



Sutton Coldfield Natural History Society

A Brief History of the Society

The very first record of the existence of a Sutton Coldfield Natural History Society consists of the minutes of a committee meeting held on 19 December 1919; the meeting was chaired by Mr H. Foster Newey, who became the first President. The first public meeting was to be a 'Conversazione', which was to be arranged 'as early as possible'. The first programme seems to have been published in 1921, with fortnightly meetings from 10 February to 28 April of that year. By then, the President was H. Overton, and the Secretary was Mary Richards. On 23 November 1921, it was agreed to 'amalgamate' with the Vesey Club: the 1923 programme is headed 'Vesey Club and Sutton Coldfield Natural History Society', with the former in larger print. The Society continued to hold committee meetings and issue programmes from 1921 to 1931. Intriguingly, the connection with the Vesey Club seems to have either weakened or disappeared, since the later programmes are headed only 'Sutton Coldfield Natural History Society'. The last known meeting was held on 15 January 1932. The Society then ceased to exist, and there are no records of any meetings for some 19 years.

The Sutton Coldfield Natural History Society was re-founded in its present form by G. Mantle Childe (who had been a member of the original Society). He called together a committee which met on 24 October 1951 and took the chair as the President of the Society. The minutes record that the meeting drew up a winter programme. The first Annual General Meeting was held on 8 June 1952, chaired by the President; all subsequent AGMs have been numbered accordingly, so that, e.g., the 2001 AGM was the 50th. (There was, sadly, no 70th AGM in 2021 because of Covid-19.) Regretfully, no minutes remain for the 1953 to 1962 AGMs, but minutes of committee meetings are continuous from 1951 to the present. An interesting feature is that in the '50s and '60s, several of the committee meetings were held in Dovedale during summer 'expeditions' in which members would stay at hotels (e.g. on 26 July 1958 the Committee met at the Izaak Walton Hotel, Dovedale).

Some notable events

1951 The Society was re-founded in its present form.

1953 A Junior Section was set up. It was led for a long time by Kathleen M. Lightfoot (née Green).

1955 The first New Year Social was held. There was a 'Quizzical Social Evening' on 2 January 1952, but 1953 and 1954 seem to have had ordinary meetings in January.

1956 The AGM was first held in September as at present – originally it was held in the Spring. G. Mantle Childe was the President/Chairman.

1957 The offices of President and Chairman were separated, P. James becoming the Society's first Chairman, G. Mantle Childe remaining President.

1962 The Fellowship Hall was first used as a meeting place; before this time meetings were held either in members' houses or in the Central Library.

1963 The Friends of the Park Association proposed that they 'incorporate' the Society. The Secretary counter-proposed that "the FPA might consider making [the SCNHS] an annual grant in return for guidance and assistance in any matters concerning the natural history of the Park." It seems to have been a stand-off!

1964 The Society first had a representative on the 'Parks Advisory Committee' which involved both the Sutton Coldfield Borough Council and local societies.

1965 "A Guide to Sutton Park" was published, edited by the then Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Society, P. James and J.C.W. Field.

1966 M.J. Hill was first elected a Committee member; he became Acting Records Officer on 3 November 1966 and was confirmed as Records Officer at the 1967 AGM. He served the Society in this capacity until 1999.

1967 On 30 October, the Committee agreed to send out a 'News Bulletin'. On 5 March 1968, this was referred to in the minutes as the 'Four Seasons', but it was agreed that there should be three issues a year rather than four. Hence it appears that, in spite of its title, there never were four issues! (There are currently only two.)

1974 With the re-organization of local government, the Parks Advisory Committee ceased to exist and with it our representation.

1984 The Committee structure was revised and clarified. The first Annual Dinner was held at the Holly Bush, Little Hay.

1985 The Society was at last able to join Birmingham District Council's Sutton Park Advisory Committee (after making representations for some years).

