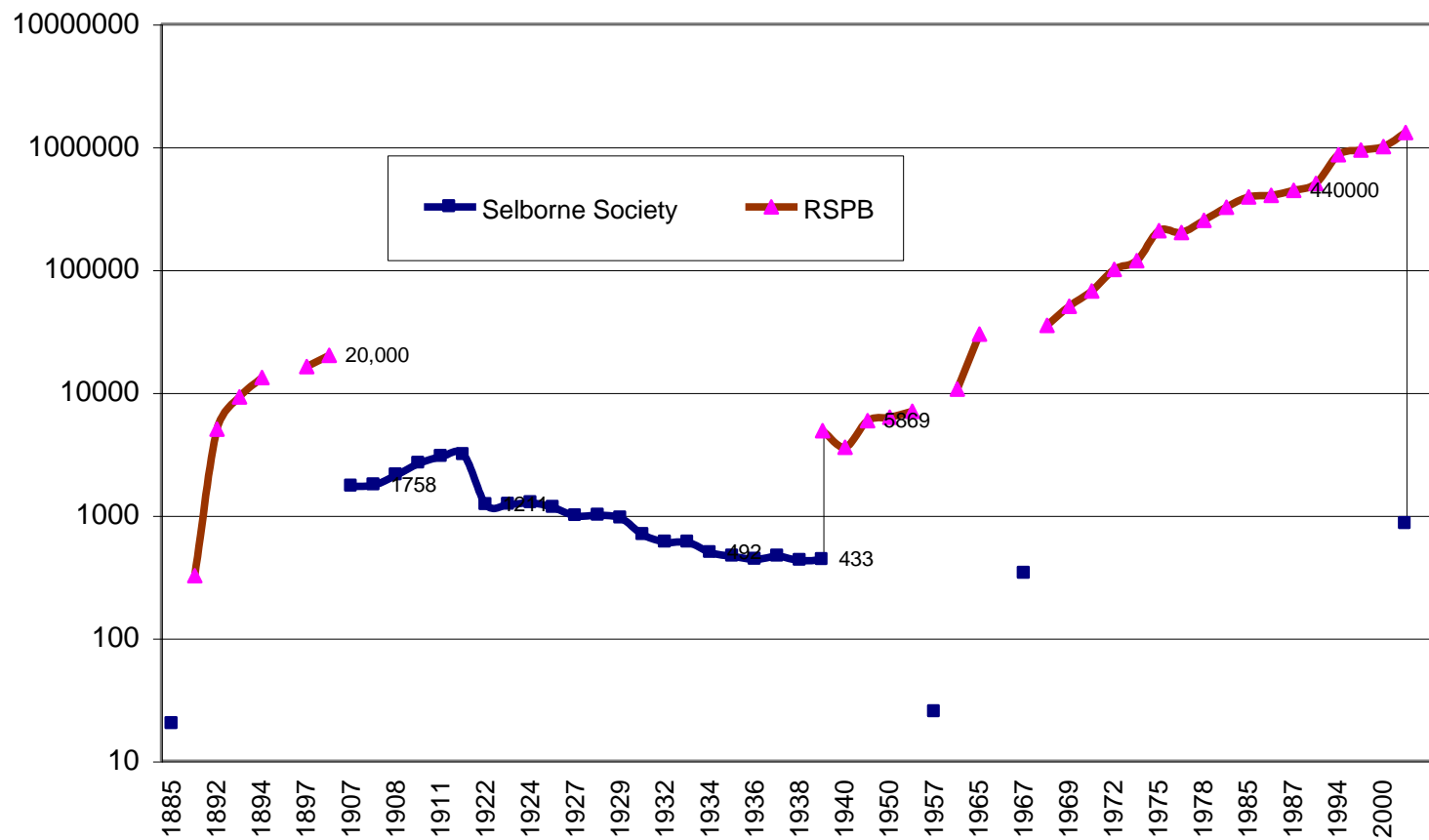
The Selborne Society’s position in respect of certain sections of the establishment, however, was enhanced. Insofar as the Society retained any clear conservation goals, it saw these as something to be secured through popular education under the patronage of the great and the good. Both education and the search for patronage increasingly became ends in themselves.

Some years previously, the Duke of Portland had accepted the office of President of the Society in place of Lord Avebury who had himself replaced Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Society’s first President, who died in 1892. (The Duchess of Portland had become President of the SPB on its formation in 1891 and she remained President of the RSPB until her death in 1954). By 1919 the Duke had been joined as President of the Selborne Society by no less than thirty-five Vice Presidents. The list for that year includes the Duchess of Bedford, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Earl Curzon of Kedleston, Viscount Grey of Falloden, Professor Henslow, Lord Leverhulme, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Canon Ranwsey, Lord Rothschild, the Duke of

Rutland, and the Earl of Selborne. At the AGM in March 1921 the editor of Nature, Sir Richard Gregory (who had already joined the Extension Committee under which the Society's growing programme of educational provision was promoted) was added to the growing number of vice- presidents together with the Marquess of Crewe. The following year, in June 1922, Lt. General Sir Robert Baden-Powell (founder of the Boy Scouts) was added to the roll.

The Selborne Society's links with 'society' were supplemented and reinforced by high profile social occasions. From 1912 it was decided that the annual *conversazione* (at the Civil Service Commission in Burlington Gardens) would be accompanied by entertainment. In addition to Morris dances and sword dancing there would be a 'Gilbert White Exhibition' including an exhibition of microscopes and illustrations, open to public on the following Saturday and Monday (price of tickets 3<sup>s</sup>/6<sup>d</sup> for one, 7<sup>s</sup>/6<sup>d</sup> for three). "*In the afternoon of the Saturday, Mr Webb will repeat his Punch and Judy lecture and admission to the Exhibition will be 1s/-*"<sup>21</sup>. The actual event seems to have been well orchestrated, literally as well as metaphorically. It began with the overture 'Raymond' with Franz Ziedler's Bijou Orchestra, went on to a display of Swedish Educational Gymnastics by the Anstey Physical Training College, progressed to Children's singing games, then a programme of Swedish Folk Dances (in national costume) and concluded with an address by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu.





**Figure. i. Membership of the Selborne Society and the RSPB 1885-2005.**

### 3. Education and the wilderness years (1918 – 1939)

This is not to say that education was neglected by the RSPB. There was no mention of education in the SPB's 1891 Articles but the first purpose of the RSPB as laid down in its 1904 Charter was *"To encourage the better preservation of Wild Birds...by developing public interest in their utility in the economy of Nature as well as in their beauty of plumage and note"* (emphasis added). Its second purpose read *"In furtherance of the above to promote research and study in all matters connected with birds, either by means of lectures, demonstrations, exhibitions, and meetings, or by issuing from time to time pamphlets, leaflets, periodicals and other literature, or by inviting and promoting the writing of papers and essays with or without prize awards for the same..."*.

Educational work had, in fact, been a feature of the SPB's work from its inception. As early as 1895 the SPB, in its Fifth Report, announced the inception of a 'Lantern-slide and Lecture Scheme' with a *"fund to support it and also a Society library of lanternslides which can be borrowed"* <sup>22</sup>. By 1896 the SPB's Sixth Report was able to announce that sixty- two lectures had been given, all supported by slides from the Society's collection. During this period the Society also produced its 'Educational Series' of leaflets covering 24 different birds or bird groups. However, such lectures and leaflets, along with ornithological research were seen (and subsequently articulated in the RSPB's Chartered objects) as a means to an end, not as ends in themselves.

By contrast with the RSPB, the lectures promoted through the Selborne Society tended increasingly from the start to become (together with social activities) the core activity of its constituent branches, and they could be on virtually any subject. Moreover they brought in a considerable income to the Society as they were provided to branches from the central secretariat, which increasingly found itself acting as a lecture

bureau. Council Minutes in February 1914 approved a proposal made by the Extension Lectures Committee for a handbook, which would give details of lecturers (who would pay to be included), their backgrounds, and of the lectures that they offered. By the following (April) meeting of Council, the Handbook was ready and printed *“The handbook which consists of fifty pages was laid on the table and it was announced that already its circulation had produced considerable results and that it had practically paid its way”* <sup>20</sup>. The same minutes report a discussion over *“the large number of Extension Lectures”* which had been arranged, and the problem that their work had grown to such a size that in *“in the London County area, the society would have to be registered as an employment bureau”* <sup>20</sup>. By 1915 the Extension Lecture Committee is referred to in Selborne Society documents as an “Agency”.

