



Duncan Stewart

The arrival of Duncan Stewart as a boy in Phil's in 2003 saw the NHS acquire its best Secretary for at least a generation, and many believe its best ever. With his quiet, persuasive Scottish charm, Duncan coaxed first his Don i/c out of NHS hibernation, and then proceeded to make the Society the best-supported in the School. The Library section has been

restocked and revamped, equipment replaced and updated, and even the minibus has a magnetic insignia!

From moribund to merry band in about three years flat, the Society experienced a sea change – from intermittent and poorly attended local jaunts to a full programme of a dozen trips a term, days out handling reptiles on the Dorset heaths, the reinstatement of overnight trips to Portland and the Dawn Chorus tradition, Sunday excursions to Slimbridge in Gloucestershire, Stone Curlew hunts, a lecture visit from Professor Oliver Rackham (now the Society's Honorary President) and more besides, all attended by up to twenty regulars and many more occasional members.

In 2008, Duncan, his lieutenant, Thomas Mills, a contemporary Philite, and a dozen others sallied forth to India on a quest for Bengal Tigers - and they found them, trumping all other school trips, it is believed, with not only nine Tigers, but 200+ bird species, numerous other mammals, Delhi and the Taj Mahal as well! The follow-up trip, in Spring 2009, saw a further fourteen boys take on all the wildlife South Africa could throw at them – from Southern Right Whales and Great White Sharks, to leopards, lions, white rhinos and over 300 birds.

Duncan surpassed even himself in his final term, when he, somehow and single-handedly, talked Sir David Attenborough into coming to lecture to a packed New Hall. An audience of over 500 simply had to be the

biggest NHS meeting of all time – and with a natural history demi-god as the star turn (and now the Society's Honorary Patron)!



Sir David Attenborough, May 2008

Duncan finally left Winchester, a wildlife-packed 'gap' year and a glittering zoology career at Oxford ahead of him. But it was not to be. While working as a volunteer for the Argyll Fisheries Trust in his beloved West Highlands in October 2008, Duncan tragically lost his life, as a passenger in a road traffic accident.

The NHS as it now exists, thriving, popular and getting more boys out of Winchester than for decades, is Duncan's memorial here at his old school. And thriving the Society is – lots of junior members, lots of trips, a fundraising campaign in support of the critically endangered Northern Bald Ibis, equally enthusiastic, if contrasting Secretaries in Joshua Nightingale (Coll) and Freddy Hawkings (H) and the prospect of Morocco in Spring 2010! Additionally, an annual lecture in Duncan's memory has been established – this February, Chris Packham, the presenter of BBC's *Springwatch* was the invited speaker.

So, 140 years on, the NHS represents tradition, enterprise, enthusiasm and the outdoors. The Sub-Committees have gone, the activities of the Society no longer focus on dusty collections of eggs and beetles, and the NHS is in rude health.



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# Natural History Society

in the field since 1870!



# Natural History Society

The current dons in charge, Simon Woolley (Coll, 1983-88) and Julia Casson, update us on the NHS in 2010

Founded in 1870, the Natural History Society is among the very oldest of Win Coll's societies. Established with the encouragement of Headmaster Ridding, the NHS was from its very beginning an arcane institution, with a byzantine structure comprising numerous sections (including an Astronomical Section – Astro: Soc: of the 2009 vintage, beware!), sub-committees and important-sounding official positions. Almost anything of scientific interest came within its compass, even the archaeological finds that resulted from the installation of a municipal sewage system in 1878. Science teaching had only just begun at Winchester and Darwin's *Origin* was a bare twenty years old – while observations of the natural world had a proud heritage (notably, in Hampshire, in the person of Gilbert White at Selborne); organised, scientifically-based recording of what is now called 'wildlife' was in its infancy in 1870.

Practical activities on St Catherine's Hill and further afield were supplemented by a series of lectures (topics included 'Diamond Mining at Kimberley' and 'The Channel Tunnel'), and boys and dons made presentations on their areas of enquiry. It has often provided its own kind of humour, sometimes unintentionally: early lectures included 'The Homing Pigeon' by A. Sparrow, and a Collegeman talking, from personal experience some would say, on 'some low forms of life'; a report on a demonstration by a taxidermist concluded triumphantly: 'in less than an hour he had stuffed an unprepared starling'.

Such enterprises notwithstanding, the NHS effectively collapsed after just over a decade of existence, but was re-established at least twice before the First World War, notably under the enthusiasm of Mottram Hewett (don: 1884-1916). He had an infectious love for the outdoor life and a little-boy delight in creepy-crawlies, bird-nesting, rat-catching and fish-snaring. But the Establishment of the School regarded him and his followers with some disfavour.

This is the way he begins the introduction to his still classic pamphlet called 'Bug-hunting': 'I feel it advisable at the outset to utter a humble word or two in the hopes of propitiating those great deities, the Captains of Lords and Football, and the Senior Prefects of the various Houses... and the particular attribute before which I prostrate myself is the suspicion with which they regard Bug-hunting, considering it a dangerous pastime and liable to sap the foundations of all true manhood.'

A later book, *The Open-Air Boy* has a gleeful emphasis on killing rabbits with traps, sparrows with catapults, or eels with spears. *The New York Times*, in its 1902 review, considered a more appropriate title to be *A Ruthless Boy* and opened by considering that Hewett 'must have been born with the instincts of a savage'.

