

DEVON & CORNWALL NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY 1838-1851

In 1851, the Plymouth Institution (now the Plymouth Athenaeum) merged with the Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society.

The Natural History Society had been formed on 3rd May 1838. Many of its founders were members of the Plymouth Institution, including Charles Hamilton Smith, retired soldier and natural historian.

Hamilton Smith, an early experimenter with camouflage in soldiers' uniforms, was President of the Natural History Society.

The Natural History Society met first at the Mechanics' Institute in Princess Square and then at the Royal Union Baths, designed by John Foulston, architect of the original Athenaeum, on the south side of Union Street.



It met in the upper rooms of the Baths, which accommodated an extensive museum and naturalist's library: "The Baths comprised shower, vapour, and swimming baths, a reading-room, and a room for refreshments. The waters of a medicinal spring named the Victoria Spa, are dispensed at the pump-room in the same building," according to 'A Topographical Dictionary of England' in 1848.

The Natural History Society boasted about 150 members against 44 of the Institution. Charles Darwin and William Hooker were among the members and women were allowed to attend most meetings.

The merger invigorated the Institution, but brought with it the cumbersome name of 'The Plymouth Institution and Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society'.

Below is an extract from the 'Annals and Magazine of Natural History', published in 1841:

DEVON AND CORNWALL NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY.

The Members of the Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society met for the first time on Monday evening, the 4th of January, in their new rooms, at the Royal Union Baths, Plymouth. There was a crowded attendance of Members and their friends, amongst whom were many ladies resident in the town and neighbourhood. This Society has been established about three years, and numbers above a hundred Members. Lectures are delivered weekly during the six summer months, and monthly conversaziones held during the winter. Zoological, Botanical, Geological and Statistical Sections have been formed, which meet at stated periods, and from which much valuable local information may be anticipated. Lieut.-Col. Hamilton Smith, K.H., K.W., F.R.S., F.L.S., &c. &c. &c., the well-known naturalist, is the President of the Society.

Captain Creyke, R.N., one of the Vice-Presidents, was requested to preside on this occasion.

Capt. Creyke, on being called to the chair, mentioned the encouraging prospects of the Society on the opening of their new rooms at the commencement of the new year, and the pleasing business of the evening, the presentation of the portrait of their highly talented and esteemed President.

A testimonial relative to this gratifying object having been read by Mr. Markes, as Secretary of a Committee appointed for the purpose, Mr. G. W. Soltau congratulated the Society upon having obtained a room so well qualified for the delivery of its Lectures, and possessing such excellent accommodation for the reception of the Museum, which he hoped at no very distant period would rival any in the West of England, and in a situation so accessible to country subscribers and to all who might visit the neighbourhood; and alluded to the advantages of such Societies from that friendly feeling which is engendered amongst all classes in the search of truth and investigation of nature.

"Plymouth," observed Mr. Soltau, "presents peculiar attractions for the formation of a Natural History Society, when we reflect that we are situated in one of the largest harbours of England, which daily offers additions to our Museum, obtained from every quarter of the globe; that we are situated in the midst of the most extensive mining district in Britain, and that our soil produces some of the rarest specimens of the vegetable world. We have now a place suitable for the reception of those wonders of nature, and which

is at all times open to any individual who may take pleasure in their investigation; and allow me specially to remark, that we are most ready at all times to further and assist the most humble inquirer after knowledge. Allow me now, in behalf of several of the Members of this Institution, to present the portrait of Lieut.-Col. Hamilton Smith to this Society. His name, his talents, his acquirements, are too well known here, are too well known wherever science is appreciated or knowledge sought, to require any remarks from me. Long, long may the original of that portrait remain amongst us, to benefit us by his counsel, to aid us by his advice, and add lustre to the Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society!"

The Chairman, having warmly expressed his sense of the talents and worth of the President, and the obligations which he had conferred upon the Society, the adoption of the testimonial proposed by the Committee having been carried by acclamation, the Chairman resigned the chair to Lieut.-Col. Hamilton Smith, who delivered the following address:—