The increasing dominance of this lecture bureau activity over others proved a continuing source of friction. In April 1915, another Martin, *“Dr William Martin raised objection to the principle of the Extension Lectures”* <sup>23</sup>. At the following (June) meeting, Martin’s resolution *“That the professional lecture – agency now carried on by the Selborne Society should cease”* <sup>24</sup> was lost, with only Martin and its seconder, Mr Oakes, voting for it.

At the same time, the Selborne Society affirmed – on paper at least – its commitment to public education. The same 1914 minutes record that *“the Selborne Society realising the educational importance of Lectures and Exhibitions arranged by Public Libraries and having considered the provisions of the Public Libraries Bill 1914 supports the proposed provisions as to Library Lectures and requests for extension Lecture Secretary to take such steps as may be necessary to ensure the enactment of these provisions”* <sup>20</sup>.

Despite (and perhaps because of) this activity, ordinary membership was already in decline well before 1914. The Selborne Society Minute Book 1907-1911 includes a notice dated Oct 25 1909 signed by Annie Archer ‘Hon Secretary pro

tem' calling a Special Meeting of the Birmingham & Midland Branch for 4 November, stating that Branch would be dissolved unless volunteers came forward to act as officers <sup>25</sup>. By 1911 there was clearly a widespread problem with the involvement of members in local branches. Minutes of the Council meeting of March 28<sup>th</sup> 1911 record the outcome of an *"Enquiry into the work of the Branches"* carried out by the secretary, who had written to all branches and had replies from four of them. The Bath branch, with 228 members *"claims to be more or less independent of the Society"* and was paying no contributions to the Council; the new local secretary *"found that the society had been living each year on the income to be derived from the next and has been cutting down expenses in every way and getting the lectures for nothing until the branch is on a proper financial basis"*. One new branch had been formed, in Blackburn, with 11 members. The Brent Valley and Richmond branch (404 members) was the most active, particularly around its Bird Sanctuary, Perivale Wood (which had been established by W M Webb in 1902 as one of Britain's earliest nature reserves). No replies or information had been received from the Brighton branch (previously with 168 members) or from Croydon and District (29 members). The Richard Jefferies (Worthing area) branch had been inactive since the previous year, as had the branches in Kensington and Bayswater, the Rother Valley and in Farnham <sup>26</sup>. In 1913 the Selborne Society's Council agreed with Webb that because no remittances had been received for some time from the Blackburn branch and because the subscriptions received from the Worthing branch secretary were too low, the warrants of both branches should be withdrawn <sup>18</sup>.

During the 1914-18 War, membership declined even more rapidly. Several branches were in difficulty. The Midhurst branch secretary resigned and, having failed to find a replacement amongst the branch's nine members, the branch closed <sup>27</sup>. In parallel with the decline in membership came financial difficulties. The April 1915 Finance Committee minutes report a deficit of income over expenditure of £37 and the possibility of giving up the Society's offices at 42, Bloomsbury Square. The Society's thirtieth Annual Report for the same year

reports, *“in view of the war being prolonged, it duly made all the economies that it felt to be advisable”*. At this stage the Society still employed its Secretary and Librarian on honoraria. A Council meeting the following year in December 1916 at Red Lion Square condoned the Secretary’s failure to call an AGM and four Council meetings in 1916; the Secretary reported that *“his usual allowances for the past six months would amount to £82 but he had estimated it at £40 and had asked for £25”*; the society’s net balance at the end of the year was estimated at £93 <sup>28</sup>.

As the lecture prospectus grew, the Selborne Magazine, perhaps one of the first Natural History journals in Britain shrank. From August 1911 W M Webb had taken over the editorship in addition to his post as Honorary Secretary. Presumably in order to raise income and circulation, links were made with other bodies. From 1912, the Caravan Club was allowed to use the Selborne Magazine as its vehicle. The September 1914 Council minutes record problems of paper shortages, which had required a reduction in size. By December 1917 it consisted of just four pages. Issues within the Society reported in the Magazine during the War ranged from *“the destruction which was going on in this country in connection with the war, particularly as regards the felling of trees, all of which might not be really necessary”* <sup>29</sup> to the formation of a committee to gather information about the malarial mosquito.

This last, seemingly insignificant incident was in its own way telling. MacKenzie <sup>30</sup> has argued for the significance of empire as the setting in which branches of natural science professionalised themselves – the great imperial laboratory as a congenial environment within which to frame policy – and in which the achievements of the brilliant amateur could be hailed in a modernist context. Where better than to demonstrate the value of natural history than in the elucidation of the ontology and ecology of insect vectored disease? In this way the Selborne Society was celebrating an ideological as well as an epistemic link between the gentlemanly pursuit of natural

history in England with the economic and environmental modernisation of Britain's tropical possessions.

It was clear that some at least on the Society's Council felt that it had lost its way. The way in which its officers responded to their concerns indicated that it had indeed done so. At the December 1914 Council meeting (by which time "*With the British Army in Flanders and France*" appeared in the prospectus as a lecture title together with "*Flies and How They Disappear*") the Chairman of the Selborne Society's Council, Dr Buxton abruptly announced his resignation. "*Sorrow was expressed that Dr Buxton should sever his connection with the Council so abruptly after the many long years during which he has served the Society. Under Rule XVI it was impossible for the Council to accept his and Mrs Buxton's resignations from the Society as the notice should have reached the Secretary before December 1st. The Secretary was instructed to write to Dr Buxton and point this out and call attention to the fact that he could continue as a member by paying the minimum subscription of five shillings...*"<sup>20</sup>.

There is no record of how Buxton responded to this, however it is unlikely that the five shillings was paid! Buxton was replaced as Chair of the Society by Dr Chalmers Mitchell, but Mitchell himself followed suit and resigned the following December (having attended only one meeting) together with William Martin<sup>31</sup>. Both refused to reconsider their positions despite personal appeals (including a visit to Mitchell by Webb) to do so. Interestingly, E A Martin from Croydon (who had presumably failed to renew his membership following the Society's involvement with the Committee for the Economic Preservation of Birds) was (re)elected to the Council. Whether this was a move by Webb and the Council to build bridges with members of influence and to rescue a falling membership, or whether it was an attempt on Martin's part (if he was aware of it; he was not present at the meeting) to redirect the Selborne Society onto a more conservation oriented path is unclear. The Selborne Society's Council removed Croydon branch's "warrant" in 1918.

It is debatable whether these events were a consequence of the dominant roles of individuals (such as Webb) within the Society, or the logical extension of its trajectory as a provider of recreational learning, or the Society's response to the difficulties consequent upon the War. In any event, the Selborne Society finally lost its way as a conservation organisation. Its activities diverged in two directions, on the one hand, under the influence of Webb, becoming increasingly concerned with the semi-commercial provision of lectures, on the other, responding to the demand of its (declining) membership for social activities, in particular rambles and meetings.

### **3.1.    *The Lecture Bureau and The Selborne Society Ltd***

Throughout the 1914-18 War, Council meetings were largely occupied with the procedures for incorporating the society under the Companies' Acts. Objects of discussion included the need to extend the Society's work "*to embrace general scientific subjects when making an endeavour to popularise science*" as well as "*making opportunities of obtaining more money by instituting higher grades of membership and new sections with additional subscription*" and "*obtaining the right to hold property*" (Council Minutes, 17 May 1917).

By the end of the year, incorporation had taken place. The Jan 16 1918 Council Minutes (held at 28 Red Lion Square, recorded also as the headquarters of a magazine entitled 'Knowledge' with W M Webb as Proprietor), record the first meeting of the Society after its incorporation. Two 'Annual Reports' precede the minutes, for 1917 and for 1918. Each consists of just a single paragraph, the 1917 Report concluding "*This therefore is the last report to be produced under the old conditions which have subsisted for the past thirty- two years...*"

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The minutes of the Council, chaired by J Oscar Parker with W M Webb and 15 others present, make for interesting reading.



