

# Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - July 2019

## Society visit to Selborne.

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It was a warm and sunny day when the Wargrave Local History Society members enjoyed a visit to the Gilbert White house and gardens, along with the Oates Collection, at Selborne, in Hampshire.

The house, called Wakes, had been bought by Gilbert White's grandfather (also Gilbert)



when he was vicar of Selborne. The family moved into Wakes from the Vicarage in 1728, following the death of Gilbert senior, young Gilbert then being about 8. He inherited the property in 1763, adjoining land having been added to create a larger garden, which Gilbert landscaped so that he could watch and record the flora and fauna that lived there. His diary recorded the building of a Haha (to keep animals in the meadow away from the gardens), and a wall to help the growing of fruit trees (both in 1761).

Gilbert went to school in Basingstoke, and continued his education at Oxford, becoming a Fellow of Oriel College. Like his grandfather and uncle before him, he then became ordained in the Church of England, his first curacy being with his uncle at the church in nearby Faringdon, before returning to Selborne as its curate, and living at Wakes (even though he was the vicar of Moreton Pinkney, in Northamptonshire).

In between his duties at the village church, Gilbert set about carefully recording what he saw in his garden and surrounding area. Over 4 decades, he systematically noted the weather, the types of seeds sown, and what grew as a result and the wildlife to be seen. Gilbert White was unusual, for his time, in studying the animals and birds in their natural surroundings (the usual practice at the time being to examine dead specimens). As a result, he had a wider range of observations on which to base his conclusions - different birdsong, for example, enabling him to identify various species that otherwise were considered to be the same variety, whilst the importance to the natural world of creatures such as earthworms was unknown until Gilbert carried out his investigations. His experiments with 'Timothy the tortoise' might not be approved of now-a-days - placing the tortoise on the edge of the Haha to see if it would see the danger, or fall over the edge, or be dropped into a barrel of water to see if it could swim (it couldn't - from which Gilbert deduced that it is "not at all an amphibian"). The tortoise would often disappear for a while - Gilbert thinking that Timothy "had an innate need for an amorous female". Despite these experiments, the tortoise survived, and it was only after Gilbert died that it was found that Timothy was a female tortoise!!

In due course, Gilbert published the results of his wildlife studies in 1789. *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* has remained 'in print' ever since - becoming the fourth most published work in the English language (after only the Bible, Shakespeare and *Pilgrim's Progress*). His work was the foundation of studies that would now be described as ecology, and much of Charles Darwin's work was based on Gilbert's findings.

Gilbert's diaries and correspondence not only recorded the natural life he observed, but also descriptions of the house. These have enabled the rooms to be restored to be



much as Gilbert would have known it - some of the furniture, portraits and soft furnishings such as his own bed hangings, surviving from his time there.

In 1954, an appeal was launched to buy the house and set up a museum recording Gilbert White's work. Robert Washington Oates - keenly interested in Gilbert's studies - agreed to provide the necessary funds, if it could also provide a home for his Oates Collections, relating to an uncle and his nephew (the latter a cousin of Robert). The older, Frank, was born in 1840, and - like Gilbert White, was a keen naturalist from boyhood, especially wild birds. He too had studied at Oxford

University. Ill health forced him to abandon his studies, whereupon he travelled to both America and Africa to pursue his study of the wildlife there (and hopefully regain his health), and specimens of birds from the Central American trip are displayed in the museum. As with Gilbert White, Frank Oates carefully recorded his observations, and those from his visit to Africa in the 1870s resulted in a book; *Matabele Land and the Victoria Falls A Naturalist's Wanderings in the Interior of South Africa*, in which he described varieties of both wildlife and trees that he had discovered in - then - little known parts of Africa (he being one of the first Europeans to see the Victoria Falls in flood). Sadly, he caught a fever on

his journey back from central Africa, and so the book was only published after his death. It is considered to be an important addition to scientific knowledge, and several of the species he discovered bear the name oatesii in his memory.

Frank's nephew, Lawrence, was also an explorer, being one of Captain Scott's team aiming to reach the South Pole in 1911. The Norwegians, led by Amundsen, were also on an expedition of discovery to the Antarctic, and became the first to reach the South Pole. The British team suffered from bad weather and insufficient food supplies. Lawrence Oates, therefore, decided to leave his fellow explorers, saying "I am just going outside and may be some time", in the hope that his sacrifice would help the remaining men survive. The gallery in the museum tells of his life - not only in the Antarctic, but also his earlier career in the Boer War, where he refused to surrender to the stronger Boer army. There are many photographs of the Antarctic expedition, and displays record the significance of the work that the expedition achieved - much of it being the basis from which present-day climate change studies are derived.

The afternoon ended with a delicious cream tea - an essential part of any Society visit!



The next meeting will be on Tuesday September 10th, when local GP Dr Mark Puddy will look back at 70 years of the National Health Service, whilst on Tuesday October 8th Linda and John Evans' subject will be Caversham Court and the Families who lived there.