

Introduction

Well over a century ago, the Reverend F A Walker, the rector of Dry Drayton at the time, published a history and natural history of the parish. This modest little book, published in 1876, recorded lists of the natural history species he found in the parish around that time - the birds, flora, butterflies, moths, mammals and other orders that he identified. Although there is no narrative to speak of, these lists give us a fascinating glimpse into the natural richness of a country parish that has changed dramatically over the course of the subsequent twentieth century. Like many country rectors of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Reverend Walker pursued an interest in the natural world, developing a keen skill in observation and identification of the flora and fauna that modern day incumbents might well envy or have little time to follow.

In his concluding remarks to the natural history, Reverend Walker stated : *"I have purposely abstained from attempting a complete catalogue of every species of each order of insects occurring in the parish. Indeed, to do so would involve a work of capture, observation, comparison, and nomenclature that would certainly occupy a long time, owing to the fact of my not being familiar with several groups, and probably lead to the indefinite postponement of this little work..."* Clearly, he also recognised the limitations of his knowledge, confining himself to those species with which he was familiar. It seems that he did have help with the flora, from a Reverend Augustine Ley, curate of King's Capel, Herefordshire, whom he acknowledges in his concluding paragraph. But his main passion must have been with the butterflies, which take up the whole first half of the natural history. For each species he recorded detailed lists of dates and numbers seen in the year 1874. At the time, collecting was all the rage and gentlemen collectors made frequent visits to the favoured insect sites such as Wicken Fen to take countless specimens and varieties of butterflies and moths. However, it seems that the Reverend Walker himself was not one of them, since no mention of collecting can be found in his accounts. All his notes apparently are derived from observations of the butterflies in their natural setting - the lanes, fields and closes of Dry Drayton.

The British countryside, including our parish, has changed out of all recognition from what Walker would have assumed was a natural order that would go on forever. He could not have foreseen the effects of two subsequent world wars on the British people and the need to be self-sufficient in food production which fuelled the agricultural revolution that followed. The dramatic effects of this, and the more subtle environmental changes on our native wildlife that resulted in its impoverishment would have seemed far-fetched to him. As for the concepts of wildlife and environmental conservation, to which we are slowly becoming accustomed, these ideals would also have appeared incredible to Walker.

And so, as we enter a new millennium, I felt it opportune to set down a natural history of Dry Drayton as it is today at the close of the twentieth century. The parish is in no way out of the ordinary as regards its natural history. There are no rarities here, no expanse of unusual habitat. But this is precisely what makes it so special to all of us. Many nature reserves have been created in Cambridgeshire and wonderful and important though they are, they are an unfortunate necessity in our man made world, set up to conserve our diminishing wildlife. No such conventional reserves exist here in Dry Drayton. It is but a small community in the wider countryside that should still be a home for plants, animals and birds, as it was in Walker's time. But it is exactly this 'wider countryside' that is most under threat now, from development, unsympathetic land management that does not have wildlife at its heart and the insidious, but now all too obvious, threats of climate change.

I hope that by putting down this record of our parish natural history, it will help us all to recognise the importance of looking after what we have left. I would like to hope that the 21st century may see a greater public enlightenment about the importance of the natural world around us and our vital stake in it, for without this our own existence becomes ever more precarious.