Webb was confirmed as General Secretary *“with an agreement for a term of years with all allowances as heretofore subject to such rearrangement as may be recommended by the Finance Committee”*. He was also appointed Editor of the Society’s journals *“with an honorarium of 50 guineas per annum”*. The Registered Offices were confirmed as 83 Avenue Chambers (by then also the offices of the journal Knowledge of which Webb was proprietor) for which an agreement *“as to payment for the use of the address and room should be drawn up by the Finance Committee and submitted to the Council and a General Meeting”* <sup>32</sup>.

At the same meeting, two ‘Standing Committees’ for ‘public work’ were defined. The first was an ‘Extension Committee’ (including Webb with Parker as Chairman and a Mr Ashton as Extension Secretary) to develop the Society’s lecture programme and educational work, and to see if it might be possible to start up a Nature Study Section. *“Committee to prepare a statement of its present liabilities. Mr Ashton to be a Managing Officer of the Council with an agreement for a term of years with an allowance for clerical help.... [and] a promise that a salary would be paid to the extension Secretary so soon as the receipts of the committee justify it was made”*. The second was the Finance Committee, to be comprised again of Webb, Parker, and Ashton, with the addition of Mr Davie as Financial Secretary *“to be an ordinary officer of Council with a small honorarium, the amount to be suggested by the Committee”*.

The core structure of the Society’s administration (and the prospect of remuneration for its officers) having been established, the question then remained of how to cater for its remaining members, both those involved in other central activities and those living further afield. First, ‘Sections’ of the Selborne Society *“to deal with the interests of members and their friends”* were created, each with a working president and secretaries. Foremost of these was a ‘Ramble Section’. Dunton was named as secretary, together with Ashton who was a member of the Extension Committee. The arrangement was not to last. In addition to the central Sections, provision was also made for *“Local Committees... representing the Society*

*generally, or a branch of the Society". However, "It was decided to withdraw the warrants of the Croydon Branch and of the Brent Valley Branch". Having done this, the minutes of the meeting record that "As Brighton was the only remaining branch it was decided to hear the views of Sir John Otter before discussing Bylaws to govern general and particular Branches"*

32

This transformation of the Society into a lecture bureau can be read either as a take-over, or as the noble efforts of a dedicated few to keep a worthwhile venture afloat. Perhaps the kindest reading is also the most accurate; it was a bit of both. W M Webb certainly had a dominating (if not domineering) position within it and was the driving force behind the survival of the Society but also the cause of its difficulties. It seems likely that many (such as E.A. Martin) for whom the primary problem was the Selborne Society's inability to focus on campaigning for achievable conservation goals, had already decided that the RSPB (or other, local voluntary action) was the appropriate focus for their energies. Others, such as William Martin, saw the Selborne Society's emphasis on income earning lecture work, driven by Webb, as both a denial of the aspirational ideals of Musgrave's original Selborne League, and as the manifestation of individual dominance by Webb.

### **3.2. *Membership, affiliations and sections***

As a voluntary membership organisation, the Selborne Society emerged from the 1914-18 war at a very low ebb indeed. However it could be presented - on paper – as in good health. This was more appearance than reality, in part a consequence of a policy of securing patronage wherever it could be found. How many of the 'vice presidents' re-elected at the 1919 AGM were involved in any significant way with the Society (indeed, whether they had all consented to lend their names) is uncertain. What does seem clear is that the Selborne Society was by this time cutting corners, if not engaging in a kind of make- believe to present the appearance of health, including using names of individuals (who were

sometimes ignorant of the fact) for promotional purposes. A letter from William Martin dated 29<sup>th</sup> January 1918 declares “*I am sorry to see that my name appears in the Memo of Association of the Selborne Society Ltd. This appearance is quite unauthorised. I left the Society two years ago. Please do not use my name thus*”<sup>33</sup>.

William Martin’s letter is accompanied by a series of letters to Webb from Winifred M Dunton (who had been Honorary Secretary of the Selborne Society since 1914). The first, written on 21 Jan 1918, a week before Martin’s, declines the position offered her as one of the secretaries of the ‘Ramble Section’ of the Selborne Society, and announces her resignation from Council (after amalgamation of the Central Excursion Branch merged with the Extension Lecture one). “*It was neither a fair nor courteous proceeding to leave me to learn at a minutes notice that the Central Excursion Branch was to be joined with the Extension Lecture one, without any consideration of members’ views... I feel convinced that a voluntary and a professional branch cannot work harmoniously, and that many members would feel that I am betraying their trust if I help to combine the two branches*”<sup>34</sup>. A further letter dated ten days later states “*You tell me I owe a duty to the Council which appointed me, but I cannot help thinking that the Council does not represent the opinions of the majority of its members*”<sup>35</sup>. This is followed by a final letter (4 February) that betrays a note of exasperation: “*Will you please take my decision as final? There are many differences between us*”<sup>36</sup>. Martin and Dunton clearly decided that they needed a vehicle for their continuing commitment to their ideals and formed a new natural history/rambling club, under the name of the Gilbert White Fellowship with William Martin as President and Winifred Dunton as Hon Secretary. In the Draft of Rules and List of Officers for the inaugural meeting on April 20<sup>th</sup> 1918, the Fellowship’s Objects were stated simply as “*To continue the work of Gilbert White in the study of Natural History and Antiquities*”<sup>37</sup>. There are no subsequent records of what became of this new body.

The decline in the Selborne Society as a membership organisation, which had started before the onset of the First

World War (and became near terminal by its end) was only postponed by the purchase of Perivale Wood and specific, sectional activities that ran alongside development of the Lecture Agency. The inter-war period continued the Society's decline as a voluntary body. In effect, the Selborne Society gradually ceased to maintain itself as a membership organization. During the 1920s and 1930s a number of former branches severed their links with the parent Selborne Society and became independent natural history societies.

One consequence was a severe shortfall in finance. In March 1921 it was agreed to send lawyers' letters to defaulting payers<sup>38</sup>. Clearly not all responded but where an individual's name was considered important they were retained on the list; the following year *"It was agreed for the time being to excuse the subscription of Mr Julian Huxley one of the trustees of the Bird Sanctuary"*<sup>39</sup>. The subsequent story of society is one of continued decline in national membership (and conservation activity) as the lecture bureau (and other) activities increased.

In September 1923 a large list of names was removed from the membership list because of non-payment of subscriptions<sup>40</sup>. The January 1925 AGM noted that the Council *"has not yet been able to put the Selborne Society into as good a position as it occupied before the war owing somewhat to the fact that less honorary work is forthcoming..."*<sup>17; 41</sup>. Reported membership during this period varied between 1100 and 1300 members. The Annual Report for 1927 notes that membership had declined to 982 members and expresses the hope *"that when the Magazine is issued again regularly... it will be easier to fill the places of those members which are annually lost"*. The Annual Report for 1930 records the deaths of no less than four of its Vice Presidents, and that for 1931 notes that *"the number of members owing to deaths and withdrawals, is now getting considerably less"* and had fallen to 690. The Report for 1932 announces the death of a further four Vice-Presidents and the reduction of members to just 600; and that for 1933 records the death of yet another Vice President (John Galsworthy) and notes that the work of the Society was concentrated on *"the Lecture Bureau, the Rambles and the two Bird Sanctuaries"*<sup>42</sup>.

The 1934 Report notes as a 'special incident' of the year, the *"relinquishing of the Officers of all or part of their salaries owing to the need for economy..."*<sup>43</sup>. Although membership appeared temporarily to have stabilized, it had fallen to 433 by the time of the outbreak of War in 1939 (Figure. i).

Despite these difficulties, an appearance at least was maintained of much activity. As early as 1907 the 'Central' branch of the Selborne Society was already involved (at least in theory) in so many activities that Webb (as Hon Sec) proposed that *"taking into consideration the number of the objects of the Society & the difficulty in promoting them adequately, separate sections should be constituted, if necessary each with its own Chairman and Secretary to deal with matters concerning each object"*<sup>17</sup>.

