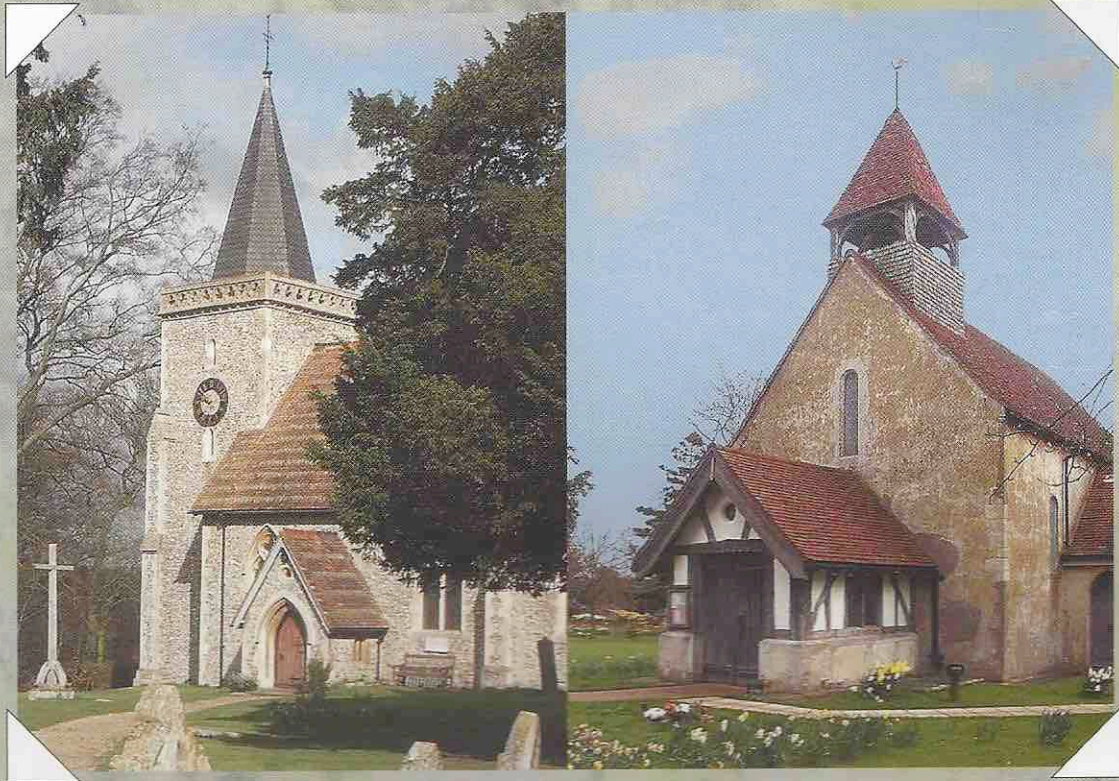


THE
BOURNE SOCIETY

Village Histories



8 **CHELSHAM & FARLEIGH**

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Chapter 18

The Local Naturalists

by Brian Thomas

RECORDING THE PAST

With the rapid changes in our environment and the accelerating declines and local extinctions of several species of plants and animals, it is perhaps more important now than ever before to keep accurate records of our local flora and fauna and the habitats in which they can be found. Only a few years ago, many of us living in Chelsham and Farleigh or just walking through one of their leafy lanes, perhaps took for granted the sight of a flock of house sparrows, a hedgehog running across the road, a pond full of frogspawn, or a sky dotted with bats. How many of these wonders of nature can you guarantee seeing today? Similarly it was not that long ago that a mid-summer drive round the district produced such a splattering of insects on the car windscreen that the wipers had to be engaged to clear the mess or a full hose-down was necessary on returning home! Many kitchens had sticky insect strips hanging from the ceilings or a can of fly-killer on standby. These are virtually things of the past since there are now so few insects. Unfortunately it is not only the insects that have declined – where are the mud nests of the house martins under the eaves, where are the flycatchers that nested every year on the corbelling of the chimney stack or the swallows flying low over the fields and gathering on the telephone and power lines in the autumn ready for their long return flight to South Africa?

It is extremely fortunate that a number of exceptionally gifted and dedicated naturalists took the trouble to record in considerable detail the wildlife in Chelsham and Farleigh. Foremost amongst these were Arthur Beadell, Raymond Clarke, Hubert Pounds and Cecil Prime. Raymond Clarke wrote 'It is difficult to imagine any English rival to this area in respect of recorded knowledge about plants'. Historical ornithological records are similarly second to none.