"Gentlemen,—At length we have the pleasure of meeting in our new locality; in a situation where I trust the Society will long continue to flourish in zeal and unanimity, with advantage to the studious portion of these towns and honour to itself. The situation where we are now assembled is one of the most convenient that could be selected, for Members residing at opposite distances will find it nearly central. The space we already possess, with the additional rooms which we shall obtain on or before next Midsummer, will supply all the accommodation the Society can reasonably want for some years; and should the pursuit of natural history become so prosperous that by that time our space within this building should become insufficient, I am sure every Member present will admit such a result would be one of congratulation more than regret. As far as my own opinions are concerned, I feel we are now in possession of a Lecture Room sufficient for the wants of the Society, and of additional space for the exhibition of our geological and mineralogical specimens, for a Committee Room and Library, and for a Store Room, all on one floor, exclusively tenanted by ourselves, in a handsome building and remote from noisy interruptions. I deem it a favourable omen, that on this day of our first assembling here the Meeting should be graced by the presence of ladies. Here let us hope that we shall often be again honoured by their presence; nay, more, that they will deem it time well employed, occasionally to come and participate in some branches of our pursuits. Here we may look forward, in the course of next August, to find a portion of the British Association, such, for example, as the Medical Section, promulgating and discussing some of those immensely important discoveries which the zeal and profound abilities of the first men of their class in Europe are constantly bringing forward on occasion of their Annual Meetings; and before I proceed, I beg to announce to the Society, that I have received an official communication from the Plymouth Council, appointed to make the preparatory arrangements,—a communication which the Secretary will have the goodness to read to you in the course of this evening. But to proceed: it is in this room I fondly hope the Society will pursue, with renovated spirit, the several subjects of inquiry embraced by its Sections: here Zoology and Botany will receive their due share of attention; Geology and Mineralogy will be carried on with that enlightened zeal which is already beginning to bear fruit in the vicinity. Here, as soon as fit elements can be created, I

shall be anxious to propose the formation of an Agricultural and Horticultural Section, with a view of spreading in these counties, among the smaller proprietors and agriculturists, information on the progress made in other districts and abroad."

The President then expressed the sincere gratification he felt at the spontaneous and valuable testimony of approbation of his exertions in the cause of science, and of personal regard which he had received.

The letter from the Local Council stated that the British Association would visit these towns in the early part of the ensuing autumn, and that the liberal support of the nobility and gentry of the two counties was looked forward to with confidence by the Council.

Mr. J. C. Beliamy, one of the Curators, announced the following donations to the Society since the last Meeting:—

A valuable collection of Minerals, from Sir George Magrath; Fossils, Minerals, Birds and Shells, Rev. W. S. Hore; Minerals, W. R. Newton, jun.; Land Shells of Devon and Cornwall, Rev. C. A. Johns; Coral, Lieut.-Col. H. Smith; *Ornithorhynchus paradoxus*, Capt. Smith; Fossils, Dr. Tripe; Birds, Mr. A. Pincombe; Birds, Rev. F. Lyte; Grasses, &c., Adj. Stevens, R.M.

The Rev. C. A. Johns, F.L.S., rose and said, "I cannot allow the evening to pass without proposing a resolution, which I am confident will meet with the cordial support of every Member present. We are all aware that the very being of a Natural History Society depends upon its Museum; for without the opportunity of constantly referring to specimens, neither the tyro nor the proficient in natural history can expect to derive much benefit. Through the kindness of our numerous Members our Museum already contains a great number of specimens; but this is not enough, for without order and arrangement their value is greatly diminished. This desirable object was effected, so far as space would allow, in our late rooms, and for this we are indebted to our Curators. Within the last fortnight, however, every case with its contents has been removed, and the specimens re-arranged."

Mr. Johns concluded by moving thanks to the Curators, which was carried.

The Rev. W. S. Hore, F.L.S., F.G.S., in returning thanks on behalf of himself and colleague, said that the requisite time and labour had been most readily and willingly given. "We only regret," he added, "that the limited means of the Society prevented us from making a more splendid display this evening, though the additional labour might to us have been sensibly increased. Numerous specimens of rare Mammals and Birds are in our drawers, which the expense of mounting alone prevented us from displaying amongst our other treasures. I would also beg to remind the Members that the geological and mineralogical specimens possessed by the Society are not exposed to view in consequence of the room intended as the Museum for that branch of Natural History not having yet been prepared for their reception. When exhibited, they will prove that much attention has been paid to the geology of this and the neighbouring county by the Geological Section." Mr. Hore then alluded to the advantages of the location which had been selected, and which, independently of the increased accommodation, would afford facilities to such residents in Devonport and Stonehouse as might feel inclined to join the Society, which already presented encouraging prospects of increase.

Mr. J. C. Bellamy also returned thanks, and acknowledged the valuable assistance which had been received from Mr. Sampson, and from Mr. Pincombe, the Preserver to the Society.

Votes of thanks were also passed to Mr. P. F. Bellamy, Treasurer, and Mr. R. Saunders, Secretary.