The 1921 Council minutes record its decision that the Society would no longer try to form local branches, but that it would instead focus on trying to secure the affiliation of other organisations whilst retaining local committees to propagate its work. The first example of affiliation to an external body proved disastrous. Since 1912 Webb had allowed the Caravan Club to use the Selborne magazine as its vehicle and on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1921 the Selborne Society amalgamated with the Continental Touring Club; the Club's secretary (Mr W R Harvey) became the Selborne Society's 'Travel Secretary'. However the December Council meeting resolved that *"The amount received from tours abroad is not at all commensurate with the trouble involved"* and the agreement with Mr Harvey was cancelled<sup>44</sup>.

In 1923 the Selborne Society carried out yet another paper reorganisation into no less than fifteen 'sections'. The list is eclectic: *"The Wild Life Preservation League (International); The Bird Sanctuaries Association; The Amenities Congress; The Gilbert White Club; The Gilbert White Memorial (The Brent Valley Bird Sanctuary); The Nature Study Centre; The Nature Study Society; The London Pilgrims; The Lecture Bureau; The Lecturers' Alliance; The Union of Peripatetic teachers; The Federation of Lecture Societies; The Schools Lecture Circle; The Club and Institute Lecture Circles; The Film Library;*

*Comrades of the Lens*”<sup>40</sup>. For all of them, the executive was the newly named General Purposes Committee.

It seems likely that some of these existed on paper only, but not all of the internal sections were merely paper entities. Some proved enduring. ‘Comrades of the Lens’ was the name of the Society’s amateur Cinematographic Section (established in 1921), a prominent member of which was Oswald Moseley - later leader of the British Union of Fascists but then still a Labour MP<sup>21</sup>, The section appears to have remained active until the outbreak of the Second World War. The mainstay of the Society throughout the whole of the inter- War period however, was its principal activity, the programme of outside educational lectures. For these, the Society paid the lecturer directly and charged the promoters, generally making a profit. In parallel with the lecture programme were rambles, initially provided for members, but subsequently advertised to the public. Membership declined, the lecture and ramble programme grew and were increasingly run as an entirely separate enterprise from activities of the Society as a membership organization.

The focus on rambles and social events invited criticism from its members and occasionally, from outside, something akin to ridicule. In 1919, an article in Punch declared: *The Selborne Society, which used to be a purely rural expeditionary force, has lately taken to exploring London, and personally-conducted tours have been arranged to University College in darkest Gower Street... What GILBERT WHITE would say to all this brick-and-mortar sophistication we do not dare to guess. All that we venture to do is to suggest one or two more urbane adventures... London offers such opportunities that we shall be surprised if the Selborne Society ever looks at a mole or a starling again*”<sup>45</sup>.

If the focus on rambles was entertainment, the emphasis on educational activities seems to have been due initially as much by financial as by higher ideals. Motivated initially by the need to keep the society solvent, the lecture bureau activity increasingly appeared to become a commercial end in itself. In

1921 it was agreed that Webb as Editor would receive 25% of monies directly accruing to the Society through his public work, including tickets for rambles. At the 1923 AGM, W M Webb was reappointed as Editor of the Magazine *“with a salary of 50 guineas and with 15% of the ramble profits and 25% on other monies brought in by his exertions (including advertisements) as a bonus”*<sup>40</sup>.

In 1920 Sir Richard Gregory, Editor of Nature, agreed to join the Extension Committee and the Lecture Handbook was replaced by the “Lecture List” which was produced annually from 1921 until 1948. Initially at least, the programme showed steady growth. In 1920, 221 lectures were held, and there were 59 Rambles. In 1924 there were 532 lectures and 97 rambles; in 1925: 437 lectures and 99 rambles. In 1926 107 rambles were arranged, (of which 6 had to be postponed due to the General Strike), together with 568 lectures (372 of these were *“for Schools and more important lecture Societies”* and 196 for *“Women’s Institutes and bodies with slender resources”*). The Society’s Annual Report for this year expressed regret that it had been impossible to organise lectures in prisons, despite interest from the prison authorities, because of their inability to pay even traveling expenses to lecturers.



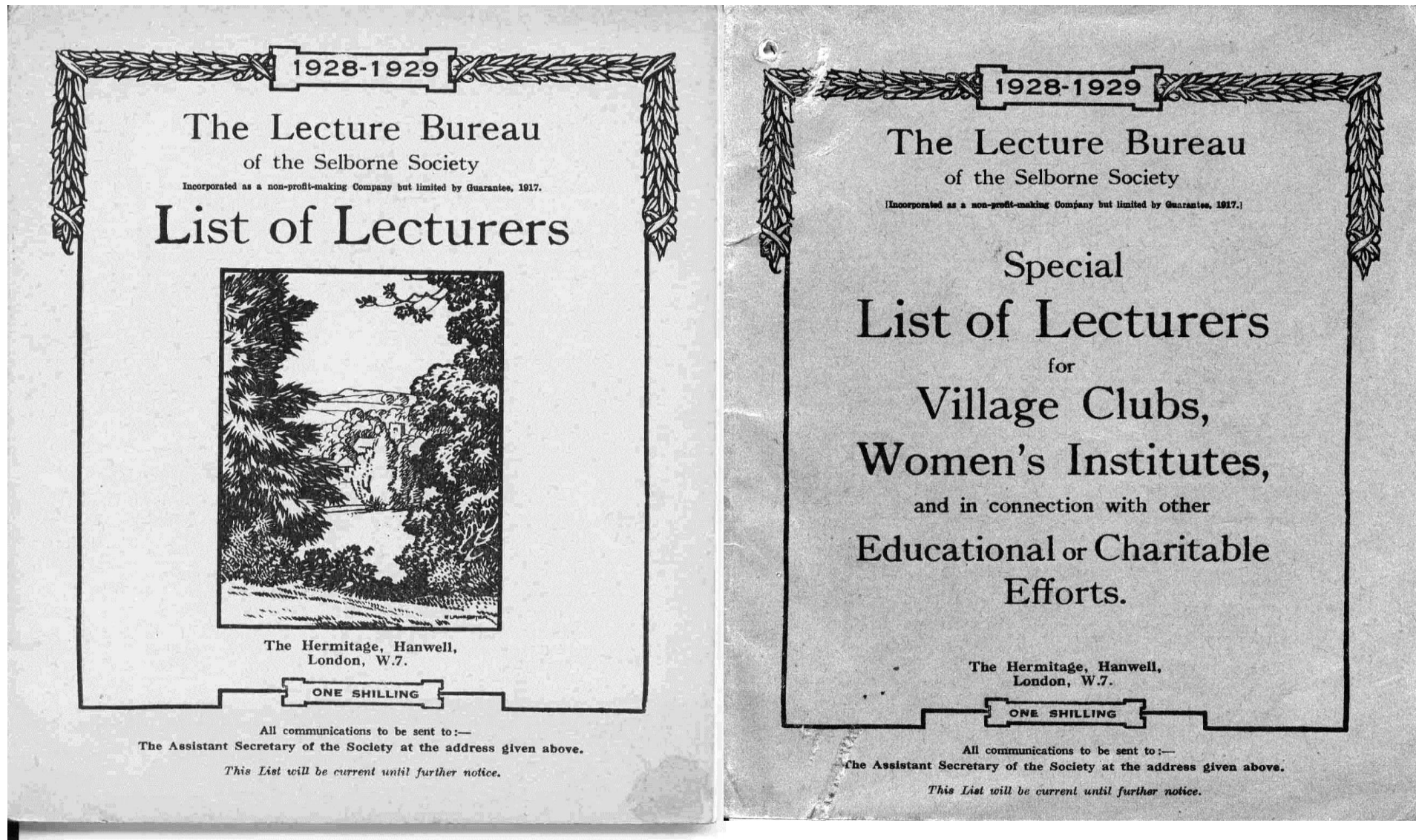


Figure. ii. Front covers of the 'General' and 'Special' lecture lists for 1928-29

## British Empire Lectures

(General List).

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE DINNER TABLE.  
CURIOSITIES OF CURRENCY.  
THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MILK.

*by* Wilfred Mark Webb,  
F.L.S., F.R.M.S.  
(Staff Lecturer)

CANADA, FROM EAST TO WEST.