The newly opened Museum (1897) provided a space for the ever-growing NHS collections, some of which remain intact – notably the herbarium, recently reorganised and curated by Alastair Land (don, 2003-)

the greater part of the Lepidoptera collections, lovingly restored by Jonathan Cooper (don, 1986-), some of the stuffed birds (many acquired by Headmaster Fearon from William Chalkley, the renowned local taxidermist), and almost all of the Oological Section's precious booty. The latter is kept safe, but out of sight these days – blown birds' eggs (including those of many endangered species) are not how the NHS likes to present itself in the 21st century!

The tides of interest in natural history have ebbed and flowed in the past century – notably, surges of enthusiasm occurred in the Edwardian period, when bicycle expeditions to the New Forest, the coast and elsewhere grew in popularity, and

Watching deer in the New Forest



in the mid-1950s, when 'Bunny' Dowdeswell (don, 1951-68) was at the helm, followed by Michael Baron (don, 1956-88), both natural historians of national repute. The attitude to conservation was also beginning to expand and this resulted locally in Bunny setting up the Fallodon Nature Reserve in Water Meadows. A boy Warden was appointed and bird trapping with mist nets and a tunnel trap to enable bird ringing provided many with a literally 'hands on' experience. Clearing of ditches and improvement of water flow in the stream alongside Fallodon produced a favoured site for salmon spawning and may have done much to improve the summer runs of the fish into the River Itchen.

In the early 1960s, when the annual Dawn Chorus expedition was perhaps in its heyday, NHS members contributed regularly to newly established national recording schemes (such as the Common Birds Census and the National Ringing Scheme) and first findings of several new hybrid orchids can be credited to the

Crabbing in Chichester Harbour



Society; one bears the name of its discoverer, H. A. Jackson, 'The Jacker' (C, 1898-1903; don, 1908-47 & 50). This era produced a number of boys who became real experts in

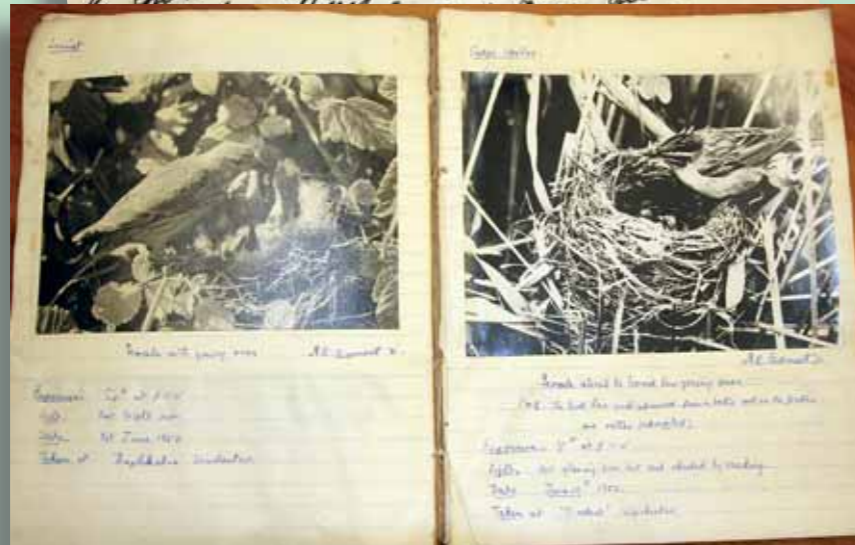
Team NHS in South Africa, 2009

a wide variety of spheres, including some of international repute: from one who set up a Management Plan for the major Panda Reserve at Wolong – Dr John Mackinnon (H, 1960-65) – to another who made a monumental study of the rare birds and their extinction in the islands of the Pacific – Dr Alex Cheke (A, 1961-65).

In the late 1970s-1980s, Geoffrey Robinson's enthusiastic and relaxed approach encouraged many an over-serious and/or under-employed young Wykehamist (the author included!) out into the surrounding countryside. The dynamic duo of Baron and Durran (don, 1960-93) supplemented Geoffrey's efforts with regular summer Bot Soc trips.

With the growth of mass-participation music, sport, electronic communication (and who knows what else), NHS has at times struggled to maintain its position, but, unlike the Archaeological, Printing, Stamp Collecting and many other 'old-fashioned' school societies, it has never folded and never has a term gone by without proper NHS trips. True, the early 1990s were lean years, with some exceptionally keen individuals but little wider interest, but even then the Society went international, taking a small group of boys to witness bird migration in Israel in 1994. Sam Bosanquet (G, 90-95), Richard Billington (C, 90-05), Tom Gilbert (C, 96-01) and Tom Grose (F, 98-03) kept things functional into the new millennium, but it is in the last four years that the Society has seen its latest renaissance.

*This Society was first proposed March 10<sup>th</sup> 1870. A meeting was held of those who wished to become members of such a Society; at which it was resolved that the Society should be formed; that it should be divided into sections embracing the various branches of natural history; that it should be under the control of a Committee of 5, 3 of whom to be President, Secretary, and Treasurer at least.*



The founding Minutes, 1870 and bird photography, 1950