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On the evening of Monday 1st July 1895, between 8pm and 11.30pm,

**Conversazione in the University Museum
'By kind permission of the Delegates'**

In honour of the eighteenth Annual meeting of the Midland Union of
Natural History Societies.

Evening Dress, Carriages at 11.30

Megan Price

About 400 people were present at this event, which was organised by Henry Underhill, a High Street Grocer and amateur archaeologist, and Edward Poulton, University of Oxford lecturer in Zoology.

The Victorian conversazione was a social gathering held once or twice a year by a learned society. It was a ubiquitous cultural event of tremendous significance and popularity, representing the epitome of middle class cultural sophistication; it was a way of demonstrating to the public the society's scientific prowess and its institutional pride. In Oxford, the Ashmolean Society, the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club, the Junior Science Club and the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society each held individual and distinct Conversazioni.

These occasions normally had a preliminary planning committee, an ambitious programme of events and presented exhibitions of 'natural and artificial wonders' (Bellamy 1908: 337). In Oxford these societies were able to make use of the new University Museum, which had opened in 1860. Surviving plans of exhibits and programmes of speakers reveal that during the 1880s and 1890s, University members such as Edward Tylor (1832–1917), Arthur Evans (1854–1941) and Edward Poulton (1856–1943) played prominent roles in the proceedings.

Non-University individuals were also involved. Henry Underhill (1855–1920), a High Street Grocer, was often called upon to give lanternslide lectures. Frank Bellamy, an Assistant at the Observatory, demonstrated various telescopes, and George Druce, a chemist and botanist, display his collection of local flora.

In the Victorian era science often operated in the public gaze, through lectures and *Conversazioni* at newly established museums, from pressed flowers and collections of seashells, telescopes and demonstrations of gases, to fossils and ancient human remains, the physical and visual products of activities relating to natural knowledge were presented to and by the urban British public. The amateur and the emerging professional whether collector, researcher or writer participated in these *conversazioni* as visitor, exhibitor, and lecturer and often all three.

The subject matter of the *conversazione* or *soiree* was remarkably eclectic. The new Oxford University Museum, in the Gothic style, provided an exemplary setting of fine and decorative arts in which to display natural history, antiquities, archaeology, ethnography, technology, chemistry and astronomy against a background of music, selections from the popular classics.

The visual, aural, olfactory and tactile elements of these *Conversazioni* were a foretaste of today's interactive museums. The walls of the University Museum were covered with diagrams, landscapes, portraits and statues. To illustrate their subject, speakers used massive prepared illustrations, freehand drawings on chalkboard and the magic lantern. For scientific demonstrations and travel and discovery these were invaluable, they could bring the distant, foreign and 'other' into the Victorian scene. In biology there could enlarge the miniscule to frightening proportions-creating nineteenth century horror films.

The gaze of the visitors would not only be on the exhibits, this was an opportunity to see and be seen, and the participants were part of the display. The local press was meticulous in recording those present. In Oxford, the mix of 'town' dignitaries such as George Claridge Druce, in his capacity of Mayor, and the notables of 'the gown' (Arthur Evans, Edward Tylor), who were already becoming national figures, supplies valuable evidence of the relatively broad social sphere of those interested in science.

This was also an opportunity for academic scientists within the University to recruit amateur collectors or assistants whose work would support their own research; for example, amateurs could display the products of their often-isolated scientific endeavours with like-minded visitors. Whether fascinated by spiders and stone circles, like Henry Underhill, or by astronomical observations like F. A. Bellamy, there would be someone there with an equal passion.

Non-experts or non-professionals could, at least, on these occasions exchange ideas with professionals on an equal footing. The following day the grocer returned to his store and the professor to his lecture room.

The Growth of Local Scientific Societies, Social Relationships Knowledge

In 1873, the scientific journal *Nature* ran a series of articles on the growth of local societies, in order to highlight the 'general advance of intelligence, elevation of taste, and spread of education during the present century' (Nov 1873: 24). This was felt to be as the result of the increase of local scientific societies from about 1840. Learned societies in London were already well established, with their own protocol and traditions of membership. The Society of Antiquaries, The Royal Society and the British Association, for example, consisted of men from the intellectual aristocracy of nineteenth century who, through their relational networks held considerable power in the creation of new knowledge.