*by* A. Watson Bain.

MALAYA, THE MARVELLOUS.

*by* Hubert S. Banner,  
B.A., F.R.G.S.

CYPRUS, OUR NEWEST COLONY.

*by* W. Bevan,  
O.B.E.  
(late Colonial Commissioner for Cyprus.)  
(Horsham)

OUTPOSTS OF EMPIRE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

*by* Captain F. W. Chardin.  
(Guildford)

THE INDIAN EMPIRE.  
CEYLON.

*by* Lt.-Col. T. S. Cox.  
(Sidcup)

v

## British Empire Lectures

(General List).

MESOPOTAMIA, THE CRADLE OF THE WORLD.

*by* Captain Alex. W. Cuningham.  
(Westbury)

PEPPER-POTS AND PALADINS, THE EVOLUTION  
OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE.  
COOKERY THROUGH THE CENTURIES.  
HOUSEWIVES AND HERRINGS.  
MAGICAL MILK.

*by* Professor J. R. Ainsworth Davis,  
M.A., M.Sc., F.Z.S.

INDIA : ITS PEOPLES AND PRODUCTS.

*by* Mrs. Hilda Mary Dunn.

STOP ! LOOK ! LISTEN ! (Canada).  
THE ROMANCE OF EMPIRE.

*by* E. J. Golledge.

SIX THOUSAND MILES IN CANADA.  
AUSTRALIA THE WONDERLAND.  
THE ROMANCE OF THE MILK PAIL.  
A PICTURE STORY OF THE MAKING OF THE  
EMPIRE.

THE WHEAT-FIELDS OF THE EMPIRE.  
THE SHEEP-FOLDS OF THE EMPIRE.  
TEA, COFFEE AND COCOA.

*by* J. Nugent Harris.

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Figure. iii. Extract from the General Lecture List 1928-29

# William Platt

*Author of "A Popular Geology," "The Joy of Education," etc.*

## MOUNTAINS AND MOUNTAIN CLIMBING.

Dealing with the beauty, interest, and sport of high and rocky places.

## GEOLOGY AND SCENERY.

The history of the rocks is woven into their Shape, Form, and Beauty.

## LONDON AND THE THAMES.

## THE ROMANCE OF THE PEAK DISTRICT.

## THE ROMANCE OF THE SCOTTISH BORDERS.

## THE HUMOUR OF EDUCATION. (No Slides.)

Breezy tales in which Children, Teachers and Parents all play their parts.

## BEETHOVEN, MAN AND MUSICIAN.

## THE STORY OF THE ORCHESTRA. } With selections on the Pianoforte

## SCHUBERT AND HIS TIMES.

Titles of other Lectures, musical and geographical, on application.



(London.)

# Dr. Ethel R. Spratt

*Doctor of Science (Botany), London; Carter Gold Medallist; Fellow of the Linnean Society; Fellow of the Institute of Hygiene; Associate of King's College, London.*

## THE ROMANCE OF PLANT LIFE.

Hunger and Love are Universal Problems and therefore have to be solved by Plants—Green Colour is the Basis of all Food—Interdependence with Insects and Birds.

## THE SOCIAL LIFE OF ANTS.

Ants are Insects with Great Strength, and believe that "Union is Strength"—Build Homes—Care for the Young—Food—Life Story—Pets—Menace of the White Ants and their Use.

## BACTERIA: MAN'S FRIENDS AS WELL AS HIS ENEMIES.

Bacteria, Microbes or Germs are Everywhere—Life's Simple Children—They Provide Food for the Whole World—Cause Diseases—Also Used to Combat Disease—Devour Waste Products and Dead Bodies—Microscopic yet All Important.

## HOW NEW PLANTS AND ANIMALS ARE MADE.

Nature has everywhere Forbidden the Banns of Inter-marriage—The Web of Life—Struggles and Partnerships—Survivals—New Forms—The Stones in the House of Life—Resemblance between History of the Race and Childhood of the Individual.

## WHAT IS MILK.\*§

Nature's Infants' Food—A Perfect Food—Man's Normal Needs—Digestion of Milk—Milk a Home for Bacteria—Great Need for Hygienic Care of Cows—Milking and Distribution—The New Glass—Lined Rail Tank System of Transport—Vitamines Necessary to Health—Three Vitamines Present in Milk—Milk and Long Life.



(London.)

Dr. Spratt was formerly Lecturer at King's College (University of London) and Battersea Polytechnic. She is now a London University Extension Lecturer.

§ Free Lecture.

Figure. iv. Extract from the General Lecture List 1928-29

### **3.3.     *Marketing Empire***

In 1927 the lecture programme received a major boost following the decision of the Empire Marketing Board to contribute half of the fees for selected lectures and to put all their arrangements for their own free lecture work into the Society's hands. The "General Lecture List" for the next three years (1927-29) ran to over sixty pages and carried titles and brief synopses of lectures offered by some sixty lecturers together with their biographical details. In addition a Special List of Lecturers for Village Clubs, Women's Institutes and in connection with other Educational or Charitable Efforts was produced of some 28 pages and 73 lecturers. In all, 1,332 lectures (and 93 rambles) were provided in 1927. In 1928 there were 1,242 external lectures (and 96 rambles) and in 1929, 1,400 lectures (including 241 on Natural History, *"many of the others dealt with travel and exploration"*) and 111 rambles.

The Empire Marketing Board (EMB) was set up in May 1926 as part of the official machinery of state. All its finances came from an annual Parliamentary vote and it was serviced by civil service staff. Its object was to promote the Empire as an entity and to promote its products – food and manufactures. Its main activities were scientific research, economic policy, and publicity. In respect of the last, it organised exhibitions, poster campaigns, shopping weeks, media (press and radio) promotions and lecture series. The EMB's 'educational' work predominantly used other organisations as their vehicle, including 'established' adult education institutions as well as those for whom education was a secondary purpose, such as training colleges, adult and army schools, cooperative societies, the YMCA, and Womens' Institutes.

At its peak in 1929, around 2,400 lectures were promoted, to a total audience of more than 500,000 people, at a cost to the Board of £10,500 <sup>46: 204</sup>. The EMB's section in the Selborne Society's 1928 Lecture List announced *"These lectures, which are of the "popular" type are free from any political or direct advertising propaganda; they deal, for the most part, with travel*



*and life in various parts of the Empire and the majority of them are illustrated by lantern slides*". The EMB's subsidy to the Society for 1929 was £3,794.2s 0d although there seems to have been some flexibility about how it was used; initially the lectures subsidised by the EMB were advertised as free, however they were subsequently offered at half-fee. The Society's Annual report for 1929 declared "...commission on the fees paid to it has helped the Society materially"<sup>47</sup>.

The decision of the Selborne Society to act as the EMB's agent may be put down to opportunism. However, the Society was already well connected with Board of Trade circles, since its sponsorship of the CEPB more than a quarter of a century earlier. Moreover, the EMB no doubt saw a clear congruence between its own activities and the existing lecture programme of the Society. *"The EMB confirmed in the minds of the majority a world view, a broad conception of the nation's status and power in the world as the centre of a legitimate and uniquely favoured imperial system"*<sup>46: 224</sup>. In his 1929 election manifesto, Stanley Baldwin declared *"the Empire Marketing Board has proved its value as a new agency of Imperial co-operation in many ways, and not least by its encouragement of scientific research both in Britain and in the Dominions and Colonies"*<sup>48</sup>. Grove<sup>49</sup> has argued that that science based land management in Britain's empire was an essential input to conservation practice in the UK itself. In this context, the Society's interests in the malarial mosquito in 1917 may be seen as a precursor to its work in popularising empire 10 years later<sup>50</sup>.

