

Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society, Natural History Section

Minutes of meeting held in the New Walk Museum on Wednesday, 21st November, 2018 from 7.00. until 9.30pm. 33 members and 1 guest attended.

The meeting was chaired by Hazel Graves.

- After a welcome, Hazel announced that refreshments were available as self-service and invited more members to sign up onto the refreshment provision rota.
- Apologies were received from John and Sheila Tinning.
- She gave a reminder that an extraordinary general meeting will start our meeting on 19th December 2018, and mentioned that other meetings during this season had been re-arranged.
- The next section meeting, geology section meeting and parent body meeting were trailed.
- Sightings were –
 - Field Blewits, *Lepista saeva*, at Oadby shopping centre
 - 7 Little Egrets, *Egretta garzetta*, in Stonegate on 14th November – Jennie Parry
 - Jay, *Garrulus glandarius*, on Queens Road, Leicester – John Bailey
 - 2 Green Woodpeckers, *Picus viridis*.
 - A possible Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*, roost on the Liquidambar in the High Street in Leicester city centre - Tony
- Three books by Dave Goulson were displayed.

The lecture was the 46th **Sowter Memorial Lecture** entitled **The Joy of Urban Botany by Geoffrey Hall**.

Hazel's introduction began with this section about Freddie Sowter.

- **Freddie Sowter was an important past member of our Society and contributed to the Natural History Literature and records of our County.** Along with others of our past members he was part of what has made the Leicester Lit and Phil, the Natural History Section and their connections with the New Walk Museum such very important parts of the History of Leicester and Leicestershire and hopefully these connections can be maintained. He was an amateur naturalist in that he worked as a Textile Chemist for Courtaulds, Loughborough, after active service in the First World War, until retirement due to ill-health in 1958, and pursued his hobby in his spare time. He spent a lifetime supporting the study and conservation of our natural environment.
- Many of our Natural History experts seem to engage in three main areas of expertise. The first being Field Natural History by observing and recording what is around. The second is studying past records and relating the present to the past looking for changes and trends which can be published and examined and used. And the third is being involved in the administrative, educational and conservation aspects of Natural History. Freddie Sowter certainly was involved in all these aspects.
- He was a very active and competent field naturalist, his main area of study was Cryptogams or spore producing plants. Between 1941 and 1972 he published on bryophytes, Mycetoza which are a grouping of slime moulds and now not considered as cryptogams, and lichens amongst others. He

was an important contributor to Horwood's 1933 Flora, as a member of the Flora Committee, actively engaged in field work, and research of historical data and analysis. He was a member of the Botanical Exchange Club.

- He early became aware that the Flora he was studying was changing, with woodland felling and agricultural changes associated with the wars. He published "Our Diminishing Flora" in 1960. He became committed to conservation in the two counties and worked with the Nature Reserves Investigative Sub-Committee for the area when it was set up in 1943 and contributed to the concept of SSSI in 1952, although bitterly disappointed that this gave no protection to the last area of Leicestershire's wet moorland at High Sharpley. He was a founder member of the Leicestershire Trust for Nature Conservation, and a Member of Council until he died. He was influential in securing the bequest of Miss C.E. Clarke of her five hundred acre estate at Charnwood Lodge to the Trust as a Nature Reserve, for which many of us are so grateful.
- Whilst undertaking these studies, plus a full time career, he was also committed to the administrative side of Natural History, actively involved in the British Bryological and British Lichen Societies. He was a Council Member of the Lit and Phil Parent Body for several decades, and also he was the Society's representative on the City Council Museum's Service, he was elected as an Associate of Section D Botany in 1927, he became Honorary Secretary in 1930, and also Curator of the Society's Herbarium. He was instrumental in reforming the Botany and Biology sections in 1944, becoming Chairman in 1963 and President until his death in 1972. How he had so much energy I don't know.

Then she introduced the speaker.

- Geoffrey originally came from Wokingham and studied his first degree at Portsmouth. He then did his Doctorate at Cambridge University on the Ecology of Microfungi followed by a period of Medical Research at Westminster Medical School studying microbial adhesions to cells. He also worked at Health and Safety Executive in Neasden and for 11 years at the Mycology Institute in Kew. He moved to Leicester and completed a Master of Science degree in Information Technology and worked at County Hall for Leicestershire County Council for 12 years in IT. He then became Natural Life Curator at the County Council's Museum Store. In January 2015 he took over as County Plant Recorder from Mike Jeeves. I realise I don't know if his interest in botany as opposed to mycology has been life-long or more recent but I will find an opportunity to ask him that later!
- Geoffrey is County Recorder for Botany for VC55 ie the old counties of Leicestershire and Rutland and an active member of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland taking part in surveys in more far flung corners of our Islands. He is also a leader of the local BSBI group and very patiently helps beginner botanists on outings. He has expended a vast amount of energy since 2015 coordinating the amateur botanists of VC55 to collect data on a tetrad ie 2 km by 2 km square basis for the 2020 BSBI plant atlas. Many of

these botanists were trained at the excellent Plant Identification Courses at Leicester University run by Richard Gornall and John Bailey, aided and abetted by Louise Marsh, Russell Parry and Geoffrey amongst others. Geoffrey is also coordinating the work of volunteers at the County's Herbarium who are conserving both the plant herbarium and the bryophyte collections and getting the data into electronic form so it can be analysed in detail for changes in distribution.

- Geoffrey has been joined by Russell Parry and Steve Woodward as Assistant County Recorders and they have spent endless hours mopping up the less popular areas of VC55 that have been avoided by other volunteers, for example those in the more far flung reaches of the county and the more urban areas such as industrial estates. This data is taking a vast amount of processing and I think the plan is to gather even more data and shortly to produce a new County Flora.
- Geoffrey fits the Sowter Memorial lecture bill perfectly as like Sowter he is a big believer in recording and analysing our county flora, by looking for changes in the flora. He also spends hours at the County Herbarium chasing down old records which can be assimilated into the new flora to make comparisons. As I understand it the search for the current list of plants and their distribution in Leicester has led to preliminary conclusions even before the data has been analysed. One is that the variety and frequency of plants in our wider countryside is diminishing, possibly due to some extent in increases in intensive agriculture and conversion of natural landscapes to industrial ones and possible climate change. Our Sowter lecturers in 2017, Richard Gornall and Anna Farrall, were assisted by Geoffrey in collecting seeds from plants at risk in our county to preserve for the future. Another finding is that we are acquiring a new alternative flora, plants unhappily often referred to as weeds that are now becoming established in our urban areas. These plants will make an enormous contribution to the 2020 BSBI Atlas and the new VC55 Atlas when completed. This, I think, is what Geoffrey will be talking about tonight. I started off by saying that one element of Natural History depends on current recording and research. Another is relating it to the past. I think tonight's talk will be giving us a flavour of the future.

The lecture began by outlining current vc55 vascular plant recording which is working towards the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland Atlas 2020. These findings were contrasted with those from the last floras of Leicestershire and of Rutland. Some notable changes in taxa numbers per tetrad showed a shift of greater variety of taxa recorded from rural to urban areas. Rural and urban habitats were compared, including ease of access. There was an analysis of the composition of our current urban flora indicating numbers of native, archaeophyte and neophyte taxa. The suitability and variety of urban habitat for certain species was highlighted, and how some of these were introduced by human activity both deliberate and accidental.

After questions, Hazel gave a vote of thanks.