On another social and cultural level a new class of people was beginning to gain access to this new knowledge. The growing section of society, termed the middle classes, and lower middle

classes, had by around the 1870s become both educated and mobile and were able to participate in intellectual activities, (see Allen 1994; Cooter and Pumphrey 1994). The 'growing taste for science' in the nineteenth century had encouraged the emergence of new local intellectual societies. They differed from those already in existence, normally called the Literary and Philosophical Societies (Lit and Phil), where members came from the middle and upper classes and were less involved with science than broader intellectual topics. Between 1781 and 1830, there were twenty-two 'Lit and Phil' societies, mainly in the north of England. The manufacturing cities of York, Leeds, Halifax, Sheffield and Bradford were the location of many of these societies where the members were wealthy industrialists (Alberti 2003). Through personal connections, family or business networks, the presidents of these societies were able to attract some of the most famous scientific speakers of Victorian Britain. Thomas Huxley, William Boyd Dawkins, E. Ray Lankester, George Rolleston, and Alfred Russell Wallace all appeared in their programmes (Alberti 2003: 345). Edward Tylor was a frequent speaker in Yorkshire during the 1870s, where he had family and business connections (Anna Tylor's notebook).

From the 1850s, the number local of these intellectual societies increased, but rather than being in the 'Lit and Phil' mould, they were simpler in composition and to a certain extent, more socially accessible. The county societies were often the haunt of clergymen, doctors, lawyers and local 'squires,' (see Levine 1986). A local society was an association of like-minded individuals from a particular locality which met regularly for the common study of one or more branches of science. Members regularly presented papers on a wide range of subjects, and, what is perhaps more important, they carried out physical investigation of the natural history, geology, zoology, botany, meteorology and archaeology of the district. The new society was more proactive than the earlier antiquarian societies and often included a Field-Club. Its members researched the natural history of the surrounding district, normally incorporating its archaeological features.

These societies were also becoming more egalitarian; the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club for example, was inaugurated in 1880, and brought together men and women from a wide variety of backgrounds and social classes, 'town and gown', academic, amateur. An interesting remark made in 1870 by Sir Walter Elliot, in his address to the fiftieth anniversary of the Berwickshire Field Club. He stated that in 1868, 'intelligent working men were admitted to the society'. J. Britten, the author of the articles in *Nature*, commented that this was an invidious distinction and that 'science at least is a common ground on which all classes can meet without a shadow of bitter class-feeling to mar the genealogy of intercourse'. The journal supported the idea that a 'working man' should be received on a common footing with other members.

Reciprocity

These new local societies were part of an extensive network, which exchanged periodicals and journals and often-reciprocal speakers. Their annual publications of proceedings or transactions included a list of the corresponding societies and these show a notable increase in the number of local societies from the 1860s to the 1900s. The network of speakers is also an interesting phenomenon. For example Edward Poulton and Underhill as members of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club both appear to have spoken on their subjects to the Chester Archaeological and Historical Society in the 1880s and 90s. Also from Oxford, Edward Freeman, Arthur Evans, and J. H. Parker of the Ashmolean Society were regular speakers at the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society at Taunton Castle. Edward Tylor was addressing meetings here, in his home county of Somerset, as a member, well before obtaining his post as Curator of the Oxford University Museum in 1884.

Class

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the activities of local 'scientific' societies were varied and thriving. It is clear that they were dominated by the middle classes, but a section of this class that were previously unrepresented, the 'middling sort' were also beginning to penetrate the lines of social exclusion. The city and University of Oxford can provide such valuable case studies. The 'middling sort' were themselves a highly variegated stratum of society, split by political affiliation, religious denomination, by occupation and by region. They were often connected through networks of businesses, marriages or residence.

This was particularly noticeable in Oxford, a city still dominated by the University. The founding of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club brought together both town and gown. Its preliminary meeting was called by George Claridge Druce, a botanist (1850–1932), apparently, the name Claridge was added later, and who at the time was the proprietor of a chemist business in Oxford High Street. Professor M. A. Lawson, also a botanist, chaired the inaugural meeting at the Botanical Gardens. The list of original members of the society in 1870 suggests that there was a wide spectrum of members, it contains the names of Oxford citizens and University members, various clergymen, the Duke of Marlborough and trade and business owners including Henry Underhill, whose father was the proprietor of a well established grocery store in Oxford High Street (Bellamy, Chapter 1, 1908).

Conclusion

The function of these local societies was more than a pastime; it was a vocation. It offered an opportunity for participation with like minds, and for the non-University member it was also a demonstration of middle class cultural sophistication. It was a polite form of cultural entertainment alongside art, music literature and history. The foundation of the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club acted as a vehicle for the town to become associated with the gown.

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