In this respect the Society was behaving politically true to form, even if the outlet for that political character had changed, from the conservation of nature, to the celebration and preservation of a particular social and economic order. If the RSPB represented the 'nonconformist' (humanitarian, reforming) strands of early conservation philosophy then the Selborne Society represented the 'establishment' (natural history, imperial) other<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The dichotomies presented in this paper (between the Selborne Society and the RSPB, between natural history and nature protection, between education and campaigning, or in their class and gendered character) are inevitably over-simple and

Throughout this period, the linkages between the interests of the Selborne Society with wider issues in governance and culture are striking. 1926, the year of formation of the EMB, also saw the British Broadcasting Company (formed in 1922) become a Corporation – the BBC as we know it today. The success of radio broadcasting was accompanied by attempts to widen the impact of ‘narrowcast’ media such as film. The EMB – largely through the efforts of individuals such as John Grierson (who founded the EMB’s film unit in 1928 before doing the same in 1933 for the Post Office where he made his most famous film, *Night Mail*) is credited with pioneering the educational documentary.

The Selborne Society was by this time – amongst its many other activities – already championing the use of film in education. Its amateur Cinematographic Section (the ‘Comrades of the Lens’) was one manifestation; at the same time and in keeping with the tradition of diversification, the Lecture Bureau’s lectures were soon joined by other educational ventures. One, encouraged by members’ interest in film, was the promotion of movie films in school education.

By 1924 the Society had established a library of educational films, which could be hired for 5s each. In January 1924 The Times newspaper carried a report under the head of “*The Cinematograph In Education. Demonstration By Selborne*

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certainly cannot be used to map the behaviour of individuals. However, the relation between local circumstance, personal biography and political orientation would repay further study. An example of conservative activism, very different from the radical liberalism of the Martins, is provided by Mary Beatrice Crowle (nee Finucane) who joined the Selborne Society as a lecturer in the 1920s. Born in 1874 in Brisbane, she travelled widely after her marriage to a naval officer and eventually settled in Plymouth where she was an active suffragist, becoming a member of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association by 1913 and the honorary secretary of the Plymouth branch in the following year. During the First World War she worked with the Red Cross as a nurse, established a Ladies Rifle Club and was one of the first members of the local branch of the Women's Police Force. After the War she moved to Bath and began lecturing on her native Australia. She became a member of the committee of the Bath and District Women Citizens' Association and was elected to the Bath Union Board of Guardians. During the 1920s she became involved with broadcasting and in the 1930s joined the League of Nations Union. Towards the end of her life, she became concerned with issues of vivisection and homeopathic medicine <sup>51</sup>.

*Society*". The problem, it reported, was that few schools possessed a film projector. To meet this need the Society had established a mobile *"operator with portable outfit to give demonstrations to such schools as desire to add cinematograph lessons to their curricula. Since March visits have been paid to 130 schools in all parts of the country"*<sup>52</sup>.

The venture was successful and the cinematograph continued to be promoted by the Society. Ten years later (in 1934) The Times reported the Society's concern that new regulations which attempted to set standards for film (16mm) and film safety (non flammable) might limit their use<sup>53</sup>. Film was seen as a potentially important educational medium, but its use was inhibited by the lack of suitable apparatus for projection; in 1935 there were still only 1000 projectors in the 32,000 schools and colleges in Britain<sup>46: 214</sup>.

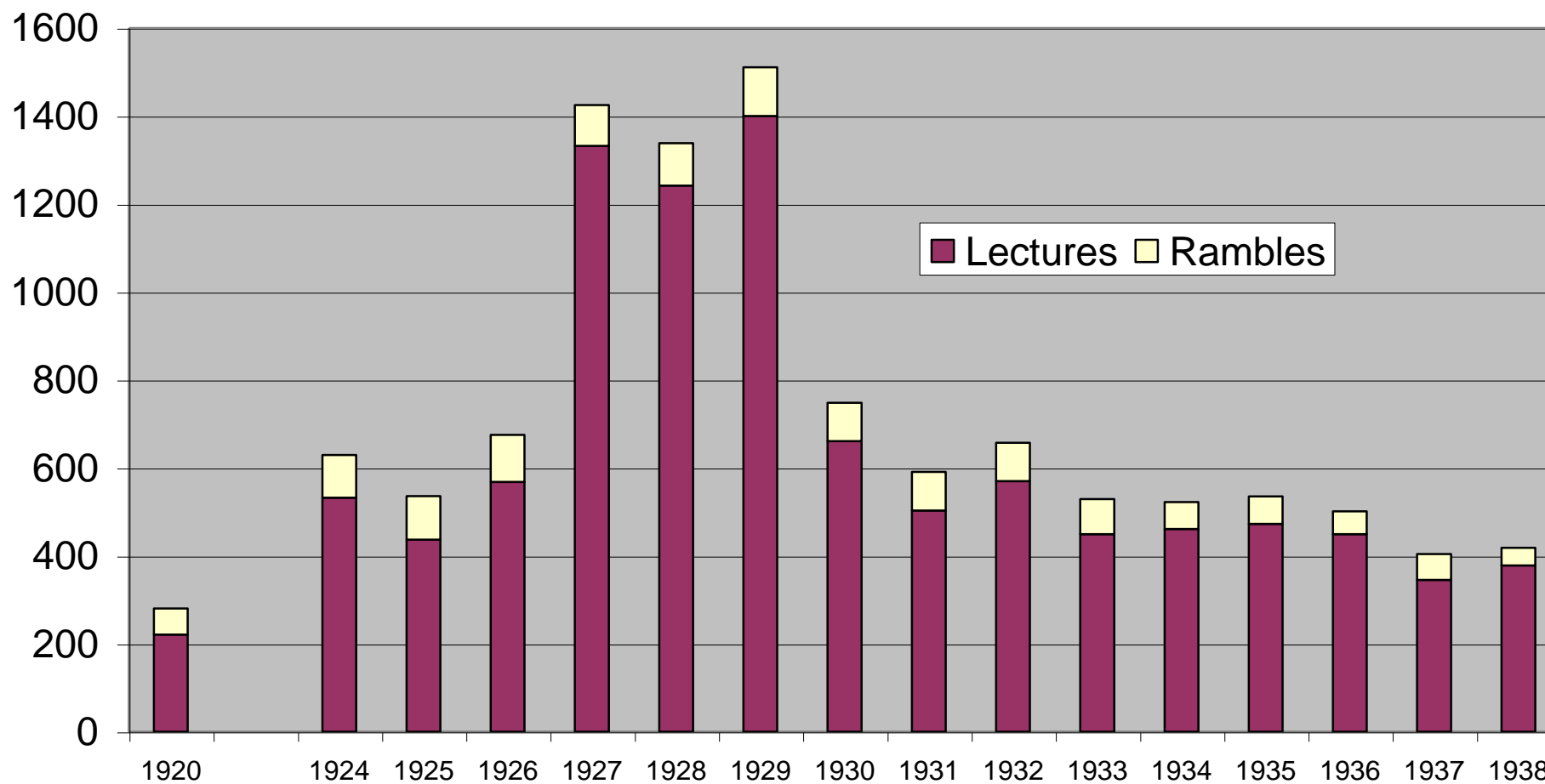
The period between 1927 and 1929 when the Selborne Society acted as the EMB's agent seems to be the high point of the Agency's provision. The following year, in 1930, consequent on the ending of grants from the Empire Marketing Board, the lecture programme returned to its pre 1927 level (661 lectures with 87 rambles). It continued at this level (1932: 87 rambles, 328 lectures; 1934: 80 rambles, 449 lectures) until the outbreak of the second War. By way of comparison, the London University extension programme over this period amounted to some 115 Extension Courses and around 50 Tutorial Classes, together amounting to around a third of the national total<sup>1</sup>.

Later editions of the handbook include details of the offerings of more than 50 lecturers (who paid for their space), each with brief biographical details (and photographs). The 1937-38 prospectus (the last before the outbreak of War) lists some 50 lecturers, each with a small photograph, biographical notes and titles and synopses of the lectures on offer.