ARTHUR BEADELL (1872-1957)

'It was no vicar or anyone else who endowed Arthur Beadell with the two-fold power which he shared with Gilbert White of Selborne – the gift of seeing what the rest of us miss, and the perfect ability to say exactly what he had seen.'

So said Ray Clarke in *The Bourne Society Local History Records* in 1966. Beadell did not have the opportunity to attain the scholastic heights of Messrs Pounds, Clarke and Prime but was nevertheless fortunate in having a very good and much loved 'character building' schoolmaster at Warlingham – John David Clarke – who taught there for 31 years, from 1879. Typical of the times however, Beadell left school for manual work on a farm at a very early age and thus of necessity was largely self-educated.

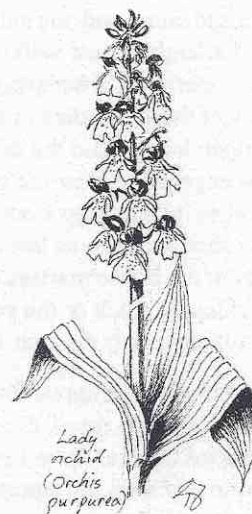
His contemporaries whilst accepting his interest in birds and animals, thought him childish and a freak to be engrossed in the study of plants and butterflies. Fortunately this did not deter Arthur from being 'his own man'. He records that he had to work on a farm for seven years without a holiday and that because he was too poor



A HISTORY OF CHELSHAM AND FARLEIGH

to purchase books – and being in any event ignorant of what particular books were available – he consequently made 'little advance in knowledge'. Fortunately these years were not wasted, for whilst out in the fields in all weathers, tending the farm animals, he noted with poetic accuracy the wonders of the local countryside. Things improved over the years since he clearly found more and more spare time to roam the wilds of Chelsham and Farleigh, particularly so later on when he ran his own building business from a yard at 46-48 Sunny Bank. He lived in two old but quaint flint cottages a little further down the road at 66-68. It was not unusual for staff returning home in the early hours of the morning after a night shift at the nearby Warlingham Park Hospital to see the open-collared Mr Beadell sitting on his front doorstep playing 'The bluebells of Scotland' or other well known tunes on his tin whistle.

Beadell's education advanced apace. On his frequent perambulations around the district he would find a plant he did not know and immediately take it to a local botanist to name. It was not long before a second opinion was needed on one of his finds and then a third, until he made friends with nationally famous figures in the field such as W H Griffin (a friend of Charles Darwin) and C E Salmon (author of *The Flora of Surrey*). In Beadell's classic little book entitled *Nature Notes of Warlingham and Chelsham* he relates the wonderful story of his most exciting botanical find – the *locally extinct* Lady Orchid – and all the frustrations he encountered over several years before the 'red letter day' when Mr Salmon came by train from Reigate to confirm its reappearance in the County after an absence of 72 years! Beadell's book transports the reader to many scenes sadly long since gone, but his descriptions bring them to life; so much so that it is almost possible to smell the banks of marjoram and thyme, picture the gathering of gallons of luscious wild strawberries, discover the secret spot where nine different species of orchid can be found, or crawl through carpets of stinging nettles – oblivious to pain – to snatch a magical 'once in a lifetime' glimpse of 60 hooded crows together.



Arthur Beadell at his 'Sunny Bank' cottage

Arthur Beadell, the 'grandfather' of local naturalists, did not confine himself to observing wildlife. When a local footpath was blocked, extinguished, or to be diverted, letters were sent to the Ramblers' Association, local and sometimes even national newspapers. As the early custodian of our local wildlife heritage he recognised the importance of conservation and was, for example, a leading light in the long struggle to purchase, and so preserve, the 200 acre Selsdon Wood Nature Reserve and Bird Sanctuary; the largest landholding of The National Trust in the London area at the time. Malcolm Sharpe, Chairman of the Committee to preserve these woods, regularly corresponded with Beadell. The latter's influence was such that his recommendation of a Chelsham man, Robert Barnes, for the post of first senior keeper, resulted in his appointment on 27 April 1936 at a weekly wage of £3. Barnes, originally from Buckinghamshire, had previously been

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employed as gamekeeper to the Daniell family on the Fairchildes estate at Chelsham. Beadell knew all the keepers employed in the two parishes and many more from miles around. It is almost certain, therefore, that Barnes was not only a good keeper but one with a natural affinity for, and love of, the natural world. His employers were clearly happy, since he kept his post at the Bird Sanctuary until his retirement some 15 years later. In a quiet plot of Warlingham churchyard the best known local naturalist took his final 'retirement'. An appropriate birdbath memorial in grey lichen-covered stone marks the spot; the simple inscription 'Arthur Beadell Student of Nature 1872- 1957' perhaps understates his unique contribution.