

Lifelong Fascinations - a journey through natural history

ROSEMARY HILL

I was asked to write an article on how I became interested in natural history, but this is rather difficult because I cannot remember a time before I was interested. At a post-conference dinner some years ago, I can remember sitting at a table where a member of the Society for the History of Natural History asked the question 'Are field naturalists born or made?' A very lengthy and pleasant conversation ensued at the end of which it was agreed that a field naturalist is both 'born' and 'made'. So I shall go back to the beginning of what I know about 'made'. My earliest memory is one accurately dated to when I was 18 months old when close family friends moved house and I told them many years later where their small brass horse with the fur mane used to be kept before and after they moved. Note that it was an animal I was obsessed with! Three months previously I had moved to a new home with a large garden which in subsequent years I could not be kept out of. My days were spent feeding the birds, and chasing around after my father asking for wriggly worms, snails, woodlice and the greenhouse toad. There was a large flowering broom bush which swarmed with bumblebees to entrance me. The local park had some aviaries and small mammals and another park had a tropical greenhouse with a small stone pond where large goldfish could be seen. When I started school, the class would be trooped down to the park to find items for the nature table. Best of all, in the holidays my father would occasionally take me into the Department of Zoology at the University of Birmingham where he worked, to go in the animal houses where I saw various snakes, frogs, tropical fish, locusts, lizards and the usual laboratory mammals. There was even a baby crocodile which bit someone's finger and was strictly out of bounds. When not tied up with the large garden, there were frequent family trips out into the countryside to find wild flowers and birds. Fortunately the local library was at that time stocked with good natural history books. My parents kept a caravan at Borth on the Welsh coast where we holidayed 2-3 times a year until I was nine. Every time we arrived the first thing was to stop at the beach and run down to the sea. Most fine days were spent at Ynyslas where the beaches provided hours of shell hunting and the early discovery of the inevitability of tides, and Borth provided rock pools.

When I was a little older I began to hear tales of the Wire Forest because my father's parents had moved there to escape the pollution of Birmingham. They had been advised that my father's childhood bronchitis would kill him if they did not. He spent formative years wandering through the forest watching the wildlife, collecting firewood and helping to pick fruit in the



Rosemary Hill, aged three and a half

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orchards. He had a fascination for the lizards and some blue butterflies that were never satisfactorily identified, and for Dowles Manor. As I was more used to his electronics activities I envisaged a place of tangled multi-coloured wires, not trees, so he had to take me there to set the record straight. This was the first of many visits and a shared lifelong fascination.

I studied the sciences for A-level and was lucky to do the Nuffield biology course which included a project (ecological preferences of woodland wildflowers) and my first field meeting looking at Cornish rocky shores which extended my marine shore knowledge. I read Biology (Ecology) at the University of Durham, a course split between the Departments of Botany and Zoology with Geology as a subsidiary subject. Zoology gave me a good grounding in the invertebrates and in using keys for identification, and botany included trips to Upper Teesdale for the habitats and flora, often with David Bellamy, and it was then that I began to get interested in field identification of mosses, seriously wild places and plant sociology (my degree project

Wyre Forest Study Group



Dowles Manor in the winter of 1938/39

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involved this). All three subjects involved field trips around NE England and I discovered what a wonderful area this is. When I met Ron Boyce who came from the Durham area this also became a second shared lifelong fascination and we had many happy and productive holidays working our way around the nature reserves including the Magnesian limestone and its orchids.

By chance a mutual friend encouraged Ron and I to go on a field meeting organised by June Chatfield and this was the beginning of a more serious study of molluscs. It helped that there are limestone sites in Hampshire, increasing the number of species found, and involvement with the Conchological Society of Great Britain followed. Interest then spread from land and freshwater to marine molluscs, especially the microscopic species. Ron and I were also invited by the same friend to visit New Zealand and that began another lifelong fascination by providing completely new habitats and species to challenge everything previously known in an extraordinarily beautiful country. On my first trip there I wandered onto the muddy shore at Akaroa Harbour and was amazed to find an assemblage of shells with a striking resemblance to the Barton Beds fossils of the UK and I began to look for molluscs all around the country finding similar species

to those in the UK occupying similar habitats. There are a large number of endemic species in New Zealand and I found this sharpened my ability to distinguish the differences between species and this then applies in turn to the UK fauna. On every trip into the field there is always more to discover.



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