Lectures were on a wide variety of topics, well beyond natural history and indeed beyond 'science'; a high proportion of them were of a trivial nature compared to the content of 'mainstream' extension and tutorial classes. A few titles serve to give the flavour. Those offered by W M Webb include



*“Buying a Wife”, “What can be done with a camera”, “The Curiosities of Currency” and several under the title of “Curiosities of Daily Life” (including “The Origin of the Hamper” and the “History of Punch and Judy”). Lecturers included a number of women. A Miss Weeden-Cooke offers “The Vestal Virgins, their Origin, Life and Homes” whilst Miss I Cruttewell Abbott, “Beneath Big Ben” and “The Far East and its Problems”.*



**Figure. v. The Selborne Society's lecture and ramble programme 1919-1939**

## **4. Death and renaissance (1945 and after)**

Throughout the inter- War period, the Selborne Society appears to have survived on the margins of financial and organizational viability. By the end of it, the Society had all but collapsed as a membership organisation; it had become, effectively, a small but struggling business. However, according to one employee (the wife of W M Webb's son, Geoffrey), even as late as 1939 the Selborne Society managed to employ four full-time staff including an Assistant Secretary (wages £2.10s per week) a Senior Typist (£1.5s) a Junior Typist (£1) and Perivale Wood's Keeper (£2.2s) <sup>54</sup>.

The Second World War proved near fatal for the Society. During it, both the lecture and ramble programme of the Selborne Society continued, but at a much reduced level from which it failed to recover. The reserve's Keeper was conscripted. Many of the Selborne Society's officers were occupied elsewhere or had moved out of London. W M Webb was himself absent on censorship duty (though his son Geoffrey visited the wood regularly and tried to keep the hedges and fences in repair).

By the end of the Second World War, the Selborne Society's decline into obscurity had been such that its existence – let alone its survival - is ignored or dismissed by most historians. Allen's history of British natural history <sup>55</sup> dispenses with the formation of the Selborne Society in a single sentence <sup>55: 198</sup> and then goes on to discuss the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds at length. It is perhaps because of this that some have assumed that the Selborne Society was subsumed by the RSPB <sup>56: 322</sup>.

In fact it survived, but in 1945, as in 1918, the Society emerged at very low ebb indeed, hardly functioning as an organization, let alone as a national body. There were only two small branches, one in Ealing and the other in Selborne itself. The Selborne branch inevitably became concerned primarily with village preservation, monitoring planning applications and

maintaining amenity. It separated from the Ealing branch in 1974 to become an independent organisation, the "Selborne Association", with the primary aim of protecting and enhancing the interests of local residents, although celebration of Gilbert White was still retained as a subsidiary aim. The Middlesex (Ealing) branch retained the name of the Society as well as its archives (and what little money there was in its reserves), its activities focused principally on Perivale Wood (although regular visits to Selborne were continued and the branch actively supported the opening of the Wakes Museum in Selborne in 1955).

Webb, in his seventies, made an attempt to revive the Society, but with little success. At the end of war, the Selborne Society appeared, on paper, to be doing exactly the same thing as it had at the start. For example, the 1948-49 prospectus lists 20 lecturers, 10 of whom also appear in the 1937-38 Prospectus, offering almost identical wares. Thus, a H Norman Edge has moved from Fakenham to Cumberland, but still offers four lectures, on weather and weather recording, on Ben Nevis and its observatory, on Volcanoes and Earthquakes, and on "*Sun, Moon and Stars*". Otherwise the prospectus and the titles and descriptions of lectures – is virtually unchanged. Miss Theodora Eyton-Jones (Mrs Leonard Patterson) still offers "*Changing China*" and "*China as I Knew It*", but her lecture on "*Palestine Seen from Eastern Roofs*" is now titled "*Palestine Seen Again from Eastern Roofs*". Captain L Greenstreet is still offering "*Two Years on the Antarctic*" and "*Shackleton's Last Voyage*". Miss Olive Hicks still offers her programme of dramatic recitals. T Bowen Partington still offers "*The real China*" but "*Ceylon, the Pearl of the Orient*" has been retitled "*Ceylon, the Pearl of the Indian Ocean*". W M Webb (using the same photograph as in 1937) has added "*Frauds and Forgeries*" to his "*The Naturalist Lends a Hand*", "*With Dame Nature as Godmother*" and "*A Year in the Bird Sanctuary*".

The appearance of timelessness is deceptive. The 1948 prospectus appeared to be a last effort. By 1949 the Lecture Bureau ceased to exist. Webb, saddened by the earlier death of his son Geoffrey, died in 1952. In the same year, soon after

the death of Webb the Selborne Society Council was re-formed. T L Bartlett (previously honorary. librarian) was elected Chairman and the Revd Dennis Paterson succeeded Webb as secretary. In the 1956 Annual Report, Paterson gives a brief account of this rebirth. *“The task was formidable indeed. The membership had practically ceased to exist, and the public had forgotten the ‘glories’ of the past. The Wood, as far as a Sanctuary went, was derelict. Irresponsible elements, both young and old, had broken through the decaying fences, smashed the bird boxes, and engaged in the shooting of every kind of wild life”*<sup>57: 2</sup>.

Young men from Perivale Community Centre begin to clear scrub and debris from wood, and the Society set itself a target of 250 members (though saying, *“we have a possible maximum of three thousand”*. This, perhaps co-incidentally, was the peak of the Selborne Society’s membership in 1914). There were setbacks, however. In March 1955 one of Selborne Society’s officers (also its solicitor) was accused of misappropriating £375 of the Society’s money. By 1957 the Ealing branch of the Selborne Society had a mere 25 members. The Wood was reported as being in a parlous state. Hedges & fences were in decay, and there was uncontrolled shooting. A psychological boost was provided when in the same year the Nature Conservancy declared the wood a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)<sup>6</sup>.

1958 Major G A Cattley replaced Paterson as Secretary. The emphasis of the Society’s work was on the wood, with an intensive management programme, and on its educational potential, including open-air natural history lessons. In March 1958 the first issue of the renamed The Selborne Magazine was restarted as a four-page leaflet. It was later incorporated as a section of the quarterly Birds and Country magazine. In 1967 it appeared again independently as an 8-page magazine, however rising costs meant that it was eventually replaced by a

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6 A supposedly protective designation created under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. The designation had little meaning until the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, and was only given real ‘teeth’ by provisions in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

duplicated newsletter. This first issue of The Selborne Magazine interestingly returned to conservation as a priority over natural history (along the lines of the motion proposed by E A Martin more than half a century previously), and restated the objects of the Society 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>58</sup>.

Perhaps still attached to the pioneering aspirations of its pre (first) World War society and certainly harking back to its origins, a fifth aim was proposed, *“to campaign for small education sanctuaries”* in Britain’s town and country planning programme. It was also suggested that *“perhaps we should now aim at branching out into the counties”*<sup>59: 26</sup>. Perhaps fortunately, neither idea was taken up. The Society wisely continued to concentrate on local activity; a very different body from its predecessor – amateur, egalitarian, inclusive, informal. The Wood became – as it is today – the focus of its activity, central to the work of the new Selborne Society. As one of Britain’s first nature reserves it is a symbol of past achievements but also an example of how oases of wildlife could be maintained within what had by now become a predominantly urban area.

The Society appealed for new members, for up to date addresses of old members who had lost contact, and fixed the minimum annual subscription at 5/- (or £5 for life membership). It announced regular educational field meetings in the Wood, on the first Saturday afternoon of each month; *“Tea and Garibaldi biscuits will be available”*<sup>58: 1</sup>.

In addition to practical conservation work on the wood, the Society also restarted an educational programme. Much of this was directed at local schools, and in 1961 the Carnegie Trust funded an ecological studies programme based on the wood. The wood had already by this time become the focus for adult studies. In the autumn of 1958, a programme of London

University Extra- Mural Extension lectures was initiated; the Annual Report for that year offered thanks to the students for helping in the renovation work <sup>58: 1</sup>. In the Extra- Mural<sup>7</sup> Prospectus for the 1960-61 session Tom L Bartlett is listed as teaching three classes, at the City Lit (Drury Lane), in Wandsworth, and in Wembley <sup>60</sup>.

Aspirations beyond the Selborne Society's strength continued alongside real difficulties. Its much reduced membership still included individuals who lived some distance from London. In something of a re-run of the Society's founding notion of local secretaries (if not residual aspirations of a national presence) it announced 'regional representatives' (in 1968 in Cheshire, Devon, Hampshire, Hertford, Kent, Lincolnshire, Sussex, Wiltshire and Scotland). By 1967 the 82<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report reported a slow but steady growth in members to 335 adult and 57 junior members but declared that *"our sole surviving trustee is now advanced in years, and as your Chairman [Tom Bartlett, by now living in Devon], and Secretary [G A Cattley] have both passed the normal allotted span of human life, we feel it is time that the Council corporately and members individually took thought as to why, where, and for what purpose our society should continue"* <sup>59: 26</sup>.