1988 Following a decision of the AGM, the office of President was made five-yearly and Harold Fowkes was elected to the post. (He had previously been appointed President on a temporary basis for 1987/88.)

1989 The AGM adopted a new constitution.

1991 "A Natural History of Sutton Park – Part 1: The Vascular Plants" was published by the Society, written by the Society's President and Secretary, Harold Fowkes and Peter Coxhead.

1992 "Part 2: Fungi, Lichens & Bryophytes" was published (edited by Harold Fowkes and Peter Coxhead).

1995 "Part 3: Birds" (by S. Bodnar) was published (with the same editors).

1997 A second edition of Part 1 was published. The Society was involved in the ceremony declaring Sutton Park a National Nature Reserve.

2003 The Society was left a substantial bequest following the deaths of two former Honorary Members, Kathleen and Frank Lightfoot.

2005 Following the death of the then President, Harold Fowkes, the post was left vacant.

2014 The Sutton Coldfield Area Group of the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust merged with the Society. The Autumn Programme was drawn up by a joint meeting of the committees of both groups. The closure of the Fellowship Hall, where the Society had met for at least 40 years, was a further stimulus to change to the Sutton Coldfield Area Group's normal meeting date of the second Thursday of the month.

Officers of the Society

On its foundation in 1951, the only officers of the Society were the President, Secretary and Treasurer. There

were also three ordinary members of the Committee. In 1956, the Committee first proposed the election of an officer described as 'President/Chairman'; from 1957 onwards, the Society has had a separate President and Chairman. The Society has had a variety of other Officers at different times. One of the first additions seems to have been a Vice-President, who later became the Vice-Chairman. There was sometimes an Assistant Secretary, and almost always a Press Officer. From 1964 onwards, the Society had a Records Officer, although this post was usually combined with another. There seem to have been either three or four ordinary committee members. Strict constitutionality has never been a virtue (or a vice) of the Society!

Principal Officers since Re-founding

| Year(s) | President | Chairman | Secretary | Treasurer |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 51/52 | G. Mantle Childe | | Miss G. Brookes | Mrs M. Brookes |
| 52/53 | " | | Miss M. Leake | ? |
| 53/54 | " | | " | Miss G. Brookes |
| 54/55 | " | | " | Miss B. Phillips |
| 55/56 | " | | Mr & Mrs J.C.W. Field | " |
| 56/57 | " | G. Mantle Childe | " | " |
| 57/58 – 58/59 | " | P. James | " | " |
| 59/60 – 62/63 | " | " | J.C.W. Field | " |
| 63/64 – 67/68 | " | " | J. Presland | " |
| 68/69 | <i>vacant</i> | Mrs C. Smith | " | " |
| 69/70 | P. James | " | R.J.G. MacFarlane | " |
| 70/71 – 73/74 | " | J. Presland | " | " |
| 74/75 – 75/76 | " | Mrs A. Freeman | H.H. Fowkes | " |
| 76/77 | " | " | " | " / R.G. Winfield |
| 77/78 – 78/79 | " | " | " | R.G. Winfield |
| 79/80 | " | " / R.H. Ide | " / Miss J. Dorman | " |
| 80/81 – 81/82 | " | R.H. Ide | Miss J. Dorman | Mrs B. Wadsworth |
| 82/83 – 85/86 | " | " | Dr P. Coxhead | " |
| 86/87 | " / H.H. Fowkes | " | " | " |
| 87/88 | H.H. Fowkes | " | " | " |
| 88/89 | " | W. Hayston | " | Mrs B. Smith |
| 89/90 | " | " | " | " / D. Shepherd |
| 90/91 | " | Miss J. Ryder | " | D. Shepherd |
| 91/92 – 94/95 | " | Mrs M. Willson | " | " |
| 94/95 – 97/98 | " | " | " | Miss K. Ashcroft |
| 98/99 – 04/05 | " | M.F. Moore | " | " |
| 05/06 – present | <i>vacant</i> | " | " | " |