The appeal was not ignored. In 1973 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 (including Kevin Roberts<sup>8</sup> who, with Peter Edwards, began a programme of biological monitoring). These individuals combined expertise in natural history, knowledge of conservation, and a commitment to

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<sup>7</sup> The London University Department of Extra – Mural Studies was incorporated within Birkbeck College in 1988, to become its Faculty of Continuing Education.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Roberts was for many years an Extra-mural Lecturer and between 1992-1995 was Director of Birkbeck's postgraduate Diploma in Environmental Education and Heritage Interpretation.

education in equal measure. In 1974 (26 October) the wood was declared a statutory Local Nature Reserve<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the tradition of London University extra-mural courses held in association with the Society and/or using the wood was revived, with a summer term short course meeting in the afternoon in the 'classroom' (a hut) in Perivale Wood. This subsequently developed into a series of Tutorial courses meeting in the adjacent Perivale Community Centre. Later, classes from the University Certificate in Ecology and Conservation (from 1988 part of Birkbeck College's BSc Environmental Conservation) and the Diploma in Countryside Management and MSc in Protected Area Management used the wood (as they still do) for fieldwork.

In this way, a quarter century ago (and three quarters of a century 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 small local voluntary society focused on its most significant asset, Perivale Wood, but with strong links to wider currents of conservation and adult education beyond its boundaries. The last reminder of the Selborne Society's previous glories and its key role in conservation was the celebration of the Society's centenary (together with that of the Royal Entomological Society's Charter) in 1985, marked by the Post Office in the issue of a set of stamps<sup>61</sup>. In 2004, to mark the centenary of the Charter of the RSPB, the Selborne Society issued its own celebratory booklet<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The LNR designation was also (like SSSI) introduced under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, but was rarely used until the late 1980s until which it was one of only 2 in London (the other being Old Park Wood in Ruislip).



## **5. Conclusion; education, engagement and opportunism**

Today, the contrasts between the Selborne Society and the RSPB as well as with The National Trust (both of which it helped to form) could not be greater. The RSPB has over a million members and The National Trust over three million. Each has more members than all Britain's political parties put together, in numerous branches. The Selborne Society has less than a thousand members in just a single branch. The RSPB, and The National Trust are both highly efficient corporate organisations, each with regional offices (as well as local branches), the former running some 140 reserves covering over 111,500 ha, attracting more than 1m visitors per year, the latter Britain's largest private landowner with almost 2% of the land surface. The Selborne Society has just one reserve, some 11 ha in extent, which is open to the public on just one day per year. The RSPB and The National Trust both employ more than 1,000 full, part-time and contract staff and attract many more volunteer days besides; the Selborne Society today 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 National Trust has comparable influence, at least within the UK. Both organisations have distinct but very significant educational provision over a range of forms and media, for both children and adults. The days when the Selborne Society could claim to influence national (let alone international) educational policy or curricula are well in the past. Even at a local level it eschews engagement beyond the curtilage of its reserve and it 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.

At its peak, the Selborne Lecture Bureau represented a significant element in inter-war adult education. It is, however, an element, which does not fit easily into conventional narratives of voluntary sector workers' self-education, philanthropic ministry, and nascent state provision, with which it had little connection. It did however represent a different – and in some ways equally influential stream of informal adult learning characterised by an emergent liaison between recreational learning on the one hand and 'political' propaganda on the other.

The Selborne Society in the inter-war period fits into the relatively large group of bodies which Lowe<sup>62</sup> terms 'other national organisations' along with the YMCA and YWCA. Today of course, the Society's output is far too small for it to appear amongst the 68 such organisations listed in the NIAE (now NIACE) handbook. Probably precisely for this reason - its (inter-War) independence from 'mainstream' currents in adult learning and its present insignificance in this context, - the story of the Selborne Society (like that of kindred independent lecture agencies) has been neglected. Yet at key periods the provision of these independent agencies (certainly that of the Selborne Society) has both reflected and reinforced a demand for recreational learning that has always existed in parallel with the more 'serious' endeavours of mainstream provision and students.

An examination of the Selborne Society's 'Lecture Bureau' period provides a number of lessons for the present, by which we can learn from history's 'failures' as well as its successes. In some ways the Society's inter- War lecture provision catered (in the words of Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister, in the introduction to Birkbeck College Centenary Lectures 1823-1923) for a middle class version of Birkbeck's "*pilgrim student who seeks knowledge and the power that comes from it*"<sup>63: ix</sup>. But that conjunction of 'knowledge' and 'power' conceals a complex set of polarities between social action and public

education. The Society's emphasis on knowledge and education in place of active campaigning meant that it was perhaps inevitable that as Britain's first national conservation organisation (in its early days seen alongside the SPB as a bird protection body, but with much wider aims of conserving all nature) it should revert to its roots in the tradition, symbolised by Gilbert White, of broad amateur enquiry into the natural and cultural landscape. The Society's focus moved inexorably from birds to natural history in general. From natural history it progressed on the one hand to science (including physics and astronomy) and on the other to geography, travel and antiquarianism. Finally it moved further, to entertainment. As it did so, it became a vehicle for delivery of the 'educational' output of a short-lived but extraordinarily influential enterprise, the Empire Marketing Board.

However its further conversion into a semi-commercial lecture bureau seems contingent on particular conflicts in which the political was intimately connected with the personalities of key players. In some ways the Society was an early promoter of what would today be called 'environmental education'. Pepper <sup>64</sup> characterises education as the "*environmentalists' panacea*", focused on *individual* enlightenment as preferable to *collective* social engagement and invariably concealing a conservative political stance. The ascendancy of the Selborne Society (and its selection by the Empire Marketing Board as the vehicle for delivery of its own educational programme) seem to be associated with the phenomenon described by Kelly in which, during the 'twenties and especially during the 'thirties the "*driving forces of social reform and religious service became noticeably weaker and the motive of personal culture reasserted itself*" <sup>3: 286</sup>. Certainly the proliferation of Selborne Society lecture topics reflects a curious form of recreational self-realisation through study on the part of their participants. In its avowed disengagement from significant social and economic issues, the composition of the inter-war lecture programme of the Society makes profound contrast to the programmes of mainstream inter-War adult education as represented (for example) by Birkbeck College or the WEA, the latter of which

was subsequently to grow to fill something of the niche which the Selborne Society previously occupied. This ex-centric (and in many ways, even in the inter-War period, marginal) position has, nevertheless, deep roots in nineteenth century (and earlier) traditions of adult education. It embodies the apotheosis of education (*vide* natural history) as the alternative to social and political action. Indeed, 'education' as conceived by the EMB was clearly understood as part of the "*antidote to the poisonous doctrine of socialism*"<sup>46: 196</sup>. In contrast to the educational provision of campaigning NGOs such as the RSPB, to whom it was clear that education was ancillary to its central purpose, bodies like the Selborne Society saw education as their *raison d'être*. Ironically, in its revival in the 1950s and 1970s (and in its existence today) the Society represents a return to its nineteenth (and eighteenth) century roots in the tradition of naturalists field clubs and of scientific and philosophical societies<sup>65</sup>.

What set the Selborne Society on a different path from the RSPB or The National Trust 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 and The National Trust were clear from the outset that they needed to change them, albeit within a limited frame. Today, the Selborne Society and the RSPB exist at opposite extremes of an extraordinary range of voluntary conservation organisations that is so much a feature of the UK conservation scene and whose educational activities – formal and informal – are a vital complement to 'mainstream' provision in adult and continuing education, ever more so as the latter becomes focussed on formal assessment, outcomes, and completion. Within this range, the Selborne Society has, curiously a place that is both unique and representative – unique in history as the pioneer of British conservation, representative in its present manifestation as a small local natural history society, and with a curious inter-war history as a significant provider of recreational adult learning that sheds light on where both nature conservation and adult education find themselves today.

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